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Meg Walters March 15, 2019

A Series of Insignificant Happenings

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Abstract

A Series of Insignificant Happenings
By Meg Walters

This fictional collection consists of six short stories which are centered on the inner dialogues of various women. While each story focuses on a different female protagonist, or multiple, many of the stories explore similar topics. Among these are insecurity, the sacrifices required for love, the gendered power dynamics of relationships, and the difficulty of grappling with both the present and the future at once.

In the piece “On the Precipice of Some Ominous Canyon,” the lives of three women from the same family and their experiences with growing up are examined. In “Quixotic,” a customer service representative compares her current dull relationship with a childhood infatuation. In “Why We Go to Slovakia,” a young college student abroad desires to broaden her social horizons while struggling to forget a toxic past relationship. In “Wisteria,” a recent graduate and artist attempts to recover her individuality and functionality after a long term relationship went sour, while in “Starved,” a current marketing intern remembers a best friend from her college days who was sick with an eating disorder. In the last piece, “Drive,” a woman steals her ex-boyfriend’s cousin’s car to get back at him for cheating on her.

The reason for the title of this collection stems from one commonality which the stories seem to share – the smallness and subtlety of the plot. All of these pieces are far more driven by character than by the series of events, and although the events that do occur in the present day story lines may often seem insignificant, for the characters they are anything but.

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Table of Contents

ON THE PRECIPICE OF SOME OMINOUS CANYON

At the ripe old age of fifteen years and eight months, Penelope Hayes feels that all the universe is within reach. In the daytime, the sun is a clementine that she peels apart slice by slice. At nighttime, the moon is a peach she plucks right from the sky. Her perfume smells like strawberries and her nails are painted black. She keeps her hair cut short, grazing the shoulder blades, the bangs falling into hazelnut eyes. She is going for the edgy look. Aggressive lipstick, combat boots laced all the way up. She carries a Rupi Kaur book in her backpack. She draws on her thighs with sharpies during class. The margins of her geometry textbook are littered with lines of her own poetry, stanzas here and there about escape, drunkenness, that time she almost skinny dipped in the lake but didn't. Oh youth! She would get a nose ring too, if it weren't for her mother, if it weren't for her grandmother, who do not understand the first thing about being edgy.

"Why on earth would you pay someone to poke a hole in your face?" Mrs. Hayes asks when her daughter brings up the subject for the third time. They are carrying the groceries into the house, four large paper bags mostly full of canned tomatoes and noodles and garlic bread for that night's spaghetti. It is cold, the winter air biting at their noses and hands.

"Because it's cool," Penelope says, dragging out the last word, leaning up against the front of the house. "I like how it looks."

"Well," Mrs. Hayes says, struggling to remove her keys from her pocket and unlock the door without dropping anything, "I think your nose is beautiful the way that it is."

Penelope rolls her eyes. She bounces from one foot to the other, gritting her teeth against a gust of harsh wind.

"Maybe if you wore a warmer jacket, you wouldn't be so cold."

"Maybe if you unlocked the door faster, I wouldn't have to suffer."

The keys click finally into the lock, and Penelope dashes past her mother into the house. She leaves her bags on the counter before taking the stairs two at a time and closing herself up in the bedroom. Mrs. Hayes sighs. She herself takes her time, hovering at the kitchen counter, listening to the quiet of the house, before she begins to unpack. Cans in the cupboard, fruit in the bowl, coriander in the spice rack. Her husband must be off at his basketball league again, her son is thousands of miles away, her daughter might as well be. She turns the television on, pours herself a glass of wine and sits on a barstool, swirling it.

Mrs. Hayes does, too, understand the first thing about being edgy. Probably the second and third thing also, she wants to tell her daughter. Of course, she cannot tell her daughter that, because to tell her daughter that would be to admit that she had snooped through her daughter's cell phone and read the message chain between her and some guy named Charlie. It is not an act she commits often, snooping. Mrs. Hayes prides herself in being an honest woman who respects privacy and trusts her children.

Then again, she had trusted her son Jacob, and now he is off in Argentina, partying with prostitutes and shooting up drugs in the bathroom of some nightclub. Probably. Or so she assumes. He calls her just infrequently enough that she worries. He answers her questions just fast enough that it is suspicious. As if he knows what she wants to hear. As if he knows her anxieties and how to quell them. He has a job in a restaurant, he says. The neighborhood is safe, he says. He has a friend named Sebastian who he bicycles with on the weekends. As much as Mrs. Hayes would like to believe him, she has not forgotten what it is like to be twenty-two in the same way that she has not forgotten how to be edgy. All that confidence lining the pockets

like money. All that hope rushing hot as adrenaline in the blood. How she left her wallet on the table of a café once while she went to the restroom, thinking that no one would dare to steal a thing of hers.

As a mother, she knows better. As a mother, she has tried her best. She would like to believe that her best has been enough, that she has failed on occasion but that all has not been lost. From the other side, it is easy to judge. Mrs. Hayes' own mother never ceases to do. Why did she let her son go like that? What if he gets killed? What if he gets kidnapped? What if he joins a drug cartel to make ends meet and evolves into a cold-hearted murderer who eventually gets his own feature-length documentary on the History Channel? Mom, he is an *adult,* goddammit. Besides, you're being racist again. What even was the protocol in this situation? Certainly not to sit there and take it. But certainly yes! Sit there and take it!

It has become a real issue. They haven't talked much in the months since he left, only brief phone calls littered with observations of weather patterns. The truth is that Mrs. Hayes wants to talk about so much more with her mother, but she also wants assurance. To hear that all kids are this way but that it ultimately works itself out. That even though it feels like Penelope drifts further away from her with every passing second, like a plastic bottle in the river current, it is only an illusion. That her kids will find their way home and stay. She takes a small sip of her wine, placing the glass on the counter with a clink.

*

Grandma Hayes is a very anxious woman who does not understand the desire to be edgy. It sounds to her like an unpleasant thing to be, on edge, in danger, teetering over the precipice of some ominous canyon. No, thanks. She is good as she is, in her house on top of a hill, putting puzzles together. Bird puzzles, fox puzzles, puzzles of monuments and churches and dark

forests. The best part about puzzles is that she never runs out of options. As soon as she clicks the last piece into place, she rips the image apart, slides its remnants into the box, puts the box in the closet, and retrieves a new box from the stack in the living room. Once that stack runs out, she takes the bus into the city and sells all of her previously completed puzzles to the secondhand bookstore, exchanging them for new ones.

Just this morning, she finished a puzzle of a bundled-up child skating over a frozen lake and now she sits in her chair, admiring it a moment before breaking it up. That part is always the hardest part, but she does it. She takes the box with all its pieces, gives it a good shake, puts it away. There are only two new puzzles left, and she chooses the one of a desert landscape, with cacti and scorpions and a blazing sun. The day is still young, and if she focuses she can get quite a good bit done. Like always, she forms the border first, starts with the outside and moves in. It is a mundane process, but one that she enjoys. Routine keeps the anxiety at bay, and she is a woman prone to anxiety.

Oftentimes, she cannot sleep or remain asleep. A few months ago, for instance, she woke in the middle of the night to the realization that she had forgotten to have her leaves raked. The following morning was leaf collection day which is a day that, much to her dismay, exists in some places now. Her neighborhood is a strange place that did not used to be so strange. Back when she and her husband first bought the house, it was all so simple. Now there are fines for not cutting the grass, fines for not shoveling the walkway in the wintertime, regulations which determine how many lawn ornaments a person can have – the maximum is three and none can be flamingos. Now there is a communal leaf collection day, as if the trees understood deadlines, as if the trees knew exactly when their leaves should be shed. Grandma Hayes awoke in the middle of the night in a panic. She called her daughter.

"They're going to talk," she said, her voice high and fluttery. "My lawn is atrocious, and all the neighbors are going to talk."

Her daughter attempted to calm her down, but the conversation finished with Grandma Hayes insisting that she drive over right that instant.

So Mrs. Hayes and Mr. Hayes and Penelope and Jacob piled into the car, the ends of their rakes protruding from the open windows like skeletal hands. Grandma Hayes watched from behind the living room window as they worked, tiny headlamps strapped to their foreheads. At one point, Jacob shoved a handful of soggy leaves down the back of Penelope's shirt, which led Penelope to whack him in the shins with her rake, which led Jacob to put her in a headlock, which ended with the both of them on the ground, laughing and rolling like pigs in the muck. It was Mr. Hayes who ultimately pulled them apart and banished them to opposite corners of the yard, but he did so good-naturedly, with a smile and a shake of the head. Grandma Hayes felt her heart swell with appreciation, and she bustled to prepare them four mugs of hot chocolate.

"Thank you," she said over and over again. "Thank you all so much."

She tried to slip Penelope and Jacob a five-dollar bill each, which they were immediately forced to return.

"You don't need to pay your grandchildren for being your grandchildren," Mrs. Hayes said, but when no one was looking, Grandma Hayes snuck the bills into their jacket pockets.

She is old, but she is not an idiot. She is aware what a nuisance she is, what havoc she wreaks, how she needs taking care of. Several times, her daughter, as well as her four sons who have scattered themselves to various locations around the country, have tried to convince her to move out. The upkeep is simply too much for an eighty-two-year-old woman, let alone dangerous, let alone that she could fall and break a hip. Oh, fall shmall, was all Grandma Hayes

had to say. Besides, where would she move to? One of those homes with the bingo and the Salisbury steaks and the nurses who taunt you with their beauty and their potential? Thank you, but no thank you. She has no interest in synchronized swimming or friendships with other old ladies who will inevitably succumb to dementia or irritability or death before they learn to do the "eggbeater" kick underwater. If nothing else, her eighty-two years of life has given her this small right, this stubbornness. She has worked, and she has laughed, and she has gone to a million and two funerals. The least she deserves is to stay in the house that she has spent so many years making a home of. It was this house that her husband had bought for her, this house within which their five children grew, this house in which she feels alone but never lonely, surrounded by the artifacts of the life she has lived.

Still, though, she feels bad at times. She feels at times like a crazy woman. Her poor grandchildren, having to come over in the wee hours of the night to rake leaves. Her poor Penelope especially, now that her brother has abandoned her, vanished off to some distant country where there are likely earthquakes, where people are likely gunned down in the streets. Poor Penelope, growing up with a brother so far away and her crazy puzzle-obsessed grandmother so close. What a chore! It is a man's job to leave, Grandma Hayes was told as a girl and has since repeated on various occasions. A woman provides them with a place to come back to.

*

Penelope loves her grandmother. Penelope thinks that she is a funny lady. She does, however, grow sick of going over there all the time. Even more so now that she has to make the walk all by herself, even more so now that it is January. Her faux leather jacket, while quite edgy, does little to defend her against the elements. When her mother bursts into her bedroom

late in the afternoon to tell her that Grandma needs help again, Penelope groans and asks why and collapses backward onto her pillows. She is in a mood and doesn't want to. Besides, she has plans later, she has a person to see, she has things to do.

"She's *your* mother," Penelope spits.

"She's *your* grandmother," Mrs. Hayes spits back.

Then she starts to cry in the subtle way that mothers are supposed to, the tears brimming without quite spilling over, and Penelope sighs. She feels bad about her earlier comment, about the door and the suffering. So she laces up her snow boots and heads out.

The walk is not long, but wintertime in suburbia is a generally interminable period of time. All the cookie-cutter houses with their yipping dogs and abandoned swing sets become even more mundane beneath the snow. The streets are blanketed with silence, Penelope's feet trudging through the slush the only sound. How she wished to be surrounded by noise. How she wished to live in the throbbing heart of a place. When she asked her mother why they chose to live here rather than in the city, she answered that the school systems were better, that the area was safer. A logical answer which made Penelope question the essentiality of logic for the first time. One day, she would move to the city. Maybe not this city, but another one, a bigger one, where the hum and the buzz were as potent as drugs.

Charlie was, in part, the impetus for the desire. He had been a city kid, a big city kid, a NYC kid. It was only last year that he transferred here, and that much is clear in the way that he moves. Too quick. Too many stops and starts, like he needs to go somewhere but there is no place for him to go to, like he has not grown used to the pace of the suburbs yet. He fidgets when he speaks, with his notebook, with his hacky sack, with the nub of his pencil eraser. Many a study hall he has spent talking to Penelope. Many a study hall spent describing where he is from,

what it is like just to walk down the street there. He says the phrase with such pride. Where I am from, where I am from, a mantra that she will never say with equivalent authority. He tells her about the food stands with their shredded meats and deep-fried doughs. The traffic as constant as radio static. The reek of hot garbage in the summertime. How when it rains, it's like the city is cushioned with bubble wrap, all hush, all softness, all puddles reflecting the buildings that tower above them. It's just walking! Down the street! He makes her feel as if she has not done a thing. He also makes her feel as though she still can.

"You would fit in there," he said once, tracing her arm with the tip of his finger, the touch showering off sparks. "The city would look good on you."

Tonight, Penelope and Charlie are going to Sonic for milkshakes. The very thought of it warms her body with pleasure. In suburbia, Sonic is sort of a big deal. It means something. It means potentially a next step. They have not kissed yet. Penelope has never, in fact, kissed a boy, and she has decided that if she turns sixteen without ever having kissed a person, she will die inside. Wither like a spider plant, turning brown in the extremities first and then everywhere else, her life ending before it even begins. She needs to be home by eight, and it is already five-thirty by the time she arrives at her grandma's house.

She raps her knuckles on the door chipped with red paint. A minute later Grandma Hayes appears, her white hair neatly curled, a button-up dress and a pair of house slippers on.

"Penelope!" She says it as if surprised, as if it isn't always Penelope knocking on the door. "Come in quick now, dear. The world is a nasty little freezer today."

She does as requested, her entire body thawing the instant she crosses the threshold. The furnace is cranked on high, the air almost thick with the heat. Penelope sheds her jacket, her hat, her scarf, piling it all on the armchair by the door and plopping down onto the couch. The living

room is the same as always, the lighting soft and pink, the coffee table stacked with gossip magazines and mystery novels, the walls lined with framed photographs of children and grandchildren in all sorts of settings. On a folding table is a partially-finished puzzle, the image still too disjointed to make sense of. It is a nice feeling to be here, a familiar feeling.

"How about some apple cider?" Grandma Hayes asks, already meandering towards the kitchen. "I just made some fresh."

"Cider sounds great, Gram," Penelope says.

She snatches a caramel candy from the glass bowl on the table and pops it into her mouth. She lolls her tongue around it, fiddles with the golden wrapper in her fingers, listens to the clock tick. The television is turned on but with the volume low, the local news anchors sitting with their mugs and construction paper smiles, thin, insincere. They discuss the recent chickpea fad, how people are putting them into everything these days. The chickpeas in smoothies, the chickpeas as pizza crust, the chickpeas dipped in chocolate – the magical legume, they call it.

Penelope looks at the puzzle again, thinking of what it could become, but it still seems like nothing. The concept of puzzles has always seemed ridiculous. All those hours spent, all those minutes dwindled away, for the assembling of an image that could be seen right on the front of the box. She finds it anticlimactic, unsatisfying, to create a thing while knowing what it will look like in the end.

"There you are, dear," Grandma Hayes says as she enters the living room with two mugs in hand. "Careful now. It's hot."

"Thanks, Gram." Penelope wraps her hands around the warm ceramic, stares at the steam twisting upwards from the cider's surface. "Mom told me you need help with something?"

"Oh yes, I do." She nods a few times. "Just a box in the attic that I wanted brought down, that's all, some decorations I want to put up. Finish the cider first."

Penelope nods, bringing her mug to her lips. It is too hot, but she still takes a sip, grimacing when the burn ripples across her tongue. On the television now, the news anchors have changed subjects, have gone from the chickpeas to the drowning of a high school girl a few miles over. Went too deep in the lake at night. Intoxicated friends who did not see her. Grandma Hayes clucks her tongue.

"It's a dangerous world," she says. "You have to be careful out there."

"I always am, Gram."

"You have to stick to the shallow end."

"Of course, Gram."

"You have to know where you're safe."

Penelope nods – it is a familiar speech.

"You see, the problem with people these days is that they go a little farther and then a little farther. They think they can handle it. They want, and they want, and they want. Nobody is ever happy with anything." Grandma Hayes shakes her head. "Nobody accepts where they are."

Penelope nods again, goes hmm, sips her cider, stares at the clock ticking away on the wall, the hour hand inching closer and closer to the six.

*

Grandma Hayes loves the month of February. There is something about its icy enclosure, its forbidding tundra, that draws her closer to the people around her. Besides, February 14th is her favorite holiday and has been ever since childhood. She used to spend weeks creating personalized cards for everyone and everything she knew, every cousin and classmate and swing

set and tree. She wanted the whole world to understand how much she loved it. Only when she got older did she realize that it was strange to write a love poem to the spruce in the backyard or to the smell of libraries or to the feel of raw pumpernickel dough in her fists. Only when her legs grew upwards and her chest grew outwards did she realize that love was a reserved thing. Love was like a bottle of rich wine, retrieved from its hiding place on special occasions. Love was for people, for men, for her man.

She met her man when she was seventeen. He was intelligent. He wore spectacles and drank whiskey and shared with her all the tidbits of trivia that he knew. He had a shy look about him, always dodging her gazes, always reaching for her hand and pulling back. She was smitten by day two. She found it much easier to love than not to love, to believe than to doubt, to trust than to question. They kissed for the first time in the garden of the local park, surrounded by the dense odor of rhododendrons and honeysuckle, afterwards dipping their feet in the pond. That night, arrived at home, the bottom of her dress heavy with water, she did not sleep until the moon did. There was so much to wonder about then. There was so much to hope for.

Now February 14th is still a lovely day, even if it is lovely in a different way than it used to be. It makes her think. It makes her calculate what her love has added up to. She remembers all that she did and all that was done to her and all that she allowed to happen while she sat there, sipping cider, doing puzzles, kicking her feet softly as the days slid by. He died of a stroke years ago, but sometimes, she still feels him in the house. Sometimes, she hears his fingers drumming on the dining room table, she hears a book slam shut, she hears a bowl full of stew rattle on the table when his fist lands nearby. She hears his croaky voice singing Sinatra in the shower, in the car, at the desk.

*

To get to the attic, Penelope has to climb two flights of normal stairs and then a third flight which descends from the ceiling after pulling a string. She has never been in the attic before. Grandma Hayes tended to give Jacob those sorts of tasks, while Penelope read the mail aloud or taught her how to search for new shortcake recipes on the internet.

"Careful dear, be careful!"

"I'm fine, Gram," Penelope says, but she hears the wooden stairs creak beneath her weight and notices that her arms are shaking.

Once her head has finally poked up into the dark eaves, she removes the flashlight from her back pocket and shines it about. Some insect dashes away into a corner. Penelope shivers. Holding the flashlight between her teeth, she hoists herself up in one smooth motion, nearly hitting her head on the ceiling which hangs lower than a ceiling should. Her heart races. She sweats even though it is cool up there. Goosebumps scatter over her moist skin.

"The box should be on the left," Grandma Hayes yells up, but her voice feels faraway, ringing like a distant church bell in Penelope's ears.

