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Doris

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

Doris

By Martin Krafft

Doris gets entangled with an ex-boyfriend and has to deal with the consequences of being in love with someone who she knows will leave her.

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&

Mom

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Gobo Comes Back

A knocking at the door jarred Doris from her after-work nap. She lay in bed, wrapped in the covers, and curled tight into a ball. It was a loud, persistent knocking. After a minute, she stretched one leg, then the other, and forced herself to roll out of bed. Frowning, she stumbled to her feet. After closing her bedroom door to keep the cat in, she went to the front door and peered through the peephole with a gnawing anxiety. Yes, there he was, after six months, slouching, tapping his foot on the cement. He had called and said that he was coming sometime this week, specifically to see her, just as soon as he could get a ride back all the way from Memphis. Even telling him that she now had a new boyfriend was not enough to deter him.

“Gobo!” She yanked open the door and groaned her pet name for the young man in front of her – even now she could not think to use his real name, Harold. He stood grinning before her, nose scrunched and eyes wrinkled, with a bottle of cheap wine and single rose just starting to wilt. Gobo, now with a beard, expansive, knotted curls flattened in some places and sticking out haphazardly in others, and large holes in his jeans. He was wearing a collared shirt that had been a birthday present from Doris, but it was much more stained than the last time she had seen it. He looked her up and down and let out a whistle, or tried to, but only a strained whooshing sound came out. Before she had time to consider whether or not to let him in, he had ducked under her arm, entered the apartment, and was hugging her around the waist.

“No, Gobo, I told you not to come.” She shoved him away and retreated to the kitchen, where she grabbed dishes from last night’s dinner and started washing.

“God, it’s so good to see you,” he cooed, standing up. “Doris,” he said with soft, slow emphasis.

“Don’t ‘Doris’ me!” she said, scouring her plate to remove a bit of dried spaghetti sauce. “I haven’t seen you for six months! You said you’d be gone a month – at *most*. You just strung me along, saying you’d be back soon. And you never even had the balls to break up with me, officially. After three months, though, that was more than long enough for me to realize you weren’t coming back anytime soon.”

Gobo followed her to the kitchen area, sauntering, feet turned out like a cowboy. He was grinning at her, as if Doris had just told a joke. His eyes were shining. He leaned against the counter, a few feet away from her, and in his slow, slurred voice, said, “What do you mean have the balls to break up with you? I didn’t want to break up with you. You’re the one who broke up with me. And I’m back now, aren’t I?”

“You can’t just move in with someone and then decide two months later that you want to leave indefinitely to go on a road trip. You didn’t even move your stuff out. You didn’t even clean it up. I had to clean up all your stuff and put it in the closet and was supposed to just wait for you to come back? How is that fair? You didn’t even take the stuffed animal pig I bought you for your birthday.”

His eyes twinkled as he said, “I didn’t have any room for the pig. But I love the pig. I’m looking forward to seeing it again.” His voice grew soft, earnest: “Doris, I wasn’t ready to come home yet. I didn’t want to get up and go to work everyday, to be in a routine where I didn’t have anything new to challenge me. But I’m ready to be with you now. I’ve grown up some. I’m ready to stick around, even if it’s not as exciting.” His body was bent towards her, inviting.

“You can be such a jerk.”

“I’m not being a jerk,” Gobo said, sounding surprised. “I’m not saying you’re not exciting, but the *lifestyle* will be less exciting.”

“Why are you here? I told you that I didn’t want to see you. Why did you come when I told you not to?” Doris tried to make her voice as cold as possible.

“I thought you were just *saying* that you didn’t want to see me. I can’t imagine you not wanting to see me, not wanting to talk to me.” He spoke carefully, as if he knew that suggesting Doris did not know her own mind would upset her. And it did.

“You would think that,” she said, shaking her head. “But if I said I didn’t want to see you, you should have respected my decision. You think I’d be happy to see you when I told you not to come?”

Gobo bowed his head before her, and said, “I had to come. I had to see you. You don’t know how hard it’s been, not having anyone I could talk to the way I talk to you.” He paused, eyes lost in contemplation, then said, warmly, “The way you listen to everything I say and ask tough questions about it, to really make me think about what’s going on. And your struggle. All the shit you put up with from your mother. It’s beautiful, I think.”

Doris laughed. “Me getting shit from Peggy is not beautiful, Gobo. If you really wanted to talk me, you shouldn’t have left. There’s no room in my life for you anymore. I’ve found someone else who I can depend on.”

“What do you mean no room?” he exclaimed. “You think you can find someone else to replace me? I’m a one-of-a-kind. I’m my own person. And I had to go. It felt like the right thing to do.”

He paused, stroking his beard, then said, “You knew I’d been talking to you about wanting to go out West. It was something I’ve always wanted, and I’ve done it now. I’ve gone and seen mountains and deserts, and all kinds of people I never thought I would meet. People in communes, nudist colonies, people who lived for years without any money. But the whole time I thought it wasn’t enough because I didn’t have anyone I really cared about to share it with.”

Doris laughed harshly. “But you hardly ever called on the phone.”

Gobo shrugged. “Because my phone was dead most of the time.”

“That’s fine. But I felt abandoned. I had every right to break up with you.”

Doris felt a sense of satisfaction as she confronted him, face to face. She wanted to hurt him, to make him hurt for all the pain he had caused her.

“I’m not saying you didn’t,” he said.

Doris attacked the dishes with a sponge, so forcefully that dirty water pooled in the bottom of a pot splashed her. Doris cursed under her breath, as Gobo, seeming to ignore her, craned his neck to look about the apartment.

“I see you’ve hung my photographs,” he said, moving to inspect the frames hung over the TV in the living room. “You must have paid a lot for this!”

Doris cringed. Why had she ever decided to frame them? “No, not that much,” she said. Even with a discount she found in a newspaper, they had still cost a lot. But she had wanted them to look nice, the photographs that he had taken the time to develop and print in a dark room, and then mailed to her. And this was even after she had started dating Sammy. There was something about the photographs, though, the stark, black-and-white landscapes, pictures of the desert, that Doris had admired regardless of the fact

that Gobo had given them to her. She felt more centered looking at these images of barrenness, less caught up in whatever was going on around her. Now she could hardly look at them.

“They look nice.”

He returned to leaning against the counter, a little closer this time. Doris kept looking up from the dishes to make sure he didn't come any closer, as he gazed at her with that smug, accepting smile, eyelids half open. That look made her shift her weight and toss her hand, still wet, through her hair. Oh, Gobo. She felt as if she were being sucked into quicksand, and only her mind could pull herself free. She had to be disciplined.

He scooted closer along the counter, and after she did not push him away, put his hands on her shoulders. Gobo kneaded his hands over her shoulders and tried to start massaging, but she ducked away from him. She didn't care how good he was at massages. Doris moved back to the sink to finish washing the dishes, and as she did Gobo leaned forward and attempted to grab her in an embrace. Before she could pull away he was trying to kiss her, attacking her with an open mouth and she clamping hers shut. His breath reeked. That was nothing new. When she tried to pull away, he grabbed her head and started licking her cheeks. Finally he loosened his grip just enough and she wrenched her head away.

“Gobo, that's gross,” she said, making a face at him. “You're so immature.” Taking a towel, she wiped the saliva off her face, then started drying the dishes, and stood up straight, ignoring him. “For all I know you have all kinds of diseases.”

“I’ve been tested,” he argued, making Doris frown and keep her gaze locked on the dishes.

“And I’m not immature,” he continued. “I’m just overwhelmed with affection for you.”

Intending to hurt, she said, “I told you over the phone that I have a boyfriend now. I’m not available to be with you, even if I wanted to. But I don’t want to.” She looked up to see Gobo’s reaction, expecting him to reel, as if slapped. She had never even been able to talk about her male friends from work without him squirming. But now Gobo shook his head as Doris tried to towel the saliva off her face.

“What’s his name?” he challenged.

“His name’s Sammy. And he’s real.”

“I’m sure. What does he do?” He had a mocking smile on his face, his hands dug into his jean pockets.

“He’s a very good lawyer.” Yes, Doris knew all about how good a lawyer Sammy was, since Sammy talked all the time about how many cases he had won. She realized that she had been drying the same pot long after it was dry and moved to put it away. Gobo tried to reach forward and take the pot from her, but she gripped it tight and turned her body away from him.

“No, he doesn’t mean anything,” he said. “Does he make your life more exciting the way I did? Have you been to the abandoned prison with him, the church tower? Have you had *any* adventures with him?”

Doris ignored him. She had liked the abandoned prison and the church tower because Gobo had liked them, but they had never been of much interest to Doris of themselves.

Grinning now, he said, “Does he scratch your back the way you like?”

Doris frowned. Sammy did not scratch her back. In fact, he gave her very few signs of affection, mostly in front of his friends, as if he were trying to show off the fact that he had a girlfriend. Or when Doris was upset, and he would give her some touch like he was petting a dog. She had asked him if he wanted to go to the prison, but he had laughed at her like she was crazy.

Gobo turned to her, eyes twinkling. “Do you know how good you look right now?”

Doris was in her pajamas and could not imagine that she looked that good, but she blushed, and ducked her head under the sink to wash the saliva off her face. Patting her face dry, she said, “I’m just wearing pajamas.”

He placed his hand on her waist, then snapped the elastic of her waistband. “But you still look good,” he said, with a big wink. He removed his hand and turned his body away from her. Did he really think he could pull off trying to be coy now? He was incorrigible.

“You can’t just tell me that I look good and expect me to take you back. No, I think I respect myself a little more than that. You left me and now you have to deal with the consequences.” Doris struggled to keep her voice calm, but she could feel her body tensing up.

“Consequences?” he muttered. “Love shouldn’t be this ... this *vindictive* thing. I did what I needed to do, and that doesn’t have anything to do with how I *feel* about you.” He clutched his hands together at the word, “feel.”

“But you seem to have no idea that what you did might have hurt me,” she retorted, voice high-pitched and taut, like a tight-rope being traversed. “You never even apologized for leaving.” The whole thing was ridiculous, how Gobo had no idea that he had done anything that would have hurt her, and how Doris had to convince him of this thing that was so obvious to her.

“I’m not sorry for going, but I’m sorry that it hurt you. I needed to get away. I needed to travel, to see new things, to not have any idea what I was going to do when I woke up in the morning.”

“That night I made steak for you,” he continued, “and told you that I had found a ride share all the way to St. Paul’s for \$45, and I was thinking about taking it. Do you remember that?”

“Of course, I remember,” Doris said, glaring at him.

“You remember how I told you, if you really want me to stay, I would stay?” His tone sounded like he was lecturing to a child.

“How could I have made you stay? You asked me once and waited like thirty seconds for me to say something. I wasn’t sure what to say yet, but you acted like that was the end of it. You didn’t ask me about it again, and I wasn’t sure you were actually going, or when, until one morning I went to work and came home and guess what? You were gone!”

That night, Doris had stayed late at work to finish running the statistics program for a report, and not been in any hurry to get home anyway because she was afraid of coming home and finding that Gobo had left. She walked into her apartment and saw a crumpled piece of notebook paper that had been pushed under her door. As soon as she saw it she knew he had left, but she picked it up, still not wanting to believe as she read, "I love you. I'll be back a more interesting man." She had crumpled the paper up, thrown it in the trash, and cried. The next day, she had taken it out of the trash, smoothed it out, and kept it.

"Gobo," she sighed, and shook her head back and forth. Pushing past him, she opened her bedroom door, looking back to make sure Gobo was not following her, and grabbed Ralph the cat, who was scratching at the door, and carried him to the sofa. Pinning Ralph down to keep him from running away, she used her free hand to hold a pillow between her and where Gobo would sit on the couch. She could not let him get too close.

He plopped down as close as he could next to her on the couch and leaned forward, reaching around the pillow for her thigh, but she batted him away. "I never stopped caring about you," he whispered. "I'd be waiting for a ride somewhere, sitting outside a gas station, and be overcome by this urge to see you. I wanted so bad for you to look at me with that look you do when I can tell you're in love with me, when your eyes squint, as if I'm the only thing you're looking at and ever want to look at."

When he reached for her hand this time, Ralph rolled over onto his back and scratched him.

“Ralph,” Doris reprimanded, but she picked the cat up gently and set him on the floor.

“Fucking cat.” He inspected his arm. There were red gashes on it, but not bad enough, Doris thought, for her to get out the first-aid kit. “I don’t know why you got a cat to replace me.”

Doris laughed at him. “I didn’t get a cat to replace you. I always wanted a cat, and when you left I finally had the time for it.”

“A cat will never love you like I do.”

“Yeah, well, Ralph is an indoor cat, and he will always be there when I need him.”

Ralph slunk to the corner of the room and started licking himself. “And at least he doesn’t lick my face,” Doris said.

“But you have to clean up his shit every day,” Gobo muttered. Leaning forward, he spoke: “I think about you falling asleep at night, alone –”

“I’m not always alone,” Doris cut in. In fact, in the trash can next to the couch were several used condoms, for even when Doris had found out that Gobo was coming, she had thought about cleaning up but never been able to bring herself to do it. Cleaning up would have meant that she actually expected him to come.

“Yes, you are,” he said. “You might be with someone, but you’re still alone.” She fixed her eyes on his chest so as to avoid looking at him.

“But I’m not alone with you?”

His eyes dug into her, and this time when he looked at her she shivered. “I don’t know. Not as much. I know I don’t feel as alone when I’m with you.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little presumptuous of you to think you satisfy me so much, and that no one else possibly could?” she said, trying to sound detached, but inwardly reeling. God, he looked good, in that disheveled, indifferent to appearance sort of way. Her skin was tingling all over. How nice, and easy, it would be for him to pick her up, like he used to, and carry her away to bed while stomping and grunting! For him to lean over her in bed and rip his shirt off, so that she could run her hands through his tangle of chest hair. At the same time, she wanted to hit him. To punch him. To make him feel some of the pain that he had caused her.

“Not as well,” he murmured.

“You’re so full of it! There were plenty of times when you didn’t even make me orgasm. You finished, and that was the end of it.”

His face reddened, then hardened. He rotated on the couch to put his feet up on her lap and shrugged, saying, “There are different ways to satisfy someone. I satisfied you in a ... a, I don’t know, *spiritual* way.”

“Ha. You were always making fun of me for going to Church.”

“There are different types of spirituality. There’s a spirituality that comes from living fully, and I helped give that to you.” They both were silent, not looking at each other, until he added, “You told me that it didn’t matter how good I was.”

“Well, you could have tried a little harder.” Doris had been far too nice with him when they were dating. There were far too many nights when she came so close to climaxing, when he finished and rolled over with a forlorn look on his face that made her heart go out to him, however unsatisfied she might feel.

He straightened up and said, with his eyes fixed on the ground, “Anyway, I’ve gotten better.”

Doris blushed, and, hurt, pushed his feet to the ground. The thought of Gobo with another woman made her stomach twist into knots.

“I want you to get out of my apartment right now.” Her voice was firm. She felt cold. The anger that had been pouring through her, hot, molten, which at any moment could have turned to affection, was diffusing out of her, and she felt nothing. Without anger, there was only a great, unapproachable chasm between them. Who was he to come here and make a claim to her heart? He looked ridiculous with his mouth hanging open and eyes drooping.

“I can see this isn’t going anywhere tonight,” he said, with a grating laugh, and stood up. Taking two steps, he stopped, and turned to her, wavering, like a tower of cards about to collapse in on itself. Doris could feel him willing her to call out to him, but she was silent. Her lip curled at him, and with a look of great pain, he turned to go. He opened the door and slumped out, head bowed, like a dog with its tail between its legs.

As soon as the door closed, Doris let out a sigh of relief. Now that he was not in front of her, it was easier to dismiss him, to think of him as someone who did not have to be connected to her life. Doris had passed this test of will power. But of course there was guilt. Doris was always feeling guilty about something. The whole time Gobo had been over she had given hardly a thought to Sammy, the new man in her life. Why hadn’t Sammy been more on her mind? Doris did not want to think about it.

Seeing the presents Gobo had dropped on the floor, Doris snatched up the wine bottle and rose, and as she did a petal came off. She found a vase to put the flower in and

set it on the counter, then put the wine in her cupboard, and went into her bedroom. If only she had never met Gobo, Doris thought, life would have been much less demanding.

Entering her room, Doris pulled a box, the “Gobo box,” which was a shoe box he had decorated with hearts drawn in black Sharpie, from under her bed. There was the symphony concert ticket stub from the night of their first sexual experience. Doris did not particularly care for symphonies, and neither did Gobo, but Gobo cared very much for the idea of symphonies. When he bashfully asked her if she would like to come home with him, she had agreed, blushing, and they rode in silence back to his apartment. They were silent going up the stairs, and silent as she followed him into his room, which was covered in dirty clothing and books. He had undressed her carefully, then burst out laughing as he kissed all over her naked body.

