

JUST AROUND THE CORNER:
AND SOME OTHER STORIES

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By
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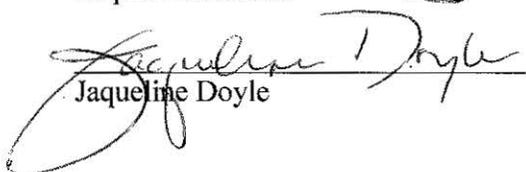
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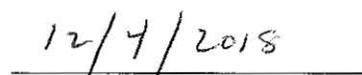

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Day Camp

More than any game, the campers prefer “Murderer”. To play it, they need to be lined up along the fence or handball court, as counselors choose a secret murderer and a public detective. The murderer will never reveal himself to the detective. They’re at a party, circling each other, shaking hands in brief introduction before moving on to the next stranger, often meeting the same person in repetition until the game is over. The murderer operates silently, squeezing hands or tickling wrists as indication, causing the victim to die after three more greetings. The detective is granted only three accusations before the murderer exposes himself.

They clasped their hands over their eyes as the counselors make certain the children left no fissures. Maria paced behind them to select roles. Jonah scraped his Birkenstocks to cover her tracks. She touched one girl’s head and, after a pace, a boy’s.

“We have chosen a murderer and a detective. Josephine will be the detective.”

Maia exclaimed.

The line broke and they began shaking hands in circle between Maria and Jonah. Ricky raced over to me, waving his ball-cap. In shallow breaths, he called out:

“Caroline”

“Ricky, get back in line and close your eyes.” His hat obscured his face as he trotted up to me.

“I can’t hear you with your hat over your face.”

His eyes seemed pinched and sallow, penitent, until he lowered the hat, and a grin peeked out.

“I always know who the murderer is.”

“That’s why you cover your eyes.”

I rubbed his bristled head. He took the hint, closed his eyes, shielding his face with his cap, before leaning in to whisper:

“There are cheats for this game. Do you want to know how I always know the murderer?”

I whispered back, “No,” cracking a mona-lisa smile. To tell the director how you cheated; that took balls. Or trust, at least.

“I can see through the holes in my hat.”

I peeked into his sweaty cap, through the vents to see the world moving in a vague kaleidoscope. It wasn’t that clever, but still, he’s a clandestine little mother-fucker.

“Come on Ricky, that’s cheating.”

Almost imperceptibly, he shrugged his shoulders, as if he hadn’t heard at all, and runs back to meet the other groups.

Within five minutes, most of the group members had played out their theatrical deaths and lay giggling, more or less, in a pile. They failed to guess the murderer.

I’ve never met anybody who relishes dying as much as nine year olds.

I never could have been a camp director before. It was harder to do everything sober. They said a lot in those cheap-coffee, mothballed church basements, those waxed linoleum community event rooms or the sterile latex treatment center rooms. But they never told me I wouldn’t be able to do half the things I did before, and could only do

them half as well. I'm sure that works for them, especially when I'm there to work for their mental health. That's not happiness. It's settling.

The owners embody the Silicon Valley mission: affecting change with minimal accountability. Over coffee, they spoke with a seeping affability that casts an adequately honest demeanour. By default, the job was long hours, little pay and brought a high turnover in employees. They organized the hiring process this way: get 'em young, get 'em energetic and desperate. So they don't have a rigorous screening, which works for me because nobody needs to be seeing my pictures or posts. I don't think I could in good conscience be in charge at any other camp.

The Petersen's company expanded aggressively last year, in all directions across three states. But it's secondary to their main focus. They write scripts for PBS programs, and have spin off books and other merch. So, they had set up the camps as largely a way to promote, and commit market research on the children. Ingenious. Children's media is a pretty solid racket.

Every school I've ever worked at has had a stage. Some of them have two, usually a wider one with a higher platform and a lower elevation so the little ones don't trip or, if they do, don't fall very far.

We sat cross-legged on stage during our first orientation, in a circle. We did name games, simple improv games that work alternately as teambuilding exercises. I get we needed to build a rapport quickly. Theater people were good with this interactive level. I had been a stage manager in high school and noticed that thespians spent most of their

time on stage. Warm-ups always happened on the stage. If somebody was watching a performance, it was usually from the side, not the audience.

They reviewed the structure of the camps, with each daily module consisting of a meeting at 7:30am, arrival at 8:00, morning assembly at 8:10, four rotating modules of Writing, Arts and Design, Music, and Stagecraft, with obligatory lunch and breaks in between until a 3:00 pick-up time.

It's good summer work. Especially for teachers. Like school except without the unaccounted lesson planning and homework hours that made me leave fourth and fifth for third grade. The Auteurs' Studio provides some of the lesson plans, but use a fair amount of my language arts plans. That way I get some input and can work how I please. I get some experience with 1st and 2nd graders for my new position next year. Two less hours at school. About the same pay.

It's Monday of the final week and Malcolm still walks through the door like he isn't allowed in the teacher's lounge, ducking his head, awkward smirk. He's senior at Stanford, studies theater with a major in rhetoric. He's overweight, with thick, well-styled black hair cut short, and a small goatee, cut longer to narrow his round face. Yeah, he's just a counselor, but everything felt like home by the end of last week. I admit, it was a weird the first day, and when Malcolm first asked if we could use the room, even I felt the need to ask somebody. I barely felt comfortable in my any of schools' lounges. Carl jingled his ring of keys, "well, you're teachers, aren't ya?", I stopped, realizing it was rhetorical and smiled affably.

The lounge was situated in the middle of the parish, overlooking the playground. I recognized the layout immediately: oblong table in the center of the room surrounding by a horseshoe kitchen and the inevitably repurposed child-height circle table and chair. We tucked our boxes in the back closet, but even in the summer, there were carton piles and to-go containers leftover from the school year. The teachers fled that last bell faster than the students; a subtle reminder.

I wasn't a great actor, but talking with parents were some of my best performances. I played relatable/ invested/ perceptive/ professional/ capable/ yet fully-formed quirky very convincingly. By the end of the day, my eyes had cleared up and the anxious demeanor had faded down to a normal adult worn by another workday. Parents loved my apparent honesty. I truly loved their kids, but really related more to them than the parents; kids aren't innocent at all, but their parents definitely shape the direction of the corruption and the blinders of their entitled existences. And for that, I revile most of them.

There are these memory lapses. Shitty sleep. After long days and dehydration, even the nights are punishing. It's like I'm sleeping in an oven that just started venting. It cools off right before I wake up.

At morning care today, Seth ran up to me, nearly wailing. "Miss Caroline, they're making pecan pies and they shouldn't". After the third day, some of the kids turned the sandbox into a bakery, prepped for a service job down the road.

"No, remember: we share the sandbox."

“But they’re mixing tanbark in the sand,” he pointed back to his exhibit where Ricky grabbed handfuls of tanbark, handed them to Jillian, and she placed them into a grey pan shaped pie. Ricky had corrected Seth earlier during storytime, so he was looking for any reason he could. I was hoping he’d give it up, but he wouldn’t move.

“Come on, Seth, don’t be a…” my brain stopped, lost the word even as I looked at the cue hanging around my neck. He looked at me like I suddenly spoken baby babble. “Whistleblower.” We talked about how a whistleblower wasn’t a bad thing. I saw the confusion in his face and dopamine soaked into my brain; this is why I love these little fuckers. I get to show them a part of the world they haven’t seen and, unlike us, they actually want to know. They still get some pleasure out of it.

These camps were condensed for everybody involved. I’m used to the awkward introductions and the heartfelt goodbyes, but with usually more time between. By the end of two weeks, they had reached the same intensity as a whole year’s of student interaction. The children showed so much growth over the three summer months that I had previously been away from them.

Our music and choreography teacher Joey was getting pushier during our morning meetings. People were just coming alive, recuperating from commutes, sipping coffee, finishing up their breakfasts, and all we could muster was taking in the day’s information. But he took the opportunity, perhaps because of our staff’s states, to turn collaborative lessons into dictations. Today he sat on the edge of the desks, talking to the junior counselors and teachers seated in the baby chairs. He had suggested his usual minute bullshit changes, just to remind himself that he could make the counselors do them. By

the end of the meeting, he was sprawled across two desks, his elbows propping his nodding head up.

We prepped our coffees in the teacher's ceramic cups with assorted corporate logos and filled our water jugs before the first assembly. Sarah concocted her coffee at the concave counter.

“Some of these kids are definitely 1st graders,” she had been teaching middle school English in Napa Valley, working at a Waldorf Elementary beforehand. “That’s way too young to expect them to write anything that makes sense to them, let alone us,” she splashed some coconut milk in her coffee, “except David.”

We laughed. David just turned seven, and he carries around a pocket dictionary/thesaurus, a tome relative to his hands that he carries like a parcel. He doesn’t talk during lunch, and barely looks up from his coke bottle glasses. Even during free reading time, he sticks to his definitions and synonyms. His parents were trying to turn him into Arthur Miller or at least a sanitized David Mamet. His name was half-way there. But they were always weirdly developed like that, I told her. During the summer they’re between grades, even at the beginning of a semester, a student is barely a fifth grader, still ripe a fourth. My students were merged, so I had the privilege to give the fourth and fifth graders “the talk” most parents had avoided or misconstrued. I couldn’t tell which group was more embarrassed: the kids who had started puberty or the ones that hadn’t yet.

The counselors performed skits in front of the stage for the morning assemblies to fidgeting cross-legged audiences. The teachers stood and gave bubbly directions related

to their days' modules. Sarah discussed peer revisions for the day that the first parts were drafts and they would be writing again after today's workshops where, she explained, it would be sort of like grading each other.

"I knew this was school," Jared yelled as discovery. There was a laugh, louder amongst us. I looked to Sarah at the front, then Hamed, and Steve on the sidelines, my superiors in age, who had laughed it off. It seemed taboo to even say this was school, like it was some sort of secret we needed to keep in order to keep the camp running smoothly. I noticed the counselors looking to me, even more embarrassed than I knew I appeared. It didn't bother me as much; I'd remind the kids all the time how close to school this actually was. It didn't get easier, in fact it never ended.

The morning assembly cleared out and the older kids went to writing while the younger ones went to their Stagecraft acting class, the groups alternating in reverse order. The auditorium was cleared out. My sneakers squeaked across the parque and filled the room as I cleared out forsaken jackets, paper scraps, lunch boxes and hung them on the hooks. A pink piece of paper, folded neatly down the center bloomed open. I picked it up and unfurled it.

"Somebody touched me here"

I looked at the handwriting. Was this a joke? A lie? It was scrawled in a disciplined hand but an unformed script. The simple statement was spelled correctly, punctuated and everything. It could have been anybody, any age. But did it mean "here" as in this location or as the child pointing with an invisible hand to him or herself like a therapy doll? I wished it was the latter but I couldn't afford to delude myself. Even

though some of our kids attends this school during the year, and there are other camps at this location I knew what it meant. This happened here, at this camp.

They should know, they probably needed to, even though there's very little we could do, so I called them at the end of today and told them about the note, recalling that it was anonymous and vague. They said this had happened at another camp, where the child wrote a note accusing another student, only to confess he'd done it as a prank. They told me it was okay, they had an insurance policy that covers them in the event of sexual misconduct and molestation. They said they had performed background checks, but notified me they would be coming in tomorrow for a brief training; I didn't ask why this hadn't happened in the beginning. It could have been the kids from the science or writing camps. Or the counselors. They said to not specifically address the note to anybody, that they would handle investigation if they felt it merited it.

I sat at the benches and often ate with the kids, to supervise certainly, but more to interact like a peer. "Caroline, can I sit here" Alexa asked. She was adorable, asking permission. I nodded with a dry mouthful of sandwich. She sat down across from me at the padded mesh tables, arching her elbows the surface as she ate her own sandwich. She didn't pair up as often with the other kids, and seemed very eager to please when she had their ear, and seemed liable to say anything to keep their attention. The past few days she'd been going everywhere with Tamara, who'd often clutch Alexa from behind, both smiling that one had and the other was wanted. But today she was quiet, stopping chewing only to brush blonde locks from her face.

Tamara was one of the most dangerous kids. More than poverty or abuse, it was the parents who could afford to neglect their kids that damaged them the most. She spent hours scrawling stories in her room. The obsession stretched beyond her years. Sarah tried to reinforce students feedback, but she met it with silence and kept building her story. She even looked like a Bronte; straight, center-parted chestnut ponytail, choleric paleness, sallow eyes. She didn't have much interest in acting but she could cast a mood so credible that her motivation wasn't clear until she replaced her mood with a whole separate one.

Alexa ran to find Tamara, who'd chosen to eat indoors. I tried to find some shelter but the rays were inescapable. Sweltering again. "It's a dry heat," parents remark. Fuck y'all, I sit in a classroom all day and I forgot sunscreen again. The lunch bell rang and Alexa lined up with the rest of them. I wanted to find some time to talk with her myself. But the schedule's back to back, and by the time I remember, they're switching classrooms. It's not that big of a deal, I'm telling myself. Girls will be girls. I've been in my fair share of darkened supply closets, taking turns like we were taught.

They were all writing scripts the first week, for skits, the second week they workshopped and revised, spending the last two days writing dialogue for the MCs and description for the playbills. At least they were supposed to be. It was Tuesday and they were still workshopping, challenging comments other students had made.

It's about the same every day. I try to pound the water, because I'm outside more than the counselors are, but it's no use. As much as I hate the gridlock, I like having my

little isolation box. At least when I was in college, there were summers. There were only internships, which received as much attention as I was paid, and sweaty, drunk, dancing, cruising summer nights. Now, school never ends.

I don't know why this takes more energy. Maybe it's the heat. Maybe it's the exhaustion from the year. Or the volume of the kids. It's impossible to properly discipline kids you'll know for only two weeks. It's an unspoken suspended respect. I spray perfume and pop some gum into my mouth. Saccharine flavor covers the dank. I wiggle my tooth. I swear it's been looser the past few weeks. It's that wax, and maybe the mali or coke from Death Fest. I'm still moody. Let's stick to buds.

Those words kept unfolding this morning. I wanted to handle it on my own. I couldn't go around to every camper and ask them. I also couldn't go to every counselor and ask them, especially if one of them did it or told a parent. But we couldn't just wait on this. Knowing about this before a parent was our only advantage. Every counselor had his or her particular oversights, most obsessing over one set of rules; they seem to cover each others' blind spots, though.

Her mother had complained to me this morning that she was going to the bathroom alone, worried her 11 year old wouldn't make it to the toilet unsullied by who knows which creatures lurk in a single school occupied by three camps.

"That's straight ignorance," Sarah sat on the break room round table, "Does she even know her daughter?" She was a petite woman a few years older than me, narrow hips, proportionate tits to height, a mousy brunette. Sarah wore this perfume, the sweet and uncomplicated scent of industrial soap and lily blossom, which seemed beyond her

years, and masked a premature desperation. She was congenial, but had the stern reserves of a teacher, one of those moral compass so strong it pierces in to remind you how inadequate your efforts are. She had the disposition of a girl I'd meet at a house party, confront in the bathroom and finger to hear the sounds she made.

“Tanya has all the classic escape behaviors. That girl is leaving for the bathroom after every transition, between every activity. That’s like eight times a day. What is her bladder, a shotglass?”

“Our fault for telling them to drink so much water,” I wrote it off.

“She's right. It's basic parenting” Steve said over his salad. “You just have this sixth sense when your kids are lying. You've been around them too long to miss all their tells,” he placed a forkful into his mouth, “She's just ignoring it.”

Tanya was back on her way to the bathroom. Third time this since writing started at 9:30. Sarah asked me to supervise it. We walked slowly.

“I want you to know you can tell me if something makes you feel funny,” I told her finally.

“You mean laughing?”

“No, something somebody does makes you scared or sad.”

“Okay,” she said, “Milo told me my play was bad.”

“Well, Milo should find some better words for that, shouldn't he?”

She wanted me to come into the stall with her, but I told her I will stay outside the bathroom because only one person should be in the stall. She sang a song “This is how we work, work, work...” and washed her hands coming out declaring “people share it all

the time.” She said yes it happened here during lunch, yes it was with campers, yes they were girls, and she listed some. She shook her wet hands until we got to the classroom. I asked her what they did, “we talk,” she reached for the knob, “can I go back to writing class,” she asked the question I never would have guessed from her.

I stepped into the class for a minute. Sarah was crouched down, with the doe-eyed patience you present to a frustrated second grader. Connor and Ricky, two classmates sent to the camp together, were fighting through their skirts.

“Your character’s laser beam is out of ammo and then it has ammo a second later. That’s stupid,” Connor teased.

“Your play stinks. Bears fighting giant ants at a picnic. How dumb can you be?”

These were the two boys who at lunch later would be straddling and humping each other in the sandbox, slapping butts, all grins and giggles.

I looked around but didn’t see Tamara’s contemplative face. She had apparently texted her mother to get her out of camp. Leaves early, arrives late, the bare minimum rules followed. She needed a “swift five fingers to the ass”, as mom would say. But she’s got two of them, and it seems, between kissing it, wiping it, and sitting it on a pedestal, they never thought to temper it. Of course the parents are the same; paying for two weeks of camp and attending one of them in favor of a coastal trip. My mom integrated circuits all summer at CISCO. If I wanted a ticket or trip, I was working for it by 14.

My lips were parched and my eyes throbbed. I had gotten pretty drunk last night. We hadn’t been able to round all the college friends up for at least a year, the last time was Sarah’s wedding. But last night was the only time; Virginia got an hour away from

the baby, Sherri had her manager cover the bistro, and Brenna canceled her last appointment and picked up Sarah from the studio. I tried to wear a nice dress but I wasn't about to take the piercings. They all seemed to have.

They talked about how busy their year had been, raises, new accounts, clients, subordinates, coy references to multiple figured salaries.

Virginia wasn't drinking, she says, she and Henry are going for "number two", as if a food order. Between her silent judgment, and the others' cocktail and specialty shot tasting, a felt the need to pound them down. Or maybe it was the question about Dylan.

I tried not to think about him. We hadn't been together for years. After we broke up the third time, it became clear everybody tried not to think about me. We couldn't even share friends; he got them. I had to stop going to shows, my record stores and coffee shops because I'd run into him and we'd be fucking within a few hours. The sex was pretty compulsory and nearly clothed, his beer gut rippling beneath some stretched, black rag of a band shirt, with mine pulled up to my neck, almost strangling, so he could handle my tits. One of us would fuck somebody else and it would be done soon. I was single for a bit, and wasn't drinking nearly as much when he was gone. I would have saved money, but I just spent it on weed, online rentals, and a few more pounds. And sure, it helped with work a little. I haven't ever been as close to my students as the ones this year. I've never cried on the way home from the last day of school.

I had to do extended care today because Jonah had other plans, a euphemism for something. Forgot sunscreen again. Pink turned to maroon. I aloed the fuck out of it. Alexa was always picked up last, every day Maria told me. She'd amble through the yard,

kicking a ball. I remember that. I'd sit on a bench alone, which seems weird to me now as I'm sure some supervision was legally required. But that's how I remember it. My uncle would pull up in my mom's old car when I had been expecting her.

I can't remember them at all. I assume they're nightmares. But I haven't had dream for years, or don't remember them. Even if I could, I wouldn't write them down because who wants to remember nightmares? The soaked bed is from the heat.

I smoke a bowl on the way there, and cottonmouth, the skin peeling from caffeine and heat dehydrated. I switch from Dillinger Escape Plan to Baroness, for more soothing melody. I only take a hit or two because I know I'll just be on edge and spinning. Even though I'm in charge, they can't know.

I checked in on Hamed's class before lunch. Hamed's class worked on costumes and set design. He worked at a Jewish Day school in Berkeley as an Art teacher for middle schoolers. The campers spent the time rifling through plastic bins of taffeta, assorted fabrics, donated clothes, and cheap construction paper to make costumes for their skits. With the final performance in two days, they were stitching their designs together.

I took a moment during his class to talk to him. Hamed had been on yard duty during lunch. He gathered his hair into a ponytail, "David came up and told me they were playing in the bathroom. I asked him what and he said he didn't know but he heard cackling and a camper came out and told him they weren't following rules." He tightened his hair, pulling it.

"Did you check?"

"I had to watch the yard. Sarah hadn't finished lunch yet. Ricky came out and told me they were TPing the bathroom. Sarah covered and I went in to find streamers slung across. Like white curtains. They had plugged up the sink which was overflowing."

"Fuck, what a scene."

"Yeah," he looked amused, "I've had to tell them the toilets aren't a play structure like three times."

"Well, it could be worse. When you find a bunch in there and it's totally quiet, you know you've got a bigger problem."

"At least at school I know them all. Two of the kids were wearing those auburn shirts from the writing camp. They wouldn't leave. I knew it was a power play but I helpless. I had to lead them out. They looked at me like it wasn't my jurisdiction."

"Yeah, I know that one. You can't help it. It's the fucking parents that hear 'no' more than they say it."

I'd been getting complaints from parents that the kids were stressed about completing their plays in time. We knew it. Everybody's eyes but the parents were stretched and bruised into a sort of middle-aged despair in as we accepted that school never ended.

Most of the kid's works come out imitations of things they'd seen, maybe one or two had honest-to-god creative talent. Most of them just wrote about their lives with a single twist, something very clearly horrifying and hyperbolic that they are taught, and in turn teach their readers, is possible to overcome.

During her mid-day break in classes, Sarah took me aside, into the cubby corner, where we could still watch the older kids she'd seen previously. They worked silently amidst crinkling paper and droning fans.

"Have you seen Alexa's play yet?" I said I hadn't. Sarah looked back to her, and lowered her voice.

"Maybe we should go outside." I nodded to Maria to keep an eye on them; she returned it.

"There's a scene in there where she and a male counselor are dressing and undressing each other." One of ours, I thought, stomach sunk into my uterus; I rationed my words. "Keep going," I felt she was going to detail it anyway.

"Well," she shifted her weight, looking back as if she was still exposed, "to be fair, the characters are preparing costumes for the recital on Friday."

"And it's her and who?"

"She made up a counselor. Timmy. Red hair, stick arms, two dimensions."

I laughed at her description, the less plausible the details came. It sounded like an amalgam.

"Tamara's in it, too."

"Okay," I tried to stay neutral.

"And they tickle each other all over." It seemed faster if Alexa just read it to me. But she continued.

"There's a page where they tickle around their underwear, and Alexa has a frowny face," she turns the page in her mind, "then Timmy finds them, tells them it's

bad,” my eyeball pulsed, “but then he joins in.” She anticipated my reply, acknowledging her concern, which I wasn’t ready to grant her.

“Keep going,” I repeat.

“Well that’s it,” Sarah’s voice quivers, “it’s the whole plot. She goes to the writing teacher, who tickles her. Then the camp director who does the same. Then the Petersens. Then her parents and...”

I interrupt her “how does it end?”

“She keeps changing the story.”

“But we’re not mentioned specifically, right?”

“No, just our titles,” with her pause, she politely demanded my assenting credibility.

“Thanks for bringing it up,” I smiled to promote ease, “let’s keep an eye on it.”

“Should we suggest she change it?”

“No, it’s okay. Let her keep going.”

“Are you sure?”

“There’s no need for alarm yet.”

“I could ask her why she chose tickling,” Sarah continued.

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

Now Sarah would know; and if she found out I knew before she did, she’ll suspect me of something worse. And the longer I keep it a secret, the more it’ll look like a front. I can’t tell her I knew, not after hushing it. If I’d admitted the note, she might inflate it to a problem she’d actually do something out. If it didn’t happen, we could ruin

some kid's lives, the camp credibility, and our own. If it did happen, who's to say we could do anything about it? It was best to keep it to ourselves. But I can pretend I'm taking her lead, and talk to Steve or Hamed, somebody with her same authority; she'd at the very least see that I take it seriously, but trust another confidant more than she. If I approach them now, while she's still in class, I can get to them first, ask some more deflective questions. This is all assuming she doesn't decide, during a timed silent exercise, to text the owners about her hunch.

I left late today and saw Alexa swinging by herself, pumping her legs for momentum. I gave her some pushes. I asked her if she was having fun. Yes. How's your play? Good. Are you making friends? Yes. It looks like you and Tamara are getting close? I guess. Do you like Tamara touching you? I didn't know how else to say it.

“Alexa,” our heads turned to see a tall, anemic blonde woman calling out to us from the middle of a phone call. She waved her hand to beckon her daughter.

“Bye, Miss Caroline,” she jumped mid air and fled from the tanbark.

I walked to my car and grabbed the bowl from my center console. I felt myself singe in the seat. I keep forgetting sunscreen. Every time. Curse of the pale chola. I'll keep aloeing it.

They were supposed to come in today for sexual harassment training. Emails came every hour or so saying they were tied up and would be here progressively later in the day. By Thursday, there seemed little point.

I can't fucking do it anymore. I haven't eaten a full meal in three weeks. I can't do anything when I get home. I wash my face in cold water but haven't bathed. I only want pizza for lunch and dinner, the exhaustion diet. It's fucking terrible. My tooth feels looser and looser. I forgot my lunch and ate a raw can of spaghetti I'd found in my car. It was a low point, for sure, that's why I ate in the car. My first few months being sober were like this. Gorging food in traffic, freeway flying between my fifth grade class in Cupertino to an aftercare program in Fremont. That was my sober bottom.

I went a few months until the seizure. It was a Thursday afternoon, my second year of fourth grade. I was leaving for the day and the kids were in aftercare. This Kindergarten boy froze and fell backward, the bushes half breaking his fall. I caught him before his head hit concrete. He started seizing in my arms. They had no idea what to do, the director returning with an icepack. For a fucking seizure. I had to explain to the father and my coworkers the protocol. The tremors stopped, he lost consciousness. The father played him the star wars soundtrack on his phone to keep him awake. I had never felt calmer. Sirens mounted and the paramedics pried him from my arms. I went to gather the hoards of onlooking students up into the library, sitting down and playing crazy 8's with a girl, my disposition completely upbeat and positive. I wasn't pretending too much. I got high from it, the adrenaline mainly, but also whatever I hadn't fully detoxed. The whole surrounding staff congratulated me, and I politely ignored it, their adulation and respect causing even more a scene that truly embarrassed and discomforted me. I went home and couldn't sleep, my feet twitching in bed like I was still running. I had been planning it all day at work. I got off right at 3:00 as the first and second hand aligned, picked up an

eighth and a six pack, pulled out the bowl in the back of my closet, popped a bottle and “went out”, as they say.

By 1:00, Joey’s class had devolved into rabble. Flying paper clips, chortling, spitting contests, racing, wet fart sounds, from which emerged shrieks of alternately pain and ecstasy. I don’t know how he had been hired, really, beyond the fact that the company was deflating and he could carry a tune. This year was more choreography. The older ones were sly to the silly dances as a sort of pacification. He couldn’t control the room. Jonah stood in the back and joked with a small group. Joey couldn’t get them to do almost anything he wanted. They smelled his insecurity, his need for attention. He didn’t get that management was largely a matter of disembodiment: neither the children nor your ego can touch you. Zen state. Except, his version was more a flaming monk. As had been the pattern, I walked in to find three children swarming him with inane personal questions, to which he responded with relish and detail, while the other dozen tore the walls down. He’d reengage minutes past his lesson plan, with snipes, sarcasm, and lectures, which simply wasted more time. Passive aggression to children is far less passive than with an adult. No positive reinforcement, no transparency or balanced communication. Then he’d come to me after, genuinely perturbed as to how they could be so inconsiderate. He never considered how bad he was.

Sarah was around the corner, peeking in. She wouldn’t be receiving the little ones for another half-hour. We leaned on the banisters, myself on the guardrail of the top steps.

“Camp is good for setting boundaries kids don’t get to in school or home.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“My mom was a therapist. She said she knew one of the kids I went to camp with. How did she know another kid that didn't go to my school, wasn't in my plays, music classes? And he wasn't a son of a friend of hers. I asked she met him, “the dentist?”. She said, “yes, I met him at my doctor’s office”. She told me to make sure not to be alone with him and not to let him touch me. So we were playing Duck-Duck-Goose one day at camp and he was tapping people on the shoulder. He was coming around I started getting really anxious so I froze. He came around and tapped me “duck” and I stood up and screamed and backed away. If that wasn't embarrassing enough, I peed a little. There was this male counselor who I remember I had a crush on, even at eight or nine, and he and I looked through the lost and found for and took a pair of oversized track pants. I wanted him to take me to change. But he handed me off to this girl I barely knew who seemed put out that she had to do it. It made it worse.”

“That stuff is so confusing, huh?” I tried not to invalidate her experience.

“It was,” she looked toward the stained glass inlays. “I saw you talking with Alexa. In aftercare. I’m just saying it’s good, in my experience, to be direct when talking with kids about these things.”

I told her I’d taught sex ed and some kids may not be ready to hear everything.

“Well, then maybe we should just talk amongst the counselors,” she looked down, “the kids may just distort something sexual even more than it needed to be.”

“I totally agree,” I said, “The Petersens just told me to keep it between us. I’m not making anything official. I want to see if there are any trends in behaviors. That’s all,” I put my hand on her shoulder and squeezed, “thanks for wanting to help.”

I met Naomi last Spring. She had been a student assistant at my school and was transferring at the end of the year. We went out to drinks and ended up sucking face in her car, like a perfect gentleman on a high school date. She turned out to be an ideal summer guide; she found all the free events like drum circles, street fairs, open mics, and festivals, those fun activities meant for old couples. We heated up pretty quickly and, by April, she was sleeping over almost every night. By last month, she had left, tired of the ashes on the nightstand, the gurgling bong in the middle of the night. I haven’t heard from her in a month. Dylan hadn’t complained about it, but he didn’t complain about anything I did really.

They called me back early Friday morning saying, “tell them it’s a priority, but don’t spend too much time pursuing it.” I got the picture; it’s just one kid, and who knows if anybody was telling the truth, right? If it wasn’t the last day, I’d have more space to let the shittiness of the situation sink in. None of us will see each other again. We can all move on.

I couldn’t pretend anymore that this priority that wasn’t supposed to be a priority had become my priority. There are other words for it, but there’s only one that keeps coming to mind. Even if I could narrow it down, it hasn’t gotten any clearer. Camp for most of us was a place to explore others, so there were no real victims there.

We finally made an announcement at morning assembly. Sarah organized most of it. I told her we couldn't spend too much time on it. Only two minutes. Not like those PSA assemblies we had all the time: the more you know, the less they care, the other teachers and I would laugh. They kept it dull and short. Little scenes like Sarah and Steve, him taking a piss and her standing right behind him to show that counselors shouldn't be in the bathrooms with students. Counselors shouldn't be alone with students. They used a foam rally finger to point to "safe zones". The kids already knew this, but we had to perform due diligence.

Most of theater class Steve had devoted to improv games. The past few days, as the skit drafts came in, the campers had been blocking and memorizing each other's scenes. All day they'd been rehearsing their deliveries and acts, starting with the younger ones and now, around the end of the day, with the older kids. I took him off the stage, we watched the children working out their stories.

He said he found two of them out during lunch. It was Ricky and Seth, turned facing the wall, with matches firing off firecrackers. The position they were in, he thought they were doing something else. They claimed they were working on pyrotechnics for their play.

"Have you seen anything with Alexa?"

"Besides her with Tamara?" Steve asked.

"Anything I should know about?"

"Nothing you can't see yourself. I don't think anything has happened," he watched the fourth grade director of the push another actor into place, "But she's totally the type."

I paused to wait for confirmation. He continued.

“You probably had some training on grooming, right?”

“Do you think she's being groomed?”

“No, and I hope she hasn't been somewhere else.”

I asked the counselors, but most of them had so little experience with children to know what was a warning sign. Kids weren't following Jonah's instruction and he had repeatedly told Celia to keep her hands to herself, and she was confused during a touching game. She later reminded him, after rubbing her crotch, that she was following the rules. Malcolm said Victoria was clearly not wearing underwear under her skirt, he noticed as she went down the slide. Maria railed against Milo's misogyny when he told Lena she was stupid because she was a girl. And all of them had problems with the bathroom usage. But nothing that pointed here.

For the longest time, I didn't even know what to call it. I think it was that feeling that kept me silent. Most of the time though, it just felt like another reason to keep it to myself. I told Mom around eighteen, after he'd died. She found so many reasons to doubt it, the ones that kept her head turned in any direction she could without facing it and looking directly into the sun.

We were at Seacliff that Thanksgiving, at Tio's place after we broke the lease at our condo and Dad moved in with Rena, his then girlfriend. I was reading on my stomach all day, and my whole backside roasted beneath my training bikini. Mom told him to show me where the aloe was while she finished the pecan pie. He took me out back to the succulent garden, to the aloe's pale green tendrils. Tio snapped one off into his hairy fist,

and nodded for me to do it. I cupped my palm over the soft stalk and broke it free. He wiped the aloe stalk on my shoulder and it began to cool me. So I did the same with mine. He offered to help me apply it, front and back, and I said yes. We both did it.

By 2:00, the camp was whirling chaos but somehow it appeared completely manageable. The parents were set to come in an hour and a half to see the final show. Steve had assumed the duties of seamstress in the back auditorium, patching holes in costumes and hot-gluing pieces together. Sarah was helping run lines on stage with discrete casts of kids while Joey clapped out beats for musical numbers, mirroring their dances and broad gestures. Hamed alternated between stapling or nailing together plywood supports and painting one dimensional kitchens, playgrounds, front yard facades, and seascapes. The stage was narrow, but two dozen yards deep, and even with school property stored in back, there was still enough room to stand the sets up, one facing the other in reverse order of appearance, making it more efficient to strike them between skits. Sets were reused for different skits, making a school in one act become a house in another.

I haven't showered in three days. It's all I need but I couldn't even get into the tub without my muscles aching my body onto the floor. I have to bring my dinner, weed, laptop into my bed because when I get home because I can only sit down once before I'm out.

We gathered the children into the green room, an old rectory basement painted literally as a jungle, with a canopy, twisted vines and spiking stalks of ferns and foliage. I walked up to the auditorium with 10 minutes before the official end of camp. We had

closed the doors, so I could hear parents murmuring outside. But the echoing silence of the room magnified, while my sole presence offered a fleeting sense of ownership over the room.

Parents filed in and were presented playbills by the ushering counselors. They seated themselves and waited, crossed legs fidgeting at the ankle, fanning pamphlets in the air, side conversations on the phone. I felt the need to corral them.

