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TAKE ME HOME

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ABSTRACT

Take Me Home is a collection of short stories through which I attempt to allow the reader a closer look at what comes before, or rather exists behind, desire. In these stories, I try to unearth the tacit assumptions that the characters have about themselves, their environment, and the larger context (the world) in which they find themselves. Whether the character is unsettled by a somewhat unusual event (such as the freezing of the TV in *Static*) or a mundane one (the sighting of a significant other, the loss of a loved one), the characters in these stories are made to face the subtle desires that determine their behavior.

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The Foreigner

Although they only visit on weekends or in the evening, Helen feels that her house has been filled with sharp-named men. They hover in the doorway, eyes fixed on the dirty white walls or the corners of tiles that bend up toward them, before introducing themselves with firm handshakes – Mr. Walker, Professor Adams. “How do you do?” they ask. She repeats the phrase in her head, trying to imitate the way they hold their o’s: the first o rises and the second levels out. She thinks about graphing it in her sketchbook– capturing the way the rise of the first invites you, while the drop in the second puts you in your place, reminds you that the question is a formality. Inconspicuous work, she realizes. When a foreigner asks a question there are nuances to become aware of, things they don’t want to hear. Not like an Irish question.

The men are not interested in Irish questions or Irish answers. She knows that they are only interested in her father. While she works her family’s rocky farmland in the summer heat, the men (strong and able-bodied), follow him out to his canvas-covered currach with their cameras. Her father has friends in town or down by the water who call him Danny, but the men call him Mr. O’Malley. Some weekends he spends entire days with them - showing them how he warps the wood and stretches animal hide across it, then having them in the house come evening to explain what keeps the blessed thing afloat. On these evenings, Helen notices the indignant way her mother goes about pouring their tea. She throws their sugar in carelessly, her thick shoulders hunched, and wipes her hands on the faded yellow dish towel too often. When she carries the tray out for them she looks smaller and heavier, like gravity is pushing her down

closer to the floor. The men call her Mrs. O'Malley, never Elaine, and when she puts Helen to bed she says to her: "We're old ruins to them! Just something dead that's still breathing is all. Picking your da apart just to study him. I'll not have them in my home."

This is the first wave of foreigners to sweep through Helen's life. When she talks about these foreign men as a woman, long after she's left her home in Wexford for New York, she'll realize that in only a few summers they had managed to invade her childhood. She'll see them in every picture she has of herself as a girl – taken by them, taken of them. Her father crouched low beside his boat, her smiling next to him, and behind them a foreigner in a suit with his limbs too straight, his smile barely visible. Some of the photos have been published in studies, in books, and even in museums – 'a Wexford fisherman and his daughter', they'd read, or 'a fisherman and his currach'. Underneath these captions, scholars would condense her father's life into two or three concise, grammatically pristine sentences. They would explain the boats he made in only the most technical sense – the stretching of the hide, the application of adhesive. She had laughed with her mother when they first received them. They'd snorted at the way the men scrunched their noses up at the stench of the lobster pots.

Despite her mother's opposition, the foreign men kept coming. "As it is, we survive enough," Helen had heard her ma shout once, "Without being studied, we survive enough." Helen wondered if she was talking about being poor, or being Catholic, or just being Irish. Helen started to bring tea and coffee to them when they visited the house. Elaine would busy herself outside and grumble about the men's stiff suits and the big black cameras they would carry. She hated the cameras the most, said their geometry was off. To her they looked like torture devices and she thought someday they'd shrink the whole family with one of those flashes and jam them into that tiny, dark space to watch them squirm around like ground beetles.

When Helen was younger, Elaine would tell her to pick beetles and other pests out of the garden they kept for themselves, a humble plot closest to the house. Together they would fill a dirty white bucket with grass and leaves for the bugs. Helen's da would want to kill them, but Elaine was against it, very much against it. She would send Helen away with them, so she'd walk the bucket up one mountain path or the other tilting it toward her, holding it under her nose, or stretching her arms out as far as they could go to better admire the beetle's wing cases; the gentle, sloping shape of them, the way they reflected sunlight, the metallic shine. When she found a suitable patch of moss or a bush that grew out from the rocks she would toss the things out and think of her da saying, "The second you dump the buggers, they're sure to be crawling back."

The beetles did come back, and Elaine said they ought to grow some flowers for the things to eat to keep them off her bush beans and her squash. The garden was hers, and she worked it like a frightened animal. She picked the beans quickly, as if there were a man under the soil trying to snatch them away. Helen could never keep up with her in the garden. Her mother was happiest there, she knew, where she could exist in that simple way. There, she knew by instinct which beans were best for picking and could pull each one from the same spot between the stem and the sprout with concentrated force.

The men were intrigued by the women's work in the garden or in the fields, but Helen's mother had forbidden them from taking photos. She hated their camera's flash the most because it would disorient her. It made her eyes hurt and she was afraid it would shrink her. Once, shortly before her husband's death, one of the researcher's assistants, a young American, had slipped out to the porch for a smoke and innocently enough captured Elaine in a moment of what he called "rustic beauty." Her in her black clothes hunched over a row of bean plants, tending to them in

her precise way. Despite his vision of the moment, she was angry, hot as hell, and her back was aching. She heard the shutter, saw the flash, and was on her feet chasing him a moment later, chucking freshly-picked beans at him and shouting invective.

Helen blew the researcher's photo up and hung it in her first New York apartment. It was there to remind her of her mother's stable form, her hurried nature, and not just the beauty of her home, but the rage of the place that is hidden. The picture was taken a week before her father's death. She does not know what the last picture taken of her father was, but she is sure there is some stiff researcher beside him. She is sure it is catalogued at some university. She does remember the day her father did not come back. It was a windy one. It was mid-summer, but the rain was coming down sideways and angry, half sleet. The ocean was grey, the sky was grey, the rocks were grey. The day her father didn't come back the world was a scene inside a snow globe – everything shaken by God knows who. Elaine was praying by the window the way she did when it stormed, sitting there beside an old picture of her father nailed into the wall, white rosary beads hanging from it like slow rain. "Everything is too big for me," Elaine had told Helen once when she asked why she was always praying when it was storming. She had answered quickly, as if she'd been saving the words up inside her for a long time.

Elaine found, after her husband's death, that her own home was too big for her. She did not want to sleep in their room, and during breakfast her eyes would fill up at the emptiness of the table. She would swallow her food hard and look up at the ceiling. She even missed the stench of him, she said. Helen started to think about the shape of the feeling in her mother's eyes and wanted to add it to her sketch book. She thought of the feeling as something with gravity that pulls you down and lets you go before tugging again. She knew her mother was resisting the tug when she came to her on a quiet summer evening and said, "Being so used to having strangers in

the house, we might as well profit from it some.” This is how, by the next summer, the second surge of foreigners would come into Helen’s home.

Elaine worked on the house the way she worked in the garden, hurriedly and with a sense of purpose. By late June, she was ready for what she called tourist season. The house was clean and she had planted flowers in the garden, not for the beetles, but for aesthetic appeal. They both laughed at the strangeness of it, as if planting flowers for beetles wasn’t mad enough. Still, she cut the flowers and arranged them in the bathroom, on the kitchen table, and in her bedroom, where strangers would sleep.

The first groups of strangers to live in Helen’s house left in the mornings and came home at tea-time. They said that Helen and Elaine had a beautiful home and that Ireland was a wonderfully scenic country. They reminded Helen of the researchers who followed her father, but Elaine did not carry their tea in with slouched shoulders as if gravity was pulling her down. Instead she would hum and step lightly about the kitchen and say it was lovely to have the house full. Elaine, who had turned red in the face and cussed at the academic men who came by to see her father, smiled gently and told Irish stories to the foreign men and women who came to stay. It was Paul, a middle-aged American man from New York, and his daughter Catherine who were the first tourists to try and get a real sense of the place. Even the researchers, Elaine would say, could have learned a thing or two from Paul.

Paul arrived on a Friday afternoon and kept both Helen and Elaine occupied all day with questions and stories. He asked them what it was like in the winter and what they did for fun and were there any spots they would recommend he visit. He was a tall and gentle man who seemed to take a genuine interest in them. Helen worried that Elaine would hate him, the way she did the academic men, but Paul had a disarming nature. He laughed often and with a wide,

unencumbered smile. Like most Americans, his t's and k's were sharp, which made him sound harsh, and after a few days with him it made Helen and Elaine laugh that such a casual and kind-hearted man should sound so edgy. He, however, rejoiced in their different use of English, and would call Catherine over with glee when a new discrepancy was revealed to him. "They call tic-tac-toe x's and o's!" he would exclaim, and go on to tell them that x's are kisses in America and o's are hugs. "Is it the same here?" he would ask. His questions were lovely, selfless things; the kind that made Helen's ma smile when she answered them, and maybe later in the day she would remember and smile again to herself while she worked.

Paul would often help Elaine with the housework, an unusual but not unwelcomed gesture. One night, Helen overheard the two of them talking softly in the kitchen the way adults do when they think the children are fast asleep. Yellow light spilled from a crack in the door and Helen sat just at the edge of it, letting the hum of insects outside and the gentle clanking of dishes lull her. She could make out Paul's low voice remembering his wife to Elaine. "She was too weak toward the end of things," she'd heard him say. She thought of birds sleeping in trees and watched moths flutter against the door, recklessly pursuing the light. Elaine explained, drying the last dish with a now soaked towel, that her husband is probably drowned in the Atlantic, but possibly happily living in some other part of the country. "We never found a stitch of him," she whispered reluctantly. Helen felt the blood rush out of her face. She had never imagined that her father had chosen to leave. She saw Paul's hand around Elaine's shoulder and her heart prickled and her head throbbed.

The next day Helen payed special attention to Paul and Catherine. Paul's hair was dark and dusted with grey, but Catherine's was the color of hay. She had brown eyes with a touch of green and an elegant figure that Helen envied. Helen wondered if Paul's wife was lithe, like

Catherine, or sturdy like Elaine. Helen herself was tall and had a thin frame that would take years to fill out. Catherine wore a different outfit every day and had lovely hairpins speckled with pearls that she would use to fasten her hair. She told Helen that Paul owned tall buildings in New York and that he would walk around inside of them, 20 stories from the ground, confidently in a no-nonsense suit with a fresh tie: green or blue, and sometimes even purple. Helen tried to image Paul in a clean suit. She tried to image him with a sharp and demanding face. She could only see the Paul she knew, who wore fat mans around the house and waited until after breakfast, and sometimes well into the afternoon, to brush his hair and wash his face. She could only think of the Paul who stayed up late with her mother to sit beside her at the fire and touch her with the most painful uncertainty, as if she would break or scurry away.

Years later, long after Paul and Catherine had left Ireland, Paul would pick Helen up in a slick, black car at JFK airport. He would confess to an almost fatuous longing for Elaine and a deep regret concerning his inability to convince her to make the move to New York. He was so glad, he said, to be able to help Helen with art school and with adjusting to the city. He wondered would Elaine consider visiting. He had worn a green tie that day, and had taken her to the Met to see Bruegel's "The Harvesters", and then to MoMA. He justified each selection that he studied for more than a minute by saying, "I think Elaine would have loved this one." She was tired from the flight and confused by the height of the buildings and the bustle of people, but she stared at the art and nodded and felt refreshed. She had only brought a small suitcase with her sketch book tucked neatly at its center, but she felt prepared.

On the first weekend of Paul's stay, he caught Helen ripping wood from one of her father's old boats. "Need some help, missy?" he'd asked. At first she thought he'd be cross, then remembered he had no reason to be. She told him she was going to use the wood to give some

shape to the feeling of being tugged down. “That’s an ambitious project you’re planning there,” he’d said and she showed him her sketches and asked him could he help find her some nails. Paul changed when he saw her sketches – his eyes lit up with excitement. He nodded his head and flipped through the pages. “You’ve got some real chops!” he said. He told her that, if she kept at it, he could help get her into a school in New York.

After that, Helen couldn’t get the idea of moving to America out of her head. She would think of Elaine and Paul laughing in a colorful kitchen, while she and Catherine made plans to spend the day in Central Park. Helen could see things fitting together perfectly. In the evenings, Catherine would fix her hair up and dress her up in her American clothes. They took turns walking from one end of the hallway to the other and Helen would keep her eyes firmly closed, imagining that she was in the sleepless city already. Without Helen’s secret knowledge, Catherine had decided that their parents should be together all on her own. Catherine started to describe all the places they would visit together in New York. They made knowing faces at each other when Paul offered to wash the dishes or asked Elaine to sit with him by the fire.

By the fire Elaine sang Irish songs and told stories. She told Paul and Catherine an old Irish tale about a fat baby, but lied and said the story was about Helen. She told them that Helen was a big fat baby with the appetite of a king. Helen wanted to eat more food than Elaine and her husband combined and wanted the best of everything. At first, Elaine told them, she thought it was awful bad luck to have tastes that fine in a family like theirs, but then she thought herself blessed to have such an ambitious child. So, she said, her husband brought back the biggest lobster he’d caught that week and they had a big celebration with all of their friends. They put Helen inside the lobster’s shell with a crown of grass and bog cotton on her head, and wheeled her around in a wagon.

Paul was delighted by the story, but Helen was embarrassed. She asked Elaine later what she thought an ambitious baby in New York could get. This was Helen's way of approaching her new infatuation, of breaching the topic of their possibly moving to New York safely. Elaine had pointed out toward fields littered with poison foxglove and cold beaches under rocky cliffs and said, "There's what you'll have, ambitions or no." Helen was bitterly effected by Elaine's response. She felt puerile and helpless. She knew that Paul was making his own arguments because with each day Elaine's eyes took on an even more obdurate gleam. Helen let her hope fade long before she hugged Paul and Catherine goodbye.

Helen's anger toward Elaine turned to pity not long after Paul's departure. She could see a string as thin as spider's silk reaching all the way out past the mountains, out to the Atlantic and connecting back to Elaine. Her mother no longer hummed in the kitchen and her step was as heavy as ever, pulled down and now out to a place she would never go. She, too, felt a tug and wondered if Elaine could not see it in here – the need to leave, the fine string pulling out, or to where it lead.

As a child, Helen thought her mother was as immutable as the landscape. Even in New York, she only had pictures of Elaine that made her look resilient, almost permanent. This is why, upon her return to Wexford, she was unsteadied at the sight of her mother in the doorway. She was an old Irish woman; her hair, by then, completely grey, and her dress stained with dirt from the garden. Helen thought of her just as the researchers had when she was a child; a sort of rustic beauty. And she did take a photo, although there was no flash, and her mother looked at her, indignant, the way she had looked at those men. Helen was a foreigner. She could no longer understand the disappointment she had felt the day her mother had pointed out toward the fields, speckled with foxglove and the blue sea under rocky cliffs, and said, "There's what you'll have,

ambitions or no.” After years in New York, the Wexford landscape looked nothing short of empyrean to her. She thought of home, her studio on Grant Avenue, where she keeps her first piece of art, an empty frame made from the wood of her father’s currach, hanging on the back wall. She keeps a picture that she took of her mother the day she left there, too, and she wishes she had one of herself.

Natural

“Hi,” you say and hate yourself for the way it hangs, uncomfortable in the air. “How are you?” A default, and not surprisingly the words fail you. You are actually deeply concerned. You want to show genuine interest in his well-being, of course, but don’t know how. You hug him. This is yet another ritual informality that hurts you, but you forget about it when you feel how warm he still is, how solid his chest is against yours, how well the muscles of his arms work themselves around you.

“I’m good,” he replies, his voice not wavering. You would flinch at the response if you weren’t letting the relative ease of his movements fool you. When you pull away, your breath catches shallow in your chest. You are reminded. Even here—hovering in your foyer—the deep, knowing sadness that comes with dying is seeping from his eyes.

You walk him into the kitchen while your mom takes over with his wife. You are trying not to imagine him as he was last described to you, ripped from sleep with his arms locked in the air, his hair disheveled, his eyes desperate and confused. Push from your mind the scene in which his wife (your favorite teacher, your mom’s best friend) shoves him into her midsize sedan, his arms still stubbornly stretched above his head.

Instead, learn from the way your mom talks about normal things: the broken handle on the cabinet, the cat’s refusal to use the litter box, the new carpet in the living room.

“It’s nice,” he smiles.

Stare with him into the cut and loop carpet. When his wife asks the color, you remember the sample swath. “Natural,” you tell her.

In the kitchen he stares ahead, placid. Let his wife breach the topic when she’s comfortable.