Now she ran her finger along the stem of the first rose he had given her, shriveled, but still with an element of decaying beauty. Would he have bought the rose, though, if an attractive waitress had not been going around the restaurant selling them?

And the notebook paper telling her of his departure. Looking at it, she felt a wave of bitterness sweep over her. She closed the box and pushed it back under the bed, back to its blanket of dust.

Now that Gobo was back at least he could get his stuff out of her apartment, and that would make it easier to stop thinking about him.

Doris went into the living room, turned on the television, and flipped through the channels before she found a reality TV show about fashion models. This could absorb her with the least chance of making her think of Gobo, because it was such a different world from Gobo’s, but even thinking about how different it was made Doris think of

Gobo. Finally she was tired enough to go to bed, but in bed, she no longer felt tired and alternated lifting the covers on and off her as she got too cold, and then too hot.

The next day, Doris invited Sammy to come over after work, and texted Gobo that she did not want to see him again, that she would be busy with her boyfriend for the rest of the week. She convinced the secretary at the front office of her apartment complex to hold his stuff, and texted Gobo that he could pick it up there. And what choice did she have? She did not want to see him again and did not want even to think about him. She could stop herself from thinking too much by surrounding herself with Sammy.

Doris was always the one to organize their meetings, and she liked it that way. For five weeks she had been seeing Sammy and they had never had a conversation about whether or not they were dating, but when Gobo had called her, telling her that he was going to come back, Doris felt sure enough to call Sammy her boyfriend.

A controlled but forceful knocking summoned her to the door. There he was, standing upright, not slouching, a large and reassuring presence, Sammy. Sammy, who had his clothing ironed and his suits fitted for him. His hair, blonde, luscious, was gelled into place, and he gave his head a toss, as if to show off how much effort he had put into aligning every follicle.

“I wish I’d seen you last night,” Doris said, frowning, as he strode into the room, shoulders thrust back.

Sammy smirked, full of confidence. He was here now, and stated, simply, “But you didn’t invite me over last night.”

Doris bit her lip, which Sammy noticed and, hesitantly, as if he were being forced, put his arm around her waist. Doris came up to his shoulders and she had to crane her neck to look up at him.

“You know you can invite me over whenever you want,” he said. His voice was surprisingly high-pitched and prone to cracking for someone of his stature, but Doris was just glad that he had at least one physical imperfection.

They moved to sit on the couch, as Sammy patted her on the head. He looked at her with eyes meant to soothe, but Doris did not want to be soothed. She felt an urge to discuss last night with him, but as Sammy reached his hand up her skirt and started stroking her, she wavered.

She could not stop glancing at Gobo’s photographs, and felt that the images of wide, open space, richly textured in early morning light, were sneering down at her, trying to hold her accountable for not going and seeing the world like Gobo. She forced herself to look at Sammy. Running his hands along her thighs, he began to talk about his day at work.

“We had just finished a case, that I helped win, so I was feeling pretty good. Jake and I wanted to play a prank on the boss, so we bought a Playboy magazine and cut out a photo and snuck into his office to tape it over the picture of his wife.” Sammy had a witty, expectant gleam in his eye – he was never this animated except when he was telling stories.

“I went into his office later when he was in and said, ‘Oh, that’s a beautiful wife you have.’ He thought it was hilarious.” Doris forced herself to laugh, but it came out as more of a sigh.

He stopped fondling her. “Everything all right?” he demanded.

Doris nodded her head again and smiled. Inwardly, she was reeling. She felt wrong being here with Sammy, just as she had felt wrong last night with Gobo. No, they were wrong in different ways. Gobo had hurt her, and she was wary of him for it. Around Sammy, she now realized, she was just bored, and thinking this, she could not help yawning.

She watched him stand and stride his way to the bathroom. Oh, Sammy. He was a beautiful human being to look at, so full of strength, and yet a gentle man, a sweet man, a condescending man sometimes. As Doris thought about it, he could be worse. At least she knew more or less what to expect from him, and she could expect him not to feel the need to run away across the country. He liked his job too much.

When Sammy came back, he noticed the flower on the counter and laughed, saying, “Who sent you a wilted flower?”

“Peggy,” Doris said. But Sammy did not know that Doris called her mother Peggy, so she added, “My mother.”

“Your mother? Why?”

“Because I’m a good daughter.” Sammy grinned and returned his hand to stroking Doris’s thigh.

Doris shifted her weight, uneasily. “I don’t know if I’m up for hooking up right now.”

“I mean, we don’t have to hook up,” he said, then, after a pause, “But I didn’t see you last night, you know?”

She felt a sudden aversion to Sammy, his tan skin, well-sculpted face, and straight posture. That unwavering look of superiority on his face. It was not Doris that he wanted, she thought. It could have been some other woman, probably someone more attractive than Doris, and he would have been just as satisfied being with her. Someone who would look up to him without questioning, which Doris could not bring herself to do.

“I know, but I’m tired,” she said. “I had a long day at work. Can we just cuddle?”

Sammy laughed mockingly. “Cuddle?”

“Yes, cuddle. I just want to be around you.”

With a smirk, he said, “Well, there’s really only one way for you to be around me.”

Doris groaned. “Sammy, come on. Is it OK if we don’t hook up tonight? I promise we will tomorrow night.”

Sammy grunted. “I’m busy tomorrow.” His eyes were not desperate. He would probably be fine if they did not hook up. But how else was he supposed to act around her? They never really had *conversations* about anything, and made up for it by hooking up – a lot. Sammy was skilled, if not very affectionate during love-making. It seemed to be more a matter of pride for him not to seem like he was losing control when they came together.

“Well, I’m not up for hooking up tonight.”

“You should have told me that before I decided to come over,” Sammy said, a distant look coming over him. Doris noticed his body tensing up.

“I wasn’t sure whether I’d want to or not. And why can’t you come over just to hang out?” But that wasn’t really fair. Doris had never particularly enjoyed listening to him talk.

As if trying to defend Doris, Ralph the cat hopped up on her lap, and she started petting him. Sammy turned away and started tapping his fingers. Finally Sammy scooped Ralph up in his hands. A loud knocking sounded from the door.

Sammy tossed the cat to the ground, then stood up and started towards the door. Doris started to rise, froze, then lunged after Sammy and used him as a slingshot to launch herself towards the door. She yanked it open and stepped outside, slamming the door shut behind her.

“What’s that about?” Gobo drawled, leaning against the railing with a smirk on his face.

“Why are you here?” Doris demanded.

“Just thought I’d check up on you,” Gobo said. “I’m crazy about you, you know?” Doris pulled him down the stairs.

“Sammy is here right now. You need to leave. Right now.” She spoke with an emphasis that she did not feel. Rather, she felt empty, like a bucket of water that had been tipped over and drained out.

“I was hoping he would be here.” Gobo’s smirk grew even bigger. His eyes ran up and down her body. Doris shivered and folded her arms across her chest.

“I don’t care,” she said. “Just leave.”

“OK.”

He turned and sauntered off into the darkness. She reentered the apartment and locked the door behind her. She should never have invited Sammy over before sending Gobo packing for good.

“You won’t believe who that was,” Doris said, forcing a peal of laughter, as she sat back down on the couch and put her hand on his lap. But Sammy stood up and shrugged his shoulders, as if to show off his strapping muscles.

“Who was it?”

He stared down at her, looking suspicious. She paused a moment, then knocking erupted from the door. Doris leapt forward, but Sammy was faster. He pushed past her and flung the door open, and standing defiantly in the doorway was Gobo, holding another rose, even more wilted, and a bottle of wine – he must have hidden them in the bushes. He dodged past Sammy into the apartment. Doris and Sammy were too shocked to think to stop him.

“I thought I’d get you a flower to go along with your other one, dear, sweet Doris,” Gobo slurred, moving to the counter and dropping the rose in the vase. “If you’d like to stay, you can share the wine with us,” he offered Sammy. “There should be another bottle from last night, unless Doris already drank it.”

“What’s going on?” Sammy’s voice was sharp, but not quite focused enough to be angry yet. But as his veins started to bulge on his neck, it was clear that he was going to be angry. How funny, Doris thought to herself, that I’ve never seen him get upset before. Instead of getting flustered, though, Doris felt like she was not involved, but rather that she was viewing the events as if they were taking place in a TV show.

Gobo looked from Sammy to Doris. That excited gleam came into his eye. “Oh, how rude of me! I should have introduced myself to you. I’m Gobo.” He held out a hand to Sammy to shake it.

“What the fuck kind of a name is Gobo?” Sammy said, eyes narrowing. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m Doris’s lover,” Gobo said, beaming.

Now Sammy’s voice shrilled with fury as he said, “I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing. This is my girlfriend, buddy.”

Sammy’s body was taut with rage. Gobo, on the other hand, slouched, at ease, but like a cat, ready at any moment to snap into action. He ran his eyes over Sammy and snapped his head to look back at Doris, with a smug look that suggested Gobo had dismissed Sammy entirely.

“If you’re going to get so upset, you should probably just leave,” Gobo said, motioning towards the door.

Sammy’s jaw dropped open. He seemed to be struggling to close it, but it would not close.

“Gobo, you’re ridiculous,” Doris said.

She could feel herself growing anxious. The shock had worn off. This was not a TV show but her life. She had to deal with it as expeditiously as possible, or everything would fall apart. She tried to pull Gobo to the door, but Gobo would not be dragged, and drew Doris close to his body. She caved, enveloped by his hand.

“Doris, I love you,” he whispered, sincere without the adornment of melodrama. Whenever he said those words they seemed to mean something different. Now she felt

trapped by them, possessed by the sense of ownership they implied. But this time she could not resist him. Doris and Gobo looked into each other's eyes, and the rest of the room, Sammy included, dissolved.

At last, she turned to Sammy, who stood watching them, erect back as always, strong as always, and not quite seeming to understand. She saw the incomprehension and, feeling for him, moved to comfort him, but stopped just short.

"You cheated on me," Sammy accused, his so often confident face contorting into revulsion. She shook her head, but not energetically enough. Sammy thrust his hands through his perfect blonde hair, and with one furious look back, stormed out, slamming the door behind him. Then silence. Gobo plopped down on the couch and lay grinning at her.

"You asshole," Doris growled, then moved to the couch and began hitting him.

Gobo let her. He was laughing. God, she wanted to hurt him. She hit him as hard as he could but that just made him laugh harder. With a groan Doris plopped down next to him. "You asshole," she muttered.

"Don't give me a hard time for doing everything I can to win you back," he said, with the air of a victor. Then, growing serious, apprehensive (the shift was so quick Doris wondered if some of it was not affected): "I'm so sorry for everything."

He leaned close to her and clenched her hands in his, as if he expected the scene and Doris to slip out of his grasp.

"What do we do now?" Doris said, feeling dead.

“Let me kiss you, and tell you that I’m so sorry for leaving. I don’t know why I did it, but I’m glad I did.” He paused, then said, in a hoarse voice that couldn’t be staged, “I’ve realized that I don’t want anything else but you.”

After a pause, Doris said, full of expectation, “Why’s that?”

He blinked. “Why’s what?”

“Why don’t you want ‘anything else but me’?”

Doris was trying as hard as she could to force herself not to feel anything, because the moment she started to feel something she had no idea what torrent of emotion would pour out. She was afraid of that, of giving up control.

“Because you’re you,” he said, grinning, and leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead. “You know when I’m full of shit and you know when I’m being sincere, and you make me want to be sincere all the time.” He clasped his hands together and pressed them in front of his lips, then continued, softly, “You put me in a better place when I think about you.”

He leaned forward and Doris let him kiss her, but she did not throw herself into it. “Not like that,” he said, voice tender and quiet, encompassing her. “I want all of you.”

And Doris kissed him then and was consumed by the act of kissing him, because he could tell when she was really kissing him and demanded nothing less than everything. Gobo kissed differently than when they had dated before, more slowly, less aggressively. He ran his hands over her, and his hands felt rougher, more calloused, but more careful.

At last he was going inside her, and Doris almost burst into tears it felt so right that they would be together again.

The next morning Doris woke up, and Gobo was not in her bed. Dread pitted in her stomach. Last night had been a mistake. She smelled the scent of sex on her bed, grown stale, and was overcome with anxiety. She had had a good thing with Sammy, and she had given that up without really thinking about it.

But maybe Gobo really was different now. After they finished making love last night, he had pulled her head gently to his chest and not said anything. She, overcome with satisfaction, had collapsed next to him and been glad of his silence. She only wanted silence, and not to think about anything. Anything he might have said would not have been the right thing. The Gobo she had known would have made some comment about Sammy, but he said nothing and just kept stroking her head.

Gobo had come back, and he was going to be a part of Doris's life again. It was like sinking into quicksand, and the more she struggled against it, the more she sank, not just into love, but hopelessness. No hope that she would ever be able to be strong, or at least strong in the way of standing up for herself. But she would have Gobo, at least, for now, and that meant a lot to her.

As she was sitting at her cubicle later in the day, she found herself, instead of researching different economic microfinance programs in Indonesia, which was even on the best of days a struggle for her, sneaking glances at the framed family photo above her desk: Peggy, Walter, and the one who kept them stuck together, Doris. Doris had placed the photo there because she liked how happy they all seemed, even if she knew that right after taking the photo, Peggy had snapped at Walter that he was a "complete idiot" for

almost dropping the camera. Now the image of her mother glared down at Doris, accusingly. Doris dreaded the thought of telling Peggy about Gobo, for Peggy had hated Gobo, made only a half-hearted attempt to conceal that while she and Gobo had been dating, and afterwards talked about how he was an example of how Doris made really “stupid” mistakes that jeopardized the rest of her life.

Doris flipped the photograph over. She did not need her mother’s imagined disapproval to fuel her sense of guilt and rashness, and anxiety over the future.

Peggy

Before boarding the plane to Orlando, Doris had bought the most expensive piece of cake in the airport shop. Now she slid it across the kitchen table to her mother, who set down her *People* magazine and reached for the plastic container slowly, as if fighting the urge to lunge for it and dig in with her bare hands.

“You brought that for me, sweetie?” Peggy inspected the price tag and nodded at Doris with a solemn look on her face. “I guess I should use a plate,” she said, after consideration, with her index fingers pressed to her lips.

Doris retrieved a plate from the cupboard and set it in front of her mother.

“I need a fork, too,” Peggy said, sounding suddenly tired as she gave a look towards the drawer, “but that’s fine. I’ll just get it.”

Exhaling, she pressed her feet into the ground as if to stand, but did not rise. Without a word, Doris retrieved a fork. Instead of sitting back down, Doris stood at the counter, scrutinizing her mother. Peggy still had her hair dyed platinum blonde and looked thinner, even more anxious, than the last time Doris had seen her, several months ago. A thick layer of make-up was not enough to prevent Doris from noticing the wrinkles on her face. This was Doris’s mother, Peggy, whom Doris had early been ordered to call by her first name and not “mom.” Dressed in a neatly pressed skirt, low-cut, flowing shirt, and cashmere shawl draped over one shoulder, Peggy made Doris, in her t-shirt and jeans, feel like a slob.

Peggy lifted the cake from the container, set it on the plate, and stabbed her fork into it. As if in a trance, Doris could not take her eyes off Peggy, who was attacking the cake with quick, frequent jabs, like a bird pecking. Listening to the click of the fork and

sound of Peggy chewing, Doris cleared her throat. She wanted to say something, anything to break the silence, but the only thing she could think of to talk about was Gobo. Somehow, she needed to warm Peggy up to the idea that Doris had gotten back together with her ex-boyfriend, Gobo.

Though Peggy had never actually met Gobo, she had inferred enough from the stories Doris had told adoringly about him when they first got together to form a dislike for him. She was wary of his going to protests and spending time with anarchists and homeless people, whom she considered to be people that Doris should under no circumstances associate with. When he broke up with Doris to go on an impromptu six-month road trip across the country, dislike had turned into loathing, and whenever Peggy mentioned Gobo on the phone now it was easy for Doris to imagine her mother's lip curling in disgust. The last thing Doris had told Peggy about her relationship status was that she had just started dating a successful, young lawyer named Sammy. Peggy had been much more enthusiastic than Doris about it.

There was no reason for them to talk about Gobo right now, though. She would have the whole weekend to break the news. Now, it was easier just to watch Peggy eat. Fortunately for Doris, she was still full from the large breakfast of eggs, waffles, and bacon that Gobo had made for her before she left.