I could see the line backing up at the door as Malcolm made small talk with each incoming adult. I lifted a stack of pamphlets from him and handed them out with a painted smile and greeting. Andrea was ushering families to different rows and seats as they arrived. I strode to the plastic aisles and reseated whole families and little siblings, stepping over knees and feet. I handed Andrea the stack of playbills. I looked to the rustling curtains, snagged slightly ajar. I hopped on stage and untied a knot in the string, finally closing the crimson gap. My heart pounded. Tanya was next to me backstage, trying to safety pin a piece of silver lycra to Connor's spacesuit, so I removed her to my side and started stitching it on from a nearby sewing kit. My face was mistyped in sweat. In the green room, I saw Josephine smearing stage lipstick almost to the edge of David's cheeks. I rubbed it off with cold cream and reapplied it with a shaky hand. The show was set to begin. I went outside, stage right to find a gel on the red lights was missing. There were extras in back, which I had to find, and safety pinned them on with the one I'd taken from Tanya.

The Emcees took the stage. A song and dance introduced the Auteurs Studio Variety Hour.

The skits began. In many cases their lives were reflected back to parents with clumsy blocking and stilted dialogues, adorned with oversized pant suits and briefcases. The parents smiled along despite the performances, often because of them. The ridiculousness of adult pretenses was naked and evident, but who knows if they saw it. Maybe they were simply bemused by the mimicry.

Alexa's skit was next, and apparently she had changed the story. I stood at the back, not wanting to see the parent's meager smiles of disapproval, watching the backs of their heads, some glowing phones and cameras documenting the performance. The curtains opened. The music started. The scene began, the children emerged and their parents cheered them on.

Wall-to-Wall Carpeting

Randy sat on his legs, picking little plastic ants out of the carpet beneath him and placing them into his cupped hand. He sat in front of his desk in the den. His briefcase lay on the edge of the tabletop above his head.

“Maybe you shouldn’t yell at him like that.” Stacey sat in the armchair, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands as she spoke. He must have known it was a mistake.

He sighed, and picked tangled fibers out of the plastic. “When did carpet become popular again?”

He placed the ants inside a small plastic barrel and got to work scooping the monkeys off the ground. “You know,” he tried to alter his tone to nonchalance, “you can see every stain from this close.”

The corner behind Randy was peeling up at the baseboard.

He had been coming home from the motor plant, eyebrows knitted, gears ground from the commute, his mind swollen with ergonomic notes on the new model-T.

He moved slowly, bent like a cow, revealing his monastic bald spot. Maybe he was biding time to respond to something she had phrased more as quasi-question, a little buffer. But how could she know if he didn’t express it?

He could have said it differently to Chris, Stacey thought. ‘Sweetie, do you want to clean up your toys’ or ‘how will you know where they are if you don’t put them away yourself?’ Just last week, she returned from her night shift to find Chris dumping water

on his Hot Wheels, soaking pools deep into the carpet, and yelled him to his room. She heard a thud on the walls, and came in to find him hitting his head. She iced his forehead while Randy directed his care onto the walls, stapling foam padding to the spots near his bed.

Randy fixed on a spot behind her, across the room. Plush carpet covered their home. Even the bathrooms of the condos came staged with soft mats.

His mother was a phone operator. Her husband ran off to Arkansas with a newer, younger girl. Their divorce was finalized in terse letters delivered through a courier. No finesse, she'd scoff, a fine how you do.

Stacey stared at him, formulating another question.

“Did something happen at work?”

“You know, it would be much easier to clean these up if it was hardwood.”

“Randy,” she gathered all her remaining patience after a hospital shift, “you need to make him understand what happened.”

He started picking at the carpet. Each. Individual. Thread.

Randy had borrowed a set of matchbox toy cars, just larger than a fingernail, from his classmate Charlie, who had counted them and written the number in black sharpie on the box. When he got home, he had to play with them. He heard his mothers' car pull up. Knowing he should have started his homework, he darted to his room, leaving the cars tangled in the rug. She returned with her usual clamour: muttering, clinking glasses, chairs scraped across linoleum, the television's human white noise. She soon started with the vacuum; Randy knew it had not been a good day. He kept working. He didn't leave

his room until the motor had cooled. He came out an hour later to his mother in a sweatsuit, her feet up on the table. The carpet beneath her was barren, baring only windswept tracks.

“You know I’ve tried. You’ve seen it.”

“Yes,” she lowered herself with her arms from the chair, leaning cross-legged against it, “

Stacey knew he was thinking it, because she’d heard it in countless variations. A petty scrap of his mothers’ neglect he’d held onto for comfort. He had weathered his righteousness, and ground it into the single memory, even as she had begun to lose her own.

“Something’s not getting through to him,” Randy chewed a cuticle.

They both stared at the same spot, a worn bit of carpet. Marley had come out so normal, they had both wondered aloud, what had they done wrong with Chris? Daycare staff had taken them aside, concerned that his gaze was always wandering or fixed in some corner. No matter how they consoled each other, they couldn’t avoid the permeating thought that they had somehow deprived him of childhood. Their thoughts threaded. If they had been more careful in their first apartment, if they’d had him sooner, if she hadn’t had those couple glasses of wine during the second pregnancy, if Randy hadn’t dropped him on the tile floor, if they hadn’t fed him certain foods, if they had followed or not followed a certain book. The doubts sunk in deeper.

They met each others' gaze. Randy sighed, his lips parting to speak. They heard a soft thud on the carpet above. They looked up to the ceiling corner. An irregular rhythm pounded into the floor.

The Five Ball Cascade

I thought he was joking at first, just blowing off some steam. But you know other than you he always was the most committed. And he was always just blowing off steam. I thought you'd want to know what's going on. Greg sat with his elbows on his knees in the peeling leather recliner to lead our group meeting. We had missed another Saturday and Sunday performance, the second weekend this month. Stellan and Uta were working the bars, and Kyle had the late shift at the parlor serving slices to the same customers.

"Alright," he seethed, "what do you think we should do?" Greg asked. "I know you can't quit. We all have to work. But the less we're working the park, the less we make."

"Maybe we could ask them to trade off?" Gretchen looked to Greg, then the others for support, remembering it was he who she was challenging.

"That seems reasonable," Kyle added.

"No. Not now."

"Why isn't it reasonable?"

"We shouldn't have to share it. We are authorized to be there. They aren't."

Uta sipped a screwdriver. "How do you know?"

"I overheard them saying they hadn't filed their noise permit."

"When?" Stellan asked.

"It doesn't matter. If we keep missing days, they're going to take the whole territory. The fact that it's public is their security."

We've been working Central Park for three years now. Around when you left, the end of spring, like every year we had to prepare for the Summer tourist season but, specifically, for the Blackrobats. The first Summer, Greg's voice went hoarse from having to project; we thought we'd move further away, but the further from the fountain, the less foot traffic we got and the more they got. Then he got that damn P.A. system the next year, which made us get that damn noise permit from the park police. You remember all the places we tried? Moving out near the Met, great field, the carousel, the mall. When we tried Washington Square, Union Square, but didn't last more than a few months before Greg insisted we go back. Turns out he was right; staying in the same place would have been better. The Blackrobats went viral without anybody there to split their take.

"What if we negotiate times of day to alternate?" Kyle suggested. He pet the back of Stellan's neck, who brushed him off.

"They're not just going to hand us days or times. You've heard them talk about us."

It was true, at some point, usually a third of the way through their set, they'd say, "you didn't come here to watch juggling. Let 'em play with their balls," they'd say juggling below their crotches. I don't think they're any better than us. It's kind of incomparable. But the way they take money is far more graceful. They play with the concept of paying them, but they bring it up very rarely, only to do so aggressively in the end, patrolling around with upturned caps, two or three at a time. Those things are brimming to the brim with cash, every time.

“They’re not looking for compromise. They send their guys out to poach our audiences before their sets.”

"It wouldn't hurt to ask," I looked between the others for confirmation, "I could do it, if you don't want."

"I'm the representative, guys. We voted on this."

This had been voted on. You had looked to me that day, and I raised my hand. Greg was the most qualified. He'd directed shows before, you insisted. He had organized. And its true. He had promoted us, he had covered our gaps in rent, he had worked out the technical passing and was the feeder for our group routines. He'd made us better. You reminded me he had enhanced your work when you developed the Pass-Ball Furies after competing solo for months outside the Flatiron Building, when you realized you could execute more number and pattern juggling if you worked together. It was only a year until I came in, Uta, Kyle, and Stellan sixth months later.

"We can't vote again. There's an even number without Julie. No tie breaker."

He had voted last time, but maybe he couldn't vote now because he was the elect, and who would want to vote themselves out? I was too worn out to ask.

"Then you ask them, Greg," Kyle resigned.

"No, not after they egged us."

"They didn't. They egged you," Stellan said.

"It was meant for any of us. For all of us."

"It looked like you threw that egg."

"I didn't."

"It was a pretty big wind-up," Kyle supported his partner.

"I was not trying to throw the egg."

"It was an accident," I said as a reflex, predicting a lashing as Greg felt more cornered.

"It had cracked a little and was wet. That and the small size."

"You've juggled eggs a thousand times. And gripped them, no problem," Uta remarked. "So, you made a mistake?"

"That's not the point. They threw it back. They were trying to hit us," he pulled off his glasses as if he might dash them against the wall, then delicately cleaned them with his silk kerchief. "Instead of doubting me you should be doubting your own reflexes to catch it. And maybe ask why you think I wouldn't protect all your interests."

I didn't see the whole thing because my focus was on the act. I picked up two long zucchini and tossed them to Greg, who gave me this trembling, petulant "you can't fuck this up" look beneath his blonde bowl cut. I locked onto his eyes for focus, finding only cold panic. In my periphery, I noticed the gourds land in Greg's hands, expecting yours for some reason. I felt two gourds land in my palms, breathing out in completion, before throwing them back, mourning how much more dependable you were as a partner. Greg gave me a lofty "thanks for not fucking it up, Gretchen" look, the type that he'd picked up from years at Academy.

My hand tossed the zucchini to my left, where it was exchanged for another by Uta, who in turn had crosslaced hers with Kyle, who was standing beside Gretchen and receiving his own from Greg. I looked beyond Greg's eyes to keep focus. I didn't have to

try this hard before. As partners, you and I were perpetual motion, seemingly unreal. I felt it when we met in college, at the Hampshire Juggling Club. You approached me, a year older, assertive and shoeless, and taught me to execute my first three-ball cascade. As you suspended the objects in air, a look of serenity spread across your face. It was so appealing—the feeling we would both share—that I joined the Furies and found myself driving a packed wagon into Harlem the year I graduated.

I saw my zucchini slam into Greg's chest, his green eyes wide in surprise. I had gotten out of cycle, causing the crosshatch to fall apart. The small crowd gasped and laughed. The dancers, who were prepping their next set, snickered. Greg's cheeks bursted deep red. Catching his breath, he slid his headset microphone back into position, announcing from their mobile PA system that "because you've been such a *gourd* audience," who received him with silence, "we have one more course for you". The cluster of viewers murmured with errant claps.

I heard them make fun of us again, their crowd laughing. Greg turned back to us, his thin, showman smile growing manic as he motioned to the eggs. Our small audience tittered and yawned, checking phones and watches, pacifying and wrangling their drifting children. Greg hucked something furtively, before landing my pass with the other hand. I barely processed it until the return shell hit him like a gunshot, spewing yolk on his face.

"It's hard for me to believe this was accident," Uta tied up her dreads. "You trained at London academies, like me. Except you graduated. Even in Romania, audiences don't forgive."

"I'm human. Things can slip from my hands."

“No accidents. That’s not how I was raised. You know this too.”

“Yeah, I know, Uta. I’ve heard this gypsy shit before.”

“I’m just saying you fucked up.”

“Yeah,” Greg gritted his teeth, “well it wasn’t because I was fucked up.”

She arched her eyebrow and sipped silently. She had been sleeping through her hangovers and through practice the past few months.

"Kyle, did you renew the permit?"

"When?"

"Last month."

"Yeah, yeah. Paid the registration and everything."

“Good, then we have leverage,” he looked around and sighed, “so no new ideas? If you have any, I’d love to consider them. Something constructive.” It seemed compulsory to keep asking, and we were exasperated, aware that there was only one person he was listening to.

“Alright, here’s something I’ve been thinking. A little low, I admit. But I think they deserve it. I say we get some extra eggs, maybe four dozen, enough to show them we mean business. Then one of us comes in with a bucket of grease or oil and pours it on their spot. It’s supposed to rain this weekend, so that can only help.”

“Isn’t that a little dangerous?” I asked, skeptical as to how serious he was.

“No, they’ll be fine. They won’t hurt themselves. At least not their bodies.”

“It’s cheap. I don’t like it.”

“We deserve this. You are all so talented, and you want to work hard but we can only do so much. It’s not like we’re not trying. We just need a break. Some intervention. It could buy us a week or two during peak tourist season.”

The heart of our interest is in keeping the attention of audiences. If you watch them, crowds tend not to split, and one group can quickly attract the majority. Both of us need to keep them captive, and slowly build our value in the eyes of the audience enough to compensate us with at least time and, at most, their money. We have to assume that people can and will leave at any point. We have to keep the spectacle escalating. Each performance must go from busking to high art. I assume that the audience will greet us with indifference or contempt. I try to keep my expectations low to match their underlying sense being that “art” doesn’t happen in the street.

The sun stretched across Manhattan, dragging Kyle to the parlor, Stellan to the go-go club, and Uta towards her flair bartending gig, that left them all exhausted in the morning. The old Greenpoint Gasket factory is doing well. We still practice in the open living room, when we have time. It’s nice to have our family. Greg still helps us take care of the bills. We all pitch in when we can. We each cook once a week now. The plates teeter, balanced on dirty forks and pans. Ants, mildew, stagnant water. We haven’t yet figured out who does dishes but every family is a bit dysfunctional. The sink gets clogged from the dish build-up, which has burst the lining of the pipes, something Greg keeps insisting on fixing with electrical tape. It’s getting pretty foul, but most don’t notice, particularly Greg. I still don’t believe he doesn’t have a sense of smell; I mean, he does, but his taste buds are underdeveloped. Greg keeps leaving his laundry in the washer and

it gets that sour mildew smell. And he just dries them as they are. Now he always smells like a sweet sort of repulsive. Not that it bothers him. If I couldn't taste or smell anything, I'd be fucking miserable. I'd kill myself for lack of flavor.

We're still doing your show. It's not like food juggling is anything new, but between our food service gigs and circus arts, your packaging "Playing with Food: Served in Six Courses" was genius. We miss having you as the emcee, but your stage design lives on. You were so energetic, perky, and somehow impervious to heckles and judgments. We do alright, thanks to your addition of "tipping your servers"; Stellan and James come around with bill plates and clips for dollars. The act is okay, but it's getting a little stale. We do the clumsy waiter juggling bit for Appetizers, then the vegetable toss for Salad, then the Brunch section with the eggs and grapefruit passing, followed by the bowl balance and ladle juggling for Soup. The Main course still uses the plastic pizzas and mutton legs we made, completed with an oversized banana split Desert that assembles as each part falls into the center bowl. I still keep the clipping of that New York Magazine blurb.

We could use your talent again. Like that year you worked the Little Apple Circus in Coney. Your tightrope juggling, the simple toss patterns, some fountains, showers, cascades, windmills. I had a feeling you'd get higher. You say how we'd all tried out for some of the bigger shows, so when you received the callback for Cirque Du Soleil's show, I was proud, but we all didn't think much of it. We'd never known anybody who'd gotten a position. But once you were offered an alternate position and joined them on a

European tour, there was a melancholy. I knew Greg was jealous. I guess it's been, what, three months now.

I only assume you're paying rent on your room because they left it empty, and if it weren't for the heavy uninhabited musk, I'd have thought you were just working late. I come in and sit on your bed, look at your sparse open closet and fall asleep imagining the sets and props of your new life. It still feels like, after work I'm going to come home to that studio we shared for that first year, until she moved in here to Greenpoint.

Greg said you'd lost your phone in London, or that's what Greg told me when I asked if he'd heard from you. I asked him to see the e-mails, but he's sort of evaded it. He said you used a friend's to call him about the month's rent check. I sent you a bunch of e-mails, but I know you tend not to respond to those. I assume you're probably so busy. In case you lost it, my number is 642-7355; you remember the area code.

I remember waking up to your beanbags diving towards the high ceilings, working out patterns and notating them. It was the soft, comforting sound like rain. Nobody's really practicing anymore. The group feels out of orbit without you.

Did I ever tell you how the first month I was here, I would have a hot dog for lunch everyday? I spent the majority of the day on my feet, because it was cheaper than buying, cooking, cleaning, organizing, and keeping food. And being on my feet was cheaper than being in our studio. I found myself circling Bethesda fountain after a days' interviews, making ripples in the water and watching the light move as if I had done it with the merest touch of my finger.

Nothing has changed with work. The only steady thing is the same one I've had for the past three years, that party character gig. It took an hour and a half to get out to Long Island today for work. My pug face passed as remarkably native underneath the straight, black Pocohontas wig. I was awkward, and made me look like a whitewashed extra in a Thanksgiving pageant. But I still get to perform, teaching juggling, something that allows me to ignore the costume a bit.

The host, one of the girls, became frustrated. She abandoned the process in favor of more instant gratification. I assumed it was the birthday's influence. The birthday girl dragged her feet and cried because she couldn't juggle two balls. I tried to intervene but the girl threw the beanbags at me and screamed. Parents' heads turned instinctually, and her young, taffeta clad guests gaped. Even the fellow characters stopped what they were doing to watch. The little girl dropped where she was, planting her heels in the ground and crossing her arms. Her parents crept out to her, embarrassed, the only two people who weren't relieved to be themselves. They huddled around her and repeated soft, inaudible requests. I could see little plastic mary-janes protruding from the comforting mass, kicking up clods of dirt and sod. The more they tried to quell her, the more of a scene she made. By the time they had coaxed her into a bright-red, sniffling, heaving state, most of the parents had said their quiet goodbyes slipped out with their kids. The parents apologized and paid us all for the whole day. The little girl stood the whole time, hand in mother's hand, with a look of relief on her face. She looked triumphant.

My Dad's been relentless all day. He texted me he'd be in the city this week, and asking if I had time to meet up for dinner, if I wanted to stay with him, if I wanted to

spend a day with him. I got off work and saw five messages, a few with simply a cluster of question marks. I wasn't sure why he was coming over from Bucks' County. He'd been a stagehand at the playhouse for at least two years and I know it's not the off-season.

I didn't have the freedom you did. We lived nomadically for years in cottages, backhouses, but mainly studio apartments, staying in one place for maybe a year or so, but always within twenty miles of my mom's apartment in Allentown. I'd curl up next to him on our corduroy couch to do homework and watch whatever he wanted. It didn't make a difference to me. My interests were his. He always wanted to show me something. You've got to see this, Gretchen. He'd snap the disk from its case into the tray and would disappear into our combo DVD player. I can't believe you haven't seen this movie, he'd say, as if I'd been a recent acquaintance with an existence in any way separate from his own. Sometimes he'd forgot he'd shown me ones from his own collection, his favorite movies in their flaking dust jackets, cassettes clacking and whirring into the player, fuzzy old comedy scenes he'd rewind until he'd squeezed every last laugh from them and I elbowed him in his overstuffed middle. Maybe it's thinking just now but, right at the point the momentum had built the illusion, he'd pause the movie and suspend me right there while he went out back to come return later cough-laughing at a line. Be the ball, he'd shriek in delight, I gotta see that one again. Do you mind honey? I said I didn't.

Kyle was supposed to meet me at Cafè Vesuvio, since he works right off Bowery. I didn't plan on going downtown, but he wanted to meet and he said he wanted it to be

someplace else, before the next Saturday. It had been forty minutes that I'd been nursing a cappuccino and a lemon water. I sent another text reminding him where I was and how long I'd been there, alongside five other unread updates. I left to walk around Washington Square Park, watching people crowding around a breakdancer. I bought a hot dog from a cart, ate it, and bought another. I'd finished five by the time I decided to go back home.

"I'm so sorry about yesterday," Kyle's eyes bent in. I hated apologies. I tend to tune them out so I didn't even register his excuse. His contrition disgusted me.

"It's okay," I stirred honey into my tea, "so what was it we couldn't talk about at home."

"You know Greg. He's so paranoid I can't talk about these things at the apartment. Especially now. I don't know if he'd poison me or evict me or what," he laughed nervously.

"What happened?"

"It's about the noise permit."

"Stellan told me he'd get it done on his day off, and of course he didn't. That's more my fault for thinking he would." I knew things weren't going well. I had seen Stellan sleeping on the couch a few times. He was out there a few days ago, and told me he'd fallen asleep when he got home. But he had a pillow from their room and a phone charger plugged in.

"I usually do it in person on the days we're up there. But it's been a few months."

"So do we have the permit?"

“I sent it in,” he laced his fingers, “but the check bounced.”

“I can go with you, if you want?”

“That would take a load off. Thank you.”

“Sure,” I sipped my tepid drink, “Are you going to tell Greg?”

“I don't know. He's so busy with his plan.”

I looked at him with what felt like a too caustic confusion.

“That whole egging thing.”

“I thought he was just running his mouth.”

“Me too. But he convinced me to drain the grease traps at work.”

“Stellan told me last night he asked him to bring twice the eggs we usually do.”

“What the fuck,” an old fury I hadn't felt in a decade rose up. I could tell by the thickening feeling in my eyes and the look on his face. “What is happening to him?”

He shrugged. “Julie wouldn't have let it get to this.”

“No, she would have focused on the act.”

It always worked with you, every act; you had the confidence to emcee the show, the wit to improvise, and your stagecraft was ingenious. Greg's always been mechanical in his practice, like Shannon's juggling robot. You were a star with the headset microphone, commanding a sea of screaming fans every show. Greg was more of a televangelist, or a presenter at a tech convention. Your moves and jokes feel flaccid in his hands.

This is the type of shit he's been up to. He doesn't plan well, like you, or rather he isn't forward thinking. You were always three steps ahead, fluid and constant like a water

wheel. Sure, you were scattered and un-tethered, barely ever in the house for more than fifteen minutes, but once you planted her feet and set the balls in motion, you were grounded in your transcendence. Just when the harmony seemed untenable, your transition came before anybody could process. The balls circled, then crossed, then wove together. I could feel you diffused between the spheres. But you couldn't have been more present then, and less unaffected. So once you looked forward in my direction and smirked or half-winked, I knew that much more where her priorities lay.

I dreamed about you last week. It was relieving to see you. You were performing just for me. I sat with my back to a tall pine tree. You juggled bright balls, like from a pit, in a fifty-ball cascade, and each circled in the air. They twisted around like a spiral galaxy and I knew somehow it was telekinesis. Then you floated up with them, like a hot air balloon until you were just a speck in the sky. I woke up that morning in her bed again and my clothes were inside out. I've been doing it all week to see if it works again.

I worked a small party in the West Village. I was Elsa today. I brought my cotton-upholstered balls and some plastic icicles for today's act. My lily skin matched well with the synthetic blonde braid down my back. I couldn't work with kids that day. This girl didn't even seem to notice I was there. Her plates and party hats all bore Elsa's face but it was almost like she was resentful I'd stepped out of the decal uninvited and into her party. They had a live imaging Karaoke on a screen as big as my bed, digitally plastering bunny noses and tiaras into their faces. I went to the bathroom and sat on the fuzzy toilet seat just to pass the time.

When I was still going to see my mom at her apartment, she used to give me elaborate bubble baths, using all the bottle sometimes. I had always wanted to help her prepare it. We came home from the lake, and she told me to get ready for the bath as she put our towels in the laundry. I reached in past the medical supplies to find it, boxes of band-aids, tampons, rubber tourniquets, bottles of drain cleaner, lotion, rubbing alcohol, shampoo and a stash of palm-sized rubber balls tumbling out from the cabinet into a pile on the floor. She came in and looked horrified at the mess I'd made, reminding me that this was why she always prepared the bath.

She took a job as an aide at my school around second grade, and was always a rumor in the halls. I'd plan to come and she often said she wanted check my homework when we talked on the phone. I'd take the bus early to school or stay late afterwards to show her my grades. I'd heard so many times from her that she should have done her homework. I'd come to her as the star student to find she'd called out for the day, arrived late or left early. We rarely ended up in the same place at the same time. When I did, she'd pet my hair, nodding along with my accuracies and pointing to my errors agreeing to with every grade I received.

It was often a let down, but when I saw her it was always a surprise, so much so that it kept me going all the other times. It only went for so long until the surprise that she was rarely there wore off, and it became predictable. Straining to keep hope was the hardest feeling to hold. In middle school I started wishing she was dead instead of waiting, worrying, hoping for the finality of not having to care anymore.

We went to the Arsenal, the parks department building in Central Park. We stepped from the modern city streets back to an era where we stored ammunition against our enemies and placed it at the edge of a park. It was adjacent to another brick building with colonial lattice windows. People lounged and relaxed, promenaded, shared life with friends and strangers near one of the most continually militant buildings in New York.

I saw a blonde bowl cut waiting in line. I shivered, imagining it was Greg coming to push us into line. We sat on a bench and I kept looking around, waiting for the man to come back so I could confirm it wasn't him.

I spent a lot of time waiting on benches. At least I knew my Dad was there, he just wasn't right there. He was over there, standing at the counter, leaning and shifting the weight to alternate feet. A young officer with a buzzed blonde head, brown eyes a little close together, mid-twenties sat down and watched me. He told me to close my eyes and open both of my hands. He could tell I was wary. "It's a surprise," he consoled, "a good surprise". I felt a solid rod in my right hand and a crinkle pile in my other. I opened my eyes to find a ball and cups game in my right hand, and a pile of wrapped strawberry and butterscotch hard candy, a gumball and a gobstopper. I put the candy into my jacket pocket as I knew what to do with it. But he took the game and showed me how to play it. The wooden ball was secured by a long twine length, which kept the ball close when it failed to meet the cup after a lunging effort. He handed it to me. The ball mainly flew up and dangled, but I was able to connect with the cup enough times to keep me going. I threw it up a little forcefully and the ball flew through the air, almost hitting my Dad. He threw it back, acting as if the accident as an affront. Instead of fixing it, the officer

detached the string, tied it together, and showed me Cat's Cradle. In two motions, he fashioned a tangle from a single loop, then showed me how to pass it over to each others' hand. The lattice, the looping knots and their simple untangling pulled me in, until my father had completed the paperwork and took me home.

It took awhile to find the permit Kyle had sent out, as it hasn't yet been filed. When they did they reminded it was voided. We found out, after over an hour, that it would be too late to file the noise permit for this month.

I don't think I've ever worked a character in the park. I was Snow White. I had a backpack of mirrors and apples to juggle. At least I didn't have to worry about a wig today. I had curled my hair at the bottom, put a toning mouse in to darken the chestnut color.

I wanted to loathe these people but so much of it was hard to do. The mother had clearly just gotten off work, had a jacket on over her scrubs. An older woman whose face bore similar features blew up balloons between her knotted fingers. The grandfather used all his energy to chase his grandchild's guests in giggling circles. I could tell by the way the mother talked to the magician and the guy with the guitar, her tone, hand on the shoulder, hugs that they were friends. They were happy to do the favor, they beamed back.

My mom was never invited to my birthdays. I'd see her at school mainly or, rather, feel her presence always near the same halls and old brick buildings of Pennsylvania schoolhouses. By third grade, she wasn't a classroom aide anymore. She started subbing in the district. I'd come to the front office at recess and see if she was

subbing and which room she was at, then stop by to see her at lunch to find a locked classroom. She usually took lunch somewhere off-campus, but somedays she'd stay in her classroom or car and share her lunch since she wasn't much of an eater, often nauseous from her stomach problem. I remember her petting my head as I ate half of her sandwiches. I asked fourth grade or second grade, students' she'd subbed for the day before what they did, for some more glimpses. The day I walked in and saw her name Ms. Hicks-Collins written in loopy script on the board I ran up and hugged her in front of the class. "Okay pugs," she said, "I have to act like a teacher today." Everybody listened to her. Nobody talked or got up without her approval, even when she nodded off showing us a movie.

By the time I finished the party, it was early afternoon. I walked south to Bethesda and saw three of the Blackrobats setting up. It looked like the first set of the day, as only a few were there setting up and laying claim for the day. I had a feeling this could be resolved faster than Greg wanted it to be. I walked up to one of the smaller stocky guys, usually the bottom of a lift or pyramid move.

"Hey I don't think we've met, but I'm with the Pass-Ball Furies," he surveyed my costume, "the jugglers."

"Oh yeah, the food slinging crew."

"One of..." I was about to say us, "the members is having some issues."

"There's therapists for that."

"No, I mean with our acts," I looked around to the crowds of families and lovers taking snapshots, pointing.

“It’s first come, first served.”

“I know you shouldn’t have to but do you think maybe we could trade off? Or coordinate our hours so we don’t overlap. I get that it’s a public space but maybe you could talk with the others.”

“I think you just answered your own question.”

“Okay well, can we talk about the eggs?” He looked at me. “You egged him maybe a month ago.”

“You mean the guy who tried to egg us?”

“It was an accident,” I amended it, “he said.”

“We were trying to throw it back. We thought you’d catch it.”

“Maybe you can stop the insults.”

“What do you mean?”

“The comments you have in your set about us”

“We’ve got that in every set. Whoever’s there. Like today, it’s the bubble guy,” he pointed to the overweight man with headphones drawing out large iridescent spheres followed by a line of children, “It’s a bit.”

“Maybe you could talk to them about taking it out when we’re there?” I felt ineffectual, furious at myself, this fucking guy, and the world for sending me to this situation to feel like this.

“Maybe I can talk with them. But tell your boy he should toughen up. All this just comes with the territory.” Short of setting up camp overnight, I don’t know what else our people could do.

I rode the subway as Snow White, as I was going to be late for dinner with my Dad. He wanted to go to this Pakastani place at St. Marks. I walked in, hugged him, and said I had to change. I told him I'd order whatever he was having. I came back and asked for a glass of cabernet and told myself not to catch his glare.

"How are you doing, Gretch?"

"I'm doing well. Busy."

"Uh huh," he waited for me to qualify it to him. I was too tired to hold out.

"Yeah, just working and keeping the juggling up. Working on our group."

"You keeping up with rent?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"If you need some cash, let me know."

"No Dad. I'll cover it."

"I can spare some if you need it."

"Thanks for the offer, Dad," I cupped his hands in mine to assure and assuage him.

"You can always come out to Bucks if you need to. We have an extra room, even if it's just for a visit."

It had been creeping on me more and more. Moving out. But I wouldn't tell him that. He'd be in front of my house, lugging all my things into a moving truck by the time I got home tonight.

"There's this great circus arts store downtown. One of my neighbors owns it. Maybe he could get you a deal."

“I’m doing fine on my own.”

“Okay,” he sat back and sipped his soda, I swigged my wine.

He asked how you were. I told him about your tour and he was overjoyed, and gave one of those completely honest “good for her” encouragements, a pride that only fathers with phantom daughters relate. He told me why he was here; a friend in the union came down with pneumonia and would be out for a few days. So, he asked his rep to call up my dad and toss him a substitute favor.

“It’s at Carnegie. Can you believe it? I’d get you tickets to see it but it’s all sold out. They’re doing Rhapsody.”

“But you’re just throwing a light. For an orchestra.”

I imagined a disembodied spotlight, and him expecting me to beam proudly at the adept focus and precision of its moves and think ‘that’s my dad’.

“It’s more than that. They do all these different hues but, you know, blue. They got me arranging the gels and filters.”

I shrugged, “It sounds like it will pay well.”

He arranged the forks on the table, “yeah, not bad,” lining them together. “I thought you’d be excited.”

“It’s good to see you.”

“You want to stay at my place tonight?”

“Your place?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a room for the night. It’s got two twin beds. We could rent a movie.”

“Like old times,” my voice carried a little disdain.

“My eyes will be clearer. I won’t reek.”

“That cologne is still nasty, though.”

He smelled his armpit and chuckled.

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“I only got this room for the night. Staying with an old friend tomorrow. Then back to Bucks on Sunday.”

“Always on the move.”

“Hey babe, you gotta keep it moving. You stop to think about it too hard, you’ll lose focus and like humpty dumpty it will all come tumbling down. Speaking of which, how’s work? Are things more stable?”

“It’s okay. The kids are little assholes sometimes. But it’s nice to work in different places. I was in central park today.”

“That must have been hard.”

“No, the mom and daughter were really sweet.”

“I mean being in the park.”

“I’m always in central park.”

“You know what I mean.”

Yes, I wish I had forgotten. I had for the day, at least. My mom was having her first unsupervised visit. We were at the swings and she was pushing me. I heard her say “hello?” into her mobile phone and then I swung backward with no support, “I’m at the playground. I’ll be right there”. I pumped my legs to keep the momentum and, after a

minute or so, called for her. I turned around, but she was gone. It got colder, the sun setting while my heart sped up. I saw a ranger patrolling in the distance. She found me and we waited in her trailer for an hour before calling my dad to pick me up.

My dad picked up the check. I was three glasses deep when he hugged me and gave me a wary look. I felt a void when we went our own ways. The wine only filled so much. I didn't want to be with my Dad, risk feeling better, and I didn't want to go home. I ended up downtown at Uta's bar. She spun bottles and slipped me free shots all night. I woke up in your bed the next morning, clothes inside out.

I was wrecked most of today. Kyle and Stellan showed up in across from the Plaza in an uber. Stellan brought two-dozen past due eggs from his work that were going to the dumpster. Kyle emptied the grease vat at the parlor into an industrial sized bucket, as Greg asked. I honestly didn't think they would come through. They carted them down the Mall towards Bethesda. We had the terrace today, the Blackrobats stretching at the stairs to below us. Uta set up the mobile curtain and lined the prop vegetables behind it. Greg adjusted his microphone and tested his levels.

“I really didn't think you'd go with this. They brought everything. But we shouldn't do this.”

“We're going to.”

“This breaks five of the street performers codes.”

“Come on, those are only courtesies. This is the only way to send the message.”

“It isn't. I talked with them.”

“When?”

“It doesn’t matter. They said they’d discuss it.”

