

Hidden Letters: Stories

Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in Creative Writing
Michelle Hoover, Advisor

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor
of Arts

by Sarah Duffett

May 2017

Copyright by Sarah Duffett

Table of Contents.

i.	Bodie's Watch
ii.	The Fruitstand
iii.	Mothers
iv.	The Death of Cam Rowe
v.	The Boy with the Gardener's Hands
vi.	Iris' Mail
vii.	This is a Story about Phone Sex, and

History repeats itself. Somebody says this.
History throws its shadow over the beginning, over the desktop,
over the sock drawer with its socks, its hidden letters.

History is a little man in a brown suit
trying to define a room he is outside of.
I know history. There are many names in history
but none of them are ours.

"Little Beast," Richard Siken.

"Bodie's Watch"

A shitty house full of horny twenty somethings, and God bless him, it's actually Kelly McArdle who opens the door. She's thinner than he remembers. All her life, she'd been teetering on the edge of chubby, but now she's all sleek collar bones and boney knees. Her red hair is cropped around her ears, which are gilded with earrings in all possible places. She's got silver in her nose, too, and her pretty, freckled face (Kevin's face) looks so surprised.

"Uncle Dan?" She says. Dan is not her Uncle.

There's an almost party behind her. Just six people huddled on craigslist couches. Some asshole kid who should cut his hair holds up a blunt.

"Your Mom said you needed your dishwasher repaired. I was in town, and I figured—"

"Who's at the door, Kel?" The kid with the blunt asks.

Kelly turns around. Her neck is blotted with a field of hickeys. Dan wonders if the kid with the blunt is the type to leave marks.

"Uhm, it's a family friend. He came to fix the dishwasher," Kelly says. Her hand tenses on the door frame.

"Dude, it's like, 10 o'clock at night."

What's this old man doing here, she's probably thinking. Doesn't he have anywhere better to be? Nope. This old man has a change of clothes in the back of his car and drinks whiskey out of a Thermos brand thermos. This old man drove hundreds of miles to fix a dishwasher.

"I'm sorry, we're having a, a..."

He's never heard her stutter. She's always the first to talk in a room, first to laugh. He used to imagine her at school, hand stretched tall in the air, waiting for the teacher's eye. He had never been like that. When she brought home her first set of all As, Kevin had been so proud. Dan had pulled her aside at a barbecue and told her that she was playing her hand too quick. She had been 13. *Now they'll always expect it from ya, kiddo.*

"Man, that's fine. Do whatever you want, you're grown. I'm just the schlub who came to fix the dishwasher."

Kelly chews her lip, painted dark maroon with lipstick.

"Well, thanks, Uncle Dan."

He nods and walks into her small, carpeted living room. He wishes she would just call him Dan.

"Uhm, this is Talia," Kelly says, gesturing to a girl with thick black hair and a torn t-shirt. "She's my roommate."

Talia nods in his direction.

"This is Davey, he was my climbing instructor but we hang out now."

Davey is the asshole kid with the blunt.

"And, uhm, this is Lindsay, she's a friend, and she's really, really great." Kelly points to a girl in the corner, blonde with wide shoulders.

"Where's the kitchen?"

"It's just that door to your right, there."

Dan nods, and moves around the drunk bodies to the kitchen. Kelly doesn't belong here. It's a Wednesday, shouldn't she be studying? When Liz told him she was paying rent so Kelly could live off-campus, he

thought it was a good idea. Standing in Kelly's tiny kitchen, with unwashed pots and pans crammed on every inch of the counter, fruit flies buzzing over a wooden bowl of overripe bananas, Dan feels that the structure of a dorm might have been a better call.

Grunting, he gets on his knees in front of the dishwasher. Kelly laughs. The dishwasher is full, still, and the plates and bowls are flecked with rotten food. His knees burn as he stands and turns, only to bump right into Kelly.

"Uhm," she says. She's covered with flush. He imagines it spreading all the way down to her toes. "Do you want a beer, Uncle Dan?"

"What I want is for one of you kids to do the damn dishes. Ever heard of a sponge?"

She shuffles past him and shrugs her shoulders. Her blush has deepened. She opens the fridge and pulls out two beers, one PBR and one craft beer. She hands him the craft beer.

"Bottle opener is in the drawer next to the dishwasher."

He doesn't need one. He turns to the counter, angles the bottle so the cap is resting just on the edge of the counter, and slams his hand on it. It's a trick he learned the summer before he tried out college. The cap flies off, and he turns, bringing the bottle to his lips triumphantly. Kelly is back in the living room with her friends. He watches her red hair as she drops to sit in one of the couches, and rests her head on that girl Lindsay's shoulder. Dan's neck hurts.

He unloads the feted dishwasher dish by dish, laying them to rest on the small kitchen table in the corner of the room. He's surprised that the table wasn't already loaded with dishes. When the pile is

done, he takes a long sip of his beer and sighs. He pulls out the lower shelf of the washer to take a look at the machinery at the bottom. In the living room, they're listening to some rapper. He reaches into his toolbox with one hand, and into the dishwasher with the other to feel the pump cover, which appears to be in good shape. He closes the main door of the dishwasher and, with his screwdriver in hand, gets on the ground.