At last Peggy spoke. "It'th goodth to sree *vous* again," she garbled, crumbs spraying onto the table though she held her hand up in front of her mouth.

Doris forced a smile but still could not bring herself to say anything. She got up to fill a glass of water from the sink and looked around the kitchen. Light was streaming in from the bay windows, bleaching the room with the bright afternoon sun. The walls

were a dull gray this time, in what must have been the fourth or fifth kitchen remodeling since Doris had graduated from high school. Doris shook her head, wondering why it was so hard for Peggy to pick a color she liked and just stick with it. And why gray? Gray was so somber.

Peggy flitted the last bite of cake to her mouth and turned her attention to Doris. “Don’t drink the tap water. There’s filtered water in the fridge.”

Doris stopped mid-gulp, poured out the rest of the water, and went to the fridge.

“So how are things with Sammy?” Peggy asked, with a prying look.

“They’re OK,” Doris said, trying to sound casual. “We broke up, though,”

Peggy straightened up in her chair, rotated so that she could look at Doris without craning her neck, and scowled. “Broke up? Why didn’t you tell me? When did you break up with him? All this time we talk on the phone, and you never thought to mention that you broke up with your boyfriend.”

“We didn’t break up that long ago.”

“I just don’t understand why you won’t tell me what’s going on in your life,” Peggy said, eyebrows knitted and creases spreading all the way across her forehead.

Avoiding Peggy’s gaze, Doris said, “I do tell you things. I just didn’t want to talk about Sammy. To anyone.”

“But why not?” Peggy said. “You know I would have been there for you.”

“It was just something I wanted to deal with myself.”

If Peggy felt sorry for her, she would give Doris less of a hard time. Doris tried to look upset, but her display was not enough. Peggy’s lip jutted out, pouting, as if she had been insulted.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Doris said, looking at Peggy out of the corner of her eye, not wanting to make eye contact, “but I didn’t want to burden you.” Peggy was already anxious enough whenever she called Doris on the phone as it was, most of the time crying because of something that had happened at work, either too much to do or her boss telling her that she wasn’t creative enough to be in marketing.

Peggy stared, her mouth hanging open for a moment before speaking, in a wavering voice, “Burden me? I’m your mother, Doris. You’re *supposed* to burden me. I just want to look out for you, sweetie, but I can’t do that if you won’t tell me anything.”

Tapping her fingers on the counter, Doris sighed. She looked away, then turned back to face Peggy, and, feeling numb, said, “I do tell you things. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Sammy. I should have. I just didn’t feel up to it.”

Peggy humphed. “I really liked Sammy, too, from everything you said about him.”

Laughing, Doris said, “You mean you liked that he made a lot of money? What else did you really know about him?”

“You could have done much worse, though, than not to have that base covered.” Peggy gave Doris an accusatory look. “You *have* done much worse.” At least she didn’t say Gobo’s name this time, but it was clear enough whom she was talking about.

“Sammy would always be able to provide for you. And you were always talking about how attractive he was.” Peggy’s eyes were shining, as if she were imagining a handsome knight riding up and taking her, not Doris, away.

“That was because I couldn’t think of anything else to say about him. He was nice, I guess, but he just didn’t really do it for me.”

“You mean,” Peggy said, with a prudish look, “in bed?”

Doris shook her head. “No. In life. He wasn’t very interesting.”

“What do you mean, interesting?” Peggy had her chin held high and a disdainful look on her face.

“I don’t know, Peggy. He didn’t have anything interesting to say.” Straightening up in her seat, Doris said, “I don’t know why I have to defend my decision to break up with him.”

Her most common memories of Sammy were of him coming over, late at night, dressed always in Hollister, tossing his luscious, dirty blonde hair with a smirk. He would nod at Doris without really making eye contact, and then grin as he rolled his shoulders, and start explaining the details of cases that he had been working on throughout the day, or different pranks that he had done with his buddy, Jake. With a preening look, he would say how much everyone at work liked him, and how it could be only a matter of time before he was awarded another promotion. After saying all this, he would take Doris’s hand and lead her to the couch, where he would begin kissing her, lightly, as if he were afraid of being sucked in by her.

Sammy was gone from her life now, and good riddance.

Peggy looked flustered. “There’s no reason for you to lash out at me, Doris.”

“I’m not lashing out at you,” Doris said, trying to stay calm. “I –”

Peggy opened her mouth to speak, but Doris, wanting to get out of the room, cut in, “I think I need to go take a nap. I’m feeling tired.” She opened her mouth wide, trying to yawn.

“You’re tired? We’ve barely had a chance to talk yet. You should have slept on the plane. You know I took a half-day at work because I wanted to spend time with you?”

“You didn’t have to take off work.”

“But I wanted to see you,” Peggy said.

Doris hunched over, trying to look as tired as possible. “If I take a nap now, I’ll have more energy for the rest of the weekend.”

“Well, then, you should go take a nap.”

Doris attempted another yawn. On her way out of the kitchen, she stopped and asked, trying not to sound too preferential, “What time do you think Walter will be home?”

Peggy frowned, as if Doris had just told a crude joke. “I have no idea when your father will be home. He’s probably forgotten that you’re even coming.”

“Did you tell him what time I was coming?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Peggy said, in a distant voice. “I sent him an e-mail about it, I think. You know how he is. He likes to work late.”

Doris trudged up the stairs to her bedroom and collapsed onto her bed. She lay there without pulling back the covers, which Peggy had neatly tucked in underneath the mattress. Her room was just the same as it had been in high school, with the exception of a few boxes of old magazines and newspapers Walter must have put in there when he was cleaning the rest of the house. She rolled her head from side to side, looking around her room, with the dolls from her childhood still lining her bureau, and posters of attractive male actors covering the walls. She glazed over Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, and a young

James Dean. They were attractive still, very attractive, but she was no longer absorbed by the feeling of adoration she had felt growing up. She thought, instead, of Gobo.

Maybe Doris could tell Peggy that she had started spending time with Gobo as a friend and see how that went. It wouldn't go well, but at least Peggy wouldn't be as shocked as Doris just out and saying that she and Gobo were back together, not just dating, but living together. Not that living together had been Doris's idea. Certainly not. She hadn't been thrilled by it, but he convinced her, saying that he didn't have enough money to pay for a whole room's rent, and hadn't they used to live together anyway? She didn't need to tell Peggy about his not having enough money, or even that they were living together. All Peggy needed to know was that she was in love with him and that they were dating again. Doris would feel much better getting that off her chest.

Doris yawned, and this time actually felt tired. She pulled back the covers, wormed her way inside, and, feeling quite warm and snug, fell asleep.

After her nap, Doris went downstairs and found Peggy sitting in her massive leather armchair in the living room, hunched over her magazine. Doris sat down on the couch across from her.

"Did you know that Brad Pitt and Angelina are adopting another African baby?" Peggy asked, looking up with a pleased expression as Doris sat down, and then back at her magazine. "I don't know why two people that attractive don't have their own kids."

If she had been upset at Doris, Peggy seemed to have forgotten about it by now. Doris stared at her mother, who was flipping through the tabloid with her eyes narrowed in intense focus. She could not help grinning at the thought of her mother being like a

cat, one minute, explosive, scratching if anyone should walk by too close, and the next, affectionate, expecting to be patted on the head for presenting a dead mouse.

Glancing down at her wrist, Doris saw the faint outline of a pig that Gobo had drawn on her. It was just one of the many strange things about him that pigs were his favorite animal. She rotated her arm and placed her hands in her lap. Doris considered saying Gobo's name, just saying it out loud, and waiting for Peggy to ask what she was talking about. Doris would start talking about how she had seen him. That they were spending time together. Soon enough Peggy would realize that they were dating again, and Doris wouldn't have to worry about having to figure out what she could and couldn't tell Peggy when they talked on the phone, which was as frequent as every other night whether Doris liked it or not.

At length, Doris said, "That's interesting. What's the kid's name?"

Peggy flipped back a few pages. "Zahara," she said, with a frown.

"That's a nice name."

"Hmm."

More silence. "Do we have any plans for dinner?" Doris asked, rubbing her stomach.

"I don't know. Just let me finish this article."

Doris straightened up on the couch and cracked her neck.

"Don't do that. You know it makes me feel uncomfortable." Peggy put her hand to her neck and massaged it, an anxious look on her face. At length, she put her magazine down and said, "What would you like to do for dinner, then?"

"I could make dinner, if you want."

“Since when do you know how to cook?”

“I’ve been learning.” Doris curled up on the couch, drawing her feet underneath her, then, staring at the carpet, added, “A friend’s been teaching me.”

“Oh? Is this is a male friend?” Peggy leaned forward, a conspiratorial gleam in her eyes.

“Yes.”

Peggy frowned. “You haven’t told me anything about him?”

Doris hesitated, then said, “I used to work with him.”

“Hmm. Which job do you know him from?”

“The fundraising job.”

“The one where you worked with Gobo?”

“Yeah, that one.” If Doris didn’t start inventing details to throw her off the trail, Peggy would figure out soon enough that something was up.

Peggy leaned forward, with an eager gleam in her eye, and said, “What’s his name? How long have you been seeing him?”

Doris’s stomach lurched. She opened her mouth to speak, but now the thought of saying Gobo’s name seemed terrifying. Peggy’s eyes narrowed, suspicious, but before she could say anything else, the front door opened, and a moment later, into the room came Walter, towering, bearlike, lumbering on his haunches, shoulders dipping from side to side as he walked. His stomach protruded a little further than the last time Doris had seen him, and his chin had started to disappear into the girth of his neck. He saw Doris on the couch, and his face, normally impassive, erupted into a grin as she stood to hug him.

“Hi, Walter,” Doris said, beaming.

“Well, look who it is,” he said, in his slow, deep voice, grabbing her in a firm embrace.

His shirt was damp with sweat, but he pulled her close, only letting go after several seconds. As Doris moved back to sit on the couch, Walter stood for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to follow Doris to the couch. Peggy looked up from her magazine and gave him a disinterested glance. He lowered his gaze to stare at the floor and moved his hands to cover the bald spot on the crown of his head.

“Was your flight OK?” he asked Doris, after a moment of shifting his weight and scratching his head.

“It was fine.” She tried to make her voice sound warm, but she could only get so excited talking about her flight.

“You miss home?” he said, with a bashful look.

“Doris was just telling me that she was learning how to cook,” Peggy cut in, closing her magazine and setting it on her lap as she gave Walter an imperious look.

“But she won’t tell me who’s been teaching her. It’s a boy.”

Walter turned to Doris, and, chuckling to himself, said, “A boy? Are you sure you should be spending time with boys?”

Doris blushed.

“Well, do we have anything to eat?” Walter said, patting his stomach and moving to sit beside Doris on the couch.

“Nothing,” Peggy said, fretting. “Nothing at all.”

“Why don’t I run to the store and grab some groceries, then?” Doris said, standing up. “I can cook something nice.”

Walter nodded his head in approval.

“I just want to know who’s been teaching you how to cook,” Peggy muttered.

“I’ll go to the grocery store with you,” Walter said, pulling his keys out of his pocket and jiggling them in front of Doris, as if he were enticing a dog to go on a walk.

Doris frowned at him, but his eager expression did not change. Doris followed him out the door when they were stopped by Peggy calling, “Wait!”

She appeared at the door, and with a shrill, commanding voice, said, “I’m not going to wait for you to go shopping, and then for Doris to cook something. We’re going out for dinner. I know a place.”

Doris waited in the living room with Walter as Peggy went upstairs to get ready. When neither of them said anything for several minutes, Walter reached for the remote and turned on the TV, and they watched a documentary about boxing. As far as Doris knew, Walter had never expressed any interest in boxing, and the dull look in his eyes suggested that he still had very little. At times, though, Walter would turn to Doris and break into a smile, as if having her there was enough to convince him that he was having a good time, even if they weren’t talking.

She could not help feeling pity for him, sitting on the couch, his mouth hanging open slightly as he watched the screen. During commercials, he would take out his book, a thick history volume on Ancient Rome, and read, leaving Doris to drift in and out of paying attention to the TV.

Thirty minutes later, Peggy appeared, her hair braided instead of in a bun, with what seemed to be a new layer of makeup, and the shawl readjusted to cover both her shoulders. “Walter, you’re not wearing that, are you?” Peggy said, gliding into the center of the room and puffing a spray of perfume onto her wrist.

“But I wore this to work,” he said, standing up, with a defiant tone.

“And you’re covered in sweat, Walter.” She said his name with such a look of distaste, the same one that she used when she was talking about how much she disliked Republicans. Walter grimaced and looked pointedly at the floor, silent.

“I’m starving,” Doris cut in, leaping to her feet. “I think we should just go.”

Shaking her head, Peggy pushed past them and led the way out to the driveway.

“I’ll drive,” Walter volunteered, before Peggy had gotten to her car.

“No, that’s OK. I don’t think you’re a very good driver. I’ll drive.”

Peggy opened the driver’s seat of her Mercedes, and Walter followed, stopping in front of the passenger door.

“You’ll need to sit in the back, Walter,” Peggy ordered. “You know Doris gets car sick if she doesn’t sit in the front.”

“Why don’t I drive?” Doris asked. “That way Walter can sit in the front. He’s so big.”

“No, I know where we’re going,” Peggy said, sitting down. “It’ll just be easier for me to drive.”

Walter clambered into the back and sat with his knees folded close to his chest and a grimace on his face.

“So are you going to tell me who this new boy is?” Peggy demanded as she gunned the car out of the driveway and shot off down the road. “You won’t even tell me his name?”

“It’s nothing,” Doris answered, staring out the window at the neighborhood houses flashing by. The feeling of insignificance that she had felt earlier in the day was replaced by a resentment towards Peggy.

“Is it so hard just to tell me a name?”

Walter cut in, “She doesn’t want to talk about it. Why don’t you leave Doris alone?”

Doris gave her father a grateful look. At the same time Peggy craned her neck and glowered at Walter. The car swerved for a moment to the edge of the road, before Peggy spun the wheel to bring it back, this time going into the other lane.

“Peggy, what are you doing?” Walter said, voice fearful.

Bringing the car back into the middle of the lane, Peggy regained her composure, and said, “Walter, I’m trying to have a conversation with my daughter.” She practically spat the word, “daughter,” at him, and her eyes narrowed to slits.

“We’re going to dinner,” Doris cut in, beseeching. “Can we please just try to be nice?”

They were silent for the rest of the car ride. At last they pulled into the parking lot of an expensive-looking French restaurant. “I’ve been here with work, and it’s delightful,” Peggy exclaimed, growing cheerful again. “You’ll love it, Doris.”

Doris forced a smile and the three of them walked into the restaurant, Peggy streaming ahead, always having to lead the way, Walter, trudging along at the rear, gaze

cast downwards, and Doris, stuck in the middle, afraid to walk beside either parent for fear of hurting the other one. Peggy marched up to the hostess and said, "Reservation for three. If it's going to take more than half an hour, we'll go somewhere else."

The restaurant was busy, but not busy enough for Peggy to worry about how long it would take them to be seated, Doris thought, looking around at the waiters strutting about with their neat bow ties and smug, polite faces. Jazz was playing softly over the speakers, not the kind that Doris liked to listen to, the kind that washed over you and let you sink into thought, but the cheery, elevator music type.

The hostess gave Peggy a forced smile and said, "I'll be sure to find you a place."

"There, you see," Peggy lectured, turning to Doris. "You let people know what you want and you won't have to wait as long."

After ten minutes, the hostess brought them to a small table in the corner of the restaurant, which was right by the door to the kitchen, so that a constant stream of waiters was rushing by. Her parents sat across from each other, as far away as they could possibly be, leaving Doris to sit in the middle.

The waiter, a small, round dark-skinned man, with a shiny bald head, and an immovable, impersonally polite smile, brought their menus and asked for drinks. Peggy, put his hand on the waiter's shoulder and asked for his thoughts on the wine selection. Like a machine, the waiter began reciting the different types of wine. When he brought back a bottle and asked if they were ready to order, Peggy said that they were. Walter sat puzzling over his menu, and the waiter said he would come back, but Peggy ordered with a sharp voice, "Walter, please just go ahead and order."

After another moment, in which Walter's brow furrowed even further as he looked up and down the menu, he said, nodding his head towards Doris, "I'll have what Doris is having." When the waiter reached for Walter's menu, though, Walter put his hand on top of it, saying, "I'll hold onto it just a little longer, in case I decide I want something else."

A look of aggravation flashed over the waiter's face, then he resumed his smile and hurried away.

"You won't believe all the trouble that is going on at work," Peggy said, pouring herself a full glass of wine. "My boss gave me a project at the last minute two days ago, and I almost had a panic attack trying to get it finished."