“They’re not just going to give it to us. I've met these people before. They were in circus arts camps, my college. Their parents spent their money on extracurricular voice lessons, camps, classes, agents, to insure their kid get that much closer, some who can barely afford it. Then they all graduate to here. And they all find the hard truth. You can't buy luck, you can't buy exposure. You can't dance or sing your way into any network.” He tapped his palms. “That's my edge: I started with their end realization. People will let you down, upstage, sabotage you. Your talent will let you down.” He powdered his hands and slapped them together. “Parents will miss recitals, drink your tuition money, your camp registration fees. They'll smash your equipment if they stumble over it. If you want to be there at the right place and right time, you have to keep and stay in that place, and be there all the time.”

Greg turned around and tried to approach groups to entrap an audience.

I walked to the edge of Bethesda terrace. Paralysis clung to my skin, seeped into my muscles and bones as a narcotic. The statue trickled and I surveyed the pond, the cobblestones and pines in the distance. I’d never really looked at her. She stood frozen in step, pigeons bearing insubstantial weight on her head, her shoulders, and her hand that reached forward. The five chubby little baby cherubs seemed to stay untouched by the water that rushed beneath her feet onto the lily pads I the pool.

I had never told you this. Never anybody, but I can’t stop thinking about it now. I was fourteen when she was found in a park in Allentown, where she seemed to be napping under a tree, the joggers told the police. Until they saw a stray soccer ball hit her

and knock her body down, and decided to check on it. She'd only been out of the clinic for a week, for pneumonia, my father told me then.

I had been rearranging the zucchini when I noticed the unmistakable march of authority passing by Greg. Two park rangers, three NYPD. They walked briskly down towards the dancers.

I could see them talking, hands at their hips, to members of Blackrobats. The dancers pulled papers out of a folder and handed them to the Rangers. The Police began to pat them down, and I could hear them objecting with strident tones. I couldn't believe they came out of nowhere just to fuck with them.

Greg stared with an invested gaze, as if towards manipulated objects. I looked at him and felt so stupid. Of course he wouldn't depend on us for his revenge. We were always his fallback plan, and it was his bowl cut I saw yesterday at the Parks.

Anger took over for a moment, replaced my consciousness like a stroke or aneurysm, only the dizziness and spotted vision reminding me I was in this body. I loathed my own faith in another person, mainly myself. But it subsided and fell from my thoughts. I didn't need to pretend Greg was helping us. I didn't need to carry that anymore. I didn't need to keep trying to be something to somebody that neither of us wanted.

The Blackrobats pointed to us. Two or the Rangers and cops walked toward us slowly.

I thought of my Dad, the little shop in Bucks County. I saw the toppling dishes, the leaking pipes in the gasket factory. Mainly I thought of you. How high you'd gone without ever planning on coming down.

I dropped the zucchini, turned around, and left the park.

Save The Bay!

The shellfish only clung to their home if there was a wide enough berth, when the neighbors had dragged their boats from the dock and stowed them into carports for the winter. Kathleen said she had heard scuttling beneath them in the mornings. It was a welcome surprise to the underfunded couple. The bounty swayed them towards seasonal pescatarianism. Charlie scraped crab and abalone from the hull with a screwdriver. They became accustomed to it, and sunk milkcrates into the water, laundry baskets and a wicker bassinet to bring in more. This was when overfishing laws were more relaxed, Charlie now reasoned. The following Autumn they needed to change pace, lifting the anchor for the first time in three years, and sailed up the coast to Alaska. They rented out space in a dock, needing to settle in for a few months, before returning home to their harbor in Carmel soon after the New Year. There were no crabs that winter. The currents had flushed the fertile algae, seaweed tufts and limpets from its underbelly. The surface hadn't been stationary long enough. It wasn't habitable.

Deep muffled pulses wake him, layered above the sharp water lapping against the sides and the docking bells his usual alarms. Charlie rises before his eyes are open. He's already put on his slippers and glasses by the time the second lid breaks free its encrusted slumber. Today the Marin county commission votes, and they still have time to spread the influence.

He takes one step into the kitchen, boils a pot of percolator coffee, spots it with sweet condensed milk, before sitting down behind his desktop computer in a tank top and plaid pajama pants. No response from Laurie at Parks and Recreation about the carbon emission issue, or Juan from the Rent Board about rent reduction or Alex from the zoning commission. Their previous messages had been terse, polite; he sensed their weariness at his persistent reoccurrence, by e-mail, at public forums and council meetings. They are public servants and, more than ever now, need to be reminded where their duties lie.

The California Employment Development Department left a notice at his P.O. Box. He's been unemployed for several months now, laid-off as a county surveyor, and hadn't yet grasped their deposit system. Luckily, Doug was letting him work at his print shop part-time. The morning jackhammer began, vibrating the dock, punctuated by twanging country music and marble-mouthed hooting.

Rows of ferns, succulents, lilies, and ficuses are dispersed amidst nascent seedlings. Within his model forest, a sign peeks out, leaning against the porthole.

In middle school, he protested to impeach Nixon on the front lawn during lunch before a gang of eighth graders jumped him and he spent the rest of the day in the nurse's office. The principal sat him down for a congenial talk, tacitly supporting his effort for free speech from beneath horn-rimmed glasses. Charlie began to organize impeachment demonstrations on the lawn, their large numbers more effectual.

He rides past the peeling waterfront apartment complexes, and crosses the canal towards the university. Charlie's usually buoyant as he rises the green patch of grass that constitutes their daily claim. Tours shuffle past and singular students begin to trickle in

along the pathways surrounding the lawn. Clumps of trees line the glade, and Charlie expects they'll provide he and his friends very little protection from the sun. Charlie ties his long, grayish black hair behind his ears, and rolls down his red linen pants to the knee. He stands alone in the center of the lawn, where he places his sign facedown on the warm dew.

He doesn't know much about zoning, and he feels guilty, a mild fraudulence in protesting it. Then again, he hadn't known much about the ocean, but he'd known that killing whales was wrong. And he knows now that sleek, bloated developers endangering preserved and historic marshland of the marina is wrong. And as a member of the Marina Committee, he has even more a right to know. They help keep citizens informed. Their meeting minutes have been slowly, monthly, paring down the group's attempts at communication with the development company to:

“The Committee continues to request information on this matter.”

Why tonight's County Commissioner's meeting is closed to the public, though including the Community Development Department and Department of Public Works, more branches than ever before, is unclear. It doesn't smell right. How Village Development Group, now a subsidiary of Morton Investments, was able to seal the county doors is also unclear.

The demonstration was supposed to begin at noon, with everybody having arrived at quarter to. Revolutions never start on time, he treats himself to a cynical jibe, not that we want a revolution, maybe half-revolution. Ellen e-mailed she'd be late; her car arriving now arriving makes sense. She's usually busy with White Pond, her bookstore in

Sausalito, which she and her husband Jonathan co-own. She ties back her straight, silver hair and tucks it behind her sweater vest, and grabs her sign from the hybrid. Doug pulls up next to her and begins extracting a hibachi grill from his car's interior, packed swollen except for the drivers' seat. Ellen has brought somebody with her this time, a young woman he doesn't recognize. Charlie anticipates the warm feeling of mixing with the crowds in brisk mornings, united in a common grievance.

They greet each other with encouragement, and back-patting hugs. Charlie hadn't seen Ellen since the Department of Fish and Wildlife public forum to reinstate private fishing rights in the bay. The girl carries a blanket and some books in a crate, her short black hair pulled back. Ellen hugs Charlie, and turns to her side.

"This is my niece Shelly. She's staying with me for a few months."

"Oh great. We could use more bodies, even if you're just tagging along."

"Not really. I'm an ecologist. I guess, I'm interested in it."

"Yeah?"

"I'm studying it at UC Santa Cruz. Marine Biology, mainly."

"How long have you been there?"

"Two years. But I'm taking this Fall semester off," she stares down at the grass, anticipating subtle disapproval. "I guess I thought Santa Cruz would be more political, less about getting high and bonfires."

"Yeah," Charlie remembers the town as the haven where Bay Area activists went to retire. "It's different now".

"It feels like drugs from up north keep trickling down there."

“And that’s bait for undergrads, for sure.” Charlie smiles at her precocious edge.

“Where are you doing with your time off?”

“I was with Greenpeace last summer, so they let me come back and canvas. I’m lucky to be staying with Aunt Eileen in her studio. Its cozy surrounded by those walls of books.”

After they arrange their belongings, they cluster together, examining one another’s signs.

“Nice lettering there, Ellen” Doug notes, leaning in with his sign. “Support Local Businesses” proclaimed the top letters, followed by, “No To Marina Developments”; the phrases are separated by a pier and scribbled watermarks.

Marlon pulls up in his land rover, wearing a purple leisure suit and golf hat just visible beneath tinted windows. Ellen examined his: “Why thank you. Yours are always the most eye-catching.” They assented with indistinct murmurs. Doug’s “Preserve the Marsh!” sign was clearly the most artful, his devotion to the estuaries paling in comparison to his poster composition. A crane and two smaller ones are tragically fleeing their calligraphic nest of reeds. He had spent most of the previous night printing it out on reinforced cardboard, laminating it, and duck taping it to a PVC pipe.

Charlie’s sign is still facedown. He picks it up and can tell they’re twisting their bodies toward its face to see if his slogan had changed. The letters are scrawled in uppercase, maroon lettering: Save the Bay!

Marlon laughs, arms full of leisure gear. “If it ain’t broke, huh, Charlie?” They all laugh a little, an inside joke in recent years. The slogan had become a mantra he’d kept for marine demonstrations over the years.

“What’s wrong with a little consistency? Activists know not to put less effort into the sign than the issue.”

“Sure, sure. Activism. Can somebody help me out here,” Marlon asks clearly having expected an offer. Doug comes forward, taking some lawn chairs and the handle for his cooler.

“The sign still applies, and its 2015” Charlie shifts his weight to the other foot, “What does that say about our preservation progress?”

“That we’ve got more bays than actual threats.” Marlon sneers under a thick black moustache.

“What about yours, Marlon?” Doug counters.

Marlon lifts his sign, particleboard nailed to a shovel handle, and slaps it with his palm.

“ ‘OUR Taxes Pay For YOUR Housing?’ ” Ellen repeats, “Nice. Altruistic.”

Marlon smiles, as if to reiterate Charlie’s response. The message isn’t exactly what they are trying to convey, but who is Charlie to tell him how to connect to the issue. Marlon came out, volunteered another body, another voice, even though he’s retired and lives in a three story Victorian a block away from the college. Marlon’s voice is valuable, he has to remind himself. Charlie channels every stream of grace and cooperation he can.

“Thanks for making one, Marlon. And for bringing the snacks.”

Doug divides a stack of fliers out evenly.

Charlie knows campuses better than the students. He's been canvassing at the State universities for a few years, joined the No Nukes folks at Cal once or twice. But the last time he had even taken a class was at CSU Monterey, twenty-five years ago. It's where they met, where Kathleen was researching earth systems and physics, he ambling stoned through a Sociology degree. She studied Vladimir Vernadsky the Soviet, not Communist, ecological theorist; it was important for her to make distinctions, for both of them, as their world expanded, before it all the allegiances started to blend back together and dissolve. It was her dissertation, she'd say, come on. 'First it was the rocky geosphere, then it was the fleshy biosphere, and now it's the noosphere, and we're in it,' she'd frown, 'and it's so easy to sweep under the rug the fact that the guy conceived of the noosphere as a nuclear powered Stalinist utopia.' He adored her rhetoric. Though he'd lost the content, the timbre remains with him.

Charlie and Shelly target groups of students and professors in the surrounding walkways, while Doug hands out pamphlets at the library behind them. Ellen approaches students along the sidewalk in front while Marlon had volunteered to watch their belongings. Charlie can hear the echoes of their candor ring out across the green.

"Join us for a demonstration around 2:00 on the lawn..." he says, with Doug overlapping:

"...Maybe? We'd love to have you. We could use your support."

"restaurants are historic... been here since before we were born..." Ellen entreats a professor. "There's no reason to lose them, they still do great business"

“These places are institutions.”

“the County Commission votes tonight and we’re trying to raise awareness to influence their...”

Charlie was amazed to hear Shelley’s young voice talk about the topic with authority: “Construction sites are three times more likely to introduce toxic byproduct into the ocean than existing businesses. And that’s not even counting the garbage produced by workers” she speaks with the passion and influence of a website. Charlie and Shelley walk back to the lawn.

“I like your sign.” She interrupts the silence.

“Thank you.”

“How long have you kept that slogan?”

“Over a decade now.”

“Nice to see you stick to your word.”

“Thanks. I always thought ‘Save’ feels more mobilizing. Especially for anybody who’s on the fence with an issue. Maybe it was the Save the Whales campaign, or just a Quaker education, but it stuck.”

They had all made it back to the center of the lawn. Marlon is pouring coffee and handing it out.

“Yeah my aunt told me about that,” they both sipped their cups, “What made you decide to leave Greenpeace? I’m sorry, is that too personal?”

“No, not at all. It was political. My leaving, that is. They lost focus. I was on some of those Norway expeditions. We basically went up there to stand guard while they

skinned the whales. Nobody did anything. And forget U.S. waters. Dolphins, whales, oil spills; they just wanted to be associated with the effort. It was economic. They needed the federal funding, and whaling was a big one. Imagine if we, a federally funded non-profit were to try to take on Chicken O' The Sea, a company that itself receives subsidies.

There was always a stalemate.”

She listens intently, with little prejudice despite his rising passion.

“I know you work for them, so I’m sorry if, my soapbox is starting to buckle.”

“No, it’s okay. The amount of time I have to stand in the sun is pretty inhumane.”

They take more sips and turn to Ellen and Doug’s chat, Marlon looming outside the conversation.

“Harold’s such a nice guy. He owns”, Ellen snaps her fingers, “you know, I always forget which one. One of the marina restaurants.”

“The Captain’s Line?” Marlon says.

“Yeah, it’s that one, I think.” Ellen points.

“Yeah, Harold owns The Line.” Doug confirmed, “He’s been coming in for signs and banners with us for ages. Terrific guy.”

Charlie recalls having printed some recently. “Sunday Senior Buffet”. A personified crab promoting his own “Friday Feast”, or two smiling clams toasting “2 for 1 Tuesday” with beers How those clams grew arms or eyes was beyond him, he thought as he laminated the signs. Toxic runoff, likely.

“Is that one of the places we’re...” Shelley stopped mid-sentence, seemingly unsure of their action.

“One of the three old fish houses on the marina.”

“So, when do we find out about these votes?” she asks. They look to Marlon, who checks his phone and, clearing his throat, responds: “He told me they wouldn’t start until at least 3:00.”

Lunch comes soon, and they prepare a picnic. Charlie sits between Ellen and Shelley, who discuss mutual relatives, a conversation that he’s absorbed in yet distinctly isolated from. Doug is fanning the coals on the grill underneath blistering franks and patties. Charlie wonders, despite the frivolous carbon emission, whether they’re allowed to barbeque on the school lawn. Doug asserted he brought tofu dogs, but Charlie politely declines. He goes for Ellen’s potato salad. It was all on the same grill, and besides, he hadn’t eaten meat since their crab dinners twenty years ago.

Ellen and Shelley eat over the grill. Charlie comes over and sits next to Shelly.

“Is this your first protest?”

“For Marina development?”

“I meant in general, but I guess that answers it.”

“Yeah, I’ve done a few. My friends and I did Occupy Oakland my first year in the Bay Area. March for Equality. I volunteered as a street medic for the Ferguson protests.”

“Wow, you’ve really sunk your hands in.”

She shrugged. “I guess. Not compared to some of my friends. They’re into the ALF sort of things.”

Charlie smiled. “Oh yeah, I know that. I did some radical stuff.”

“With ALF?”

“No, I was with the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. I did some of the missions into Mexico and up the coast. Norway once.” A wisp of gray hair has blown into his eyes.

“When was this?”

“After we sold the old boat. I moved out of Monterey and ended up meeting them at a rally in Santa Cruz.”

“How was it? They seem a little extreme.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t hack it with those guys for that long. They were too shortsighted. It was unsustainable.”

“He splintered from a splinter group.” Ellen laughs.

“Yeah,” Marlon scoffs, “a tiny piece of Greenpeace.”

Charlie inclines himself to agree with him. “Yeah, yeah. That Paul Watson was a nut. Too many mushrooms, too much McLuhan. Too much press. Look at that show on TV. You wouldn’t have stuck by a guy like that for long, either. The Shepherds were sea fascists.”

“The old ‘think local, act global.’ mistake” Ellen says, gently jostling Charlie.

“That ecoterrorism is a steep hill.” Marlon smiles ominously, as if from firsthand knowledge. Marlon made his money in microprocessors, retired at fifty, and spends his winters in San Diego. Charlie doesn’t like them any more than they do, but that word was too much: ecoterrorism. Radical action. He liked monkey wrench; it always seemed like the bad guys were the monkeys and they were the wrench, fixing it, or at least smacking

them. It adds up. He's the one who goes to town hall meetings, the committees placating him in light tones, tired from long days.

"So, any news, Marlon?" Charlie sighs.

Marlon is seated in the lawn chair swiping his phone. "Nope."

"Really?" Charlie asks, "Did you ask your brother?"

"Yep. An hour ago. He says Frazier hasn't gotten there yet."

They take in the news.

"I've been thinking," Ellen said, "This whole situation sounds like something that happened in Sausalito when I was a teenager. There was an inconsistency in the zoning. Except, developers made the inconsistency. Gulf Oil and this architect Thomas Frouge illegally zoned it to build this Marinello city. 2000 acres in one fell swoop."

"And we got them back years later", Charlie replies, almost from the same brain, "as the Marin Headlands."

"Some more classes are getting out," Shelly stood up, "should we get back to it?"

They pick up their signs.

"And that was from concerted civil action on our part," Charlie continued to Ellen, "direct action, not like now, where you just post some graphic-designed flyer online in some group invitation or sound-bite with a pound sign next to it or a profile picture." He recalled seeing Kathleen's hashtag posts, and that she works for Chevron now, her airbrushed photo on the website bearing the subheading "Environmental Consultant."

He looks to Shelly, who is stacking the pamphlets into her back pockets. He looks up at his poster, the edges peeling from the humidity in the air. He secures the sign in the crook of his arm, resting the butt of wood in his palm. “We’re here on the front lines. Doing something.”

Marlon’s phone chimes, and they look back to him for a verdict.

“He says: ‘Now they’re in deliberations.’ ”

Doug turns the music up and they step towards the street. From the chair, Marlon tells them to go on without him, that he’ll be fine where he is.

Charlie shakes his head at Marlon. He imagines Kathleen’s husband; similarly retired from the tech boom, flooded with dividends, all the time in the world. He’d seen him in the family photo’s, grinning out from beady eyes, potbellied and hairy all over except his head. The guy looks like a seal in a striped Polo. He’s never met him, but he knows something about him is intolerable if this is his second marriage. He’s sure it’s a social illusion, Kathleen’s smile is too wide, her arms pulling her stepchildren too close, bright treasure hanging from her, gleaming with too much satiation.

They have distributed the majority of the pamphlets, and most of the students have vacated. Their voices are hoarse, and Doug’s playlist has looped twice over.

“It seems like we got more students last time,” Doug says despondently.

Ellen and Shelley are packing up, and helping Marlon carry his belongings to the car.

Charlie assents, not knowing how to explain it.

“The ranks were getting older,” Ellen says. “Shelley’s the first 20-something we’ve had here in awhile.”

“Glad to have a voice.”

“I don’t know, man, maybe it’s just too much noise to contend with.” Doug notes.

Charlie shrugs his shoulders, non-committal. He won’t believe that. A kid with a good heart and focus can find passion in any issue.

Kathleen had to drag him away from the issues. He’s too selfish to care for anything, Kathleen informed him, but his own needs. When she confirmed her pregnancy, he stopped meeting with his deep ecology groups and stopped any open rescue missions. He found this patched the hole for them. They took some time to travel that Summer. On the trip back down from Alaska, a current rocked the boat and her stomach slammed into the galley counter. They withstood a red tide the next day. By the second miscarriage, they had begun to assume she was infertile. They hadn’t even wanted a child by the time they found out she was pregnant. What’s the point, he wondered, of giving up my purpose for something that won’t happen anyway? He didn’t voice this protest, since it was neither of their faults, but it didn’t mean he had to drop a cause just as he was gaining momentum.

He hugs Ellen. Shelley comes in and he offers his hand, but she comes in and hugs him around the waist. They drive off and Charlie wishes he had been in the car with them. He tries to picture Shelly’s night once she was gone, tucked safely into the room of books.

But they had her, in a yellowing free clinic in Watsonville, two weeks premature. She stayed swaddled within a plastic tub for another two weeks, inside a translucent breathing apparatus. They set up chairs before the paned glass, and stared into the aquarium of tiny static babies, who recalled scuba divers to Charlie. The elastic hood pinched his head during his last rescue mission to release manta rays. They hoisted the slick rubber bodies from the pools and into the tanker trucks they'd rented. Once the truck reached the bay, they opened it up to find the couple floating like wetsuits at the water's peak. The salination and oxygen levels had been miscalculated.

The lawn is empty.

Marlon is sitting in his lawn chair, his sign across his lap, sipping a diet soda. Doug is scraping the grill and dousing the coals. Charlie walks within range of Marlon, who catches his eye, and feels compelled to say something.

"Any news?"

"Still deliberating." He responds curtly, his eyes on his phone. Charlie had expected him to leave first, but here he was, until the end. Charlie fills a cup of Marlon's coffee. There's no need to thank him for coming or give him the satisfaction. He wouldn't have been invited if his brother wasn't an aide to a County Commissioner.

"It's nice of you to make the time to come down here."

"Are you kidding me? I wouldn't miss this. Social event of the season," he smiled to infuse more jest into the statement, until looking Charlie in the eye and saying "you and me, we have all the time in the world."

Charlie shifts to defense, until he realizes Doug must have mentioned he'd been laid off. Even if he mentioned it in sympathy, Charlie assumes Marlon wouldn't take it that way. He can't imagine which is worse: Marlon's sympathy or his scorn. Charlie sees a cluster of students.

The 4:00 bell rings in the chapel, and more come pouring from classrooms. He wants to catch some before they leave. Charlie asks Doug for the extra pamphlets and Doug pulls a thin, crumpled stack from his baseball jacket. Charlie gets to work, his sign in one arm, and the literature in the other. He moves from the field to the main path. So many groups are passing him by, entranced with conversation, or avoidant, too busy to get involved in the conversation. Some are alone, keeping their eyes down as they approach.

Marlon has left without a word, leaving an impression in the lawn where he sat. The sun glints off the silver can he left in his wake. Charlie's facial features tighten with disgust. He walks over to Marlon's spot, seeing uncut plastic rings resting beneath the melting ice from the cooler. Doug is carrying his grill to his car. His laminate sign is sticking out of the ground, the sun is reflecting off the signs in a blinding intensity.

Charlie turns around to find empty pathways. He hasn't distributed flier since the bell. A young man ambles from his class, speaking into his phone, chewing an energy bar. Charlie can't decipher the words between his own shallow breaths, but he's determined to approach this one. The student walks steadily, and makes eye contact from a few yards away, so Charlie expects to have a good shot.

“Have you heard about the new Marina developments?”

He keeps walking, continuing his conversation in Spanish.

“Excuse me sir, do you have a moment to talk about...” the man raises his eyebrow to Charlie and puts up a hand as if to say no. Charlie waits, the late afternoon sun shining on both their shoulders. He looks backward to see the can peeking out from the grass. He passes Charlie.

“I’m sorry, to bother you,” Charlie follows him, “but we’re trying to raise awareness about the Marina developments. Are you a resident of Marin County?”

The young man cups his hand over the receiver and responds, “No, I live in Vallejo,” before turning back to the conversation.

“Even so,” Charlie steps in front of him, “you’re a part of the community.”

“I guess. My uncle lives here.” Charlie asks where, the young man irritated to have been roped into the conversation. “Can I call you back?”

“In the Canal apartments with my nieces and nephews.”

“Well, maybe you could give them...” Charlie extends a pamphlet to him, but the young man steps backward in a slow pace.

“I’m sorry,” the young man pleads brusquely, “I really don’t have time.” He turns around and walks faster, placing the phone back to his ear. Only a few meters ahead, Charlie watches him go, and notices a furtive tossing gesture from the boy’s hand. A silver wrapper hit the ground, and blew away.

An impulse shot him forward in wide steps.

“Excuse me. Maybe you don’t have time to talk, but you do have time to throw away your garbage.” Charlie still clutches the pamphlets and the sign.

“I don’t have time for this.” The wrapper twitches between blades of grass.

Charlie walks closer.

“No, time? Isn’t that what that phone gives you: more time? To do. What?”

“To catch the bus. Step off, mother-fucker.”

Charlie drops the pamphlets. He notices his embroidered black polo, and steps in front of the man.

“Pick it up.”

“Get out of my face, bro.”

“Just go and pick it up.”

“Fuck you, bitch.” Charlie grabs the arm of his polo. The young man takes hold of the wooden handle of his sign. They tug on it until splinter slices his palm and Charlie releases his grip of the shirt and the sign.

The young man snaps Charlie’s signpost over his knee, and to avoid staking Charlie in bewildered rage, plunges the second part into the ground. He stalks forward, muttering “old punk ass bitch.” Charlie doesn’t follow.

The sign juts out of the ground in a pathetic, rakish angle. Doug trots from the parking lot and stops a few paces in front of Charlie.

“Hey Charlie, I think we’re done. It’s time to leave. Before security comes.”

“Fuck him,” he mutters, “at least I was doing something”, the final word sticking in the recesses of his throat. Something, something that needed his amplification, his voice. He’s faint as he hops on his bike and straps the remnants of the sign across the rear of the bike.

Charlie speeds downhill, brakes off, until he's far from the college. He rides past the canal, men in hoodies returning home, until he reaches the bay bike path.

He's still dizzy, caught on the young man and the wrapper. His action was indefensible, and the guy was just a student. But it doesn't mean I was wrong, he subdues himself, that kids was rude, looked like he didn't give any shits about anything. Charlie watches the bobbing ships along the docks. He veers left into the road.

A car honks around the turn and smacks his sign, shattering the plywood canvas, before accelerating into the distance.

He lifts his bike and picks shards and splinters from his bike.

Charlie puffs a roach, sitting on his main deck, the horizon bobbing with the tide. He looks out over the water, sensing the whales and dolphins being slaughtered, the waste from the local refineries trickling out, corroding plastic and metal, human waste dumped out from houseboats and local sports bars, and the colonies of scum spawning at the edges of the body. There's something more pressing beyond the horizon, his cause, indecipherable in the fog.

He thinks he sees a whale, or maybe a dolphin. His stomach gurgles. They were smarter, than us at least, he thinks; they'd never close family businesses to put up lofts. Monkey wrench, he begins to turn in his head, just tightening establishment screws. We're channeling a greater voice. Speaking for transparency. And I know that voice is the majority. The committee, the demonstration: we thought, maybe this time, if we went

through the local channels. But the County Commissioner is just a creaky wooden man, too. Maybe we, or I, went about this all-wrong. It was my responsibility, to keep the message focused. Well, our message. Important distinction.

He remembers the young man, clenching the heavy polyester polo between his fingers, now recalling the embroidery as not a crocodile, but a fast food logo. What an asshole, he critiques himself, baying at that poor guy. He was probably on his way to work to pay for the same class he'd just come from.

The barking of the sea lions becomes sharp and distorted. He hops onto the dock. The pier feels uncertain beneath his feet. It could all be gone very soon, and he'd have to vacate the Land Baby, find a new boat in another marina. He can see the sheen of the dock-lights off what looks like a fin.

Kathleen and he left the hospital early that morning and released her ashes into Monterey bay. Until then, Charlie hadn't comprehended how people could be apathetic. The two ounces of powder spread as quicksand onto the surface of the ocean. It was hard to stop himself from caring. It retained water and spread like an oil puddle. His opaque rationales cleared and he could see, from this angle, the illusion. He sensed that apathy was painless. People cared between panes of plexiglass, levels of attachment people had sealed off. The ashes muddied the water, a turbid cloud that faded away. There could be so many layers of glass that an object's lines became indistinct, reflections from each pane obscuring every layer of affection, until he could barely imagine her at all. His feet anchored to the pier. Kathleen's face was grief-beaten, dry wrinkled canvas. He reached over and she shrank from his hand.

He can see, more visibly, Shelly canvassing tomorrow, unfazed by apathetic pedestrians, going back south for another semester of school, wash up into a fellowship somewhere, scouring the tide pools for data, for answers, in the very near future.

The air and water are placid, almost indistinct. A form floats in the water that appears a reflection on the edge of the pier. He sees her leaning, arms outstretched on the adjacent dock, bracing her body. The air ripples and bleeds together the stringed harbor lights and fog lamps. She pulls her dark black hair back and into a pony-tail. The water is still, the surface clear. Shelly swings her fin restlessly. He looks down for stability, and rests his hands on a post. She's gone. The land and sea shimmer equally, both murky and blinding. A sputter of water sounds out, dripping from a rising body, followed by pattering on the wooden slats of the pier. The wood creaks beneath the child's soft, hesitant footsteps.

Good on Paper

I wish I hadn't asked. All I need to know is if last week's women worked for him. His explanation of the ladies I should be presenting was, as men often reply when describing an ideal, vague. He needed something confident enough to get any man but desperate enough to be looking for him online.

"You've got to make her the perfect woman," The man who called himself "John" said over the phone to Kellen, "but real. You'd have to believe it yourself."

I got it. There's little room for suspension of disbelief on Craigslist. Going into Casual Encounters already felt like walking into a strip club or a windowless massage parlor. I'd have to take a naturalistic approach.

"So, what, like schoolgirls and cops?"

"Na, na, nothing illegal, or anything that could be fake."

I stifle a laugh. They were all fake, no names or addresses, at least physical addresses. His own post from a month ago was no bullshit: "3 posts a day, 15/post. 5 posts a day, 25/post. Paid weekly." He'd given me a random e-mail generator that linked to an address somewhere. What he does after he receives them was none of my business. He paid up on his end so far. As long as the five-hundred shows up in my Pay Pal this week.

"So, more like divorcees and horny co-eds?"

“Yeah, but keep it diverse. Try some lady who has this fantasy they just can’t shake. Those get the most hits.”

“So, light fantasies.”

The challenge was fun; no types allowed. A fantasy that didn’t seem like one, unconscious perhaps, as if reading the ad would cohere any man’s disparate set of desires. And nobody could really fantasize about a type. When it comes down to it men wanted clarity, even if they could not provide it.

I wouldn’t have taken this job if I had to field responses. This is a one-way transaction. He set up an ersatz addresses; a fast food joint, public building or park, or sometimes an apartment number too high for the listed complex. I really didn’t want to know much else. Was he a liar? Definitely. Was he spamming? Likely. Stealing identities or spreading viruses? I don’t even want to know. I know that it’s my job to lay the bait and that’s it; like most of them, he probably strikes quickly and you’ll never hear from him again. He probably manages a roomful of autodialers at his sidejob.

I’ve tried to remain dispassionate about this; that everybody needs to make a living (I don’t exempt myself) and some slowly become their skills; or on the other end, that the men responding to the ads are those well-meaning, kind souls with crippling shyness and sensitivities for whom the internet offers a blind eye and social comfort. Anonymous hard workers, responsible, narrow in build but not in thought, and adorably rule-bound except when nature calls. Older men, widowers with firm jaws and sparkling eyes beneath stubbled, weathered skin which, for some reason, is always tan from years of sun exposure. I can’t help but associate these men with leering cheaters or prowling

womanizers, with uncomfortably close, yet anonymous catcalls that, were I not certain they were calling to somebody else, I'd start running.

Air seeps in beneath the sealed off door, where the kitchen had been. Our Victorian house had been converted to a four-bedroom apartment, and my kitchen had been a servant's quarters. I have a review for Romance Junkies for the new M. Beatrice Sexton novel. I normally have more but just couldn't take on the extra reviews this month.

I've been working on the tone. Keep them casual, like the encounters, as if written between shifts at the gym or solo orgasms. But not too casual. Enough detail to show her interest. But that she could just as easily choose the next guy. Guys like that.

Let's go with some short sketches:

What's with this heat in October? I can't sleep. Send me an e-mail, and we can chat a little, get to know each other. Here's something: there's only one thing that gets me back to sleep. I've told you something, now tell me yours.

I'm trying to average one typo per post. But this one is too oblique.

At the end of a week, nothing seems to work. I have toys, and a good combo of boys, but I know them all. Their curves only stay fresh for so long. I'm desensitized. Show me what it's like to sting.

Not too coy, but barely even human. And what's with the internal rhyme?

Doorbell. Must be the prerelease from the publisher. I check the mirror by the door, rubbed my cheeks and under my eyes, scrunch my curls a bit.

The peephole shows a thinning comb-over and hornrim glasses above a faded Conan the Conquerer shirt. Mike from upstairs. After the time I came to the door with my towel on, Mike always rings the doorbell when he hears my pipes clanking.

“Hey Kellen,” he pauses, hoping I’ll provide the segway for him, “did they turn your water off today?”

“No, not today. Were they supposed to?”

“I’m pretty sure they weren’t supposed to.” His eyes scan me before flattening a stray hair, “are you on deadline today?”

“Yeah, a little. I’m expecting a package for a book review.”

“Anything good?” his eyes widen, lips fluctuating in nervous hyperbola.

I tell him it’s historical fantasy, and he stares at me with all the mechanics of engagement, relaying that he’s dedicated most of his concentration to this action. I paraphrase the polished blurb from the editor, omitting “romance” or “erotic” or “steamy”, lest I reinforce bathing in his mind.

“It’s a World War II espionage story. Two telegraph operators from different sides are hired to break codes from the other side. They intercept each others’ messages, and begin to write their own messages,” he interrupts, asking “if I’d read” some history book about ciphers that I should “check out” and was personally guaranteed to “love them”. I continue, “They become double-agents and they fall in love.” The last word slips out, so I cover it with some from before.

“Did they turn off your water?”

“Me? No, no,” he smiled, looking perplexed.

“Because you asked me if.”

“Oh right. So, they didn’t shut your water off?”

“Hm, no, nope, it’s been on all day.”

“Well, maybe it’ll happen later.”