Crouching slightly, one hand on the ceiling beam above her, she points the flashlight at box after box after box. It is like a fortress in here. It seems like the floor should cave in beneath its weight. There is so much more than she had expected. There is so much stuff, a whole lifetime of stuff, the accumulations of just one woman in her one house. Penelope has a single cardboard box underneath her bed in which she keeps movie ticket stubs or used lipstick tubes or funny notes that her friends passed her in class. That had seemed to her like a lot. Maybe not a lot, but a significant amount, or at least a not-so-insignificant amount. Here there are so many boxes that each one has a distinct label, scrawled on the side with magic marker, the year or the holiday or the name of a place, person, thing.

Finally she sees it, wedged between two others in the back corner, surrounded by cobwebs that graze her arm when she reaches for it. She startles backward without meaning to, cold rushing up her spine, as if a ghost were passing through. She snatches the box and flees.

*

Mrs. Hayes hated her father growing up, at first in the normal way that teenage girls hate their fathers, at first because he forbade her from wearing short skirts and staying out past dark. Then she hated him in the abnormal way. She hated him for the smoking, the sour breath, the self-loathing, the small aggressions that ate away at the family like a flame at a wood log, slowly but constantly until it was burnt black and brittle. She hated him for loving her mother just enough that she did not leave him.

The worst night was the night of the stew. Her father had been working late. He almost always worked late, almost always found himself crouched over documents long into the evening, doing the work of the higher men who had gone home. Her mother had made a stew, the aroma winding through the house like vapor, sliding under bedroom doors, making stomachs grumble. The rule was that nobody ate until their father came home, because if they ate before their father came home, then their father would have to eat by himself, and why did he waste all this money on the needs of children just to eat dinner like a bachelor?

It was 10 pm when he arrived. The five children in pajamas, rubbing their eyes with the backs of their hands. Their mother in an apron and fuzzy slippers. The stew long since turned cold. When their father sat down at the head of the table, his tie loosened, his forehead riddled with worry lines, everyone tensed. After putting the stew back over the burner for a moment, their mother came around the table with the wooden ladle, scooping large portions into each wide bowl, mounds of barley and chunks of beef and diced carrot, tomato, squash, chopped by

apt hands. In the center was a bowl of buttered rolls, fluffy and thick, covered with a dish towel to trap the little heat left inside. Mrs. Hayes, who was then the oldest of the little kids, dove right in. She ripped off a hunk of the roll with her teeth, lapped up the broth like a cat. Her father glared at her until she slowed down, using her spoon, tearing the bread into dainty pieces with her hands before popping them into her mouth. He himself had not yet taken a bite, and when he finally did, it was with such a noise of revulsion that all the others froze mid-chew.

"Are you kidding me?" He directed the question to the plaid tablecloth on which his eyes were locked. "This has to be a joke. This is really what I get when I come home?" He slammed a fist on the table, rattling all the bowls, sending a splash of broth onto the smallest boy's pajama shirt. Their mother, seated at the other end of the table, immediately stood up.

"Cold still? Does it need more salt?" She flattened her apron against her hips, her tired eyes wide as puddles, her hands reaching out towards him. "Pass me your bowl and I'll fix it."

"There is no fixing it." His face was grey as winter sky. "Garbage cannot be fixed. It can only be disposed of."

Then he did something that none of the kids would forget until they died. He reached a hand into his bowl of stew and flung a fistful of it all the way across the table. It splattered across their mother's face with a smack. Bits of beef slid into her blouse. A carrot dangled from a strand of her hair. The broth dribbled down her forehead, cheeks, chin, and she stood there with her hands still spread out before her. The children stared with their o-shaped mouths, with their spoons clenched in their hands, feeling suddenly cold in the inadequate fibers of their night clothes. Their father shook his stew-covered hand, speckling the tablecloth with broth. He grabbed a roll from the basket and tapped it once on the table, the sound it made echoing in the dead space around them. He took a bite, chewed, then spit it out into his hand.

"Eat it," he said, extending it towards his wife. "Try for yourself."

She shook her head slowly.

"Eat it, goddammit!"

She reached with trembling fingers for the ball of bread drenched in spit. He let her take it. He watched her place it in her mouth, her face wrinkling with disgust, tears slipping down her cheeks and carving lines into the film of broth that had hardened against her skin. Only when she swallowed did he stand.

"I am going to bed," was all their father said.

The rest of the family sat in silence. They sat so still it was like someone died. It was like being in church. It hurt to be still that way. Their father stomped up the stairs. There were fourteen stomps – all the children counted them. Their mother told them to eat, if they wished, and left the room. She did not come back until the next morning, by which time the remnants of stew had crusted onto the bowls and the odor of dry meat hung in the air like a fog. When the children came down the stairs for breakfast, fully dressed with their textbooks in hand and their teeth brushed, the table was already cleared and re-set. A glass of orange juice, a slice of toast, an apple at each chair.

At the time, Mrs. Hayes was twelve years old and had been grateful. After the previous night's humiliation, she thought there would be no coming back. She felt the family fissure and crumble, the house like a sandcastle cracking in the sun, reverting to grains again. But there was the juice, the toast with its smear of raspberry jam. There was the evidence of survival.

A few years later, a few years wiser, Mrs. Hayes would tell her mother that she needed to file for divorce. That it had gone on long enough and that she didn't have to take it.

"Take what?" her mother replied.

He never hit her. He never called her a whore. He didn't cheat on her or drink too much or abuse the children. He got angry sometimes, sure, like any man does, like any person does. But she had made the choice to love him, to love this man, to be happy. He never hit her.

"He doesn't hit you, because he doesn't have to!" Mrs. Hayes yelled. "You do everything he wants!"

Her mother only stared back at her blankly, without recognition, as if her daughter were just a reflection of herself in a funhouse mirror and she couldn't remember how she was supposed to look.

"Oh honey," she said. "You just don't get it yet."

*

Together Penelope and her grandmother open the box. It does not weigh much, since its contents consist primarily of paper decorations. Folded hearts and pink cut-out snowflakes, gelatin stickers to place on the windows, a teddy bear holding a flower that starts to sing when the button on his toe is pressed. Standing on a chair, Penelope tapes the snowflakes and hearts so that they dangle from the ceiling. She slaps all the stickers on the bay window. She places the teddy bear on top of the coffee table, with enough force that the guy starts singing. At the bottom of the box is a string of pink fairy lights, which Grandma Hayes places around the rim of the dining table at which no one ever dines anymore. When she plugs them in, the house becomes somehow even rosier.

The only remaining item is a framed photograph of Grandpa Hayes and Grandma Hayes together. It is not a photo from any day in particular, it seems to Penelope, not a wedding or anniversary or baby shower. They are wearing average clothes in an average-seeming bar or restaurant, drinking cocktails, smiling.

"Where do you want this?" Penelope asks.

"Oh, right there in the kitchen." Grandma Hayes gestures to the countertop next to the sink. "Where I can see it."

Penelope does as she was told, and the both of them stand there a moment, looking at the house with its pink snowflakes and pink lights and pink aura.

"Your grandfather was such a good man," Grandma Hayes says, placing a hand on her chest, "at heart."

*

A few days after the stew incident, their father came home from work hours earlier than usual. He brought with him two giant bags of take-out from the Chinese place on the corner, a luxury they almost never awarded themselves. Containers of veggie lo mein, sweet and sour chicken, fried rice with egg, dozens of plastic-wrapped fortune cookies. Their father even tried to use chopsticks. He even allowed the kids to laugh at him when he dropped a piece of broccoli on his shirt. After dinner, he banished all of them upstairs, but in the kind way. Joking and slapping them softly on the back as they scurried out of sight. He put on a record.

Mrs. Hayes still remembers this night, almost as well if not better than the night of the stew itself. She remembers how she crept from her room to sit at the top of the stairwell, listening to music drift upwards, watching her father or her mother occasionally flicker by, not quite dancing but swaying maybe. It was all instrumental, a cacophony of stringed instruments and brass, melding in the air. She nearly fell asleep, so warm and comforted up there, but suddenly the songs stopped. The record ended. In its place came a noise that she had not heard before.

Wailing. Deep wailing. A deeper version of the sound her little brother had made when he jammed his finger into the elevator door by accident. He had looked at it first, his eyes wide, as if calculating how his finger could possibly be where his finger was. Then the wailing, the sobs, the shaking of his body like aftershocks of an earthquake, continuing long after the door had opened and his hand had been saved.

But it was not her brother, the hurt one, this time. It was her father. She knew because she snuck down the stairs one at a time until she could peer around the corner, until she saw her mother sitting on the couch with her father's head in her lap. She stroked his hair while he made his noises, curled into her like a snail into its shell, an ugly and fat and exposed thing. She looked only a minute before crawling back upstairs on her hands and knees, terrified of making a sound, terrified that they would know what she had seen.

Now that she is old and her father is dead, Mrs. Hayes looks back on the moment with gratitude. Now that she is a mother, Mrs. Hayes understands why parents lose it. She had not wanted the kids at first. The thought of a body within her body had repulsed her. In those days, her own life felt like enough, like almost too much, like there were so many things to touch and to see and to hear. In those days, she left her wallet on the table at the café while she was in the restroom. In those days, she flirted with anything that breathed and kissed anything with a mouth. She doesn't know what it means to be edgy? Tell that to the girl who did back flips into the deepest end of the swimming pool. Tell that to the girl who later drank peach vodka straight from the bottle and climbed a tree in a stranger's backyard, her bikini still on. Penelope did not know about any of this, because Penelope did not ask about any of this, the same way that Mrs. Hayes refused to ask her own mother certain questions. It was easier to assume yourself right. It was easier to not pay attention.

Penelope almost never pays attention. She is often off in her own universe, a comment which her teachers have been leaving on her report cards since the beginning of report cards. Tonight, she shovels her spaghetti down her throat so fast it's impossible for her to taste it. Mr. Hayes asks her to pass the salt three times before she realizes that he is talking to her. When Mrs. Hayes asks how it went at Grandma's house, Penelope says it was fine and can she be excused now? Typical. Mrs. Hayes sighs and nods and her daughter runs up the stairs two at a time, her plate left behind and scraped nearly clean. She thinks about how she felt at the top of that tree, her friends rioting beneath her, their faces reddened with alcohol, their laughter like hyenas in a pack.

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Hayes will watch from behind the curtain as a boy pulls up out front in a used grey Honda thrumming with music. She will do nothing but watch as her daughter smiles at herself in the hall mirror, fixing her hair, adjusting her t-shirt. She will do nothing as her daughter strides off, slamming the front door shut behind her, leaving the sickening smell of strawberry perfume in the air, as the hum of the car engine fades off into the distance, going and going until it's gone.

Mrs. Hayes lets the curtain fall, turns to look at Mr. Hayes, sitting in his leather armchair, rattling the ice in his glass of post-dinner cognac. He smiles at her and motions that she come closer, so she does, perches herself on his lap, rests an arm around his neck. He nuzzles softly into her. At the top of that tree, she had felt that the entire horizon was her territory, that she knew it, that it belonged to her. How silly a feeling it was. How delusional and egotistical and young. Yet sometimes she thinks that she was right to feel it. That maybe she should have never come down.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" she asks, and her husband shrugs, takes a sip of his drink.

"I think she's going to live," he says.

*

Penelope is in a car with Charlie in the parking lot of a Sonic. This situation overwhelms her. The night is dark. The car is warm. It is musky like teen boy, and the milkshakes are so thick they won't come up through the straws. She tries so hard to suck up her mint-chocolate-chip that her face blazes red with the effort. It makes Charlie laugh.

"Be patient," he says, touching the soft spot beneath her chin with his index finger. "It'll melt."

Penelope laughs too, looks downward, and that is when it happens. His lips are cold and soft. It happens so slowly and so suddenly it is almost like it doesn't happen at all. It is as if her life rewinds and accelerates at the same time, so she goes nowhere. They smile like idiots. They kiss again and again. She kisses back without knowing how to, like it is instinct, like flailing her limbs around in water, not so much swimming as staying afloat. They clamber over each other into the backseat, laughing when they kick the windows by accident, laughing at how nothing breaks. Penelope lays on top of him, his body like a plank, his hand in the back pocket of her jeans. The car is too warm. The air is thick as the milkshakes were, and it is hard to get enough of it. His hand goes from the pocket of the jeans to the zipper, from the zipper to the beneath. His hand is cold. She is afraid. The fear is like the kiss, an instinct.

What if a car pulls up next to them. What if the delivery guy comes back on his roller-skates. What if the milkshakes turn lukewarm and this feeling does, too. What if they never become anything. What if they become too much. What if she leaves him, or he leaves her, or she doesn't leave him when she should. What if she goes further and further until she wants more and more. She thinks about all those boxes in the attic, all the moments piled like dirty clothing,

one on top of the other of the other. What if this moment matters more than she can know it does. What if the precipice ends here and tomorrow she is just falling, falling. What then? What now? What next?

She kisses back, leaving no space between their bodies for questions.

QUIXOTIC

Yvonne likes Nick most of the time. Nick is a good guy, really, which is to say there is nothing particularly wrong with him. He has a tie with panda bears on it and a pair of socks with little bicycles. He makes a mean buttered toast. It's just that the sex is mediocre. It's just that when they're finished, Yvonne does not feel finished at all. Her heart goes ratta-tat-tat like a tambourine in her chest and sleep evades her, no matter how hard she tries to catch it.

She tries hard. She closes her eyes, listens to his heavy breathing, counts the hippopotamuses in her head like her parents told her when she was a child afraid of sheep. Tonight, she reaches four hundred and twenty-three hippopotamuses before she can't stand it any longer. She shoves Nick's fat arm off the plain of her stomach and sits up. The cold ripples over her bare skin, raises the hair on her arms, reminds her of nakedness. Wrestling the blankets out from under the heft of his body, she pulls them up to her chin and peers at the television.

On the screen is a rugby match, a bunch of wide little men chasing each other over nothing. Yvonne fumbles for the remote on the nightstand, knocking over a glass of water in the process. She flickers through the channels, skipping over the news and a soap opera and a talk show and a documentary about pink dolphins. Ultimately, she chooses a reality show, which she almost always does. This time it is an episode of *Sunset House,* which features the escapades of fifteen young and assertive and beautiful people all staying together in the same house on Sunset Avenue. She loves this type of show without knowing why, especially the ones that leave people in a confined space until they love one another or hate one another or lose it. She is aware that her taste is trashy. Nick has told her as much. Nick has told her that nothing about these reality shows is real, that it's abnormal to act how these people act, that they're all in it for the money. Yvonne shrugs and asks if the same thing couldn't be said for rugby. Are points real? Is it

normal for grown men to throw themselves into the dirt over a stupid ovular ball? The richest rugby player in the world receives a salary of 2.196 million dollars. Do you even know how many jacuzzies that could get a person? By that point in the conversation, Nick has usually fallen asleep and Yvonne wins the argument by default.

The truth is it doesn't matter whether the shows reflect reality. The truth is some nights the shows feel more real to her than her actual life. If not in the exact occurrences, then in the sensations produced by them. If not in the overall story arc, then in the fact that there is an arc. That things happen which cause other things to happen which eventually resolve the first things. People fall in love. People rage. People have fits during which they throw chairs or drinks or glass bowls. Afterwards, they apologize, pull one another close, whisper that they didn't mean any of it, none of it, not at all.

For example, Keegan and Taylor in *Sunset House.* In the most recent episode, which Yvonne has found playing on channel ten, Keegan has drunken sex with this fisherman named Harry who Taylor is apparently in love with but who will never love Taylor back because she is fat and also terrified of the ocean. The situation becomes a ridiculous ordeal. The situation escalates to the point where Taylor pours her plastic cup full of beer right over Keegan's head. Keegan stands there with the froth dripping down her nose, her bangs matted to her head, the reek of yeast in the air. She lunges at Taylor, and both bodies roll around on the living room carpet, flinging elbows, snatching at fistfuls of hair. This lasts only a minute, until they both get sick of being angry and lay motionless instead. His dick is so small, Keegan confides. So small it's almost not there. They laugh until their faces turn red and their breath runs away from them. Then they apologize and pull one another close and whisper that they didn't mean any of it. The theme song plays, the credits roll.

Yvonne slides out of bed in one smooth motion, groping about for her clothes, the sweater and jeans and fuzzy socks which have grown cold from laying on the carpet so long. Wiggling into one pant leg, she whacks her shin against the side of his dresser and curses. Nick goes on snoring. He is so far out of it tonight, even farther than usual, the television casting his unconscious face in a lovely and surreal light. The blue sharpens his five o'clock shadow, softens his undereye lines, takes off a few years, a few pounds even. His jaw is slack and spit dribbles from one corner of his mouth. Looking down at him now, Yvonne feels a flicker of something like affection. She shivers, then laces up her snow boots and steps out into the frigid night.

It is February in Pittsburgh, and it seems like it. A fresh dusting of snow covers the grass, and new flakes stir in the wind, forming small tornadoes that never touch ground. The street is silent, all the families inside, all the streetlamps shining light down, the asphalt exceptionally black against the glow.

Inside her car, Yvonne sits still, watching her breath cloud up and dissipate, warming her hands beneath her thighs. She is starving. Her stomach purrs like an engine, and suddenly all she can think about are doughnuts. Specifically chocolate. Specifically with vanilla icing and rainbow jimmies. The kind they sell discounted at Raymond's Super right off Route 56. It is a familiar sensation, one she feels often after passing time with Nick. Hungry. Hollowed. As if his very presence has worn away at her, like wind against canyon rock, leaving her body an empty bowl, wanting and wanting.

But to reiterate, Nick is a good guy. To reiterate, Yvonne is the one at fault. Yvonne eats too much and never feels full. Yvonne reads too many books. She turns the key in the ignition and peels away from the curb, cranking the heat all the way up, cranking the radio up too. It plays a sad song, a song about leaving the night too young.

*

Yvonne can eat whatever she wants and not gain a single pound. Her mother envies her for this, but sometimes Yvonne gets concerned. It seems impossible that a body can consume so much and still look as her body does, slim and lithe and mobile, like a reed swaying in the wind. She worries that something is wrong with it. She worries that she is not a real woman. When she was thirteen, a girl in the gym locker room accused her of just that. She looked her up and down, raised her eyebrows, asked with an edge in her voice whether she belonged there. In response, Yvonne hung her head, swung her lanky arms by her sides. Over time she grew accustomed to her boyishness, her ability to slip like a sheet of paper through the cracks, like a coin in a slot. Put her just about anywhere and she fits. Her best friend told her that if it weren't for her tomato nose she could be a model. It was just too fat always, and too red in the autumnal breeze. A boy in her history class said the same thing. His name was Nick, too.

Back in middle school, it seemed like every boy's name was Nick. There were actually six of them, and they were all just okay people. None of them are the Nick with whom Yvonne currently sleeps, although she imagines for some reason that they all lead similar lives. That they all have tropical bird calendars in their kitchens, blankets on their couches knitted by loving mothers or aunts, an absurd quantity of canned corn and wheat bread in the cupboard. Maybe they meet once or twice a month to discuss rugby or model planes or other Nick issues, like it's a society. Yvonne has never met anyone with her same name, and so has never been a part of such a thing.