"Did you get it done?" Doris said, trying to show the appropriate amount of concern, not too much and not too little. Otherwise, Peggy would get upset that Doris was being callous, or if Doris showed too much interest, keep complaining for the rest of the night.

"I did. But I felt awful at the end of it." Peggy lifted the glass of wine to her lips and took a large gulp. "It's really an awful place to work."

"Do you think you could find a different job?" Doris asked, but halfheartedly. They had had this conversation plenty of times before, and it always went the same way. Peggy worried that she wouldn't be able to find a job if she left her current one, and yet she wouldn't even look for another job. She said it was because however stressful it could be, she liked the challenge of working in marketing.

"I don't know, Doris. I'd like to, but I just don't see it happening. Not in the near future, anyway. But you tell me about your work."

“What about it?” Doris said, reluctant.

“Don’t be so *evasive*. How is it going? Have you decided to give up working as a government data analyst yet?”

“It’s been going well.” Doris forced a smile, trying to sound more enthusiastic than she felt about the position, which was full of people she could not stand, who were always picking out little details that she had not done right, improper formatting in the graphs, not enough significant figures. “I think I’m going to have a full-time position soon,” she said, only able to muster a weak smile. The idea of going to work there full-time actually seemed unbearable.

“Well, I guess that’s a good thing. You’ve been working there for what, a year, and they still only have you part-time?” Peggy’s voice was full of aggravation. If Doris wasn’t going to be upset, well, then, Peggy would always be there to fill in.

“Yeah, but it’s a job.”

“But they hardly pay you anything,” Peggy said, with a nonplussed look on her face. “If it’s just a job, why don’t you get something that pays a little better?”

“I’m doing research on the effectiveness of different state welfare programs. It’s a really good thing.” It might have been a good thing, but for the past month or so Doris had become more and more convinced that she didn’t want to be the one to have to do it. What she was doing was just too menial. It didn’t challenge Doris at all. Not that she had any idea of what else to do. “They pay me enough, to get by.”

Peggy’s laugh rang out through the restaurant. “That’s not really true, though. I’m paying your rent, aren’t I?”

Walter had been flipping through the menu, turning it over, and rotating it around the table, when he looked up at Peggy and said, voice quiet but annoyed, “It’s not all *your* money.”

Peggy ignored him, and poured herself another glass of wine, then, looking at Doris, said, “I think it’s time we have a talk about your *career*.”

“But Peggy, we talked about my ‘career’ less than a week ago. I don’t have anything new to say.”

“It’s different in person, though.” Peggy looked earnestly at Doris and reached to place her hand on Doris’s shoulder. “I just think it’s time that you start thinking about getting a job that will actually support you. You’ve been out of college for three years now, and I’m still paying your rent. Do you see any problem with that picture?”

Doris felt as if Peggy’s hand was smashing her into the ground. “I don’t want you to pay rent for me anymore, then,” Doris said, shrugging Peggy’s hand off her shoulder. “I can take care of it myself.”

Retracting her hand and placing it in her lap, looking proper, Peggy gave a reproving stare, and said, “But you said you didn’t have enough money for it.”

“Well, I do now.” Now that Gobo was paying half of the apartment’s rent, that was. Doris had been planning to ask Peggy to reduce how much she gave in rent anyway, maybe only in half, but now better just to cut it off completely and be done with it. “I’ve been saving up, and I don’t want to feel so dependent on you.” It would just mean that she couldn’t go out to eat as much, but Gobo didn’t like going out anyway, when it was much cheaper to cook.

Doris looked to her father for support, but Walter had apparently snuck his book into the restaurant and set it on his lap under the table, so that Peggy could not see it.

“Doris, that’s not the point,” Peggy argued, her face flushing. “I’m happy to pay it for you. I don’t want you to pay your rent if that means you won’t be able to enjoy yourself. I don’t want you to have to cook all your meals at home and not go out for a nice dinner. I just want you to start thinking about getting a job where you have enough money to provide for yourself. Don’t you want to have a real career? To be rewarded *financially* for the amount of effort you put into your job?” Peggy said the word, “financially,” with a look of reverence on her face.

“Have you thought about law?” Peggy continued, growing in enthusiasm. “I think you’d make a great lawyer. You ask the right questions, Doris, that’s what Uncle Ralph has always said.”

Taking her fork and knife and clashing them against each other, Doris inhaled deeply, puffed her cheeks out, and blew out a loud stream of air before answering. “Yes, I’ve thought about law, because you bring it up every time we have this conversation. I don’t want to be a lawyer.”

Peggy looked disapprovingly at Doris, who in response moved the fork and knife to do battle underneath the table, out of Peggy’s gaze.

“But you could at least try it out,” Peggy said, patting her bun as if to make sure it was still there. “You shouldn’t write it off just like that. You could get a position at Ralph’s law firm, as a paralegal or something. If they like you, and of course they’ll like you, I’m sure we can convince your uncle to have the firm pay for you to go to law school. You could do a lot worse than become a lawyer.”

Peggy was twisting her wedding ring on her finger, her voice becoming tinged with anxiety, as if whether or not Doris decided to become a lawyer would mean the difference between a life of extreme poverty or unbounded wealth.

“But I’m saying that I *do* have enough money to pay for the rent. And I don’t want to figure out what I’m going to do for the rest of my life. Not right now, maybe never. I want to be able to move around, to try new things. And I have a job now, don’t I? I’ll start paying for the rent. What more do you want from me?” Seeing Peggy open her mouth to respond, Doris was compelled to add, “I’m doing what I want, and you’re just going to have to be OK with it.”

Peggy sniffed, took her napkin, and, with a wounded look, blew her nose loudly into it. Feeling a wave of aggravation towards her, Doris took her napkin and started twisting it in her hands.

“Walter, you’re not reading, are you?” Peggy demanded, after Walter had set the book on the table, so absorbed in his reading, and having been ignored thus far in the conversation. “We’re trying to have a nice dinner.”

Walter looked up at Peggy, like a dog deciding whether or not to run away when its master is right in front of it, calling. He turned back to his book. Peggy opened her mouth as if about to say something harsh, but looked around at all the peaceful dinners going on, then turned back to Doris and set her hands on the table. She began smoothing the tablecloth, and kept smoothing it even after it had been flattened. Leaning back in her chair, her whole face furrowed in concern, she said, “I’m afraid for you, Doris. I’m afraid that you’re going to decide not to get your life in order right now, and that you’ll enjoy being ... *reckless* ... for a while. But twenty years from now, you’ll decide that

you miss the lifestyle that you grew up with. You'll want something more for yourself, but it'll be too late. Why not get a real job now, and just see how you like it? If you really hate it, *then* you can quit."

Doris pursed her lips. She wanted to say something to strike out against the warning, but Peggy's words had latched on and were eating away at her. Peggy took a deep breath and continued, "What if you want to have a family? Walter and I sacrificed to provide the best for you. Do you want your children not to have all the opportunities you did growing up?"

Doris sawed the fork and knife furiously back and forth under the table. "I don't know if I want kids. Maybe I don't, so what's to stop me from living for myself for a while?"

"'Maybe' you don't, Doris, but it would be pretty bad if you decided one day that you did, but you were broke, and only had a part-time job. What kind of a life could you build for a family then?"

Doris was silent.

"You need to pay the bills," Peggy continued. "That's just a fact of life. And if you ever want to have a family, you need to think about them, too. You need to plan for it."

Peggy had a pleased, almost triumphant look on her face now. Could she really be enjoying this, explaining all the ways in which the world pinned people down, like beetles stuck with a needle on a board and left to die, squirming in place? How was this any way to live?

Doris set her fork and knife down on the table and placed her hands in her lap. “But where does that lead to, Peggy?” Her voice grew more resolute as she said, “What will any of that do to make me, make anybody, happy?”

Peggy’s face registered a moment of uncertainty, before she said, with even more smugness, “You have to provide for yourself before you can worry about being happy.”

No, Doris would rather worry about being happy, first, and let the rest work its way out, she now realized. Surely it would be better to have tried for everything, she thought, with a cool resolve hardening in her gut. Doris straightened up in her chair. Looking at Peggy’s neatly positioned hair, so unnaturally bright, and her anxious, disproving look, she was suddenly overcome with hatred for her mother, who tried so hard to force Doris down a path that could not possibly lead to anywhere fulfilling. It could only lead to being like Peggy.

“You’re giving me advice about how to live *my* life?” Doris said, even gritting her teeth at the thought of ever haven given in to anything Peggy pressured her to do.

“Peggy, you hate your marketing job,” she continued slowly, voice quiet but firm with condemnation. Doris felt powerful in her anger, as if she could tell Peggy anything, even about Gobo, and have no concern for the consequences. “You think I want to live like that, like you?”

“Doris, you have no right –” Peggy sputtered, then trailed off. She looked away, eyes full of doubt, face ugly in the contortions of pain.

Walter had looked up from his book and was staring at Peggy, a hint of a vindictive smile on his lips.

“I’m leaving,” Peggy said, at length, as she pushed back her chair slowly.

“But the food will be here any second,” Walter said, his eyes gleaming.

“You can take a taxi home,” Peggy replied, her voice hollow.

Head bowed, she picked up her purse and went out of the restaurant. All the other diners around were too absorbed in their own conversations to notice her. The argument had not been loud enough to catch their attention, Doris thought, turning in her seat to watch Peggy go. She felt indifferent to her mother, and yet surprised by the indifference. The waiter appeared, balancing a tray with their food. He still had the same immovable smile as he set the plates on the table.

Peggy shouldn't be allowed to drive home, not after two glasses of wine and an emotional outburst. “I need to go talk to her,” Doris muttered to Walter, who was eying the food and clearing his book away.

Her stomach rumbled as she watched the waiter set the filet mignon in front of her. Doris grabbed her purse and, nodding at the waiter, feeling self-conscious in front of his unchanging polite face, she hurried out of the restaurant. Peggy was in the parking lot, leaning against the car. She did not look up as Doris approached, and shuddered when Doris grabbed her in an embrace from behind.

“I'm sorry, Peggy. I didn't mean to upset you.” Feeling Peggy's body heave with silent sobs, Doris's ill will towards her mother gave way, slowly at first but then in a giant wave. This was her mother, Peggy, who had given so much to her, and because of that sacrifice, how could Doris do anything but love her in return? Her mother was so thin, so helpless. “I appreciate everything you've done for me. Really, I do.”

“I've tried to do the best for you, Doris,” Peggy said, her voice wavering, then, dejectedly, “I just want to go home.”

Peggy pried herself free and tried to open the car door, but it was locked and she yanked the handle twice before digging through her purse.

“I’ll drive, then,” Doris said, taking the keys from Peggy’s hand before she had a chance to protest.

Silently, Peggy went around to the passenger’s seat and got in the car. As soon as Doris had started driving, she turned to Peggy and, after a moment of hesitation, full of a need for truth, said, “Mom, I just wanted to let you know, but I’m dating Gobo.”

Peggy’s face changed from hurt to surprise. “Gobo?” she said, confused.

“Yes. I just wanted to let you know.” Doris waited for her mother to respond, to lash out with hatred for Gobo. She was ready for the anger, the condemnation, but Peggy was silent, staring out the window. In earnest, Doris said, “I’m not asking for your permission. I just want you to be happy for me.”

Peggy sighed and kept her head turned away from Doris. When they got home, Peggy declared, in a flat voice, that she was going to bed, and hurried up the stairs. Doris sat in the living room and turned the TV on, expecting Peggy to come back down at some point, but she had not by the time Walter showed up at the house, about an hour later. Doris had gotten a bag of chips from the cupboard and was almost to the bottom of them.

“Well, that went pretty terribly,” Walter said as he sat next to Doris on the couch. But he seemed just barely able to hold back a look of smugness. “You should have just put her in a taxi.”

“I couldn’t do that,” Doris said, for the first time feeling as if she were about to cry.

“Are you crying?” Walter asked, in a dubious voice. He put his arm around her, by now absolutely reeking of body odor.

She did not answer, but wiped her eyes. Walter rubbed her shoulder, not saying anything, for several moments, then pulled out his book and read with one hand and kept rubbing her back with the other. When Walter moved his hand away, focusing on the book, Doris stood up and told him good night.

On the way to her room, she tapped lightly on her mother’s door, then, getting no response, cracked the door open. Peggy lay in her bed, still wearing her dinner clothing, snoring slightly, body twisted at a haphazard angle. Doris closed the door as quietly as she could and went to her own room, feeling miserable.

The next morning, Doris was eating a bowl of cereal when Peggy came downstairs, looking haggard with her hair uncombed and make-up smeared over her face.

“Good morning, Doris,” she said, her voice sounding vacantly cheerful.

“Good morning, Peggy. How’d you sleep?”

“Very well, thank you.”

Peggy moved to get a bowl of cereal too, and sat hunched over the table, her eyes fixed downwards on her cereal. “What would you like to do today?” Peggy asked, after a long silence.

“I’m up for whatever you want. Why don’t we go shopping?” Doris would even go shopping if it would snap Peggy out of this rut.

“You don’t want to go shopping, though.”

“Peggy, please don’t be upset. I wasn’t trying to offend you last night. I do want to go shopping.”

“I’m not upset,” Peggy said, voice lifeless, and took her bowl of cereal to the sink.

When she came downstairs an hour later, dressed in a skirt and blouse, her eyes were no longer so haggard but full of coldness.

“I’ll be driving,” Peggy commanded, sounding almost malicious. Still she would not look Doris in the eye.

They drove to the mall and Peggy led the way into H & M. Doris tried to keep up, but Peggy walked briskly.

The store sprawled out before them, with shoppers hurrying between the aisles like ants working in a colony, and in just as seemingly a random pattern. There were mirrors everywhere, and people casting sideways glances to see how they looked as they walked by them. Doris already felt silly being here, when she would much rather look for something in a thrift shop, that would have the possibility of finding something weird and fun. But she was here to cheer Peggy up, and Peggy loved H & M.

“What do you think about this one?” Doris would ask, holding up a random article of clothing.

“Oh, that would look nice,” Peggy replied, but each time a frown would spread across her face as she said it.

Peggy moved about the aisles at a fast pace, flipping through articles of clothing, sometimes pulling them out to hold them up, checking the price tag. Most of the time she put them back and moved on, which was quite different from when they normally went

shopping, and Peggy would put in the cart what seemed like every other article of clothing. Now there were only a couple of shirts in the cart.

Doris placed her hand on Peggy's shoulder and said, "Peggy, this is ridiculous. I don't know why you're so mad at me. All I said was that I didn't want to live exactly like you. It's not a big deal. Why shouldn't I want to live my own way?"

Peggy's eyes flashed for a moment in anger, then, face going blank, she said, "I don't want to talk about it. But for the record, you said, 'You think I want to live like that?'"

Doris blushed. The anger that she had felt last night had been a new thing for her, and now she felt embarrassed because of it under Peggy's cold stare.

"So I hear you're dating Gobo now," Peggy said, holding up a blouse in front of her to survey it in the mirror, then with a look of disgust slamming it back on the wrack. "I would look terrible in that."

"I am dating him," Doris said, feeling as if she were being led to her execution.

"When did that happen?"

"I don't know. A few weeks ago?" It had been four weeks on Thursday.

"Things are going well?"

"Pretty well, given that he'd been gone for so long."

"You've got to learn –" Peggy started, her voice growing sharp, then trailed off.

"What do I have to learn?" Doris felt like she was giving the executioner an axe to chop her own head off with, but at the same time she was intrigued. Maybe Peggy had some secret about relationships, some insight she had learned before being Doris's

mother, when romantic relationships would have been something fresh and exciting for her.

“You need to learn to have a little respect for yourself.” The cold detachment that had been present throughout the day was ebbing out of Peggy’s voice and giving way to the lecturing tone, so familiar. But there was a more humble quality in her voice now.

“What do you mean? I do respect myself,” Doris replied, frowning, but feeling a knot forming in her stomach. Did she really respect herself? What did that even mean? Doris did the best she could, most of the time, and tried not to regret her decisions, didn’t she?

“He left you and you take him back? That doesn’t sound much like respect to me. He made a choice to leave you, and he should have to deal with not being able to have you.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Doris said, patiently.

Peggy put back a sweater she had been looking at and turned to face Doris. In a hollow voice, she said, “I think you’re making it out to be more than it actually is, this thing with Gobo. It doesn’t matter whether you date him or not, he’ll move on soon enough.”

Doris could feel the potential for the same hatred she had felt last night, how easily it could well up inside her and give her the strength to strike down her mother. But that was not the way Doris worked. It required more strength *not* to lash out at Peggy, who always seemed to say the things most likely to aggravate, Doris thought, remembering how pathetic her mother looked last night.