“If they didn’t notify us then...”

“You never know. I’ll check in later to see.”

“I’ll, um, I’ll let you know if it does. How about that?” I negotiate.

He’s already halfway up the stairs when he proclaims, “See you in a bit.”

I return to my desk and look out the window. Kids in an afterschool daycare are rebounding a handball against peeling plywood.

I need your help. I work with teenagers at a youth outreach program. Between their hollas and the energy they take, I gotta be tough. But it’s not like I can’t get it. I get home and then I can’t shut off. I just need somebody to come, give it for a few hours, then get the fuck out. Let’s keep this shit efficient.

I don’t know her, and we have little in common, but I know I like this girl.

My head is throbbing from the wine I finished last night. I got 15 sketches done, and I posted seven ads in casual encounters last night. I stagger out to fill the water and a trickle comes out. The super doesn’t know.

I can’t make it up to see mom this weekend. You can write anywhere, she’d say, but she just didn’t get it. I need to be in the city; after Fordham, I couldn’t go back to Yonkers. I had to keep going south, and was content until I hit Fort Greene. I offered to

get her to move-in; we could get a bigger place, move our stuff back together and live like two gals in a cougar den. It couldn't be less exciting than my life now. One of a city's many paradoxes: work from home, you never leave it; work in the city, you never see home.

I didn't like that I couldn't write as a man; maybe it was for believability. That 'Women Writing Men' workshop isn't for nothing; I didn't dissect Hemingway, Mailer, Bukowski, Diaz for my health. Yeah, gender's a construct, but it's been helping me with this one character's voice. But my normal shtick still applies: scatter a few seeds of your own in; a little bullshit, some thought you'd had, some more bullshit, a deep desire.

I've been trying to juggle some of these new women. I have a cop who wanted somebody to handle her braids. An older dance instructor, metaphorically limber. The barista who needs to fulfill her workplace sexcapade, or the chef, or the esthetician, or the bartender, or the grocer, or any number of unsanitary possibilities. Keeping up five a day, at least by my standards, is difficult if he's looking for realism.

I'm tempted to check to see who responded, but I had told John I didn't want to. But a little part of me wants to know how many responses each post got. I'm thorough, and I take pride in my work. I want to know who was the best, who worked, who didn't; a little feedback to make some changes. I control myself, and choose not to; I had plausible deniability in case John's into some really deep shit.

I read over the sketches, revise a few until I hit a wall, decide to start some coffee, and some berries and yogurt. I sit back down, check my OkCupid and Match. Lana told me to try Tinder, but I'm not exactly fast, or hot really, so I've stayed away from it. She

said it actually made her more confident, meeting those thirty-something boys who love nothing more than stretch marks, thin skin, and dark nipples; after a divorce, she's found her weird oedipal calling. It's the kind of connection I hope not to make. But she likes her current toy, a cut, butter-face mother's boy, as much as he likes his women, to use his winsome term, "worn in".

Dong. It's the pre-release from the editor. A little late. Some gloss, two mascara flicks. I open the door.

"Baby, I missed you so much." The man's face comes off as watercolored red splotches on a pock-marked canvas sheet, an abstract picture of a Caucasian man hitting the corner of middle-aged. He has a duffel bag at his feet and a satchel on him. As generic as he appears, I know immediately I've never seen him before. I check the number on my door. "I think you have the wrong apartment."

"Nice try. I remember signing that lease with you. You're stuck with me," he giggles and tries to embrace me. I jut my hand out as politely as I know how.

"What's your name?"

He juts his hand in mock jocularly, "Well, hello, miss, it's nice to *meet* you. I'm Neil Slaboda," and before I can meet his introduction, he's smothered me in lanky arms in a full-bodied hug. I try to push him back, and he leans into my hair and inhales, whispering, "smells like home". He lets go and slides through the doorframe and into my apartment, clomping back toward the kitchen. "The flight always feels so much longer. Do you have any coffee brewing?" His bag lays on the doorstep. I slam the door and look for my cell phone to call the police, but it died in the night. He leans on the counter,

piling grinds into my fucking filter. He flicks on the coffee pot, pulls out a mug while yawning, and shuffles through my tea cabinet, looking until he said “Ah,” reaching on his tiptoes to pull out non-dairy creamer.

“You have five seconds before I call the police,” I hold up my dead phone as a warning.

“Alright, I get it, I’m a little discheveled but three layovers in Dusseldorf won’t help my complexion much.”

“Listen, *Neil*...”

“I love you but I’m exhausted. Before you go into a whole thing, just let me get settled, okay? I just need to take a shower, a nap, some lunch, some Playstation, check in on the fantasy league.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I know we’re almost out, but this is my creamer, remember? So that we didn’t have to have the argument again.”

He pours himself a cup of coffee and asked, “did you get any sleep last night?”

“What does that...” I don’t want to get close to him, so I keep trying to turn my phone on to call the police. He walks down the hall towards me. I place my hand up.

“Don’t come near me.”

He stops, his sigh turning into a growl. “Don’t worry, *babe*, I won’t touch you. You don’t have to worry about that.” He walks to the bathroom in front of me and clings to the door, “After a trip like this, we used to miss each other. Now it’s like I’m barging into your apartment.”

“Yes, it is,” I laugh with hysterical fury.

He slams the door and locks it. I try the knob, place my fingers under the cracks and shake the frame.

“Dude, get out of my fucking bathroom.”

I pick up my phone and dial emergency, hearing his mutterings of “I can’t believe this...can’t take a shit in my own...fucking bathmats...sliding everywhere” between rings. I’m about to start talking and he opens the door, flushing the toilet and releasing a testosterone protein stink into the room. “I’ll be back in a few hours,” he tugs his laptop case, “when you’ve gotten a nap.” He slams the door and leaves me on the line with an operator’s “Hello?” growing slowly more impatient.

I can’t think of what to do after the police report; they think Neil Sloboda is a pseudonym. They have a car on the block in case he comes back. I throw the duffel bag on my doorstep out on the curb.

I can’t write. I work on my quarterly budget, but that really only takes ten minutes. I go on autopilot, and check some errands off my list: picked up the drycleaning in Astoria, the new blinds in LIC, did some Whole Foods shopping to stock up.

On the walk from the subway, I pass some brownstones and it occurs to me this wouldn’t happen if I lived somewhere with a doorman. A shaggy headed toddler helps his mother carry his sibling’s stroller down the steps. Then again, I couldn’t afford a brownstone unless I had at least a double income, or roommates, the kiss-of-death for singles.

I mix a cocktail and sit at the computer. I'm feeling looser, and I go through my sketches. I end up stuck trying to decide hair color for half an hour. It would be so much easier if I could see those responses; but I've got to keep that boundary. I smile at my mom's finger-jabbing advice: *the right one will love you for who you are. Don't change for a man.*

The little rituals help; I put the laundry away, finding they had given me three starched, men's dress shirts, probably thinking it was one of those "boyfriend shirts". I'll have to return it tomorrow. I turn on some crooner music, make myself a chicken cordon bleu, crack open a bottle of white. Some quinoa, zucchini and asparagus. I end up going for several courses, like when mom comes to stay, forgetting it's a dinner for one. Francois is a chef, well a private Creole chef settling into New Orleans; he'd make this recipe a lot.

Some sips later, I find it easier to get into character. I close my bedroom door and it all starts flowing:

I've got a stressful night and I play hard. I have some paperwork to do inside tonight. I thought I might like a you to barge in, lift my ass cheeks and shuffle the whole pile, take on these cost-benefit projections.

I hear a rattle in a lock from my next door neighbor.

Can you handle only watching? I observe people all day long, seven days a week. I'm a security guard at a Manhattan Museum. I might as well be an emergency exit. Nobody sees me. I want you to watch me; by myself, with some guys, some girls. Make me a found art object. Just remember: no touching.

Dishes clank together, microwave beeps, ice-cubes tinkle in a glass.

I work for a sex-chat hotline. I do pretty well for myself. But it's hard to do this job with this secret. I can think of the filthiest, nastiest, degrading combinations; they've got to feel real or the person on the other end won't get off. How do I say it? They're inside me, but none of them have ever been inside me. I need somebody I've never talked to get over here and fuck me so I can check this off my goddamn list. Can you share this secret?

Wind blows from beneath the sealed door. My stomach gets tight and I get up to eat. I open my door and the sounds are louder. The kitchen lights glow into the hallway like a spotlight. I hear mastication, utensils scratching down the hall. I walk in.

His face looks flushed, but he doesn't appear or smell drunk. He's devouring bites of chicken.

"Whoah, you scared me, honey."

"Who do you think you are?"

He looks at his plate. "I'm sorry, sweetie, it looked like it was enough for both of us." He pops a bacon-covered bite into his mouth, "I thought you'd be at yoga."

"I, um, skipped."

"Perfect, so maybe we can have dinner together? A romantic night? The meal's on the table and everything," he swallows, "What would I do without you honey?"

"That's my food."

“I’m sorry I’m late again. I had drinks with Lisa, you know, from ad sales. Smart girl.”

He loosens his collar, and tucks in his tie, purple dots poking out beneath silver stubble, “went to the gym, thought I’d get in a workout.”

He looks like a senior J Crew model, carved jaw, sloping nose, squinted eyes a little close together and, even with food between his teeth, I notice a seductive smile that he probably flashed all over town.

“Stop eating my food and get out.” A splash of bleu cheese falls on his shirt, “Damn it,” he strides down the hall, leaving me in the kitchen, with my phone in the bedroom. I pick up a paring knife, and walk slowly to the bedroom. He’s trying to rub out the purple marks, until he saw me, and began removing his shirt.

“So, my shirts are finally done. Took them long enough.”

He slides into a white t-shirt, then one of the crisp dress shirts.

“I know tonight’s usually our night, but I need to get back to the office. No rest for the wicked.”

He buttons the shirt up, then the sleeves, “I know this is our romance night but, well, maybe tomorrow, huh?” He reaches his hands out, as if to kiss me on the forehead, and I step back. “Okay,” he grabs his coat hanging on the door, “I’m sorry, but this is the guy you married. I’ve got to do these things, for both of us.”

“Please leave.”

He shakes his head, “don’t wait up for me”, and seals the door. I slip on the chain lock.

The locksmith arrives first thing in the morning. I slept on the couch the whole night, chair against the door. I meet him outside and let him only as far as the hallway.

I go for some coffee, and buy some lilies on the way back. They're arranged on the end table by the front door. There's a comforting sugar odor. I stretch out on the couch.

The bell makes me jump. I fell asleep on the couch again. I saunter to the front door, and peep through the door to see the brown uniform, short cut pants and shirts displaying cut, tanned appendages. I check the mirror; no make-up, dehydration wrinkles, splotchy skin. Fuck it, I open the door.

"Henry," I smile broadly, only it's more to assuage my paranoia than for him.

"Hey..." he pauses, looking for a diminutive to replace my name, before checking the package, "Kellen." Any other man couldn't have smoothed that over but Henry could because he's Henry; adams-apple buried in a neck thick enough to imply a well-constructed upper body, biceps taugth in the sleeves, broad smile, full lips, little gap between his teeth, deepset brown eyes. Everything you could want in a man.

My vulnerability is palpable. "Is everything okay," he asks, so I play it cool.

"Yeah, just waiting for a friend," I sign on the waist level tablet, and he hands me the brown package, "do you have a fun weekend planned," I ask forgetting it's Wednesday.

“Nope, nothing yet. Depends when I get off.” He turns around and waves goodbye with a conciliatory smile that feels inviting until the warmth wears off and it feels like a UPS “Since We Missed You...” notice.

I decide to wait outside on the steps for the police: I have to tell them “same thing, different man”. I didn’t even get this guy’s name; he was so assured of our intimacy. I haven’t smoked in three months, just picked up a pack at the corner store. My mom’s old banner runs through my mind: *nobody wants to lick a wet cigar*. The police arrive, and the report seems even more vague than the last.

I spend most of the day on the brick steps. It’s not trauma, just avoidance: nobody could come in if I’m not home. If I’m waiting right outside. I can’t help but imagine even the officer parked out front combing message boards on his consul for his own rendezvous. It would be comforting to be able to assume that he was, but I realize I can’t.

The last one looked good. I could tell from his profile; word choice, list of interests, all barren of humble or arrogant pretense. Dates went well, we agreed to take it slow. We got close, and then one day, I called and the line was disconnected. He’d given me a burner phone number: classic cheater move. I can’t get it fucking right. I put myself out there. I try to find guys my age who are stable. Especially in the city.

It’s officially overwhelming. Now I wish I’d had roommates all along, someone strong enough to kick intruders to the curb. The best I have is Lana. I send some messages to my Yoga ladies, my Writing Men women, even Mom, just to talk with her.

I try to dig into Sexton's book, but I find myself drifting fifteen pages in. The embossed letters in Victorian script *Amore's Code* belies a new installment within the well-tread "Axis Affairs" series; it feels patchwork, and I could have written far more elegant prose.

A car pulls up and asks me if I called a cab. I respond no, and the driver idles by the curb.

Mid-sentence, a nail taps me on the shoulder, and I see Lana with her flowing gingham blouse, bleached flip curl, and husky voice. "What's this weird shit you texted me about?" I explain it to her, and she asks, "sounds like Francois is getting to you."

"I wish," I laugh with exhaustion, "he only cooks for 18th century French aristocracy, those elegant debutantes that pay him to work their kitchens, and fall in love with his flavors."

"And *more*," she laughs.

"Yes," I feel myself blush, "and more."

I open my apartment door and find a man in a flannel shirt, open with hair, a thick trimmed beard, and chestnut hair shagged over his ears and forehead.

"I'm just here to get some things. I was hoping you wouldn't be here."

"How did you get in?"

"It's my place too, you know. Until the end of the month," he places the creamer and French press into a banana crate, "Did you really need an enforcer," he nods towards her direction, "Hi, Lana. How's the workshop?"

Lana stands awkwardly in place, waiting for my response, before answering “Hello”, as if swayed to match his politeness.

I could hear my father explaining. I cradled the weighted headset between pigtails, asking Dad why he needed permission to come home. My finger burrowed deeper into the receiver coils. My mother’s hand stretched closer, until she yanked the cable. This pulled the headset from my shoulder and yanked my body onto the floor by my pointed index finger.

This stranger is shuffling around my bedroom, and I storm in this time.

“See, I knew this would happen if you were here,” he becomes more agitated, “Hovering.”

“Get the fuck out of my room.” I’m trying to be calm but it’s hard not to scream and scratch or simply let him go about picking up pieces of my room.

“Yippee is okay, she’s staying with me. And I called your mom already and told her I’d drop her off those books she leant me.”

He reaches into my closet and pulls out a duffel bag I’ve never seen, and rifles through it. For a moment, he’s vulnerable yet composed, determined and resigned to what appears his newly single existence; he’s beautiful, and I now wonder how I couldn’t have wanted him before.

“I’ll get out of your hair,” he walks past me as Lana describes his features to the police, “I have to start prep-work before we open.” Before closing the door he says, “I notified the post office but, if you get any mail, you can call me. Or forward it to Serena’s house. You remember her address, from that work party.”

I nod. He hands me a key, and walks out the front door, and into the waiting cab. “Yeah, here she is, I’ll let you talk with her.” Lana hands me the phone. The voice on the other line asserts I tell them about the man. I pause, immune to the operator’s impatient “Hello?” on the other end.

Checkout Counter

ONE

The oven stood on the side of the highway, peeking up above a ditch at a rakish angle.

It wasn't really there, Kira told herself.

It's rounded metal edge reached up from reeds and straw, just visible. The brown stains from previous tenants, the cast iron burners arrayed in tinfoil and that singed sunburst along the rim from the greasefire last year.

They had planned their getaway. No jobs, no family, nothing for four days except driving and hikes, and if all went to plan, some tension-free leisure sex. Kira and Brendan decided on the convenience of a free cabin rental on behalf of Brendan's client. Kira finally felt comfortable taking time off from the library. She had been absentminded all year, in a foggy half-existence, finding it difficult to connect to every point in the day that she needed to get to. Though she couldn't forget to lock the doors, or add the steps to the kitchen, little oversights absorbed more time than the rituals themselves. They left Visalia's pastures for the cliffs of Mendocino, passing miles after agricultural mile to finally reach a shoreline. Kira softly glared, trying to pry Brendan's eyes from the road.

"I know, I'm trying to find a place that has gas, too." He responded. She couldn't hold it much longer. It seemed like he was deaccelerating. Despite the agony, she preferred to hold out for a gas station rather than a rest stop. She found herself leaning over to check the speed.

Nearing Bodega Bay, a sign flashed past Kira's passenger window: If accident occurs, remain in car. That's the last thing they would do in an accident, she thought. Stay there. They'd clean the seats, dust the dash, scrape the glove box or pick the upholstery to its hull. She knew that they'd need to move. Just stay there, she smiled, and let noxious clouds of priority or restraint suffocate them. Beyond comprehension. She might even get behind the wheel, for the first time in a year, flood the engine and snap the axles bend the tire rims in an attempt to just drive.

He pulled into a convenience mart and Kira strode to bathroom, to find it locked. She waited in the store while the husky clerk struggled to remove himself from his phone conversation. She could see the bathroom key, hanging behind rows of cheap sunglasses and bandanas, welded to a flattened chain that dangled from a socket wrench. It was within reach.

She pressed her knees together. It glinted, catching the sterile light. The clerk prolonged his conversation, avoiding her line of sight.

Kira closed her eyes and breathed. She thought of Brendan's metronome at their house. He rarely used it, so she had placed it on the rim of their tub while she bathed in candlelight. 'ONE, two, three, FOUR. ONE, two, three, FOUR', she repeated to herself. The clerk bridged toward the receiver, preparing to hang-up.

ONE, two, three, FOUR.

"What can I do for you, missy."

"Can I get the bathroom key?"

"Somebody's in there."

She counted silently. “I don’t think so.”

“You checked?”

“I did.” ONE, two, three, FOUR, “the key’s right there.” She motioned across the counter. She felt her abdomen swell.

He turned slowly, chewing like bovine. “Yep.” He sighed and handed her the key.

She tore it from his hand and trotted toward the bathroom, in step with the rhythm. Each step felt like agony.

Once she got to the bathroom, she almost didn’t care at its state. She closed the door and waddled across stained tiles, knees clasped, pulling one, two, three seat covers off and laid them as delicately as possible across one another until even. She tried to see through the light of the doorway, to check if the bolt was in place but couldn’t visualize it with assurance.

Kira paused, beltline at her knees, considering the lock.

She penguin-walked to the door, pelvis aching, to find the bolt in place. She laid herself down slowly, so as to not disturb the paper alignment.

She timed her stream. Temporary relief came.

She was safe. She was hiding in the grade-school bathroom as a girl, for solitary moments of pleasure.

The concept of a legitimate escape seemed a distant one. Kira had spent the past year holed up at work, behind the circulation desk, talking with library patrons, offsetting the officious air of counter management. It reminded her she worked with people, composed of somewhat more flexible spines. She was a gateway, however archaic, to

information and as such, she felt accountable for her patrons' tastes. She tried not to judge, even silently, their choices. One of her coworkers would escort her to their car and drive her home. Upon her return from work, every cigarette was accounted for, every door and window latch was secured, every faucet handle squeezed tight and on until bedtime, when the dripping accelerated her heartbeat. Since her car trouble.

She returned the key briskly and left. Brendan leaned on their maroon station wagon, staring in her direction, and not at his phone. His eyes grinned exuberantly enough under bushy, black eyebrows. But she knew what he was thinking: he didn't want to be late for check-in again. She'd taken so long to lock the doors, windows, secure the alarm, they'd missed their reservation at Yosemite's campground the previous night, having to instead sleep in the stale air of a franchised motel room. Just as well for her; she had preferred they take their time and wind through the cliffs slowly.

Brendan remarked the time under his breath, muttering "okay," scrutinizing it all, "okay", before turning the ignition and heading north. Kira knew he was going to dance around his concern, coming full circle by the end. He wanted another apology, but not another fight, to reassert her penitence in their late departures. She knew he loved a verbal waltz, but she still wasn't certain what inclined her to accept his invitations. 'One, TWO, THREE. One, TWO, THREE'. She reached for her purse.

The flash from Kira's camera reflected off the windshield. Brendan rubbed his swollen eyes with his thumb and forefinger, hanging his head down during a long stretch in the road.

"You brought the camera?"

“I thought I might. Normal people take pictures on vacations. To remember them.”

“Normal people take vacations.”

They chuckled in tired breaths, and looked at one another, reaching their hands across the console and braiding fingers.

“We really need this,” she smiled, “and I miss walking on dirt.”

“Yeah,” his lips flattened, “I think we’ll still get some good hiking in.”

Six months prior, Brendan had given her his old digital camera after she’d begun counting her cigarettes. She’d read somewhere that every time she checked something, the memory of it became less solidified, and he’d thought it might help. Having to pick up the camera might make it more conscious, and she teased herself that she could make a high-resolution flipbook of her daily habits.

She sucked in a silent breath and released it over the course of ten seconds. Don't be shameful, be grateful she repeated to drown out the jingling keys.

“Thanks for planning this. It wasn't until we got out that I realized how much I'd needed it.” She squeezed his hand. “Thanks for the push.”

“You know me, it's how I show love.”

Until recently, Kira usually pushed, particularly when it came to showing love. She consciously embodied the librarian fetish, subdued outfits, work casual cardigans and half-calf dresses or slacks, quiet and voracious for sense and stimulation. While she reviled the association, she couldn't help herself. She had more friends before she moved to Visalia than she had now. The intimate probing of sex were always preferable to other

touches. Had it not been for bars, she wouldn't have met somebody like Brendan. Without the bar, Brendan was more present and attentive, but it was harder for her without it.

They reached the cliffs, and Kira peered into the spry reeds that lined the road, the brittle ice plants and ivy that crept up the telephone poles.

A halo of sun struck the heating metal of the playground. Her lycra tights couldn't grip the pole, so she shimmied her way up. Blood rushed and a tremble coursed through her, not fear, or exertion but an consuming joy she'd never found through anything else she loved. Not ice cream, not sugar, not mom or dad or the puppy, picture books or toys. Way better. She looked to see if anybody was watching. The sense had barely registered before fear mounted to shame; she shouldn't be feeling this sort of pleasure in front of everybody. So she began to wait at recess, until fickle winds blew the crowd of classmates to the swings or merry go round, to inch her way up the pole until she reached the peak. Kira would spend an entire recess waiting and climbing.

Brendan's arms began to pivot as they clutched the steering wheel, shifting in time to match the immeasurable turns in the road. Kira still couldn't handle all the turns and cliffs. She'd been carpooling to and from the library with a coworker since she no longer had a car and wasn't driving. Kira rolled down the window and flicked the cigarette out the small crack.

The checking and counting rituals drained her like a poor nights' sleep. It had been so long since they happened so regularly that she'd forgotten, their repetition selecting only general annoyances over specific agonies.

She looked out to the reeds, and back to Brendan's side of the road. The same model oven, with charred pots and pans stacked on the stove, teetered on the cliff ahead.

"That's so weird," she pointed to his side, "I saw that oven earlier on the side of the road in Petaluma."

He leaned into the curve.

"Can't look right now," he grumbled, "we don't need a new one, if that's what you're getting at."

Kira knew she shouldn't have pointed it out. The greasefire was an accident. Besides, he wasn't drinking anymore. It was vacation, she repeated to herself, we should just leave that stuff at home.

Kira turned back to her lap to make sure she had turned off the camera.

"How many left?" Brendan turned to her.

"Fifteen out of twenty."

"Including the last one?"

"Yeah. Not bad right?"

"Next stop the patch," Brendan smiled, displaying the small gap between his front teeth. His blind encouragement was earnest enough. He'd come home from meetings with a bulging energy. He'd peck her on the cheek and go straight for the fridge and pop a can of soda, edged with determination. She waited for him to take his sip and talk about steps like they were walking under a ladder. She waited with prudence, accepting her inability to understand for the time being. This was what she had learned from learning, the

suspension of disbelief. In the meantime, Brendan had an inheritable disease, carried on, like diabetes. Or obesity. Or Cooties.

After a moment of reassurance, she bent over and began to rustle through the purse at her feet.

“Didn’t you just...”

“Yeah,” Kira slipped in, “But now I just want to have one.” She lifted the pack from a side pocket. She flipped the top, plucked one from the row, and lit it. She counted the remainders and took a photo. She ran her fingers along the filter tips. Taking another extended breath, she looked down to her camera before laying her head back and pulling at her cigarette. She closed her lids and saw the washed out photo. She heard Brendan’s baritone:

“How you doing over there, Kiki?”

“I think I’m okay. How’re you?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, just stop asking. I’ll be fine, okay?”

What little light left in the early evening diffused through the fog, spreading faintly yet evenly across a monochromatic sky. The glow of his headlights quickly replaced the sun. A familiar flapping of the center reflectors underneath his left tire redirected Brendan’s attention to the road.

She gazed at him, trying to soften any wrinkle of judgment.

“Sorry. I was waiting for a straight shot in the road to sneak a peak of the ocean.”

She glanced over his broad shoulders.

“I forgot how meditative it can be.”

“Probably even more when we’re stopped.” Kira smirked.

Brendan deflected with optimism and grace. He was alluring when preoccupied, and he seemed to know it.

“I’ve been photoshopping these water/beachfront photos for the past month. Some days, I’d be staring at the same picture for hours. I started seeing the waves crashing and the trees blowing.”

“Were you tripping?” Kira joked.

“Not then, no.” he smiled and after a turn in the road, chewed his cuticle. “Looking at it now, I don’t know, it’s weird to see everything moving.”

TWO

She didn’t get motion sickness, so the car’s coiling momentum along the cliffs rocked her into lucid memories that felt like dreams.

As much as she desired to graduate to a larger playground, one with at least two playsets, the Merry-Go-Round was her interest; of every play-set, this was the only item that was singular to the first grade experience. Naturally, it became her first destination. She found a line snaking around the edge of the tanbark, of fidgeting, uneasy children of varied ages—all older and larger than her—awaiting the hypnotic swinging circle. Kira waited patiently, digging holes in the tanbark with her gel-plastic mary janes, coating the shine with auburn dust. They only had fifteen minutes, a fact that extended the wait.

When she finally got on, she noticed the new batch of kids laughing at her from behind the metal poles. What was it? Had she forgotten something? She grabbed onto the bar and everybody in line behind her winced. Why shouldn't she take the open space? Wasn't it her turn? What had she forgotten?

She tried not to think of the other kids, but her palms began to sweat as she clutched the warm, metal bar.

She got off the merry go round, and it seemed a forcefield covered her. Sometimes kids in Kindergarten did that, "No, you didn't get me, I've got a forcefield!" As much as they'd debate it, the defense always won. Suddenly, there it was. The Forcefield. It had been there the whole time. She must have missed it.

She asked a bucktooth girl with nappy pig-tails what was going on. Hillbilly Pippi Longstocking giggled so furiously her friend had to tag in. "You didn't know? You took the cootie bar." she smirked.

"So..." Kira questioned.

"So," the girl turned her nose up "you've got cooties now."

As she waited that day for the bus, she hung her head, staring at her dusty, tarnished shoes. She knew she didn't have cooties; she knew that. But she felt funny, itchy, or hot, then cold. Every hair on her body was restless.

When she came in the next day she had been quarantined for the illness. She was a Cooties patient. Every day at recess for a month, if she approached a swing-set, she'd find them recently evacuated to accommodate her disease. Every day it became more real. Kira

had The Cooties. But she refused to be a victim. She was a survivor, and she proved as much within another month.

Kira waited patiently until, by some divine providence, she met, poor, nervous little Sammy Bilson. He was stocky, amorphous, an inhaler dangling around his neck with thin black hair, slicked to a widows' peak.

He was sitting by himself at the lunch table when she saw him.

"Be my friend." She said, welcoming him with crossed arms.

"Oh," he said as if he had never considered the concept, "well, okay." They sat for a few minutes, him talking excitedly about a new remote controlled car that was coming out. "It looks just like dad's" he said, his mouth preoccupied with its peanut butter and banana sandwich. She didn't need to know much about him. He wasn't any of the Sailor girls or Berenstein bears or the other people she liked.

Brendan blew in Kira's ear and she woke up swatting at the side of her head. The car was stopped in the tree lined dirt parking lot of the lodge. Daylight had long since shifted to the opposite hemisphere.

"Did we get here okay?"

"Yep."

"No problems?"

"None whatsoever. We're in the clear." He smiled reassuringly and she chuckled with a permeating yawn.

"Did work call? It's inventory night for all the book returns."

She looked down at her cell phone, noticing that they had no reception.

“I wanted to find a land-line before telling you about the reception.”

Kira sat fiddling with the door lock. “Hey, you never know right?” she broke a moment of silence.

“Sounds like a born manager.” He said as he unfastened his seat belt and opened the door. “Instinct”.

They both walked toward the lodge’s lobby, until after a few steps, Kira began to lag behind. The locks. Somebody could steal the car. She stared down at her feet and watched her steps. One, Two, Three. Maybe Brendan forgot to lock the drivers’ side. She slowed to a saunter.

She looked back to the doors, tripping on a rock, and centering herself. Brendan was a few paces ahead.

“You okay?” his forehead and eyes pulsed in an exasperation that profoundly irritated her.

“I’m good. It’s just dark.”

He took her hand and they walked through the lodge doors. Kira was grateful to find a rustic lobby devoid of taxidermy or firearms. Brendan chatted the bearded, middle aged man receptionist Roy about hiking areas and rooms.

“So, it looks like Janine set you up with a villa cabin, kitchenette, non-smoking. It’s got a great balcony. Lots of light.”

Lots of windows, Kira thought, picking the fur of the unvarnished redwood counter. At least it would air out the smoke.

When they walked through the doorway of the cabin, Brendan flicked on the lights to see a familiar view of the inside: wood-paneled walls, surrounding a kitchen, breakfast nook, and a living space with two overstuffed chairs and a couch seated around a wood-burning stove. Kira grabbed the groceries from underneath Brendan's arm and laid them on the counter. Her hands were trembling as she began to unload the brown bags.

Brendan came up from behind her and locked his arms around her waist. He placed his chin on her right shoulder.

"How're you doing?" he asked after a moment.

"Brendan," her voice faltered with annoyance before she reverted her tone, "You don't need to do that. I appreciate the effort but...really, I can deal with it." She sighed and bit her lip, the relief of arrival sinking in. She turned her head to him.

"Thank you, but it's my responsibility." Kira licked the top of his lip playfully and broke from his arms after a heartening pinch to his belly. She let herself fall backward onto the charcoal leather sectional. "Fuck, it feels good to finally be here."

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel it, too. The rest is sinking in."

"It really isn't a vacation until you wake up in the same hotel bed you plan on falling asleep in."

"Otherwise, it's a just," Brendan trailed off, searching the grocery bags for a soda.

"A trip?" she smiled.

"Yeah."

The bag ruffling grew louder in the absence of speech. She felt a chill from the windows, and tried to casually walk over to close and lock them. They were sealed. She stared out at the night, making out a shale crescent dotted with trees, and a wavering sea at the end.

In the corner of the window, just outside, she saw a florescent glow, and the sharp, lateral edges of an appliance. She cupped her hands over her eyes to remove the glare from the room. The image coalesced more clearly into the grayish mass of a multi-function printer, impaled by a large branch, small plumes of smoke twisting from its exhaust vent.

Kira was roused by a pop from behind her. Brendan sipped his drink.

Had she left the camera on? She went to the counter to see if it was off. Brendan's gift was nice but flawed in nature. In her mind, in order to check make sure the camera was off, she'd need another camera to photograph the first one simply for assurance. But then she'd need to buy a third camera to make sure the second camera was in fact turned off. And if only one of them ran out of batteries, she'd be screwed. The immensity of her own fixated logic hit her like a backdraft before she snapped down to grab their overnight bag.

"I'm going to try the library."

"Feel free. Let me know if you get a signal"

Brendan tried to check reception on his phone, sighing with frustration. He needed his games, no doubt, but she knew from yesterday, after having seen a reflection from the

window that Brendan was on the Al-Anon website, looking for meetings he could attend along the coast, just in case.

He always told her his program shouldn't change the way they lived. They could do anything other people did. She couldn't deal with the sparkling cider anymore. She looked back at more fragile days, at sour aluminum cans, when Brendan could still clearly convey shame to her without having to insist there was always a solution, and when his solutions were simpler.

She tried it for the first few months, casually ordering a cosmopolitan at dinner, watching his face crystallize over the course of the meal. They'd drive home in formal silence, his face masked in a dour expression. She hadn't had a drink in eight months; she came home staggering and tipsy from a co-worker's retirement party to find Brendan gone. She waited up for him all night, texted him, to find out the next morning that he had fallen asleep at his sponsor Ray's house. He had gone to ease his mind, drink soda and play video games to remove the discomfort.

The phone rang a dozen times but Kira wouldn't hang up. The library closed and locked the doors an hour ago. They were all in the back, sorting books. Only Kira was still waiting at the front desk.

THREE

They checked out just before six in the morning, needing two refills of lobby coffee before even turning the ignition. They drove north from Caspar, past logging stacks

and tractors, past trailer parks, graying ranch style saloons and general stores, into the mouth of Jackson State Forest.

At a trail entrance, Brendan locked the car and grabbed their packs while Kira filled their steel water bottles. By the time she was done, Brendan had reached her and taken her hand.

Convincing herself she'd heard the car doors chirp, Kira looked back, comforted by the reflection of the faint red blinking she saw in the glass. Brendan pulled her forward onto the verdant pathway. They gained momentum and Kira's heart began to beat faster. No walls, no windows. Just exposure. She took comfort in the stillness of the morning.

Kira felt the dew from ferns moisten her socks. The pink and green sneakers she'd bought for the occasion were now properly dusted from the trail.

Brendan and Kira tended to commune within their love of nature. She had been a volunteer trail guide in college, while he was a thoroughly merited Eagle Scout as a teen. Their first date had been a long, slow hike along a riverside trail in Yosemite.

Brendan had a step counter, but she didn't care how many she did. There was no goal. She kept a rhythm as she strode forward. One, two, one, two.