The current Nick with which she sleeps has never said anything negative about her nose. He has never said anything positive about her nose either, which causes her to believe that there is nothing positive to be said, which causes her to believe that the nose is fat and serves as further

evidence that Nick is a good guy. Everyone in the home decor company where they both work agrees that he is a gentleman. The office is where they met and, in fact, is the only place where Yvonne ever meets anybody. Her interactions tend to be the surface-level sort, grazing the perpetually unbroken ice. She asks Steve how it's going. He replies that it goes. She asks Tamara how her daughter is, and she replies alive. She comments on Doug's game of Tetris as she walks to the breakroom, and he tells her to mind her own business.

Nick and Yvonne are desk neighbors. They have the same job, which is that of customer support representative, which requires a lot of answering the phone and listening to disappointed people and patience. They are both reliable complaint receptors. They nod and hmm in all the right places, which is possibly what brought them together. During the first several months of their neighborship, Yvonne reorganized his desk knick-knacks whenever he went to the bathroom or the breakroom or the parking lot for some air. In the beginning, these were small changes. She shifted his Boston snow globe to the left of his DC snow globe. She tilted the framed photograph of his childhood dog the slightest bit to the left. As time passed, she grew more daring. She put the rubber band ball into the polka dot mug. She made a pyramid out of the old holiday cards. When he returned from where he'd been, Yvonne never gave herself away, only glanced up momentarily from her computer screen to gauge his reaction. Normally he smirked. Sunk down into his chair as if nothing had happened and left the articles as they were.

Yvonne started to spend longer than necessary in the breakroom, hoping that when she came back, something on her own desk might be moved. The Rubik's cube on top of the monitor, the pens in a stack. They never were.

Nick did ask her out to dinner once, which as her mother insisted later over the phone, was actually much better than moving her sticky notes. Yvonne herself hadn't been so sure.

Yvonne had responded to his proposal by not responding, suddenly pointed to the beige stain on the ceiling which had always been there and which everyone had noticed before. “What’s that?” she said. Then she slipped out to the hallway where she stood several moments, examining the fake plant next to the elevator.

They never got that dinner, but they did have sex in the stairwell once. Another time in the conference room with the blinds closed. Finally in a bed, in Nick’s bed, in Nick’s modest townhouse with its bird calendar and knitted blankets and multi-grain bread. From there, things progressed in the unstoppable way that they tend to, until now Yvonne finds herself in those soft gray sheets every weekend. With his arm slung across her chest, with the light of the television making her eyes ache. It has all become ingrained in her routine, just a part of the day, a piece of the life, like tying her shoes or brushing her teeth.

Afterwards, she goes home. And if not home, then somewhere else. This is an unspoken rule which she holds herself to. They have sex. They talk of mundanities like the snow or the statewide blueberry recall or the mugs without handles that their company shipped by accident. He falls asleep and she slips out into the nighttime, like a rat through a sewer grate.

He has never asked her to spend the night, but there was one time when the sound of her jacket zippering woke him up. The snoring stopped, and Yvonne froze, looking down as his eyelids twitched open. If he asked her to stay, she decided on the spot, she would say no. Even if he begged and pleaded and promised her breakfast in the morning. It’s just not possible, she would say, there’s just no way. I have a place to be, a home to go back to, I sleep better in my own sheets.

He didn’t ask her though. There was no begging or pleading or coffee with toast. He shut his eyes quickly, too hard, as if shielding himself. He pretended to never have been woken, and

by the time Yvonne laced up her boots, he had already snuck back into sleep. His breathing peaceable, his fingers twitching only slightly at his side.

*

Tonight, by the time Yvonne arrives at Raymond's Super, it is already a little past midnight, and the parking lot is nearly deserted. She crunches dark brown slush beneath her feet and walks through the automatic doors, into a wave of artificial heat. Only one cashier is working, the light above her register lonely among the row of others turned off. She is a bit younger than Yvonne, with her hair dyed purple and a line of piercings up her ear, an hourglass figure that can be seen even through the maroon uniform smock. She flips through a magazine, only looking at the pictures and even then not looking really, only glancing, the images bouncing off of her. Yvonne goes right past, boots squeaking against the linoleum tile. The cashier is too submerged to look up.

In the far right corner is the bakery section. Pop music crackles over the loudspeakers and a stock boy rolls around a dolly full of breads, but otherwise the place feels abandoned. She approaches the table upon which that morning's leftover doughnuts are arrayed, bagged with the prices marked down to forty-two cents each. Rummaging through the dozens of them, she can't seem to find any that are chocolate cake with vanilla frosting and rainbow jimmies. Only vanilla cake with chocolate frosting. Only chocolate cake with strawberry frosting. Only chocolate cake with chocolate frosting with brown sprinkles. Everything but. Yvonne turns to the nearby stock boy.

"Is this all you have?"

"Um." The stock boy looks down at the bag of pita in his hands, then over at the table full of doughnuts. There are at least thirty. "Is that not enough?"

"It's just that I was hoping for a chocolate one with vanilla frosting and rainbow jimmies is all."

"Oh." He shrugs, places the bag of pita on the shelf in front of him even though it doesn't belong with the blueberry mini bagels. "You can come back in like six hours."

"That's all right." Yvonne sighs and snatches two of the bags at random. "Have a good night."

It is while meandering to the front of the store, making a detour in the breakfast food aisle, that Yvonne sees Jeremy Barrington. She stops cold, widening her eyes and then squinting them. It takes a moment to be certain, since he is now so adult and tall and bearded. She stares at the curve of his jawline, his bony fingers, the forward tilt of his neck as he examines the nutritional information on a box of Wheaties. He has gained the slightest bit of a paunch. He wears baggy sweatpants, Converse sneakers with duct tape wrapped around one of the toes, a t-shirt with a slogan on it that she can't make out. His brown hair, suppressed by a winter pom-pom hat but still as curly as ever, flops into his eyes. It doesn't matter that ten years have gone by since the last time she saw him. She still recognizes the freckles spattered on his cheeks like raindrops.

The last time she saw him was in the eighth grade. She had been in love with him for three years by then and had even compiled a list of the reasons why. He wore a shark-tooth necklace. He painted his nails black and smirked crooked. When he sat alone at lunch, it wasn't because he didn't have friends, but because he wanted to sit alone. He played the violin. He tried hard at everything even when it was uncool to try hard. He liked thinking. He liked to be profound. When she was near him, she felt warmed by this profoundness from the outside in, like his presence were a flame grazing her elbows, her kneecaps, her unfortunate nose.

They interacted only once. They were in the lunch line, him ahead of her, holding their Styrofoam trays in their hands, waiting in line for the dry turkey and gummy mashed potatoes and the gravy that stuck to the rooves of their mouths for what seemed like hours. Yvonne stared at Jeremy the whole time. The nape of his neck, the scrawny bicep, the blue t-shirt against the skin. They watched as the lunch ladies scooped mountains onto their trays, then took them and slid towards the dessert section. There was only one pudding cup left, topped with whipped cream and chocolate flakes. Pudding was, everyone knew, the best dessert option. Their hands both reached towards it at the same time, their pinky fingers brushed, Yvonne let out a tiny gasp. She laughed a shaky laugh.

"You can have it."

"No, no, you take it."

"No, you."

"C'mon." He looked at her, took the pudding cup and placed it on her tray, smiled in that crooked way he had. "Let me be nice."

She laughed a shaky laugh again and swallowed, nodded, her face growing hot. When she sat down at her lunch table, the adrenaline hadn't subsided. Her heart throbbed in her mouth. She looked at him across the cafeteria, bit her lip with longing. She pitied herself. It was so difficult to care, wasn't it? So draining to love. Any other boy, she knew, would have taken it for himself. It was the best pudding cup she had eaten in her entire young life, so creamy and smooth and rich that even when dinnertime rolled around, she still felt full. The flavor still lingered on her lips like a kiss. The next year, Jeremy transferred to a private boarding school in the middle of nowhere and that was the end of that.

Yvonne has never talked about Jeremy Barrington or her feelings for Jeremy Barrington to anyone – not her mother, not her best friend, certainly not the Nick she now sleeps with. She is not sure why. It's not like there is much to discuss. It just seems wrong, somehow, to put it into words. Like it was not meant to be translated that way. Like something would get lost.

Looking at him now, in the harsh fluorescent lights of Raymond's Super off Route 56, she can't believe he is there again before her. In his duct-taped shoes. Comparing the nutritional and economic value of the regular Wheaties with the frosted. His skin is pasty like leftover milk at the bottom of a bowl. His face is soft and sad. She wonders if hers is, too. When he turns his head in her direction, she snatches a box of toaster pastries and covers her nose with it. She wants him to recognize her, but at the same time she doesn't. She waits until he selects the box of regular Wheaties and walks away. After counting to five, she trails behind him like vapor.

*

Most days, Yvonne likes her job and thinks she is good at it. Some days, Yvonne feels vastly insufficient for the tasks at hand. This is when the customers are too hysterical or the complaints too sad or the disillusionment too grand. Not so long ago, a woman called because a standing lamp that she received was not what she had imagined it would be.

"It's not like in the pictures," the woman said, again and again. "It's not the same."

"What do you mean exactly, ma'am?" Yvonne asked in her patient metronome of a voice. "How is it different?"

"It just is. It just isn't like the photos. In the photos, the lamp makes the entire room look better. In the photos, the lamp pulls it all together. It completes the fengshui, you know?" Yvonne went hmm and nodded. "My living room looks exactly the same. It still looks sad and grey and now the one corner with the lamp is too bright compared to all the other corners. I've

tried moving it around. I've tried changing the lampshade. I've tried changing the lightbulb. But it's a horrible lamp. It's horrible, and I expected so much more, you know? I just want a home to feel like a home."

It was at that point that the woman began to cry, to breathe heavy, to sniffle into the receiver. Yvonne did not know what to say. Yvonne thought a lamp was a lamp. She offered a full refund, a free t-shirt, a coupon for the next time. This only made the woman cry harder until finally Yvonne had no choice but to feign a bad connection and hang up. But the situation clung to her like cigarette smoke to hair. She felt bad. She sat there, staring at the silent phone for the rest of her shift, clicking the pen on her desk over and over.

*

Yvonne loiters a few feet behind Jeremy, watching him place his three simple items on the conveyor belt. The Wheaties, a loaf of brown bread, a jar of peanut butter. He stands with his hands in his pockets, looking on without much interest as the cashier scans his purchases at an astonishingly slow rate. He rocks back and forth in his sneakers. Yvonne coughs into her elbow, sniffles softly, taps her foot, drums her fingers on the counter. He glances over at her, and their eyes meet. He lifts his hand in a small wave, an ordinary wave, a wave without recognition. Then he returns to staring off into the distance, hardly even there. She sees that the Wheaties he decided upon are the regular kind, and her heart sinks into her stomach. Sure, the unfrosted Wheaties are practical and healthy and good for the heart – but they are no fun at all.

The cashier puts the items in a bag. The cashier announces the total. Jeremy pays her with a crumpled ten-dollar bill. "Keep the change," he says, already grabbing his bag from the counter, already disappearing through the sliding glass doors. The cashier is left with a dime and three pennies. Yvonne is left motionless.

She stares as the doors shut behind him, sealing him off into the darkness, stares at herself now reflected in the black glass, at the slivery outlines of her phantasmic body. Keep the change, he had said, as if thirteen cents meant nothing to anybody in the whole world. The bags of doughnuts slip from her fingers and smack onto the tile floor. The cashier asks, not unkindly, if she is going to buy those or what. Yvonne stoops to pick them back up. She pays without further comment and shuffles off into the cold.

*

There was a time when Yvonne thought about smashing her nose with a brick. That was a year or so ago. She figured her insurance would cover the surgery and maybe her nose would turn out more acceptable and maybe the other pieces of her life would also fall into place like the Tetris pieces on Doug's computer. Boop boop. Boop. But the thought was fleeting. She would never have the courage and besides, noses matter so little these days. The majority of the world has come to terms with its ugliness.

When Yvonne arrives at her dark apartment, she does not bother with the light switches. Enough moonlight filters through the windows that she stumbles easily to the living room couch, snatches her laptop from its place on the coffee table. The sound of the keys pounding, the refrigerator humming, the breath of winter colliding against the walls. Her home is so quiet that every last simple sound can be heard. She types into the search bar: HOW MANY NICKS IN WORLD. It takes her to a census website which informs her that there are 70,583 people named Nick in the United States and 451,401 named Nicholas. She doesn't know what her Nick's real name is and this strikes her as incredibly sad.

Removing the doughnuts from their brown paper bags, she feels that she should cry but doesn't. She rips off a chunk of a vanilla glazed, scattering crumbs into the crevices between the

sofa cushions. The doughnut tastes like cardboard soaked in sugar, stiff, tasteless, becoming edible only once her saliva has turned it soft. Even the vending machine doughnuts, wrapped in plastic and covered with powder, are an improvement. Even they disappoint less. For the first time in their short relationship, Yvonne considers driving back to Nick's townhouse and demanding his company. She considers ringing his door bell over and over until he has no choice but to get up and do something. She considers calling him, hovers with her fingers over the dial pad, but then she throws the phone across the room, where it slides under the dusty china cabinet. She will not do it, because there is no point, because after everything she will still end up here, if not in the physical sense then in every other sense, if not here on this couch then over there on his couch, wondering what it's for, wondering if this is it now? She will not move.

Instead, she turns on the television and plays an episode of *Sunset House* from several weeks ago. It's the one when Keegan and Taylor go to the club on a Tuesday night. There is no one else there, but they get shitfaced anyways. They lick salt from their thumbs and follow with tequila. They stand on tables and loop their arms around one another and kick out of rhythm with the song. Then they order chicken wings and sit on the curb outside, even though it's cold, even though it's starting to snow. I love you so fucking much, Taylor says, sucking the buffalo sauce from her fingers. I love you too, Keegan says, tearing a sliver of meat from the bone. Then they walk home, teetering in their high heels on the curb, clutching one another by the elbow. Taylor falls on the ice, and Keegan falls with her. The moonlight on their hair. The glow of their skin.

From her cave of a home, Yvonne watches until her eyes ache. The blanket wrapped around her shoulders, the doughnuts growing stale in their open bags. She watches until her eyes close, until the darkness of the living room becomes a different darkness, until she falls into a much softer place.

WHY WE GO TO SLOVAKIA

We first start talking about it cause her friend's cousin's mom is from Bratislava. That's the capital of Slovakia, apparently. I don't remember why she starts talking about her friend's cousin's mom, but it doesn't matter really. Juno talks about a lot of boring shit because she doesn't realize it's boring. Like veganism, for example. Or the kundalini yoga breathing process. Or how the metal detectors at the airport give you cancer if you walk through them enough times. That kind of thing. Since we're in Europe, she likes to bring up Europe as much as possible, even though she doesn't actually know that many things about Europe. She doesn't know that much about Spain either, or Salamanca which is the Spanish city we're in, because she always falls asleep in the Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness Seminar that the program requires us to go to. Tonight, when she starts talking about her friend's cousin's mom, me and Bea just nod our heads and pass the joint around.

"She's from Bratislava," she says. "It's the capital of Slovakia."

We're sitting on the stairs behind the chemistry building, in the spot we've claimed as ours, looking down at everything. It's dark, and it's winter, and the chill of the iron stairs seeps straight through my jeans into my ass. My fingers are already pale, the veins constricted, all the blood filtering towards the heart, the lungs, the stomach. I rub my hands together a few times, breathe on them, tuck them underneath my knees, but it doesn't help any. Nothing helps any during a European winter, that little I know. Tourists are easy to spot because they don't check the weather before packing. They show up in mini-skirts and Birkenstocks and sunglasses, thinking of the pictures they've seen, thinking that the entire country must be sun-coated and glistening. But it snows here just like it snows in Pennsylvania.

"She came to America when she was a kid," Juno says, "so she didn't really understand, and she doesn't remember all that much."

I take the joint from Bea and breathe in hard, until my chest flickers golden-red with the heat.

"Slovakia used to be communist, you know," Bea says.

I let the smoke out in a slow, slow stream. I already feel it, rushing warm inside me like a river current. From up here, you can see the actual river, its slick black licorice surface, the bitesize humans beside it, the city, the lights. We've been here only two and a half months, but somehow that's long enough to have developed a possessive urge. My city, my lights. I wonder if it's the American in me.

"A lot of places used to be communist," I say, "but they aren't anymore."

"I don't know if I'd want to visit an ex-communist country," Juno says.

"Why?" I pass the joint back to Bea.

"Because." She shrugs. "I bet the oppression hangs around for centuries. You can't get rid of communist energies in just a few years."

There she goes with the energies again. I rap my knuckles on the iron stairs three times, rap-rappity-rap, and the sound is louder than I expected. According to Juno, everyone and everything releases different types of energy. She claims that she can see it in the air, like hair color or a new pair of shoes. It changes constantly, according to mood and situation and climate. Mine, she tells me, is usually an aggressive blue that flickers, like a broken television or a cracked sky. I tell her she's crazy. She just laughs and says that people with blue energies are doubtful like that.

"What about ex-fascist countries?" Bea asks, handing her the joint. "You're in one of those right now."

Juno breathes the smoke in deep, then watches thoughtfully while it spills from her lips. "I dunno," she says.

"Maybe you're a fascist, and fascists can't detect the energy of other fascists," I say.

I'm mostly joking but I'm also not. There's something about Juno that I despise. It could be fascism. It could also be that she has more money than I do. Or that she's prettier than me. Any number of reasons really. The other day I described her as a friend during a phone call home and cringed immediately afterwards. I guess there isn't a better word for someone that you smoke with four times a week, get dinner with, drink beer with, walk aimlessly through the streets with. Nobody does that with a stranger and Juno is far from a stranger to me. Sometimes I think I know her too well, can hear her voice in my head, can say what she says before she says it.

"Oh, shut up," she says, leaning back into the metal railing and looking up at the sky. "I'm not a fascist and you know that, bitch."

But what I actually know is that she can't remember what a fascist is or how it differs from a communist, a socialist, a masochist, etc., etc. Probably she's thinking about the civil war. Probably trying to determine again who the bad guys were. In class last week, it was a question she asked – who the bad guys were – los nacionalistas or los republicanos? She can list every shade of nail polish at the NYX on Calle Toro, but details like those ones constantly evade her, slip through her loosely knit fingers like beads and bounce off the floor. The quality is enviable sometimes. Her ability to ask stupid questions is enviable always. To not know and to ask. The

ignorance of her ignorance. The professors have by now grown used to it. They have stopped raising their eyebrows, show no surprise. There were a lot of bad guys, they say.

"Maybe we're all a little bit fascist, on the inside," Bea says, and that's how I know she has smoked too much. I think about the tour we took the day after we arrived in September for the orientation. How, as we stood in the plaza, watching kids run across the cobblestone with bocadillos in their hands, our program director told us that a carving of Franco's face had just been removed from there the year before. How for twenty, thirty years after democracy his stone gaze looked down upon the city's center.