“All I know,” Peggy continued, with a sorrowful authoritativeness, “is when you called me to say that he had left you, you said you were never going to see him again. You’re going back on your word, for someone who hurt you just because he got bored of what was going on around him. Isn’t that right? He was working, and then he got fired, and then he decided to go. He didn’t realize what a good thing he had with you.”

Peggy finished speaking, with a dejected sigh, and turned back towards the clothing racks and pulled out a neon orange scarf to inspect. She gave a slight amused smile when she saw it, then put it back.

“Why don’t you get the scarf?” Doris said, feeling numb, reaching for the scarf and handing it to Peggy.

Now they stood much closer to each other, and Doris could see places in which Peggy had not applied the make-up on her face very well.

“I don’t have anything to wear it with. And it looks awful.”

The anxiety was creeping back into her mother’s voice. Better not to talk about clothing, then, because that was something Peggy was always anxious about.

“But he’s different now,” Doris said, thinking hard. “He’s ... ”

“What makes you think he’s changed?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling, I guess. A feeling that he cares about me in a different way. It’s not perfect, but when he sees me his eyes light up like I’m the most important person in the world. Like I’ve got something invaluable to him.”

Peggy laughed bitterly. “But does he feel that way the rest of the time, Doris, when you’re not around? People like that don’t change, Doris. Not really.”

“How do you know that? You’ve never even met him.”

“I’ve met people like that before. They always leave you.” There was a profound sorrow in Peggy’s eyes, a look that Doris could not remember ever having seen in her before. How had this part existed within her mother so long, and remained so hidden? Or, how had Doris never noticed it before?

“And Walter will never leave you?” Doris spoke quietly but insistently. She wanted to hear Peggy talk about her father, now, in this moment of truthfulness.

Peggy’s eyes grew cold again, as she said, “I married your father because I wanted to make sure any children I had would have a stable home. And I did my best to give that to you.” She sighed, and then, less coldly, said, “I know that someone like Gobo can seem appealing, but he is only going to hurt you. People who run away once always run away again. It’s in their nature. If you don’t understand this, you will get hurt.”

“But how do you know? How do you know he’ll leave?”

Peggy turned towards Doris and gave her a sympathetic look. “People like that only see the world in terms of how much they can get out of it. They won’t give when it really matters, when it takes effort, when you need them to give. You date one person like this, you get hurt, then you date another one, and you start to realize they’re all the same.”

Peggy had never told Doris anything about her former relationships, hardly anything even about how she and Walter had courted. All Doris knew was that she and Walter had met at the dentist’s, and Walter had made a joke to Peggy in the waiting room, and when she chuckled, asked if she would like to go on a date. Who else had been a part of Peggy’s life, that she had locked their memory away inside of her?

“But I’m willing to get hurt,” Doris said, cautiously. “I’d rather risk getting hurt if it means I feel like I’m living.”

Peggy shook her head. “You say that now, but you’ve forgotten the last time he left you. I haven’t forgotten. I remember how you called me every day, sobbing, for three weeks.”

“But I’ve already gotten back together with him,” Doris said, feeling helpless.

“So you break up with him, and keep yourself from getting hurt even more.”

Peggy’s voice was firm. There was clearly no doubt in her mind that Doris should break up with Gobo.

“What makes you think he hasn’t changed? He used to be like that, sure, but he came back for me, didn’t he?”

“It’s easy to see what you want to see,” Peggy said, pushing the cart straight ahead now and no longer stopping to look at the clothing. “But people don’t really change.”

They were going up and down the aisles, as if walking a maze that neither of them could figure out how to get out of, just yet.

“Do you really think that, Peggy?” Doris asked, full of anticipation. She paused, struggling for words, then at last, added, “How can anybody live like that, without the hope that you, or anyone else, can become better?”

“When you live with someone for long enough,” Peggy said, her voice flat and a distant look in her eyes, “hoping they, or you, will change, and no one does, you realize some things about the way people are.”

“But isn’t that awful?” Doris could not stop herself from asking.

Peggy's face flushed with anxiety. That look of profound, detached sorrow, seemed to have disappeared back inside her. Voice shrill and nervous, she said, "Well, I live for you now, Doris. My life has been to provide you with all the things you need, so that you can build a good life for yourself, and I live for you to make sure that you're not doing anything too stupid."

Suddenly they came upon the lingerie section. Lace panties and Brazilian thongs were right in front of them. Peggy blushed, and looked away.

"We can go now," Peggy said. "I'm done shopping. Wait, you haven't picked anything out? You have to get something."

Doris grabbed a shirt off a rack, checked the price tag and was about to put it back, but Peggy said, "No, don't worry about that."

After they had checked out and were walking back to the car, Doris said, "Peggy, please can we not talk about Gobo. At least, please don't try to convince me not to date him. I've made a decision to be with him, and I want to stick out, even if I get hurt."

"We just won't talk about him, then."

Peggy did not bring up Gobo on the drive home, instead talking about the neighborhood gossip in a harsh, superior tone. Doris did not respond, and after a while, Peggy grew quiet. When the car pulled up to the driveway, Peggy turned towards Doris, and with a tear trickling down her eye, said, "I'm sorry I haven't provided the best example for you, Doris."

Doris squeezed her mother's hand in hers and was silent, brooding.

Later that night, after a relatively uneventful dinner that Doris prepared, in which Peggy talked about a neighbor's new addition they were building, and Walter talked

about a documentary he had watched about Genghis Kahn, Doris was sitting in front of the TV with Walter.

Peggy came downstairs in her nightgown, with face cream rubbed all over her cheeks, and said, "Walter, can you please turn that damn thing down."

Without looking at her, Walter turned the volume down.

"Doris, are you packed for tomorrow? Your flight is at 9:45 in the morning, and if you miss it, I'm not going to pay for another ticket." The anxiety was back in her voice, maybe even stronger for having gone away at all.

"I love you, Peggy," Doris said, in earnest.

Walter shifted his weight uneasily on the couch.

"So you're not packed?" Peggy demanded.

"I am packed," Doris said, feeling disappointed, but unable to pin down why exactly.

Peggy stared at Doris for a second, searching, then said, suddenly full of affection, "OK. I love you too. Goodnight, dear."

She bent forward to kiss Doris, and Doris tried to hug her mother, but ended up getting Peggy's face cream in her hair. With a wretched look, Peggy fled the room.

Doris leaned back against the couch. She looked at Walter, who turned towards her with a weak smile, then back to the TV. Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes, as she was overcome by a realization of her parents' failure. To some degree, she had pitied them before, but now the starkness of their situation crashed down upon her. Peggy and Walter had failed most of all in the attempt to be happy, either by themselves or with

each other. They loved Doris, yes, but not in a thoughtful way. In a giving way, but one that demanded repayment through obedience.

Peggy and Walter would live out the rest of their lives in this home, the home they had bought to make a life together, and for Doris, almost thirty years ago. One day one of them would die, and the other would go on probably just the same as before. This was their life, or what was left after the rest had been sacrificed in Doris's name.

Doris thought all this, and when she looked again at Walter, saw his balding head and bulging stomach, she wanted to yell at him. Why did he just sit there, dumb? How could Doris think that she would be any different, though? She, too, would fall short, she worried, feeling nauseous. How could she not, when she depended so much on Gobo, who had already left her once? At least she was trying to change, though.

Doris ran her hands through her hair, and sighed, but with the sigh, some of her anxiety seemed to be flowing out of her.

Making Do

Doris jumped as she heard the front door of her apartment slam open. Gobo charged straight into the bedroom, where Doris was sprawled on the bed trying to respond to a plaintive e-mail from her mother. He jumped headlong onto the bed and, rolling over, let his hand flop onto the small of her back.

“I met somebody you have to meet,” he said, his face flushed with excitement.

“Oh, yeah. Who’s that?” Doris said, still caught up with trying to tell her mother that it wasn’t healthy to get so upset about getting criticism from her boss. If Doris didn’t send the e-mail, consoling, she would get a call soon enough, and she didn’t feel up to talking to Peggy.

Gobo moved his hand to rest on her butt, and said, “This college student from Georgia State. She’s an English major. I think you’ll like her.”

“Why’s that?” Doris looked up from her computer.

“The first thing she said to me was that she liked my hat.”

Wary, Doris said, “You mean the one I got you for Christmas, with the spikes?”

“Of course. I brought it to work and was wearing it. She was buying a disposable camera and very offhandedly said that I was probably the only CVS worker ever to wear a hat like that to work. I asked her for her number so that she could go to drinks with us.”

“Won’t that be weird?” Doris said, frowning. “She probably thought you were asking her on a date.”

“No,” Gobo hurried to answer. “It wasn’t anything flirtatious. She was just ... compelling.”

“And you felt compelled to ask her to drinks?”

“With you, yes,” he said, with a disarming smile. “Because you don’t really have many female friends,”

“That’s because you drove them all away the first time we dated.”

Gobo rolled over onto his back, and, rubbing his hands over his eyes, said, “Well, they had those whole six months when we weren’t together and I wasn’t around when they could have come back and said hi. And anyway, I didn’t drive them away in the first place. They just thought I was too free-spirited.”

“No,” Doris said. Gobo was always taking any opportunity to describe himself with the word, “free-spirited,” and Doris was always wary of him when he did. “You made it so that we spent all our time together, and they got mad at me for that.”

“That’s their own damn loss. And now I’m trying to find some new friends for you.”

Doris laughed. “I can find my own friends.”

Gobo sat up and looked at her, challenging, and said, “So you don’t want to meet her?”

Doris turned back to her e-mail, and said, “OK. OK. I’ll meet her.” Then she looked up and said, “And I’m not a weirdo.”

Gobo laughed his loud, splitting laugh. “Yeah, you are. Not as much as me, maybe, but you are.” He made a whooping sound, and clapped his hands together, full of energy. “You’re dating me, aren’t you? Only a weirdo could date me.”

Doris grinned. Gobo grabbed her foot and pulled it close to him, kissing it all over.

“Gobo, that’s gross. I’m trying to write an e-mail to Peggy,” she said, half-pleading, but not expecting Gobo to take any heed.

He laughed, softly, and said, “She’ll still be there when we’re done, you beautiful, weird, weird woman.” He lifted the computer away from Doris, started the song, “Let’s Get It On,” by Marvin Gaye at full volume, and set the computer on the floor.

Now, with pursed lips, Doris looked over the young woman seated across the table. Having pulled out her phone, the woman, whose name was Milena, was making it a point to avoid eye contact. She was even thinner than Doris, pretty, with strong cheekbones, and pale blue eyes, captivating with a calm yet vulnerable expression on her face. But she carried herself in the way of someone who had until recently not been good-looking, and had just begun to notice that people were taking notice of her. Dressed in black that looked more funereal than seductive, she made frequent, jerky movements with her hands that indicated youth and inexperience, though her sad, wide eyes would occasionally look up from the phone and flit around the room, absorbing.

Doris and Gobo had just arrived at the bar and were sitting close to each other at the booth. When Milena walked in, there was an obvious look of surprise on her face that quickly disappeared behind a mask of reserve. Gobo disentangled himself from Doris and leapt up to grab her in a full-bodied hug, lifting her off the ground. Setting her down, he rushed to the bar to buy drinks, leaving Doris and the woman alone. Neither of them spoke, but when Doris looked away, then turned back to Milena, she would see Milena flit her eyes away and start to blush.

At last, Gobo returned to the table, balancing three beers. It was still always surprising to Doris how she could be so attracted to him, even with his too wide lips and curly hair sprouting out at haphazard angles, looking like he hadn't washed in months. Gobo, with his strong cheekbones, hawk-like nose, and fiery eyes that contained in them a perpetual challenge. Doris glanced at Milena to see how she would look at Gobo, but she kept her gaze fixed on her phone until he had set the beers down and plopped down next to her grinning that wide-eyed, crazy smile.

"I'd like to thank you for joining us for drinks," he declared in a magnanimous voice. He reached a hand out, and with a teasing smile at Doris, placed it on Milena's shoulder, gripping. Milena was motionless.

Doris cleared her throat.

"I am just trying to make our guest feel welcome."

Then, shaking his head, he stood up and switched sides, sitting right up against Doris and sliding his hand over her thigh. Doris grabbed his wrist in a vice grip and held it away from her.

"Can I pay you for the beer?" Milena asked in a quiet voice, her face unreadable.

"Certainly you can," Gobo said, stifling a grin, "but you *may* not."

Why was Gobo always talking so loudly? There was no need for him to yell. Doris shushed him, but he continued at the same volume, saying, "I want you to appreciate how much it cost. That beer you're drinking was eight dollars. I picked the most expensive one they had."

Could Gobo ever buy anything and not exclaim about the price? He was always showing off about something. He had certainly never spent that much on a beer for

Doris, though, she thought with a frown. And anyway, he had asked Doris for \$20 dollars before getting in the car, because he was low on cash. Doris didn't expect to get that money back any time soon.

A whiff of his cologne made Doris start drumming her fingers on the table, anxious. Gobo *never* wore cologne.

“So how was your day, Milena?” he asked, leaning forward at the table, with the same intent voice that he used talking to Doris when he came home from work. How could Gobo talk to Milena in the same way, the special way that made Doris feel like she was the most important person in the world to him? Doris felt like she was watching a movie in which she had a premonition that one of the main characters was going to die, it just wasn't clear when or why.

Milena, who had hardly moved at all since she sat down, opened her mouth to speak, and then, after a moment of hesitation, said, “I just wanted to be clear about my expectations. I thought this was going to be a date, but I see you are romantically involved with someone, Gobo.”

Doris could not help admiring her clear, strong voice, which said everything precisely, as if each word was just the right word for what she was trying to say. She spoke with intention, as if each word was the result of a struggle to bring herself to say what she felt.

“Date?” Gobo said, clearing his throat.

“Yes, a date,” Milena said calmly. “You were working, and you asked me to wait for your break, and then we talked for a while. Then you asked if I wanted to go get a

drink.” Her voice grew quieter at the end, as if she were growing concerned for any trouble she might be getting him into.

“Jesus,” Gobo said, running his hands through his hair. “This isn’t what I wanted to happen at all.”

Doris laughed in what must have been a shrill, piercing noise, judging from the nervousness she felt gnawing away at her stomach. “What did you want to happen, then?”

“I think I should leave,” Milena cut in, looking unwaveringly at Gobo.

In one fluid movement, she rose into a standing position, collected her purse, and turned to leave. Gobo snapped into action, leaping to his feet and grabbing Milena’s hand.

“This has been a big misunderstanding,” he said, sounding desperate. Gaining composure, he continued, with the soft, eloquent tone that he used whenever trying to convince someone to do something, “I’m sorry if you thought I was romantically interested in you, Milena. Doris is my girlfriend, and I care about her very much, so much so that I wanted her to meet you. Because I think you’re an interesting person. I suppose I’m a naturally flirtatious person, and I apologize for any mixed signals I might have sent. But I think we can move beyond this. I like spending time with interesting people, and you two are the best women I know. It’s not awkward, or wrong, then, that the three of us would spend time together. At least finish your beer.”

Milena tried to pull her hand away, and Gobo let it drop.

“What do you think, Doris?” Milena asked, face grave with that look of feminine understanding between them: yes, man can be idiots, but what can we do about it? Who

did Milena think she was, giving Doris that look after coming here to get with her boyfriend? How could she give Doris that look of understanding and not realize that she wanted Milena to leave, right away? What good could possibly come from this situation?

In a flat tone, Doris answered, "I guess so."

Milena stood, face locked in contemplation, as she stared at the floor. What was going through her mind that she had not left yet? Did she think that she could steal Gobo away from Doris, right in front of her?

Gobo was slouched back in the seat, with an annoyed look on his face, like a child pouting for not being able to eat all of the cake at another kid's party.

"I'd like to pay for my beer, anyway," Milena said, sitting down and taking a wallet from her purse.

"No, no. You're my guest," Gobo urged, but Milena had extended a ten dollar bill and the look in her eye made clear that she would not accept **it back**. **She left it on the table**, and he sneered at it.

The question she had struggled to avoid the past three weeks since they had gotten back together was pressing in on her like a hand squeezing the guts out of a beetle. Was Gobo worth it? She feared the answer. He had not changed as much as she had hoped when he came back from his six-month adventure out West, and now Doris was having to deal with the consequences. He was like a bird flitting from one thing to the next, pecking at whatever caught his fancy and chirping the whole time about how great he was.

"Well, I'll take that," Doris said, reaching for the bill. "Gobo paid for the drink with my money anyway."