Years ago, Dan had lived in this city with Kelly's Dad. The smell of the air on the drive up – pine, or gin – reminded him of that year. They would count the hours it took to reach the bottom of a bottle. Only *crazy people drink gin*, Kevin used to say. When Kevin was drunk enough to not pay attention, Dan would let his hand brush Kevin's hair, which was red, soft, and a little too long. By the time Kevin died, he was bald.

Dan is twisting out the bolts when Kelly comes in again and stands over him. Without looking back, he knows it's Kelly: she hasn't changed up her breathing since she was a little kid (in through the nose, out the mouth).

"How's it lookin', Uncle Dan?"

"Dunno, haven't really started lookin'. Having a good time out there?"

"Oh, yup. Didjya want another beer, Uncle Dan?"

"Still nursing this one."

Behind him, he hears the freezer open, feels the icy breath of it as Kelly pulls out what sounds like a pretty full bottle of something. The freezer door closes.

"Davey broke it."

"Broke what?" He gets the panel open and reaches his hand inside. The float switch seems a little wonky.

"The dishwasher," she giggles. With his hand still inside the dishwasher, he rubs the tips of his fingers against his palm and imagines that he had reached out and touched her ankle.

"How'd he do that?"

"I don't know. He was the last one to use it, so he must have broken it."

"You're the college kid with a 4.0, Kelly. You'd know better than me."

He rubs his fingers against his palm another time, if only because this time his knuckles ache.

"Uhm, yeah. Right. Uncle Dan, do you have some place to stay tonight? It's kind of late."

"Figured I'd hunker down in my truck, if that's all right with you."

"I mean, we have a couch."

He looks up at her. She's passing the bottle of vodka between her hands to keep the chill away. There are goosebumps where the bottle has touched her skin. He watches them spring up around her collar bone.

"I'm hoping to get this over with soon enough. Don't worry about it."

He waits for her to leave but her keds seem glued to the floor.

"Uncle Dan?"

"Yeah, Kel."

"Can you, uhm. Can you not tell Mom about Lindsay?"

"Lindsay who?"

Without moving, she gestures to the living room with her eyes. The blonde girl is spread out on the couch facing him. She's smoking a joint. She tries to hold in the smoke, but fails, coughing instead.

"I don't care if she's smoking pot, and I don't really think your Ma does either, girly."

She shakes her head and sits on the ground beside him. She puts the bottle of vodka between her legs and taps her shoes against the linoleum.

"Mom didn't tell you?"

She looks up at him. There are worry lines between her eyebrows.

He takes his hand out of the dishwasher and sits up. He wipes the dirt from his fingers onto his pants. He knows now what it is, she doesn't have to say it, but he wants her to, anyway.

"Lindsay and I kinda dated."

"So, you're gay, or whatever? I don't care."

She's peeling the label off the handle. Her eyes are glued to the floor.

"I'm not gay," she whispers, "and I'm not really worried about what you think, anyway."

He puts his hand back in the dishwasher. She turns towards the wall. He imagines her counting all the stacked piles of plates.

"I wish this room had a door," she says.

Her eyeshadow is smudged. He wants to wipe it away with his hands. He remembers when him and Kevin were young, and they'd fix up old cars. At the end of the day, when they were covered in black oil, sometimes Dan would chase Kevin down the street, threatening an oil

streak to the face, or neck. Three years ago, Dan had gone to Kevin's funeral with grease covered hands.

"I don't tell my friends about Dad." Kelly says.

"That's probably a good idea," he says. "Most of 'em won't get it."

She bangs her head against the cabinet behind her.

"Kelly?" Someone calls from the living room. Dan thinks it's the girl with the black hair. "Where's the vodka?"

#

He takes a break to smoke in the back yard. He counts the stickers on Kelly's inherited SUV. Boy, she's been a lot of places. *This Car Climbed Mt. Washington!*

"Hey," someone says. He turns around, but it's Lindsay, not Kelly. She's leaning on the porch's banister. She's wearing a flat brimmed baseball cap. Definitely a queer.

"You're Kelly's uncle?"

"Not, uh. Not officially."

She joins him on the lawn. "Can I bum a smoke?"

He brings his cigarette to his lips. He wanted to quit when Kelly was born. With his other hand, he pulls the box of Parliaments from his pocket and tosses it to Lindsay.

"Isn't this when you tell me I'm not supposed to smoke?"

He shrugs.

Lindsay's legs are covered in a soft down. She's a rounder girl, but pretty. Her legs look too small for her body, like two toothpicks holding up an orange. She's wearing an oversized sweater.

When she lights her cigarette, he notices patches of white on her fingers.

"What's up with your hands?"

She glances down at them with little surprise. She shrugs.

"I have Vitiligo. You know. The thing Michael Jackson had? Not as bad, though."