The third grade field trips the Sierra Trails were nice getaways, but they would bore Kira after an hour of walking. She'd look everywhere on that nature hike for the one special time and place where she could masturbate. Even two or three minutes; now that she'd found it with her fingers, that's all she needed. She had to find the right time, maybe looking for specimen samples or making leaf prints. It was the right space she needed most, behind a large rock, a thick grove or a slope off the path, perhaps a womb of bushes

for coverage. Even laying down in a patch of high grass, the shivering tips of grass the only giveaway. She chose Sammy as her partner, knowing she could ditch him without him saying anything. They agreed at her urging to split up and return in two minutes to show each other their finds. She nestled into a grove, slumping her jacket over a stump and straddling it. She was getting close when she heard a nearby crunch and Sammy appeared on the edge of the stump. Maybe he knew what she was doing, but he knew for sure it wasn't right. Kira was so close and he'd already caught her. He froze and observed in awe as one might a deer in the midst of grazing, or dying. She glared into his eyes with complicity as she came, feeling her own slack, checked out gaze.

Brendan and Kira reached a hilly peak and shared a bottle of diet coke at a vista point that overlooked all of Jackson's foliage, beyond the cliffs, to its end horizon.

Rows of car's vibrant coats peeked through the trees, opening into the parking lot. Kira immediately searched for their sedan. She neared the car, forgetting if they'd locked it, and her stomach churned. One step followed the second with terrible import. Three more steps to the car. She anticipated the door handle, pulling it to find the door give way and open. Brendan looked at her with that look she didn't need to see again to loath; silent dread and exhaustion, as she opened all four doors, rifling under the seats, in the trunk, checking the console and glove compartment to find everything in its place.

Back on the road, Kira put her feet up on the dashboard and watched Brendan, the late morning sun giving him luminosity. He appeared relaxed. She glanced down at his ankles, noting their contour as they shifted pedals. Kira loved his arch. Its' bow was elegant and supportive yet entirely flesh. She had fallen in love with the arch itself. In that

moment, it was the only thing. The object of her affection. She hadn't considered that she could hold all of her love for a person within a single body part. Lust, certainly.

Resentment, certainly; the back, neck, temples, knees, wrist, etc. But arches curve held vitality, support resultant from flexibility.

She opened her eyes to see a sedentary white sedan ahead, parked at a rakish angle along the side of the road, its passenger side wheel resting atop a rock or stump. Though the headlights were on, the hood wasn't raised, no smoke, and there were neither people nor an accompanying note on the windshield. As it passed by, she thought she saw the dashboard lights on, and the drivers' side door ajar.

“Do you think they're coming back?”

“Who?”

“Whoever's car that was.”

“That blue pick-up?”

“No, the white sedan back there,” she looked to the rear window but saw only forest and road. “Where was the blue truck?”

“Right there,” he pointed his thumb backwards, “the one on the side of the road, wrapped around that powerline. That mitsubishi with the white stripes, like my old car.”

She had been thinking the white sedan looked just like her stolen one.

“You mean, like the one you,” she traded out her words, “that you had to scrap?”

“Yes, that one.” By his near flat tone she could tell she hadn't covered fast enough, that sounded to her like ‘yes, the one I crashed drunk and towed to the junkyard after lying to the police.’

“Thanks for driving, Bren. I forget how the stress adds up.” She had offered a week before to try driving to ease the burden, but neither of them revisited the offer.

“Yeah, it can. This seat’s like ‘the hot seat’.”

They laughed, separately.

“How so?” Kira asked.

“I don’t know,” he laughed and shook his head “feels like it taps into my spinal column, and makes me furious, like shocks or something.”

“Seriously, like when I was driving around, looking for work, and it was summer and a hundred and ten every morning. One time I missed an interview all together.”

“You never told me that.”

“No? Yeah” he trailed off and chuckled to himself, “It was about a month after we got this, so last May. I was two hours late. I missed the turn off for a building, phone’s jammed in the seat, ringing, buzzing, I’m going seventy down a one-lane road and I almost hit a jackrabbit. I slammed the breaks, my coffee spilled forward, all over my pants and the consul, and all over my portfolio. I sat there, more than anything wanting to dive into the next bricked up watering hole and knock back the entire bar. I hadn’t been sober a month yet. I beat the wheel. I screamed until I felt my throat tear. I had tears in the corner of my eyes mixing with sweat from just sitting there.”

“What happened?”

“I found the nearest thing I could, the drafting compass, and stabbed the seat.”

They both laughed.

“Right?” Hilarity rose between the two of them. Kira ran her hand along the side of the upholstery. She could feel four small holes in the leather.

“You never mentioned that.”

“Ten minutes later, all I could think about was how I’d fucked our trade in value.”

She laughed, knowing full well. If only she’d locked the door, or started the engine before plugging in her phone, maybe it wouldn’t have happened. If she’d left her wallet in the glove compartment. She fingered the tears.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Wouldn’t have made any difference.”

“You broke the printer that day.”

Brendan took a breath, and in exhalation, asked, “was it that day?”

“It was.” She came home to find her old printer impaled on a barbell, and Brendan locked onto the gaming screen until the next morning.

Sam started asking Kira over for playdates. While his mom was inside, they’d play Nintendo or watch videos in repetition, until she went outside to water or sunbathe by the pool. They’d go to his room, where they had to leave the door open, a fact that only excited them both. She hadn’t needed to show him what to do. She never once touched him, to avoid spreading the cooties, but she claimed the pleasure twisting his face. He would turn his head and look at her in the middle with narcotic laden eyelids, chin tilted up. These expressions would stick in her mind and serve her later on. The look was as if the orgasm wasn’t because of her but, as she had orchestrated it, it was all for her. Do you approve, the look intimated.

FOUR

Now was the time. She had rinsed the sheen from her body, her hair and body still soft beneath towels. It had taken her a bit, maybe the endorphins from earlier, maybe Brendan's vulnerability. It wasn't just the alcohol that made it easier before. It was the shame. For every drunken outburst of hers, bathroom soiled, his every killed liquor bottle or emptied a twelve pack on a weeknight, they'd find a regret that needed reciprocating. One would ravish the other with the passion of anticipated redemption.

Brendan knocked on the bedroom door.

"Brendan? Don't come in yet!" Kira exclaim from within the bathroom.

"Okay."

"Alright," she murmured, "you can come in."

Pushing the door open with the toe of his shoe, she saw Brendan's frame cast in pools of candlelight.

She grabbed him wordlessly, and kissed him. She felt him stiffen, and her loosen. They moved to the bed in the candlelight. The flicker followed her, now streetlights from the library parking lot.

Sparse, chipped light posts sent inadequate yellow beams downward. Kira had closed the alone and later than usual. Walking to her car, she felt somebody mimicking her footsteps. Kira lightened her pace, confirming another behind her, and made her way more briskly to her car. She fiddled with the old automatic lock.

Bredan rubbed her clitoris and grabbed her hip. He kissed her neck, she fixed her eyes to stay in her body, but her eyes wandered. She supposed he knew she was looking through the wall, through every wall, to every door and every lock within her minds' eye.

“Hey Bren. I’m sorry, it’s the doors. I need to...”

Her words were swallowed as he grabbed her face and kissed her, both of them exhaling with force. Kira began to unbuckle his pants as their lips remained locked and proceeded to unzip his pants with trembling fingers before the two wrestled them off. Kira slid down his torso and grabbed his bare thighs with both of her hands and closed her mouth around him. Brendan grabbed her shoulders and she tensed.

“Excuse me miss, can you help me?” The disembodied voice was so raspy Kira thought it was an old man. She opened the door and turned to meet the body of a stocky thirty-something woman who, as she approached, appeared ravaged beyond fifty.

She pushed Brendan down onto the bed, counting. The windows. They must have locked them before they left, so she breathed: ONE, two—wiry fingers seemed to pry each venetian blind. THREE—a draft crept underneath the lattice, FOUR—the window squeaked open.

She glanced at the door and cataloged the anxiety. One, it was unlocked, two, it was cracked, three, light broke through, four, the doorstep was a set of gnarled toes in sandals.

Fingers curled around her white doorframe, and into the car. The rank smell of malnourished flesh invaded her. “I’m lost and I need to get to my brother’s place in Fresno.” The woman had fuzzy jowls, the inevitable downturned lower lip, short spiky

graying hair, and a yellow pallor beyond the dim streetlights. She held her arms out, a tote bag and purse in one, and a duffel bag in the other.

“I just missed the last bus north.”

She approached within inches of her face. Kira sat down and put her key in the ignition. The woman talked at length about her brother, where she was from in Arizona. The questions came fast as the woman leaned into the open door with two broad arms.

Clutching her legs, he began to make slow, deliberate movements. Muscles in her legs tensed, like bundles of warm rebar. As he slid one arm down to her ankle, she immediately replaced them along her thighs. In a fluid movement she closed her legs and sat up.

“I’m sorry, I can’t. Can we just go back to how we normally...”

“Yeah, sure.”

She indicated for him to turn over and Brendan shifted to his back and she crawled back on top of him. She leaned down to kiss him. A tug at her phantom braid pulled her head back.

Reaching over to the nightstand, he fumbled for the package of condoms he had in his overnight bag.

The light obscured her vision of the face, leaning closer into her car door with intentionally distracting babble.

Brendan rolled the slippery rubber over his tip of his penis and Kira pushed it all the way down and guided it into her. Penetration brought her back. They thrust their hips together. Kira’s eyes darted throughout the room to check the ambiance. One, two—

Overcome with lust, Brendan grabbed her and reversed their positions. Her thighs pressed against him, and she could feel her mounting pulse pounding against his side.

The two hands seized and tried to drag her from the vehicle. Kira slammed the door the woman's arms, hearing a scream from the window "fucking bitch". Hitting the door lock, Kira turned the ignition and placed the car in reverse. The woman rattled the doorhandle. The door, still unlocked, flung open, and the woman dragged Kira out by her hair and, in two yanks, they had reversed positions. The woman released the parking break and peeled out onto the highway. She felt the stun of cold, textured asphalt against her face and body, and shivered.

She pushed him away delicately. "Why did you have to do that?"

"I just thought, for the sake of trying new things...maybe it will help..."

"New things?" she snapped back. She flicked her eyes up and down as she spoke, unable to make a connection with his.

"Yeah, new things. I don't mind feeling like you're raping me, but I do mind if you do

"That's unfair. You know it's not about you."

They both felt it at that moment: he'd failed so many times, they both considered, why not drive down to the liquor store and get it over with. Only Kira knew that they would have to go no further than the bathroom. She warned herself: he could never know. She couldn't do that to either of them.

Putting his underwear back on and reaching for his robe he looked her directly in the eye as he spoke.

“I do know. It’s like the thought I get every time you go check something. It’s an irrational thought that, maybe this is it: maybe this time will be the last time.”

“All too familiar” she stared him down.

Brendan punched his fist and stormed out of the room and walked to the kitchen, quickly softening. Furious, she ran to the bathroom and slammed the door.

She soon heard stomps, growls, heavy panting, pillow muffled-screams in sequence. After a few minutes, they subsided.

She heard the clicking of a lens cap and a silence, dreading the inevitable retaliatory smash. Instead, she heard silence, followed by the flick and flint of a lighter. Acrid cigarette smoke trickled in as she drifted off.

She and Sammy raced each other to orgasm behind the handball court, the first time she faked it. He finished first, and gloated; she was agitated and frustrated with him. She took him by his clammy hand to the playground. The kids who had finished lunch early were trickling into the swings and slides. She pulled him toward the merry-go-round.

“We’ve got to get there before the line starts,” she said. Kira clutched his hand tighter. There was nobody on the Merry-Go-Round. She nearly flung him onto the platform.

“Aren’t you gonna come?” he asked with an overeager grin, displaying an empty socket.

“No, you first.”

“But…” he looked around “you’re not coming?”

“No, no...” she shooed him delicately, “it’s more fun by yourself.”

He stepped down in solidarity. She pushed him into the eternally empty space, and set the cycle in motion. She watched his hand clutch the monkey bar.

He giggled and squealed as he spun, coming back around, happy and dizzy and thoroughly disoriented. By the time he stepped off, a tittering, whispering, line had formed, murmuring “cooties” in a taunting melody.

After that day, she was cured. Though she still experienced the same itchy, hot, cold, restless feeling, Kira recalled a naïve satisfaction that it was no longer her problem.

She didn’t want to nudge Brendan awake, and preferred watching him. His body molded the covers to a heaving, mountainous shape on the couch. It was better before when she thought the other person knew, but she liked it more now, knowing for certain that he didn’t. An arm raised from the couch and braced itself along the back. Yawning and stretching, Brendan rose and looked out to the ocean. Amidst the light of sunrise, the ocean silhouetted him in a faint purple.

He walked to the small kitchenette to find Kira sitting next above the sink. She had stretched out on top of the counter, smoking in the windowsill, with a cup of coffee to her side, as she did at home. She usually sat in the windowsill of their apartment, her feet on the kitchen table, her legs arched at the knee. As he approached, she turned to look at him with glazed, un-rested eyes and smiled. He opened his mouth wordlessly, and Kira spoke.

“I’ve been working on a joke” she flipped the window lock, “It’s topical. Want to hear it?”

He sighed and returned with a softened, lovingly defeated tone.

“Sure.”

“Where does an obsessive compulsive grocer work?”

Brendan spread a well-meaning smile across his face. He flicked his eyelids open with great resistance, staring towards her face in the fading darkness.

“You tell me.”

“The checkout counter.” Brendan walked towards her and reached forward to the coffee pot next to her leg. He removed it, paused, and set it back down.

“Same as you.”

She stubbed out her cigarette and lined it up symmetrically with the other butts she had smoked. She turned her gaze to the side door, its bolt lock visibly secured through the crack in the frame.

“Same as me.”

Just Around the Corner

The first week in January, between fiscal and academic periods, affected a general holiday across Oakland. Even Pandora closed during the holidays, giving Austin two weeks paid leave. Small bursts of people appeared in warmer hours; relatives, vacationers, family gatherers huddled into cozy, new hotspots to dine.

They had agreed nothing too greasy, too cheap. They could afford a good meal. They hadn't blown too much savings on the moving van, and they had extra considering they hadn't needed to place a deposit on the house. Scott insisted on a new pop-up Quicksilver Spoon off of Alcatraz.

Scott extended a forkful of piping risotto to Austin, blowing to cool it down. Austin bit down and nodded in approval. "Yeah, pretty good."

"Right? I didn't think those goji would go well with the cilantro and curry."

"Is that coconut milk?"

"Yeah, no butter or cheese. Vegans really work their flavors."

"Berries in risotto. Who knew," he sorted his cherry tomatoes from his feta and left the cheese in a crumbled pile at the corner of his plate. "I just can't with those blackberries at home," he'd been working on their winter the garden, subdividing lettuce plots, carrot and beet plots, and a section for snow peas to crawl up the lattice along the side of the house.

"I was trying to cut them back last week. Tenacious fuckers. Thick stalks, thorns, spikes."

“Yeah, I hate them. We had loads of them in our backyard. They take over. My dad used to make me tear them out every three months.” It was hard to imagine anything grew in his family’s house. He’d met Austin’s family on a summer trip to San Diego, for a vacation at his parents’ vast and drafty glassed-in manor on the beach. They’d sold their Silicon Valley home and split their gross into two houses.

“And all for tiny berries that bloom once a year,” “I’d almost say it wasn’t worth it. Then I get a taste...” Scott smiled, his head sinking into his shoulders with delight, “the flavor.”

“I never really cared for them.”

“Get the fuck out of here. Blackberries?”

“Too seedy for me. Not worth the fuss.”

“Well, Mister Ridiculous Distinction, then I won’t save any for you”

Austin’s parents bought the condo on 41st street for its neighborhood. A good investment. Austin couldn’t say no to a three-story house with a two-car garage, and Scott couldn’t deny a subsidized rent. The bay bridge was to the west, hills to the right. They faced splintering Victorians, sun baked into washed out pastels. Their street corners displayed brutalist apartment complexes managed by the same company, sharp spackled edges chiseled with age. One on the corner towards San Pablo had mission style stucco walls with a carport carved in its facade. On the far corner towards Martin Luther King stood a grey-shingled housing development, four ends closing in on a central courtyard. On either side of them splayed rows of fenced in duplexes with shallow porches. They were nicely situated, every few storefronts there was a new ramen restaurant, an

alehouse, and a new print shop. There was a corner store, a Laundromat, flea market, TV repair shop, which were there in case they needed them.

“I love living where we have these pop-ups. They close before the portions shrink. They don’t overstay their welcome,” Scott remarked.

“Yeah, this is a good one. Sensible price, simple menu, not an alehouse or undergrad magnet.”

“It’s refreshing to see something unique here in Berkeley.”

“Is this Berkeley? I thought this was the border.”

“If it wasn’t for the Gertrude Stein, Here/There installation, there’d be no difference.”

“It’s like Downtown Oakland is trying to be Shattuck or College Avenue. And now Shattuck and College are trying to be gallerias. Pretty soon people will only need to exist in one place.”

“Doesn’t it already feel like that? Like the only people left in this city are those who can afford to live anywhere else and those who can’t afford to leave?”

“I guess. It’s still another leading question.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“I’m just saying, if you talk with your clients like that, I can see why you’re having a hard time at work.”

“Bitch.”

“I’m all yours.”

While it was still in escrow, Scott had been stalking the house. He felt strange confessing, as strange as feeling the need to confess, that he had driven by the house. Austin smiled at him, as if his moral habits were prudish or quaint.

“Yeah, I’ve driven by a few times. Parked once or twice and sat there thinking ‘just leave already!’” His eyes bulged in a simulated fury, then a haughty strained chuckle.

“I don’t want her to think we’re pushing her out,” Scott recovered.

The woman had three days. But they couldn’t help themselves. When Austin came home from work, shuffled through the avenue of boxes, he found Scott waiting on the bed with shoes on, with one destination in mind. Austin would go without changing. They’d park across the street and watch the glow beneath the shutters, hoping to see the peak of an inhabitant’s shadow. They wouldn’t speak, just watch for half an hour, thoughts overlapping. She must be she gathering her life up in there. Is it a hard box for her to pack, with fragile items, heirlooms, encased in well-coordinated layers of cushioning sediment? Is she listening to nostalgic songs or working in silence? Drinking wine, or liquor to ease the move? They never did see her shadow, much less meet her. Custody of the house was discussed by realtors. But they were connected, Scott realized, in their life shifts, “shifts” he tried to label it, not necessarily her down as their up. She left two days late, and when they stepped in with the first boxes, Scott sensed how they been breathing the same air, watching the same walls as the previous tenant, probably minutes before, within such an intimate surrounding for a woman he’d never know.

Austin had spread some of the food around his plate and left for the bathroom. He knew Austin wouldn't ask to take it home so Scott asked the server to box it up and to bring the check. One of them would want it later tonight; one of them would have enough drinks to whet their appetites. Scott wasn't a part of the "Clean Plate Club". He needed no incentive at his family's table. His siblings would devour the food so quickly there was still steam rising from an empty plate.

Austin asked Scott to carry his leftovers. The streets enlivened. Lingering traces of daylight were gone. Winter lights blazed, woven through Chinese, Japanese, and other indigenous maple trees. The brightness of the strung lights created a haze, their bulbs lining Shattuck as a festive resort. They moved along, filling time before meeting at the White Horse, with a tacit inclination to walk and shop. Austin leaned into Scott's shoulder. He ran his fingers through Austin's hair. A rare quiet moment, where Austin was still, he thought, and they could pretend they deserved this life.

The first few days in the house, they acted as if they were trespassing. They looked down as they passed their neighbors, opening their doors and walking inside before any potential interaction. It didn't help that their home security alarm kept going off; check the front door, check the balcony door, "check yourself" Scott mocked. When he lived with his sister, he had actually caught people in the house before, his main use of the baseball bat. Even then, it was more an awkward experience, as if Scott had walked in on the person defecating or masturbating. One burglar froze as he carried a flat screen in his arms; Scott saw an indignant expression that, were the man not the intruder, could have shamed him back into his own room. Scott waited with the bat, sensing that neither

could make a move nor a threat the other couldn't predict. The man slowly replaced the TV on the cabinet and walked out the door, closing it gently. Theft more often appeared as objects simply disappearing; from their porch, their backyard, more often from their car seats, leaving only shatterproof glass sprayed across the sidewalk.

They sauntered down the promenade and stopped at Cold Feet, browsing socks of all thickness and texture. It took Scott awhile to adopt the gay male sock obsession; what started as a code evolved into accessorizing. He never thought he'd pick it up, but his first few pairs fit so snugly, he couldn't ignore the bright, novel patterns. Scott had an eye, but not for his own wardrobe. He was so accustomed to his siblings' over washed tube socks, thin in the toes and ankles. It always seemed that right before Scott could grow into his sibling or cousin's clothes, they handed another baggy outfit down to him.

He could tell the line was long, but the cashier at the parlor struck Scott as colder than the yogurt. He brought out a melodic greeting, "Hi," extending his "i", "how're you doin," but he received no upturned lips, no reciprocation beyond his transaction total. He brought out his smile, the broad one that wrinkled his eyes, alongside his credit card. But she only completed the transaction. He needed her smile, so he followed it with a thank you and a phrase that never failed to serve a response.

"Have a good night."

She moved to the next customer as Austin began to head for the door. There was a shuttle driver he often saw who never greeted or smiled. As it continued every evening, the demeanor seemed more than incidental or habitual to Scott but endemic to her. In some lights, only his Latino features dominated, so he gave her a "hey, how you doin" to

let her know he was a gay brother so she could relax. But she only gave him shade. One of those people that made his unacknowledged "Have a good day" feel like a command.

Austin browsed the bookshop's greeting card section. "I like these ones," Austin pointed to a card with Fozzy and Gonzo at a doorway, Bert and Ernie bestowing a bouquet of flowers beneath a "welcome to the neighborhood" speech-bubble. "You think they would have responded sooner with these ones?"

"Austin, you just sent them out last week."

"But they were e-cards. It's not like they got lost in the mail."

"Give them some time."

"Maybe I should have done paper."

"For a housewarming?"

"Yeah. Maybe they'd see the effort we put in, see the return envelope, tell how much it means, feel guilty, and say yes."

"You didn't care this much for your birthday. You said you didn't even want to celebrate."

"That's why I sent RSVPs for this party."

"Bring it up tonight. If you can't wait. Most of them will be there."

Scott glanced at the clientele. So many people dressed down for going out. But Scott could always identify trust funds by their frame glasses, designer, cutting-edge retro horn-rimmed, replaced in a year. He used to think that it was just more privilege, don't need to look sharp cause people are only looking at the résumé. Only the name needed to be dressed Anglo, but that had been covered for black folk for years. Scott's coworkers

were accustomed to their south bay cradles; sandals, jeans, untucked, wrinkled flannel. They had their designer ties, blazers and slacks, like Austin, in the backs of their closets for holiday parties, gallery openings, and parent dinners. It was in public, on the town, that they could keep their loose work outfits on. It was like the playground, to stay safe from ridicule they'd keep entitlement to themselves and stay visibly subdued. Except those glasses.

He had grown up with his cousins, his mother and grandmother in a large Victorian near Lake Merritt. Scott's mom a part-time MRI technician, but most of her time was spent driving a cab around Oakland. She did airport runs, coliseum runs, but mainly door-to-door driving. She'd eat the dinner Scott's grandmother prepped, her feet on the table, in her purple scrubs. After eighteen hour days at two jobs, she'd come home complaining of her feet, and even then she'd look down at him in his pajamas, smile "evening, little man", before plopping him on her lap to feed her spoonfuls of peas and mashed potatoes. She'd laugh herself back to life with her own cab stories. She had to call the cops on a guy who cut up her seats. Another one handcuffed himself to her door; refusing to pay for a locksmith, they had to hack off the door handle at the cab depot. Cut and run stories were more common, of free riders with collateral, of the well-meaning widows on credit that kept her paying for gas a gallon at a time. He found a .38 in her glove box while she was buying a pack of cigarettes, but it never appeared in one of her stories.

Scott waited outside the dispensary a few blocks down. Austin knew what he liked, so he asked him to go in and pick them up an eighth of something hybrid, maybe some oil for his vape pen. He stood outside, taking the thick, warm smoke into his lungs. His pulse sped up and time slowed down a bit. He watched a tall man with a yellowed beard volunteer as a crossing guard for pedestrians, a smiling as he ushered folks past the curb; it was clear nobody needed it, but everybody wants to feel useful, Scott reasoned. He checked at Lyft and then Uber, to compare prices to get to White Horse. The Industrial Organizational firm Transitions he worked for couldn't negotiate ride credits, even though they were contracted with Uber for psychiatric services.

"Some guy mentioned in there how Uber's logo looks like the logo of the Mega Corporation in Robocop. That can't be an accident."

"You know they knew what they were doing when 'Uber' became a verb. All those companies want to be verbs. Speed, action, efficiency."

"What verb you guys would be: to Pandora?"

"It's accurate," Austin tucked a gram into his pocket, "something you can't close if you wanted to. Welcome to the internet, motherfuckers." He laughed, and Scott giggled free from his ride-share app.

"Hey, how've you been?" A young man, tanned with frosted blond tips waved and walked over from the front of the shop. He approached Austin and put his hand on his shoulder. "I know we met somewhere." A pair of high-end velvet leisure pants hung from his hips, an oversized Raiders sweatshirt slung over his narrow shoulders, a pair of bloody fangs drawn below the chisel-faced logo.

“Remember, I didn’t have a beard then. Peter?”

Austin squinted into his eyes and cocked his head, “Austin.”

“No, I’m Peter. We met on Cal campus.”

“Did we have a class together?”

“No, I doubt it.”

“Did you stay at Lothlorian? The co-op.”

“Yeah, yeah. I forgot the name.”

Austin smiled. Scott watched his face with more assurance, the distant envy of an acquaintance he never met. He moved closer to Austin.

“Peter, sure, sure. How’ve you been?”

“Hanging in there. Looking for a solid place, solid work. I just heard about a construction gig by the marina.”

“Yeah,” he paused under a blank smile, “who were you staying with at Lothlorian?”

“Will, at first.”

“Steinmann?”

“Yeah, yeah. We met in People’s Park”, he hiked his sagging cargo pants, “were you with us that night the bear came in?”

“The bear?”

“Yeah, the bear came in, with the bandanna on, turned out to be undercover campus police. Ran us out of the house.”

“I must not have been there.”

“No you were. You were the one who warned me about the bears. We had stolen the bear statue? Remember? They didn't like that. We ran to Telegraph, fell asleep. We woke up in the Wright institute, they were doing an EEG test. Gave us sixty bucks for participating, bought some hash.”

“I don't think so.”

“No, remember, we went back and all the bears were in riot gear. They strip-searched us. Slashed your leg up?” He rolled up sweatshirt sleeve, “got me too”, bearing a veined forearm, taugth with three slash marks below red sores. “Come on, man, you don't remember?”

He noticed somebody eyeing a bike and backpack near a bench and scrambled to protect them.

"It's best not to let them go to far into the conversation.”

“I really thought that we'd met.”

“That's why I don't make eye contact. You never know if somebody will see it as a threat.”

“That feels like a generalization.”

“Trying to play it safe.”

“Prejudices feel safe. The people I met were nice before they got sick. And they'd been slowly punished for being nice. Like that one girl, the one who exploded when they wouldn't serve lunch past time. You were there. She'd circle the room and check on me every twenty minutes: 'you good'? I started to get that she wasn't really asking me. I'd never know who she was asking.”

Austin bundled into his jacket and wool scarf, walking a bit more briskly. Scott pressed up against Austin, who kept looking stiffly forward with fixed eyes. Scott laid his arm across his shoulder, expecting the relief of Austin burrowing into the nook of his sleeve. He veered into the Creperie. It had been hard enough that Austin was so often in pain, but that Scott couldn't help or, rather, Austin wouldn't accept it, soured the nights' flavor. He felt the warmth let out from the store, the air of rich sugar, and followed Austin in.

Scott stood second in line, staring at his phone, a foot or so between him and the first person, the people behind him clustered together to keep the line from going out the door. It irked Scott in these moments, Austin standing so thoughtlessly, taking up space and time in front of lines and cars. Others were okay with close proximity, but Austin's problem was too much space. Austin expected everywhere to accommodate him, without considering what he was asking.

Scott cut in line next to Austin. They reached the register and the young cashier asked "what can I get for you, boss?"

"Nutella crepe, no sugar."

He turned to Scott, nodded his head 'sup', "what about you, brotha."

"Nothing. Thanks," he turned to Austin, "the yogurt was enough for me."

Scott swung the leftovers in his hand while Austin finished his crepe. They ambled through downtown, past the light-strung district.

“I was at the market around the corner a few days ago, and I was walking down the aisles and this woman was muttering and shaking her head while we were in the canned foods aisles.”

“At you?”

“Yeah.”

“How could you tell?”

“She was kind of loud.”

“You’re just paranoid.”

“No, she was repeating ‘just leave’ barely under her breath. Then she said ‘find another place to go. Why do you have to come here? This is our store.’”

“Our store?”

“She was black.”

Scott had been in, and hadn’t thought much of the black clientele.

“Do you think it was homophobia?”

“No.”

“Try not to take it personally. Some people are racist.”

“I just, I don’t really want to go back there,” he scooped the bottom of his cup with his finger, “and I was so happy when we moved in. There was a grocery store a block down.”

“You can still go there, Austin.”

“It’s not mine.”

“You can still go.”

“No, I won’t.

The bar was long and bent, a deep hard wood polished with arm grease on the edges, gutters and grooves worn in by the weight of thousands of elbows bearing millions of drinks. The top was scuffed and tan, sanded by scrapes and water damage. Each subtle courtship, invested flirtation, bareback venture or negotiated blowjob seeped into the splinters of the surface, treating the wood with history's stains. Sailors met here, came in and out of the rooms that had were quickly seized as lodging for that single, seductive purpose: liberty between four walls and a ceiling.

Paolo and Addison sipped CosManhattans at the bar, Addison bending over the bar, pushing his sharp shag back to smirk and whisper into the bartender’s ear. Paolo displayed no hesitation at his partner’s advances, deep in conversation with a slick otter next to him, laughing as he cleaned his glasses with his shirttails.

Scott greeted his old friends and roommates, accepting cheek kisses. They spoke to Scott, suddenly and seamlessly a couple again, asking one another’s questions about the new house. He responded with repeated information: moving as statistically stressful occasions, at each other’s throats over the tiniest things, so much take-out because the plates aren’t unpacked.

He began to speak automatically, a small splinter of anxiety burrowing within as he wondered where Austin had gone. He needed to keep track of him.

Austin had found his old co-op roommate Anton, an ethics teacher at Berkeley Extension and writer of several neo-Marxist blogs, who’d come to celebrate Addison’s

chapbook news. They stood huddled in the corner, Austin holding nursing a beer he seemed to hold with his whole forearm as Anton rolled a cigarette with a stern expression. Scott always found him strikingly good looking, with long brown hair, a beard and sharp right angle eyebrows, but Austin never seemed to remark on it.

The back-room dance floor was spinning 90's remixes. Scott walked back and saw a friend of theirs Dani on the dance floor. Scott came up behind him and hugged him around the shoulders. Dani grew up in Richmond and became part of the Oakland queer arts scene before moving to San Francisco.

"It's good to see a sister here," Dani joked and smiled. They caught up for a minute, about Dani's new performance piece, the new house. Scott put his drink down to find Dani dancing solo on the floor. He joined him for a few wordless minutes.

"Austin got a Black Lives Matter sign and put it up in our window."

Dani smiled and swayed.

Scott assumed the comment was drowned out in the music. "Isn't that weird," Scott asked him, following up. He looked down, his shoulders alternately rising up, his head weaving into a personal dance.

Scott caught his eye to indicate he was talking and Dani motioned to his deaf ear. Scott leaned in close enough to smell coco butter beneath his sweat and peaty cologne and repeated the question.

Dani bobbed his head overtly between beats. Scott felt a validating relief shoot through his body. He hadn't received the coy smirk he'd expected, but the nod signified enough.

Dani strutted off the dance floor, fanning himself with both hands. He sat at a cocktail table, sipping a gin and tonic through this small straw. Scott moved closer and fell into a seat next to him.

"Don't you think that's a little weird?"

Dani looked beneath his brow, lips pinched from the suction.

"I do."

"Right?"

"Yeah, it's weird that it's a problem for you."

"Come on, you've got to admit it's a little self-serving."

"Showing respect for the black body that isn't even his?"

"That's what I mean"

"Bitch, you just don't get it, do you? He's respecting your body."

"But its like he's entitled to."

"Well, somebody's got to."

The music faded out and the stage lit up. Cheers came from the seats in the back. Scott recognized an acquaintance Calvin in the back, wondering why he would have even been there. He didn't deign take the bridge east; maybe south for clients, west for yachting, north for spa days. But not East, not Calvin. Dani might come to visit his old collective, appear at galas. Scott didn't like to make assumptions, but when Eric handed him his drink during the show he couldn't help but remind Scott whom Calvin was there to get. For the whole show, Calvin had been in his phone, in the front row, as if the bent

foldout chair had been reserved. Now “Philistina” was onstage, and Calvin sat up, his phone facedown in his lap.

Philistina channeled the lone Diva in her movements. Her lips fit the parts of speech, wrapping so tightly around someone else's voice in such an effort that truly entitled her to its essence.

Philip's own voice had been trained at multiple intervals through his life. Like most castratos, he retired young. He was in Oakland Gay Mens' Chorus, but he retired and sang solo only for casual pleasure. His melodies only appeared in nonchalance, to fill the air while doing dishes and transitory moments, or as a private showcase at parties, to sing a few bars with soulful precision before closing his lips or sliding into an unrelated response or quip. Scott asked him years before why he didn't just sing the songs as Adele or Christina Aguilera or Paula Abdul. It would be an insult, Philip had responded, it's not my song to sing. It's not my voice.

He stood watching Philistina, swaying into his illusion. Such as shame; he could do such a gorgeous rendering with his voice. But that was drag, and who was Scott to break tradition, even if his version could reinvigorate that song. Philip's padded hips bobbed. He highlighted the song as pop Kabuki, his makeup a mask, a subdued expression of sorrow painted on. To Scott, it intoned a loss uncommon to the world around him, something private and permanent. A dent, a stain, an engraving, a split no weather or age could refuse.