Milena smiled shyly at Doris. Why was she smiling? Doris wouldn't have said anything if she thought it would make Milena smile, if she thought Milena would see it as an invitation to stay. Doris had overestimated Milena's observational abilities, or else, Milena was psychotic and had no consideration for Doris's feelings. There was no middle ground.

Doris could feel herself losing control, and placed her hands in her lap, trying to regain composure. She had nothing to fear from Milena. She was the one who would go home with Gobo.

Forcing herself to be polite, Doris smiled back at Milena, and tried not to be upset when she sat back down. Gobo squeezed Doris's thigh and looked between the two women with the condescending stare of the conqueror.

Though she could move her arm just slightly to the left and touch him, Doris looked at Gobo and felt as if she were observing an animal contained in a zoo exhibit, remarkable and separate.

Doris sighed. She felt suddenly claustrophobic, boxed into the booth by Gobo. The fact that she and Gobo had moved in together, right away after getting back together, raised the stakes of their relationship. The fact that Doris had risked telling her mother, Peggy, that they had gotten back together, though Peggy despised Gobo, raised the stakes. This was Doris's life, and she had made sacrifices for him, and he responded by asking Milena out for drinks.

"All right then," Gobo said, placing his hands flat on the table, as if he were mediating a conflict. "Why don't we talk about this? For conversation, and truth." He said "truth" in a facetious tone. Doris felt like she was being mocked.

“What would have been wrong, per se,” Gobo continued, “with me trying to have a threesome? What’s wrong with open relationships? Milena and I were talking about open relationships earlier, and she said that she thought they could be a really good thing.”

His eyes were twinkling like they did whenever he started talking about ideas that other people found difficult to wrap their heads around.

“I said they could be a good thing,” Milena cut in, but Gobo did not seem to be paying any attention to her now, focusing instead on Doris.

“If you don’t have anything to say yet, Doris,” Gobo said, reaching his arm around her, and breaking his gaze from Doris’s, “I’ll start talking, and then you either of you can step in whenever you want.”

Did he think he was teaching a class? Doris reached behind her, lifted his arm off her, and scooted along the booth seat away from him. She couldn’t help smirking at him. At times he could be so hopelessly tactless, that it didn’t seem worth doing anything but pitying him.

“Oh, I’ll talk about it,” Doris said, with a sickly sweet smile. “You can do whatever you want when you leave me to go on your little road-trip across the country, but when you come back, I don’t want to deal with all this open relationship crap. What’s wrong with it? If you didn’t think anything was wrong with it, why didn’t you talk to me about it first instead of asking Milena on a date?”

Gobo stared at her, scratched his head, then, at last, said, “I just don’t understand the idea that you can’t love more than one person. We’re all adults, right? Why should

any person have ownership over anybody else? Human beings like to fuck around. It's against our nature to try to fight it, so we might as well embrace it."

"You're not answering my question. Why didn't you tell me you thought this was going to be a date if you didn't think there was anything wrong with it?"

"I wouldn't necessarily say that I thought this was going to be a date," Gobo said, sounding uncertain. "But I dislike the idea of being closed to any sort of relationship because you're already involved with someone else. Life is about making yourself open to new experiences."

Doris wanted to reach out, grab his beard, and yank it down. See how he liked that. But no, Doris was someone much more likely to deal with her pain quietly. "But if you really love someone, how could you stand to share them?" Doris said, her voice soft with pain.

"It doesn't work for everyone," Milena cut in, in an authoritative tone that made Doris's insides boil. "Everyone in the relationship has to decide it's what they want." Milena gave a pointed look at Gobo, who started playing with his napkin. "But there's also an opportunity with it. You learn so much from being romantically involved with just one person, so with more people, there's more of a chance to learn."

"That sounds wonderful," Doris cut in. "Why not just go around sleeping with every person you meet?"

With a calm voice, Milena answered, "I may say these things, but in my own life, I don't have sex with that many people. Hardly anyone, in fact, because it gets too complicated." Then, after a pause, "But that doesn't mean the idea doesn't work, in principle."

Doris looked at Gobo and a wave of emptiness swept over her.

“Who was the last person you had sex with, Milena?” Gobo demanded, leaning forward at the table. Though Doris could not see his face so far forward, it was not too hard for her to imagine that he was leering.

“What do you want, a name?” Milena sat rigidly at the table, and there was only the faintest trace of a smile on her face. Her tone was not quite condescending, a little too anxious for that.

“I don’t know. A story. Who was he? What attracted **you to him?**”

Without feeling anything towards Gobo, Doris still dreaded the thought of telling her mother that she and Gobo had broken up again. Of her mother being able to say, “And you expected him to be any different this time around?”

Yes, Doris had expected him to grow up. Now he was leaning forward at the table asking Milena about her sex life. Doris felt as if her head were being forced repeatedly under water. What did Gobo’s love mean if he wasn’t satisfied with just Doris? It didn’t mean much.

“What would you do if I decided to get back together with Sammy?” Doris cut in, turning towards Gobo.

He looked at her curiously, as if trying to decide whether or not she were being serious.

“Do you want to get back together with him?”

“Just answer the question, can’t you? If we’re having a talk about open relationships?”

“If that’s what you wanted,” Gobo said, after some consideration, in which he rotated his napkin on the point of his index finger.

Doris exclaimed, “But don’t you see how you would be hurt by it?”

Gobo straightened up, and voice firm, said, “If that’s what I thought you really wanted, then I would get over it.” His eyes shone with conviction.

“But why should you have to get over it?”

“Because ... otherwise, you’re missing out.”

Doris was silent.

Milena had been watching the whole conversation without moving a muscle, as far as Doris could tell, except for her eyes, which were working fast enough to make up for the rest of her body, flitting back and forth from Gobo to Doris. She had an almost eager look on her face, as if she wanted them to keep fighting.

“Are you going to drink that?” Gobo asked Doris, pointing towards her glass, which she had only tasted before realizing it was a dark beer. Doris did not like dark beers, and Gobo was always forgetting that, or else he thought that if he got her enough dark beers eventually she would just give in and decide she liked them.

“That’s my beer,” Doris said, and tipped up her own glass. Too fast! Feeling nauseous, she stood up and stumbled her way out of the booth towards the bathroom.

“I should probably go check on her,” she heard Gobo say, but he did not come after her. After going into and locking a bathroom stall, Doris found herself staring into the toilet bowl. She did not have to throw up, but she did not want to go back to the table. She might as well stay here for a while and see if anyone came to check on her. Staring into the bowl, she was filled with resentment towards Gobo. At the same time,

she still wanted him to come for her. To rescue her. Finally the bathroom door opened, and Milena's voice called, "Are you all right?"

Doris cleared her throat, flushed the toilet, and came out.

"That was pretty rough out there," Milena exclaimed, standing by the door. In the poorly lit bathroom, she looked like some specter of death waiting at the door for Doris.

Doris stopped, calculating, then, trying to sound emotionless, said, "There's been worse."

"I didn't know that he had a girlfriend," she said, wringing her hands together.

Doris kidded, "I'm just surprised anyone would be interested enough to go on a date with him." She felt suddenly light, as if she were being lifted up, as if none of this mattered and was all a joke she would tell to as-of-yet unknown friends in the future. She tried to set Milena at ease, saying, "He's not that great a catch anyway. He can be a bit of a self-centered asshole, sometimes."

Milena stepped forward and squeezed Doris's arm. There was an awkward silence, until Doris said: "Sometimes I think that he's just acting out for attention. But this is the first time he's done anything like this in a while. We just got back together, actually. He'd left me to travel across the country."

Doris didn't stop to second-guess herself for opening up to Milena. After all, who else did she have?

"Did he?"

"Just up and left one day because he found a cheap ride to St. Paul. He just left a note to say that he had gone."

"That's terrible."

“God, my mom wouldn’t leave me alone about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Milena said. Her face was sympathetic, not judging Doris for opening up to her.

“But he can be so sweet sometimes,” Doris sighed. “So understanding. How is it possible for someone to be so good one minute and so bad the next? It’s like he’s a completely different person.”

“He’s still figuring things out, I guess. It can be hard sometimes for people to settle for what they have.”

“But why?” Seeing Milena’s look of puzzlement, Doris felt suddenly self-conscious for having opened to her. Then again, there was no reason to feel bad. Who else was she supposed to open up to? Doris had no one to support her. She was always the one supporting.

“I don’t know,” Milena murmured. “He still has some growing up to do, it sounds like.” They stared at each other in silence, until Milena added, “But it could be worse, you know? At least you have something, you know? It must be very exciting.” From her tone it was clear that she didn’t have anything in her life to make her feel the same way.

Doris could feel compassion for Milena welling up inside her. Here was this stranger, who had come to seduce her boyfriend, and now she was listening to Doris talk about her relationship.

“So how many open relationships have you had?” Doris asked, full of warmth now.

“Only one.”

“What was it like?”

“It wasn’t like anything else I’ve ever done before. I was romantically entwined with a married couple, and instead of just one person being there to love and support you, there was two.” Milena’s face brightened a little as she reminisced, and her speech grew less rigid, more flowing.

“What happened with it?”

Milena gave a wistful smile. “They moved away. They had each other, and I was the one left out.”

“Did you hook up with both of them at the same time?”

Milena nodded her head solemnly.

“So you’re a bisexual,” Doris said, perplexed.

“I guess so. I don’t really think about it like that. Sometimes I’m more attracted to girls, sometimes I’m more attracted to guys.” Milena leaned back against the bathroom counter, and for the first time that night looked genuinely comfortable. She looked like a different person, with the brooding circles lifted from her eyes, even more pretty. Would Milena try to kiss Doris now, Doris wondered?

They were silent, neither of them stepping towards the door, and Gobo, or towards each other.

“But it just seems so complicated,” Doris said at last, half to herself.

“That’s not necessarily a reason not to do it, though,” Milena said, smiling.

Milena stared at Doris with eyes that seemed to wash over her, enveloping. There was sadness and understanding in her eyes, and something else, something curious and excited, maybe even greedy.

“So what are you going to do about Gobo?” Milena asked.

The bar door opened and a large woman with small eyes scrunched on her face stumbled into the bathroom, hiccupping, and rushed to a stall. Then there came the sound of barfing, and a hand hitting the side of the stall.

Milena and Doris grinned at each other.

Doris went back to biting her lip. “I don’t know,” she muttered, lost in thought. “I have no idea. It’s hard, you know. However stupid he can act there are times when he looks at me and he just seems so full of compassion that he could never do anything but love me.”

But he *doesn't* always seem to love me, Doris thought to herself. Not just now, inviting Milena to dinner, but other times, sometimes when Doris was talking about her work, and there was a glazed look in his eyes. Was he thinking that Doris wasn’t right for him? That Doris was too boring, too conventional? Was he thinking that he should have stayed out West, where he could have adventures without having to worry whether his actions hurt anyone?

“So why don’t you have a boyfriend now?” Doris asked, trying not to get caught up in feeling sorry for herself. “You’re an attractive woman.”

Milena shook her head, grinning. “I’m not *that* good-looking,” she said facetiously. “I don’t know why I don’t have a boyfriend. I just haven’t met anyone, man or woman.” She gave a knowing look at Doris, and now Doris shifted her weight, feeling uncomfortable. “Or I meet people, and they don’t seem to like me.”

“So you liked Gobo?” Doris asked, in what must have sounded like a false enthusiasm.

Milena laughed. "I just thought he was a little crazy. Who else would hear a hat like that?"

"I bought that hat," Doris said, and inwardly, thought, why did I ever buy him a hat that just gives him an excuse to talk to women? Then again, apparently Milena had initiated the conversation. Because of that dumb hat. "Do you want to go check on Gobo?" Doris said, mustering her strength.

They walked out of the bathroom together, arm in arm, and Gobo eyed the two of them as they sat down next to each other facing him. "What was that about? Are you OK?"

"I'm fine," Doris said, with an extravagant smile.

"Gobo, we need to have a talk," Milena said, mockingly.

"What?"

"You tried to get me to come here so you could have a threesome with us, didn't you? Did you have any idea how that would make your girlfriend feel?"

Doris turned on Gobo, and feeling a wave of sorrow fill up the empty space inside her, said, "Gobo, why did you do this?"

Gobo looked from one woman to the other. At least he did not look hurt. If he had tried to look hurt, Doris would have reached over and slapped him.

"Doris is too good for you if you're going to treat her like that," Milena said coldly.

Still Gobo did not say anything. He seemed about to speak, then closed his mouth.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he said at last. “I wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t trying to hurt you. It just didn’t seem like a big deal to me. Whatever happened, was going to happen.”

Doris stared at Gobo, and he stared back, and then he stood up and said, “Doris, let’s go home. Milena, I’m sorry I invited you. This was – this was – a terrible idea.”

Milena slid out of the booth too. Doris walked past her, giving a I-don’t-know-what-I’m-doing look, and followed Gobo to the car. He opened the door for her and she got in without looking at him.

They drove in silence all the way home. Doris watched the houses whiz by, eerie in the street lights, and was filled with an immovable sense of hopelessness. Gobo sat slouched at the wheel, looking dead. Once he had pulled into her apartment complex, he muttered, searching within himself, “I’m not sure why I invited her.”

Doris looked at him. Their eyes locked. He turned away, and in that moment of avoidance Doris felt she could see all the selfishness in him. She hated him for it. Thrusting open the car door, she unbuckled her seat belt and rushed up the stairs. Gobo pursued her. As she reached the top, he caught her and pulled her close to him.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I just can’t keep straight how I feel about anything.”

“Why did I trust you? You left me before. I thought you had changed but you’re still just the same *thoughtless* Gobo.”

He responded, voice low and hoarse, “Please, I promise I’ll make it up to you. I’ll never leave you again.” His eyes shone with desperation.

Now he started to look guilty, trapped. He lashed out, “She asked me on a date and I couldn’t say no. I know it’s my fault, but it’s not like I initiated it. And I brought you along because I didn’t want to go along with it, really.”

The night had turned cold and Doris shivered. Gobo rubbed her shoulders, then took off his coat and draped it over her.

“I don’t think so, Gobo,” she said, thrusting the coat back to him. He did not try to stop her as she pushed past him and into her apartment. He just stood watching her, slouched against the stair railing, and was there when Doris turned for a second to look back at him. She almost wanted him to come after her, and not just so she could keep giving him a hard time, as if his coming after her would have made everything else OK, because at the end of the night Doris could know that he was still hers, and she his, and that at some level there was nothing anyone could do to get deeper than what they had between each other. But he stayed still, looking remorseful, and she stormed into her apartment and slammed the door behind her. After pressing her back up against the wall and taking deep, deep breaths, she turned and locked the dead-bolt. He had a key, but as she lay in bed trying to fall asleep she did not hear any attempt to open the door.

Waking up in the morning after a restless sleep, she half-expected to see Gobo sprawled next to her, but he was not there. She lurched out of bed to prepare herself a bowl of cereal.

Last night was enough for Doris to be done with Gobo, she thought with a feeling of anxiety. But the thought did not quite seem real to her, as if she knew she were still in a dream. Taking the cereal into her room, she looked at Gobo’s duffle bag spewing

clothing across the floor, and shivered. No more Gobo. At least she would have her own room again, but that did not make her feel any better.

She sat on the bed and without giving much thought to the taste began eating. What could she fill the empty space with? Sammy, maybe? He was easy enough to be with. But the thought of that just seemed like trying to hide from having to open herself up to anyone.

Or she could be alone. She could be alone for a while and figure out what it was she wanted to get out of her life. Because with Gobo there was no time for thinking of anything but Gobo. The prospect of guiding her own life again after a three week hiatus since Gobo had come back filled her up, invigorating. She was ready to be by herself. Gobo coming back had shown her that.

With forceful energy she went to the closet and picked out her best looking outfit, a pink skirt and light blue v-neck. She was going to look good today.

When she opened the door of her apartment to leave for work, Doris leaped back upon seeing Gobo curled up in a ball outside the door. Oh God, what was she going to do with him? He stirred, and looked up at Doris with exhausted eyes.

“Goddamn, that was cold last night,” he said, shaking himself as he rose to his feet.

“You should have knocked on the door. I didn’t think that you would stay out here. That was stupid.”

“I did knock, after a while, when it got too cold. You’re just too heavy a sleeper.”

“”You didn’t have anywhere else to go?”

“Nope,” he said, and placed his hand on her hip, hanging his head.

“Well, you should have knocked louder, then,” Doris said, brusquely.

He laughed an unhappy, pitiful laugh. “I’ll remember that the next time.” Then, after a pause, he said, “So, can I stay?”

“Yes,” Doris said, without thinking. “I don’t know, I guess.”