"That's some bullshit," I say. No one disputes the statement. We sit in silence a few moments, shivering. The moon hangs like a lemon rind in the sky. Several streets over there is the noise of the people, but we can barely hear from where we are. I am handed the last of the joint, so I finish it, grinding it into the concrete with my sneaker.

"Let's go to the river," I say, because I am in charge here or because I like to think so. We all get up and shake the warmth back into our limbs. The numbness has crept into my feet, my fingers, my nose. The first few steps send sparks shooting up my ankles and it occurs to me, not for the first time, how strange this is. The three of us in this city. Our three bodies in the street, our silhouettes in the glow of the storefronts. Us among all these people drinking draft beers in the cold, grabbing at elbows, grabbing at hands, kissing and speaking lovely as music. To get to the river, we pass ten restaurants, three souvenir shops, one gelato place, and one man handing out fliers to tourists in the street. Beer, wine, chupitos! It is the same man as always, from the bar where all us guiris go. Venga, ladies! He doesn't recognize us. We shake our heads no, keep moving, unphased, the route to the river so familiar and redundant now in a way I never thought it could be.

*

We're all studying abroad here for different reasons. Me to escape my psycho ex-boyfriend Randy. Juno because she has more money than she knows what to do with. Bea because of an incomprehensible interest in linguistics. She is the best at Spanish out of the three of us, not that the comparison says much. Even she stumbles over her words when under pressure, forgets how to say rice or shrimp or goat cheese right before it's her turn to order, blushes when asked a question she doesn't know the answer to. I got a C in beginner's conversational topics. Juno flunked. We stick together somehow still. We are all achieving what we came for with varying success rates, which is to say that some days are better than others.

Two weeks ago, for example, Juno maxed out her credit card after buying a pair of designer boots. Two days before that, Randy called me at two in the morning (which here is eight in the morning) to tell me that he found someone new to have sex with. She has blue hair and knows how to make pancakes and, when they're at the peak of it, she whispers in his ear *deeper baby deeper*. Yeah? Well fuck off and eat your pancakes, I have class to go to, is what I said. Then I took some papers from my desk at random, crumpling them up and shoving them into my open backpack, zipping it halfway up. I stole a banana from the fruit bowl in the kitchen and the peel burst, golden mush seeping out like from a flesh wound.

I didn't realize until I got to class that I'd left my grammar packet on the bed. When the professor called on me to answer número siete, I burst into tears and excused myself to the bathroom, saying la baño instead of el baño, which isn't even a logical mistake to make. I stayed there until the class ended and then I slipped back inside to get my stuff. The professor was still around, and she made me sit down, told me that it's okay to be nervous about speaking in another language, that it's natural to feel vulnerable at first. I nodded. When Juno filled out a

request for a new credit card online, they declined it. Bea wanted an egg sandwich, ordered a steak one by accident, and ate it anyways to avoid causing a fuss. It is just how we are here.

*

I met Randy because my sink broke. I don't know why the sink broke. It just happened one day. I went to turn on the water and there was nothing really. Just a drip, a constant drip that soaked my sanity slowly up. I whacked the faucet with a wrench. I stuck a hand down the drain. I poured rancid chemicals down the drain. I did everything I knew how to do. Then I gave up and called the landlord who called the repairman who showed up at my door a day later and who turned out to be Randy, although I didn't know all that it would mean yet.

I hear there's a predicament, were the first words he said to me.

There is certainly a predicament, were the first I said to him.

We went into the kitchen and I demonstrated, turning all the knobs every which way, the result remaining the same, drip-drip-pause-drip-drip. He said that he would handle it and I said okay and hovered for an uncomfortable eight seconds. Then I padded out of the kitchen in my socks and waited in my bedroom, listening to the clinks and clanks and murmurs that sounded more distant than they actually were. After an hour they stopped. There was the squeak of his work boots, a knock on my bedroom door.

It's fixed, he said softly.

So I came out and we stood in the kitchen together. He reached out and turned one of the handles and the pipes groaned and a stream of water shot forth so violently that it splashed us both, speckling our t-shirts, raising the hairs on our arms.

Incredible, I said.

Is it? he asked.

I nodded and looked at his eyes set like stones in his face, the long lashes above them, the curve of his jawline, gentle as a boy's. How easy to conquer, I thought. How easy to make mine.

*

Some days here are better than others. Some days are even almost good. They're supposed to be good, that's what everyone tells me. You ask someone who was in Switzerland the semester before, Australia, Mongolia, Paraguay. Incredible, they say, life-changing. Now they have a Swiss girlfriend who speaks five languages. They have a new sense of style, wear button up shirts and jeans ripped in seven different places. They are skinnier, from all the walking they say. Their laptop is covered in stickers, their book bag in pins, their walls in photographs. I have one sticker, no pins, a handful of photographs taken on my crummy phone camera. I have exactly one Spanish friend and he barely speaks English. I've probably gained weight from all the smoking, but I don't know for a fact because I haven't shelled out the money for a scale.

I only know the Spanish guy because he is friends with my Italian roommate. His name is Diego and they're fuck buddies, I think. Sometimes he's sitting in the kitchen when I wake up, cradling a cup of coffee in his hands. The roommate, her name is Margherita like the pizza, bustles around making toast. "Buenos días," she says to me, and I smile and nod and cross my arms over my chest, conscious of my braless-ness, wondering if my nipples are visible through my t-shirt. The guy speaks better English than he does Italian, and once we had a full-fledged conversation while Margherita was in the shower.

"Do you like Spain?"

"I do."

"What do you like most?"

"I like the food."

"Everybody likes the food."

"I like the history."

"Why? You like dictaduras?"

"No, but they're interesting."

"American history is not?"

"It's okay," I said. "Comparatively there's not much."

"But that is nice," he said. "You are more new."

I shrugged. Dipped a galleta in my lukewarm coffee. I kept it submerged too long and it got soggy, one half breaking off and sinking down.

"You are modern," he said. "You make things instead of have things."

I shrugged again. I looked sadly down at my mug and the missing galleta half. "That's one way of looking at it," I said, but I'm not sure he understood because he started talking about American houses and cars and asked me if everyone has a yard with a flag hung up just like in the movies. Margherita emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a soft white towel, a trail of steam following behind her. "Ven," she said, smiling her stupid Italian smile and squeezing Diego's shoulder. He put his coffee mug in the sink with a clatter and waved at me as he left. I felt a pang in my chest. I turned on the television extra loud. It was set to the news, which it almost always is, and I looked at the snapshots and videos and subheadings without understanding. I sort of tried to piece it together. I googled some words on my phone, accepted others for what they were, ultimately just guessing.

*

We are at the river now, hugging close to its curves, looking out at the water which is as still and black as ink. Mostly we are alone. A bicyclist in neon green leggings breezes past. A group of students ahead are sprawled in the grass. Juno has to bring up the topic again.

"You know why people go to visit Slovakia?" she asks.

Bea and I shake our heads.

"They don't go to have fun," Juno says, "I'll tell you that much."

I bury my hands deep in the pockets of my jacket, suppressing the urge to snap her neck. Bea, who you can tell is still a lightweight, makes a rectangle with her thumbs and index fingers. She lifts it up and frames the moon, tilts her head. I marvel at her indifference to things.

"They go to learn something," Juno says. "They go to discover something about their own lives."

"Isn't that why anyone goes anywhere?" I ask.

"Yeah," Juno snorts. "Sure."

As we pass by the group of friends, one of them takes a rock and tries to skip it across the water. It doesn't bounce even once, just plunks immediately to the dark bottom. Another friend laughs at her. Another friend tries herself. She skips it easily six times across, maybe seven, does a small victory shuffle. They are dumb high school kids, I realize now, can tell by how hard they try to outdo one another. When I was a dumb high school kid, I used to loiter in the shopping mall. I used to trail behind groups of people that I barely knew, sipping on a smoothie, listening to the mundanity of their teenage interaction. Who kissed who, who looked at who funny, whose haircut made them a lesbian, where the party was. Not that I went to the party. Not that the party meant something to me. I reach down to pick up a stone, but I don't throw it across the water, just hold it in the center of my hand until the cool gloss of it turns warm.

"Most people," Bea says, "come here to get shitfaced and take pictures in castles, as far as I can tell." She halts mid-step, so that I almost run right into her. "Do they not have castles in Slovakia? Or alcohol?"

"Of course they do," Juno says. "It's just not what they're known for."

"So what they're known for is communism?" Bea asks. "That seems untrue."

"They're not even communist anymore," I say. "They're a republic." I'm only seventy-five percent sure that's right.

"Technically yes," Juno says, "but my cousin's friend's mom says that they've still got a lot of work to do."

"Fuck your cousin's friend's mom," I say.

"Damn." Juno holds her hands up in the air. "Chill out."

"She doesn't speak for an entire country," I say.

Then I try to chill out. I'm not sure where the rage comes from or why my face feels so hot or my head so light. Maybe I've finally reached the threshold of my tolerance for Juno's bullshit. Maybe I'm sick of people who pretend to know. Maybe I miss screaming at Randy and throwing stuff and causing scenes. Maybe I miss the dysfunction, its cyclic nature, its certainty. Maybe I miss Tex-Mex food and good reality television and my elderly dog who pisses herself when the doorbell rings.

"Sorry," I say and look down at my feet. They feel heavy, like the soles of my shoes are made of lead. When I look over my shoulder, I wonder how it is that they haven't left any mark, any holes in the ground or indentations in the concrete, how there's nothing at all.

"Whatever," Juno says. "Let's drop it."

The group of friends, now far behind us, laughs so loud that it's impossible not to hear it. The sound is like a knife scratching a pan. We pass under a bridge and the laughter is swallowed by the rumble of a car overhead.

"I'm hungry," Bea says. She places a hand on her stomach like a child.

"So then eat," I say.

*

Randy is not actually a psychopath. It was unfair of me to say so. He told me often that I say unfair things, to which I replied that his disliking a thing didn't make the thing unfair. We fought once over this. We fought many times over the same topics. Over music. Over television. Over the color scheme of his living room. We fought over how often we were fighting. All the time, he said. Almost never, I said. I think it was the theatrics that I liked so much. It was the power. It was the knowledge that no matter what I did, he would not leave me.

Our arguments escalated to the physical only a handful of times. One time, for example, I cheated on him with an electrician and he threw a dictionary at me from across the room. Another time, I cheated on him with a dishwasher and he spilled hot tea on my leg. You do it to feel like you're better than me! Like you're better than all of us! Oh please. The sex wasn't even good, I told him, don't get worked up about it. The burn from the tea hurt only a little bit. It left a smear of a raised scar on my thigh which I later built an attachment to and traced when I grew nervous. I felt disappointed almost when it faded away a few weeks later. I slept with the electrician one more time, but his entire home was like one blown fuse and the scent of its mess clung to me afterwards, in the mouth, in the hair, vaguely metallic. It was not enjoyable until he called me two nights later, begging me to come back. I didn't. I only listened to him hold his

breath on the other end of the line. Later I showed up at Randy's with a bottle of rosé and told him that I was leaving him. For who? A garbageman? A waiter? Europe, I said.

He took the wine glass that I had painted little flowers on for him and smashed it against the table. The wine inside pooled on the table's surface, dribbled off the ledge, seeped into the carpet. What the hell, I yelled and shoved him. We had sex for the last time there on the floor. His fingers buried themselves in my flesh, his mouth carved at my throat, and I woke the next morning raw, tugging shards of glass from my hair.

*

We go to the same place to eat that we usually do. It's a Middle-Eastern restaurant, small and tucked away, somewhat dirty and with few tables. The food is cheap and the portions large and speaking Spanish to the employees does not give me as much anxiety as it normally does. I tend to assume that we're both foreigners, even if we're not, that our language is equally broken, even when it isn't. I order a doner kebab for two euros fifty, slide the coins across the sticky linoleum countertop and say gracias. Bea and Juno order the same. We stand waiting, shifting from foot to foot, looking up at the television. The news is on. Politicians talk of one thing or the other. I struggle to keep up, even when I do research in English. Lack of knowledge about one past issue leads to lack of knowledge about one current issue which leads to an overall sense of hopeless disorientation. I think so, anyways. I point at the caption which scrolls slowly along the bottom of the screen.

"What does that mean?"

Bea and Juno shrug. It's okay because I wasn't expecting an answer. The only word I recognize is huida which means flee which was a bonus vocabulary word on my last exam. But who is fleeing and from what and where do they flee to? The screen shifts to an advertisement

for mascara and the man behind the counter calls out that our kebabs are ready. We take them and venture back into the streets, despite the cold, despite the fact that my hands were just beginning to flush red with new blood. It seems strange to stay inside, in that tiny box of a place with its slim stretch of countertop and orange tile floors. It seems not to suit us.

We sit on a nearby curb, the wind blowing strands of hair across my face, getting caught in the corners of my lips. I take a bite of the food, gnaw on a chunk of meat and bread and tomato. I feel a bit of sauce dribble down my chin and I wipe it off with the sleeve of my jacket. It's while doing this, my sleeve in front of my face, my cheeks ballooned out, sauce thick as blood on my face, that I see Diego walk by.

At first, I'm not sure it's him. He could be any random guy with a random leather jacket with his arm around a faceless girl, but actually the girl has a face, and her face is the same as Margherita's, and it is Margherita, the girl he has his arm around. They are discussing something serious, probably intellectual, probably the fleeing politician or the tenets of communism or the origins of life. It is hard to tell by their faces in the dim light of the streetlamps. A few other friends trail behind them, everyone walking slowly, everyone with seemingly no intention of going anywhere. Maybe they're somewhere already. Diego stares at me for a second, as if struggling to match face to memory, and then grins. I stand up.

"My favorite American!" he says in Spanish.

"My favorite Spaniard!" I say in English.

It's not necessary to say that we know only one American and one Spaniard respectively.

"How is your night?" he asks.

"Oh you know. It's dark."

He laughs. Margherita rolls her eyes, slides her hand into his back pants pocket. It looks uncomfortable. It has to be uncomfortable. Her arm is bent awkwardly so that her hand is at the right height for insertion in the pocket and the pocket itself is denim, rough, too small. She keeps her hand in anyways. I feel suddenly embarrassed of my eyes. They keep darting from the pocket to her to him to my shoes and back. They must be awful red. They must be wide like a child's. I open my mouth to say something but a gust of wind knocks the words out of me and I make a sound like strangulation. His eyes are black ponds in the lamplight, soft and thick and pitying.

"Do you want to go with us?" he asks.

"Go where?"

"Not here." He shrugs.

"I don't think I can."

"Why not?"

"Because." I crack my knuckles, twist my fingers. I kick at the curb with the tip of my shoe.

"Because why?"

I turn to look over my shoulder at Bea and Juno, still sitting on the curb with their kebabs. I look at their stupid snow boots, their glazed over eyes, how they're talking over each other, their voices melding into a mindless insistent buzz.

"Your friends can come too," Diego says.

"They aren't my— " I start to say, but I don't finish. "They don't want to come."

"Why not?"

"They aren't like you."

"They do not like me?"

"Yeah," I say after a pause, "that's it."

"Okay." Diego shrugs, confused. "Well, have a good night."

Then Margherita pulls him gently away, her hand still in the back pocket, his arm still on the waist. I watch them retreat into a side street, their friends lolling behind them, their backs passing through light and darkness and then light again. They are too lovely. They float almost, in a way I never could. I stay standing. Bea and Juno stand too.

"Are you going to eat that?" Juno asks, pointing at the food in my hand of which I've taken only one bite.

"No," I say and throw it onto the ground, onto her shoes.

*

Last week, Randy called me for the twentieth time since I left him. This time I chose not to answer, so he left a voicemail. It went on for several minutes and spiraled progressively out of control. By the end, he admitted that the blue hair is faded and gives the impression of a washed-up mermaid. He admitted that the thought of pancakes makes him dry heave. He admitted that he has never been capable of loving someone as much as he has hated me. Is that not what loving is? Then what? I listened to the voicemail six times before I deleted it.

That night, I dreamt that a shard of glass had lodged itself into my foot and dissolved there. Melted into me like a snowflake, turning my skin a violet blue that spread upwards, outwards, sheathing my entire body. When I woke up, I spent an hour in the bathroom with a flashlight, probing at my skin as softly as if it were a stranger's skin, trying to find where it hurt.

*

When I get back to my apartment, it is of course silent and dark. I can hear the refrigerator humming and the furnace churning and beneath me the neighbors playing music.

Even though it's warm inside, the cold lingers in my extremities, that tingling in the tips of my fingers and toes that means they are losing the ability to feel. I go into the kitchen without taking my shoes off. I put a kettle of water on to boil, take a yellow mug from the cabinet and rip open a tea bag with my teeth. I hover my palms over the stove, waiting.

When I broke up with Randy, he told me all the typical stuff. That I can't do any better even if I pretend I can. That I will regret this. That maybe we don't love each other really, but it's not possible for anyone to love anyone really, so take the consolation prize and be happy with it. Usually I think he is wrong, but sometimes I wonder. On my phone, I google pictures of Slovakia and see that they do have castles, that the castles are quite beautiful actually, that they don't look like communist castles anymore even if they used to. Still though. I don't know if I want to go there. Steam curls out from the kettle's mouth, and I reach to pour the water over the teabag. It is a nice feeling to wrap my hands around the mug, the heat sinking deep into the heart of my palms, pulsing almost. It is a nice feeling in its simplicity.

I take it and stand by the window in the living room, push the curtains to the side, look down at the street. It has started to rain sideways. A man with a giant broom sweeps the sidewalk, collecting stray wrappers and cigarette butts, the water running down and off his slick jacket. I feel bad for him for a second, but then I think that it must feel good. To keep the city clean. To maintain something. It's almost a luxury to be needed. I decide that tomorrow I will not apologize to Juno because I am not sorry, because I do not care about her ruined shoes. But I will show up at the stairs again. I will get high and eat little toasts layered with sliced ham, tomatoes, olive oil. I will stare into the closed shop windows, at the figurines and snow globes and miniature flags, at the shimmer of our reflections in the glass, and after a while I will tell us where to move on to. For now I just stand here looking out, until the mug of tea goes cool in my

hands, until the man and his broom disappear down an alleyway, leaving the sidewalk empty, leaving the tile sleek and glistening with the rain.

WISTERIA

"The charms of wisteria are almost impossible to resist. Lounging languorously over a fence or pergola, the perennial flowering vine will beckon to you with her heady perfume. Before you know it, her nodding, pendulous blooms have hypnotized you. Soon you are rushing to the nearest garden center, determined to own her, but be warned. This climber has a mind of her own." – Jeanne Rostaing

1.

On average, Jane thinks about Gabriel seventy-five times per day. She knows this statistic because every time she thinks about Gabriel, she makes a tick mark in a small notebook that she carries with her. This is a technique suggested by her therapist. The goal is to monitor her progress, to become larger than the tick marks, to prove to herself that life can be and should be and is more than tick marks. So far, the technique has a low success rate. In the past four months, the average amount of tick marks has decreased by only two-point-five, and even though her therapist assures her that two and a half steps forward are still a forward movement, Jane knows the truth. Jane knows that seventy-five ticks per day, give or take two-point-five, is pathetic.