"Is it permanent?"

"Yeah. Eventually I'll be even whiter than I am now," she laughs.

He looks back toward's Kelly's car.

"So. I hear you're Kelly's girlfriend?"

"What? Oh. No."

She drops her half smoked cigarette to the ground and puts it out with the flat of her Birkenstock.

"We used to date. But like, we're friends first. I mean, we were hooking up, and it was great, and we talked about dating, but then, like, she flipped. It was weird. Now she's all flirty again, and I don't really know what to do."

"Yeah, can't help you."

"No," she says. "I guess not. Did Kelly tell you I was her girlfriend?"

He laughs. A car passes by on the freeway. He likes this city. It's small enough that you can still see stars. He likes this girl, too, with her pale little hands. He doesn't have the heart to tell her that Michael Jackson's bleached his skin.

"Did you know her Dad?"

Dan takes another drag and nods. Know is a small word.

"She told you?" he says.

"Yeah." She crosses her arms. "She just like, opened up one night after we, you know." She walks past him to lean on Kelly's SUV. "I mean, I was kinda surprised, but not really?"

"She doesn't talk about him a lot, all our friends assumed he was dead or like a bad Dad, you know, so. I didn't ask her anymore about it, and I think that's why she freaked."

"Are you tryna ask me what I think?"

"No, I mean. You know her. And you're a family friend. I don't know."

"What she tell you?"

"That he died when she was in high school. He had been sick for a while. That's like, all she said."

He thinks of Kelly in the kitchen, here, with the vodka between her legs. How closely she had wanted to guard some things. Kevin had been like that too – it was what Dan liked about him, that in any given room, Dan probably knew more about Kevin than anybody. Dan looks at Lindsay, at her weird hands on the bright blue of Kelly's paint job. Hands that touched Kelly, held Kelly.

"Do you think I messed up?" She takes her hat off. "By not asking more?"

"Jesus, I don't know."

She takes out a packet of tissues from her pocket and blows her nose. She drops the used tissue inside her hat. He remembers being young. He remembers being young and watching Kevin, and pretending that whenever Kevin called him his best friend, that he was saying something different. He and Lindsay are not standing far apart on the lawn.

"Can I tell you a story?" He asks.

"Sure."

"When I was growing up, I had this dog. His name was Bodie, okay? And Bodie was a good dog. I grew up in the same neighborhood as Kelly's Dad. One day, we're hanging out, joking around in my room with Bodie. Then we start fooling around. No particular reason for it, just two curious kids. He hates it. Can't get a boner, the thought of touching my junk kills him. Well, see, coulda been a lot worse for me. The only reason I didn't get a boner was 'cause the dog was watching us, you know? He was just looking. Standing guard."

Dan puts out his cigarette. Lindsay's brows are drawn together. There's a spot on her face, too, that's pale like her hands.

"Well, I gotta finish the washer. You live here? You need a ride back to your place?"

"I'll just crash here, I think."

Dan nods. He runs his hand through his hair. He looks at Lindsay, bug eyed and a little awed.

"Go on inside, kiddo."

#

By the time he finishes the dishwasher and runs the damn thing, the living room is quiet. The instructor and the dark haired girl have gone to bed to fuck. Lindsay is asleep on the couch. There's a puddle of drool beneath her mouth. He dampens a cigarette still burning on the ash tray.

Kelly is spread out on an old Lazy Boy recliner. He takes advantage of the silence and watches. Even drunk, asleep with her mouth open, she is etherial.

The only other door on this floor leads to the bathroom, so he heads upstairs in search of her bed. Muffled sighs and squeaking from one closed door, that's a no go. At the end of the hall, though, there's a door open just a crack. He lets himself inside. A candle burns on the window sill. The whole room smells like vanilla. He blows it out. There is no bed frame, just a mattress on the floor. Dirty laundry is everywhere. There's a dresser and a card table that houses Kevin's old wooden record player. A perfect room for a late-teen, but a mess she'd probably be embarrassed of in five years. He kicks a pair of underwear out from under his boot, and makes his way downstairs. When Kevin got really sick, and his legs were fucked, Dan had carried him once, from his wheel chair to his bed. Kevin had felt so fragile, like a pressed flower. For a moment, Dan stood, just holding him. Kevin had clicked his tongue against his teeth and asked if Dan was planning on holding him forever. When Dan had finally put him down, Kevin had laughed. *Good thing too. I probably would have pissed all over you.*

He stands at the bottom of the stairs, looking into the living room. Even from here he can hear Kelly breathing, in through the nose, out through the mouth.

If she wakes up in that chair tomorrow, she'll probably have a massive hangover. But maybe if she wakes up in bed she'd be just a little less screwed for classes the next day. He'd sleep in his truck. Maybe he'd write a note and leave it somewhere for her to find, so she'd remember he'd been there. Maybe she'd keep the note in her dresser, stashed behind her socks. But first, up she had to go.

"Hey now," he says, "Kelly McArdle, it's bed time."