Gobo stood unmoving. “I’ll only stay if you really want me to stay. I’m sorry, you know, and I’ll try to be better.” His voice was full of earnest, but he had had just as much conviction about his ability to change before.

Doris held open the door, though she certainly was not “really” sure. He shuffled past her, went straight to the bed, and collapsed.

“Should you call in sick for work?” Doris asked, coming in after him and sitting on the edge of the bed. She could not bring herself to touch him.

He grunted, then almost immediately fell asleep. Doris turned around and hurried to her car. As she drove to work, she was overcome by a feeling of guilt. She should have kicked him out. She should have been strong. There was still time for her to tell him that things were over. She could go back to her apartment right now and kick him out. Otherwise, she would be letting him walk all over her.

In spite of herself, Doris felt compassion for him growing steadily inside of her. Who did he have, if not Doris? What would she give up, by forcing him out of her life? Not just all the bull shit. Also the way that Gobo ran his fingers over her hand when her mother had another breakdown and called Doris demanding consolation. He would look at her with eyes that convinced her she need not be weighed down by her mother’s anxieties. And when he talked to Doris about books that he had been reading, how he

had been moved by them, and just wanted to share that feeling with Doris, to have a discussion with her and hear her ideas about them.

Doris felt that she was on a pendulum, swinging back and forth from one extreme to the other, with only a moment, not even a moment, just a point as long as any other in the trajectory at each peak before she would plummet backwards in the other direction. She closed her eyes and could see only Gobo smiling back at her, wandering, faithless, but passionate Gobo, and that was enough to reinforce Doris's decision.

She thought of Peggy. It was not just that she was wary of her mother's triumph if Doris had told her they would break up. Rather, she thought of how Peggy's life had turned out, how she had married someone who didn't have that throbbing sense of adventure, and how she hated her husband for it now. Gobo was a chance for things never to stay the same, for better or worse, to be always exciting, even if it took him longer to change himself. That was OK. Doris would be there for him, and one day, he would realize what a good thing he had. She would mother him when she had to and love him when he was strong enough for it.

Doris shook her head at the idea of Gobo ever realizing how good he had it, and gripped the steering wheel. But so what if he didn't figure things out? Whether he appreciated her or not, Doris was willing to go along for the ride, for now anyway. What else was there?

This same moment of deliberation would come again to eat away at her, but Doris would rather that than a long line of uninteresting days without the struggle.

Goodbye, Gobo

Doris had been waiting for fifteen minutes and was about to check her phone again to see if he had cancelled when Sammy, dressed in one of his tailored work suits, strode up to her table. He was wearing his favorite red silk tie that Doris had never been fond of but he liked because the red was a “power color.” While they were dating, he was never late for anything. At least he had come now, but then again she picked his favorite restaurant for their lunchtime meeting, an expensive Italian place.

Two women at an adjacent table stopped talking as he seated himself, maintaining his rigid body posture the whole time. They looked thirty-something, were coated in make-up, and wore mini skirts. In spite of herself, Doris had a momentary feeling of satisfaction that she had dated someone as attractive as Sammy, who drew such attention when he walked into places. But the sight of his thick muscles and head of neatly placed, luxurious blond hair did not make Doris’s skin tingle as it had before. When inviting Sammy to lunch, she had considered the idea of dumping Gobo and trying to get back together with him, but now she thought that was probably just because things felt weird with Gobo. Sammy sat down across from her, back straight as always, but sneering.

“Well, Doris,” he said. “How ya doing? It’s been a while.”

It had been four weeks since she had last seen Sammy. Gobo had stormed into her apartment and told Doris that he loved her, right in front of Sammy, forcing Doris to choose between them. Her hesitation was enough for Sammy to storm out, and she had not talked to him after getting together with Gobo that night, feeling too guilty, until yesterday, when she had called him and asked him to lunch so that she could explain herself.

The waiter, a towering man with a neatly trimmed beard, approached. “What would you like to drink, sir?” he asked in a delicate voice, with his head bowed.

The waiter placed his hand on Sammy’s shoulder, and Sammy beamed, as if the touch were a gesture of admiration.

“Diet Coke, please,” Sammy answered, stern and commanding as always.

“We’re out of Diet Coke.”

“You’re out of Diet Coke?” Sammy looked suspiciously at the waiter. “But you always have Diet Coke.”

“We only have regular Coke today, sir.”

Sammy ran his hands over his biceps, and said, “Water, please, just a little ice. I need to maintain my figure.”

“You look very fit, sir,” the waiter said, bent forward as if paying homage to Sammy, who, now that Doris was no longer dating him, seemed like a peacock strutting about with its tail outstretched for the world to gaze upon. Doris struggled to hold back a smirk.

A cold glance from Sammy, the first look he had given her since the waiter came up, made her shift in her chair, feeling self-conscious. She had come here to apologize, and should feel at least some degree of guilt, shouldn’t she? But he would not even look at her, turning instead to survey the women at the other table, who were hunched over their table whispering. They burst out laughing, loud, slurred laughs, took gulps from their champagne glasses, and hid their faces from him. Finally Sammy turned towards Doris, smirk turning into a sneer.

“Why did you invite me to lunch?” he demanded. “You don’t want to get back together with me, do you? I’m dating someone else, you know.”

Doris leant forward, placed her hands on the table, and said, “I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, Doris?” His voice was falsely sweet, but his mouth contorted into a snarl at the end. “Sorry for *what?*”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” Doris said.

Sammy glared. “Well, it doesn’t really matter if you were trying to or not. You dumped me to get back together with your ex ... right in front of me!” It was not a pained look, but a cold look, a vengeful look, that he pressed upon her.

Why had she invited him to lunch, Doris wondered with a sinking feeling in her stomach? Some things were better just to let go and move on. But now he was sitting across from her and they hadn’t even ordered their food yet.

“I wanted to make sure you knew that I never cheated on you,” Doris said. “Gobo had just shown up the night before. He had told me he was coming back to Atlanta, but he didn’t say when, and I didn’t believe he would come anyway. He just showed up. And I didn’t even kiss him. I kicked him out.” Doris thought her voice sounded too timid, too guilty. Sammy wouldn’t believe her if she didn’t sound more confident, though she was telling the truth.

“I don’t believe you.” Sammy looked triumphant in his hatred, but when the waiter came back with his water and a menu for him, he put on a face of polite detachment. “Thank you,” he said, voice even and unreadable.

When the waiter left, Sammy pressed his hands down firmly on the table, with a strained look on his face. “I don’t believe that you didn’t hook up with him,” he said. “You cheated on me. But it doesn’t even matter. I am so done with you it’s not even funny.”

“I didn’t think we were right for each other anyway,” Doris said, soothingly. “It would have happened anyway.”

“You’re so full of shit. We were fine together.” Sammy cracked his knuckles, as if to prove his point.

“We were *OK* together,” Doris said, thinking, “but we see the world in different ways. You work for a law firm. You make a lot of money. I’m an analyst at a non-profit. You always seemed to hold it against me because I don’t make a lot of money –”

“That’s not true,” Sammy cut in. “It’s not that I ‘hold it against’ you. I just think you’re not reaching your full potential.”

Ignoring him, Doris continued, “I’m doing difficult work too. It’s difficult to run through statistics, reports, studies, all the time, and try to figure them out. At least I’m trying to do something, something good.” Doris actually disliked her job, but she had gotten it attempting to fight for something good, and she might have been doing some good, but she didn’t get to see any of it. Looking at Sammy, sitting up straight and with no sign of weakness, no sincere emotion in his eyes, she said, “You don’t seem to have any ... compassion.”

Doris was afraid how he would react, but he seemed unfazed. “What does compassion get you? Compassion is just how weak people try to make themselves feel

better for not being able to get ahead.” His voice was strong and clear and proud, without the slightest hint of irony.

For a moment, sitting there with his finely carved face and eyes glaring down at Doris, he seemed barely human, like a bronze statue, with just as much life. Doris was overcome with dislike for him, and for herself. How could she have ever dated him?

He continued, “You say that you don’t even feel like you’re doing anything at your job. You don’t see your work being put to any good use. And you said that you spend most of your time surfing the internet.”

Doris could never win an argument with Sammy, who was a lawyer and had debated in college, and high school before that. She hated how when he made a good point in an argument his face contorted into a look of unshakable pride.

“But at least I’m trying,” Doris said.

“So I guess you didn’t enjoy all those times I took you to nice restaurants, and bought you nice stuff. Those earrings you’re wearing. I’ve worked hard and figured out what I needed to do be a productive member of society, and be rewarded for it. You think *Gobo* will ever be able to get you earrings like that?”

If only Sammy knew that Gobo was working as a clerk at a CVS ...

Sammy shook his head, each hair staying neatly in place, perfect face stern, and said, “And if you wanted to break up with me you should have just done that instead of waiting until something better came along. But how you thought Gobo was better than me, I have no idea. He looks like a bum.”

A fleck of spit flew from Sammy’s mouth and hit Doris’s cheek when he said the word “bum.” After a moment of shock, he gaped at her, then turned away, blushing.

Doris wiped her face with her sleeve and brought her hand up to the pearl earrings and thought about taking them off and setting them on the table, but no, that would just antagonize him. Also, she liked the earrings, and did not want to give them up just to prove a point.

“We weren’t even dating for that long, though,” Doris said. “It was nice that you bought me stuff, but it was kind of weird. It felt like you’d rather spend money on me than actually getting to know me.”

Sammy looked furious, but before he could respond the waiter returned and asked what they would like to order, placing his hand on Doris this time. Doris flinched at the touch of his hand. She did not want to be touched by anyone right now. Her blood was coursing through her, her neck tingling. She pressed her hands together underneath the table, as hard as she could.

Sammy ordered a salad. Doris had not had time to order so she scanned over the menu and picked out a different salad, though Sammy had picked the one she wanted. Sammy did not even really like gorgonzola, but Doris shuddered at the thought of the waiter’s knowing look if they ordered the same salad.

The waiter left and before Sammy could open his mouth to speak, Doris cut in, “Gobo cares about me, and you didn’t care about me.”

Sammy looked startled at first, then his face screwed up in disagreement. “I did care about you,” he said, but his voice sounded flat, as if he were arguing more for the sake of arguing than out of any feeling of sentiment. “He’s the one who left you before, wasn’t he? What makes you think he won’t leave you again? You’re letting him walk all over you.”

Straightening up at the table to match Sammy's rigid back, Doris said, "He cares about me, but ... I don't know, he's too immature to do it all the time."

How cold Sammy's face was, how ugly he looked with that sneer. She fell silent, lost in thought.

How ironic it was, Doris thought, that he didn't even know that Gobo had tried to draw Doris into a threesome less than a week ago, and that she hadn't even brought herself to confront Gobo about it yet. She wasn't sure how to go about it, though, discussing that night at the bar with Milena, a woman he had just met.

The waiter came and set the food down, with a bow. Why had she not just ordered the same salad, she thought, seeing Sammy's, with the little bits of gorgonzola staring plaintively at her? They ate in silence, without looking at each other. Doris tried to eat slowly, but she always ended up rushing through her food. Sammy, on the other hand, took small, careful bites, and was still eating long after Doris had finished. Checking her cell phone under the table, Doris was disappointed to see that so little time had passed, and that Gobo had not replied to her text message telling him to have a good day. Not that she really expected him to write back. He had a limited texting plan and primarily sent them when he needed to make logistical plans. He had even told Doris to curtail her use of affectionate text messages for him because she was using up too many. It was not that he wasn't affectionate, just not via cell phones, he said.

Once Sammy finished, he folded his napkin and placed it on the table, then looked expectantly at Doris. "Why did you invite me here, really?" he said.

"I just wanted to explain what happened. And also, I think, to try to understand why we got together."

Sammy laughed, his surprisingly shrill, cutting laugh. “What do you mean, why we got together? You were funny. We got along well. I thought you were attractive. I enjoyed talking to you.”

He shrugged his shoulders, noncommittal.

“You were always the one talking,” Doris said.

Sammy’s eyebrows raised. “That’s not my fault. You could have cut in at any time. I just had more to say, I guess.”

“All you did was talk about how great you are at your work. I don’t want to feel like I have to cut in.”

“You wanted me to ask you how you were *feeling*, did you?”

Doris blushed and started twisting her napkin around her finger. God, he was awful. Soon enough she would be out of here and would never have to worry about Sammy again. Why did he have to look at her so angrily? She said, “What about you? What’s going on in your life? How’s the law firm? Did you end up winning that case about the embezzlement?”

“It was fraud, actually. And yes, I won.” He cinched his tie, which was already centered perfectly, and cracked his neck. “My new girlfriend is very attractive.”

For just a moment, Doris wished she had dressed more nicely, or brushed her hair before she went into the restaurant. Sammy turned to look at the two women in mini-skirts, who were standing up to go. One of them winked at him before bursting into another bout of giggling. Sammy winked back, then turned to Doris and said, “I’m just very fed up with you.”

“Are you kidding me?” she said, struggling to keep the anger out of her voice. “You come here and try to make me feel bad for breaking up with you, but you never gave a shit about me. This was never about me, you - you - jerk. You’re just mad because something didn’t go the way you wanted.”

Sammy looked as if he had just been slapped, then, voice low, full of cruelty, he said, “Well, you invited me to the lunch, didn’t you? Did you expect me to roll over and be nice to you? After you broke up with me in front of your ex-boyfriend? That’s bull shit. I’m the one with the right to be mad.”

“Sammy, you need to grow up. Things didn’t work out for you, now get over it. You won’t gain anything by trying to make me feel bad.” Reaching for her purse, Doris said, “Thank you for coming, Sammy. I hope things work out with you and this girl.”

Doris struggled to keep the malice out of her voice but could hear it coming through anyway.

“Oh, they will. She appreciates me, anyway.” Then, as she did not say anything in response, he added, “You made a big mistake dumping me for Gobo. I would have never said this when we were dating, but I can do so much better than you.”

Doris dug into her wallet, dug out a twenty and a ten dollar bill and placed them on the table. “That should cover just about everything,” she said, with a cold look at Sammy, then strode out of the restaurant.

Instead of exasperation, or any sort of ill will, she was surprised to feel so invigorated. She was done bowing down, not just to Sammy, but to anyone. For the past week or so since it happened, she had avoided talking to Gobo about his botched attempt at a threesome, and about their relationship. Gripping her hands on the steering wheel,

she promised herself to confront him tonight, maybe not as soon as he walked in, but at some point.

Doris was sitting at home having just turned the TV off, bored by everything that was on, when Gobo marched into the apartment. He was not wearing a shirt but had his CVS uniform draped over his shoulders, and as soon as he came in whipped off his belt and tossed it to the floor. “Where have you been all my life, you beautiful woman?”

He picked her up, spun her around, and set her back down on the couch. Doris was silent, unresisting.

“I’ve been wanting to make sweet love to you all day,” he said, setting her back down on the couch and bending to kiss his way up her arm. She quivered as his beard rubbed against her arm. He smelled strongly of body odor, but Doris had gotten used to that.

“I guess you didn’t feel the need to respond to my text, though,” Doris said, trying not to sound snide as Gobo moved to kiss the other arm.

Gobo laughed. “You’re not mad at me for that, are you? You know I don’t like to send texts. You don’t seem very into this. Turn around. I think you want me to scratch your back.”

Doris rotated slightly, and he began running his hands with just the right amount of force up and down her back. “I missed you,” he cooed into her ear. “Even if I didn’t send you a text message I was thinking about you.”

Doris could feel herself opening up to him. When he moved to take her shirt off, she lifted her arms for a moment, then lowered them, frowning. Gobo looked at her, at

first just seeming to think that she was playing some game, then, when she still kept away from him, stuck his lower lip out, pouting. He always tried to look innocent, and most of the time Doris found it endearing, but today she was just aggravated by it.

“I went to lunch with Sammy today,” she said, trying to keep her voice neutral.

Gobo looked at her, thoughtfully. “How was that?”

“I wanted to apologize to him.”

“Oh? And how did that go?” A slight smile spread across his lips. She could not stop from looking at his chest, so thick and hairy, but unlike so many times before did not feel a jolt of excitement coursing through her. She felt nothing. Doris freed herself from his embrace and got up to go to the refrigerator.

“Not so well. What do you want for dinner? We don’t have much.”

“I’ll go to the grocery store and cook something nice for you tonight,” he called from the sofa. “Actually, do you want to go out to eat? I feel like I should take you out.”

“I’d rather you cooked,” she said, then flopped down on the couch as Gobo stood.