“His hair’s started to fall out,” she explains as she pulls out a chair and sits. He follows like an old animal and sits beside you.

“It breaks my heart seeing it go,” she continues, “for different reasons, of course.”

Push back again. Do not think of the person you are in love with. Do not allow yourself to recreate the sensation of their hair, soft against your fingers. Do not juxtapose their smile, the very thought of which allows your heart to settle and expand, with his.

Instead, nod your head. Tell her that it is barely noticeable. “You can hardly tell,” you say and it is true. There are no visible signs, aside from that submissive knowing in his eyes. If you ignore the strands of grey around his collar, he even looks robust.

Imagine that in front of you is an ordinary man in his forties, with half of his life behind him and half of it ahead.

Forget that he was in fact an ordinary man until a month ago, when he woke up in the middle of the night with his arms up as if he were surrendering to something. He couldn’t put them down and he couldn’t talk to his wife, who laughed at first and then tried not to think about things as she half carried half dragged him out into the driveway. The 3 AM street was soft with porch light and the night was still and suspended and even with her sense of urgency, the car moved slowly through the quiet. She felt like a ghost outside of her own body. Hours later, a stranger would tell her that they had found a three centimeter tumor in her husband’s brain.

When her eyes fill up, swallow hard but do not make a noise. Pretend that her pain is only her own. Her husband may be dying, but the people you love cannot die. Your father and mother, his same age, will not die. The person you love, who kissed you for the first time last week, who sneaks away from their after-school practices to meet you at yours during breaks, who makes your head feel light, who you believe may be everything beautiful in the world, will not die. You have just discovered this kind of love. His wife knows this—she smiles at you smiling at each other in the hallway. She asks how they are doing when she sees you alone. She is asking now, but you cannot answer.

Time passes.

She talks to your mom about the chemo. He stares ahead politely while she works over the pros and cons of participating in a clinical study.

“As it turns out,” his wife says, “there is more than one tumor.”

You feel, more and more, that what is being endured in your kitchen is too much to be endured. How many times has he heard this information or been made to sit through these diagnoses? You do not want your kitchen to become a place of unendurable suffering, so you devise a plan to save him from having to listen any longer to the details of his own death.

Wouldn't you rather be somewhere else? You ask in your imagination. *Yes!* He answers. *I want to climb Mt. Everest, walk along the Great Wall of China, snorkel the Great Barrier Reef!* You are ready to take him wherever. *Great!* You tell him before snatching your mom's car keys. The two of you peel out of the driveway, catch a quick plane out of town and from there see the world. You are the one who saves him from spending his last days alive in your kitchen, listening to his wife talk to your mom.

Plans are swirling in your head. You open your mouth, excited, but the words you'd need to form exert a pressure on the trip that crumbles it. You run your tongue along the back of your teeth and decide not to give it up. What you muster instead is this question: "Do you want to come downstairs with me?" His eyes turn slowly to you. His wife's eyes and your mother's eyes turn slowly to you. "The foosball table is still down there," you offer.

He smiles, then stares down at the kitchen's peachy linoleum tiles. His looks like he will get up. He does not get up. "I think I'll stay put," he says apologetically.

Here is what you cannot explain—the anger that fills you up until you can barely bring yourself to smile back at him.

"Okay," you say. "No problem."

You glance at the clock for the first time since they've arrived. It flashes numbers back at you. You wish they would leave. Your hands shake as you push your chair back. Your body feels light. Movement is unnatural.

In the bathroom, the shock of cold water grounds you. You look at yourself in the mirror. You are young. Your skin is tight. He is young, too, but he is out there picking at his nails while his wife goes on asking questions, providing the infinite particulars of his death. *The details of death are inexhaustible*, you tell your reflection. Your face contorts. Is it true that not even death can unstick him from answering "I'm good" when you ask how he is or from sitting at your table, as he always has, while his wife talks about their lives, her feelings, their son's new job, his fading body?

You return to the table. You help your mom set plates, fold napkins, line silverware, but you are watching him there and something heavy is settling in you. You are thinking that the details of life are also inexhaustible.

During dinner you stare at your plate. You spend some time watching him pick at his lemon seasoned chicken. You can't help thinking that you could have saved him, in some small way, if he would have let you. You are thinking that if the person you are in love with was dying, they would have let you whisk them away to Pompeii or the Galápagos, somewhere exotic. You pull at the frays of your placemat until, come desert time, your mom asks if you'll bring the pie over.

He volunteers in your place.

"I've got it," he says, but when he tries to stand the chair thumps against the floor and his wife is behind him, holding him steady. He looks confused and something in you sinks before settling. Your face is hot. You are worried and ashamed. He probably couldn't have made it down the stairs with you, you realize. You could not have saved him, you also realize, even if you had taken him halfway across the world.

You step back from where he stands, confused and unsteady. His wife makes a joke. Her smile is too big, and it would have annoyed you earlier, but now you are thinking that she is something else altogether. You are thinking of a line that she read weeks ago in class, while light shuddered through the windows: "How we live our days is, of course, how we live our lives." She sits him back down. You look at him. He smiles, same as usual, but you see him differently for not changing, for picking at his pie while his wife talks about their lives, his dying. You watch with him as light trembles across the cherry wood of your kitchen table.

Static

The image on Mary's screen stops and starts again with a jerk. The natural colors and familiar shapes of the scene are overtaken by surging blocks of yellow and red, baby blue and green. Outside it is raining. The TV flashes back. For a moment Mary's favorite actor, Vincent Del Gruccio, is a blur that extends from one end of the screen to the other.

The image on the TV stabilizes just as a thickly mustached man approaches Stephan (Vincent Del Gruccio). Mary watches Stephen smirk, confident that he can escape death here, as he has at least a dozen times. This is the last episode of the third season. Mary expects, of course, that it will have an emotional impact. Like most finales, she guesses that it will go out with a bang, she is ready even for some concentrated pulses of affection, but she could not have expected that the scene would eventuate in her falling in love.

The characters are in a warehouse, a huge, grey space where the lighting is eerie. Stephan stands beside stacks of sealed boxes with his muscled arms hanging casually at his sides. To his right is the body of some minor character—an antagonist's love interest. Is she knocked out or dead? In front of Stephan is a man with a gun. The powerful head of some organization.

Outside, Mary hears thunder. She sighs when the TV's soft sound begins to sputter, and expels air even more forcefully when the audio fades completely away. Still, she continues watching.

Stephan's mouth is moving, so is the man's. The man turns to the woman's unconscious/dead body. Stephan shouts something. He looks defensive. He has no weapon, so he steps back. The man approaches, still aiming the gun.

Holy shit. Mary texts her coworker/love interest Ethan. *This is intense.*

She is almost certain that Ethan is watching the finale, too. Although she introduced the show to him only a few months ago, he watches it more adamantly than she does. Sometimes they watch it together in the office. Tonight, however, she is glad to be alone. If Ethan were with her he would be on her case about the TV not working, "You're an engineer, aren't you?" he'd exclaim. "Fix it!"

In terms of the action on the screen, Mary is now a bit lost. The man shoots at Stephan, and Mary hears the gun go off in her head. Stephan dodges, but the bullet grazes his arm. He lunges forward, kicking the man in the stomach and knocking the gun from his hand.

The man pulls a knife from his pocket and pushes Stephan down. He takes a moment to align the knife over Stephan's heart. They are talking, but Mary still cannot hear. One of Stephan's hands is pinned down by the man, while the other is gripping the man's wrist, pushing up against the weight that would plunge the knife into his chest. Stephan seems to be losing strength. The knife moves closer and closer to his heart. *How can they kill off one of the main characters?* Stephan's face is sweaty and strained. The man above him, smiling, seems to have just experienced a second wind. Mary thinks, plot wise, that Stephan kind of needs to find a way out of this. The actor, she remembers, is still contracted for another season. Still, the knife inches closer. It is centimeters from his chest.

The image pauses.

Mary sighs, checking her phone. 12:15.

I know, man! Ethan's response reads.

"Man?" Mary asks herself quietly. She stares at the message, tugging at her hair while she waits for the TV to flash to black before sputtering for a moment and returning to the image. She hopes that the sound will return in the process, but the image remains frozen on the screen.

Mary checks her phone again. 12:20. It's late. She decides to try and catch the rest tomorrow, sighing when she realizes how difficult it will be to stop Ethan from spoiling the ending for her. Aside from him, avoiding a spoiler should be easy. The rest of the office is twice her age and has probably never heard of the show.

Mary flicks the power button on the remote without getting out of bed. The image—the man with the knife hovering ominously over Stephan's heart—remains on the screen. She presses the button again. Nothing. She thinks about getting up and trying to unplug the TV, then realizes that the plug is somewhere behind the long, oak bookshelf she uses as a TV stand. She checks her phone again for the time.

"Not worth it," she says to herself, frustrated. She falls asleep facing the screen.

* * *

At work, Ethan doesn't take more than ten minutes to find her. Shifting a stack of papers from one arm to the other, he runs a hand through his dark, curly hair and starts to ask, "Can you believe..."

"Shhhh," Mary says, smacking his arm. "I didn't get to the end last night," she tells him, letting her hand linger for a moment on the warm curve of his elbow.

Mary's desk is cluttered with papers.

"What?" asks Ethan. "Why the hell not?" Mary sits back. She likes the way Ethan leans forward when he asks a question, letting his eyes settle on hers. When she tells him about the

image frozen on her TV he laughs and says, “Wait, don’t you have a degree in engineering?”

There it is.

“They never taught me how to fix a TV,” she says.

Mary works as a sales engineer alongside people with names like Carol Snodgrass, the woman who occupies the desk beside her. Mary’s job is to know everything there is to know about the variety of thermal mass flow meters that her company, which provides “construction management services,” has available.

Carol Snodgrass sells self-operated temperature regulators, something that neither Ethan nor Mary knows anything about. When Ethan first saw her neighbor’s name plate, a tacky, acrylic thing, he looked at Mary and mouthed, “Carol Snodgrass? Is this real?” She had shrugged, then mouthed back, “Is your job here even real?” Although he claimed that he worked with product manuals, he had never been able to describe what he actually did to Mary’s satisfaction.

The papers Ethan holds against his chest now are probably manuals, and Mary still cannot imagine someone with Ethan’s energy writing or reading production descriptions and instructions for a living. Ethan goes over and grabs a cone-like paper cup from a plastic table near the water cooler. “So you don’t want to know that Stephan doesn’t—”

“C’mon,” Mary cries playfully, “Go linger somewhere else! I mean, I can’t believe I have to be the one next to this stupid—”

“I know,” Ethan interjects. “I mean an actual water cooler, with paper cups and everything. We’d laugh if we saw it on TV.”

Mary shakes her head, grabbing some papers from a pile on her desk. Ethan leans over and asks about lunch. Rather than the uncertain, “If you have time, would you want to grab lunch

with me?” she is used to, he asks simply, “Italian or Chinese?” Ethan tries to look casual, but Mary notices the way his eyes flitter from the clock to her desk to the carpeted floor. Mary feels blood rushing to her face. “Italian,” she says, and takes a moment to notice Ethan’s thick chin, the stubble that colors it, the way his lips move when he smiles.

* * *

At home Mary orders Chinese food, waits for it, and eats in silence before going into her bedroom to check the TV. She takes a breath at the door and pushes it open to find the man still hovering over Stephan with his knife. She dials the customer service number of her provider and waits, swaying her hips in time with the elevator music. Every five minutes or so an automated voice interrupts. “Please hold,” the voice drones, “your call will be answered shortly.” While she waits, she tries to turn the TV on and off again, it doesn’t work, then she tries replacing the batteries in her remote.

She stares at the image on the screen, trying to remember the context. They are in the warehouse because they suspect that some important documents are hidden there. The woman who is either dead or unconscious is the mistress of the powerful man who, since last night, has held a knife above Stephan’s heart.

After forty minutes on hold listening to indistinct elevator music, Mary ends the call to customer service. Turning back to the screen, she can’t help but be frustrated with the details left out in the episode. Where is this warehouse, who owns it?

Most importantly, Mary wonders what the hell happened to the woman. She had been there, on the floor of the warehouse, when Stephan arrived on the scene. Is she alive? Mary studies her figure. The woman is slim and elegant, even sprawled out on the warehouse’s dusty floor. She has thick brown hair, a small nose, and perfectly red lips. Above the woman’s right

temple is a deep cut from which blood flows, saturating the ground. She has on a tightly fitted purple dress and simple black heels. She is away from the action and yet her body, simply lying there, is central in a way that Mary has not grasped.

As far as Mary knows, she could be dead from head trauma or she could just have a somewhat serious, but certainly not life-threatening, cut. She notices that the style of the woman's dress is similar to one she owns, and wonders what brand of shoe she is wearing. Does she only get to wear them on set, or are they hers to keep? Mary sees her own shoes, kicked off in front of the bed, and realizes that the woman may be dead. Then she reminds herself that the woman is an actress, and that the blood is as unreal as the character she is playing. Still, there is a woman who bleeds on the warehouse floor. Mary sleeps with her back to the TV and dreads seeing the body, still limp, on the screen in the morning.

She anticipates the scene the next morning before opening her eyes. She places ceiling fans that hum like sleeping giants above the characters' heads. She tries to remember the rest of the warehouse. Are there windows? What time of day is it in the scene? The woman in her purple dress is on the floor with blood pooled near her head. The mustached villain crouches above Stephan, a fiendish smile spreading across his face. He, as she remembers, is experiencing a moment of victory. A moment of pure, adrenal bliss. She imagines Stephan there below the man. His face is in a sad grimace and his soft, brown hair is muddled with sweat. The muscles in his arms ripple smoothly, frozen in a moment of upward resistance.

When she opens her eyes the scene is a bit more gruesome than the one she had put together in her head. There is a gash in Stephan's arm from which blood is trickling, staining his grey V-neck. The man above him is smiling, but more perversely than she had remembered. His teeth are thick and yellow, his face is flushed.

Mary studies Stephan closely while she eats breakfast. Of course she knew he was handsome, he is played by Vincent Del Gruccio after all, but frozen there on the screen is someone else entirely. His eyes are a gentle brown and his eyebrows are just the right thickness. His chin is smooth, but his jawline is sharp. She follows the subtle slope of his collar bone. She notices the prominence of the forearm that pushes against the knife. In his eyes particularly, there is something that makes him not Vincent. In Stephan's eyes there is fear and resistance. As he leans forward, struggling against the force the man exerts on him, Stephen's eyes seem to be fixed on Mary. She wants only to pull the knife away from his chest. She yearns to brush the wet hair from his broad forehead.

* * *

"I could come over and take a look at your TV for you," Ethan says the next day at work when Mary resists, once again, his attempt to discuss the finale. "It would be a small price to pay," he says, "to be able to talk to you about what happened."

Yesterday, the offer would have excited Mary. She may have postponed, pushed for the weekend so that she'd have time to throw away the takeout containers sitting at the foot of her bed and maybe vacuum, but she would have accepted. There is no way that yesterday-Mary would have let the chance to spend extra time with Ethan pass. Today-Mary, however, has been noticing the bushiness of Ethan's eyebrows, the fleshiness of his arms, and most of all the dullness of his eyes, which address her as he leans forward. Ethan's gaze is nothing like Stephan's, and she wonders if she wants the TV to be fixed.

Carol clears her throat from her desk and makes a move for the water cooler. Mary nods at her.

“How are those temperature regulators selling?” Mark asks Carol, throwing Mary a wink.

“Oh, just about as well as you’d think,” she says.

Ethan makes her laugh, even if she can no longer help but to notice the way his jaw blends into his neck. She doesn’t care much if he sees the takeout containers. She knows that she may not be able to deal with the TV on her own, and that she can’t let the image remain there forever, so she tells Ethan that she would appreciate it.

In the elevator, Ethan jokes about seeing her apartment. “I hope you remembered to hide all of those bodies,” he says, and Mary is aware of a certain tension, an expectation of his that she can’t place and tries to dismiss. Ethan runs his hands through his hair, then sticks them in his pant pockets. When he sees the image on her TV he says, “Damn, that has to be the most dramatic—”

“Tell me about it,” says Mary. She hands Ethan her remote and tells him that the outlet is behind the bookshelf. While he fiddles with the buttons around the screen, Mary picks up the dirty socks and t-shirts that litter her room.