The drag was over, and Phillip removed his make-up at the table with a cold-cream compress. The Sunday night dance-party had begun, but the January cold kept some out, and university's winter breaks explained the rest. Phillip sat across from Scott at a long table. The smoking patio was warmed up, and its inhabitants were beginning to bundle up back home. Calvin fawned next to Phillip's arms, trying to privatize the conversation between just the two of them, leaning obtrusively when Phillip spoke to Eric on his other side. Arthur came in from the bar, the three carried on a brief exchange, before huddling in the corner over a blunt wrap. Scott sat between Paolo and Addison. Dani came with his gin and tonic, and sat next to Calvin, preferring to talk with Addison and Paolo, his polite contempt for Calvin evident by his lack of acknowledgement. It didn't affect Calvin, or if it did, he was so motivated to hear Phillip explain his drag name that he wouldn't address it.

"It's from philistine," Calvin leaned his head into his hand, more invested now that he'd caught a lasting topic with Phillip, "combined with the Greek 'phillo'."

"I know that one, it's 'love', like philanthropy," he softened his eyes and tone as if a pupil, "but what's 'philistine'?"

"Isn't it the guys Samson slaughtered?" Paolo asked.

"Yeah, but this is different," Anton contributed, "this is the German word that Nietzsche and Nabokov used."

"It's somebody who can't appreciate the arts," Dani interrupted. Calvin responded "thank you" with haughty condescension.

"A philistine is among us," Anton announced through laughter.

“I thought that was Latin,” Addison questioned.

“Greek,” Dani said, “Latin came later, with the Romans.”

“Guys, it's German. I just said it.”

Arthur sat down at the far end, next to Paolo, across from Eric, sealing the blunt with his tongue. Anton sat at the other end of the table, across from Calvin, and nervously stroked the edges of his moustache and beard. Austin found the remaining seat next to Eric, across from Arthur. Scott was glad to see the two warming up; Scott had a summer fling with him before he met Austin, and Austin had been biting and frigid in Arthur's presence. Artie was clever, fun and funny, not the smartest guy, Scott reasoned, but he'd been a loyal member of 'Late Victorians', replacing Scott and Austin when they moved to their new house.

“Can anybody actually say the year Greece became Rome?”

Members whipped out their phones.

“No, no. This is like trivia: no phones allowed,” Dani halted.

The men groaned and looked to Phillip, who looked up from his compress with cat-eyes, “I want to say it was 140-something BC. The Romans took the Corinthian territories, like Macedonia.”

“So they dominated Alexander?”

“Technically,” he rubbed

“That's hot.”

“But how do they pin it down, like really, to one year?”

“You know that shit happened slowly,” Paolo blurted out, “and nobody really noticed it”.

“No, he’s right.” Phillip removed his eye shadow, “Very little changed. In fact, the Romans quickly realized...”

“That Greeks were the shit?” Scotty interjected.

“Well, yeah. Romans were always conquerors. Even assuming they weren’t so accustomed to assimilation and appropriation, the Romans hadn’t the time or wherewithal to develop a culture.”

“So they just took it.” Addison. Some laughed grimly, others drank.

“Horace said it best, boys, ‘captive Greece captured her rude conqueror’,” Dani sipped his highball.

“How do you keep all this shit in your head?” Eric jabbed his forearm.

“I’m a performer. We recite. How do you know all those diagnoses?”

“Diagnoses,” Eric smiled, “I use them every day.”

“Me too.”

“And I have people help me remember them.”

“I don’t? It’s hard to forget how much late-capitalists need my culture. Especially here. Without artists, business sticks to a template. Look at the app. It’s a growth template.”

“Tech is art now. That’s why they call it ‘new media’.”

“Art is not media,” Anton jabbed, and finally made eye contact with Calvin, “it is the antithesis.”

“I disagree. Media has always helped art, especially now. Like the Internet. It just helps the cream rise faster,” he looked next to him for Dani’s support, “you know what I mean right?”

“I’m not touching that one.”

“Fine, but think about this. If you’re an artist, you have two choices: rely on patronage or become a businessman yourself. Either way it’s chasing money, or culture that gets you there. New media gives something between, like, what’s that term: ‘Mixed Media’? It’s like we have a mixed media now, public and private working together to generate the best content and markets so that no property goes unrealized.”

“I don’t think you’re using that term right.” Addison’s irritation was flat and dry.

“I know. I’m reapplying it, Addison. It’s like a melting pot for the arts.”

“We get it, Cal,” Arthur looked up from a text.

Calvin’s stiffened any dejection from his face, his drink finished in one sip, before retreating back into his texts. He had inherited his grandfather Millius’ sum and created a delivery app called *Viola* from it. He sold the company two years prior and was content to exist in leisure. Scott could see from a few seats down that Calvin was alternating between *Grinder* and *Tinder* to hedge his bets.

“Guys, we need to do this more often,” Paolo urged.

“This was by accident.” Eric lit a cigarette.

“Then let’s plan this out.”

“I’m down. Seeing my crunchy, hometown girls,” Dani shook his shoulders to a silent beat. Dani founded an arts collective in West Oakland and, one design job later, he

had moved the collective to San Francisco for the same purpose: get that audience. He got one audience member Daniel Meeks, took his hand and his last name, but kept his stage name Tupelo cause he had a following.

“I’m with that bougie bitch. There’s nowhere we can have a conversation.”

Addison said, “without two or three libations.”

Scott looked to Austin, recognizing the chance to mention the housewarming.

Austin got up and carried his empty drink to the bar.

“Yeah, we need to plan this.”

“I don’t want to be one of those old fags withering on the barstool, twenty-four in my head,” Addison smirked and rolled his eyes.

“Or one of those queens in a men’s chorus,” Eric leaned into his drink, and belted a note out to coerced giggles, before taking in a sip.

“Excuse me,” Philip pointed his finger into the air, “if you can find a better place to practice choir and be openly gay, I’d love to hear about it.”

The bang made them jump. Somebody had taken a hip shot to the panel outside, raving to himself as he passed.

“It could be worse. We could be paying that guy out there for blow jobs,”

Addison quipped

“Or giving them,” Arthur laughed.

Calvin expressed a look that encompassed physical and ideological disgust. “On that note, I should be going,” he offered a cheek kiss to Phillip, his eyes staring far off

into the future of his next rendezvous. He gave a distant clamshell wave to the others, sealing it with a saccharine “byeeee” while avoiding Anton’s glare.

The door closed and the group released an audible sigh.

“Fucking San Francisco Libertarians,” Addison shook his head, “no offense, Dani.”

Dani put his hands up, shook his head, and jutted his lips out in understanding.

“I just commute. I’d work in the East Bay if UCSF was here.”

“He had to catch his jet,” Arthur smiled.

“Or it’s a gala for one of his new charities. Purging a homeless camps with a cluster bombs,” Anton smiled with an acerbic defeat. The group groaned.

“That’s not funny,” Phillip said.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself,” he smiled.

“You’re not helping,” Eric said, “aren’t you supposed to be the champion of the proletariat?”

“Not the lumpen.”

“That attitude won’t help anything.” Paolo waved him off.

“Seriously, though, what can we do? It feels like the bigger these problems get the further removed our assistance is,” Phillip said.

“Like what?”

“Like Kiva.”

“Kiva helps.”

“But how much? And where? And whom?” Paolo pleaded.

“It helps out Saadiq, motherfucker,” Addison joked, “He gots to start his Internet café and get paid.”

Their laughter layered, and accelerated into side chatter.

“No, I want to hear this,” said Scott, “Paolito, when you say ‘assistance’ what do you mean?”

“I mean ‘helping’. What actually helps. Like, lets say we assume all these problems are discrete, and we had to choose one thing that helps the most people in the most ways, what would that be?”

“Cock. Always helps,” Art jumped in.

“Can always depend on you Artie. Seriously,” Paolo arched his eyebrow, “Let’s get into it. Show me you’re more than just a bunch of fuckboys.”

“Harsh words,” Addison said.

“No, he’s right, let’s talk about this,” Phillip asserted, “We all agree on a simple point here: modern industrial society creates wider and wider inequality. It’s there in open corners, any vacant land near transit hubs. Prime real estate. Housing developments multiplying neck-in-neck with tent camps.”

Austin came back in with a long island ice tea.

“Yeah, it’s a no brainer,” Eric said

“Not for brain-dead people smart enough to pick up a ballot,” Anton added.

“Exactly my point,” Phillip continued, “what offsets that?”

“You’re the terminal-degree guy,” Dani said, “What do you think?”

“I’ll tell you under one condition: I want to hear from all of you. I don’t just want my voice in an echo chamber. Different ideas, no rants.”

“And for fuck’s sake, no interruptions,” Eric continued.

“I like that. If you’re going to be a critic, do it on your own turn.”

“Alright, let’s just hear it,” Anton snapped his fingers.

“Just follow me here because I’m not going to try to prove anything. Before we thought, we felt; empathic abilities were our cognition. The old baby burning the hand; the baby doesn’t first think after a burn ‘this is hot, I shouldn’t do this’, it feels ‘fuck, that hurt!’ Despite all the reasoning afterward, it occurs again and its experiential sensation is a crucial motivator. I’m saying that underneath all these continued mistakes we make individually and collectively, is the baby yelling ‘fuck, that hurt’ to which we constantly respond ‘fuck your hurt’; I think that these destructive behaviors occur proportionately to how little we attune to empathy. Not doing so produces a callow person. Doing so fills us with all those classic loves. Some days, I walk down the street and I feel everybody’s inner beauty, it’s connective, tantalizing, as if I could make love to each person I pass.”

Paolo raised two fingers. “You boys mind?”

“Yeah, practicing empathy is the beginning. But it usually ends there. Practicing equality is harder. When I’m appealing eviction notices for old ladies, the Rent Board is almost always sympathetic; but if they valued equality more than sovereignty of management companies, they’d find a way. My point is we won’t ever truly implement it if we don’t value it. For me, it starts at home, in my community. Equality in relationships; I don’t mean to preach but y’all gave me the time, so I’m gonna talk

polyamory. Like with Addison, this was the last boundary. I can say anything to him. I can tell him that guy's ass is round and tight. I can fuck him if I want. And I could ask Addison to join. Or not. The point is you don't have to waste time with the fuckboys, hoping its love. Love shouldn't be about power, it's about equality; polyamory is about strings being attached. Addison's my main. And the only way it works is with more communication to make sure it's fair. We spend hours talking still. If we base relationship dynamics on traditional standards, we imitate the worst of breeders' normative power dynamics. Marriage is not equality for the queer community, homeownership is. And in cities, not suburbs. We can colonize parts of these cities, paint lampposts like rainbow maypoles. It can't just be serendipity that gay friendly cities are all phallic. Just look at them geographically: San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, all of Florida. All cocks. And I think it's no coincidence that culture is produced in the base but always ends up at the tip."

Artie giggled "Just the tip", before removing himself to for another drink.

"All right, I've got something," Eric sipped his drink and laced his fingers together in front of him. "Equality is what we're hoping for. Balancing freedom with equality is always going to be our challenge here. I think equal access to goods, services, like healthcare, certainly, but to ways of living that don't lead to toxic lifestyles. Equilibrium is what I'm talking about, equality within yourself. People need balance in life. Studies are always showing this. Fuck, we need to simply read studies. I emphasize plural. We need to be deductive. Like studies on screen fatigue leading to cataracts. And studies that don't polarize it: limit phone usage, limit computer usage. No need to fear the

extremes with these sorts of habits. If we do this, we'll get closer to consciousness living, with our body instead of against it. So many of my patients don't know shit about basic health. So maybe value health education more, put some money into it to make it interesting; like, imagine what reality television could do with teaching basic health. Clever, and incessant like Geico ads, but you know, publically funded. And it doesn't look like that's going to happen anytime soon. So I guess, in the meantime, temperance is a good way to go. We've approached seemingly unlimited levels of personal gratification; who would give up that lifestyle? Or could with ease? The middle-class have to treat it as if we had a stroke and survived; scrupulous detail to moderation in all types of consumption."

"Does anybody want refills? I've got a tab going?" Arthur asked. Austin handed him his empty highball, Addison his martini glass.

"You're talking about this empathy and equality shit. But y'all forget that we're needy motherfuckers. All of us. A bunch of needy little babies deep down. So balance only comes when we each get what we think we need. I'm gonna tell a little fairy tale. So we were all born fucked up. Long time ago. Gods made us, then they had a very human crisis: resource allocation. They'd depleted all their proteins and matter making us. Being expedient and aloof and entitled, they never planned it out ahead far enough. So, when they began to feel hunger pains, they'd take bites out of us. And then send us on our ways. People walking around with chunks out of their legs. Chunks out of their hands, feet, heads. Chunks out of their pockets, mainly. One eyed, three fingered, one handed. Black folk didn't need to be losing their feet to diabetes. The Gods were severe as fuck.

Then Jesus came and turned them into statues and stories and coloring books. So we were finally allowed to heal. And our skin healed. Our tendons, muscles healed. But you get it: a void. A lack. I want to go back and be all: *Siggy, get out of the closet, girl*. But I digress. One person's chunk healed into major depression, or bipolarity, or ADD, another's into a premature birth, some into narcissism. Some into masochism. And it's not like they're looking for that person, or they know it, but the path narrows, and that masochist can't help but bump into that sadist for one exciting meet-cute. The fucked up one always finds a reciprocal other. It comes out; we always find each other's chunks. And we love them. Try to anoint them. Maybe take a few bites ourselves."

Austin came back in with the drinks and distributed them. The group took some nipped, some gulped. Scott swigged his wine, watching the tracks bleed down the sides. Addison sipped from his martini glass and stood up.

"I'm following Dani here. Since I think art is the dialogue we need, I'm going to read a poem from my chapbook as some convenient self-promotion," Addison giggled and the others followed suit. " 'Let's See A Smile,' he folded back the page:

Just try the food, the music, the color but
 know that no culture can be owned
 or fixed on a shelf.
 Compliance can't be bought;
 It is born from respect, cultures from mutual.
 Culture might be earned,
 but compliance cannot

be bartered, convinced, or claimed.
 Nothing is right around the corner,
 Negation pushing out everything vital.
 No guaranteed satisfaction is not a warning but
 an invitation to try something
 discomfoting
 but breathing.”

Scott didn't know what to think, but watched the others nod their heads in understanding. He didn't know if that was it.

“I know it's supposed to speak for itself by I'll speak for it,” Addison continued, “I'm trying to say that comfort is our enemy. We used to think that the Internet helps connect people beneath lines of power. But now we know it creates that firewall, the echo chamber. Pop ups are the only thing that changes that; some annoying advertisement. I think that we should make sociopolitical pop-ups from data-mined keywords that directly challenge whatever ideological bubble you've created. It's not just virtual. Like right now: we live in the most leftist city in the country, in the most leftist space, surrounded by only leftist people, now that Calvin is gone. We have to bridge the gap and find more cross-sectional allies in the queer community. I always remember the Mutsuo lines 'Become the father of the homos/ You of the boundless mercy/ At street corners on doss-house steps/ They tremble with friendship.' We need to love each other to love ourselves. I want to try be everybody's daddy, reach out and touch them. This won't come as surprising to any of you but I'm going to echo Paolo: we need multiple partners. All the

time. Everybody fucking everybody. For fellowship. Seriously, what are the two loves that most people will do anything for: children and the person they're fucking. Should everyone subscribe, we would have a transitive fucking-web, where everybody would have the biochemical and erotic incentive to maintain egalitarianism. And we should start it soon, while we're young. I guess that leaves out ugly people or old people. Or married. And not poly. Or near married monogamists."

Scott thought the comment might be directed at him. Even if it wasn't he didn't like that it applied. He looked at Austin who avoided his eye line.

"Scott, what do you say?" Paolo asked, "You fanned this fire here."

"I guess I think this all ideal. This is what we should do, but not what we've done before. We've heard a lot on love, empathy, personal accountability. But isn't it better to adapt rather than push blindly towards idealism? Doesn't that just become delusional? Isn't it better to redefine ourselves than become an obsolete identity? To love ourselves first, then others, for the sake of resilience?"

"Questioning is the trap," Anton intervened, "That's the first symptom our modern disease. That's how opposition gets you. Colonize your mind, lead you to their questions and undermine yours. That's what a devil's advocate is. An early adopter."

"Isn't that just more paranoia?"

"It's better to select the right questions. And if it's paranoia, it's the one I choose. It's the only real power we have."

"Doesn't that sound like cynicism? Don't we have to question as a habit, a principal? Isn't that the definition of non-compliance?"

“It’s still engaging it.”

“I’m not engaging this one. I’ve got to piss.” Austin wobbled from the table.

“It seems pretty simple. The only way to curtail materialism is to engage as little as possible. First, we have to put down the booze, the sex, the consumption. It just distracts from the pervasive, endemic problems or, worse, creates more, or adds a stronger foundation to the old ones.”

“That’s a little abstract. Can you explain it more?”

“Okay, so housing development. Who are those low-income spaces for? After the crisis, nobody’s giving homes to NINJA loan qualifiers. It’s for people who can already afford a roof. Then there are empty spaces for housing, they’re just fenced off and reserved for another buyer. I advocate disruption. You can do a lot of social justice with a pair of bolt cutters: open dumpsters, chicken wire in empty lots or houses for squatters.”

“But can’t you also do a lot of injustice? Steal a bike, a car, really anything. Don’t these right-to-property infringements propel foreclosures and gentrification? Maybe communities should have rights to a property.”

“Yeah, but all it takes is one person to buy into their neighborhood and it starts,” Paolo said, “maybe not tomorrow, but not long.”

Scott almost spilled his wine. “Austin got this Black Lives Matter sign.”

General sounds of approval rang out, a few displaced scoffs; Scott didn’t check to see whom.

“That’s my point: Austin got it.”

“Maybe I’m missing something. Isn’t that good?” Eric scanned the room.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Artie swooned.

“Totally,” Paolo assented, “more allies, more visibility”.

“And you’re black, too” Addison pointed out.

“I’m half black. My dad was from Guadalajara. You met him, remember?”

“Sure, but I think we’re all missing something.”

Scott looked to Dani to enunciate it for him, that it shouldn’t be up to Austin, that he didn’t really have a right to put it up. But Scott couldn’t, and he looked for other people to say it for him.

“Do you think he should have gotten the sign?” he asked Addison.

“No. Signs are meaningless gestures in themselves. I’m all for BLM, but you know most people’s involvement ends with those signs.”

“So, do you think those signs help?”

“Of course they help. The more people love something other than themselves, the closer we get to understanding,” Phillip reiterated towards Scott, “you should be thanking him.”

“But should the black community be looking for white validation? Isn’t it up to black people to make their own lives matter?” Scott asked.

“Our lives,” Dani chimed in, “and that’s some greased logic there. Why are you tripping about Austin getting a sign? Ask yourself, and work that one out a little better. Signs mean everything, Addison, you’re a poet, you should get that. Those signs tell me one important thing: that a white person recognizes how unaccounted black lives are.

We've known it for centuries. Whether we like it or not, it's a sign for whites because they're the ones who continue to see demographics every time they look at my face." He turned forward. "And Scotty, you should know better. You could waste your energy counting the reasons white folks use those signs for vanity. That's bad faith, and I know you were raised better than that. No matter what, those signs help black people. If you're going to ask another question, it better be 'why *didn't I* get a sign?'"

His mother used to keep a sun-bleached photocopy of the black-nationalist fist in the bay window of their Victorian. He fixated on why the fingers were out; if it meant black power, shouldn't it show the knuckles, not the fingers that can just be pried open?

Austin returned from the bathroom and sat down, "Is this about the sign?" The others nodded. "If it bothers you so much, you can take it down as soon as we get home"

"You heard your boy," Dani pursed his lips to avoid a full smile, "you can take it down if you're not feeling it."

"Bitch, please," he blurted something between a growl and a pained chuckle, "why would I take it down?"

Dani recoiled with a head cock, a raised eyebrow, silent. Scott shook his head fervently, his hand over his brow, trying to laugh off the ignorance

"At least it stands for something other than a horny statue." The group looked to Austin with confused expressions. He pointed to Scott, "Ask him."

"It's a Hermae, Austin. And it links our queer legacy."

Instead of unpacking, Scott had been bringing home new purchases, to fill the new house with things other than paint samples strewn across the floor and empty space.

Scott had bargained the statue down. The bust featured determined eyebrows, a long mass of wavy hair a lush, and curly beard veiling a cherubic face that gazed out with pale cataracts and a placid expression.

“But nobody else knows that. It's three feet tall, white plaster. Head, monolith, cock, balls. In that order. All in their places.”

Scott scoffed, “it’s classical art.”

“It sticks out like, well, like a big white cock. And he bought this two-foot Corinthian column to put it on. The dick might have been lost in the grass otherwise, but now its right at eye level.”

“I don't see why...”

“And here I am, working in the garden, my pink gloves on. Somebody walks by and gives me a nod or a smile, until they see that statue, bright asylum wall white, and they know exactly what I am, and turn away,” he sipped the beer, then tiptoed a mime, “Sometimes I step right in front, try to block it until the person leaves, pretend to train some vines around our driftwood lattice. I’ve been trying to obscure it, twist it in the blackberry or jasmine vines but there's no way it looks like it belongs in that fucking garden. Even without that fluffed cock.”

“Okay, the other ones were erect. Do you think that would be better?”

“Don’t pull that leading shit out just to get your way.”

Scott looked around, and then back to Austin to intone that this was not the place. He couldn’t help but defend himself.

“I mean, what’s wrong with rubbing it in their faces, but not, you know, in their faces?”

“Great, yeah, paint me as the homophobe.”

“Did I say that?”

“No, but I can tell I was supposed to. You think your questions are so piercing, don’t you? They’re coward’s armor.”

Scott’s brow knitted, his hurt consciously magnified by embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” he announced, “I didn’t realize you were so sensitive about this. That’s totally valid. I didn’t know it was such a problem” Austin’s face turned red, though he followed protocol enough to sit down after Scott’s public reconciliation.

“I’m sorry that happened,” Scott directed his apology at the group.

“No, no, I’m sorry I pushed it so much,” Dani said, “you know me, I just take it too far.”

Austin sipped his drink as the conversation diverged, assenting and engaging as much as possible. Scott offered contrite looks, which Austin appeared to match.

Some had filtered out earlier than others. Anton always tended to leave before everybody to stave the temptation to drink. Phillip left earlier, as did Dani to make the longer trips home over the Bay Bridge. A small group said their farewells in front of the bar. Paolo and Addison were taking BART to Fruitvale. Eric gave Arthur a ride home to keep him from stumbling home or into another bar. Austin and Scott walked slowly downtown.

“We could walk home.”

Austin groaned. “Can’t we just Uber it?”

“You don’t want to try it? Forge the path home from White Horse?”

“Exactly why I want to Uber it.”

“That’s not why.”

“If I hear any more of this ‘delicate mid-white boy’ shit,” he tickled under Scott’s shirt.

“I didn’t hear me say that.”

“Everything else about you did,” Austin soured a bit, and Scott pulled his shirt down.

“So you’re okay walking?”

“Sure. Fine.”

“Along San Pablo?”

He scrolled through ride share apps. “Yes.”

“Under an overpass?”

“Just say it.”

“It’s like when we’re taking a walk; you see a tent on one side of the street, you cross to the other. If we go down Telegraph, those tents are on both sides.”

“Oh, fuck you. I knew it. It has nothing to do with that. It’s just health, you know me, I’m a germaphobe.”

“Yeah,” Scott looked down the street, then the sky, “are you sure you just don’t want to risk feeling bad?”

“Fine,” he beat his forearms in the air, “You’re right. Whatever you want to hear,” he pulled out a cigarette and lit it, sitting on the curb. Scott looked down the street, trying to look composed as bundled gaggles of revelers passed by. By now, Austin’s disposition appeared to have migrated, leaving only the deep cut in his forehead.

Austin tried to talk to the driver, plumbing some reservoir of energy to appear congenial. The driver said he worked for Uber and Lyft, Taskrabbit on the side, and Airbnb. He looked at Austin to apologize; his mouth opened with no sound besides his lips parting. But it was enough to make Austin turn, enough to make Scott wish he could revoke the feeble attempt. Austin’s eyes checked out, matte and frozen, picked up from the state facility, the gaze that said ‘I know I’m not crazy, but here I am.’ And he was, as long as the state held him. Scott could pass through security, shift his focus, drive home and get high until the thought of Austin sleeping on a locked cot subsided into a restless nights’ sleep.

Even as they arrived home, they sat anchored to the windows in the drivers’ backseat, as far away as possible. They passed Victorians, boarded up, the street turned cobblestone by potholes.

They passed by their house and Scott saw the yard’s shadows shifting. “Oh, this is us.” Scott was overly accommodating. The driver’s headlights passed over their yard. Two men in hoodies walked past the car, walking with wide-spanned steps.

They walked to the door and Scott checked his pants, his jacket pockets for keys.

“Where’s the statue?”

While on the line with the emergency operator, Austin had to ask Scott if this was a hate crime. It was an attempted robbery, or maybe vandalism. Any crime felt hateful, Scott reasoned, but the words were disparate in this case.

Scott looked down from the second floor bay window, lights off, unable to hear anything beyond murmurs. He stared at the sneakers, slung limp over the telephone wire outside the window. The silent lights reflected off the walls of the houses. Older residents stood out on their porches, looking out disapprovingly. Austin leaned against the fence, offering his statement as the cop nodded. Scott tried not to meet the neighbor's eyes; Austin's anger was justified, certainly. And Scott felt a superficial indignance for the man he loved. With Austin standing there, trying to dig deep into details he might have missed, only Scott saw the officer wasn't writing anything down; it didn't help to think that Austin didn't see it. Scott couldn't meet the neighbor's eyes to see their heads shaking. He'd been on those porches before, hearing the derision, wondering himself what that white boy trippin' over. More importantly, that he be tripping in the first place. It was more than just futile to bring the cops in; it was insulting. It said so much more to Scott; that Austin even thought to call them, that their presence, their assistance was warranted for a vandalism offense, that Austin was entitled to justice for such an offense. Scott knew it to be, at the most, a crime of passion, and at the least, an act of recognition. Austin walked over to the monolith in their yard, lights absorbed into the matte plaster, gesturing to it as the officer stood with his hands on his shoulders, putting his notebook away. It looked like an unmarked grave.

His mother's voice repeated compassionately, then sternly, "I'm sorry, I can't help you". A mumbling voice responded with a heated intensity. He had heard her door slam on the street, jingling keys moving closer to the front door. There was wailing, but he couldn't tell which was his mother or grandmother. The front door opened again, but his mother never came through.

Austin closed the front door and sighed. His footsteps ricocheted up the stairs.

"They said they'd keep a lookout for the head. I filed a report but there's probably not much they could do, they said.

"Yeah, I thought so."

"I just thought I'd check," he placed the keys in the dish near the landing, "I'm sorry, baby."

"Why?"

"Well you bought it."

Scott shrugged and raised his hands, "it didn't cost much."

"At least we got to see who all our neighbors are," they both laughed with a shamed release.

"And they got to see us."

Austin put his arms around Scott's waist. "You don't seem too pissed about the statue."

"We're in Oakland."

Austin pressed his palm to Scott's jaw, and gave him a slow kiss, "you're taking it quite well."

Scott patted his back, “as long as you’re happy.”

“It doesn’t make me happy. I’m just relieved to be done with that.”

“With the hermae?”

Austin stepped back. “Come on, it’s too late to bring this back up.”

Consciousness returned to Scott. The small injustice sunk him into frustration, more than his usual numbed irritation; the loss had left a frigid space the object had filled. The warmth of the liquor, the soft ether of the cannabis had long faded into an inconspicuous dysphoria that drained the night of any hope of future pleasures. Remember what you still have, he told himself. Austin’s sharp eyebrows were even more alluring in faded shadows from the streetlights outside. Scott kissed his broad forehead, the patient lines and look from below brought back the reminder that somebody was still grateful and desired him. He kissed his eyebrows, eyelids, high cheekbone, feeling a natural heart-race, until he reached his lips. Scott’s tongue pushed his lips open, past his teeth. Austin’s kiss opened up for Scott, his head pushing back in submission. Scott grabbed the thickness at his crotch. Austin stepped back, pushing his chest lightly.

“I need to go brush my teeth.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m tired. Long night. As much as those things sober you up, I still came back in drunk.”

“We still have the leftovers.”

“No, I just want to brush my teeth, take my meds, pass out.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” Scott’s tone halted with exhaustion, “I’m okay.” He repeated as if to assure Scott he was answering the question. Austin began creaking up the stairs. There was a growing space with each step that Scott couldn’t leave open.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I said I’m fine.”

“I know. I just really want to know.”

Austin stopped at the fifth step. “It was just that man who recognized me today.”

“The homeless guy?”

“Yes, the homeless guy.” He reflected back with a measure of loving spite.

“It’s okay. He wasn’t really talking to you,” Scott recognized his own position, “did it bother you?”

“That’s what bothered me. He wasn’t talking to me.”

“But it happens all the time,” Scott moved closer to the banister, “I guess I’m not following.”

“It wasn’t him really. It just reminded me of someone else.”

“Who?”

Scott leaned on the banister. “This boy I met,” he fluttered his fingers, “at the facility.”

“Who?”

“You didn’t see him. We met in the main room during my intake. He introduced himself through the NP who was working with me.”

“How do you know it was him?”

“I recognized him. I was his roommate for two days.”

“He was very nice, sensitive, like overly accommodating.”

“He sat on my bed, his legs folded beneath him, bracing himself with his arm. If he weren't so preoccupied I'd have thought he was posing. He looked down when he talked, tracing fingers in my bed sheet ripples. He told me about the bars in New Orleans, what the boys were like out there, growing up without socks or pencils for homework, but at least schools had trumpets for street corner second-lines. He talked with sharp upturned lips, one of those plump bottom lips you want to nibble on.”

“Which one was he?” A picture could help Scott understand.

“He was only there my first three days. He was discharged before you arrived the first day.” Guilt swept Scott at the reminder. He couldn't get the time off work the first day. He had a deadline to submit a driver evaluation. The thought resolved to resentment. It wasn't his fault traffic made him miss visiting hours. What was he supposed to do? Be first in line?

“What was his name?”

“Noel.”

“What was Noel doing here,” Austin looked puzzled, “in the East Bay?”

“He drove the street-car, for tourists mainly. Got laid off for missing work. Moved here, did the same thing in San Francisco, got laid off. He became a bike messenger in the city, for packages, weed, you know.”

“What brought him to Oakland?”

“Mobile bars in Jack London,” Austin descended a step.

“How'd he end up losing that one?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Austin answered with an uncertainty Scott took as frustratingly naive, “I didn't ask.” Austin was deaf to his deliberate assumption. “Last place he said mentioned was Salvation Army.”

“Rehab?”

“He didn't say. All he said was it wasn't helping.”

“A boy like him. At Salvation? I'd imagine.”

“We'd hang out on the patio, sneaking crusts to the wild turkeys. They had cameras but no sound, so we'd talk there. He said he used to target the Turkeys in basic training, and the cadets would poach them but leave the carcasses. They had no space to store them so they just left them for the scavengers.”

“That's cold.”

“I guess. He still cooed at them, fed them his lunch every day. Except the turkey.”

“Sounds like a picnic.” Scott hadn't remembered the last date they had. The last hike. Any time they went out Austin found a way to let him off the hook and declare it a date.

“He came on pretty hard the second day.”

“Ooo,” Scott took on an aroused air, “how do you know?”

“It was pretty clear.”

“Like what? Did he grab your dick?”

“Long glances, sucking in his bottom lip,” he descended another step, “invited me to the shower, to keep clean, scrub each other. Things like that.”

“What happened?”

“I took my own showers, Scott.” Scott sat on the coffee table to rest his ankles.

“He kept singing to me. Soft, but with one of those pitches that sounds like an expert, like he used to sing every chance he got.”

“Must have been nice,” Scott tried his best to transform his jealousy, his own inadequacy into listening.

“It was. He never remembered verses, just choruses, and only parts of choruses, pausing before drifting off into another song's chorus.”

“Those nights he never crawled into my bed, never invited me to his,” Austin took another step down.

“Did you want him to?” Scott knew better than to ask these questions, but it was instinctive nevertheless.

“I did. Just to know that I was invited.”

“We never even touched,” he descended to the landing.

“How do you remember?”

“I would have. Nobody was allowed to. You remember.”

“But how do you remember that?”

“Because it would have been a moment. It would have meant something.”

“To him?”

“It felt weird that he hadn't.”

“Why?”

“Scott, what do you want me to say?”

“Why it felt weird to you.”

“Because I wanted him to. Is that what you were hoping to hear? Because I hadn't been touched, can't remember the last time somebody wanted to touch me when they couldn't.” Scott looked down and put his face in his hand. Austin remained at the landing.

“What happened to him?”

“I heard the sheets rustling in the night. I thought maybe he was masturbating. I woke up in the morning to find only crumpled sheets. They sent him earlier that morning.”

“And that was it. How weird.” Austin stepped to the floor.

“I saw him last week.” Scott's heart dropped. Each of Austin's texts could have been for this boy.

“How do you know it was him?”

“I recognized him,” Austin sauntered towards Scott. “I called out his name and he turned around.”

“He was wearing a fleece blanket around his shoulders,” he stopped and gestured to his own frame, “Those ones you find at the dollar store, pieces of fabric with jagged stitches at the end to keep it from fraying.”

“How,” Scott stuttered, “how was he?” He asked as if it was a friend he hadn't seen in years.

“Off his meds. He was happy to see somebody that recognized him.”

“What did he say?”

Austin passed Scott and sat down on the couch near him.

“We talked about the facility. But he only spoke generally. I brought up our moments with the turkeys, and he said something like ‘yeah, there are always turkeys there. I like to feed them my sandwich crusts. They thank me,’ or something like that.”

He leaned back into the cushions and hugged a throw pillow.

“I’d ask him things like if he still had a bike and he’d look at me with fleeting dismay at how I knew these things, then so casually described how it had been stolen while he was sleeping one night, with that eerie intimacy that someone gives to a complete stranger.”

“What happened?”

“I confirmed he knew where the shelters were. Where to get his meds,” Austin looked to the window and Scott saw wet tracks reflected on his cheeks, “and then my Uber came and I got in,” he spoke with a trembled tone. Austin sniffled.

“That’s sad he didn’t remember you.”

“He barely remembered himself. But that’s not the sad part.”