He lifts her up. He tries not to get distracted by the warmth of her body. Even now, thinner than she'd been before, she's still soft. By the time he gets to the top of the stairs, he's huffing and puffing. The old wood flooring of her house creaks beneath their weight. In her room, he has to squat to get her on the mattress. He's so close. The top button of her Polo has come undone and he pulls it off. Undoes her bra, pulls off her pants. Her breasts are pale, with small, pink nipples. He's surprised to find the left one pierced. She's wearing a pair of lace boy shorts. Even in the darkness, he can make out the swirls of her red pubic hair.

You could touch her now and it wouldn't matter, all that time and it wouldn't matter, go ahead and touch her now she wouldn't remember it.

He grabs a ratty t-shirt off the floor. He smells it first, then stuffs her head and arms into it. Somehow she looks more beautiful with her breasts pressed against cotton and her thighs spilling out from the t-shirt's mouth. He becomes all too aware of his own arms, exhausted from carrying her, and the weight at the front of his trousers. He puts one knee on the bed.

But just like that she rolls over and her eyes are almost open. She smiles at him, a quiet one, a small one, and says: *Dad?*

#

The day Kevin died, Dan and Kelly were the only ones in the room. Kelly was wiping away Kevin's drool with a damp face cloth. She had skipped school to go the hospice. When she asked Dan to drive her, he was a little surprised, but he agreed.

Kevin couldn't talk anymore. That was the worst part of all of this, though at times there seemed to be an endless list of shitty things. Kevin was surrounded on every side by his useless limbs. When his eyes met Dan's, the look was still razor sharp. Dan kept himself in the corner of the room. He never visited Kevin by himself. The room felt too cool. He fantasized about being alone with Kevin. He didn't let himself get further than that. There with Kelly, he was safe.

Kevin was only at the hospice because they were all waiting for him to die. On that afternoon, they stopped waiting. There were no heart monitors screaming, no rushing nurses. There was just the early morning breeze. Kelly noticed before Dan.

"I think Dad's dead," she said.

Dan rushed out of his chair to stand at her side. She held the small rag in her hands.

"Yeah," Dan said. "It doesn't look like he's breathing."

He watched Kevin's body. It was just a thing in a bed, a waxy doll. Kevin had been dead for months, really. The last word Kevin said was "shit." Dan opened his mouth. He put his hands on his friend's chest.

"Uncle Dan?" Kelly said. She was 16 years old. Her hand rested on his shoulder. When he saw it there, a gentle freckled thing on his stained work shirt, he realized that he was shaking all over. He was crying. Dan was crying, all over himself. The hand on Kevin's chest had become a fist. He was clenching the fabric of Kevin's hospital gown.

Before long, he was hitting Kevin. Later, Kelly told him that he was shouting "fuck you," like the chorus to a rock song. Kelly didn't

speak. After a minute, she hugged him from behind, squeezing as hard as she could.

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay."

A cork board on the wall told him which nurse was on duty. The board's Expo marker swung back and forth on its string. He watched it dance. Kelly moved her hands across his chest, as if petting a dog. Bodie was a good dog. They never talked about it, so Dan could never say what he had felt that day. His hand itching to touch Kevin, his body thrumming until he looked at that dog.

Kelly, so calm, an ocean breeze, turned him around. She sat him back in his chair and pushed the call nurse button before sitting on the ground in front of him. She kept her hand on his knee.

He looked at her red hair pulled up behind her head, her long neck and its zits. She rubbed her thumb along Dan's knee.

"Uncle Dan," she said. "It's alright. It's okay to cry. You're alright."

He wanted to ask her where she got so good at this, where she had learned this from. She had never looked so beautiful as she did then, sitting on the floor of her father's hospice room, explaining to the nurses that her father had passed. She hadn't wanted to call them just yet, she had said. *We*, she had said, *we had wanted time*.

In his car, now, Dan takes a drink from his thermos. Inside her room Kelly is asleep. Dan had left her room, and walked too quickly the stairs. Lindsay was awake on the couch. She was wrapped in a blanket, sipping from a water bottle. They looked at each other for a long time, before she sighed. She put the water bottle on the coffee table, and laid back down, turning away from him and the stairs.

"Turn off the light," she said. "Otherwise, I won't fall back asleep."

He turned off the light and stood, waiting for something. When it did not come, he walked through Kelly McArdle's living room, and out the front door to his car.

It's a four hour drive back home. He has somewhere to be in the morning. He can make it without stopping if he tries.

"The Fruitstand"

Margaret buys a Toyota Camry because it's the car that Forbes Magazine says has the most bang for her buck. She used to take the train, liked to take the train even, but now she wants to see the cool back roads and feel the faux-leather of the steering wheel under her palms.