Ethan is bent over so that half of him is behind the TV. “After looking at this for a day or two, you probably won’t be bothered by the ending,” he says. When Mary looks in his direction she sees only the stiff lower half of his body. He begins to tug at the bookshelf and Mary watches the TV wobble.

The scene is shaken, the girl in her purple dress no longer lies still on the ground, the villainous man’s arm, raised above Stephen, trembles, and Stephen’s eyes drift off, no longer focused on Mary. She fights the urge to hold the TV steady. She knows now, too late, that she is

not ready to leave the static of the image. Even the TV's movement disturbs her. Still, she will not stop Ethan from pulling the cord. She will let the scene be jerked away. She will lose Stephan as he is here, as she loves him.

“Are you ready, finally, for the ending?” Ethan asks, tugging the cord. Mary watches as the screen snaps to black.

“C'mon,” Ethan urges. “Let's watch together.” Mary is aware, again, of an expectation that she cannot place. She clears a chair for him, throwing a pile of papers and clothes onto the floor behind it. Ethan gives her a strange look as she climbs into bed, crossing her legs and leaning against the wall behind her. She throws him the remote.

* * *

As they watch the episode, Mary tries to ignore the glances Ethan directs at her from his position in the chair. She sits up when the mustached man approaches Stephan, drawing confidence from his familiar smirk. She watches as the scene plays out. The man shoots at Stephan, shoves him down, and finally holds the knife over his chest. The gunshot she hears is louder than the one she had imagined, and when she jumps Ethan takes his eyes off the screen. He sees that her hand is pressed to her heart, laughs, and turns back. “Don't be a wimp,” he says.

She wants to close her eyes. Stephan's arm strains against the weight imposed by the man above him, against the pressure of the knife. His breathing comes out in short gasps. Blood trickles down his wounded arm, and blood pools near the head of the girl in her purple dress. And there, of course, is the look of fear and resistance, once directed only at her. Then, the look gives way. She watches as the man overcomes Stephan and thrusts the knife into his chest.

“Oh damn!” Ethan shouts.

Mary does not face Ethan.

“There you have it,” he laughs. “Can you believe they killed him off? Risky.”

She watches as Stephan gasps for breath.

“Leave,” she tells Ethan.

“What?” he laughs. “You okay?”

“Leave,” she says, touching her own chest.

He leaves.

Take Me Home

“I do all my shopping online,” Kaitlyn announces to the sparsely populated room. Unfamiliar faces. She scrolls past layered sweaters, laced sleeves, jeggings, jeans, and cardigans before dragging a ridiculously named tank top (something like Abstract Double Layer Babydoll Cami) into her shopping cart where a dozen or so more fatuously named skirts, shirts, and dresses wait to be purchased.

“No variety in plus sized clothes in the stores,” she tells strangers, clicking the checkout button. The button reads more like this: CHECKOUT.

“Men like confidence,” is the advice Ali had given her.

“Just spent like three hundred bucks,” Kaitlyn says.

She scans the faces in the room, collecting responses. No. She scans the male faces in the room, collecting male responses. She makes note of the few men who smile at her, whose eyes flick to hers in a moment of confirmation before returning to their drinks. She doesn't waste time on the others. She doesn't bother with anyone who might be Ali's.

She had decided earlier that week, while the house was still quiet, that what she needed was a man. Any man. She had an awful day at work, which ended in the guy she'd been into for a month shutting her down when she asked him out for a drink. “No, thanks,” he'd said. That was it. They worked together in a small gas station and spent the last hour and a half of their shift in painfully awkward silence. She'd driven home, opened her front door, and there was Ali snuggling up with some guy she'd never seen before in the living room. “Can't you take it

somewhere else for once?” Kaitlyn snapped. The guy jumped away from Ali and looked down at the table. Ali brought guys back to their cottage most nights of the week. She sent this one back to her room.

“Forget the stupid gas station dude,” Ali sighed when Kaitlyn told her that he had officially shut her down. “This weekend we’re throwing a party!”

Ali bought the alcohol and invited her friends and set up tables and chairs outside. She made a playlist and borrowed a disco ball and mixed jungle juice with plastic soup ladles in big, blue recycling bins. This aggravated Kaitlyn—did Ali think that she did not know what kind of music to play at a party or how to mix jungle juice? She became especially dedicated in completing the task that Ali succeeded in almost every weekend, in doing what Ali had set this party up for her to do, in getting a guy to spend the night with her—the whole night!

When the time came for the party to begin (some two hours after the party was actually scheduled to begin), Ali stood at the door collecting sticky/crumpled/ripped bills, while picking out the handsome guys, the ones who wore the necessary shirt-cut or brand of shoe, for herself. Ali wore smoky eyeshadow and tight dresses, whitened her teeth, jammed her small feet into even smaller heels, and batted thick, tarred eyelashes while running her tongue over enchanting red lips to get the guys. Kaitlyn watched from her spot in the living room, then let her eyes settle back to the screen in front of her.

Kaitlyn lists the men who showed any interest during her shopping outburst. There are four, but Ali is flirting with two of them at the door. That leaves only two: Joe, who was dating one of Ali’s friends until last week, and Tim, who Ali had briefly introduced as a runner. Joe’s smile was more of a flinch, but he had acknowledged her, and that was the criteria. Joe is first on the list because he is by far the most handsome and, despite being handsome, his bad taste in

clothes makes him unappealing to Ali. Joe's shirt, for example, is not a brand name shirt and is also not an exciting color. It is the kind of color you see in a nursing home, off white. Ali will never go for that.

Joe and a friend carry Ali's beer pong table through the crowded living room and out to the lawn. The cottage is one in a complex of about one hundred, each a near exact replica of the next. There is a slight variation in color—some cottages are grey, others are blue-grey, green-grey, or purple-grey. Each cottage has a small concrete patio. On Kaitlyn's concrete patio, Joe and his friend expand the table and push open green and orange beach chairs. The huge lawn that all of the cottages share is often littered with red solo cups and napkins. Kaitlyn fills a pitcher with water and grabs a stack of cups for the table.

“I call first game!” she yells at Joe and the guys who are now standing around the table. Ali brings three guys out to the patio and Joe bothers her until she agrees to play. It is Joe and one of Ali's suitors vs Kaitlyn and Ali. Ali only lands two shots. Kaitlyn has to drink every time she misses. They start to fall behind and Ali's suitor adds a new rule: “Losers take their shirts off!”

“No way, no way!” Ali laughs.

Kaitlyn thinks about Joe, who is watching the game from behind the guys. She throws the game on purpose. Ali refuses to take her shirt off, but Kaitlyn proudly tugs her black, “Mo Money, Mo Problems” T-shirt (\$35) over her head. Her nipples are newly pierced with silver hoops and they are something she wants to show off.

The boys stop hounding Ali. Kaitlyn's nipples harden from exposure. She glances around the lawn. A few people are staring at her, but most are talking, drinking. Joe barely glances at her. No one whoops or whistles. Behind a group of people near the side of the cottage, Kaitlyn sees a figure crouched on the ground, coughing. She pulls her shirt back over her head.

As she approaches the side of the house, she sees that the figure is a young girl. She is coughing. Her spit leaping from her mouth in gossamer strings that turn blue, red, and then pink with the flashing lights. Kaitlyn panics. How old is this girl? How far is she from home on a Friday night? Wheezing. Spitting. Kaitlyn doesn't know what to do next. Sit her up? Slap her back? In a TV show, the protagonist would perform CPR or something. Where is the heart, physically? Center chest, behind the sternum. Kaitlyn thinks about breathing—the expanding and collapsing of lungs, the diaphragm—she knows nothing, so she presses against the idea of where the heart is. A bit to the left, below collar bone, above barely formed breast. She pushes her hand away. She is fine, but Kaitlyn doesn't know what to do next. The girl looks otherworldly against the floor, her vernal limbs rearranging themselves, her skin pale and fresh against the street lights.

“Is that kid okay?” one of Ali's prospects for the night yells from the other end of the beer pong table. Has no one on Kaitlyn's end of the table noticed the kid lying in the grass hacking and spitting? The kid is okay and not okay at the same time. Kaitlyn wonders for a moment about how to scream this to the drunk guy across the lawn. “She's fine,” is what she settles for.

“What?” the guy bellows before he changes his mind, extricating himself with a shake of the head and a dismissive wave of the hand.

Upright now, the girl wipes her chin with the back of her flowery purple sleeve. “Is everyone drinking that stuff?” she asks Kaitlyn, pointing to one red party cup in a graveyard of red party cups.

“Mostly,” Kaitlyn tells her. The girl looks up and in her eyes are reflections of the drumming lights. Kaitlyn guesses, from her quick recovery, that the girl was putting on a bit of a show. There is something about the way she stands, leaning in, and the way she softens her face, and the way she opens herself, pulling her arms away from her chest, that pleases: *Talk to me. Pay attention to me.* Kaitlyn wonders if she looks the same.

The girl tucks a chunk of beach colored hair behind her ear. Her face is red and her breath is shallow. “It’s disgusting,” she says, laughing abruptly and crossing her arms over her chest.

Joe appears at the pong table and Kaitlyn watches his arms flex as he tosses a ball. She watches his face change. Although she has met Joe for the first time tonight, and has spoken to him for a total of ten minutes, she imagines him loving her. She wills him to look in her direction.

The girl, Kaitlyn realizes, can easily be incorporated. Joe will look at her and she will call him over and enlist him. “We need to help this poor girl get home!” Kaitlyn will tell Joe and he, being a decent human being, will help her. Maybe years from now, when Kaitlyn’s friends ask how she and Joe met, she will tell this story. “We were the only two people at this huge rager who cared enough to help a poor eleven-year-old get home,” she would tell them. They would coo, “You two are perfect for each other!”

Kaitlyn stands over the girl because there are bodies everywhere and she is big enough that people give her space. To the left, Ali has a few guys laughing with her, leaning in toward her, offering her drinks. Men never offer Kaitlyn drinks, so she makes sure to get drunk enough on her own. The group glances in her direction, and she knows that Ali is talking about her. She wishes she wouldn't have taken her shirt off. Now Ali is using Kaitlyn's drunken desperation to hide her own less obvious desperation.

The girl stands beside Kaitlyn, pulling at the hem of her shirt. "My name is Emily," she says. Kaitlyn tears her eyes away from Ali. She knows that to be a good person she has to act interested. No one is paying enough attention to inflict it upon her, but she feels the kind of disconcerting pressure that plagues her every interaction with children—the need to love them because she is a woman, and women, if we love nothing else, must love kids. Kaitlyn does not love kids, and she wonders why she (who hates kids) is the only person on the godforsaken lawn who is paying any attention to the fact that a random brat has somehow landed herself at their party.

Kaitlyn looks past the lawn. Beyond the last row of houses, a plastic fence separates the cottage style community she pays an obscene amount to live in and the "real world," where adults (Kaitlyn is not yet a full-fledged adult, thank god) pull their practical cars through driveways with netless basketball hoops into in garages full of junk. Getting the girl home, Kaitlyn imagines, will be a matter of getting her back over the fence and walking her to one of the houses just beyond. Her plans for the night have not changed much. In fact, the girl has made getting a man to stay the night easier. If Joe won't come along, she will find Tim. Tonight is still about Kaitlyn getting the attention of at least one of the two guys who had smiled at her in the living room.

“My house is so boring,” Emily says. “The only fun thing about my house is that I can hear all the music from my room!”

“What music?” Kaitlyn asks.

“All the stuff you guys play. It mixes together and sounds crazy in my room.”

Standing with Emily is getting irritating because Joe is not looking in Kaitlyn’s direction. Kaitlyn is also getting sick of straining to hear Ali, who is definitely shitting on her. Grabbing Emily’s hand, Kaitlyn walks her over to the beer pong table where Joe is talking and taps his shoulder.

“Joe” she says.

He turns around slowly.

“Yeah?”

Emily’s hand is still in hers. “This one,” she looks pointedly at Emily, noticing that she is standing with her back straight and her eyes fixed confidently on Joe, “wandered down here from—”

Kaitlyn imagines that Joe, ignoring her as strictly as he is, must be dedicating plenty of attention to interpreting the look Emily is giving him. He gets down with his knees in the grass so that they are eye to eye and asks, “What’s up? Are you lost?”

“No,” says Emily.

This is a bizarre moment.

“What do you mean you’re not lost?” Kaitlyn asks. “You’re what, ten years old, and you’re at a college party.”

“I’m eleven,” Emily says with her chin up and her eyes still on Joe. “I came down here because I wanted to. It looked like fun. Lights, dancing, everybody laughing.”

Joe raises his plastic cup, “It IS fun!” he yells. Everyone around raises their plastic cups so that all Kaitlyn can see is arms stretched up and cups in the air, and all Emily can see is probably torsos and a red plastic sky.

“Let her be,” Joe says, not even looking at Kaitlyn. “Girl came down here for a reason.”

Kaitlyn is starting to see her situation for what it is. She is the only relatively sober person here, aside from Emily, a lonely girl who has wandered down from her comfortable home atop the hill and into this disgusting and pathetic party. She wonders what she was thinking, wanting to hook up with Joe. Sure, he is half-decent looking, but is that how a person should act upon encountering a little girl at a college party?

“He’s right about you not having to worry about me,” Emily tells Kaitlyn. By the door, a circle of people cheer while a girl chugs something. Beside them, a girl leans into a kiss. “My dad says I’m smarter than most of his students.”

“Wow,” says Kaitlyn, “a kid whose dad thinks she’s smart.”

“My dad,” Emily says, lifting her chin and resting her hands on her hips, “is a professor. He might even be one of yours.”

“Doubt it,” Kaitlyn says. She watches while someone spills a drink and someone else dances and someone else takes a plastic ladle from one of the recycling bins, scooping red liquid into their cup.

“What are they drinking?” Emily asks.

“Kool-Aid and cheap vodka,” Kaitlyn tells her.

“What’s the difference between vodka and beer?”

“Vodka is a lot stronger,” she realizes that may not mean much to Emily. “It gets people drunk faster.”

“They’re all drunk.”

“Yeah.”

“Well my dad’s right about me being smarter than most of you,” Emily laughs, pulling at her sleeve. “I mean, I’m the only one who actually knows they want to be here.”

Kaitlyn looks at her. Her face is red and her breathing is shallow. She thinks about taking her home right away, but Emily is so excited. Plus, finding Tim first wouldn’t be the worst thing.

She takes Emily’s hand and maneuvers with her through dancing/screaming/drinking/spitting/kissing/and so on twentysomethings in favor of her new mission: finding Tim.

Tim is one of the other guys who smiled at her when she talked about spending three hundred dollars on plus sized clothes online. He is tall and has a runner’s body with long arms and legs. He had been shut down by Ali at the door, probably because he wasn’t toned enough, and because he wore an old grey T-shirt.

Emily goes along with finding Tim because as long as Kaitlyn is looking for guys, then she is not making Emily go home. Kaitlyn knows this, of course. Really they are just wandering around aimlessly. Emily has pulled her hand out of Kaitlyn’s and is adventuring a bit ahead. This makes Kaitlyn nervous, and when she loses sight of Emily completely, she panics.

“Emily,” she shouts, walking faster and faster, pushing through people. “Emily!” and there she is, standing over some guy’s hunched form. The sound of retching competes with the music and overcomes it as Kaitlyn gets closer. *Please don’t be Tim*, Kaitlyn is thinking.

Emily is not moving. “Are you okay?” she is asking the guy again and again, but he can’t answer. Kaitlyn puts her hand on Emily’s shoulder. Emily’s eyes are wide and her whole body is

shaking. She clings to Kaitlyn's arm. The man vomiting against the side of Kaitlyn's cottage is not Tim.

"What's wrong with him?" Emily asks, and for the first time she seems like an actual eleven-year-old.

"He'll be fine," Kaitlyn tells her. "He just drank too much."

Another standing near them yells. Emily flinches and clings to Kaitlyn even tighter. The guy comes closer. "Bobby!" he yells, and Kaitlyn realizes that the yelling guy is Tim. "You'll be okay, man," Tim laughs, laying a bottle of water beside him.

"Thanks for looking out for him," Tim says. "We need another team member for flip cup. Bobby was supposed to be our guy, are you down to replace him?"

Kaitlyn looks at Emily. How could Tim not ask about her?

"She can come, too," he says.

Kaitlyn takes Emily's hand and they follow him across the lawn. What the hell is wrong with these guys?

"You're the girl from earlier, right?" Tim asks.

Kaitlyn nods.