He threw on his CVS shirt, took Doris’s car keys, and marched out of the apartment. Doris turned the TV back on to wait for him and found a nature show about tigers to watch. Part of the show featured tigers in captivity, pacing back and forth in their cages. With a bitter laugh, she imagined someone filming her own life with Gobo, him pacing back and forth in their apartment, the whole thing narrated by a British accent.

For dinner, he lit a candle and turned off the lights. They sat on the couch with Doris’s plastic plates. Shadows from the flickering candle danced on the wall. Doris thought she should have been moved by the romantic setting but felt only a dull ache

rooted in what felt like the back of her head. Gobo set his hand to rest on Doris's thigh. His grip, so familiar, nonetheless made her shift her weight. Gobo straightened up, turned to her and said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Doris replied, more sharply than she had intended, refusing to look at him.

Giving her thigh a squeeze, Gobo continued, "I feel like something's bothering you."

Doris shifted away from him. "Why do you always think something's wrong with me?"

"I don't always think there's something wrong with you," he said, sounding confused, but his eyes locked on her face, searching. He moved his hand away from her thigh. "But it seems like something's bothering you right now."

He looked at his plate like he wanted to start eating, but with a sigh moved it off his lap onto the coffee table.

"Why don't we eat first?" Doris said, shoveling a forkful of rice into her mouth. It was burnt, because Gobo had gotten distracted from the cooking by the nature show.

"Before what? Before arguing? That doesn't sound like a very enjoyable dinner."

He seemed torn between deciding whether or not to grin at her. Doris leaned forward and set her plate on the table and stared at him. He stared back. She turned to look at the floor. After a pause, he said, "Is this about Milena?"

"I don't know," she said. "Yes." She sighed, relieved. Why was it so hard for Doris to bring this up? She felt so weak. "Yes, I'm upset about Milena."

But that was not all of it, and that was why Doris had been afraid to bring Milena up, for fear of what else would come out, she realized, with a dull sense of foreboding.

“I didn’t really want to hook up with her,” he said in earnest. “Just because I invited her to drinks with us, that doesn’t mean ...”

“But you were being so flirtatious, picking her up in a hug when she came in. And sitting down next to her and putting your arm around her.”

“That was just when she got there,” he protested, but still with that half-grin on his face. “I’m a naturally affectionate person. I can’t help it. But she doesn’t have anything on you.”

“Why are you acting surprised that I would be upset about Milena? You tried to have a threesome, right in front of me! I think that qualifies as grounds for being upset.”

She stood up and walked to the sink. She could not sit any longer. After filling a glass of water, she stood at the counter.

With a face as grim as if he were about to be executed, he stood, followed Doris to the counter, and took her hand, squeezing it so hard that she winced. “Well, you should have talked to me about this sooner, if you were upset,” he said, voice soft, affectionate.

“I didn’t know I was upset. Or I was trying not to be. But I am now.”

In a quiet, earnest voice, Gobo said, “Would you rather I hadn’t asked you about it, and gone out to drinks with her by myself? I asked you because I didn’t trust myself. I asked you because I didn’t really want anything to happen with her.”

“You didn’t trust yourself? Why don’t you grow up a little bit, then? And why on earth did you start talking about open relationships with her, if you weren’t trying to

have a threesome?” Doris asked, pulling her hand free. “Or were you trying to dump me and hook up with her?”

“That’s ridiculous, Doris,” he said, somehow able to start grinning at her, and reaching again for her hand. “It wouldn’t have been about her being more important than you. It just would have spiced things up a little bit. I don’t know why a threesome is such a bad thing. How’s it any different from experimenting with, I don’t know, role play?”

Doris felt a lump forming in the back of her throat. She wanted to be angry, but now all she was feeling was hurt. She pushed past him back to the couch and sat down.

“I forgot to feed Ralph,” she said, hurrying to open her bedroom door and let the cat out.

As soon as she opened the door, Ralph darted out and slunk to the corner, where he fell to the ground and started licking himself. She went into her bedroom, opened a can of Friskies, then went back into the living room, with each step feeling like she was dragging a great weight behind her.

“It’s not like it would have gotten in the way of me caring about you,” Gobo said, then paused, running his hands through his beard.

Suddenly chuckling, he moved to the couch and let himself fall into it, spreading his legs wide and tapping his foot to a disjointed beat. He seemed entirely too comfortable for the conversation Doris was trying to have. Doris was not even sure what conversation she was trying to have, but her premonition was that it would not be a good one, and that he should look more serious for it.

“Having a threesome is different,” Doris said, finally able to put words on some of the things she had been feeling. “Of course it’s different. There’s another person involved. It’s no longer that intimate moment between just us. Why would you want to give up on that just so you can ‘spice it up’? How do you think that makes me feel?”

He opened his mouth as if about to argue, then closed it. “I’m sorry,” he said at last, pulling his legs in and hanging his head like a child being punished.

Seeing his guilt, Doris felt something hardening in her gut, something that Gobo could not penetrate, could not persuade her to give up.

“You feel sorry now,” she said, “but what about a week from now? You’ll just go off and do something else.”

Gobo was like a wild animal, like the tigers she had been watching, and there was no keeping him contained. She had seen his eyes brightening to watch them on the screen. She was tired of trying to cage him, and of being hurt when he lashed out at her by doing something stupid because he felt trapped.

“Doris,” he said with a sigh. “I try so hard to be good with you. You make me want to be good, and most of the time it’s fine. I’m sorry if I didn’t think inviting her to drinks through entirely. I don’t know if I wanted to have a threesome. I try to tell myself now that’s not what I wanted but I just don’t know. It’s not that I wanted to lose out on that intimacy that I have with you, but it seemed like something that we could have shared together, and made us even closer. I could say, ‘Remember that time we had that threesome?’ And you could say, ‘Yeah, I’m glad we tried that out, but I don’t think it was for us.’”

Doris bristled. “Gobo, you’re so full of it sometimes. If you really wanted a threesome, I have no idea why you didn’t try to talk to me about it. Why you just sprung it on me like that.”

“It wasn’t very tactful,” he said, sighing. “I just thought that if we were all in the right setting, it might just happen naturally. I didn’t want to try to force it.”

“You had just met Milena, too.”

He put his hands up over his head, scratched his hair frantically, like a dog with fleas, then continued, “You know, it’s almost like the details don’t even matter for me? I care about you so much, and that’s not really ever going to change. And any of the stupid shit I do shouldn’t matter, because deep down we both love each other.”

But did he understand how those words could be insufficient, however much he meant them? That it was not enough just to love deep down if the surface didn’t match up, Doris wondered. She was silent, brooding.

“Do you remember the first time I said ‘I love you’?” he said, with a sad smile.

Of course she remembered. They had been going for a walk in a park, and Gobo had put a hand on her waist and then fallen to the ground. Doris shrieked and checked to see if he was OK, and laughing, he pulled her close to his chest and whispered the words to her. She had smiled at him and thanked him and then kept walking. They hadn’t talked about it for a week, but after turning the idea over in her mind, she felt right saying the words back to him. And when she said the words back, with a rather smug smile he said that he already knew.

But no, he was trying to take control of her emotions, to break apart that feeling of hardness, of strength, growing in her stomach. She would not let herself be manipulated,

and forced the memory out of her mind, trying to shut out the feeling of tenderness that was enveloping her as she started to think about all the good times with Gobo. She looked around the apartment and instead of finding something to distract her, there were only markers of their living together.

There were his library books scattered around the room, and she thought of the times that he would read to her in a quiet, soothing voice after they made love. She saw his shoes, coming apart at the tongues, and thought about walking with him in the park, when he would take the shoes off and leave them at the park entrance and run barefoot on the grass, and pull Doris after him. Then, if she were too slow, let go and sprint as fast as he could until collapsing on the grass and waiting for Doris to catch up to him. How as soon as she got close, he would leap up and pull her to the ground, and begin kissing her.

Yes, she loved Gobo, how he prevented life from ever becoming a string of monotonous events for her, and how he could look at her with those eyes that contained within them a challenge, as if they seemed to say, "Doris, come run with me, as far as we can." But Doris was tired of being left behind. Just running with him was not enough if he was not patient enough to stop from dashing ahead. Not only that, but when he went no further, and stopped, panting, Doris resented having to wait for him. She had grown while he was away, too, and had kept growing, but now he seemed to have stalled.

If she wanted to think about memories, what about the time that he had left her, how she had cried and cried and called her mother, Peggy, the mother he mocked for being so overprotective, and said how she wanted never to see him again.

Gobo sat looking intently at her, as if he were trying to figure out what he needed to do to stop her from having a break down. But there was nothing that he could stop, at

this point. Whatever would happen had been set in motion, and Doris could only wait to see what the cold feeling in her gut would lead her to do. She felt like a bucket of water that had been hovering on the edge of tipping and finally been nudged over. Now there was nothing to keep the water from pouring out.

“The details do matter,” she said, with quiet conviction. “They do matter. It’s easy for you to say they don’t matter because you’re not the one who gets hurt by them. You can just write them off, saying you still love me, but how can you love me and keep hurting me? How is that fair?” Taking his hand, she said, “Gobo, you can’t keep depending on me to tell you what’s right and wrong, to punish you when you do something to hurt me.”

“I know,” he said, squeezing her hand back. “I know. I’m trying to change. I’m trying to grow up, be a better person, all that shit. But it’s hard. I need *you* for it. I don’t depend on you, it’s just ...”

From his eyes, beseeching, she could tell that he was hoping for reconciliation.

“But how can I love you if you take so much?” she said. “Gobo, I don’t think this is working anymore.” She paused, and then, as if she were dragging something from deep inside her: “This isn’t fair to either of us to keep going like this. I don’t know. Maybe we should just break up.”

Gobo reeled, as if slapped. “I thought ...” he started, then stopped.

He stood up and looked at her, hurt, but gaze full of tenderness, then picked up his plate and carried it into the kitchen. He came back and sat on the couch, taking her hand. Would this be the last time he stroked her hand, Doris thought with dread?

Overwhelmed by love and hurt, she turned to the pictures hanging on the wall from out West that Gobo had printed and mailed to her, and that she had paid to frame. They were beautiful, well-composed landscapes. Majestic scenery, the likes of which Doris had never seen in person. They were captivating photos, and she liked them not just because Gobo had sent them to her but because there was something about them that made Doris feel excited, powerful. Looking at them now, though, she felt that she had been living too long through Gobo. What if Doris were the one to leave, to have her own adventures? She wouldn't even know where to begin. She would be terrified to start out on her own. She could not imagine wanting to go somewhere without Gobo, she thought, blinking back tears.

“This is something I have to do for myself,” she said, pressing her hand against her eyes. “I need to be alone.”

“But we make each other stronger,” he said. His eyes were glistening as well.

“In some ways, yes. But you put so much weight on me, you know, to tell you what to do. I don't want to be a mother for you, Gobo. I can't keep loving you if you make me be that for you.”

How could she ever break up with him, seeing the hurt now pouring out of him? Doris was the only one who could stop that hurt.

“Why is it wrong for you to help me be a better person?” he said, entreating, but not plaintive. “I help you too, you know. I help you want to have adventures, don't I? Would you have ever thought to have broken into an abandoned church and climbed the bell tower without me? Or investigated that old prison? I think that I'm the only one who realizes how quirky you are, and I think it's beautiful. Nobody's ever really

understood you. They don't realize how much is going on in your head, and I'm not saying I do, not entirely, but I love what you're struggling with and I want to share it with you."

Doris felt suddenly dizzy, but managed to stand and make her way towards Ralph, who was napping in a different corner than the one he had run to at first, and scoop him into her arms. At last, she said, "But Gobo, what if I want to figure things out for myself? To have my own adventures?"

"By why would you want to do anything for yourself, when you can have someone to share your, your struggles with? I'll support you in whatever you decide to do."

Gobo leaned towards her and reached out his hand.

"Please don't touch me," Doris said. "It's too hard. I think ... I think we need to break up."

"No, we don't. We balance each other. You're making the wrong choice." The authoritative tone in his voice made Doris wary, aggravated.

"You just have to respect my right to choose, then," she said, voice firm.

"But I can't respect it if you're wrong." He tightened his grip on her hand, as if to keep her from running away.

"Do you hear yourself? You don't respect me! I need –"

"I do respect you. I just don't respect the choice that you're making."

"Gobo, if things are ever going to work out between us, you need to let me go. I need to figure things out for myself before I can really be with you, and so do you. You've hurt me and it's not enough for me to keep taking you back. I need to feel like an

equal. Sammy didn't treat me like an equal. He didn't understand me. You understand me, and you still don't always treat me like an equal."

Gobo stood up. He stared at her for what seemed like a minute without moving, then opened his mouth to speak, and after another moment, at last said, "I'm sorry you feel that way." He sounded hurt but no longer combative, like his body had been drained of all the fight in it. "I guess I'll walk to a motel tonight, and get my stuff tomorrow morning."

"Where's the nearest motel?" she said, as a victor acknowledges a hard-fought opponent. "It's too far. Why don't you sleep on the couch tonight and I'll drive you to work tomorrow morning?"

"I'm not sleeping on your couch, and I'm not going to work tomorrow morning. I'm leaving. I'll get my stuff right now." His voice wavered, hoarse, but she could tell that he would not come back now even if she told him to. He went into her room and turned the lamp on, then pulled his duffel bag from the closet, and moved about her bedroom cramming it full of clothing. Doris stood in the doorway.

"I don't want this to end badly," Doris said. "I still love you. I just need some time apart. For myself."

"It seems like you're being the selfish one now," he said, full of bitterness. But no, Doris was not going to feel guilty.

"Gobo, I'm not doing anything differently than you did," Doris said, with tears running down her eyes now. "You went away when you felt you had to, and now I'm trying to do the same."

He looked so pitiful trying to zipper his bag shut as the zipper kept getting stuck. So in need of comfort, and who else would comfort him but Doris, who loved him and loved to run her fingers through his tangled mop of curls as he rested his head on her chest at night, telling her that she was the only one who had ever really taken the time to get to know him, who saw him as more than just someone who couldn't follow rules.

Doris turned away from him in the doorway and pressed her hand to her face. Harder, harder, she dug her nails into her forehead, to distract her attention. He left the zipper halfway zipped and walked past Doris in the doorway, making her skin quiver as he put a hand for a moment on her waist.

"Gobo, I still care about you," she said, after he had walked past her and was too far to reach for her.

"It doesn't really feel that way," he said, voice full of bitterness. He flung the door open, and slammed it shut behind him.

Doris tried not to burst out sobbing. She sat on the couch and started shoveling the cold beans and rice into her mouth. She managed to cry quietly for a while, even when she went to blow out the candle he had lit for their dinner. But when she went to bed, as soon as she had lain down her body was wracked by heaving sobs. Lying in her bed, especially, she kept turning to look at the empty space on Gobo's side of the bed. It wasn't even Gobo's side of the bed anymore. It was nobody's side of the bed, she thought, too numb to feel another sting of pain.

In the middle of the night, she woke up, and, worrying that Gobo had not found a place to stay and was camped outside her door, went to open the apartment door to see if he was there, and if so to tell him to come inside. But he was not there, and Doris stood

in the open doorway, shivering, feeling like the light breeze was just blowing through her.

The next morning when she woke up, she had some time before work, and so she forced herself to take out a pencil and paper and start a list. She would start a list of things that she needed to do.

“Job,” she wrote down first. That would be the first thing, to quit her job. Should she wait until finding another one, though? No, what if it took too long to find another one. She could move. Why not? There was nothing for her here, and it would be too painful to think about all the time she had spent with Gobo here. She could post on Craig’s List and try to find a subletter for her apartment.

She added, “Move,” to the list.

In spite of feeling as if a great chunk of her had been ripped out, Doris felt momentarily invigorated by a feeling of independence. She felt strong. She could go anywhere, do anything, and not have to worry about whether she was leaving or being left.

She wanted to find a job with something that she felt more of a connection to than her job as an analyst. She wanted to be connected to the results of her labor, to work with people, and see herself making an impact on them. Maybe she could teach. Maybe she could volunteer at a clinic, first, and see if they could give her a job as something, anything where she had the opportunity to interact with people. What Doris didn’t have in experience, she could make up for in terms of thoughtfulness.

That moment of power, though, gave way suddenly to a brooding feeling in Doris. Where had Gobo stayed last night? Where would he go now? But no, Doris could not think about him. She would have to force herself to cut the idea of him out, for now anyway, and as what felt like a broken person, move forward until she felt like someone who could be whole.

And inside her, she hoped that Gobo, too, would grow, though away from her, so that some day they might come back together. But she could not keep waiting on him anymore, or waiting for him to leave again. Goodbye, Gobo, Doris thought, and gave a sad but expectant smile at the thought of building a new life for herself.