It takes two hours to drive from home to work, but it's nice: that in-transit feeling. She hadn't expected to like "Psychic Hour" on WMEA 90.1, hosted by the "divinely inspired" Madame Leone, but now she can't help but play it every commute. She had only started tuning in to hear some sort of misstep, a slip of the tongue. But the more she listened to the callers, and the more seemingly random, intimate things Madame Leone knew ("Is your Grandfather's watch in your hand right now?" "Oh! How did you know?"), that sort of speculation died away. There was something to it. Now Margaret had hours upon hours of road to listen and to wonder.

#

"And the country roads!" Margaret tells Jeanine in front of the water cooler, "they are just remarkable."

She can feel Jeanine's little grey gaze on her, but Margaret is looking past her to the cubical where Paul works.

"The train is just so packed, you know—"

All Margaret can see is the top of his blonde hair.

"Wasn't it expensive? To just, buy a car? And gas prices these days—"

"Well, it's worth it to me, really. Such a sense of freedom!"

"That sounds lovely," Jeanine says, sipping water from her conical cup. There's a paper in her hand. It's a small brown hand with nails bitten to the quick; such a sad habit.

Margaret wonders if it has occurred to Jeanine to ask if the break up led her to stop taking the train. He was always tighter with money, had insisted on the train. Hence his worn brown loafers, which he wore even after she bought him a new set.

"What's that?" Margaret asks, taking the paper.

Now that it's in her hand, she feels that it's card stock, not paper. An ad for some sort of baking competition. Jeanine's twelve year-old son could have made on Microsoft Word, but the ad has all the necessary information. Date. Place. Event title.

"It's just something I'm organizing," Jeanine says, "I thought I'd advertise it in the office, try and get as many people as possible. Last year we had about six entries."

Margaret looks up to confirm the pride she hears in Jeanine's voice. Jeanine is wearing a bright, warm smile. So earnest for *six* entries.

"That's nice, Jeanine." Margaret hands the paper back.

"You bake a little, don't you, Margaret? You should enter."

"Oh, I couldn't. I don't have time to come up with a good enough recipe."

"There's a prize, you know," Jeanine says, "a trip for two to the Bahamas. Max pulled some strings and managed to put something together. It's an all expense paid thing, one of those all-inclusive resorts? I've always wanted to go, but it's hard to travel these days. Did I tell you Gina has ADD? So strange for a girl."

"Right."

That night, Margaret leaves the office with her car window down, it's just barely summer, and the breeze wicks away her sweat. She's stuck in traffic at the intersection just before Route 5. From her car window she can see people huddled together, waiting to get on the train. Paul's on the far corner of the platform; she can tell by the way he's standing. They used to ride the train together, and even if they didn't say a word to one another, she never felt closer to him than when they were sitting side by side, swayed by the bumps of the track.

The car behind her honks. She drives forward.

Once she hits the back roads, there's nothing but trees and Madame Leone for miles. She passes farmhouse and farmstand, farmhouse and farmstand. There's a stand nestled among a group of birch trees, a small one—just a wooden table and a meager offering of summer berries.

The unmanned farmstand is the ultimate country road staple. So trusting: a shoebox with a square cut in the top for money, a collection of produce, and no way to really tell if you were robbed or if you just had a slow day. Most folks probably don't even count how much produce they've put out in the morning. Margaret respects that trust of course, but there's something in it, something sad, that lacks an understanding of people.

But this stand has a woman behind it.

She's there the next day, too, and the day after that. The woman is always standing there by the time Margaret drives home from work.

"I'm not saying it's wrong," she tells Jeanine in the break room. "I just mean that she's the only one who actually stands there."

"Well," Jeanine says, dragging a lint roller across the front of her black sweater. "Doesn't it make sense to stand there?"

"Of course. But no one does." She looks at Jeanine for a long moment, catching the old lady lines branching out on her face and the double chin that's grown since her second pregnancy. Jeanine stretches her cheap sweater to get her grey hair off it, and leans down to check anxiously if she has gathered every strand. *What do you really know about anything, Jeanine? Have you ever even seen a fruitstand?*

#

The next day, Margaret pulls over at the fruitstand. On the radio, Madame Leone confides in a listener that her father's sprit is with her and loves her very much. Margaret waits until she hears the segment's closing music, then turns off her car.

Up close, the woman at the stand is beautiful and dewy. Her clothes are frayed at the edges, but she's smiling at Margaret.

"Seen you drive by a few times. Unless someone else has your car." Her voice is raspy, as if she has to clear her throat but she's not going to.

"Oh, yes, that's me, I'm sorry. I haven't had time to stop until now."

"That's fine, baby. See anything you like?"

Margaret peers over the stand, simply a function table with plywood hammered around it. "FRUIT, 1.50 A PINT" is painted on the front. The heels of her shoes sink in to the grass. The only fruit are blueberries and strawberries, which don't look bad, maybe a day ripe. "You pick these yourself?"

"You bet I do."

The woman stretches. Her underarms aren't shaved. Sweat beads on the delicate hairs. They are standing close, but Margaret smells nothing.

"My, well," Margaret pauses. Anything but plain truth would do. "My husband has been begging for some pie. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Can't go wrong with blueberry, I guess."