When they get to the table, Emily kicks at a cluster of cigarette butts. She is holding on to the hem of Kaitlyn's shirt and her hand is still shaking

"Thanks for hosting!" Tim says, touching her shoulder. She notices how big his hands are. His fingers are long and thick. She stares at his jaw line and imagines how his stubble will feel against her chin when they kiss.

“Wait here,” Tim tells them. They are in a circle full of guys now. Tim comes back with a handle and passes shot glasses around. “One for you, too,” he says to Emily, pouring amber liquid into her glass. Kaitlyn steps back.

“Are you serious?” she asks and Tim shrugs his shoulders. He gives her a shot glass and leaves his hand on hers.

“She’s here,” he says, winking at her. “She might as well have some fun!” He squeezes her hand before letting it go.

A guy near Kaitlyn steps toward Tim, “What’s your problem, dude?”

Tim steps back.

“She’s a kid, man. What the hell?”

“I’m NOT a kid,” Emily yells. Tim smiles and the other man goes silent.

“I can take it,” Emily says. Tim shouts, “That a girl!” and the other man shakes his head. Kaitlyn tries to think.

“I want to take it,” Emily says, but her face is splotched red and her arms are shaking.

Everyone is raising their glasses and Emily has hers up, too. Kaitlyn grabs the shot glass from Emily’s hand and throws it at Tim’s feet. Some guys boo. Tim downs his shot and shakes his head at her. She takes Emily’s hand and drags her away from the circle.

“What were you thinking?” she hisses. Emily shrugs her shoulders at first, and then her eyes fill up and she hangs her head. Kaitlyn is angry and scared. The air around them, she notices, smells awful. This is no place for Emily. She gets on her knees and wraps her arms around Emily. She feels her own eyes filling up.

A guy walks by and shouts, “Way to waste good whiskey.” He is breathing heavily. Kaitlyn doesn’t respond, doesn’t get up. She scoots back against the wall. She is cold. Emily stands near her, guarding her crumpled form.

“Leave her alone,” Emily yells back. The guy, farther away now, snorts. One of his friends punches his arm, “Dude you’re not really going to fight a little girl, are you?” he laughs.

Emily takes Kaitlyn’s arm. “Why would you want these dumb guys to pay attention to you anyway?” she asks.

Kaitlyn stares into the grass. She wants to talk to Emily. She actually wants to talk to Emily, but she is too young. An eleven-year-old shouldn’t know about the things that can be taken away from her or how easily they can be taken.

They are quiet. Kaitlyn tries to think, but it is impossible with the music, which is too loud, and the smell, which is disgusting.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” Emily says, and Kaitlyn offers her hand. She doesn’t know how to comfort her, the same way she didn’t know how to help when she first found her coughing on the lawn. She is only pushing against the idea of something. Still, she’ll walk Emily back home to one of those houses on top of the hill. She won’t let herself think even once of returning to her cottage, where the lawn will be littered with cups and Ali will have a man in her room, to be sure.

She’ll hug Emily at the door before ringing the bell and making sure that Emily’s dad is home or that someone is home and that Emily is safe. It is only on the walk back, on a street soft with porch light, that Kaitlyn will allow herself feel lost. It is only on the way back, hopping the cheap, plastic fence between Emily’s house and her complex that she’ll allow herself to wonder, if there were someone to take her home, in which direction she would point them.

The Escape of Fred Dunhime

“So,” the woman asks, turning toward the wall, “will you pick one?”

The character steps back. He glances toward the doorway, trying to see beyond it.

“It’s certainly unsettling,” he says.

“Enough that you’re thinking of walking out?” Something in her voice gestures to the objects in the room, though her eyes are focused on him.

He gives her a look and readjusts his sweater. Through the window over her shoulder, he can make out a blue-gray sky. Power lines nod and branches gossip in the wind. He is standing before a wall cluttered with paintings and photographs. She has placed him here, just as much as she has placed herself. Here is a room overflowing with rooms. Not in the abstract. The walls of the room are an off-white that is visible only in the narrow spaces between the frames that confine one image or expand another. Within the frames are hundreds of smaller rooms, some photographed, others painted, some recreated in small wooden boxes with little squares of cloth, some made of tile.

The character has only a vague sense of what walking out would expose him to. “Haven’t I been out before?” He wagers. “I came in, didn’t I?”

He has no solid memory of walking into the room, or his intention in doing so. He is piecing together an image, however, of what extends beyond the window scene. Wide black streets and the occasional car. A short drive into town, a longer one to a city.

She watches him. “Of course there is plenty of evidence that you have entered the room, for the sake of verisimilitude.”

His shoes are in the hallway, though he has never been in the hallway and has not taken a pair of shoes off. The wood is hard beneath his feet. She moves forward, touching a brown tile on one of the images in front of him. It is a small room, somewhere near the ocean. A white curtain flutters in the afternoon sun. She touches another tile, then another, and he tries to imagine himself in the room that her finger explores. The brown tile is the room’s wooden floor. The blue tile is the sky outside the window. The white tile is the rug, then the curtain. He looks away. She has put him into an uncomfortable sweater that itches particularly near his elbows and around his waist. She has called the wind outside. When it moves the old house whispers and when it settles the window is another frame through which the man sees the world, silent and still.

“This setting may suit you,” she says, turning her attention to another image, a wide room with a pool table in the center. The dreamlike oil on canvas is confined to an intricate mahogany frame.

“Two very different characters,” she smiles. “The man you find in a beach house on a sunny afternoon, and the one you find leaning over a billiard table in low lighting.”

The character examines the painting. He reaches out and feels the canvas. It is rough against his fingertips. The room beneath his fingers is only paint: the wood of the table is brown paint, the baize green, the carpet red, the doorway gray, the open door white. White paint. His pulse echoes and he wonders if she can see it in his neck, the rise and fall of it there, the beating.

There are worse rooms, of course. The one just to the left, for example, is a claustrophobic space with only two dirty windows, a dusty cement floor, and peeling cream-colored walls. Another, directly above his head, is the disturbing image of a bedroom cobbled together with blocks of bright color. The wall a rectangle of orange. The ceiling a slab of white. No window. A neon blue door leads into a yellow-walled bathroom. No room but the one he occupies with the woman is anything more than paint or tile. All but theirs find limits in the hard edges of wooden frames. He will choose no room but the one he stands in for himself, which to him is to choose no one room at all.

The woman has turned away from him, away from the wall. Her face is hidden, but he figures that she is watching the world outside the window, and he is watching, too. He wonders what else the woman has given him for authenticity. Out there, does he have a job? A wife? He thinks of rushing out of the room.

“You can’t leave,” she mummurs. He barely makes it out. “I’m not saying that in some romantic way,” she says, turning to face him. “I haven’t made it possible for you.”

He is hardly listening to her now, though he is afraid that what she says may be true. How well equipped for life outside of this room did she have to make him? How believable of a character is he? He has a sweater that is appropriate for the weather outside and a coat and shoes in the hall. He has never purchased anything, but he knows that things can be purchased. He finds a worn leather wallet in his right pocket that contains cash, a driver’s license, though he never procured one, and a few frayed ticket stubs.

“The only reason the thought of leaving is present at all is because I allowed for it,” she tells him. “I practically gave it to you.”

The picture on the license is a picture of the character. He does not remember seeing himself, but he knows that it is him. The name reads Fred Dunhime and the character knows that he is Fred and he knows that he does not need to be placed in one of the smaller rooms by the woman who is watching him now.

Fred makes his way to the hall. The woman lingers in the doorway. She thinks about telling Fred that this is what she wanted all along, for him to find his name in his pocket, for him to leave, though she has told him he cannot. In the hall, Fred pauses in front of an oval mirror. Beneath it, red flowers rest in a vase. He turns away from himself. This logic is a weapon she could hurl at him, but she does not know that it would wound him. She does not think that she wants to wound him.

Fred is tying his shoes for the first time. He twists the doorknob and pulls it in, toward himself.

The woman realizes that she loves Fred, although she did not create him to be loved. She scrambles to make a life for him. There, in the parking lot is a car for him to drive. The road will be familiar, and it will lead to a three-bedroom house with a white porch and a warm kitchen where a woman sits waiting. When Fred opens the door she will rush to him and ask what he was still doing out, why he didn't call. Fred will lie, work running late, but he will feel like a hero returned home. He learns about himself from the way his wife smiles and from the photographs on the fridge. He will put himself together detail by detail. She will not write another sentence of him.

Casual Dating

While following my boyfriend and the mystery girl, I keep my head low, staying on the other side of the street. Their arms swing casually at their sides. They are just passing the local dry-cleaner. “C’mon,” the sign above my boyfriend’s head implores, “drop your pants here!” He is in plaid shorts and a white t-shirt. Her hair is pulled back and she has a light hoodie wrapped around her hips.

I think about them both dropping their pants right there. He would probably be in some faded, baggy pair of boxers. Enticing. In her case, what would be exposed might be more useful. The girl, after all, has a physique uncomfortably similar to mine. Melissa, my best friend, often describes me as “flat on all sides.” The girl, unless her hoodie is hiding something surprising, has the same problem. I actually apologize to guys when they first see me with my shirt off. When I did this with my current boyfriend, he shook his head. “That’s not really what I’m into anyway,” he said. Then he slapped my ass.

My boyfriend, who identifies as a feminist, wishes I could hear the way men talk when women aren’t around. He tells me that if I could only hear them go off about asses and tits, hear the terrible things that casually come out of their mouths, then I’d realize that no man has pure intentions while talking to me. At first I was flattered by this. I thought that he must have found me exceptionally attractive. Then I asked him how I could be sure that he wasn’t constantly having dirty thoughts while talking to me, if he was so sure that every other guy was.

“I’m not pretending not to have those thoughts,” he said.

Then, last night, we had sex for the first time. He was ravenous—didn't look into my eyes at all and never slowed down. Don't get me wrong, we cuddled after and everything. It's not like he ran out. Seeing him walking around with a girl whose body is just like mine after that kind of thing though. I just—

I am still following them. They are both in tennis shoes and walk at a pace that makes my feet ache in my heeled black sandals. My skirt causes problems, too, tangling and tugging at my legs when I move too quickly. This sucks. Overcome with the need to share the shittiness of the situation, I text Melissa.

Guess who just walked past me with a dif. girl?

I wait. No response.

They cross the street, almost exposing me, but I duck behind a building and press against the cool brick, letting it scratch my skin. My shoulders, which have been held high and tense, slouch in the shade. I check my phone again. Still nothing. My boyfriend hasn't responded to the last text I sent, about two hours and forty-five minutes ago now. This isn't all that surprising. He is against looking at his phone during face-to-face interactions because it "diminishes their quality." He gets upset even if I glance at mine for the time. In the alley, I stare at my phone. It is nothing but a rectangle of metal covered in a plastic case. Then it comes to life, blinking red light. I swipe the screen.

Nuh uh. Melissa replies. Wayne? I told you that Wayne Scagline was a jerk ass—

Letting out a sigh of relief, I preoccupy myself with the automatic motion of responding. Thank God. Dispelled now is the worry that today will be like this morning, when I sat alone amongst my friends who were all texting other friends, boyfriends, siblings, etc. I had no one because I am an only child, most of my friends were sitting there across from me, and Wayne

was at soccer practice. For at least an hour, I busied myself on Wayne's Facebook. I chewed on my lip as I flipped through picture after picture of him and his ex. He hasn't posted a single picture of the two of us. On top of that his ex, like the girl with him now, had a body just like mine. Light hair, a small frame, and no curves to speak of.

Wayne passes with the girl. He is smiling open-mouthed. She is laughing, leaning toward him. She may have a body like mine, but we do not look alike. She is one of those girls who— Think of the prettiest girl in your high school. That kind of girl, your typical homecoming queen—strong, but delicately framed. A girl whose hair looks perfect, even if it is a sloppy mess. A girl with straight, white teeth, with a perfectly sized forehead and eyes just the right width apart. Maybe some freckles or a beauty mark, probably high cheek bones.

I wait a moment before crossing to the opposite side of the street, relaxing only when I feel that I am, once again, at a safe distance.

Yeah... I text Melissa. Plus she's gorg.

It's not that I'm into objectifying women. Aside from being good looking, this girl may very well be an incredible musician. She may be fluent in another language. She could be a great programmer or writer, whatever. My heart sinks. I remember my boyfriend telling me how much he loved to sing with his last girlfriend, who he says has an amazing voice. I wonder if the girl beside him can sing.

Ahead of me, they begin to slow down. We are approaching a street speckled with shops, but my instincts tell me that they will end up sitting down at one of the few restaurants nearby. I think about what this might mean. Checking my phone again, I see that it is 3:47. This annoys me. What a goddamn ambiguous time. Is it late afternoon or early evening? Depends on who you ask. Is my boyfriend on a dinner date or grabbing lunch with a friend? Have I been wronged

(dinner date) or am I being crazy (grabbing lunch). Whatever their situation, I realize, mine is in no way ambiguous.

What if I staged an encounter? I could put headphones in and walk past them, distracted. It would be a matter of noticing them just in time. “Hey, Wayne,” I could say and read his expression. Would it be one of panic? Of amusement? How would he introduce the girl beside him? As a friend, a classmate, someone from work?

They have passed one of the only three restaurants on the street, an Italian place with white table cloths and downturned glasses. Still they continue to walk, kicking a rock back and forth between them. In front of me, on the opposite side of the street for them, is a deli with a painted sign and some outdoor seating. This is where they will eat, I realize. Of course. I check my phone.

Damn... Melissa has texted back. What're you gonna do?

Of course they're going to a deli at 3 fucking— it's 3:51 now. I'm not getting any answers. With a sigh I slip into a nearby bank, so confident am I that the deli is where they will eat. So sure am I that I will not lose them.

In the bank I tell Melissa that I'm following them and try to map out the deli in my head. Wayne and I often go there for lunch. It is a small space, with the kitchen in the back and the entrance and exit in the front. Rather than chairs, the deli has high booths. If I can slip past them once and sit at one of the booths behind them, I won't need to worry about them passing me on the way out.

Walking casually past the deli, I see that Wayne has chosen to sit in our regular spot. I slouch against the building, opening my phone. Its little red light is not blinking, which means that I do not have any new messages, but I click on his name in my contacts and pull up our

conversation anyway. My message still hangs there, unanswered. Glancing back into the deli, I see that our regular spot is at least optimal for my intentions: close enough to the entrance that I can sneak past them and plenty of seats behind.

In the air-conditioned deli, they are sipping from oversized plastic cups. Wayne hasn't looked at his phone yet, which makes me feel better. Seeing them in our regular spot has me wondering what it would take for me to throw in the towel. For example, would I go home if he pulled out his phone now and, laughing, showed it to the girl beside him?

No. I'm sure I wouldn't. Even if the answer was laid out plainly in front of me, I'd want to see it again and again. I'd want to feel the weight of the accumulating evidence, the cruel blow of being betrayed.

I wait until Wayne's face is hidden behind one of the huge, laminated menus and slip into the deli. Catching another glimpse of the girl, I see that aside from being objectively attractive, she is just Wayne's type. I think of the other girl, his ex who I saw kissing his cheek on Facebook. His broad smile in the picture matches his smile today, while the girl laughed beside him. Last weekend, when his friends told me that he only dated tiny girls, I made a face. "What does that even mean?" I asked. "Girls who look like a good wind would blow them away," one laughed.

Wayne rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Don't take them seriously," he said. "They're messing with you." He kissed me on the cheek and spoke in my ear, "You know that I'm attracted to you for who you are," he said. "You know that."

"What do you like about me?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "That is a question that deserves some real thought."

“You have to think?”

“You know that’s not what I meant” he said quickly. “I really like how smart you are.”

“Thanks,” I said.

But the answer was just as useless as the initial statement, “I’m attracted to you for who you are,” which is far too general to have any meaning. Who am I without the body I am in anyway? As far as modern science is concerned, no one. Certainly I wouldn’t be smart without my brain. Perhaps my insecurities could have been circumvented had he given me a more specific response, something more personal, like: “I love the way you treat animals” or “I think you’re a wonderful friend.”

I wish he would grab the girl and kiss across the table. Then I could know, be hurt, and be done with it. Instead, he keeps his eyes on the menu as I slip past with my head down, my hands shaking.

Behind them, I order an iced tea in a hushed voice and try to reign in my nerves. My seat faces the entrance, which means that when they get up to leave they will be walking away from me. I check my phone.