Today when she wakes up, the early afternoon sun already pouring through the windows, her mother and father long since left for work, she goes to the bathroom. She splashes hot water on her face for three seconds and looks into the mirror. *You can do this,* she says, *you can do this and that and all of it.* She says it aloud, which is another of her therapist's techniques. It gives the words substance, and substance gives the words power, supposedly. Next she brushes her hair and puts on fuzzy slippers and makes her way to the kitchen downstairs.

The furthest she has ever made it without a tick mark is drinking an entire mug of coffee and preparing her toast. It was the strawberry jelly that did it, how it was the exact same shade of

pink that his face turned when he tripped up the stairs or made a joke that no one laughed at. He was so endearing that way. He was so pathetic. They both were, still are most likely, despite the distance now between them, despite her being here in this house and him across the state in some other one, despite all the days that have passed since she broke it off with him – 256, to be exact.

By the time she pours the coffee grounds into the filter, she is already two tick marks deep. The hardest part is not to wonder what he is doing. If he is asleep or awake, in the shower or in the street, drinking coffee or drinking tea or molding clay with the rough of his hands. The shape of those hands. The shape of his body arched over the potter's wheel. She thinks about his apartment with all of its shelves, the ceramic mugs and plates and bowls, glazed with soft colors and fired until they gleamed. She thinks about his bedroom and the windowsill lined with plants, the basil and small vegetables that grew, how the flesh of the cherry tomatoes burst between their teeth. She misses that place. She misses those nooks and those scents and the noises of the neighbors above or below. Mostly she misses Gabriel himself, how pink his face turned when he stepped on her toes as they danced.

The coffee drip-drip-drips into her mug, and when it is almost full she adds a splash of cream, stirs it with a tiny silver spoon that clinks against the sides. The sound echoes in the oversized house. The space is too much for her body. She has been living with her parents several months now, since her graduation from arts school in May, and with every passing minute her failure seems to expand, multiplying itself as if this house were a breeding ground. She is flattened beneath it. Standing up is hard. There have been mornings that she did not get out of bed at all, and it was not the good kind of lazy, not the kind that she had experienced with Gabriel, when they stayed tucked beneath the sheets from sunrise until sunset, basking in the warmth of the other's body.

They had spent many a day like that. Laying this way and then the other way. Kissing the ear and the forehead and the lips. Come here, he was always saying, come closer. Sometimes it seemed that no matter how close Jane got, it was not close enough. She sat on his lap or hooked her legs around his back or lay flat on his chest and nuzzled her head beneath his neck. Closer, he said. They laid there and listened to the pitter-patter of rain on the window, the music that he played on the speakers, their own heartbeats. They did not get up even to eat, their hunger lacking urgency, their bodies sunk deep into the pillows. What did she need really? What else could she need?

That feeling was a different feeling than what she feels now. These days, she stays in bed not because she is happy or the desires are fulfilled. These days, she sleeps herself numb and avoids all confrontation, however minimal it may seem, however mundane. Even the grocery store brings her anxiety. Even talking on the phone to make an appointment. More than once, her therapist has suggested that she leave. That she escape the city in which all of the hurtful memories are housed. That a change of scenery does a woman good. Jane thinks it sounds lovely in theory and would be miserable in practice. She could not handle it.

Just a few days ago, she had a breakdown at the shopping mall. A salesclerk was too pushy at the home and garden store. All Jane had wanted was to return a tin watering can which she had bought Gabriel as a birthday present but never given him. She wanted to return the watering can so that she could stop accidentally finding it when she rummaged through the junk in her closet, but the salesclerk pushed and pushed until she emerged with an even larger watering can. Also a variety of succulent which grows well indoors. Also a guidebook on taking care of the succulent and a twenty percent off coupon for her next visit. She cried in the car for

twenty minutes, trying to build up the courage to go back inside, but in the end she drove home. Now the succulent lives on the corner of her desk.

All that to say that Jane cannot handle a whole lot right now. Least of all movement. Least of all touch. Even to take the bus into the city is an activity which induces stress. Her sleeve against a pole, her shoulder against the wall, her arm against another arm. When she breathes too close to the window, the glass fogs up and this disgusts her. Her own breath disgusts her, and she doesn't understand why. Her therapist does not have many ideas either.

"I don't get it I don't get it I don't get it," Jane had wailed in their last appointment. "Why do I hate myself?"

The therapist was patient, soothing, rubbing her shoulder while she sobbed into a wad of tissues. Then the therapist gave Jane a list of exercises meant to promote an environment conducive to self-love. She is supposed to be kind to herself. She is supposed to buy flowers or eat dark chocolate or have a glass of wine before bed, for example. She is supposed to take bubble baths and say nice things about her body when she looks in the mirror. Jane doesn't understand. Jane thinks it sounds like advice for a pregnant woman. Jane wonders at times if she might be pregnant. Of course, that is impossible. Of course, more than 256 days have passed since the last time that she had sex. But still. She feels fat and irritable. She feels that all the little tasks are challenges. To make them easier, she turns them into lists.

Taking her mug of coffee up to her bedroom, she sits down at her desk and looks at the succulent that she did not want, resting peaceably in its pot. She removes her note pad with her lists from its proper drawer, which is different from the notebook with the tick marks, but which she sometimes gets confused about. So many places in which the complications of her insignificant ailments are attended to. On her list for today are only three things. To get dressed.

To eat a vegetable. To find a job. She starts, as her therapist recommends, with the small tasks first. She slips her sweater over her head, inserting one arm at a time.

2.

Jane finds a job. It takes her only twelve days of dedicated searching, but those twelve days seem to her an eternity. Time lately has a way of doing magic, expanding and condensing at once. As a little girl, time had been so hard to keep track of. The days slid by without her conscious recognition, the sky shifting from color to color before she had a chance to look outside. Now the hours drag their feet and kicks rocks. Now she checks the clock constantly, wondering if it is acceptable yet to eat dinner, to shower, to go to bed. She wills the night to come faster.

When she gets the job at Mr. Polanco's Craft Emporium, she cries. The job is not a good job, but it comes with a paycheck. It comes with a schedule. She wears her nametag and knots her slimming black apron behind her back. She operates the cash register with its little buttons and dings. She memorizes the contents of each aisle – acrylic paints in seven, ceramics in nine, scrapbooking in five. Twice a week, she leads painting workshops for beginners. It is not an unpleasant job. Mr. Polanco is a not an unpleasant boss. Some evenings when it is slow, he brings her a fruit pie from the stand down the road, roasted apple or peach or blueberry. They chat.

He is an eccentric man who wears eccentric button-up shirts. Bright blues and greens and pinks, flamingos and toucans and exotic plants. He talks a lot about alternative medicine and bicycling. Jane imagines that he smoked a lot of weed as a teenager. Now in his mid-thirties, his dark hair is strewn with salt and his face is gaunt from the malnutrition. The television dinners

and the watery beers and the nights when he arrives home so exhausted that he forgets to eat anything at all. Life of a bachelor, he calls it. Once or twice, he has fallen asleep in the back of the store, in his studio, surrounded by half-finished nature paintings, a brush still gripped in the hand.

When Jane walks into work today, Mr. Polanco is sitting on his barstool, bobbing his head along to the elevator music that plays over the loudspeakers. He nods at her as she enters.

"There's a birthday party today," he informs her. "Teacup painting."

"What time?"

"Six."

"How many?"

"Fifteen."

"Oh."

"You going to quit?"

"Maybe." But she clocks in.

Mr. Polanco knows how Jane feels about children, as they have talked about it a handful of times. Her feeling is that she does not want them, and to put it that way is to put it lightly. To be a mother would destroy her.

When she first made the decision to lose her virginity with Gabriel, Jane spent many months in a state of paranoia. That is to say, she lay awake long after they turned the lights off. She lay awake in a puddle of her own cold sweat, her heart sinking like an anchor through the mattress. She could not move. She started to see things that weren't there and feel things for no reason. The shadows on the wall became letters that taunted her. Whore, they said. Dirty slut, the ceiling fan called her. The bathroom faucet leaked but stopped leaking as soon as she got up to

fix it. In her abdomen grew a torrent of fears, and often one rose to the surface, kicked hard enough to leave her gasping, leave her grasping at the soft folds of her belly's skin.

She convinced herself many times that she was pregnant. Usually with very little evidence. If she had a backache. If she peed more than four times in the same day. If she wanted chocolate, if she wanted sleep, if she snapped at the cashier for suggesting she get a rewards card when all rewards cards are scams and she would lose it anyways, like how she loses most of her quasi-important possessions. Irritability was a symptom. Being alive was a symptom. Being a woman. She researched abortion methods on her phone beneath the sheets, the glow of the screen making her eyes burn.

When Jane first told Mr. Polanco about not wanting to have kids, he told her that the people who say they don't want kids are the ones who get the most of them. "The world is cruel like that," he said with a shrug, turning back towards the display of three-dimensional stickers that he was stocking. Jane didn't call him a liar. Jane didn't say that she would have shoved a clothes hanger inside her body, had it come to that. Mr. Polanco himself had one kid, a seventeen-year-old girl who lived all the way in Montgomery, Alabama with her mother, a girl conceived in the bathroom of a nightclub while her parents were tripping on acid.

"It's a beautiful story," he confided, "but a shame that she'll never hear it."

"Do you ever visit her?" Jane asked.

He only laughed.

"Why not?"

"Because." Then he shook his head like it was no big deal – men were always doing such things. "It's late now."

Jane shrugged. It seemed to her an illogical excuse. It seemed to her that he simply did not want a family, that he was content with his life of minimal attachment, like the wolves or the rose bushes or the moons that he painted. In a strange way, she found it admirable. A guy with no marks to tick. A guy with no other guy around which to shape his existence.

"I think I'm going to head out early today," he says now, sliding off his stool.

Jane tries to hide her disappointment, how much she dreads an entire shift alone in this place, this store with its too-high ceilings and squeaky linoleum floors.

"What? You have a date or something?" she asks.

"I do actually," he says, untying his apron and balling it up in one fist, "with the pizza delivery guy and my couch."

"What a lucky man." She sits on the stool in front of her register, fiddles with the edge of her apron.

It is only once Mr. Polanco is gone, his things collected, the door above the bell ringing twice in the wake of his departure, that the anxiety returns. The store is too quiet, her breath within it too loud. She busies herself with the paintbrush display by the register, organizing according to shape and then size and then color of the handle. She wonders what Gabriel would think of her, if he could see her right now, if he could see her in that apron with that nametag. It was what he expected probably. That she didn't have it in her. That her art alone wouldn't be enough.

They first met in a still life class in their first semester of art school, during which they drew an absurd number of pear baskets in different lighting arrangements. Their professor was a conservative man who wore ill-fitting suits and smelled always of potato leek soup. One time, he took a girl's watercolor pear painting and tore it in half right in front of everybody. "This simply

will not do," he said and ripped it, letting both halves flutter like wings to the floor. Jane covered her own watercolor with her hands as if to shield it, while Gabriel only snickered. "It's three pears in a basket," he whispered to her, "how bad can it be?" So she laughed too.

How small he made it all seem. How insignificant. It had felt good then, to be small, to be insignificant, a speck of paint in the background of this large thing, one half of a piece of paper floating to the ground. It was later that such sentiments began to hurt. She once spent five weeks on a single drawing of a bicycle laying on the side of a dirt road. Grass climbing up through its rusty spokes. A crow circling in the dusty blue sky. Gabriel only scoffed. He could have made that when he was nine, he told her. She could do so much better! If she just pushed herself! If she just went outside the box! She shoved the drawing under her bed and cried until her eyes were so dry that it hurt to blink.

Now, an assistant arts expert at Mr. Polanco's Craft Emporium, Jane is overwhelmed by her own insufficiency. Jane did not push herself. Jane stayed within her boxes like a little girl playing hopscotch. Sometimes his voice still echoes in the back of her mind, so close that she shivers, that it's like he's right there. She takes out her notebook and adds seven ticks, which is only an estimate really. Her thoughts continue to race, circling, circling, just like they used to on those nights when she could not sleep, when the furniture spoke to her, when she thought she felt the baby kick.

On those nights, she snuck to the convenience store down the street from Gabriel's apartment, with the harsh lighting and the pink tile floor. She bought a pregnancy test and a hot dog, as if that could hide the pregnancy test somehow. The results of the test were negative always. They took precautions, after all. Jane kept her magic pills in an old mint tin, after all,

took one at the same time every afternoon. Jane still couldn't sleep. The walls still spoke to her, still made it difficult to breathe.

"If you're nervous, we don't need to have sex at all," Gabriel told her.

"I know."

"There's no reason to feel pressured."

"I know."

"It doesn't mean anything if you need to wait. I'll still love you the same."

"I know I know I know."

She did know. She believed that he told the truth, but she continued to let him moan and touch her and leave bruises on her neck in the dark. The paranoia, she assumed, would fade with time, like a child's fear of the basement. Mostly, that is what happened. The incessant paranoia dwindled into waves of paranoia, coming and going and churning, a sort of nausea that she grew used to.

By the time that the birthday party arrives, Jane is relieved. There have been only two customers since Mr. Polanco left and neither of them were the needy type. They only bought their felt-tip markers and their stationary and they left. The children arrive in a horde, chattering and jittery, led by a mother with undereye circles and a worn t-shirt that falls to her knees and several plastic bags full of cupcakes.

"We're here for the party," she says, but she does not say it like she is here for a party.

Jane leads them all towards the backroom, above which a sloppy happy birthday banner hangs, one corner tacked up higher than the other. Inside there are three tables, five pre-made teacups placed on each one, along with an assortment of paints. There is a tiara for the birthday girl, who sits beaming at the table closest to the front, comparing various shades of purple. Jane

gives the brief speech about cleanliness and care and having fun, then sits down on a stool in the corner to make sure nobody breaks anything. One boy paints blue and yellow stripes. One girl paints the whole cup red. The birthday girl decides on lavender polka dots, forming each one with delicate strokes, her tongue stuck partway out with concentration. Polka dots? Gabriel would scoff at that girl too. How unoriginal, how predictable, how easy to forget. Jane sometimes wonders which one of them would have been the worse parent.

There was one time when her period came eight days late. This was early in the summer, when they had been dating for over a year already, when the days dragged and the sun was hot and the suburb was so small. She thought for certain that was it for her. She began to part ways with her selfhood. She stood many minutes naked in front of the mirror, running her hands up and down her hips, watching them widen and widen. Her hair piled atop her head. Her face without make-up. The bags under her eyes large enough to fit every opportunity that the baby stole. She paced through the house, up and down the hallways, considering the clothes hangers, considering the clinics. She felt herself losing it, whirling outwards like a spinning top, like a toy she could find in a children's marshmallow cereal. Everything she saw during those eight days reminded her of children's cereal, of children's fingers sticky with sugar, in boxes and in mouths.

Her panic reached a climax at the grocery store. Her mother sent her there on an errand, and babies were everywhere. The shopping carts were like playgrounds, children sitting in them and pushing them and latching onto their sides, riding them like scooters down the aisles. It was so loud. The rush of the wheels, the giggles, the scanners going off. She went for the milks, the eggs, the breads. She threw items at random into the cart, grabbing from the shelves whatever was on sale. She made little eye contact, fearing that the truth could be seen, that the dirt would show. When someone spoke suddenly behind her, she was so startled she dropped a jar of

boysenberry jam, the glass shattering, the jam smearing everywhere. The purplish red staining the floor. It looked like what she imagined her insides did. She apologized and apologized and apologized to a nearby employee until he finally told her to please just calm down already, there's no need to pay for it, a jar of jam is hardly a happening to cry over.

Ten minutes later, she was in the car with her purchases, attempting to breathe. She thought about having to return to the store several months later. Her stomach ballooned outwards. Her ankles swollen, her back sore. The way that employee would look at her, at that girl who couldn't even save a jam jar. She didn't know what he would think of her. She didn't want to know. She wanted to be in a different body, one that was her own, one that had never been invaded. For a long time, she did not move, her head on the steering wheel, her back rising and falling without rhythm, other cars pulling out and moving around her.

When her period finally came, she muffled her sobs in the bathroom hand towel and never told Gabriel about any of it.

The children sing happy birthday at the top of their lungs, and it startles Jane so that she nearly falls off her seat. The party is an hour long, but it is over before Jane knows it. Aren't all birthdays that way? They come and they go and you age, the days morphing into years, how both everything and nothing changes at the same time. She instructs the children to place their teacups on a rack in the back of the room, so that they can dry, so that they can eventually be put into a kiln. One kid asks loudly what a kiln is, but Jane pretends not to hear her. She stands in the back of the room to help the short kids reach. Then the blue-yellow-stripe boy steals the birthday girl's teacup and a scuffle ensues.

"It's mine! Give it back!"

"What for?"

"It's not yours! Give it back!"

"It's ugly anyways."

"You're ugly!"

The boy waves the teacup above her head, too high for her to grab, even when she stands on her tip toes, even when she jumps up and down, waving her arms like a crazy person. Jane looks toward the mother, who stands out in the store, talking on the phone. She feels hot all of a sudden. She rushes warm with the rage. Little boys are the worst, thinking they can take whatever they please from whomever they please, thinking that they own all of the world's teacups. She strides forward and snatches the cup out of the boy's grubby hand.

"Never!" She yells it louder than she intended to. "You never do that again!"

The room falls silent. The mother peers in from outside, pulling the phone away from her ear. The little boy's eyes go wide, grow watery. He is nine years old at the most.

"Just put your cups on the rack, please," she says, quietly this time.

The mother makes all of the kids say thank you to Jane in unison, and then they are gone, slipping out through the front door and leaving her in silence again. She wets a rag and wipes down the tables. She rinses the brushes one by one in the large sink, the paint running over her fingers, staining her skin purple, blue, red. The water pounds against the metal basin and she shakes the image of the little boy from his head. How he did not know anything. How he had not meant to hurt a thing.

3.

There are times when Jane is so lonely, she wants to die. It may sound like an exaggeration, but it isn't. The small sights are what drive her insane. Held hands. Two straws in one drink. Someone putting her head on his shoulder. Jane's hands are so cold. She can't handle

an empty bus stop, how frigid the bench is, how lifeless the night. She would rather die there than wait. She would rather die than stand there with her own thoughts, circling, circling always, like predator pursuing prey. This is only a part of the recovery process, her therapist claims. It is normal to feel lonely. It is normal to miss a person, even if that person was occasionally horrible. Is it normal to want to die? Not exactly, but it is normal to think that you might want to. Jane sighed and fiddled with her hands in her lap. She gets tired of the therapist's bullshit sometimes. She starts to wonder about the legitimacy of psychology degrees.