The woman smiles and looks down at the berries. There are grey hairs sporadically peppering her scalp. Margaret wouldn't have guessed the woman was a day over twenty-three. "What's his name?"

"Hm?"

"Your boy, what's his name?"

"Oh. Paul."

"Sounds cute." She runs her fingers over the berries, and Margaret wants to protest, but remembers that the woman picked these berries with those same dirty hands. At least Margaret has a sink to wash them.

"He is."

"Tall, too?"

So tall Paul used to have to duck under the doorways of her place. Once he hit his head on the heating unit in her apartment, and she cried at the hospital when he needed to have two stitches. She shouted at the nurses and the doctor when it took too long. *Don't just stand there! Can't you see his head?* Paul put his hand in hers and said *ah, man, Margie. Come on. I'm the oaf with the busted head.*

"Yes."

She takes the berries. She can't manage to look at the woman's face. Some part of it would be blinding.

"That's 1.50."

"Oh," she says, "I had almost forgotten."

She reaches into her bag, fumbling with the straps. Her sweaty fingers slip as she tries to crack open the tiny interlocking orbs that keep her coin purse together.

"I only have coins, is that okay?"

"Fine with me, baby, as long as it's a buck fifty."

She counts up six quarters and hands them over.

"This right?" The woman asks.

Margaret nods.

"Hope he likes the pie."

#

Margaret rides to work on Monday with one hand hovering over her still warm pie. It won't do any good if she stops too fast, but she likes the idea that somehow she can protect the pie. She usually hates baking because you can never be sure what something will taste like without ruining how it looks on the outside. And oh, that first horrible bite: waiting for the person to take the little fork to their mouths.

At work, she gingerly carries the pie to the break room. She swipes the crumbs of lunchtime sandwiches off the table until it seems a suitable place to rest her pie. She'd ideally keep it in the public fridge, amongst insulated lunch boxes and Tupperware, but that's not the point. It doesn't need to be kept fresh. Paul just needs to see

it. She peels the Saran Wrap from the pie, and not a single crumb comes up. Yes, she thinks, this really will go quite well.

If Paul eats it and likes it, she'll enter Jeanine's little competition. As simple as that.

She takes the community kitchen knife from it's drawer and slices the pie, each the size for a perfect bite. She returns the knife to the sink, but doesn't wash it. Jeanine always does the dishes for the office when the work day is done.

"This pie is so good," Jeanine says at lunch, pulling a second piece onto her plate. It's an ornate little thing, flowers on the rim. It's part of her real nice China. She brought it in from home, she often says, because she sees no sense in it just sitting around in her hutch. She winks at Margaret. "Whoever made it should enter the baking competition. "

"It could have been anyone, really," Margaret says, "I saw Mark in here earlier, before most people came into the office."

"It wasn't you?"

"Of course not."

Jeanine smiles, but tightly and without teeth.

Margaret sits at her desk and waits. She fumbles with her pens, taking them out of their little jar and re-arranging them again, like flowers. Paul strides into the break room an hour after his usual lunch break.

She swears she can hear him say: "oh great, pie!" in his bizarrely, sweetly, wonderfully excited way. He likes the pie. Oh, the pie is good. Maybe he'll poke his head into her cubicle and remind her of when she made that pie with the apples and cherries, and how he

ruined it by putting too much nutmeg in it. How he had eaten every single bite of that pie apologetically, even though it was horrible, because he loved her. He had needed two glasses of milk to get through it. She joked up to the day they broke up that he had ruined that pie. But she joked because she loved him and loved that he had ruined it. At least, she liked that he had ruined it.

He doesn't pop by her cubicle but he returns to the break room and eats two, three, four more slices of pie. Today she'll go to the fruitstand again. After all, if she's going to win that competition, she has to perfect her recipe.

Jeanine's eyes peak over the rim of her cubicle.

"Did you see? Paul likes the pie."

"Yes, it seems like he did."

"Did you make the pie, Marge?"

"You already asked me that, Jeanine. I told you I didn't."

She'll make three pies for tomorrow, so that maybe a slice will remind him of her taste on his tongue.

#

"Husband liked the pie, huh?"

"Yes. I'd like to make a few pies for tomorrow. Three or four pints should do."

"Just about clears me out."

The woman gestures, meagerly, at the offering before her: three pints of blueberries and just one of strawberry. The woman is wearing the same clothes as the day before. The sun is setting behind Margaret, she can feel the heat on her back, and the woman holds her hand up to shield her face from the glare.

"So, three times 1.50 will bring you to 4.50, yeah?"

Margaret pulls a five dollar bill from her pocket.

"I don't have change, sorry. You got coins still?"

"Oh, you can just keep the five then. That's perfectly alright."

She reaches across the table to hand the woman the five. She smirks as she takes the bill, hand brushing against Margaret's. Margaret shivers. It strikes her that she hasn't been touched, really touched, since Paul and she ended things. And, even then, not for a while before.

"I'll tell you a secret, then, for your trouble," the woman says.