C’mon, a new text from Melissa reads. *You have better things to do.*

I do not. I think about going home to the apartment I share with Melissa. Maybe we would talk for a few minutes before she closed her door, returning to her room with her boyfriend. I would leave my door open, as I always do, and through her closed one I would hear only the hum of the TV, maybe some occasional laughter.

I focus on the booth in front of me. It isn’t easy, but if I listen closely I can make out clips of their conversation.

“I’m always the first to know what I want to order in a restaurant,” Wayne brags. “No one else is fast enough.”

This throws me off. Wayne takes forever to order. Sometimes we have to send the waiter away two or three times before he knows what he wants. Then he gets anxious and worries that the staff will think he’s stupid for taking too long to order something simple. On top of that, when I eat here with Wayne, he spends most of the meal ripping the place apart. He says that the staff is probably underpaid and that it’s not right for everything on a restaurant’s menu to include meat. He often throws in critiques of the space as well. He’ll say, for example, that the lighting is so terrible that he’s getting a headache. When I say I want to talk about happier things he snaps, “I’m sorry that I like to think.” Then he asks, “How’s Melissa doing?” as if it is the dumbest thing in the world to ask. A complete waste of time. Of course that is on a bad day. On a good day I simply complain with him.

At the table beside me, a young girl bangs her plastic cup against the cheap wood of her chair. The ice inside the cup clinks, the table wobbles, and her father leans over her, speaking firmly. A waitress brings a pitcher of water and refills the girl’s drink. I try again to concentrate.

“My friends eat so slow,” the girl is saying.

Great, I think. Girl can’t even construct a sentence correctly. A man in a stained, off-white apron brings my iced tea. “Can I get you anything to eat?” he asks and I shake my head. On the other side of the table, the girl carries on.

“I look so young,” she says. “No matter where I go they’re always like, ‘Who left this child in here?’ It was such a problem when I was underage.” I hear her laugh and wish that I could see her. Is she leaning toward Wayne or looking out the window? And how is he looking at her?

The man in the apron brings their food. I check my phone. No messages, so I settle back into listening to the conversation behind me. “I hate this beard,” says Wayne. “I grew one so that I won’t get carded when I go out.”

Wayne does not drink much, and when he does he sips his beer and tries not to let his lips curl at the taste. I wonder what he’s trying to pull with this girl, talking so casually. I look down into my drink disappointed. I know he’s lying, but I thought that, although he hated how itchy it made his face, he grew his beard out because I had told him once that it suited him. I told all of my friends how cute it was of him.

I can’t make out the girl’s response. Their conversation isn’t giving much away. No longer invested in trying to listen, I change strategies in order to better observe the girl. Moving around, I look through the crack between the booth’s tall back and the wall at different angles, eventually finding a half-decent position. If I press myself against the wall and crane my neck a bit to the right, a decent view is possible. In position, I watch her while she talks and while she listens, noticing a few things that I didn’t see at a distance.

First, her eyes are not as perfectly spaced as I had initially noted. They are a little too far apart, which makes the bridge of her nose uncomfortably wide and gives her a vacant look. Next, her hair, which I had perceived as thrown back in the kind of careless way that very beautiful girls can get away with, is actually just sloppily pulled back. It looks unkempt, like she has just gone for a jog or hasn’t showered in a few days. Finally, she has a raised mole near her mouth that from a distance may have looked like an elegant beauty mark, but close-up is altogether distracting.

Should this make me feel better? No. But it does. My phone blinks and when I check it I see that Melissa has send me a long, long text.

After reading it, I sigh. Of course she, who has been with her boyfriend for over two years, is going to be preachy. She, after all, is the first one to criticize me when I drink too much or when I start to see a new guy.

“There’s this awful pressure for people our age to be in relationships,” she told me as soon as I started seeing Wayne. My whole first week with him she was texting me all of these stupid quotes about self-fulfillment. “You don’t need anyone else to be happy,” blah blah, all that shit. Easy for her to say that it is fine to be alone. When was the last time Melissa was alone?

Just as the man in the apron comes to refill my iced tea, the girl slips out of the stall and pushes herself forward, toward the kitchen. Why is she heading in this direction? Our eyes meet and I panic for a moment before realizing that she has no idea who I am. This irks me. She moves with a force that reminds me of swimming against a current, with her shoulders squared and her chin held up. I realize that the bathrooms are in the back, past the kitchen. Once she is out of sight, I hear my boyfriend shuffling around in the booth and panic again. I can’t believe I didn’t think about the bathrooms. How stupid am I? If my boyfriend walks toward the men’s room, I’ll have nowhere to hide. I don’t even have a laminated menu to hold over my face.

The girl spends four minutes in the bathroom, then walks past me again. It takes the pair another three minutes to settle the bill. I am relieved that he doesn’t offer to pay for her. He tells me that when a man pays for a woman’s dinner he is initiating a contract in which she is expected to return the favor sexually.

After seven minutes of waiting, they stand and I sit still, wondering what I’ll do if my boyfriend walks past me. I think about hiding under the table, but don’t want to spook the staff. I think about going to the bathroom myself and hiding there for however long, but can’t dismiss the possibility of him recognizing me from behind.

“Have you been sitting there the whole time?” he’d ask. “That’s so weird. Why didn’t you say come say hi to us?”

Unable to devise a satisfactory plan of action, I resign myself to fate. He never passes. They leave the restaurant and I wait a few minutes before paying my bill and following. Losing them now might not be the worst thing. I hope they have taken a sharp turn somewhere and will be out of sight. The bell tied above the door chimes as I leave and there they are, walking ahead of me.

I am hungry and it is getting late. I check my phone for the time and see that Melissa has texted me.

Just come home. Don't you have shit to do for tomorrow?

All of a sudden I feel very tired. I think of Wayne saying, when I tell him that I’d like to spend a little more time together, that we need to have our own separate lives, our own hobbies, our own passions.

I'll be home soon. I text her.

I am about to give up, to quit, to throw in the towel. I am about to turn around, and then I see that Wayne and the girl have turned into the walkway of an old house. I watch the girl open the door casually, without ringing the bell or knocking. Is this her house? Or is it his? If only I knew, the quick movement of her hand, the familiar placement of force on the knob, the easy step with which she crossed the threshold could have told me everything.

Unfortunately, I have never been to his place and assumed that he, like me, lived in an apartment. We don’t spend much time together, but when we do we either go to dinner or a movie. When we started to get more intimate we did it at my place, because he claims that his is too far away.

My guess is that the house is hers because of the way she leads and he follows, disappearing behind her. I wonder what he is he trying to pull with her, and then I think of his critique of other men. He tells me not to trust them because they act one way to get what they want from a woman, and then talk differently to their friends. Is that what he has been doing with her? Lying to get her to let him into her house?

I approach the house, wondering what to do. Do I leave now? Isn't he going to cheat on me in there? I imagine it, placing him in a neat room with a big bed at the center, surrounded by a desk cluttered with papers, a full-length mirror, and a closet bursting with clothes. They walk through the doorway. She doesn't bother to flip the light switch. Her figure is indistinguishable from mine in the dim room. Wayne puts his hands on her shoulders and says something very un-Wayne. She leans in and I imagine that I am her, that Wayne's arms are resting gently on my shoulders. I image that I am the one to whom Wayne brags boyishly about how quick he is to know what he wants. And when Wayne holds me this time he looks at me. He takes his time loving me, leaning in often to kiss me.

It is nothing like before.

A car horn startles me, and I realize that I am standing in the middle of the street. I rush out of the driver's way, moving to the edge of the girl's lawn. My heels sink into the grass and my feet ache. I don't have a jacket. When the wind blows my skirt balloons and my arms shake. I turn away from the house, letting my heels scrape against the pavement as I walk toward the nearest bus.

Goodbye, Mr. Rochester

Gloria pulls at the strands of hair above her temple, slowly undoing the bun she looped a few minutes ago in the elevator. Her body had felt weightless within the shifting metal walls. Now, she tugs her hair down in clumps. The door behind her is locked. A single golden key sits on the glass table, its plastic tag opaque. The rest of the room is silver and winter grey.

The tugging incites first a sharp pain, like a headache, and then a sort of disgusting resistance. The larger clumps of hair refuse to be separated from the body collected at the back of her head. They cling to it, knotting themselves so that she has to rip them apart. Weak light leaks in from three large widows. Buildings, blue and grey, clutter the sky.

To Gloria's left is a spotless kitchen. The refrigerator, which holds at most two empty pitchers, hums. A glass kettle waits on the electric stove. The hallway in front of her has a low ceiling that leads to the master bedroom. She tugs on one final clump before letting her hair fall down. Clean everywhere else first, she tells herself.

In the living room, clear strings with drops of copper and silver hang at different lengths from the ceiling like tiny flames, or thick rain. Gloria snorts. To her they look like a giant cloud of sperm swimming down from the ceiling—an observation best kept from Mrs. Rochester. Gloria collects her hair again into a neat bun, then sprays blue liquid onto the windows and wipes it away. She sprays lemon-scented cleaner on the windowsills and the dark coffee table and wipes it away, glancing toward the bedroom door when the cloth squeaks.

By now she has missed the mad dash for the washing machines in the building's basement. She glances at her watch, its once white plastic covered in grey and black scuff marks. It is twenty after four, late enough for a machine to be available. She collects blankets from the couch and towels from the kitchen, leaving them in a pile against the door. Then she heads down the narrow hallway.

In front of the bedroom door, she begins to tug at her hair again. Eventually she unties it, letting it fall down her shoulders and across her back. Smoothing the wrinkles out of her red blouse, she regrets that she smells like cleaning chemicals and not something sweeter. The dark stains under her armpits are unforgivable. She collects herself, tying her dark hair back again. He will not be there. This she knows with something near certainty. He will not be there, in the large white bed at the center of the room. Still, she cannot stand before the thick wood of the door and grasp its cold knob without being reminded of him as he was, stirring under the duvet, dissected by pale light.

From a round plastic container she pulls a lemon-scented disinfecting wipe. She moves the handle slowly, peering through the door's narrow opening like an animal searching for the source of some noise in the dark. There is only silence. The door peels away to reveal a still, white room. Gloria sighs, placing a quizzical hand over her chest. The motorized blinds, still lowered, slice the room into segments of light and shadow.

The Rochesters leave the remote for the blinds sitting always on the outer edge of the nightstand. It is a small black thing with two arrows, one pointing toward Gloria, the other pointing away, toward the wall. Her thumb passes over the arrow signaling her chest on its way to the other. The blinds rise and the room is made whole again. It is impossible to recount how it had been divided a moment before.

The bathroom attached to the bedroom isn't as clean as usual. Mr. Rochester's beard hairs, dark as pepper, litter the sink. Gloria tries to remember whether or not Mr. Rochester had a beard when she last saw him in the apartment. His face was shadowed with dark stubble the time she found him in the bed. This is the only image of his face she can recollect, though she has seen him since, if only in passing.

A dark pair of his boxers lie crumpled behind the door. Gloria reaches for them. They are smooth and cold. Their silky material ripples when she picks them up, thin strips of navy giving way to thicker ones of a lighter blue. She tosses them into a drawer full of dirty underwear and socks that pulls out from under the sink. Throwing the cloths into a bag, she tries to kill the image of him tossing the boxers aside and stepping into the shower. When she succeeds, it is only replaced by him under the duvet.

From the other room, she hears the clicking of a lock. Bags are placed on the glass table in the kitchen. Footsteps head in her direction. Mrs. Rochester clears her throat. Gloria's face flushes.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Rochester," Gloria says, heading out of the bathroom with a bag full of dirty laundry. In her heels, Mrs. Rochester stands a few inches taller than Gloria, and looking up at her, Gloria thinks of her mother. The two women are only a few years apart in age, but Gloria's mother, whose skin wrinkles near the edges of her eyes and mouth, whose joints are stiffening, whose hair is greying, looks at least a decade older than Mrs. Rochester.

"It's nearly evening. Have you seen my Mr. Rochester?" Mrs. Rochester asks. There is a gentle wave to her blond hair. Her blouse is not stiff, like Gloria's. It is sheer and graciously accommodates Mrs. Rochester's slim body. Her heels and lips are red, her skirt black. Gloria shakes her head.

“Of course not,” she says.

Mrs. Rochester steps toward her, moving with ease, even in heels.

“Give me that,” she says, then stops for a moment. Gloria looks down at her scuffed black work shoes. “Please,” she adds, reaching toward Gloria. Her nails are mostly clear, save for their opaque tips.

Gloria steps back.

Mrs. Rochester grabs the bag, spilling a single black sock and a pair of her underwear, red and lacy.

“Okay,” Gloria says, leaving Mrs. Rochester in the doorway. She yanks the duvet from the bed and tries not to think of Mr. Rochester there, under the sheets, even though she can smell cologne. Mrs. Rochester stands and watches her strip the bed.

“Leave the mattress pad,” she says.

Gloria leaves it.

“Wait, take it. Did you wash it this week? Take it.”

Gloria takes it.

Mrs. Rochester follows Gloria to the elevator, then waits for her to press the button. As they descend, Gloria pulls a strand of hair from her bun, twirling it between her fingers. She is glad that she decided against sneaking her own laundry in today, although it has been a week and a half since she last mixed her dirty clothes with the Rochester’s and she is re-wearing yesterday’s socks.

“Would you fill the pitchers in the fridge before you leave?” Mrs. Rochester asks. Gloria nods, staring at the elevator’s carpeted floor. She sees light grey circles inside of dark grey squares.

“Fill them with what?”

In the master bedroom, Gloria dusts a set of glass framed movie posters that hang to the left of the bed. On each poster, she searches for the line of thin grey print that reads, “Produced by Scott Rochester.” Covering the face of a beautiful blond woman with her green dusting cloth, she images her own face there, her hair done in waves, but the dirty cloth transmogrifies the image. The woman does not smile. She stares straight at the camera, her gaze accusatory. Gloria thinks that the woman may be a young Mrs. Rochester, but her name does not appear on the poster. The woman has one thin eyebrow raised.

Grabbing the bottom corner of the duvet, Gloria begins to strip the bed. Something shifts and the duvet is yanked forward. She lets go immediately, jumping back. The room blinks slowly. Pale winter light trembles. The blankets twist to reveal a leg, an arm, and a head.

Mr. Rochester.

Gloria stays still. She takes a moment to breath, then looks at her watch. One hand points toward the posters, the other points to the bed. It is 10 am. She reaches out to wake him, then withdraws. Water moves through the pipes in the bathroom. Until now, their only interactions have consisted of strangely intense nods of acknowledgement. Mr. Rochester is in the habit of giving these when she looks up from working and his eyes meet hers. A thick sheet of reflective metal covers the wall opposite the bed. Gloria watches herself, her distorted image, then turns away.

Studying his sleeping form, she notes that Mr. Rochester is much more handsome than she had first perceived. His face, normally sharp and focused, is soft now.

“Come over her,” he mutters, voice thick with sleep, eyes closed.

Gloria does not move. She wishes the room were darker. Long razors of light cut across the bed. They demarcate Mr. Rochester's face arbitrarily—his sloping nose and his left ear one territory, his chin another, a random patch of his hair another, and so forth.

“What’s wrong, Sweetie?” His voice is gentle.

Gloria steps closer.

“There you are.” He lays his hand on her arm. It is warm. He laughs and the smile lingers on his face. She lays her hand on his, removing it from her arm. Grabbing the two arrowed remote from the nightstand, Gloria presses the button that points inward and watches the blinds descend slowly. The room is a syrupy shadow. She breathes in, sitting beside him and pulling the blanket over his exposed shoulder.

“Thank you, Sweetheart,” he breathes.

In the basement, Gloria shows Mrs. Rochester how to use the machines. The laundry detergent Gloria uses is dark blue and Mrs. Rochester asks why all cleaning supplies are such unnatural colors. Gloria shrugs.

“These are high efficiency,” Gloria tells Mrs. Rochester before she pours the thick blue liquid into the machine. “A little goes a long way.”

The machines are white with circles of clear plastic in the middle.

“Can I be frank with you?” Mrs. Rochester asks.

The laundry room is not as clean as the rest of the building and this is probably Mrs. Rochester's first time in it. She peaks into a black trash can to her right. It is filled with used sheets and lint from the dyer, white and fuzzy grey. She grabs a handful of clothes from the pile

and throws them into the washing machine's open mouth. Gloria wants to tell her that she ought to sort them, but decides not to. They'll wash everything in cold water.

"Of course," Gloria responds, separating the sheets and towels from the rest of the clothes.