To get from Mr. Polanco's Craft Emporium to her home, she has to take the bus, an obligation which fills her with dread. She and Gabriel used to take the bus together, and it did not fill her with quite this much dread then. They took the bus together, they went to the store together, they shared a bag of gummy bears from which he ate all the cherry and she the pineapple. One night, they ate dinner at his apartment. That night turned into another night which turned into more nights, layering one over the other like coats of paint, until what lay below could barely be seen and nothing could be told apart. She started to spend the night there, waking up in borrowed clothing, in t-shirts that fell to her knees, sweatpants that dragged along the floor collecting dust. Her own bed began to feel too big for her body. It hurt to throw the red gummy bears away. When they took the bus together, he always gave her the window seat.

She still takes the window seats, but now it feels like a gamble. Anybody could sit down next to her. Anybody in the whole world. Tonight, standing at the bus stop alone, in a jacket too light for the autumn chill, she is struck with the urge to call him. No no no. She shakes her head, but fingers the phone in her pocket. Her therapist tells her that whenever she feels this urge, she must suppress it. She must make a small list in her head, or on paper with her other lists, of all the reasons why she cannot go back to him. There is, of course, the possessiveness. There is the

belittling. There is the time that she went out to a bar after class with some friends and did not tell him. Where were you? How dare you? I needed you. How he threw the tomato plant at his wall, the smash of the pot, the sound that rung for hours in her broken ears.

It was not okay, her therapist had affirmed for her. That behavior was not a sign of love. It was a sign that if she were not careful, she would become the tomato plant, she would become the smashed, her pieces littering the floor like ceramic shards. Yet it was all so hard. Yet she found this metaphor confusing, because she knew for a fact that Gabriel did love his tomato plant. Possibly even more so than he loved her. He watered it with care. He turned it every few days so that each side was equally exposed to the sun. He played it classical piano on his speakers, having read somewhere that music makes a plant grow stronger. What if it was natural to break a thing even if you cared for it? Especially if? Jane returns to the watercolor pear painting, the two halves falling to the ground. Maybe if that professor did not rip it apart, then the world would have. There is the time that Gabriel broke the tomato plant against the wall, but there is also the time he sang to her in the street. The times he took her grey mess of a life in his warm hands and molded it into something bearable.

She is holding her phone, scrolling through the list of contacts, when she hears it. A man singing a few blocks down the road. She feels an immediate pang in her chest. The song is one she doesn't recognize, the voice warbled and drunken but familiar still. She looks to the left and sees him stumbling towards her down the street, in his classic button-up shirt, bright red and covered in large seahorses. Mr. Polanco grips a streetlamp and swings himself around it, looking upwards at the moon. When he lets go, he teeters there a second before collapsing onto the cold of the concrete sidewalk.

"Are you alright?" Jane runs over, grabbing him by the bicep and attempting to pull him to his feet. He doesn't budge, just turns his head towards her. His jaw is slack, his eyes glossy and unfocused. "Mr. Polanco?"

"Jane," he says. "Do you want to know something?"

"I want to know what you're doing outside."

"No, something else."

"It's really cold."

"My daughter has hazel eyes."

"Okay?"

"Just like mine." He grabs Jane by the hand and tugs, so she sits down. "Did you know that?"

"I didn't."

"It's sort of beautiful, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so." He chuckles.

In the distance, Jane can hear the rumble of the bus approaching, the purr of the engine. She wants to go home, but Mr. Polanco is still gripping her hand.

"You know, Jane," he says, locking his hazel eyes on her green ones, his breath reeking of rum. "I always sleep with the radio on, even though I hate the radio. Just to fill the silence with sound. The nothing with something."

The bus pulls up to the stop, but when the driver opens the doors, Jane shakes her head no. The door slides shut, and the bus roars off into the distance. She realizes that he has started to

cry silent tears, and her body feels awkward all of a sudden. Like it doesn't know where to put itself.

"There's so much nothing in the world," he says, "so much."

Jane just nods. A moment passes. He sniffles. She stands up, shaking the dirt off her jeans, extending a hand down towards him. "Let's get you home," she says.

So they walk together. His apartment is only five blocks away. Inside, it looks like a storm has swept through. Wrappers litter the floor. Empty soda cans, bowls with hardened remnants of food. Artwork strewn in every available space. There are photographs hung in frames, sculptures of indecipherable objects on the tables, canvases in stacks. On the wall is a painting of a vine with luscious purple blossoms, curled up around a tree like a hand. She remembers having seen a vine like that in real life before, in the woods down the street, in the park that she used to walk to every evening as a kid. It had started as a small thing, curled around the base of a metal fence, but it grew as the days passed. It stretched around and over and under until it covered nearly everything, until the fence was the vine and the vine was the fence. It was beautiful only when it flowered.

The vine in the painting hanging on Mr. Polanco's wall is flowering and therefore lovely. Jane wants to keep it. Jane opens her mouth to tell him so, but he has already passed out on the couch. She is reminded of Gabriel, how she could never close her eyes until he did, how she could not feel calm unless he was there, how when they broke up, she had to relearn how to sleep. Sometimes she feels so lonely that she wants to die, but other times she feels so lonely that she wants to live. For herself and for herself only. So that all of it belongs to her.

Tonight Jane takes the bus alone, watches while the city shoots past the windows like a bullet. There is nobody else present really, only her and the man driving, only the shadows of

people standing in doorways, their barely discernible outlines. She sees a flowerbox full of dead things. She sees a vine crawling up a building, a dandelion poking up through a crack in the sidewalk. She sees her own face, reflected in the glass. The bus goes so fast that she feels pulled in all the directions simultaneously, her limbs entangled in the night, her body lost to the darkness. Like all of her is uprooted at once.

STARVE

The first time I met her, I almost missed her. That's how small she was. She leaned up against the brick wall, skinny as a chopstick or a playing card, something that the breeze could knock over. My friend Nadia introduced me to her. This is her classmate Cleo, she told me, the one who plays the cello and wears lace tights and shows up late to every lecture. We had talked about her before apparently. I had no recollection.

"Hi," Cleo said, sliding away from the wall like a sticker we peeled towards us.

"Hi," I said back.

Then Nadia kept talking about whatever it was that Nadia always talked about and my eyes darted back and forth between our shoes. This was at the feminist club meeting. Technically it was the Support Group for Women's Emotional, Physical, and Spiritual Empowerment (SGWEPSE) but no one called it that because it was absurd. We met every Tuesday at 5PM in the basement of St Paul's Memorial Church. It was a drippy place that smelt of mildew and withering paper, just like Pittsburgh itself. There were webs strung between the ceiling rafters, and some days a spider descended in the middle of our chair circle, flailing its legs in the air. We talked for about an hour, maybe an hour and a half. Afterwards we ate snacks and drank gritty coffee or lemonade from those gallon-sized convenience store jugs. It was a new organization, without funds, with only twelve women including me and zero men.

That week it was Harper leading it. I remember because the conversation was exceptionally dry and littered with un-funny jokes and it drudged on for half a century. All throughout it, I kept glancing over at Cleo without meaning to, without thinking about it. I guess I was watching for how she reacted to things. Like how much or how little she smiled, how she leaned forward when certain people spoke and backward when others did. Her body was like a

compass needle, so thin and slight and easy to follow. Her shoulders were sharp, her hips too, jutting out from her jeans which were torn at the knee and thigh. Slits of her skin showed like light cast through half-open blinds. Her hair was rose gold, almost strawberry, tumbling thick over her shoulders. Mostly I noticed her eyes. They were big like fishbowls, the pupils two pebbles sunk within them. She spoke not at all during that first meeting and very little during all the rest. She liked to listen, she would tell me later, and I would know that it was true. Not like how some people said it, when what they really meant was that they liked to act as if they liked to listen, because this made them seem better than they were.

When the clock finally hit 6pm, Harper announced that we would have to call it quits on the day's conversation so that we could eat snacks before meditation club came in and started laying their mats out by our feet. That day there were brownies, the dense kind that came wrapped in plastic and with fat rainbow sprinkles dotting the top. I took two, along with a paper cup of lemonade. It felt like middle school, the sugar breath, the decaying teeth.

I sat like normal in between Sam and Yeji, who talked over me about their 400-level gender studies seminar on intersectionality, their professor with a double nose piercing and a crocodile tattoo creeping up the side of her neck. Most of the people in the club majored in gender studies, if not then classics or philosophy or politics. I was the only marketing major, and I could tell that the others wondered what I was doing there. Not in a bad way. Not like they wanted me out so much as they were curious why I wanted to be in. I was curious about that too. So anyway I sat there like normal next to Sam and Yeji, absorbing half of what was said, contributing little. I glanced over at Cleo as much as I could without seeming conspicuous. I eavesdropped.

She was doubling in gender studies and poetry, I heard her tell Harper and Nadia, the people whom she was sandwiched between. They nodded fast, making twittering noises of approval. I wondered if she was rich or if her parents were hippies. She took just coffee at first, warmed her hands around it as if it were the crux of winter when it was, in fact, the first month of classes. When she finally slipped her brownie from its crinkling packaging, she only nibbled at the edges, prying the sprinkles from the top with her fingernails and popping them into her mouth one by one. She threw the rest into the trash.

When the leader of the meditation club came in like some warrior princess, her hair in two French braids that fell past her shoulder blades, we all folded up our chairs and stacked them in the back corner. While struggling to lift her chair up onto the top of the stack, Cleo hit me with her bony elbow. Or not exactly hit. More like touched, grazed even, just enough to raise goosebumps. She told me sorry and I told her it was okay. Then I said goodbye and took the stairs two at a time to get out, not sure what my hurry was, what I was trying to get away from.

*

The office where I intern after graduation is in the heart of the city. I have to take two buses and a trolley to get there, then walk five blocks. Most mornings I don't mind so much. The streets are silent at that hour, the red of dawn licking like a flame at the still-black sky. I listen to music or sit in my mundane thoughts, rocking side to side with the motion of the bus or the second bus or the trolley. I like to look out the window at everything. The commuters in their suits. The students with their backpacks. The mothers and fathers pushing strollers down the sidewalk, the elderly reading newspapers on the bench. I like to be behind the glass, to see without being seen, like the city is a zoo and the citizens its animals.

The rest of the day, I spend in a small and windowless place, where there is not much to look at and only so much to do. It smells stale in there, as if even the air has expired.

*

When it came to roommates, I always had bad luck. Freshman year it was a sleepwalker who reorganized our toiletries at 3am. Sophomore year it was a drunk who puked in my suitcase and lied about it. Junior year it was a non-person, which is to say that without her boyfriend she would have ceased to exist. I can't prove it but I'm certain that he spilled coffee on my wireless speaker and that's the reason why it crackles now. So by senior year, I had given up. When my new roommate was a kleptomaniac who had loud sex in a variety of unique times and places, I was anything but surprised. My lipstick disappeared. Then my French press. Then the lava lamp I had gotten at a consignment shop, and with it my sanity. It was around November when I decided that something had to be done.

"Move in with me," Cleo said. "I need a roommate."

"Really?"

"Really." She shrugged.

We were sitting on the steps outside the church, an hour or so before the feminist club meeting was due to start. I had come early because the aforementioned roommate was participating in shower sex, banging on the wall, squeaking up against the tile, hums and moans, etc. etc. I preferred to sit on the cold concrete steps, smoking cigarettes and kicking at dead leaves, rather than listen to them for a second longer. I don't know why Cleo was there. We weren't even good friends yet, only the kind would nod at one another if we passed by on the street. Maybe a hello if the context demanded it. But for some reason, when she sat down next to me on the steps, I told her all about the lipstick and the French press and the sanity.

"My roommate's graduating early," she said. "I can't afford the rent."

"Oh," I said.

"Besides I get real lonely. I don't think I could live by myself."

"Me neither."

It felt like a lie at first, but it was actually, when I thought about it later, pretty true. Even the shittiest of roommates were, at some point in time, a comfort. The sound of their breathing late at night, the mundanity of our conversations, the good nights and good mornings that I counted on, like little bookends on either side of the day.

"What's wrong with you though?" I asked Cleo.

"A lot of things," she said, then pointed at my cigarette. "Can I have one?"

"You'll ruin your teeth," I said.

She shrugged.

"Your breath will smell bad. You might get twitchy."

She shrugged again.

"Don't blame me later." I took the box out of my jacket pocket and she took one.

"I never blame anyone but myself."

We exchanged phone numbers to make our roommate agreement official. Then we sat there together like dragons until the meeting started, puffing poison out into the air.

*

I stopped smoking when I got the job that I have now. It was too complicated a habit to keep up with since my cubicle is located on the tenth floor and there are no convenient windows to open or parking lots to slip out into. Also, my boss caught me once in the supply closet. With a cigarette. With a small electric fan that I got for a buck fifty at the pharmacy down the road. I

would take a hit and fan the smoke away, take a hit and fan it away, over and over again. It was exhausting, and I was glad to get found out.

"I don't want to see this again," he said.

"You won't," I said.

My thumb was still holding the on button of the fan, so that the tiny plastic blades went whir-whir-whir. He took a box of paperclips from the shelf behind me, his hand brushing my waist in the process. I let the button go.

"I'm sorry," I said, but he was already gone, closing the door shut behind him. The supply closet was musty. It had a single light bulb and mountainous reams of paper which I sat on for the next twenty-three minutes, wallowing. I went back to work.

At 5PM that same day, I threw my remaining cigarettes and the fan into the dumpster behind our building. The fan made a cracking sound, like it had broken in half against the metal. I walked down to the same aforementioned pharmacy and bought four packs of nicotine gum. The cashier had hair that shimmered like gold, so that from the back she almost kind of maybe looked like Cleo.

*

I moved in with her right before the winter vacation. It was the earliest possible time that made sense. Her apartment was much more spacious than my previous one had been, organized with more attention, decorated with posters of the bands she liked and souvenir shot glasses from a variety of beaches. There were lamps which she favored over the ceiling lights and throw pillows which she favored over the couch.

"Welcome to my humble abode," she said, grinning like a boy, crooked and careless. "Now known as our humble abode."

It was not until that first month of living together that two things became apparent. One was that I felt for Cleo a feeling that I had no word for. The other was that Cleo did not eat. I could not wrap my head around the reason why. She was not fat. Her childhood photos, which I resurfaced via some brief internet stalking, did not suggest that she had ever been. There was no mention of a neurotic mother who forbade her from sugary cereals or French fries as a kid, no sign of similar trauma. All I knew was that she did not eat, that her stomach was not flat like a plain but concave like a valley, sunk between her hip bones.

"Are you hungry?" I started asking with frequency.

Also: "Do you want some?"

Also: "Are you sure?"

Also: "Wow it tastes so good."

Every once in a while, she fell for it, took a potato chip or an apple or a bite of a sandwich, but other times she saw right through me. It was like a game we never spoke of. Mostly we stuck to less confrontational subject matter, like our classes, like other people from feminist club, like the future. Those three areas gave us hours of material and for hours we dissected them, laid amongst the throw pillows, nudging one another with socked feet. There was no fireplace, but we played a video of a fireplace on the television and scooted close.

"What's the point?" she asked once.

"Of what? Life?"

"The feminist club."

"Oh." I clutched one of the pillows to my chest and stared at the ceiling. "I dunno."

"It's not like we ever really do anything."

"Yeah."

"There's no protests or marches or whatever. We just chat and eat cookies."

"Yeah." I paused. "Is that bad?"

"I guess it's not. I still kind of like it for some reason."

"Yeah, me too."

"It's comforting. It's like a little community."

"Exactly." I twisted my neck to look at her, but her eyes were closed. "A weird little community."

The fake fireplace made crackly noises. The scent of frozen pizza unthawing wafted in from the kitchen. Upstairs our neighbors thumped and outside the wind thrashed, scattering trash about the city streets.

"Besides it's exhausting to do things all the time," Cleo said, her eyelids flickering open. "I get sick of doing things. Or doing things makes me sick. I dunno." Our gazes met, and her eyes were like glossy marbles I wanted to keep warm in my hands. "Sometimes I just want to sit down and have a good communal cry, you know?"

I nodded. My hand itched to move closer to hers and I let it, only a little bit. I don't know if hers moved too or if I imagined it.

"I think your pizza is burning," she said.

"Fuck," I said.

It was burnt, but only at the edges, on the crust. I flaked off the burnt parts with a knife and piled several pieces onto a paper plate. I asked her if she was hungry, if she wanted some, if she was sure. She answered no, no thanks, yes. I folded a piece in half and took a bite. A strand of cheese dangled over my lip and when I sucked it up real loud Cleo laughed.

"What?" I said with my mouth still full. "I'm a sexy pizza model."

"You have grease all over your chin." She took a tissue from the tissue box on the coffee table and dabbed at my face. The almost-touch of her cold fingers, that cold against the tissue against my cheek, was a sensation that I folded up like a note, kept for days in my back pocket.

"Wow it tastes so good," I said, but that night I knew I had lost the game.

We sat there a while, me eating the pizza, her watching me eat the pizza, not saying much of anything. I liked that we didn't talk about the weather just for the sake of saying something. I liked the spaces we left blank. Eventually she got up to get her notebook and pens. She was very particular about her notebook and pens. Once I asked to borrow one, and even though she let me, she was all touchy about it. Like she thought I might use up all the ink or break it in half on purpose.

"What are you writing about?" I asked like I always asked.

"A bird," she said.

"What kind of bird?"

"A cardinal."

"Does it fly south for the winter?"

"No. It runs into a sliding glass door, over and over again."

"Oh." I gnawed on my pizza crust. "Then what?"

"It dies." She looked up from the page. "Then it's covered by snow and no one in the house even notices until the springtime, by which point the bird is a rotting carcass."

"Oh." I put the pizza crust down. "That's sad."

"Yeah." She stared into the artificial flames on the TV. "It happens a lot."

Then I told her the story of how, when I was a little kid, a bird had gotten trapped in our chimney somehow. We knew because we could hear it tweeting, flapping its wings around

without going anywhere. My mother grabbed the kitchen broom and poked it up in there. By the time the bird finally got unstuck, it was in a frenzy. It flew all around our living room and pecked hard at the ceiling, expecting to find sky there instead. My mother screamed and grabbed at me and dragged us both to the ground. Then there was a loud smack sound. The bird had run into the window and fallen dead onto the carpet.

"Have you ever felt like that bird before?" Cleo asked.

"Which one? In the poem or in the fireplace?"

"Either." She shrugged.

"Maybe," I said after a pause, unsure what the right answer was. "What about you?"

"All the time. Like someone must be up there laughing at me, at how I do the same thing over and over again but think that the end will be different. That the glass will vanish. That I'll be happy then."

"Oh," I said. I ripped off a piece of the paper plate and rolled it in my fingers.

She went back to her writing, and I let her even though I didn't want to, even though the words said were insufficient, hung over me like a film of smoke. She was right there, close enough to touch, to taste, to hear the air exit and enter her lungs, but at the same time she wasn't. We were separated like there was a window between us, her body existing in a different plane than mine.