“Weird coincidence,” Scott spoke soft and somber.

“I guess its better I run into them out here.” Austin lay down and turned away. Scott sat down on the edge of the cushion. He placed his hand on Austin’s hip. He winced away from the touch and they sat there still, until Austin’s breathing slowed.

Scott was passed out on the couch, curled up.

On Austin's release date, Scott felt every bump on the ride home, rolling up the windows to dull Austin's sensitivity. "It's okay," he smoothed back his hair, "it's nice to be able to have the window open." He rolled it up and down a few times, then he sat perfectly still and quiet. Even though he hadn't been there, the surreality of seeing Austin in this world after such an acetic, low-stimulus environment focused him on the passing signs advertising the very predations that Scott felt conspired to maintain state facility recidivism.

"So, how do you feel?"

"I feel better, a little nervous, but excited to get home. What did you tell the housemates?"

"Your aunt got sick. You were in San Diego. But they didn't ask until last week."

"Bitches," Austin smiled, "that's some cold shit." Scott joined in the over-emphatic laughter.

"We can tell them when you're ready. Be all like 'what? You didn't remember me telling you?'"

They sat over a real dinner at Actual Café, Austin wiping his mouth, "You know," he said casually finishing a bite, "I've been thinking the past few days, now that I've been there, it's easier to see that I don't belong there." He stood up to go to the bathroom, and jumped when a plate fell into the bus cart.

Scott brushed Scott's ear, stood up and walked to the kitchen for a pint glass, filled it with water and sipped. The light refracted through the glass. Scott could see the anthropomorphic eyes of Oski, the Cal bear logo, redressed in rally cap and a grin for his

academic beneficiaries. He sipped the crisp water. They must have pushed all the bears out to make way for the campus. But they kept what sounded good to them; the den, the bear's lair and of course Oski. They must have gone to Oregon, or Nevada, maybe even Washington, all habitating closer to Scott's siblings than he did. His father moved even further away to Florida when his ex-mother-in-law died and the house was sold.

He took another sip and imagined the end of his contract with Uber, releasing the wellness strategies into the company's employ and moving onto the next case. It was all he could do. He could only get so close to the employees before they were sent to another fare, and another, before they returned home to their spackled, carpeted enclosures, or so Scott imagined their interiors. Perhaps he could come to his neighbors' porches, see if they recognized him and have a friendly chat. Share a story or joke.

He imagined the nervous fluttering of activity before their housewarming, the room teeming with honest and lively conversation, then the exhausted clanking of dishes being stacked and empty glasses gathered. The door might knock, a delicate five-note cluster. For a moment he'd worry, for the late hour. He'd offer to go downstairs and open the door to a close stranger from somewhere far away, a face he felt he'd seen, and a voice that Austin could instantly recognize.

He drained the glass and placed the leftovers in the refrigerator. He hoped, for Austin, that Noel had at the very least a warm nook of his own, for tonight at least. He wished there was more he could do. A wind caught up and jostled the hanging sneakers, but didn't shake them loose.

Manicured

Meredith stared at the two unfinished rooms. On one side of plywood stood a gleaming industrial kitchen, clean and empty aside from hanging pots and a butcher's block adorned with bell peppers and fresh parsley. The other side of the plywood contained patterned tablecloths beneath rustic pepper grinders and heaping bowls of Parmesan, within walls of Gondola hats and mounted plates. The two quarter-rooms were surrounded by a semicircle of dolly track, adjacent to which stood two separate lighting schemes: one focused spotlight on the butcher's block, the other diffused source lighting into the quarter-restaurant.

Meredith had that sharp feeling, borne of too much caffeine and too little food. An endorphin focus. She looked to the director behind her, who pointed to the master screen and frowned, stroking a thin beard. She hated doing commercials. When it was a still photograph, for drive through menus or bus ads, she didn't have to work with a director. Just her and a small crew. Commercials took hours, maybe days, for the shot of food.

There were little unspoken manicurist rules such as: All food must be shown in movement. Hamburgers should be in assemblage, the bun patted onto the meat. Pasta twirled hypnotically. And for fuck's sake, show the powdered chicken meeting the spices mid-air. If the food isn't moving, then the camera should be, circling its meal. Or both food and camera moving, affecting stillness in a swirling background, like an upset stomach encased but churning.

She chewed her fingernail.

“Tanya,” she called out to her new assistant. Tanya dashed forward, her scarf trailing behind.

“Can you grab the brush and do another coat on the bell peppers. The lights are drying out the shine.”

It hadn't even been that long ago that she did it herself, much less paid an assistant. But she had gotten used to her old assistant, Anthony, and had to find a replacement.

“Absolutely, Miss Monahan.”

“A little more baby powder on the fettuccini.”

The assistant tipped her horn-rimmed glasses below a knit beanie.

She hoped Tanya didn't think her too cold, the skinny bitch, barking orders from the sidelines. There was no time to lecture that fresh vegetables look better shiny whereas cheese is always matte, while cooked food is somewhere between gleaming and flat. Meredith hired her because she had too much to handle, but Tanya's learning curve was a hidden cost.

Tanya painted the bell peppers, and the director flicked his eyes and furrowed brow towards her. Perhaps she was in his light or perhaps he was protective of his set. Either way, Meredith thought, screw him, he can wait another minute.

There was no way Tanya could be blamed, but it was going slower. Meredith grabbed the baby powder and went to the other side of the board, sprinkling a few puffs

and stirring them in. The director sighed heavily and she noticed him pull out a light meter.

Tanya was looking for the baby powder.

“It’s okay Tanya,” she said, “I’ve got the rest. Can you check my phone to see if James called?”

She had forgotten about the garlic bread, and the parsley. Meredith grabbed the spray bottle and the gloss paint and walked toward the kitchen. The director led the hand model to the restaurant side of the set.

Meredith stood under the spotlight, spraying the parsley with glycerin and vinegar for a fresh-washed glow.

She and her mother would spend an hour primping in the bathroom, suffocating in hairspray and tobacco smoke, before leaving for her auditions. Sometimes the bathroom was large, industrial sized, with broad metal sinks. Another month it might be filled with toiletries and family-friends hair-clogged sinks. Most months, it was the triangular closet-sized Winnebago bathroom.

Meredith moved onto the restaurant side and began scraping the garlic bread with glycerin, a sheen like petroleum jelly on teeth.

“There’s nothing from James,” Tanya handed her the phone, “but there’s a missed call from Unknown.”

James, her ex-husband, couldn’t stop texting her. It was all well meaning, communicative, if not subtle emotional blackmail. Couldn’t he just let her come to slowly

resent him from a distance? Wasn't the virtue of divorce the fact that "our child" becomes "my child"?

Janie was supposed to have arrived this morning, but James' car broke down, and he had to borrow his father's. It was important their daughter grow up in the same area, and have a cohesive childhood. But to force divorced parents to live in the same county, no matter how civil, seemed puritanical punishment. She had to tell herself it was the same for every parent. Though, between her and her ex-husband, she felt he was parceled out more ration in the divorce. Rational. Everybody would get the same, just less of the same.

Meredith met James ten years prior, in a kickboxing class near her old marketing firm, at a gym she no longer frequented. Soon after meeting James, Meredith was accepted into his family. While his parents Henry and Barbara were divorced, at least they were civil, and at least James knew his father. She and James moved into a loft in Westside Chicago, and James helped convince her to get an arts degree in Photography so she could go into business for herself. She decided to focus on food, and quit her marketing firm to attend Le Cordon Bleu of Chicago, which James' family was eager to pay for. She didn't know what to do with the amount of faith they seemed to have in her.

First came the dysphoria: words misplaced and reordered, hydraulic bursts behind the eyes, shitty equilibrium, pervasive nastiness, everything tight and shivering ecstatically. It was never until her entire disposition had warped that the reoccurring mystery revealed itself: tightening stomach muscles.

The crew broke for lunch. Meredith left the refurbished brownstone, into the brisk Chicago winter, to search for food. She didn't mean for it to get this way, but somehow she felt hunger the less she ate. A stream of sugar rushed up her spine, into her brain, and with it, euphoria. She would get Janie for five days sandwiched between Lincoln's Birth and President's Day. Since the divorce two years prior, it would be the most consecutive days they'd been alone together.

Poking at a barley and feta salad, she thought about James, how once a month, just when she had recovered from seeing him, his presence reoccurred. Her eyes pulsed. Next week was her busiest of the year, with three shoots coming up. She popped a Cafegot and dry swallowed the pill. It was her fourth dose this week, admittedly excessive. But she couldn't afford a migraine. Remind Tanya to refill the prescription. And tell her to drop them off at the office, not my apartment. Never again would she tell an assistant her address.

She had taken an immediate liking to Anthony initially. The night they went out to drinks, she'd just landed McDonalds, her first multinational client. Too many drinks and too little in her stomach, their night culminated in sweaty groping on her dining room table, finishing on the moist couch. Meredith had tried to end it cleanly after that night. She could feel him projecting desire onto anything she asked. The day she let him go, he nodded and took the paycheck from her hand. A week later, she came home to find the planner on her dinner table with a note reading 'thought your next assistant might need this'. She changed her locks that week.

Unknown called again, and Meredith silenced the phone, before dumping the remainder of her salad. Tell Tanya to change my numbers, she reminded herself.

She wanted to see Janie more than once a month, but even when her studio was with local chains and businesses, there wasn't enough time. There was hardly enough time to stock her fridge. And like most trained chefs, she rarely cooked for herself.

Meredith walked down the bright aisles of Whole Foods. The cart felt like a toy in her hands. Anthony had done the shopping for her, both for work and personal, and Tanya wasn't ready for her personal list. Meredith knew it was amateur perfectionism that had her sifting through produce aisles for her models. She was good at appearances and resigned to image as a necessary evil to existence. It wasn't an evil she produced, simply harnessed. She'd learned composition early on, subjects rendered as functional, natural, and thus authentic. Consumers submitted to image even more than taste.

She had to pick the best models; perfect romaine, half a dozen heads of them in her work fridge. She'd have to prune them and place them under the lights for only a minute or two. She regretted the immense waste it produced, and couldn't help but feel sympathy for the food. She knew the feeling of wilting under hot lights, of waiting, the sweat and Crisco sheen on her legs, repeating the same phrases between a smile stuck like a label over her mouth.

None of the produce looked appetizing. She picked up some frozen dinners, promising health, because at least she knew Janie would eat them, and they wouldn't

spoil. James had accustomed her to high calorie foods, a seemingly genetic trait of his Midwestern family.

James' mother Barbara told them in the hospital that apparently the manager called the police when she had a stroke in their drive-thru. They saw it as a wake-up call, all but Barbara, who continued buying cigarettes and candy off the nurses and hiding them in tissue boxes or socks. They kept visits short, not simply because Barb's medications melted her personality by the evening shift change, but because they had brought Janie. They learned to act strategically, to catch her in her best light. Her resentment of newfound reliance and rushes of pain and exhaustion found all her loved ones targets, even the baby who she had loved was told directly to "shut the fuck up". Even after this, she devoted herself to his mother, and fought for her mechanically. It wasn't her operative support towards James, or an instinctual maternal alignment. She had grown to love her.

It should have been Meredith's mother, they'd reflect in mordant depths. She was slowly dying already, certainly buried for Meredith. But after their sad, comparative laughs, she'd drift to the corners of her mind, feeling her mother's impeccable singing and the frantic, methodical touching of her scalp. In frenzy, she was artificially reanimated, almost alive again. Meredith so silently revoked the joke in those moments, she could barely hear it herself.

She hated waiting for James, especially in her apartment. At least at the office she could work. But her apartment was arid, sparse and vacuous, predominantly eggshell white; it looked more like a photography studio than her own.

Meredith rubbed peppermint balm into her swollen cuticles. She didn't know why she rushed out of the grocery store. There was always immense pressure to present him with a nonchalant demeanor that managed her abundant cosmopolitan life. But his lateness always betrayed her affected tone. As usual, he'd charm his way out of it with self-deprecation. He'd do it in such a way that always made her out to be the puerile parent, the typical scattered, type A workaholic, too absorbed to tolerate motherhood's many compromises.

She bookmarked places to take Janie: Lincoln Park zoo, ice-skating, improv, children's and natural history museums. Even in winter, she wanted outdoor activities for Janie, at least something active, to help keep her in shape.

The doorbell ringing startled her. She opened the door to her daughter and James. Janie jumped into her arms and she wrapped her in a hug. James had her bags slung over his shoulder.

"This is a surprise," she tried her best smile.

"I didn't want to make you come down. I know you're busy." She tried her best to take it as he meant it: considerate. For once, she wished he'd stop trying to care about her.

"Nope. I was getting ready for Janie," she turned to her daughter, "alright kiddo, want to place your bags in the room?"

Janie darted down the hall.

“I hope you weren’t waiting long. You know me, what good is a license if I can’t find my keys.”

“I found them.” Janie’s voice echoed.

“In the pantry,” James laughed himself, “she won the scavenger hunt.” Meredith broke into a genuine smile. She remembered how patiently he’d search for the keys, in a sort of ingratiating acceptance of loss, an honest joke rather than false composure, while she herself would get silently irritated with his manner. She admired, even more now that Janie was six, how he turned a petty annoyance into an opportunity to spend more time with his daughter. It would have revolted her previously.

“Do you want to come in?”

“No, I have to get going.” She didn’t want to know.

“Somewhere to be?” Why was she asking? She didn’t want to hear about which night classes he was taking to better himself, which PTA meeting he met his current girlfriend at, which date he was going on with whatever current girlfriend he’s met at a PTA meeting, or what youth retreat he’s leading.

“I’ve got cubs tickets, my dad’s taking the train in.” It was nothing so noble, but she did miss Henry, the father-in-law that still called her and sent holiday cards.

“I guess I’ll leave you to it,” a disappointment flooded her, disembodied. They hadn’t spoken, truly spoken about nothing since they divorced. They’d waste hours previously, where every inane conversation felt precious.

He handed her a McDonalds bag, with a happy meal inside.

“I got her dinner, so you don’t worry about cooking.”

“Dinner...” she questioned, examining the deflated sandwiches.

“I know, I know. It’s rare I do it. She’s been eating really well this week. It was a treat.” She knew how it worked: get Janie whatever she wants right before you drop her off.

She nodded her head and produced a damning smile for him before confirming her pick-up, and shutting the door.

Janie ran out of the room with a box of “mom’s place” toys: an American Girl doll, Power Rangers, the LOL doll collection, and a tool set. She spread them all out, surveyed them, and promptly ignored them, reaching instead for her happy meal.

“I got some yummy microwavable dinners for you. Do you want one?” She stared at Janie’s tiny paunch, poking out beneath a pink t-shirt.

“No, thank you.” Janie was eating some chicken tenders. Her politeness began to irritate Meredith; she needed to eat something.

“Sweetie, can you put away your toys before you eat?”

“No, I want you to eat with me.”

“Can you give me a minute to make something?”

“No, Mommy,” she giggled. Janie stood up and gathered the McDonalds playset Meredith had gotten as a free gift from work. “Play eating with me.”

“Okay, give me a second.”

“I’m hungry now,” she demanded through a full mouth.

Meredith sat down, and picked up a fake hamburger from the tray. They sat in silence, chewing their plastic food. She felt James next to her, her couch textured like his old Volvo. They were devouring cheeseburgers in ravenous silence, before heading back to Chicago. The habit developed after visiting Barbara, when they had forgotten to eat in the hospital, and the only meal available past visiting hours was fast food. Six-month-old Janie was beginning to snore in the back of the car.

She stared at the sheen on the toy hamburger. Janie stood up every few seconds, danced around in circles, smiling and humming as she chewed, double fistng French fries and a burger.

Meredith felt exhausted, low energy, a cluster headache simmering beneath her brow. While Janie was bathing and getting ready for bed, Meredith scoured the bathroom for any painkiller she could find, a last Klonapin. She knew she shouldn't take another Cafergot, but one more wouldn't kill her.

Janie's hair bore the tangy beef odor of an unwashed scalp. She pet her daughter's head as they cuddled each other awake. Her thin brown hairs clung to each other as Meredith started the bath water. For all the things he did right, he couldn't feed her or bathe her. She preened Janie's hair with dandruff shampoo, spraying her and drying her off. The comb caught most of the dead skin on her head. She blow-dried it to keep her hair from freezing.

"We do under-over," she laced the skates, "keep practicing and you'll be teaching your classmates soon."

“They feel tight.”

“You want them a little tight, sweetie. So you don’t wiggle in them.”

“I thought we always get bigger shoes.”

“Not for skates. You don’t grow into these.”

“Nice and tight,” she backpedalled, “they don’t hurt do they?”

“No.”

“They don’t pinch? Not cutting off circulation?”

“Circle-ation?”

“Your blood needs to move all around your body for you to be healthy. So it circulates.”

She rented a cart along with the ice-skates. It was Janie’s first time and Meredith was worried about Janie’s center of balance with her weight.

Hand in hand, they wobbled onto the ice ribbon and made their way out into the stream. Meredith wavered and swooned nausea. It was instinctual, she remembered, just keep moving. Janie shuffled her feet in little steps, leaning onto the box support like a walker, her gloves gripping the plastic handles. Deep blue slices lined the pathway below her feet. Janie giggled, her eyes wide with excitement. The path twisted past their sightlines. Meredith’s churning intestines subsided when she focused on Janie not slipping. The ribbon seemed to be leading somewhere other than back to the starting point. Janie glanced around at passing skaters, veering only slightly. Meredith’s concerns for safety melted down to a more perilous thought, watching her daughter roll her cart

down the bright aisle, shopping for a more solid mother as Meredith often had in smoky roller rinks.

The zamboni resurfaced the ice, smoothing the imperfections. Janie and Meredith sipped hot cocoa on a bench on the edge of the rink.

They hobbled over to the door to the ribbon and Janie hopped ahead.

“Don’t forget your walker, baby.”

“Mom,” she extended the syllables with mortification, “the other girls don’t need them.”

“The other girls aren’t my daughter.”

“Can’t we try it? I’ll hold on and go slow.”

“Okay, remember, if you slip...”

“Brace with my hands. Daddy told me.”

They locked palms and stepped out, Meredith’s force coasting them along. They went halfway around until Meredith’s ankles ached and swelled. She led them to the rink edge. Meredith stood on her toes.

Janie was treading ice in front of her. Meredith stood on her toes and watched cautiously. “Can we go yet?”

“Not yet. Mommy’s feet are killing her. Not since she was pregnant with you.”

A father and his pre-teen daughter skidded forward and slammed into the edge, laughing maniacally.

“I’m sorry.”

“No it’s fine,” Meredith leaned against the edge, “it’s dangerous business.”

“Hey, you wouldn’t mind taking our picture, would you?” he handed her his camera.

They moved out from the edge and somehow stood on the ice, their backs to the Willis Tower. She snapped a few, and they checked them, thanking her and skating off. She clasped Janie’s hand and started back on the course.

She always thought it a convenience she didn’t know the exact identity of her father; at least she didn’t have to lose somebody later on. Living with her mother’s friends, she was always curious how they met such toothless and valueless companions. Still, she’d develop a fondness for them; seemingly, at the moment Meredith began making connections, they’d leave the man she was supposing to be her father. “Can’t trust ‘em,” she’d say, with vague promise that she’d found something better. They’d over-pack their tiny Mazda, barely passing smog, and drive off to another paternal pasture.

“I’m going to try it.” Janie announced. She let go of her hand and glided forward, steady and confident.

“No. Janie, come back.” But she seemed to increase speed.

Meredith swept her arms out and tried to rush forward. On her second stride, her toe stuck in the ice. To counteract the face-plant, she swung backwards.

Meredith propped her head on the couch back, with an ice pack bracing her brainstem. She didn’t think it was a concussion, and her nausea predated her fall. Her vision had fizzled and dissolved; she felt outside herself more than she already did that

day. The man and daughter she had photographed propped her up, Janie staring on with uncertainty. They drove home in the cab, and Meredith hardly recognized them both. She had transferred bodies and this earmuffed pudgy girl she sat beside wasn't her daughter. Was she babysitting, or had she kidnapped this girl? She wasn't shopping for a child but the girl seemed to know her name.

She and Janie ate their microwave dinners, the “nukers” as Barbara had calls them before Janie fell asleep curled up in front of the TV.

She heard a missed call sound, then a voicemail ding. Unknown seemed to have left a message. Meredith dialed and awaited the message amidst a scratchy silence. She recognized the voice and her stomach cramped. She hadn't called in years.

The voice coughed a flat timbre with a slight pathetic undertone. Her mother had found her. She wasn't discomposed, but her message was cryptic in a way Meredith suspected had been calculated. Something about heart disease. Meredith tried hard not to take it in. Some surgery. Planned surgeries. Failed surgeries. Her mother left a number that she ignored, and then a dead line.

Meredith carried them both to bed where she slumped into sleep before they had hit the pillow.

Cold sweat and chills woke Meredith from her sleep. Her eyes were blurry. She was starving, shaking, and Janie was no longer in her bed. She got up to check on her, half-expecting Janie to be scouring for a late-night snack. Meredith rose to weak legs.

She stumbled out into the kitchen, but Janie wasn't there. Her legs buckled underneath her. She heard a toilet flush.

Meredith was on the floor, dry heaving, in the grips of centrifuge. Was it listeria, she tried to reason the cause, some food poisoning? The steel and marble kitchen churned. She saw herself outside herself, Meredith directing her with a megaphone. Barbara crawled like a toddler on her stumps, painting a fresh layer of glycerin on Meredith's balloon belly, browned and herb encrusted as a roast turkey. James and his father wore surgical masks, each holding a speculum. Her mother's cigarette smoke pooled in the shadows of the set. Janie repositioned the box lighting, then the surgical light, then dimmed the kitchen lights. She held up a light meter before conferring silently with Meredith's mother in the corner. Anthony snapped flash photos. Meredith reached for Janie, who leaned on a craft services table of freshly threshed wheat and barley stalks. She called out voicelessly to Janie. James squeezed her hand and she felt a rush of comfort and euphoria. His eyes smiled beneath the mask. Her whole body convulsed as she pushed. Janie ran from the kitchen, calling paramedics and speaking in fits and starts "Mommy needs help." Meredith pushed and convulsed. "She isn't talking...and she's shaking." Her daughter cried into the phone. She felt a squeeze at her hand and looked back to James. "You did it, baby." He said, wrapping a towel around a plate and handing it to her. She peeked inside to see an immaculately manicured bacon cheeseburger.

The doorbell rang, she was certain. Meredith tried to stand, nervous, as they weren't expecting anybody in the middle of the night. She fell onto the tiles and Janie ran to answer the door. A man's voice asked Janie questions, and then she let him in. The

man came in and prodded her, touched her face, looked into her eyes, before she lost consciousness.

She heard Janie's voice as she came to, in a bright room. She was singing. Meredith felt somebody petting her head. She opened her dry eyes to a hospital room.

Between the sterile scent of linen and soap, Meredith recalled the smell of Barbara's necrotic feet wafted with a fermented sweetness, like sun-parched watermelon. Even after both legs were gone, it lingered slightly under her purpling fingertips.

Janie grabbed her hand, screaming "Mommy", to which Meredith smiled, knowing immediately Janie was okay.

She turned and winced when James cupped her head to readjust her posture. But her body relaxed, and she savored the comfort. Henry came in with coffee, amazed she was awake.

"We were at dinner when the hospital called," his father said as James handed her water with a straw.

"I guess you were still listed as my emergency contact," the water softened her dry throat, "but how did I get here?"

"Janie called. I'd gone through emergency protocol with her."

Henry had come to visit often when James' mother was dying; even then, he could only be the father to an adult son, cook them pasta with sauce from a can. Meredith's support was constantly focused on James; he'd needed so much during his

mother's death, more than she was prepared for. Nearly any comment sent him to bed for a day, rendering Meredith a single mother of two children. She could feel how his opinion of his mother, and himself, their cowardice in facing this, deteriorated even as his love for her remained.

Meredith couldn't remember the last time she had stopped. Her muscles ached. She was too weak to care for embarrassment, to counteract vulnerability.

"I can't believe you're here."

"You're her mother," James spoke, "I was worried."

Henry placed his hand on James' shoulder, "we didn't think twice. You hadn't hesitated for Barb."

She grabbed Henry's other wrinkled palm. He was further removed from James, making his affection consequently easier to accept. She saw the charts at the foot of her bed.

"What..."

"You tested positive for ergot poisoning." James laughed incredulously

"Ergot? Like the witch trials?"

"It was your migraine medication. You must be the first person in a century"

They laughed with each other at the absurdity.

"They had to put you on a glucose drip," Henry explained, "Your blood sugar contributed to it."

“And whatever else you were on,” James said, before Henry scolded him. But she knew he was right. She saw concern in his eyes, not judgment. The effects of the icy fissure seemed clearer.

“Janie can’t lose you now, is what he’s trying to say.”

She’d taken a hoard of Percocet that stopped her heart in her sleep. By the time she died, they were nearly separated. There was no room for sex in mourning, none for movement, nor petty grievances, vacation, or any furtive escape. James spent less and less time in their bed, until he would make the couch every night before going to sleep. Meredith could no longer look at him without swelling from resentment, for the time lost, his job lost in the process. She assumed he could no longer look at her without feeling his debt to her, without taking stake in every crease in her skin, however erroneous his claims. None of it was his fault, a fact that offered little to console her. The assumptions bore into her the weight of a cosmic joke; if she was so much better than James, stronger, smarter than he was, why spend so much time on somebody she devalued?

He was a father. Meredith gave her the other parts. But Janie needed both. Alone in the raised hospital bed, with her ex-husband at her side. She realized she hadn’t touched him in five years. Meredith knew she loved James and they should never be together; these thoughts, now mutually exclusive made his presence welcome, desirable even.

She woke up in the bed again. Janie was snuggled on Henry’s lap, both snoring softly, draped with the hospital’s child sized fleece blankets. James was still there,

flipping through a home and garden magazine. She watched his eyes for a few moments, until he looked up to see her awake. He mouthed 'hi' and she responded with a circle wave. He walked toward her and she whispered "is there any food?"

"You slept through dinner. But there's a vending machine."

"Better than nothing."

"Want me to get you something?"

"Mind if I come? I need to stretch my legs." James looked out toward the nurses.

"Don't worry. It'll be fine."

She rolled the IV down the gleaming white track of hall. His arm on her shoulder to stabilize her.

They reached the machine. She unwrapped a Milky Way and split it in two and handed him a half. He bought a bag of trail mix for her to have later.

"I try never to eat this shit. Especially after what it did to your mom."

"Yeah," he chewed and sighed, before grinning, "I should blame you for making this shit look so good in the commercials." She elbowed him in the shoulder. "But really, she was an adult who treated her body like a child. She should have known better."

Meredith looked down to the bar. "Both ends should split open evenly, and always on a surface without any hands. It has to look like it just magically opens, like a door, and nothing should fall out except the caramel. It needs to stretch out between them."

She crumpled the wrapper. James put her hand on his shoulder for support, which she let slide off his shoulder. She clutched her IV with both hands, and they headed back to her room, shuffling down the florescent halls.

A Last Minute Trip

Thanks again for coming on such short notice (I know I can always depend on you). Karen & I will return from vacation on the 19th. We'll be flying into Great Falls on a redeye, and have a car take us from there.

So, Bob & Janine were going on this cruise, but they had to cancel last minute (Karen heard mention of a counseling appt. over the phone). They'd tried Todd & Shanisse, but they were already on a trip (haha). We jumped at the opportunity, esp. since my boss is out this weekend (hey, free break, right?). The tickets would have been worthless otherwise (really was very generous of them). Plus, some sun during February?! It was a no-brainer. I sent Bob a Thank You E-mail but I haven't heard back (unresponsive to work e-mail). I hope he saw it.

Anywho, we couldn't get Flora so late, and Karen's niece Janette is MIA. I immediately thought of you. I felt it might be nice to get some time to yourself, regroup without Lynn breathing down your neck. I still don't get why you haven't found a new place (what's the wait?). I'll keep saying it: there's always a room waiting for you. I only have one little sister left. I've got to take care of you.

Here's a few guidelines while we're away:

1. The Family

a. Upon arrival

i. Flora set Mallory and Jason up for the first 1/2 of the day. They've been bathed, fed, changed, clothed and napped. They'll just need a walk.

1. Their jackets and sweaters are hanging by the door (next to ours). We've made them "free-roaming" (no leashes here). They've trained themselves to stay within allotted boundaries (shouldn't be a problem).
2. If they start shivering (not "excited" shivering) on the walk, bring them back in because it means they are too cold.

b. Feeding

i. You'll notice some new appliances, (ie: toaster, blender, juicer, etc.) which we had to replace. We only have the manual can opener for now.

1. They get fed every three or four hours (try to stay on top of that).
2. If you need to cook, dishes are below the sink, utensils in the drawers, and knives are locked in the kitchen cabinet (check housekeys).

c. First Aid

- i. Mallory has been soiling herself whenever we raise our voices. So, keep the TV volume to a minimum (after a game, the living room smells like a kennel) and speak in soft tones as often as possible. Janette was very helpful with that suggestion. If you have to yell (it's okay, we all do it), make sure to change her diaper afterwards or she'll get a rash on her haunches, which she'll scrape along the front yard (if you let her).

2. Patio:

a. Snow:

- i. You might have to shovel the front patio before coming in (do so *after* the dogs have done their business, to cover the yellow marks).
- ii. Boil a pot of water every morning and pour it on the cracks of the front, side, and rear doors. Turn up the heat to keep the frost off the windows.

b. Lights:

- i. Leave the porch light on so that the neighbors know you've arrived. Between Sandy and Janette, we need to be cautious.

3. The Bed:

- a. Janette kept the room pristine, though you'll find her sleeping bag and boxes in the corner. You can sleep in Sandy's old bed (can't let go of her shotglass collection), which we've made up for you or,

b. You can sleep in our bed. It's a King (very roomy).

4. The furniture

a. Karen likes to keep her furniture immaculate (like mom). So, "keep your tush on the plastic, please" (remember that?).

5. The Bathroom

a. We haven't been able to fix the toilet since Sandy broke it (always heavy-handed with the flush). So, if you must use the guest bathroom, add water to the top part of the bowl. For your sake, I wouldn't move the bathmat.

b. We're still replacing the guest bathtub (the porcelain was stained). You can shower in our bathroom (we installed shower heads overhead!)

6. TV

a. The new system is hard to work. Karen felt guilty after they were stolen them, so she let me splurge. The surround sound consul is tricky so it's best not to touch it.

7. Telephone:

a. You can make outgoing calls, but please no long distance (we check the bill).

b. If Janette calls, please answer the phone (so she knows somebody's there) and after you hang up, call the police (parole would like to know).

Otherwise, let the house calls go to voicemail (we like to bet on how many we'll have).

8. Fax

- a. Incoming faxes are fine, but please keep outgoing to a minimum. Feel free to scan your resumè into the computer to save time and paper (I can proofread it later). You'll need the instructions, (duck taped to the scanner).

9. Internet:

- a. You can use the new desktop for internet, but please keep it PG (Labiablozenge.com was on our browsing history for a month after the webcam).

10. Front Door:

- a. There's usually some mailman coming with Karen's online purchases. On the off-chance that it's Janette, call the police.

Thanks again, Ginny. It's been forever since we've gotten a vacation. I admire you sometimes; the mobility, being able to pick up, move on, open up to new partners, shake off your problems (I'm in awe, really).

I miss having a sister in the house. It makes me feel good, opening our house to you (maybe sometime we can be there for it). But it'll be productive to get you-time (hard on valentines, I know). Maybe give you a chance to practice for one of your own (I still think Sandy could have handled it). Some time to focus on your graphics, devote yourself to clients. I hope we get to talk, after our trip.

Your Brother

Pile-Up

Samsara revolved with the light morning breeze, forearms tensing with the anticipated weight of poi handles in her palms. She swooped on her toes, high then low to the ground, her arms reaching out, alternating between an inflated paisley skirt and a whirling auburn canopy of hair. Both feet propelled her, maintaining, on an uneven lawn, precise balance and momentum. Christa watched from the porch, musing she might never stop, eventually levitating past view. She fixed on her friend Sammy as a point of reference to keep the Tree pose steady. The chicken coop and the barn were her respective peripheries.

Shiva lay in the grass, his deep chestnut coat shining in the sun, head between his paws as he licked his anus. He stopped suddenly and sniffed at the air, before sneezing and sauntering towards Samsara. Christa's right foot rooted her to the thick plywood beneath. She inhaled, wondering if they could cancel dinner tonight, before exhaling a sigh. Her excuses were thinning, which her mother knew, and she didn't need to hear the confronting queries she wouldn't make.

Samsara swung down and retrieved her practice poi, two rainbow stockings weighted with rusty stress balls which, when put into motion, chimed in discord. Were it not for the stocking laced between her knuckles, Christa would have thought the poi were an extension of her arms, swirling with seamless regulation.

Christa thought to herself that Sammy and Blake might need to stay another night. Or at least they'd like to. A full night's sleep, then start the journey home tomorrow. Her old friends had begun living too far away and her mother too close. She couldn't afford any less time with them.

Moving from her pose, Christa rested on the porch banister and nipped white tea from a tin cup. Even after three years of renting the one-acre property, rural life had a way of making each day feel crisp. The property had a small, two level shack, a barn for storage, and a cabin. They had needed the space for crops. Soon they needed the space for themselves, Bethany putting an addition onto the one bedroom cabin for laundry and office. The upkeep grew in tandem. Simply today, there was dusting, laundry, gardening, roosting, cooking (lunch, then dinner), hiding scales, locking the curing room, shoveling cinders, and chopping wood; there were old plants to pull-up: mustard, artichoke, kale, rhubarb, sugar snap peas. There was the new planting to be done: peppers, tomatoes, watermelons, cantaloupe, collards, eggplants, pumpkins, okra, southern peas; all needed to be complete before her mother arrived. She walked inside to start sweeping.

Christa might have been a clean child were it not for her parents. It had taken years of wading in a pond of clothes, loose paper, and stuffed animals for her to see the buildup of byproduct within the Victorian home, its narrow halls and corners accumulating objects like Vesuvian ash. She slept over at Sammy's house in fifth grade, her first overnight, surprised to find her absentminded and slack parents, while unable to find their keys or remember Sammy's whereabouts, maintained a structured household. Its' effortless veil veiled a mystery; the immaculate floors and tranquil, receptive chairs

and couches never bore traces of the parents or cleaners who diligently oversaw the maintenance. Just like her parents, they seemed to do nothing, yet their house's messes always vanished by the next morning.