"I don't know what my husband sees in you."

The basement ceiling is the kind that has squares that move if you push up against them. Their rough surfaces are speckled with black and grey. Above their heads a light flickers, buzzes, and burns out.

"I don't think he and I have ever spoken to each other," Gloria responds.

Mrs. Rochester steps away from her. The click of her heels echoes.

Gloria closes the washing machine's door, then holds down the start button. The button does not work unless you press it down until your thumb is red and shaking. Finally the machine beeps and the door clicks. Mrs. Rochester is startled by the noise it makes, a sort of agitated grunting, but Gloria tells her it's normal. She tells Mrs. Rochester about that morning in their bedroom.

"He thought I was you," she says.

Mrs. Rochester starts to cry. She picks at the tips of her nails.

"I'm sorry," she says, "but I want to fire you."

Gloria doesn't say anything. She hands Mrs. Rochester a pillow case. She has already stopped crying and Gloria watches her wipe away the dark makeup under her eyes. The white pillow case is littered with black smudges that start thick and then form tails, like comets.

“Let’s go back upstairs,” Mrs. Rochester says after a while. In the elevator Gloria checks her watch and sees that it is quarter to seven. She stares at light circles trapped in the carpet’s dark squares.

“Can I finish the laundry tomorrow?” she asks, and then realizes that Mrs. Rochester is firing her.

When the door tings and then opens, the apartment is dark and Mr. Rochester is sitting on the couch with a drink in his hand. The amber liquid looks otherworldly.

Mr. Rochester watches Gloria close the door behind them.

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to fire our maid,” Mr. Rochester laughs.

Mrs. Rochester takes a step closer to Gloria. Outside, a red light is blinking.

“I have fired her,” she says.

“You can’t.” He turns to Gloria. The light is still blinking. The walls around Mr. Rochester flash distorted red, then return to grey. “Come here,” he calls.

Gloria doesn’t move.

“Let me fix you a drink.”

“Scott,” Mrs. Rochester pleads. “Stop this. I pay her every month, why shouldn’t I—”

“What do you pay her with?” Mr. Rochester sneers.

“That’s not fair.”

Gloria watches Mr. Rochester stand, then clumsily manipulate his feet. His heavy step is muffled by the carpet.

“She could be just what I need,” he says to Mrs. Rochester. “Look at her! Beautiful, young, thin, poor!”

He turns to Gloria. “Imagine yourself as a star.”

His sharp eyes are focused on her. The red light has stopped flashing. The apartment is crepuscular.

“Oh, I’ve imagined it,” Mr. Rochester says, reaching toward Gloria.

“That’s not fair,” Mrs. Rochester says, “I’ve had jobs. I have an income.”

Her voice surprises him. He moves his eyes away from Gloria slowly, turning to Mrs. Rochester. His face twitches and Gloria wants to jump back, but is afraid to move. Mrs. Rochester’s eyes are bright and remarkably visible in the dimly lit room.

“Leave,” he says.

Mrs. Rochester stands frozen.

“Leave,” he says again, and his voice is fortified with the utmost certainty that his command will be carried out.

Mrs. Rochester leaves.

Mr. Rochester steps toward Gloria, grabbing her arm, pulling her into the living room. His grip is nothing like the soft, somnambulatory one she remembers. The apartment is getting darker. The glass table, the golden key, the hanging copper and silver flames all reflect light from the windows of nearby buildings. Shadows flit across Mr. Rochester’s face, distorting his features.

Gloria struggles, but Mr. Rochester quickly takes hold of her other shoulder.

“Stop,” she whispers, but he doesn’t stop. The room is grey as ash.

“Stop,” she says louder, forcing the certainty of outcome she heard in his voice into her own. Her voice is precarious. It sounds like a question. He does not stop.

They are standing underneath the copper and silver flames. Thick metal rain. Gloria thinks of the end of the world. Something rattles in the kitchen, but there is nothing there. Only

the empty fridge humming and the empty pitchers and the glass kettle, still waiting. Mr.

Rochester's breath is heavy. His eyes are fixated on her. He reaches out, tugging at her bun, but the hair remains in place. He searches for her hairband, but cannot untwist it when he finds it.

Instead, he yanks at the back of her head a few times until her hair falls loose, then relaxes.

Gloria stares ahead. She thinks of the woman on the poster whose face she covered with the green dusting cloth. She wonders if the woman really is Mrs. Rochester. Then she sees her.

Mrs. Rochester has taken off her shoes. She looks at Gloria and Gloria looks at her. Gloria relaxes her arm in Mr. Rochester's grip. He smiles, his white teeth flashing strangely in the grey light. This smile bears no resemblance to the one he offered in his sleep. The elevator dings.

Copper and silver hang on clear strings above their heads. Mrs. Rochester moves toward Gloria.

They watch the elevator door open, slowly. Police radios beep. There are strange voices, static.

Her arm stings from Mr. Rochester's grip. She closes her eyes. The apartment is dark. She feels Mrs. Rochester's hand, smooth where the pressure had been. Soft.

S-Curve

Mary jerks awake to the sound of another STAT MedEvac helicopter landing on the hospital's roof outside of her window. She leaves her husband snoring on the stiff, two-cushion couch that has served as their bed for the past two days. A few feet in front of her, her daughter's sleeping form is illuminated by the medical copter's flashing red lights. Her hospital gown, open in the back, turns red and then white again. Mary follows the dressings over her daughter's scar from her neck down to her mid-back and kills the urge to shake her awake, to make sure she knows that her mother is here. She thinks of her own scar, much longer, and remembers her own hospital room and longs for her own mother.

Here, in her daughter's private hospital room, she thinks of the six girls she shared a unit with in Rochester, New York after her operation. She smiles when she remembers the way they would count airplanes together quietly when they couldn't sleep. She feels, even now, a strange connection with those girls who she shared a month of her life with in that white room.

"God, you're so creepy," her daughter snaps and Mary jumps. Allison presses a button on her morphine pump. "Like I need to wake up to you freaking smiling down at me from my bedside."

Mary takes a step away from the bed toward the tacky geometric-print couch where her husband is still snoring.

"I just wanted you to know I was here," she says quietly.

"Make him shut up!" Allison moans.

Outside the window, the helicopter engine is dying down. Mary lies beside her husband on the small couch and shakes him awake before falling asleep herself.

Mary wakes up before the surgical residents make their rounds. She takes a Tramadol for her neck and a muscle relaxer for her back. Allison is asleep in her bed, so Mary presses the button for more morphine. On the geometric couch, her husband stirs awake.

“Day three of eleven,” he laughs.

They will be in their daughter’s white hospital room for eight more days– the duration of her recovery.

Mary took a month to recover from the same spinal surgery some forty years ago, at age fourteen. She never thought that her daughter would have to go through the same thing. When she noticed the curve in Allison’s spine, almost a year ago, she shut out the implications. She took her to the orthopedic, of course, but she didn’t think about it.

* * *

“A thirty-five degree curve is manageable,” the doctor tells her daughter. Allison nods her head slowly. Mary is elated. “So she won’t need surgery?” Mary asks, wanting only to hear him say no. She knows it is not that simple. She knows that her daughter is still growing and that the curve could grow too, but she wants to ignore that. She wants a simple answer. Allison tenses. “Doctor Bennett,” he says slowly, “you know as well as anyone that scoliosis is a chronic disease. Even if she avoids the surgery, this will affect her for the rest of her life.”

Chronic–this is a word that Mary should have expected to hear, but did not.

“Chronic,” she tries the word out. It means something different to her; it means unfair and never-ending. Mary lives with chronic pain. There is a stainless steel rod fused to her spine. She had not thought that her daughter would. She had never thought that.

“But if she doesn’t need the surgery...” Mary starts.

Allison glares at her.

“Doctor Bennett,” the orthopedic interjects, “I know that you want what is best for your daughter, but—Can I speak with you outside?”

Mary’s face flushes red. She feels like a child who is being punished for talking in class. The doctor closes the door gently behind him.

“What I think we should avoid,” he says, “is talking to Allison as if she will definitely not need to undergo spinal surgery.”

Mary leans against the wall.

“I know this is hard for you, but you are a family physician, not an orthopedic doctor. I need you to let me do my job.”

Mary nods.

“She is only thirteen, and a thirty-five degree curve is a substantial one.”

She doesn’t respond, but the doctor opens the door and motions her back inside. He sits back down and types something into his computer.

“We’ll need to implement noninvasive treatment,” he says and Mary freezes. “I’ll schedule an appointment to measure and fit her with a brace.”

Here, Mary admits that she has lost a sense of mental stability. The treatment of scoliosis has developed in strides since she was diagnosed in 1973, some forty years ago, but this does not stop her fears for her daughter from agglutinating with her own private ones. The white walls of the office, the man with his insouciant smile, they begin to change the neural charges in her brain, generating electrochemical pulses. *I am fifty-seven years old*, Mary tells herself. She looks

at Allison, who is shaking silently in her chair. *I need to be a mother*, she tries to reason with her brain.

She is not a mother. Instead, she is fourteen and she is being stretched out on a Risser casting frame. The frame, raised three feet from the ground, looks like a medieval torture device. Hanging from thick chains above her head are two large metal rings. When a tall man in white scrubs tells her to grab onto the rings, the action is familiar. She remembers hanging from similar rings, these ones covered in yellow plastic, at her school's playground. Her palms burn. The room is cold, and when her leg or side brushes against the metal frame she realizes, again and again, that she is naked. The man ties her wrists above her head and puts big weights on her hips and around her neck. She wants to struggle, but is afraid to move. She doesn't know why this is happening. In her head, she repeats the few words she overheard between the doctor and her dad: *elongation and derotation, elongation and derotation*. They are her only clue. She is afraid that maybe this is punishment for the things she had been doing with her cousin. The things she had let her cousin do to her. She tries not to think of it that way. She knows there is something wrong with her back.

She had known there was something wrong by the way her dad was looking at her, but he had never said a thing. "Let me look at your back," he had said, and then made a face that said "Something is very wrong." Now they are stretching her out. They are pulling her apart. They wrap her neck, then her torso in white stockinette, then in Plaster of Paris. When they are done she finds herself inside of a thick cast that winds around the back of her head, making a collar that scratches against her chin and holds her neck up straight. There is a big hole in the front, around her breasts, so that she can still breathe, so that her lungs have room to expand. Her body

is mostly covered; she is inside a plaster shell, but she still feels exposed. The man hands her washcloths to cover her breasts.

In the office, the doctor hands her a slip of paper that reads: “Living with Scoliosis: A Guide to Braces and other Noninvasive Treatments.” Her hands are shaking. She puts the paper in her lap and, pretending to look at it, presses her arms against her chair’s wooden armrests. She ignores the doctor and takes a slow breath in through her nose, holds it, and breathes it out through her mouth.

“Mom, are you ok?” Allison asks. Mary realizes that she has all but forgotten that her daughter, who has just learned that her spine is curved 35 degrees, is in the room. She is overcome with such guilt, such self-resentment that she almost allows herself to curl up in a ball on the carpeted floor of the office.

I need to be a mother, she tells herself again.

“I’m just worried about your volleyball season,” Mary says. “She on a team,” she tells the orthopedic.

“She’ll be able to play,” he says with a nod.

Allison lets out a sign.

Mary stares back at the paper in her lap. “Living with Scoliosis,” it reads. Mary realizes that there are a lot of things she hasn’t learned about her own surgery. She did not ask questions. Things were not explained to her.

“Living with Scoliosis: A Guide to Braces and other Noninvasive Treatments,” reads as such:

What is Scoliosis?

- This guide is for individuals diagnosed with adolescent idiopathic scoliosis (AIS), the most common form of scoliosis. Although many theories have been presented, AIS has no identifiable cause. Current research, however, indicates that AIS is inherited, as a family history of scoliosis can be determined in roughly 30% of patients diagnosed with AIS.

Who Gets Scoliosis?

- Idiopathic scoliosis is a condition that mostly affects adolescents between the ages of 10 and 16. Girls are more likely to be affected than boys. Statistics show that 2-3% of Americans have scoliosis at age 16, but less than 1% have curvature greater than 40 degrees (at which point surgery would be considered). Idiopathic scoliosis progresses while the body is growing, but does not continue into adulthood.

Bracing

- Patients are advised to wear a brace to prevent the further development of a curve when or if the patient:
 - ✓ Has an idiopathic curve that exceeds 25 to 30 degrees and may continue to grow (if the patient is prepubescent or undergoing puberty).
 - ✓ Has an idiopathic curve that is between 20 and 29 degrees in addition to 2 or more years of growth remaining and, if a girl, has not had her first menstrual period.

That is enough for Mary.

She is shaking more than Allison on the drive home.

“Mom?” Allison asks in a small voice. Mary glances at her to show she is listening. “Did you ever wear a brace?” Mary fixes her eyes back on the road to keep herself off the casting table and away from the man in white scrubs.

“Kind of,” she answers.

“Did it hurt?”

Mary remembers the horrible itch first. She would shove sewing needles down into her cast to try and alleviate it. Then she remembers the cramping that came after she ate. She couldn't eat much because her stomach would bloat and press painfully against the walls of her cast.

“It was inconvenient,” she tells her daughter, “but it's not a big deal.”

“Did people make fun of you?”

“No,” Mary answers. Her first honest response. “None of my clothes fit over the cast,” she laughs, “so Grandma had someone make clothes for me. They were so tacky!”

“Wait, will I need special clothes?” the panic in Allison's voice is palpable.

“No,” Mary assures her.

“So what did the outfits look like?”

“Oh,” Mary laughs, “They were full-on pant suits with these ugly geometric patterns. One was green and gold checkered and it had navy blue triangles on it.”

Allison is bent over laughing in the passenger seat. Outside the window familiar buildings whirl by. They are close to home.

“You should have seen them!” Mary goes on. “They were this silky old-people material, too! I was so embarrassed, but no one made fun of me.”

Mary leaves out the fact that her classmates, although empathetic, kept the kind of distance from her that you keep from people who have something wrong with them. Even her cousin stayed away from her. When she visited he said, “Oh, what happened?” and then, “I’m so sorry.” His face was contorted strangely, like it was his fault she was in the cast. No boys ever talked to her, and she was only invited to one sleepover all year (and even then, she suspects her mother was involved).

She does not tell her daughter about the stench of warm body odor wafting up anytime she moved her neck and the concomitant fear of being around other people. She doesn’t tell her that she carried a perfume bottle with her at all times to spray down into the cast.

At home, Allison immediately heads up to her room and Mary can feel the weight of the things she left out of their conversation. She feels heavy with all of the things she has never told anyone. She calls Allison down for dinner, but ends up eating alone because Allison isn’t hungry. She wonders if her daughter has been hiding things from her as well, and allows an irrational fear to build and gain conviction inside of her.

After dinner, she goes into Allison’s room to comfort her. When she finds her daughter sleeping, she is overcome with something entirely her own.

“It’s going to be okay,” she sobs, rubbing Allison’s back.

“What?” Allison stirs awake. “What’s wrong?” she asks, her voice thick with sleep. Mary cannot speak. Allison waits.

“You’re going to be okay,” Mary whimpers and all of a sudden Allison is irritated and afraid.

“I’m fine, Mom!” her voice cracks. “Why do you have to come in here and make of big deal of everything?”

Mary continues to cry.

“It’s not even that big of a deal,” Allison says. She sits up and breathes in.

“I have to wear a brace for a few years. You’re acting like I’m going to die or something.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary says through sobs.

Allison rubs her back slowly and Mary feels that she is paying special attention to the tight muscles around her spine.

“It’ll be fine,” Allison says. Her hands still. Mary stays in her room for too long. She listens to cars pass by the house and watches the shadow of her daughter’s arm moving against the carpet.

* * *

“She didn’t wash her hands,” Mary says to her husband in a hushed voice. He looks at her. Her eyes are focused on the surgical resident who greeted them moments ago. “July is the worst month for her to be here,” Mary complains, “all the new interns are just starting.”

Mary approaches the poor intern and asks, “Did you wash your hands?” The intern shakes her head, “No, Doctor Bennett” she says, “but I sanitized them before entering.”

Allison stirs in her bed.

“Sanitizing is not enough! Studies show that bacteria—”

“Mom!” Allison moans, “Leave her alone. You don’t have to stay here every second and bother everyone! I’m fine now.”

“Doctor Bennett,” the intern says softly, “maybe you should go for a walk. You haven’t left this room in two days. Give Allison some time on her own.”