*

Last week, I had to compile an advertisement for a new type of stapler. It is, apparently, three times as precise while requiring only a fourth of the physical pressure. The office was a bit jittery about it. It is an office that excites easily. As an office that distributes office supplies, we are always the first to get the prototypes. On the day the new stapler arrived, a flurry of people

moved about the corner of my desk where I had perched it. Gertrude printed out a packet she didn't need until next month just so she could give the stapler a try. Hank collected the sticky notes he had written to himself and made a patchwork. Shirlene stapled her own finger, which she claimed was an accident, but which everyone called a classic Shirlene thing to do. Personally I didn't get it. My boss told me it was because I'm young and there are still other inventions in life to hope for, but I think he's wrong. I'm just not the kind of person to get aroused by a stapler. I prefer tape dispensers or paperclips, simple and quiet things, but I didn't joke with him like that. Not after the closet incident. "Yes, okay," I said, and then I went to make the advertisement that he had asked me to make.

I received a file with model images I was to include in the brochure. How to occupy an entire two-flapped brochure with information related to a stapler was beyond me, but I figured that once I got started it would only get easier. There were over thirty model images, ten of them of just the stapler, ten of the stapler in ordinary office positions, then ten of the stapler being used by a woman with dark hair. The woman had a delicate nose, dark skin, long eyelashes that with a flutter could maybe get her whatever she wanted. The only flaw was the smile, too crooked and too daring – it had to be her teeth that limited her to staplers, instead of perfumes or sports cars. I wondered if that bothered her, or if she knew that, or if she was content to hold staplers and smile for the rest of her life. Maybe she was. Content, I mean.

"You chose that photo?" My boss raised his eyebrows at me when I showed him the first draft.

"Yes," I said. "I did."

It was a photo of the woman, holding the stapler up next to her face, as if they were taking a photo together, as if the stapler were a friend or a distant cousin to whom she desired to grow close again.

"It's, uh, quirky," I said.

"Does 'quirky' sell office supplies?" my boss asked.

"Possibly."

For a young guy, for a not-yet-worn-down-by-the-system guy, he was so unamused. He looked at the brochure again, flipped to the back which featured another photo of the woman and the stapler. In that one, although she was using the stapler, her eyes were locked on the camera. Her teeth were tucked away behind closed lips, the top button of her shirt was undone, her cheeks glowed in the light.

"Use this one on the front instead," he said, tapping it twice with his index finger, then turning on his heel and striding back into his office. He was always doing that. Entering a room and making demands and leaving.

It's funny, because if you had asked me, like Cleo had asked me time and time again, what I wanted to be doing at that time the next year, I would never have said marketing unnecessarily advanced office utensils. Yet here I am. Yet I am happy somehow. That's the other funny thing. How the future is so scary until suddenly you're right there submerged in it and then it seems like no big deal at all. How quickly a person can come to terms with it. How quickly you accept what you're given and move on.

I did as my boss instructed, at first swapping the photos, and then removing the one I had liked entirely. It was too good a photo, I decided. The average joe office guy would not appreciate it the way a person should. I set the photo as my desktop background instead.

*

By the time March that last year rolled around, the feminist club had disbanded. No one was surprised exactly. The thing was that it had never been a perfect community. Unlike sororities, it was no good at pretending to be one either. We were ugly, and we fought, and the student government declined to increase our budget of twenty dollars which meant we had to dip into our own money for the post-meeting snacks. It really downed the morale. During the last meeting, which we did not realize was the last meeting at the time, Nadia and Harper started going at it. We were discussing the make-up industry, the pros and cons, and Harper stated boldly that any woman who relies on eyeliner for confidence is an anti-feminist. Nadia, who is exactly that type of woman, who refuses to leave the house without a base of foundation and eyeshadow at the very least, pounced on her, figuratively at first and literally later.

"*You're* the anti-feminist!" Nadia shouted. "*You're* tearing other women down, *you're* doing exactly what they want you to do!"

"Oh really? I thought that dropping hundreds on beauty products is what they want me to do," Harper shouted back. "The mistake is thinking that beauty can be bought! The mistake is buying it!"

"I'll show you a mistake." That was when the literal pounce took place, and the president of the club had to put herself between them, separating the bodies with her own, obligating them to sit in opposite corners for the rest of the meeting. When word got around, the club's charter was taken away, along with the church basement and any dignity the organization had left.

No one was surprised, but I was bummed. When Tuesday evening rolled around, I found myself anxious, like I was forgetting to do something. I craved the lemonade, the stale cookies, even the basement dust and the itch it provoked in my nose. "Let's go somewhere," Cleo said,

and I agreed. We kicked at the grey slush that lined the sidewalks and walked until we got too cold to continue, which was not very long. It was half snowing, half raining, and our noses burned red. We decided to check out this hipster café called the Tin Can.

Inside the lighting was soft and yellowed as old paper. On each table was a tin can full of glass pebbles, a single plastic flower sprouting from the glass soil. Geometric paintings hung on the walls and some indie-techno song played over the speakers. We found two burgundy vinyl armchairs in the far back corner, slid our jackets off, shook away the wet. That was when I noticed how sick she was. Looking at her in the glow, her hair flaked with melting snow and falling past the ridges of her collarbone, how her sweater dangled there as if her shoulders were just a clothes hanger. I thought maybe I could reach right through her. I reached out and found her hand instead. Her fingers were turning blue at the edges, her nails pocked with white spots, but her skin was smooth as if with lotion. I took her hand, swung it between us, squeezed it once. Yes. It was there.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, letting go and standing up. "I want something."

The barista at the counter was sweet, had a nose piercing shaped like a flower and wore her hair pulled back in a clip. She bustled around, clinking cups and steaming milk and whistling. Her feet made noise, and every time she took a step the floor shook, the glasses on the countertop rattled. She was beautiful. I ordered two hot chocolates with whipped cream and two turkey wraps. When I carried them back to our seats and placed them on the small table between us, Cleo's jaw clenched.

"I didn't ask for anything," she said.

"You didn't have to," I said. "I bought it for you."

For a second, things were tense. I hovered, wondering if I had gone too far, wondering if she would throw the sandwich on the ground like a child, if she would slide the plate off the table like it was an accident. Please do not disappear on me, is what I wanted to say. I need you too much. She looked up at me and smiled, and the breath that I had been holding slipped stealthily from my lips.

"Thanks," she said. "That was kind of you."

She brought the mug to her mouth and took a small sip, a fuzz of whip cream coating her upper lip. We started talking, blissfully, of other things.

"Two more months," she said.

"Yup," I said.

"Can you believe it."

"I can't."

"What are you going to do with yourself?"

"Beats me." I shrugged. "Contribute to society, I guess, get a job."

"Sounds like a good plan." She took a bite of her wrap, placed it back on the plate, chewed carefully. "I'd like to move to Australia."

"Australia?" I stirred my hot cocoa with a spoon, pushing the whipped cream down and watching it melt into a flowerlike pattern. "What for?"

She shrugged. "Not everything has to be for something."

"Doesn't it though?"

She shook her head. "But they do have cool accents and national parks."

I nodded, took a large bite of the wrap. What I wanted to say was not what I should say, and since I am very good at not saying things, I said nothing. I did not say that she will still be

sick in Australia, or that poetry will still be difficult in Australia, or that the accent will become less cool over time due to the process of desensitization which still happens in Australia. I did not ask to go with her.

"I'm afraid of kangaroos," I said eventually. "I would be afraid to hit one with my car."

"Don't be stupid," she said, laughing. "You would never."

We finished our wraps and hot chocolates, left only a few scraps of lettuce on the plates and dark pools of syrup on the bottoms of the mugs. Slowly, stopping frequently to peer into the lit-up windows of shops and restaurants, to look up at the navy sky scattered with navy clouds, we walked back. It got dark so early then. It felt always like it was time to sleep. When we got back to the apartment building, Cleo stopped in the doorway.

"I think I'll have a cigarette," she said. "Go up without me."

So I did. I went upstairs and I counted on my calendar how many days were left until the lease ended. Seventy-four. I lay motionless on my bed, listening to music and wallowing until I heard her finally unlock the front door, leave her keys on the counter, slip like a shadow into her own room. I missed the placeholder that was the feminist club. I felt it like a hole in my sock, like the chilled tile floor pressed against just one of my toes. It had not been a perfect community, but it was what it was, and we had belonged to it. I wanted to hear people talk. I wanted people to talk about women in the workplace, women in the workforce, women in the classroom, women in the streets. Women on the street corners, the curb, under the lamppost. Women with lipstick, women without. Women with boyfriends, women without. Sentimental women. Lucky women. All the way women. How always women we would be, in this university and the next one, in this community and the next one, in all of our apartments. Sometimes I felt

that our apartment was a snow globe, its own ecosystem, full of water and made of glass and easy to shake.

Later I would wonder if Cleo had actually smoked a cigarette in the doorway. I would wonder whether she hadn't gone into the alleyway to put a finger down her throat. If she hadn't vomited next to the dumpster and covered it up with a pile of charcoal grey slush, leaned against the brick wall, coughing, red-faced, her body trembling like a bird's wing. If her heartbeat didn't sound in her ears like a spoon tapping a glass, a frail thing, on the verge of breaking.

*

I wear almost the same outfit to work every morning. It is a comfort just like a nightlight or a cup of hot tea, a small consolation. Pencil skirt to the knees, neutral colored blouse with five buttons, cardigan. Tights in the wintertime. Flat shoes. I do not have to contemplate options when I wake up, stand pantless in the closet or stare at things. I just get dressed. Other people do not have to think long when they see me. Woman in the workplace, professional woman, providing woman, a woman who fits right into her cubicle and leaves a human-sized dent in the desk chair. Before, I often got mistaken for a truant teenager. Shouldn't I be in school, the clerk at the drugstore asked me, do my parents know where I am. Now, I am friends with the bartender at the lounge down the street and I order drinks on the rocks like movie characters do. Now, I have a boss who calls me into his office for a report. An adult, I am.

"How is it looking?" he asks.

"Good," I say, having no clue what *it* refers to, "I think."

On his desk is a photograph of a young woman with full and rosy cheeks. His wife, maybe, although he wears no ring and tends to wave his hands in the air noncommittally when he speaks. The frame is tilted just barely towards me. On the wall is a monthly calendar with photos of

animals carved out of fruits and vegetables. This month it is a wiener dog made from a yellow squash and a cat made from an apple.

"I've been quite pleased with your work so far," he says.

"You have?" I fiddle with my hands in my lap. "I mean, thank you."

"After thinking it over, I would like to offer you a promotion. That is to say a full-time offer. That is to say you would no longer be an intern but an employee." He taps the edge of desk once, affirmatively.

"Oh." I flatten my already flat skirt. "Wow."

"You don't have to decide today of course. You can think it over."

I nod, smile weakly. He smiles back. I wonder if I can stand up and leave yet. I wonder if he is actually quite pleased with the work I've done, considering that I have done so little of it. I wonder if he sees me as a truant teenager, a girl playing hooky who needs looked after.

"Do you see a future in the office supply business?" he asks.

"Um." Did I? Did anyone? "Maybe."

"I certainly hope you stick around," he says. "You liven the place up."

"I do?"

"Of course." He grins. His teeth are tainted yellow from too much coffee probably. He seems like the type of man with a routine. The type who sees a future in the office supply business and the moderate economical comfort that such a future offers. I bet he eats the same breakfast every morning. I bet he was the last one picked for dodgeball in middle school, and since that moment he has worked hard to prove everybody wrong. Now he chooses the team. Now he leads it. He leans forward across the desk. "And your blouse today is lovely," he adds.

Except it is not a lovely blouse and we both know that. At the very best, it is mediocre. I bought it from a consignment store for seventy-five cents, and its pastel color scheme suggests that the last person to wear it was a great-grandmother. Probably one with rheumy eyes and tits that sagged. But all I do is button the highest button and clear my throat.

"Well I should get back to it," I say.

"You do that." He nods towards the door and so I open it, slip out, slide it shut behind me. But his words and his gaze and his promise of a practical, stable, simple existence pierce through the wood like it were fabric. They cling to me. I sit at my computer and stare a long while at my desktop screensaver, which is just lines crossing and then uncrossing, stretching out and then disappearing. Promotions are good things. I am happy. I tell Gertrude about it during lunch.

"So you quit, right?" She stops in the middle of pouring coffee. A bit of coffee drips down the pot, onto the linoleum counter. "Tell me you quit."

I shrug. I open the fridge door and pretend to be rummaging for something until Gertrude sighs and stalks off. I eat a cup of yogurt that doesn't belong to me and bury the evidence deep in the trash can.

*

It was in April that Cleo started seeing her ecology professor. It's because that's when she got scared of flunking. For months, I had listened to her complain about it. It was ridiculous that she had to be there. It was ridiculous that she of all people had to take a science class. The professor was a loon who believed in wood nymphs and biked everywhere even in the snow. It was when she got the results of the first exam, and the second exam, and the lab notebook grade,

that she went out with Dr. Elf for coffee one weekend. The next weekend they went to an indie concert in the basement of some bar. The next weekend they went to his apartment.

"There's other solutions," I told her.

"Like what?" Her eyes were already ablaze, daring me to judge her. "If you're so smart."

"Tutors," I said, "studying harder, breaking into his office for the test questions, framing him so that it looks like he's a meth dealer so that he gets fired."

"Wow," she said, not laughing even though I could tell she wanted to. "So practical."

I wanted to say that it was just as practical to have sex with a wood nymph whose only friends were his succulents and dragonfly larvae, but I knew better. Cleo did not react well to criticism, and I understood why. I imagined that she never ceased for half a millisecond to criticize herself.

"Besides, I like him." She said it more than once on more than one occasion, the way that we all repeat the things we want to believe. "I like him," she said one night when she got back from his apartment, but her face was splotchy and ravaged, her hair tangled and eyes small as if she had emerged from a sandstorm. I sat at the kitchen, slurping up a bowl of leftover egg noodles, pretending not to see her cry. "I like him, and I will pass his class, and I will go to Australia." I slid the bowl of noodles towards her, raised my eyebrows as a question, but she shook her head no and then let her head fall into her hands.

It was in that moment that I understood the lure of refusal. How it might not matter whether you needed the thing you rejected, only that you rejected it, only that you could. The ability to decide what does and what does not enter you. She rejected what she was capable of rejecting, and she took all that she was not. It meant little to her if she was dying. That week, I

had seen her eat only half a baked potato and one can of tropical fruit. I was worried during the good moments. I was panicked during the not-so-good. During the bad, I shut down.

This is an all-or-nothing type of planet we exist on, I wanted to yell at her sometimes, we do not pick and choose! We eat, or we die. That is that is that. I was angry with her. It does not make sense to be angry at someone for being sick, but I was angry with her a lot. The answer was not to get smaller. The answer was to get bigger, get fatter, get loud. The answer was to stand up on your hind legs and rage like a bear.

"Roar!" I said once, popping out when she opened the bathroom door.

"Goddammit, Kate." She startled backwards. "What are you, five years old?"

"I made meat pies," I said.

"Good for you."

"They eat them a lot in Australia."

"Okay."

"Will you eat one please."

"I'm not hungry." She stroked my arm as she slid past me into the living room. "Thanks."

The answer was to get hungry, to stay hungry, to say that I am hungry and I want sustenance and I want you to give it to me. It seemed obvious. The ecology professor would not leave her alone until the grades were in. After her phone rang for the fourth time in a row, Cleo finally answered with a subdued okay. She got up from the couch and stepped out into the world, leaving only the tiniest dent behind in the cushion. "I'll be back," was all she said. It scared me, the fact that she had needed to say it. Of course she would come back. Didn't she always.

*

I have a nightmare right after I get the promotion. In the nightmare, I am smoking in the supply closet again. I smoke several cigarettes, telling myself after each one that okay, only one more. This is my last one. This is my last one. My boss walks in and my heartbeat picks up, thrusts forward, tries to escape. I'm going to be fired, I realize, this is it. My boss only laughs. He steals the cigarette from my hand and takes a drag, blowing little rings out. "Disgusting," he says. Then he throws it onto the floor and stamps it out with his heel.

Suddenly the fire alarm goes off. The sound rips through my skull and throbs inside me like a live thing. I try to open the door, but it is locked. I am trapped with the sound, with the boss, with the supplies no one uses. I grab boxes at random from the shelf and throw them and rage. Paperclips explode into the air. Pens scatter over the carpet. I open a box of sticky notes wrapped in plastic and fire them away like my arm is a machine gun. When I run out of supplies to throw, my arm aches. I am tired. I don't want to fight anymore. The boss grabs at me and pulls me close and pets my head. "There there," he says. When I wake up with a start, I am crying, and the fire alarm is still going off. That's because it is a real fire alarm.

I slide my raincoat on over my pajama t-shirt, put on my slippers, am halfway down the stairs in the emergency stairwell by the time I realize I forgot pants. I'm wearing a pair of spandex shorts beneath the raincoat which just barely falls past my ass. Outside, most of the building has already evacuated. It must be the middle of the night still, the sky black and wordless, the people dazed and huddled against the wind like penguins.

"Nice slippers," a guy says to me.

"Thanks," I say. They are pretty nice slippers, fuzzy and designed to look like polar bears. Cleo had bought them for me as a graduation present.

"I should get me a pair of those." He wears the drugstore kind of flipflops. I think that he lives on my floor, got my mail by accident once. His name is Carl, maybe.

"No, you shouldn't," I say. He gives me a weird look before stalking off.

The fire department guy says that we can go back in the building now, it was just a false alarm, someone burnt the popcorn or the cookies. By the time I get back upstairs, the clock on my night stand reads 4:43. In Australia it is almost dinnertime, and I hate myself for knowing that. I'm not tired anymore. The adrenaline rushes hot in my blood and the nightmare hovers at the back of my mind. I leave a voicemail at the office to say that I'm taking a personal day. I don't know if I actually have personal days to take, but I take one anyways.

After laying in bed until late afternoon, reading magazines and eating fruit snacks, I get up and take a walk. I have no particular place in mind, so I don't bother to get ready. Just leave the place in my biggest sweatshirt, my tattered boots on, my unwashed hair matted down. I think that I will reject the promotion. I think that I will never be able to go back there. I get on the bus and I go somewhere else.

*

By the time that last May rolled around, me and Cleo found ourselves in a near constant state of hysteria. I haven't experienced anything like it since or before. We began to do unusual things. It was a mid-life crisis without the mid-life. We spent hours putting on make-up just to sit around the house in it. We wore high heels and tap danced on the kitchen floor until the neighbors complained. We made paper airplanes and threw them out the window at passerby. We strutted around in nothing but bikinis and feather boas. We made sculptures from household objects and named them. A stack of tampon boxes: Feminism. A stack of dirty dishes: Healthy bitch. We prank-called the ecology professor to ask in deep voices if he'd watered his

rhododendron today, then laughed until we pissed our pants like middle schoolers. It was almost the end of something and we knew that. Even if we didn't know what the something was. Even if we didn't know what an end looked like.

Our last night together, I got back from the store and heard noises in the bathroom. Cleo was on her knees, coughing into the toilet bowl, a loud cough that echoed off all the clean tile. She looked up at me, guilty. Blood vessels spread like webs through the whites of her eyes. Mascara melted down her cheeks. I knelt next to her and pulled her hair back with a hand.