"Where the fuck is the dustpan," Christa cried out to an unresponsive room, "Beth."

She clambered across the main cabin, ruffling cupboards and seat cushions in her wake.

Bethany came to the back porch, stamping the soil from her shoes and wiping her face with a dirty purple bandana around her neck.

"I don't know."

Christa disliked this response, delivered in a tone both dismissive and carefree. Shannon grabbed a mason jar of sun tea and slurped. "Did you check the supply closet?"

"I tried, but I didn't want to turn the light on."

"Are they still asleep?"

"Blake is, Sammy's spinning out front." She swept her dreadlocks from her thin neck and tied them back. "I've got to get this dust or you know we'll just end up tracking it around."

Bethany busied herself silently, spreading spoonfuls of jam and almond butter on figs. "Is there a sheet of paper? Maybe you could scoop it up," she obliged calmly.

"I guess," Christa was turning over piles of linen, "but should I have to?"

Bethany waited patiently, chewing her food, hesitating to answer the rhetorical question.

“I guess not.” She left the room with a fistful of figs to sit on the back porch.

Christa looked to a pile in the corner. She had seen the dustpan only last night. Blake and Samsara’s worn backpacks and fire spinning gear occupied the space. It might take an hour to find something at the old Victorian. She knelt down with a heavy breath, blood pressure pounding her temples, savoring the gut-feeling of recovery when she picked up a satchel, finding her bright yellow, tin dustpan lying beneath.

She felt a draft from the door, muffled, creaking footsteps followed by a crack from the doorway that startled her. Blake yawned, scratching his head, unwashed hair jutting like wheat stalks.

“Good morning,” she said with compensatory exuberance.

His response mirrored hers, in a grateful, exhausted tone.

“How was the futon?”

“So much better than wet ground. Thank you.”

“Good. Yeah I thought so.” Her mother had complained almost every morning that at least her bed had her groove imprint already set in. “Beth and I slept on it for years and it always served us well.”

“Yeah,” Blake cooed, “it was so nice of you two to let us stay.”

“Anytime. Seriously, anytime. We love guests.”

“We appreciated it. Festival camping is the worst. You barely get to enjoy the music.”

“Happy to oblige some glamping,” they laughed wearily.

“Have you showered yet?” he pointed to the bathroom.

“No, but you go.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, for sure. I’ve got to start breakfast. How do buckwheat pancakes sound?”

She’d replace the condensed milk with coconut milk, to keep it vegan for the guests. Christa noticed increasingly these were the sorts of details she remembered about her friends, regarded as important, while calling on birthdays or times of stress or joy eluded her. And yet, in close company, she was awash in superabundance of compassion; a yearning for close contact, to touch friends to assure her they weren’t apparitions. She seemed to always feel connection relative to proximity.

She looked out the window to Beth, a cup of coffee in her stained garden gloves, surveying the half-acre of garden plots. She sipped coffee beneath a straw sun hat she’d had since her early composting attempts at her Davis Co-op. Christa loved her full, compact lips, and told her on their second date that she had fantastic lips, for a white girl, and was an even better kisser for a Protestant. I should have been a preacher’s son, Beth responded, leaning in, barely askew teeth peeking from beneath skilled lips. Christa soon discovered it wasn’t a joke: Beth had been born genderqueer, of a Jewish mother who converted for her pastor father.

She reached into the bucket of fertilizer and blended her concoction into a wheelbarrow of soil and compost. Beth’s manure hasn’t been selling as well. It was only supplementary income until Arcata Organics let her go at the beginning of the summer. She tried to sell it to the growers for whom she’d taken on consulting jobs, but they tended not to use it as much during the upcoming indoor growing season.

Samsara shuffled through the cabin door, slick and flushed. Christa filled a glass from the kitchen faucet.

“You’re so obliging,” she offered. Samsara emptied the glass and handed it back.

“Ohmygod that was perfect,” she moaned.

“I could tell you needed it.”

Bethany came in from the garden plots, in a ribbed tank top and Dickies.

“Morning,” she crooned. Beth walked to the coffee pot. Christa filled another glass and handed it to Beth. She did the same when Beth would come in from the garden and search the fridge for beer.

“I’m sorry about that glass last night.”

“Hey, they’re only things,” Beth shrugged.

“No worries. It was just a mason jar.”

The wax of the oak leaves refracted the sunlight as candles. Christa and Bethany sat with their guests, devouring breakfast in a mutual silence that felt ceremonial. Bethany put down her clean plate, lit a Gandalf pipe and passed it to Blake and Samsara on the couch. Light shafts reached through the smoke.

“So, when do you think you’ll be hitting the road?” Bethany asked.

Samsara coughed, “we thought we might leave around noon or so,” offering the pipe to Christa, who passed it to Beth. She didn’t like getting high before seeing her mom.

“Cool,” Bethany nodded, laconic. Beth placed a handful of green nuggets onto the scale and tipped it into a canning jar, handing the glass to Blake. She picked up the bowl and poked at the ash in it, before rising to pack another. She left her dirty plate on the coffee table.

“There’s no rush.”

“Yeah, same here. I’ve got the sub covering my classes for another three days. So the studio’s covered. And I told Nike I’d be out for two weeks.”

“What about you Blake?”

“We’re still on break.”

Christa stared into the corner of the cabin, at a repurposed table, draped in a yellow-orange sari, of her mother’s boxes. Madeline had stayed with them when she moved to Eureka a year prior.

“If you need to stay another night, the bed’s open.”

Bethany’s brow furrowed.

“As long as we’re not getting in the way,” Blake started.

Bethany picked her dry cuticles. “There’s dinner with your mom later.”

“Maybe we should leave today, Blake.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I just have a few things to do. She won’t mind.”

“You could help me in the garden,” Bethany’s tone perked up, “pull up some roots?”

“Maybe we’ll find a semi-automatic this time,” Blake smiled at Christa. For their High School community service, they had re-tilled the garden along San Pablo and Grand

Ave, unearthing a Colt pistol. Christa suggested they turn it in the police but Blake suggested it was antiquated and it might be worth something or, at best, was a replica. The pawn clerk at the scratched lucite window commended them for their judgment, and said he was obligated to turn it over to the authorities. They passed by a few weeks later to see the polished firearm on display.

The clouds settled in the ceiling. Christa needed a list on these days off when she'd wait to see her mother. The exasperation could more easily pass as exhaustion on work nights, a pared evening as planning for an early morning, a demonstrative foray. She tore a scrap from Beth's inventory sheet and scrawled her days' ambitions. She stepped out into back yard, gripping a bucket and trowel to dig up the potatoes.

The high angled afternoon rays heated a manure pile next to their bedroom. Their property was roughly an acre, so why the chicken coop needed to be a few yards from their bedroom, she'd never be able to reason. If foxes or coyotes, or worse Shiva, get the chickens, Bethany said, we'd never be able to hear it. Scratching and cooing helped wrestle them to sleep, while the rooster howl and mealy scent of chicken shit nudged them awake. Beth was right: Christa hardly noticed it now. Even as the morning sun intensified the smell.

Bethany and Blake wedged a shovel beneath a desiccated artichoke stalk. Christa watched them from the back porch as she brushed dirt from their potatoes. She walked inside to wash them off and peel them for dinner.

Beth was pitching her self-tilling compost bin to Blake, a solar powered rotary she discussed endlessly after developing it in a sustainable business class she later dropped.

The rusty peeler creaked underneath the pressure of her hand. She hadn't seen her mother in a few months, certainly not since she had returned from Arkansas. Her mother could afford to pay for a ticket to the funeral. The peeler snapped.

She went to the barn where they stored their excesses. Christa went out to the drying room. Pungent skunk hung in the room, even with the fans. In the past year, she had minimized the amount of time in the gardens, particularly the lower garden, where Beth's clients' cannabis was cultivated. Christa used to help trim the new harvest, until the last year she began to develop a rash from the resin. She hadn't so much as touched a leaf since then.

She reached for the kitchen boxes in the back, and removed a fan resting atop it. A tumbleweed clump lay behind the box. She lifted it out. The wicker nest was woven from hay, loose burlap and frayed thread. Flying birds would make a nest out of anything. Brood parasites, her ex Caroline told her on a hike at Tilden. She cupped the wicker bowl in her hand, with four burst brown and black speckled eggs beside a white and blue speckled egg. But some were pickier than others. Some squatted in abandoned ones. Christa pointed to the imposter egg. Cuckoo's she said. They laughed, and Christa imagined the bird cuckolding the robin for its nest. She wanted to share the joke. But she didn't say it aloud.

She slumped onto the couch in the living room, peeling, with a bowl in her lap. Her eyes wandered.

She surveyed their cabin: the old loft where they stored cans, dried herbs, bleach, ammonia, vinegar. The peeling redwood walls plastered with old pictures of friends. The

wooden counter, with the morning's coffee mugs, glass pipes, and work schedules scattered across. Next to the toaster laid a toothbrush, leaning against a soiled trowel, adjacent to a package of detergent and bug spray, nestled beside a bowl of apples.

Pictures of Beth's family lay atop an end table, in front of a slender, golden opium pipe. Christa's father had been a merchant marine. He'd said he'd tried opium once, in Malaysia, but never again. Got too stuck in his body, didn't care about nothing. But he'd loved antiques, and the opium pipe became another quest of his. He never let her mom use it, never used it himself, but kept it on a shelf like a trophy.

Above it, hung a small pair of ice-cube tongs, a decadent relic. When her grandmother died, her mom found ten of them. She finally convinced Christa into submission to take it. She had too many as it was; she hadn't even gotten to the hoard of sugar spoons.

On the floor, she saw the red and blue prayer rug, its mihrab design pointed to their bedroom. Her father had used it on previous pilgrimages. He gave it to her after he "upgraded" on the first trip to Mecca with his new wife Malia. They placed it in the kitchen awhile, but kept tripping over it, so they set it beside the fireplace to catch cinders.

She looked to the desk, to the railroad tie doorstep her friend had given them. Tamar had given her the doorstep, railroad ties welded onto a horseshoe. She made junk art. Tamar stayed in Christa's co-op her senior year, an Ohio native that and a boxcar berth train hopper. She had trimmed for Beth for three years. Two years prior, she must

have missed a connection, and was caught beneath the tracks. They kept it on the desk, sticking bills between the crooked blades of iron.

Beside it, stood a wrought iron gold desk lamp green glass shade. It was her father's Sam Spade office lamp. He managed a Safeway when she was an adolescent, keeping two identical lamps on his home and work offices. He'd rest his head in his hand, leaning between the lamplight and her eyes, casting a deceptive halo around his head. Her mother kept this lamp, saying that if he wanted it, he'd have to fly out from Arkansas to get it.

A bamboo backscratcher from Jamaica poked out from a pen cup. Her father had sent it as a gift from he and Malia's honeymoon. "For our honeymoon", her mother orated, waving the extended arm in the air in the air, "He only took me for a weekend in Sausalito."

On the desk lay a silver, embossed Nation of Islam Lighter. When her parents met in 1981, her father was a heavy smoker. He taught gardening for the Black Panthers, where he met her mother, who had been a Digger in San Francisco. He started smoking again during her parent's separation in middle school. He liked the lighter, he said looking at it made it easier to quit. Allah's always watching, he'd smile and gnaw on unlit his cigar.

A Mandala book Kelly forgot the night she left, after having stayed in the back cabin for a week. Christa had been meaning to look at it, and never managed to return it. Christa had told her she couldn't find it when she knew it was in the corner, with Kelly's name in it.

A lightweight, gold-sprayed metal fro-pick her dad got in the 70's. It had an engraving of a flaming bee with horns and pitchfork, beneath the letters "Fly As Hell". Christa used to wear it to high school. She couldn't get rid of it after he moved to work for Tyson's Halal, so she started using it to help pull wool for her friend Matt, a shepherd who made them into yarn for pile carpets or clothing.

Beside the desk, between a creased lazy boy chair, underneath the sari, laid her mother's boxes. One was large, its content listings crossed out multiple times, the most recent one listed as "Memories"; Christa kept this sealed. The other box Christa had begun to rummage through. One in her mother's horrid collection of transparent glass ashtrays peeked out. She only bought ashtrays with rivets, as she was in the habit of leaving cigarette's burning. Then there was the porcelain elephant collection. She would pick her up from daycare, and they'd drive to antique shops, on weekend garage sales, to collect the figurines. Her mom had left these specifically for Christa.

At the bottom of the box, Christa found a blue and green dashiki. Her mother shipped the blouse out to Eugene in Christa's first semester. The accompanying note read: "Closed on the Magnolia house. Found an apartment. Found something your dad gave me I didn't donate, pawn or burn. I always hated it; it made me feel like Idi Amin's concubine." Why had she even kept it?

Bethany was gone by the time the sun-drown beneath the trees and the moon was transparent beside it. While Christa cooked dinner, Bethany left to pick up her mother. She never drove, and telecommuted to work as a customer service dispatcher for Abbott's

medical devices program. Her eyes were beginning to frost over with a cataract film that had negated her license.

The murmur of idle conversation poured through the open door. “Helloo,” her mother cooed out a warning, before emerging from the door, her long gray hair tucked into a wool jacket. Christa came in for a shallow embrace, enough to inhale the pungent nicotine smoke, rose water, and maple-must of the decaying matter inhabiting her cottage. Her mother’s arms held on for longer as Christa turned back to the kitchen. Beth took her coat and hung it on the rococo rack by the window. Christa added more water to the pot of artichokes.

“Take a seat, mom,” Christa gestured to the couch.

She glanced to the seat, with a look as compulsory as the gesture. “Thanks, Chris.” She sauntered through the room, looking down at corners. Christa had swept specifically to negate any potential comments.

“Do you need help with anything?”

“I don’t think so, but thanks.” Her mother nodded and pattered slowly across the room through the exhibits.

Dinner simmered within the cabin.

The cat jumped on the counter and scraped next to the bowl.

“Did you forget to feed her?”

“Him. Agni” she corrected, “I was just about to.”

“Where’s the food?”

Christa pointed to the bag leaning against the refrigerator.

“Have you found any kittens yet?”

“No, but there’s still the two others under the house. We feed them at night, when they’re brave enough to come out.”

“You just collect cats, don’t you?”

“We can’t help it.”

“Sure you can. Just stop feeding them.”

“Yes, Mom, always the animal lover.”

“We had enough without animals to keep fed,” she pet Agni while he gorged and he purred. “That’s why I stopped giving milk to that stray we used to have.”

She wished her mother would stop.

“You’d make trilling sounds as you fell asleep. Or when you were sick, like with strep. You’d make those groaning sounds unconsciously like a purr.”

“I still do it. It’s self-soothing. Probably why they do it.”

Blake emerged from outside. “We’ll have a good fire for later. Good kindling’s the upside to the droughts, I guess.”

Her mom turned her head as if ambushed. “Oh, hello.” She stood awkwardly.

“Hi Madeleine.” He went to hug her and she jutted an open hand in response. She shook it with both hands, rubbing her palms. “It’s been so many years.”

“Yes, it has,” she was vaguely amiable and terse, looking for source clues, Christa could tell.

“It’s Blake. Remember, from Christa’s high school.”

“Oh yes, Blake,” she heightened his phrase to feign recollection, “from high school.”

They stood silently, Blake grinning. “How’ve you been?”

“I’m doing well. I haven’t seen Christa in months so it’ll be nice to have this time to talk.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it.”

Samsara emerged from the door, her orange hair stringy and drying, “It’s been forever,” she went to embrace Madeleine, who flinched and recoiled in the embrace. “I’m so happy Christa invited you. I’m so used to seeing you at the Magnolia house.”

“Yes, I haven’t seen you since you helped her move up here,” she stood hands to her sides, “was that when you were dating?”

Samsara looked confused and Christa interjected from the kitchen, “Mom, we never dated.” She stirred the frying zucchini vigorously. They had sex the night before that, while Beth had been up in Arcata, unpacking their first boxes in the farmhouse when it was still a one-room cabin.

She plated the food and Beth escorted them to the table.

Her mother had always been nervous eating in front of strangers. Christa estimated this. The plates and forks scraped. Christa addressed Blake and Samsara after a few bites.

“When are you two coming back down?”

“In another month,” Blake swallowed and responded, “for my parents’ anniversary.”

“That’s so sweet,” Beth smiled, “how long?”

“Forty years,” everybody eyes widened but Madeleine’s, who sat disassembling her chicken with sustained focus.

“I thought my parents’ 30th was a big deal,” Beth said.

“This is a wonderful dinner, honey. I could grow a meal but still can’t prepare one,” she sipped her wine, “your father was the cook.”

“That’s where Christa got it from,” Beth winked.

“I thought breakfast yesterday was pretty good,” Blake said, “you made that, right?”

“Yeah, the Jewish Continental breakfast. That’s my one-trick. Anything after noon, the pan starts smoking before I even start.”

They let out a polite chuckle.

“I’ll bet,” Madeleine punctuated, “you do the dishes, right?”

Beth’s mouth was full.

“Most of the time,” Christa filled in.

“My dad did the dishes. There’d be some small tiff between him and my mom. He’d finish his drink and start scrubbing. There must have been some sort of arrangement. They never talked about it though. It was a different time. She was expected to do it all.” She looked to Christa.

Agni licked his maw and scraped at the list she’d drawn up earlier in the day, flinging it to the ground.

“So, Blake,” she spoke with a half mouthful, “You knew each other from High School?”

“You remember Blake. He took me to all my proms.”

“Was that when you were still...”

“I still am, Mom.”

“I mean, when you wanted to be...”

“No.”

“Your,” she rubbed her fingers in the air, “is it ‘beard’?” Blake smiled, which she commandeered as a sign of approval. “What do they call it for women?”

“No,” she pinched the stem away from the bottle, a trickles catching on the lip of the bottle. “The one glass was enough for me. Thank you,” she said glancing at the bowl. Her mother practiced temperance if only to display it in public.

“Was that before the cheerleader?”

“You remember her,” she was incredulous, “she only came by the house a few times.”

“Sure, I remember all of your girlfriends.”

“We were never dating, though.”

“Was that before or after Natalie?”

“Not sure.” It was during.

“Do you remember?” she pointed a fork of potato towards Samsara.

“I don’t. I mean, we didn’t meet until college, before she introduced me to Blake.” She leaned over and rested her drying hair on his shoulder. She squeezed his

thigh under the table. Christa had been brushing her teeth in the bathroom while Sammy was showering, her pale figure arched scrubbing the curly orange locks of hair. She spit, musing the toothpaste as suds down Sammy's hips as she guided her hips and cleaned her from behind.

“Sammy and I met on the newspaper, remember, Mom?”

“Arts and Culture”, she reminded Madeleine.

“I found some of those old articles the other day when I was cleaning.”

“From college?”

“High School,” her mother smiled, “you were such a good writer then.”

They finished dinner and sat around the wood-burning stove. Christa put on a percolator of decaf and Beth popped open another beer, handing one to Blake. Her mother cracked a window and lit a cigarette.

“Beth,” Christa poured her mother's cup, “did you turn the oven off?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember doing it?”

“Yeah, I remember turning the oven off. I'm the one with the memory.”

Her mother struck a look between the two of them. Christa handed her mother the cup.

“I could do some dishes if you want.”

“How was Arkansas?”

“It was hot.”

“You know what I mean,” Christa asked, “How was Malia holding up?”

“Always neurotic. She’d have chewed down to her palm if it weren’t for her nail polish. And it was that some neon pink, probably to match that drug store lipstick. She’s stuck on those colors.”

Smoke wisps rose from the ashtray. “I haven’t seen her since my graduation. How did she look?”

“She’s wearing less foundation. Her face looks less like cracked desert.”

“You know what I meant. How’s she feeling?”

“She seemed fine. No mascara streaks. No voice cracking. I’ve never seen her so relaxed.”

Sammy leaned down in consolation, “I can imagine it was a relief for her,”

“Good,” Christa mustered resigned smile. “I should give her a call.”

“She’s probably so busy with all the paperwork she wouldn’t even notice.”

Madeleine brought the ashtray to the counter top and ran her fingers along the fruit basket comprised of welded spoons and forks. “I like this here,” she tapped the unfinished silver.

“Isn’t that great?” Sammy said.

“Very clever,” Blake assented, “where did you get it?” he turned to Beth.

“She made it,” Christa nodded toward her mother, “she used to make a lot of them.” For a few years after her father left, her mother would spend nights crafting nests in front of the TV. She’d splay out whatever materials she was using that week across stacks of magazines on the coffee table. There was a nest of laquered cables for storing

wires, one of paperclips for office supplies, a nest of matches for cigarettes or lighters, a nest of keys or decopage eggshells.

“They’re very cute. You should sell them online”

Christa scoffed softly, enough for her mother to turn.

“No, these are just for loved ones.” For those few years, her friends all received her nests for every occasion.

She sipped from her cup and placed it with a clink onto the saucer. “So, when are you going to pick up those things Malia sent me?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.”

“Well, did you go through them?” she gestured to the box, “The elephants?”

“No, mom, I’ve been swamped.”

“With, um, work?” Christa resented the pause. “Work” equated to dollars, “career” to bigger dollars; if there’s no money, she liked to repeat, it’s just “occupation”.

“Yes, with work.”

“Oh good,” she puffed, “Well, I won’t take it until you get a chance to go through them.”

“I don’t know when I will.”

“Don’t worry. There’s no rush.”

“I don’t think I’ll get through it.”

“Too bad. They’re a complete collection. It’d be a whole organized display.” She pointed to the desk lamp, “and it would look great here.”

“I’m only holding onto them for you. You asked me to store them after our first load when you moved.”

“I’m not attached to them.” Put out her cigarette on the metal ashtray and placed the butt in her front pocket for later disposal. “You could give them to your friends.”

“Maybe we’ll take them tomorrow,” Blake suggested.

“You should. It would be great to know they’d be going to an appreciative home.”

“We have a lot of clutter already,” she smiled to Blake politely.

“I get that, dear. I’ve been having to purge myself.”

Christa’s face hardened.

“Which stuff?”

“Nothing too important: old clothes, tools, everything he’d left with Rhonda before he moved. Malia and the kids got most of his new things.”

“What about pictures?”

“I’ve been getting rid of them. Little by little.”

Samsara yawned and Blake’s feet twitched. Christa offered a weary smile and yawned back. “Stop it, you’re making me tired,” she turned to Beth, “maybe we should get going?”

Spring loaded, Beth walked to her shoes by the door.

“Are you sure you want to drive all the way to McKinleyville.”

“It’s okay,” Beth smiled, “It’s only a half-hour drive.”

“You know honey, why don’t I drive her back,” she seized the keys, recalling that Beth had a handful of drinks already. “It’s only fair, since you picked her up.”

“No need. I could take the bed for the night.”

Christa sucked her teeth and pointed to Samsara and Blake.

“The back cabin, then? I don’t mind roughing it.”

“Sorry, I’m storing a bunch of composting equipment right now,” Beth said.

“Well then, I should hit the bathroom before I go.” She walked toward their compost toilets and stopped. “No, I’ll hold it in, until I can get to a working bathroom.”

They listened to radio fuzz along the drive home, while her mother commented on the commercials, the insurance and lawyers exploiting fear. She wasn’t listening, but Christa was relieved for the lack of silence.

As Christa neared middle school, her parents seemed to have house-guests nearly every month. Her parents accommodated others’ emergencies, and particularly welcomed them amidst their own tensions. She’d stay away from her room, diligently studying in the small living room, supported between a stack of farmer’s almanacs/ Tribunes/ Black Panther Newsletters, and a tower of videocassettes. She had taken to sleeping over most nights a week at Sammy’s house. Maybe if she waited long enough she’d be able to look upon her personal landfill with new eyes. She hoped for this as vainly as she hoped for it to disappear. Christa resorted to colonizing corners of the house until bedtime, at which point she’d sneak into the dark room, lit only from the hall. Her eyes avoided the beetles and worms and mice in the piles, squirming in the moonlight. Inevitably, she was forced to dive into one of the piles for a field hockey or marching band uniform, sensing with dread the squishy rot in the middle.

“Can we ever have dinner at my place? It’s always at yours.”

“There’s no space there, Mom.” Christa tried not to imagine the narrow pathways parted between a sea of clutter, each corners packed with dank, imperceptible odors.

“Well, we should. It would be nice to host for once. In my home.”

“If there’s enough room, sure.”

“There is now.”

“I’ll bet,” Christa flicked her brows off once on the highway. “Is it that it’s too cluttered.”

“It’s cozy, bohemian. It’s fine. But we’re always there.”

“That’s the second time. What’s wrong with our place anyway?”

“Every time I look around, all I see are your father’s things. There’s nothing of mine there you’ve thought to display.

“Not the elephants again. I haven’t had time to go through them.”

“You’re busy, I know. But there’s always something. If it’s not a thing, it’s a person. Most of the times I come over I barely get to talk to you, without some layabout buffer in the way.”

“They’re our friends. They wanted to stay another night.”

“And I’m sure you didn’t put up a fuss. I’m sure Beth needs all the customers she can get, up here.”

“What are you saying?”

“You think I don’t know what’s going on down the hill? Or in that back cabin? It’s Humboldt, Christa. Of course you’re drying pot. That’s all it smells like this time of year.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You’re both so terrified, so shady that you make it too awkward to even mention. It’s legal, in case you forgot. I don’t care. Did you forget I grew hemp back when you were little, remember, between the tomato plants and the verbena.”

“No, I don’t remember. That’s just perfect. Just shove it in a corner and hope nobody notices.”

Static filled the remainder of the ride. The truck felt vast, even with her mother and her dog panting in the back cab. Though her mother had a car she offered Christa to drive her car, she was always getting rides from friends. Her mother owned a “Berkeley Single Passenger” car, she used to say, the vehicle people stuffed so thoroughly it obscured views and seating. Crafts and computer equipment overstuffed Madeleine’s car, whatever she had discovered to make her nests.

Christa pulled up to the duplex and helped her mother out of the car.

“You don’t even know,” her mother’s voice caught, clinging to the previous comment, “I went to stay with your Aunt because she was helping me find counseling. It’s all that shit. I’ve got...” her tone sharpened “it’s a problem, and I’m sick of it. I started cleaning house.”

“You’re lying.”

“Come on. Why would I?” she gestured to the door, “look for yourself.”

Christa felt a flicker of hope. She smothered it, too innately aware of the shame and disappointment her mother's promises culminated in. She'd believe it when she saw it.

"I trust you."

She looked to the door with an inviting glance, "You sure?"

"Another night."

She remembered the object her mother had promised, like a hostage.

"What's the deal with the secret surprise? Is it here?"

Her mother pursed her lips and her cheeks sagged.

"You want it?"

Christa nodded. She wrapped her sweater around herself and shivered overtly.

"Be right back."

She waited in the truck cabin. Her mother emerged from the cottage with apparently nothing. Christa met her mother at the porch steps.

"I can't find it right now. Why don't you turn that off and wait while I find it."

It could take an hour to find it, even if she thought she knew where. But an exhaustion had worn Christa down into a pathos, that she cared so desperately to bestow something unto her daughter, something radiant and melancholy Christa herself, in this moment, sought to rediscover and for which to reserve a place.

Christa walked through the front door. Two pillars of boxes lined the mudroom entry. She prepared the paths to narrow beyond this point, diverge into deer paths towards her mother's daily habits, the trails toward basic human needs.

The room opened up into a broad living space, as flat and barren as a midwestern tract. Nothing about it was temporary. The solid partners desk her mother had left shrouded in garages and storage units Christa's whole life planted itself in the corner, where the folding card-table home office might have been placed. In the other corner, a floor lamp sprouted beside a purple and green paisly armchair, which supported a small rococo end table. Christa took in the emptiness of the nearly unfurnished space. It didn't feel as a living room to her; there was no couch nor a coffee table, no hutch or displays. The ample void was not meant for guests. Christa hadn't seen her mother in this enclosure; it wasn't looming or festering with age; the room wasn't a breathing ecosystem, it's dense canopy threatening suffocation. It didn't bear the contents of her mother's preoccupations, or speak for her in ways she was incapable.

It was a room.

A proud glee filled Christa, a subtle shame overlaying it.

A framed photo sat on one end of the mantle, a stout scented candle and vase of long-stemmed matches on the other. The wicker frame was a part of her mom's childhood bed-set. There were so many coats of paint the weave had almost smoothed over. Her mother was well-fed, soft featured in a way Christa had never seen her. She leaned into Nathan's broad shoulder, her hand coaxed over his chest, front braids tied into a headband, clearly the very early 70's before her fluffy mane.

"Where did you get this?"

"He sent it to me years ago. Before he remarried."

"Did you just find it, when you went through everything?"

“No, I'd had it. I knew where it was.”

“I've never seen this.” They weren't a family that captured memories with photos. She had seen all of them as individuals, posing with her as an accessory, but rarely them together, and never alone with each other.

“Nobody sent me anything of his.”

“But you had a bunch of his things. And you gave them away.”

“They were more like my things.”

“I don't get it.”

“I'd kept them for so long, those things became mine. And I didn't want them anymore. They didn't serve me.”

“You're his ex-wife. He remarried and has another family,” it pinched her after she said it, her voice tinged with sympathy and curiosity as she asked them both, “what were you expecting?”

Her mother took the picture from Christa's hands and replaced it on the mantle.

“I've been trying to figure that one myself. I guess I was just expecting something new to me.”

The kettle's whistle sounded out louder. Her mother went to the kitchen and the cry sputtered out. There was a call from the kitchen, “you sure you don't want a cup?” Christa said no, heard a trickle and her mother returned with a steaming mug.

She walked to the end table and leafed through a palm-sized hardcover in a pink pastel dust jacket, the Rumi book that her Aunt Rhonda found at the Hallmark store some twenty years ago. “Sheba's Throne” was scrawled in arabesque letters: “Her palaces and

orchards, so many piles of dung,” she whispered to herself. Sammy would be spinning poi tonight, and Beth would likely be several beers deep by the time Christa came home and she hoped to catch them all before they went to sleep. She jangled her keys.

“What was it that you had for me?”

She placed the cup on the mantle and reached into her jacket pocket.

“I found this tucked into a ripped pair of gardening gloves.” Her mother produced Christa’s weathered trowel and shear set from her pocket, pink and purple, printed with ballooning daisies. Christa received it, and turned it over in her hands. They made their way out the door.

“Sure I can't get a cup?”

“No thanks mom. I don't want to keep our guests waiting.”

“No, I get it. You like keeping those people around.”

“What does ‘those’ mean?”

“The old friends, your teenage friends. You think they will be there for you in ten years? A year? Those relationships burn out, until you can't share anything but a bed and a joint.” Christa felt the cold touch return.

“Friends come and go. Family lasts.”

“Like a fucking brand.”

She looked like she wanted to slap her. “What was that?” Her face had hardened so viscerally Christa felt it herself.

“I loved him, you know,” her mother leaned on the second step.

“Me too.”

“I didn’t even love my dad. Only Nathan.”

“Me too, mom.”

“Of all the shit I junked, besides that picture” she looked into her hands, “it’s the letters I kept. I don’t care if they were corrupted. The words felt real then.”

She creaked up the tops steps of the cottage, wind chimes dangling and ringing, before straining the door shut.

Crickets trilled into the passenger seat, her car rooted in the driveway. Shiva stretched out along the back cabin, snoring softly. Christa stared at the clippers. They had come as a set: lacquered purple trowels, clogs, and mat. They had meant so much to her mother. She stared at them and felt nothing. She remembered nothing other than what she had been told: that these were her clippers and she used them for a time. It was the things she hadn't used, that weren't hers to use, that captured her memory and kept her.

Wind had begun to blow thick clouds past the red-crescent moon. Christa noticed a package tucked into the shears’ brittle, yellowed sheath. Seeds from her first plant. Her Dad and Mom chose her first plant: a bell pepper, hearty and easy maintenance, perfect at age four, when she could do little more than water.

Christa dropped them into the center console and they clattered in the crevice under the seat. She went to retrieve them but they were too far beyond her reach. A muscle stretched and she winced. She started the ignition and she backed out onto the road.

Her father lent her his peeling Mazda to her when she was seventeen. She took the opportunity to hotbox with the two friends, doing burn routes in the Berkeley and

Oakland hills. She left the windows open every night to air out the car. For about a month, a muddy sour odor stuck in her car. It was spring, so she knew it was likely morning dew soaking into mold. It continued, and she pinpointed it as dank ash droppings from pipes. During a drive, Blake dropped a roach under the front seat. They turned off the panel lights and looked for the ember under the seat. Blake reached down and plucked the hot mass, flinching before handing it to her then girlfriend Natalie, asking them to wait while she dug again. They turned the light back on to see her clutching a clump of sinewy parchment and feathers. The stray that her mom fed, she realized, had slipped into her car and placed an offering. She laughed to herself that she had neglected to receive the gift, and maybe that's why the car broke down a few months later.

She chewed her nail at a stoplight until reaching the satisfying snap. The clippers recalled, from under her seat, an old usage. Her father had described to her the concept of cellulose walls as the bones of the plant. She imagined each stalk as a house. The plants would cry out as their fibers snapped at her whim. Every time she clipped her plants, and heard the fracturing walls, she had apologized. Whatever religion her mother loosely subscribed to would make it into the penance, Lao-Tzu blending very well with Krishna and Buddha beneath a top layer of American Jesus. She knew she was reaping, like generations before her had done for necessity. It would grow back. A little trim is good for everybody, her parents would chorus.

A warm light covered the area near their house, fog thickening as she lumbered through the one-way road. She saw a glow at the consul, and heard a faint buzz from the

phone. There must be enough of a signal. It was probably Beth and she'd be home soon anyway.

Before the fenced property came into view, a gaggle of chickens trotted in the road. Shiva hopped out the back window. Christa pulled the emergency brake and left the car to wrangle the dog. He nipped at their tail feathers, but his pursuit hadn't caused their terror. A colicky wail came from the coop around the corner. Christa noticed smoke billow past the headlights and creeping from the slats in their fence. Another throng of chickens squawked and fluttered ecstatically from the driveway, Shiva appearing to smile with glee as he chased them down the road.