Mary's husband nods. "That's a great idea. Why don't we go get lunch," he says, taking her hand. "Is that okay, Alli?" he asks.

"Yes," she snaps.

"Okay," he says. "We'll be back in an hour."

Mary lets her husband lead her out of Allison's room and down the hallway, but when they reach a set of telephones along the wall, she resists.

Her brain is acting up again, and by the time her husband sits her down she is already fourteen. She is back in her hospital unit with six other girls who are recovering from spinal fusion surgery. She feels as though she's been in bed forever, but the nurses say it's been twenty-six days. Just short of a month. She has not been allowed to leave her bed for twenty-six days. Mary knows that there was something wrong with her back, but she does not understand why she has been lying in a bed for twenty-six days in Rochester, New York while her parents are back home.

She blames her father for this. He is a doctor and has told her almost nothing about her condition. A year ago, he looked pensive after feeling her back. That is the only way she knew that something was wrong. Then, one morning he drove her from their farm in Perry County, Lancaster to Rochester. He took her into the hospital and they made her lie on the casting frame, but he drove her home after that. She was even more nervous on the second drive to Rochester, and she hasn't made it home yet.

When she starts to worry that her parents might not be coming back, or that she might never get to go home again, she closes her eyes and remembers one of three things:

1. Her first time seeing Rochester.

In the car she is anxious because she doesn't know where they are going or why, but the anxiety melts temporarily when they make it to the city. This is the feeling she conjures up while she is lying in her hospital bed, the sensation of anxiety melted away by wonder. Rochester is the strangest looking place she has ever seen. She twists her neck to stare up at tall buildings that make her lungs feel smaller, that make it harder to breathe. It is grey and heavy compared to their farm at home. At home the color is in the fading red of the barn, in the rusty pink and grey of pig's skin, in the yellow of mustard flower, and in the expansive green of field corn or freshly mowed grass. The color in the city is different; it is connected to people. On the way to the hospital a sea of color surprises Mary when the car drives past a group of women in red and yellow and pink and green who are singing and chanting and thrusting cardboard signs that read **WOMEN UNITE!**, **EVE WAS FRAMED!**, and **SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL!** into the air. She longs to see the women again, but on the drive home she is in the plaster cast (still unsure of why) and has to lie on her back to keep the cast from cutting off the circulation in her legs.

2. Her time out of the cast.

When they arrived at the hospital for the second time, the nurses cut her cast away and led her into a wide bathroom and fixed her a sweet-smelling bath. There were no men there to make her grasp at things and she felt free outside of the cast. Her own body felt foreign to her. She took deep breathes and touched her stomach and stretched her arms. The nurses let her look at herself in front of the mirror for as long as she liked and left the room once the bath was filled. In the mirror she looked slim and beautiful. She thought her neck especially looked lovely, long and pale as it was, and decided that if she left the hospital again she would buy her first dress. She imagined an elegant evening dress with a dipping neckline. Once she got into the bath she never wanted to get out, but eventually they made her. Then they took her back to the casting

frame, back to the man who wrapped her up and made it hard to breathe. She remembers how wonderful that bath felt and, although she doesn't know when her cast will come off again, she imagines the freedom of it in the future.

3. The look on her cousin's face.

In the hospital, she does not worry about her cousin touching her. Not in the hospital, because she is surrounded by the other girls, and not in the future either. She knows from the way he looked at her when he saw her in the cast that he would never touch her again. Things will be different after this.

She doesn't have much to do besides think and talk with the girls most of the day, but every evening a nurse in faded blue scrubs comes in to wheel her bed out into the hallway. The nurse lines her bed up beside a phone attached to the wall so that she can make a call to home. Mary calls and can't help crying when she hears her mother's voice on the line. "How are you holding up, darling?" she asks. Mary cries and cries. When the call ends, the nurse wheels her bed back into the room and Mary counts the planes coming in and taking off from Rochester airport, right beside the hospital. She tells the other girls about the **SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL!** sign and wonders if those women are on airplanes right now, flying somewhere important. She wonders why her mother isn't with her.

Mary and her husband return after an hour and a half to a hysterical Allison.

"You were gone for too long!" Allison shouts at them. Tears and snot are mixing on her face, but she cannot move enough to wipe them away. Mary gets some toilet paper from the bathroom.

"I thought you weren't coming back!" she cries softly.

Mary wipes her daughters face and pets her hair.

“Of course we were coming back, Sweetie,” she coos. “We’re not leaving. We’re not going anywhere.” Mary’s eyes moisten. “We would never leave you here like this,” Mary cries. She slumps down over Allison’s bed.

Allison puts her hand over Mary’s and squeezes.

Mary holds her breath.

* * *

When Mary first sees the curve in Allison’s back, she feels it with firm hands that it feels as uncaring as her father’s had years ago, when he called her from the pool and made her bend as far as she could in front of him. She felt like a body when her father touched her back, not like a daughter or even a girl. His hands moved with such purpose, his thumps pressing harshly along her spine. Her father had touched so many bodies, some alive others dead, and she was just another. She wondered if her body felt different from a cadaver’s, the ones he had told her she would also need to dissect in medical school, or from a boy’s. Mary knows from her father that a doctor’s touch can never be a parent’s touch, so she tries not to think of her daughter that way. Her daughter is not one of the many bodies she has touched, or one of the many patients she has seen in her office.

She needs to be a mother.

This creates a significant problem for Mary, because it requires the stark separation of two primary facets of her identity (doctor and mother) that have otherwise been able to coexist. This is further complicated when she is forced to think of herself as Mary– who is the mother of Allison and must focus with empathy on Allison’s present experiences only, and Mary– who has also had scoliosis and cannot forget anything about it. Because Mary views her personal

experiences, her very memory, as detrimental to her ability to be a mother to Allison, she can be divided even more simply into Mary-who-remembers and Mary-who-forgets.

Mary can recall only one instance in which Mary-who-remembers was able to be a supportive mother to Allison, and that is on the car ride home from Allison's first appointment with the doctor. That moment, however, is sandwiched in failure. Mary was unable to act professionally in the office and embarrassed and worried Allison. Then, after the car ride, she went up to Allison's room and scared her half to death by waking her up and crying for God knows how long.

Mary is incredibly aware of the need to quell Mary-who-remembers in order to be the best mother to Allison. She remembers Allison's last visit with the orthopedic before the surgery as a huge failure:

"We'll need to perform a posterior spinal fusion." the doctor says. "Are there any questions you want to ask before I explain things?" he asks her daughter. Allison is staring at her knees. She shakes her head. Mary wants to get her out of the office and away from the doctor.

"Well, the surgery won't be like your mother's." the doctor assures Allison. *Does he need to talk about this in front of her?* Mary wonders.

"You won't need a Herrington rod or anything like that. We'll be infusing a titanium rod, one that won't rust or decay the way stainless steel can."

Mary does not want to think about the rod in her back rusting, so she tunes the doctor out and stares at posters illustrating common spine conditions. She wonders if her office, a forty-minute drive away, can seem as cold to her patients, as unsettling.

"We'll need to do another x-ray before the surgery," the doctor tells Mary. "Why don't we give Allison a moment to herself while we schedule it?"

He leads her outside and she watches him close the door gently. She stares at her feet, then at the swirls on the blue carpet. He asks her if she would sign a consent form that would make Allison's before and after x-rays available for medical research.

"Her personal information would be protected, of course," he says. "Well, you know how this kind of information is used."

"No," Mary answers immediately. She does not look up from the carpeted floor.

"Doctor Bennett," the orthopedic reacts, "I would think that you would understand as both a doctor and a scoliosis patient that this kind of information is crucial to the further improvement of—"

"No," she says again. Mary knows from her own experience that seeing the x-rays will make Allison realize that there is something seriously wrong with her. She doesn't want her to feel like something to be studied on top of it, some abnormality and nothing else. Her brain is acting up in the same old way, generating electrochemical pulses.

"Okay," he says. "Were your records—"

Mary is stepping out of the bath. She wants to stay longer, but the nurses insist that she get out. It had been such a wonderful bath and she felt free again to breathe and bend and move her arms. She thinks as she follows the nurses out in her towel that maybe she will be sent home with her father now. She thinks that maybe everything is over. But the nurses lead her into a sterile white room where two men are fiddling with large black cameras. The nurse covers her eyes with something dark and scratchy. Mary is afraid. She wonders where her father is and if he knows what is happening to her. Someone takes away her towel and she feels rough hands on her shoulders directing her. The sound of the cameras' shutters fills the room. Mary is humiliated.

Why are they doing this to me? she wonders. She is afraid to speak.

The doctor calls Allison out. Mary does not look up from the ground. “Why should I even wear this stupid brace anymore?” Allison moans, her voice saturated with irritation and the need to cry. Mary whispers gently in her ear. “We’ll take it off in the car,” she says.

At home Mary rubs Allison’s quivering back and apologizes. “I’m sorry,” she says, tracing the curve of her daughter’s spine, then rubbing her protruding right shoulder blade. She should have known, as the curve grew from 42 to 47 to 48 degrees that her daughter would need spinal surgery, just as she had. Allison’s spine, after all, has been deviating in exactly the same pattern as hers had at fourteen: some distortion in the lower thoracic region of the spine leading to the formation of a double (S-shaped) curve.

* * *

On her fifth day in the hospital, Allison stands. She stands because a woman who volunteers at the hospital has brought Millie, a greyhound, in to visit her. Allison smiles for the first time in days while she pets Millie from the bed. But lying on her stomach and petting the dog’s head does not satisfy her; she wants to get up and see the dog. The nurses say that it’s been long enough, and that if she feels that she can stand then she should try. So they stand by her side and help her turn in bed. They hold onto her shoulders until her feet touch the ground. From there Mary stands beside her, but Allison doesn’t need her. She is walking! She looks thin and she is shaking violently, but she is moving. Mary recognizes the way her daughter moves and remembers the way her own body felt foreign after the surgery, after the cast. Mary and her husband are excited, but don’t know what to do. They clap for her. Mary claps and smiles and thinks that her daughter looks beautiful standing there, shaky as she is. She thinks of the soft brown dress she bought herself after her cast was taken off. She remembers how she felt when she wore it, slim and beautiful and free. She decides to take Allison shopping after she’s fully

recovered. The volunteer takes a photo and gives it to Allison to keep. It is of her standing beside Millie while her mother and father smile and clap in the background.

That night, Mary tapes the picture to the wall while she helps Allison unwrap some of the gifts she's received while in the hospital. Mary is yanking tightly tied red ribbon over the corner of a neatly wrapped box.

"I wish there was a TV in here," Allison sighs. Mary laughs.

"Why were you so scared when they told me I had to wear a brace?" Allison asks. Mary glances toward her sleeping husband. The hospital room is full of the familiar hum of a helicopter's engine dying down. Allison is sitting up in her bed and Mary watches her in the flashing red light.

Mary hands Allison the unwrapped box.

"A lot was going on in my life when I had to get my cast," Mary tells her. "Someday, when you're older, I'll explain things to you."

Allison does not question her because she notices that, for the first time since she was diagnosed, her mother looks at ease.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Allison tells her mother. "I'm fine now."

Mary realizes as she watches Allison pull packages of candy, and then a T-shirt from the box that her daughter is safe. She realizes that nothing horrible has happened to her. No men will take pictures of her or make her grasp at things. She thinks of Allison as stronger, the way she thought of herself after her surgery.

"Once I was out of the cast," Mary tells Allison, "the boys in my class took an interest in me for the first time."

"Oh my God, Mom."

“Danny Rice asked me out after driving me home in his tractor.”

“Seriously?” Allison rolls her eyes.

“I fell in love for the first time,” Mary says. As she tells Allison about her life after the surgery, she lets go of something that had kept her afraid for Allison from the moment she learned that she had inherited her scoliosis.

Here is what Mary lets go of:

Mary is lead downward. She watches her cousin’s broad back as she descends the staircase, her legs bending awkwardly to account for its steepness. The polished wood is cold against her bare feet. In her head, she repeats her aunt’s list, counting with her fingers: two pounds of pasta (top right, above peanut butter), one jar of sauce (green label, not white), a stick of butter (unsalted, inside fridge door)... She stares at her fourth finger, frustrated by her failure to enumerate the list completely. His hand slides along the banister. It is twice the size of hers. The basement is cool, so she pulls at the hem of her cotton summer dress. A muffled thump echoes from upstairs, followed by a boy’s playful howl and a woman’s snapped reprimand. At the landing, she glances up toward the sound. He does not. Standing side by side, she reaches his hip. She is surprised, not yet scared, when he takes her hand. He leads her to a closet in the corner of the basement. What she remembers is his sweaty hand clenching hers, the smell of mildew, and the gentle force with which he closed the cheap wooden door of the deep closet.

Allison opens the shirt and shows it to her mother. It is a grey V-neck with the words, “Don’t go through life without scars” written in bolded black print on the back. “We should get you one of these, too” Allison laughs. “Scoliosis scar twins!”

Mary watches her daughter laugh and she pulls up new memories. She thinks of the cast and the surgery in a different way. She links them to the feeling of letting go, to the ability to not

be hurt anymore. She remembers a summer night with Danny Rice, lying under the stars in his dad's old tractor. She forgets all over again about her cousin's sweaty hands, and the men in the white scrub's indifferent ones. Danny's lips are soft and his hands are gentle. Mary feels new and beautiful.

“Can't wait till I can actually wear this,” Allison sighs, throwing the shirt back into the box beside her bed. Outside, a helicopter starts up and Mary watches her daughter in the red, then white light. “Won't be long,” she says.

Passing

In my dreams, my father is asking for a glass of water. He's reaching out to me with one of his leathery hands. It is a shaking blur of brown and blue, weak with age.

"It's not a big, fancy request," he is saying. "I just want one goddamn glass of water."

In his other hand is a camera, an old 4x5 Anniversary Speed Graphic. He is struggling to hold it up. It is a dense cube, heavy and black. The camera is familiar, an object that has had a silent presence. For years I had seen it almost every day, on a desk or dresser, above the fireplace, or on my father's nightstand. My eyes are filling up. He kept a dark room downstairs. I want to touch him, to ask him how he is, but he seems agitated. He called me Bobby.

"Bobby, come here!" he'd say. "Look at this, Bobby!"

In the dream he only watches me. I want to shrug my shoulders. There is no water around.

I wake up thirsty. The room, mostly darkened by the heavy curtains drawn closed, is unfamiliar. In my dream, the world had been soft, borderless. Now, everything is solid—the edges of the nightstand, the wood dressers, even the gleam of the mirror. My wife, Lisa, has folded her cotton pajamas neatly and tucked them under her pillow. I pull back the curtains, letting in the morning light. The top drawer of my dresser squeaks as I pull it toward me. Throwing a T-shirt on, I make my way to Alyssa's room. She swats my hand away from her shoulder.

"You'll miss the bus," I say and she jumps out of bed.

"Gross, Dad. No one wants to see you in your freakin boxers," she yells. I step back.

“I mean, Jesus...” she mumbles, “Put some pants on.” I inhale.

Although there is no one there anymore, I go to my parents’ house around lunch time out of habit. It is cold, but the living room has two large windows that let in the afternoon sun. The light is distorted by my mother’s favorite pea-green curtains. It reaches across the carpet, turning it aquatic green. Her intricate flower arrangements, the last ones she made, are sitting on the coffee and end tables, on the windowsill, and on top of the bookshelf.

The flowers are orange and red and blue and purple. Their leaves are made of cloth that has faded from exposure to the sun. They look partially alive. It is not that they have not wilted, but that they cannot wilt. I go into the kitchen and make myself a can of chicken noodle soup. Sitting on the living room couch, I eat it alone. Here, until last week, I watched *Hawaii Five-0*, *Star Trek*, and *Night Gallery* with my father.

Lisa doesn’t make it home for dinner. I ask Alyssa how school was, but she doesn’t say much. I have the dream again, only my dad is asking for something else and the camera is bigger. He can hardly hold it up.

“I’m parched,” he says, laughing.

A silver plate on the camera in his arms flashes. It reads Signal Corps PH-47E.

“I’ve never been this thirsty in my life!” he chokes out. He is clutching the camera to his chest.

The camera, the one he used in the military, I haven’t seen since middle school. Even after the camera disappeared, he would show me black and white photos of the insides of the missiles he worked on in White Sands, New Mexico. There were other pictures too, vast desert scenes and shots of cacti and tumbleweed. My favorite photos were those of the uniformed boys who were always smiling arm-in-arm.