We had graduated already. At the end of the month, I would start the internship and Cleo would go home to Philadelphia for a while. Only for a little while, she kept saying. Before long she would find something in Sydney or Melbourne and be gone. I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that every time was the last time she would be sick. But maybe deep down I didn't. I stuck out my hand, and she stood up, flushed the toilet. She took a long hot shower, and later we went out for hoagies and to get drunk. I told her that we didn't have to, but it was our last night, she said, and she wanted to. We got shitfaced with some of the other women from feminist club on the abandoned soccer field. We played frisbee for hours with a disc someone had found near the trashcan, none of us catching it, just jumping into the air and waving our hands around.

Cleo and I stayed there on the field after the others had left. We collapsed onto the dewy grass, the backs of our shirts soaking up moisture in odd places, so that when we stood we were like abstract watercolor paintings. I told her that.

"You're like an abstract watercolor painting," I said.

"You're like an idiot," Cleo said, then kissed me.

We held hands the whole walk home and laid together on the floor with the throw pillows. I could have cried. I could have yelled curse words from the window or danced on the countertop in bare feet. I could have eaten an entire pizza, but I didn't. It was too risky. I might have erased the taste of her.

The next morning, we packed our boxes without speaking much. She had a bus to catch at seven, and I walked her all the way there even though she didn't ask me to. I thought about all that I could say to her. I could tell her to eat. I could tell her to be safe. I could tell her not to disappear, but before I could, she already had. She waved and looked over her shoulder and smiled at me, until the bus swallowed her whole, and I left. For a while, I sat on the bench outside the bus station, watching the sky click from powder blue to peach to red as pomegranate juice.

*

I end up somehow at the zoo. It feels somehow right. The place is nearly abandoned, all the school kids gone home, all the families nearing their dinnertime. It is only me, a handful of couples, a handful of other lone weird girls with old clothes and dirty hair. I make my way through all the exhibits slowly. The lizards in their glass tanks. The otters in their river. The birds flapping their wings around and shitting on everything. By the time I make it to the kangaroo crossing, the sun is beginning to set and there is less than an hour until closing. The zoo worker, though, in her navy zoo shirt and safari hat, still lets me onto the path.

"You've got fifteen minutes," she says, but her tone is gentle. "Do you want some kangaroo snacks?"

"I can feed the kangaroos?"

"Only if you want to." She shrugs. "It's not that exciting."

I extend my hands and she grabs several pellets from her fanny pack, places them on my palms, and I thank her before starting out on the path. Most of the kangaroos are too far away, curled up in the dirt beneath trees, licking their paws or falling asleep. I shake the pellets in my fist, as if that could beckon them somehow. I whistle gently. I cluck my tongue. Just as I am about to give up, let the pellets slide through my fingers into the dirt, a kangaroo appears as if out of nowhere. So suddenly it frightens me. I startle backward. So does she. We lock eyes. Hers are huge and wet and opaque. Her ears are up like radio antennae. Whiskers protrude from her face. She blinks. I blink back.

I open my fist, inch it closer and closer to her. My hand is shaking so bad I'm afraid that all the pellets will drop right onto the ground, that she will think I played a trick on her, that I took her for a fool. The pellets don't fall. The kangaroo approaches, hesitantly at first, sniffing, then she takes it all at once.

Her nose is wet and moist against my skin, her tongue scratchy like sandpaper. She is a gentle eater who doesn't nip or nibble or get greedy. The pellets are gone within a matter of two seconds, at which point she looks at me, licks her lips, hops off. I stand there for a second, staring at my empty hand wet with slobber. I go back the way I came.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" The zoo attendant asks when I pass her. "You're crying."

I tell her that I am fine and smile and wipe the water from my cheeks. I am better than fine. I am better than I have been in a long time. My hand now is dry, sticky, covered in a film of animal spit, but I don't mind. I could do this for the rest of my life. I walk to the exit feeling like some type of small goddess, feeling like I have conquered this whole continent.

DRIVE

You have no plans to steal the car. It is one of those moments that does not seem to be happening until it is already over. One second, you are looking at it. The windows are rolled down. Cheap bead necklaces dangle from the rear-view mirror. There is an energy drink in the cupholder, a box of cigarettes on the dashboard, a grey sweatshirt flung on the passenger seat. It clearly belongs to someone who is not you, and staring down at it, you wonder why he left it like this, right next to the curb, right with the keys still in the ignition. The engine click click clicks.

The next second, you are inside the car. It smells of burnt cologne. It smells of sleep. From there it is all downhill, because from that point it is always downhill, because it is impossible to enter a car that is not yours like that and leave it unmoved. A threshold has been crossed. There is a turning point in every interaction, and you have turned. Go go go, you tell yourself now, a trembling hand thrusting the gear shift into drive.

*

When you walked in on your boyfriend having sex with another woman, surprise was the last emotion felt. It was Wednesday. You came from work at the coffee shop, your hair smelling of espresso and cinnamon loaf cakes and street. Entering the apartment was like entering a wind tunnel. You heard nothing but a whoosh in your ears as soon as you saw them there, on the kitchen table, her hair falling over the edge like spilt honey, her hands around his neck, his back speckled with sweat. I am so sorry, is what you said.

Then you left, closing the door behind you so that the sound could return. The creaking of floorboards above you, the sound of television across the hall, the ding of the elevator as it approached and passed and approached again. You walked a few blocks away and sat on that bench where the pigeons like to meet. They came so close to your ankles that you feared they

might peck, but they didn't. Maybe they sensed that you were one of them. Unwanted, beads for eyes, begging for what you could not have. The kitchen table must have been an uncomfortable place, you think, so hard and so cold. They must have been bored of the ordinary. In your jacket pocket was a cough drop, old, the wrapper half-melted into it, and you sucked on it while the sun sank behind the buildings like an embarrassed thing.

*

You would never steal your ex-boyfriend's car. It would be too obvious, too desperate or vengeful or insane – it turned you into that girl. The batshit crazy one. The one that falls apart without him, clings to the pieces left behind, pretends that the sweatshirt he lent her three months ago still holds his scent, falls asleep with her face buried into the fabric. Maybe you are that girl. Maybe everyone is that girl deep down. So what? You still don't want to seem like her, so you would never steal an ex-boyfriend's car. Crazy? They wish. You steal his cousin's car instead.

At least, you think that it is his cousin's car. It is difficult to be certain, because you have met his cousin only once before. It was in the summertime, at a family picnic. He had a neck tattoo and pink swim trunks and he started loving everything sometime after the fifth beer. I love you and I love you and I love this goddamn beautiful tree. He wrapped his arms around an oak and humped it.

Since that day, an entire year has passed, and the universe has begun to spin backwards. When you see him in the parking lot of the Shop Smart, or think that you see him in the parking lot of the Shop Smart, you feel a multitude of feelings. It has been three months now since the cheating, nearly three months since the break-up, and the potential sighting of the potential cousin whirls up the memories into a small but vicious tornado, ripping logic to shreds. When he abandons his car right there at the curb, right in front of where you were waiting to catch the bus,

it seems like a sign of something. Fast forward two minutes and here you are, stealing that car, stealing your ex-boyfriend's cousin's car, not crazy yet.

*

Your boyfriend always drove too fast. It didn't matter where he was going. At least twenty miles over the limit was his normal. Fast enough that you clenched your hands into fists and sat on them. That you locked your jaw tight and gritted your teeth together. That you squealed like the tires did when he slid around corners. He laughed.

Relax, he told you with a squeeze of the thigh, we'll be fine.

Then he turned the music up until the car throbbed like a heart you were inside of, warmth and sound pulsing out the windows and into the streets like blood. He put his hand on top of your knee, and you put your hand on top of his hand, until the nausea quelled. Eventually you did as he said, relaxed, sinking down into the seat and watching the world slink by the windows like a thief. His car became its own world.

His cool leather seats, the sheen of the dashboard, the masculine scent that came from no tangible source but lingered heavy like humidity after rain. It was a nice car. The down payment was more than all of your assets (i.e. the laptop, the rice cooker with two settings, the paisley vase someone had gotten you as a gift) combined, but in the beginning that did not cross your mind. That is to say the money. The value, the worth, how much you added up to.

What caught your attention was the crook of his nose, the olive skin soft as rose petals, how his arm fit right around your waist, how his entire body was like a nook for your body. At night, you curled into him like an animal taking shelter. In the morning, he pressed his lips to your forehead and whispered hello into your hair. When he got up, you listened to the sound of him in the shower, the hot water rolling down his shoulders, pounding against the ceramic tub.

You felt the warmth of him tangled up in the sheets like a phantom. Steam curled out from the half-open door.

It did not matter that he had a nice car or that you had an okay rice cooker. It did not matter that he worked in that tower with the sleek glass windows, the elevator with its marble floors, the serious conference room with its serious brown table that stretched for miles. It did not matter that he wore suits and carried briefcases and tightened his tie in the mirror before he left. You were a barista. You prepared the coffee of men like him, the large dark roasts, piping hot, one sugar and no cream please, always in a hurry to be some place. You wore your apron and kept your hair knotted up and drank free caramel lattes on breaks. You were happy then. It did not occur to you that you shouldn't be.

It was still the beginning. It was before the mandatory parties with their mandatory questions. Before the cheating, the woman with hair like honey ribbons and hands that took what they wanted. The problem, you realize now, was that you did not want enough. Men like him want women who want things, women who get the things and then want something else, hungry women. You have never had much of an appetite. As a child, you were so weak-stomached and slow that even the swing set gave you motion sickness. Your mother held your hair while you puked into the metal trash can, the summer sun breathing down your shoulders, the other children staring with disgust. There there, your mother said, rubbing circles on the small of your back. Get it all out.

*

Your past criminal record is nonexistent. There was the time you got caught smoking in a non-smoking zone behind the library but were let off with a warning. There was the time your best friend dared you to steal a magazine from a stand on the corner and you did it, running for

three blocks before the stand owner stopped chasing you. There were the times at work when you snuck an extra muffin or slice of pumpkin bread into your backpack without asking. Those times hardly count. Those crimes are hardly real crimes. A real crime is assault, or murder, or sleeping with someone else's boyfriend, or stealing a car. It is a crime to steal a car, and you are a delinquent now. Wouldn't your mother be proud if she knew? Wouldn't your mother be happy that you finally went and did something?

Anything is better than being a barista, she yelled once, anything at all!

Since then, you have often wondered if she is right. You think about all that you wanted to be when you were a kid, how the dreams shrank as the body grew. Actress, model, designer, photographer, editor-in-chief, editor, writer, food writer, restaurant owner, executive chef, regular chef, coffee shop owner, coffee shop manager, barista. Look, there you are! This is where you have settled and settled is, in fact, what you have done. There was a job and you took it. There was a boy and you fell in love with him. There was an apartment and you moved into it together. Apparently, that was wrong. Apparently, you should have been a drug dealer or a hijacker or a schoolteacher – anything is more profitable than steaming milk, more interesting than drawing in the foam, those wispy hearts that dissipate after one or two sips. Is that really what you are? Is that all you think yourself capable of?

It was not just your mother that asked such questions, but your boyfriend too. It embarrassed him at times to be associated with you. At parties, he introduced you to his friends with reluctance, with a dread that rubbed off on you, so that after a while, the very question *so what do you do* was enough to give you a migraine. You began to excuse yourself within the first twenty minutes, grabbing a plate of cocktail weenies and cheese squares, filling a plastic cup to

the rim with wine on the way out. You sat in the driveway or on the curb or on the hood of the car, staring up at the sky wiped blank with the light pollution.

One time, you hid out in the neighbor's tree house. It was cold then. You pulled your winter cap down over your ears and blew warm air onto your bare hands, cracked and beginning to bleed around the knuckles. A little girl in a pastel pink coat, presumably the neighbor's girl, crawled up there and joined you. At first, her eyes went wide and a small gasp escaped her strawberry lips. Then she saw the plate of snacks in your lap and pointed at the cocktail weenies.

Can I have one? she asked.

You gave her the entire plate.

Wow, she said, you're like the nicest person I've ever met.

You could have cried.

Instead, you chugged the rest of the wine, said goodbye, and dropped yourself down through the same hatch you had entered. The ankle sprain that resulted was mild and worth it. Limping back inside, into the microcosm of suburban wealth and institutional mundanity to which your boyfriend's co-workers subscribed, everything was infinitely more amusing. The stainless-steel refrigerator door. The glistening marble countertops. The knickknacks lining the mantel. The fireplace with its false electric flames, reaching up like tongues begging for a taste of something. It was funny how this was the life that people wanted.

Is this the life you want? you asked your boyfriend, hysterical, holding up a ceramic knickknack shaped like a fox. Is this IT?

Stop making a scene, he said with an edge in his voice, but also tenderness, also concern. The life I want is a life with you in it, he said.

All the muscles in your body softened so suddenly that the fox figurine slipped through your sweating fingers and shattered against the wood floor. Every head in the room turned towards you at once, the sentences trailing off into silences. You apologized profusely, cleaned it up yourself with a dust pan, covered your red face with your hands. But later in the car, the humiliation melted, as it tended to, into sweet, sweet laughter. That was when things were good still, when the obstacles were reasonable and possible to scale. That was when he still loved, for some reason, a barista.

Not anymore. Not any longer. Now, you are not a loved barista or an unloved barista but a delinquent who has stopped keeping track of who does or does not love her. It is funny how a life can separate into halves like that, like oil and water, like magnets that repulse each other. The thrum of the car travels through the engine to the steering wheel to the soft of your hands, and from there to the rest of your body. He can take his life of woodland creatures turned knickknacks. You will take this life of delinquency, thank you very much sir, have a good day, keep the receipt. Removing one hand from the wheel, you turn the radio all the way up.

*

When you finally got back to the apartment, after sitting with the pigeons a good hour or two, your fingertips burnt blue with the cold, the woman was gone. The coffee table was neat, the TV remote on top of the magazines, the four coasters stacked. Your boyfriend sat on the couch drinking a soda, bristled when you let the door slam behind you and dropped your keys into the key bowl. You didn't hear what he said. Your face was red as a siren, your eyes glistened like ice over a lake.

Did you know that I'm nice? you asked. Did you know that someone thinks I'm like the nicest person?

Your voice broke on the question mark, and with it all the ice inside you, the liquid hurt spilling out through the cracks. Niceness did not mean anything to him. Niceness was a pebble good for kicking, fun to abuse. Adults do not bend down to pick pebbles up. Adults ascend and ascend only.

The woman that he cheated on you with probably wore pantsuits, when she wasn't naked in your home. She bought department store perfume. She watched documentaries on the weekends. She ate organic because she could afford it and because her body deserved it – she knew that she was worth a lot. The paychecks and the men both told her so.

Right after the break-up, you moved back in with your mother. There were few places to go. What belonged to you fit in two boxes, and you took it, and you left. For the first several weeks, you laid on the couch, eating dry cereal straight from the box, watching B-list celebrities fight on talk shows, wearing his sweatshirt. For the first several weeks, your mother allowed you this wallowing. Then she stopped buying cereal and started standing in front of the television set. In a panic, you shoved the sleeve of his sweatshirt into her face and demanded to know what it smelled like. Startled, she sniffed it. Like closet? She said it with a shrug, afterwards went into the kitchen to make toast. Your heart folded up into itself like origami paper, crinkling.

Women can do anything these days, your mother told you later, as you sobbed into her shoulder. Women can do so much. Women can be neuroscientists, lawyers, real estate agents, tax advisors!

Why would you want to be a tax advisor? You moaned into her sleeve, sounding like a sea creature, like a primordial fish wailing from the ocean bottom. Nobody loves taxes. Nobody even sort of likes them. They are accepted as a strictly practical necessity, and if they were not

necessary they would be eliminated. You were not necessary or practical and have therefore been eliminated. So you think. So you would prefer to think.

The truth might be that he did not or does not or will not ever feel captivated by you. The truth might be that he could love a barista if she were more charming than you, if she had funnier childhood stories, if she had quirks, like wearing mismatched socks or tugging at her earlobe when she was bored. The truth might be that you are unexceptional and he is out of your control, a firefly that you can't cup in your hands without crushing.

Women can do anything these days, anything at all, and you sat there on the couch growing fat and growing mindless, bits of cereal stuck somehow in the hair.

*

You take the car all the way out of the city. You go through tunnel after tunnel, and every time that you emerge there is less to be seen. Trees, weeds, rest stops with their squat grey restrooms and broken vending machines, abandoned by this hour. There are taillights in front of your headlights and headlights behind your taillights, but there is enough distance between cars that it's natural to imagine they will never pass one another.

It is likely that the car has been reported as stolen already. It is likely that the license plate has been taken down, that the police have been notified, that the owner (possibly the ex-boyfriend's cousin's mother) is concerned. You try to feel bad. You try to care. But the time for such sentiments has passed. A car is only a car is only a car. Like a man, it can be taken and returned, at whatever psychological cost it may come to the driver who relied on that car for two years and twenty-seven days of transportation. According to your mother, it is not a long period of time. Not in the grand scheme of your life.

Yes, there will be another person. And then another person and then another person. They will replicate themselves like gnats. They will drive you to watch talk shows or steal cars or sell meth. They will put you here, at this point where you currently find yourself, outlawed.

When you get to a bridge, you pull the car off to the side, into the grass and dirt. The air is thick with summertime fog, the humidity sticking your clothes to your limbs, and you feel like a swim. There are no people around. You slide down towards the water on your ass, filling your fingernails with dirt, and when you arrive at the bottom you take off your shoes. You put one sock neatly inside each sneaker. You take off your shirt and fold it, then your jeans, a neat stack like in a clothing store. The metal bridge arcs above you like a monstrous ceiling and you stare a moment in awe at the dozens of ways it crosses itself. A car passes, and the sound of its rumble is a presence that raises all the hair on your bare body, strums a nerve far below the skin.

First you dip a toe in, drawing circles, surveying temperature. It is lukewarm and smooth. You take it one step at a time. The water rises to the ankles, the shins, the knees, the thighs. When it is deep enough, you submerge your entire body, opening your eyes in the green murk, losing track of your own outline. It feels good. It feels nice to swim, to support yourself, to flail with a purpose. You could do it forever. You swim all the way to the other side, arms slicing into the water, feet kicking with elegance. If only you had started swimming at a young age, you think. If only you had dedicated yourself to something early on. Maybe you could be in the Olympics by now. Maybe your face could be on the cereal box. You swim to the other side, and back the other way, and back again. You do a little flip. If people could see this right now, they would cheer for you. They would pump their fists and yell and clench their teeth with the tension. Go, go, go! Win, win, win! They would chant so loud their faces flushed hot with blood. They would chant so loud you could hear them even from the bottom of this forgotten, scum-

laden river. You would win, of course, because you always win. But if you didn't win, that would be alright too. You'll get 'em next time, champ, they would console you with a pat on the back or a peck on the cheek. You'll get them next time.

CITATIONS

Rostaing, Jeanne. “Wisteria: How to Grow (and Tame) the Perennial Flowering Vine.” *Gardenista*, Gardenista, 16 Apr. 2018, www.gardenista.com/posts/plant-of-the-week-wisteria/.