"All right."

"The berries? They're magic."

Margaret pulls at the strap of her purse and takes a quiet step forward. "Are they?"

"When your boy had the pie, he come back for three, four slices, yeah?"

Margaret holds her breath, as if in the moment before a race.

"I bet he damn near ate the whole pie."

"Well, yes—"

"I'll tell you another secret, too. Your boy? Bet he's not your husband."

Margaret snaps her head back.

"No ring. You think I don't got eyes?"

"Oh. Well. Not all married women wear rings."

"You'd wear a ring, I'd bet." The woman lowers her hand and bends behind the stand. When she comes back up, she holds a large plastic

baggie. She places the pints inside, lining them up side by side. "So they don't spill in the car," she explains.

Margaret's face is cold. She remembers the first time she felt like this, when she was a child and her father had found her trying on her mother's make-up. How the red lipstick seemed suspended for a moment before her father snatched it from her sticky hand. *Go wash your face, Margaret. Clean yourself up.*

"It doesn't matter if you're married or not. Like I said," the woman puts the last pint inside the bag, "these are magic berries. You will be. That's the way it goes. You a skeptic, baby?"

On "Psychic Hour," skeptic is a dirty word. In Madame Leone's strong accent, the word comes out like poison. In this woman's voice, it sounds teasing, coy.

"No," Margaret says quickly, taking the bag. "Of course not."

#

That night at home, she bakes six pies. The oven is only big enough to bake one pie at a time—so it takes her hours. She makes the crust with ice water, gets the amount of corn starch just right. When it comes out of the oven, every pie is perfect. Stunning. Golden crust with just a little purple bubbling through. With the pies splayed before her, she was sure: Paul would love her again. She'd win the competition and take him to the Bahamas. He'd ask her to go running with him in the mornings, and wouldn't mind when she said no. Maybe he'd wear the new loafers.

She's not in bed until three, and it's only when her stomach rumbles that she realizes that in all her baking, she hasn't eaten anything at all.

She pulls the blanket off and heads downstairs. She used all but three of the blueberries. These are fat and overripe, and when she pops them in her mouth, they explode.

She lets the juice coat her mouth and swallows. She stands there and waits. The berries only taste like berries, but then she can feel something warm in her toes. She shifts from side to side, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

#

At lunchtime the next day, the office crowds around Margaret's pies. There are twenty people in the break room, jammed together as if it were a rush-hour train.

"Who made these?" Zach, the new guy from accounting, asks.

"I don't know," Mr. Beardly, her portly boss, says. "But they're delicious."

She watches them eat, sucking the bits of blueberry into their mouths. She's surrounded by their talk, their praise.

Paul is standing in the corner of the room, alone. He makes eye contact. His spoon, covered with a hearty dose of purple, hangs in the air. Her mouth starts to form a hello, but he gives her a sad smile and his eyes return to his plate.

"I did," Margaret says. "I made the pies."

Everybody stops eating and turns to her. Paul's eyes dart back up. Behind her, Zach from accounting shuffles between people toward the door. He has a little bit of a belly and it brushes her as he goes by.

"Really, Margaret? I didn't know you could bake," Mr Beardly says.

"I knew it," Jeanine grins. "Margie, I know you too well."

She can hardly stop the smile blooming on her face. Glee wrings its hands inside her. She looks at Paul, waiting for his eyes to bloom into that warm color they were when they first met. The eyes he'd make at her when she gently corrected the way he tied his tie. How he'd stop her hands and kiss them, each and every finger—

"Margaret," Paul says. "You made these?"

They're the first words he's said to her in months. His voice is halting. *She was right, she was right: it's the blueberries, those magic blueberries.* Her toes, again, tingle.

She nods.

Paul puts his empty plate and spoon down. He brushes his face with a napkin.

"It's good," he says. He isn't looking at her, not anymore. Tears make their way to the corner of her eyes.

"Don't you want another slice?" she asks.

"I'm full now, thanks. It was good."

"But you were just eating it."

"I already had, like, three slices, Margie," he says sweetly, but when he looks at her, his eyes are stark.

Jeanine puts her hand to Margaret's back. She can barely feel it, as if it were little more than a brush of the breeze.

"Isn't it time we get back to work?" Jeanine asks the room. *No, it's not,* Margaret thinks, *this is all wrong, this is all so wrong;* her heart twists in the center of her chest, and so she turns to say, Jeanine, isn't it time we mind our own business? But she turns too quickly, and the plateful of pie that Jeanine is holding falls to the

floor. Glass shatters around Jeanine's dull leather clogs. The noise in the room stills.

"It's okay," Jeanine says, squatting down to pick up the shards.
"It's okay, I don't mind."

Jeanine's hands are shaking.

"I don't mind, I don't mind."

Paul comes forward to help and puts his hand on Jeanine's arm. For a moment, Margaret imagines that it's her arm, and tries to remember the pattern of calluses on his palm. The ones from climbing, the ones from guitar. She's clutching her hand to her chest. She didn't realize that, nor had she realized that the bunch of her blouse she grabbed was now darkened with sweat.