My dad is still laughing and I take the camera from him. The way he was holding it, it might as well have been a boulder. He steps back and sighs. It feels light in my own hands, but surprisingly solid and real.

I wake up in a dark room and move Lisa's pajamas to my side of the bed, letting them rest, still folded, under my pillow. The room is shapeless. The only light is weak, from pushing through the curtain's thick cloth. Everything is almost colorless, faint and dreamlike. I draw back the curtains and the room immediately solidifies. Color jumps into the sheets, the shoes Lisa left by the door, even my skin. I head downstairs to pack Alyssa's lunch.

From the doorway, I make out a strange arrangement in the kitchen. The table, the chairs, even the counters have been taken up with glasses full of colorful liquids. Reds and oranges and yellows fill the room. There must be at least thirty glasses. I rub my eyes. The glasses are there when I open them again.

Each glass holds a different beverage: orange juice, milk, lemonade, cranberry apple juice, ginger ale, the list goes on. I wonder how many drinks we have in the house for just the three of us. Of course, Lisa loves to take Alyssa out shopping for all kinds of useless things like pomegranate seeds dipped in dark chocolate and those expensive juices that are "naturally simple."

I take a sip from the nearest glass, which I'm fairly confident is orange juice. It's warm. There's a note on the table in the middle of the drinks. It's written in Lisa's illegible doctor cursive. After nearly twenty minutes of scrutiny, I translate it:

I'm not dealing with this! I made lasagna last night, heat it up for dinner.
See you tonight.

Love you,
Lisa

“Who asked you to deal with it?”

“Stop talking to yourself!” Alyssa yells on her way down the stairs. The bus driver honks outside.

“It’s not his job to wait for you, you know?” I throw her sandwich together. “*You* should be out there waiting for *him*.”

She’s rolling her eyes, tapping her foot.

“Did you pour all these?” I ask, throwing the top piece of bread down on her sandwich.

The bus driver honks again while I’m rummaging through the cabinet for a brown bag.

“You did. Mom says you got out of bed at like four in the morning last night.”

“What?”

“You poured them.”

“Well, for someone who was half asleep, I didn’t do a bad job,” I say, taking a closer look at the glasses clustered at the center of the table. “Didn’t spill a thing.”

“I’m seriously concerned for your mental health,” Alyssa says matter-of-factly, grabbing her lunch from me and running out the door. I don’t want to waste all the drinks, so I move everything from the upstairs fridge to the two downstairs fridges. I put all the cups in the fridge upstairs and set the goal of drinking them all before the Lisa gets back.

I drink everything, wash the dishes, and am watching the news, 11 at 11 or something, when Lisa gets home. She kicks her heels off and ties her hair back before sitting beside me. When I tell her about the dreams she shakes her head.

“You miss him, Sweetie,” she sighs. But I know that’s not it. There’s much more to it than that.

“You’re probably right,” I tell her.

“You’ll feel better when the house is sold,” she says.

I have the dream every night for a week. The camera is in my hands now, but it keeps growing.

Sorting through my parents’ house is hard. I decide to start looking for the camera there, to motivate myself to get going with cleaning the place out. I don’t want to go alone, so I hire an appraiser to come with me even though I don’t plan on selling much from the house.

She shifts through my mom’s art and says it’s beautiful, very vivid. There is an oil painting, a portrait she made of me back when I was a boy, hanging in the back of the room. I have big, expressive eyes and a wide, gap-toothed smile.

“She could have been famous,” I tell the appraiser, “but she had no faith in herself. She didn’t even sign half of her paintings.”

She touches my arm and says that it’s a shame, then turns to my favorite painting, one of a long country road that is empty save for two oak trees with leaves radiant orange in the afternoon sun. The road is one my mom and I encountered on a Sunday drive together, when she would turn a map upside down and I’d close my eyes and point. We’d drive toward the destination my finger landed on, though we hardly ever actually reached it.

“This frame is worth quite a bit,” she says. I step back.

She points out some other frames, ones my dad picked out, as antiques. “There’s a great market for them right now,” she says. “Believe it or not, they have real gold in them. Not too much, but it’s there.”

“Well, isn’t that something,” I say and nod my head politely while she handles each frame, assigning prices to each. Well, that’s her job, but I’ll never sell them.

It takes a few weeks, but we go through the entire house and I do not find the camera. We find a lot of my dad's old cameras and the appraiser handles them, but we do not find the 4x5 Anniversary Speed Graphic. In the end, I'm happy about that. I do not want her touching that camera anyway.

When the appraiser's job is done, the need to find the camera becomes more urgent. I start going to the house alone. On one trip, I find my dad's old military photo albums. I spend hours looking through them. They are black and white, but I can imagine the color of the sand and of my father's dark skin. He and his friends are young in the pictures, and miles of desert stretches out around them.

There are a lot of photos missing from the albums. Black spots appear on every other page where a photo had obviously been removed. I can't find a number of pictures that I remember looking at with my father as a boy. The most notable absence is my father's favorite picture, a small shot in which he and Robert Oppenheimer stand together near the missile range.

I go through all of the albums a few times before, at the end of one, I find a note written to my father. The note is tight cursive on aged paper. The last lines read:

I hope Bobby and Pam are doing well. As for the camera and things you sent me, I'll take care of them until you come asking for them back.

Your dear friend,
Chris.

Looking back over the albums, I find the name Chris written beneath a boy that shows up in a number of pictures taken by my father. There is one of him standing on a pile of cannon shells and one of him with his arm around a woman labeled in my father's neat writing as Barb. In an official photo, one where my father stands with a group of young men in uniform, I find

that Chris' last name is Ashe. I spend days researching Chris Ashe. I go from this connection to that and find that Chris is still alive. He lives in Sitka, Alaska.

I tell Lisa that I need to get away for a while.

“Going through the house every day, throwing their things away, it has been hard,” I tell her. I do not tell her that I am on a hunt for my dad's Anniversary Speed Graphic.

I get myself a new camera before flying out because Lisa says I will want to have quality pictures to look back at. It is just about the most expensive thing I have ever bought myself, although I've got more money than I know what to do with. I think about calling Lisa and asking her to come with me.

“I'll wait,” I want to say, “I'll wait until you can get some time off.”

I know she would probably never come. She hates places that are too cold or too hot. She only wants to sleep on days off.

I stop in Chicago and then Seattle before finally reaching Sitka. The flight is long and I am tired, so I figure I will get to the bed and breakfast and get to sleep. I think about Alyssa, who is probably at school by now. Before I left she gave me a quick hug and then scoffed, “Why would you want to go to Alaska by yourself anyway?” My wife pulled her back and explained everything away.

Now it is seven p.m. and I am wandering around Sitka, hungry. I think about my dad and Chris Ashe in the desert. Sitka is surrounded by water and mountains, and the air has a briskness to it. I ask a young man who smells like sweat and sea and raw fish where the nearest bar is. His name is Sam.

“There’s only two bars in town,” he laughs and tells me that he’s heading to one anyway. He leads me down this road and that. I am a bit surprised to pass a Radio Shack and a Japanese restaurant on the way. “We’re in Alaska, not Antarctica,” he says jokingly. “But seriously, what do you people think of us? That we live in igloos and eat whale blubber?”

“No,” I say.

“Good,” he pats my back. “Here we are.”

The street is called Katltan. The bar is a run down, white building with a big red sign that reads “Pioneer Bar.” The floor is covered in black and white checkers. There are a dozen or so men inside and a faded pool table. I buy myself a Scotch and Sam a beer. We make our way across the foggy room to play a game of pool. Sam tells me that he is a marine biologist. He lives in a bunk house about three miles from the bar and does research on Alaskan Halibut and King Salmon.

He talks about his work for a while with purpose and I want to tell him that it’s not that I’m just here visiting. I’m actually here on important business. I’m looking for a certain Chris Ashe. I’m looking for a 4x5 Anniversary Speed Graphic with a plate that reads Signal Corps PH-47E. I decide to hold that information back for now.

“It’s nice to be able to walk anywhere,” Sam says. The whole town only stretches fourteen or so miles according to Sam, but it rains almost every day. “It gets pretty dreary,” he sighs.

I had noticed a heavy fog that hug low over the nearby mountains.

“The spot where Russia signed Alaska over to the States is only a few miles from the bar here.”

“That’s right, it is!” yells an older man from behind me. I jump. “Here’s to Sitka and the Pioneer Bar!” he hollers and some men in the back raise their glasses. He must have been watching our game finish up from across the room. He nods to Sam, and then to me before throwing his quarter down.

“Go ahead,” I say, laying my pool stick on the table. Now that there are people around, I want to start investigating to find out if anywhere here has heard of Chris. The old man is tall and skinny with a head of white hair and a large beard to top it off.

“What did you say to me?” his yells and his thick saliva hits my face. His voice echoes in the small bar. Everyone is staring by the time he throws his hands up, “Did you just call me Goat Head?”

His teeth are crooked and yellow, his breath vaporous. I take a few steps back.

“I said ‘Go ahead.’” I emphasize the words slowly and gesture to the pool table, “I’ll sit out.”

“Goat Head” throws his giant white head back and laughs.

My hands are shaking a bit. I decide that I want to get away from Goat Head as soon as possible.

“Why don’t you play with me?” the old man, Goat Head asks. “I didn’t come here with anybody but myself and I play with Sam here every damn night. You can call me Goat Head. I’ve taken a liking to you!”

“That was fast,” says Sam. At the bar he tells me not be scared of Goat Head. He says he’s known him for two years now and he’s a nice man, just eccentric. “From what I’ve heard,” he tells me, “the old man’s been living in Sitka just about his whole life and hasn’t done much to step a foot outside of it.”

I order another beer.

“Rumor has it he was drafted in World War II, fought, and came right back as fast as he could get here.”

I immediately become interested in Goat Head. How many veterans his age do you think are living in Sitka anyway? I learn that Goat Head is a retired salmon fisherman with a charter boat. He lives on a houseboat not far from the Pioneer, on Harbor Street.

“I’ll give you two a tour sometime if you’d like!” he says and I know I need to get into his house. I think if I knew where it was I’d run and break into it right now because I know my father’s camera is going to be inside of it. I know that this man is Chris Ashe.

I want to get into the house as soon as possible, so I tell Goat Head that I haven’t got a place to stay for the night. He offers his place up immediately, “All the better to have company. I swear, I get lonely here without nothin to call my own. I got no wife, no kids, no pets, no nothin! You must be lonely too with no travelling buddy”

“I’m married,” I tell him. “My wife’s a doctor.”

“Some kind of specialist?” he asks and I nod.

“You out here cause that wife of yours is too busy working for dead presidents to pay you any mind?”

“No,” I say, “No, I’m here because I’ve been having dreams of my father.”

Goat Head doesn’t ask for any explanation. I pay for our tabs and he whistles on the way out of the bar.

Goat Head’s houseboat is faded yellow. I can’t see anything inside because he’s blocked the windows with scratchy looking grey blankets. From the outside it looks a bit unreliable, but I

am completely amazed when he opens the door. The house boat is crammed full of trash. I pull at the sleeves of my shirt. Even if dad's camera is here, I'll never be able to find it.

Goat head navigates us through stacks of broken furniture, old newspapers, and moldy boxes via a narrow passage that snakes into the kitchen. There is a red bucket in the sink with something brown in it.

"Sorry if it's a little messy," he says, pulling a moth eaten chair out from the table. "I wasn't expecting guests."

"I'm just thankful to have somewhere to stay," I say.

Goat head disappears somewhere deeper inside the houseboat and I spend the night searching desperately for my dad's camera. The place is so disgusting that I end up taking my shirt off and tying it around my face to stop myself from gagging. I search all night and find nothing. I check my phone and see that Lisa hasn't called. Untying the shirt from my face, I lay down on the chewed up couch that Goat Head cleared for me.

I feel the same way that I did sitting in my parents' living room. The image I've been trying to push away for weeks surfaces in my mind. I can't get rid of it. My dad is laying on the kitchen floor, a plate shattered beside him. There are two cops, one saying to the other, "Don't touch anything, we may need to take pictures." That cop is looking at me strangely. I am shaking and wishing I could stop. My dad is dead. The other cop looks embarrassed. He asks me if I'm okay and then apologizes for his co-worker. "It was a heart attack, John," he says. "There is no need for pictures." I don't tell Lisa or Alyssa about it until the next day. Eating dinner by himself, my father died.

Tonight when I have the dream, I do not have the camera and neither does my dad. He is just thirsty. "I don't know how to help you," I tell him. My voice sounds weak.

I almost have a panic attack when I wake up in Goat Head's boathouse. I forget where I am and think for a moment that I somehow ended up in a dumpster. The small couch that he'd excavated for me last night is now covered in some kind of residue. It doesn't take me long to find out that debris from Goat Head's decaying ceiling has been snowing on me all night. I wonder what I'm even doing here. I hear something moving around in the kitchen and hope that it's Goat Head. When I can make him out in the narrow maze of piled up garbage I ask, as a last ditch effort, "Have you ever stood on a pile of cannon shells or put your arm around a lady named Barb?"

"What did she look like?" he asks.

"She had big lips and curly dark hair. She was average height and wore high heels."

"I'd like to put my arm around her," Goat head laughs.

"I bet you would," I respond, trying to keep the despair out of my voice. "Say, where's a good place to get some breakfast around here?"

I give Goat Head my number and tell him I'll see him again while I'm still in town. Then I head off to his recommend spot, Highliner Coffee shop. It's a short walk from the houseboat.

The coffee shop is near a bank, the Sitka fire department, and a church. It is a dreary, warehouse-looking building. Once I'm inside, though, I'm surprised to see other people there. While I'm ordering my coffee, the sound of some animal screeching somewhere startles me. The screeching stops for a moment, then resumes. The man at the desk takes my order, unfazed. It sounds strangely distant, as if someone were playing a horror film on their laptop and no one else seems to be paying it any mind. The sound does not stop and I notice another woman, about my age, looking around.

"What is that?" I ask her and she shakes her head.

“I don’t know!” she says, still searching the shop. “Doesn’t anybody else hear it? Sounds like a kid’s screaming.”

“Let’s go make sure everything is okay,” I say and we head toward the noise. I look back at everyone else just sitting there. A married couple is fighting over something at the counter. A worker is wiping down a table in the middle of the room. There is a cashier, who is staring at her fingernails and a man reading the newspaper. Two girls are chatting in the back. They are about Alyssa’s age, and I wonder who is making her lunches in the morning and picking her up from soccer practice after school while I’m gone. When I think that out of all these people, the woman and I are the only ones who care enough to check the crying out, I feel like something important has formed between us. We are two decent people coming together in a world where no one else gives a shit. I wonder if my wife would get up if she were here.

We find the source of the noise as soon as we step out of the shop. Not far from the door we see a young boy, probably about four, crying hysterically. He is dressed nicely and his mom and dad are kneeling down next to him.

“He looks fine,” the woman says, sounding relieved. “He probably just fell,” she goes on, “or he’s just making a fuss. You know how kids are.”

“Yeah,” I say, “but I don’t know.” I’m thinking, sure the kid looks fine, but why is he screaming like that. The dad picks the boy up and carries him over to their car.

“He looks angry,” I say. “Did you notice the boy’s shoes were untied?”

She looks at me. “I think it’s fine,” she says.

“You’re probably right,” I say, but I keep looking back at the family. I even watch the car drive away from back in the shop.

I want to talk to the woman more, but she leaves quickly, shooting me an unsure smile.

Lisa calls me around lunch time and says the municipality called and the pipes in my parents' house burst. "The neighbors called complaining," she says. That and, "I'm sorry I didn't call last night, I had to help Alyssa with her homework and then I fell asleep."

"That's okay," I say.

"The water flooded the basement," my wife tells me.

"I'll come home soon," I say.

"The furniture is ruined, but a lot of things were upstairs," she says gently, "your mom's art and your dad's cameras, his books."

"That's a relief," I tell her.

That night I have a dream. I am standing in front of my parents' house and water is swelling at the front door. Waves form and shadow over me. I think that I'm probably going to die. I keep swimming and swimming toward the house, and when I get in I see that it is completely empty. It is just a house. I wait for a long time while the water drains away. When I finally walk outside everything my parents owned is scattered across the street. The neighbors are yelling at me and shaking their fists and making phone calls. They are angry, not just about the junk in the street, but about the water. They know that soon it will reach their driveways, seep into their lawns.

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