#

One day left before Jeanine's competition, Margaret speeds toward the Fruitstand. Madame Leone is talking poltergeists. She wonders if she should call in and tell Madame Leone about the woman behind the stand, but Leone deals with the dead, and this woman is so removed from a phantom. Margaret opens the door and finds her leaning against one of the surrounding birch trees, smoking a cigarette.

"Hiya," she says, "how'd the pies work out?"

"Do they take time to work?" Margaret asks.

"What? Oh, the berries. Depends. What you tryna do?"

"Something big."

"Something big always time, baby."

She flicks her cigarette and steps on it as she moves behind the stand.

"You're gonna need more berries for something big, I'm thinkin."

"Give me your best." Margaret pulls a ten out of her wallet. "And keep the change."

The woman blinks and opens her mouth wide. Her bottom lip slightly pouts, a little too heavy to stand on it's own.

"You got it."

#

The competition is in the basement of Tenth Presbyterian Church, a tiny lofted building in the town where Jeanine lives, just about an hour from Margaret's apartment. Margaret baked four different pies, each more delicate and nuanced than the one before. Finally she was pleased. The pie smells like victory in the car seat beside her.

Originally, the competition was going to be outside, but it's raining today, a much needed rain. The smell of it against pavement pushes her inside.

Jeanine stands on a little stage with a red sash that says "HEAD JUDGE." She must have embroidered that herself, the "u" in judge is perhaps a little too small. Margaret tries to wave at Jeanine, but Jeanine seems to pointedly avoid her gaze. No matter. Her pie will speak for itself.

The room is filled, mostly with people she recognizes from work. Some have brought their children. Paul is hovering by the fruit punch. She steals herself and walks to the judging table without looking at him directly. An older woman has her put down her name and home phone number on a folded index card.

"Nice looking pie," The woman says. Her grey hair is pulled behind her in a tight bun. "What is it? Blueberry?"

"Yes, thanks." Margaret beams. "I hope it's a winner!"

(She knows it is.)

There are at least 20 other pies resting on a checkered red table cloth. Pies from rhubarb to chocolate cream. And they all look perfectly fine. But none of them were baked using magic berries.

She mills about before picking a corner of the room to stand in. She fights the urge to wipe her palms on her new pants. They're designer. She bought them from Macy's.

After a time, Zach from accounting comes over and offers her a punch. He's a nice guy, Zach, and has a good hair cut. She keeps up pleasant conversation, but looks every couple of minutes over at Paul to remind him that she already has someone else to win for. He tells her that he entered the competition too, and he says it so earnestly that she can't help but look him in the eye and wish him luck.

At four, they call everyone up to announce the finalists. The two runner ups will get giftcards to Skip's Diner. Jeanine is waving people to the stage with a clipboard. She wishes that Jeanine would just look at her.

"It's my pleasure to announce the finalists of this years competition. There are three this year: Margaret Hunter, Zach Gardner, and Lillian Gifferty!"

They said her name first, and she's so sure that means she won. She glides onto the stage effortlessly, giving Zach a nod of curtesy. She reminds herself that it might be a kind gesture to eat some of his pie after this is all over.

"It was, of course, a very tough decision. These were some darn good pies!"

Laughter. Margaret looks over the crowd, links eyes with Paul. He's watching her closely. She wonders if he's feeling it in his toes yet. Or if it moves up even higher when you've had a lot. He's wearing a wonderful sweater. It looks new. Maybe he'll take pictures with her after.

"Our Second Runner up is Lillian Gafferty! Congratulations Lillian!"

Margaret claps for Lillian. Paul's gaze fills her up. She feels giddy. She imagines the grit of sand between her toes, the way Paul will look in those little red swim trunks she bought earlier that week.

"Our First Runner up is Margaret Hunter! Congratulations Margaret!"

She starts to clap but realizes it's her name and that you're not supposed to clap for yourself. Her stomach folds over. Jeanine tells Zach that he's won. Jeanine finally looks at Margaret, and Margaret's hands are clapping. She can't seem to stop them from clapping.

#

She leaves the church and drives straight to the fruitstand. Her face feels dry, caked with make-up. Madam Leone is talking, but the volume is low. She watches the windshield wipers for a while, pushing away the hot rain. She turns off the car sits in the silence, looking for the woman, but she's not there.

Margaret tries not panic, tries not to think of the magical creatures from the stories of her youth, the gremlins and ghouls who dupe and deceive, only to be gone in the morning.

She gets out of her car, slams the door. She doesn't get her umbrella.

"Hey," she calls. "Hey are you here?"

No response. Her blouse, faux-silk, clings to her back.

"Hey!" She tries again. "You lied about the berries! Hey!"

She stalks towards the fruitstand. There's no fruit on top.

She walks around to the back of the fruitstand, yelling into the woods: "Hey! I lost! I lost!"

She spins around. She thinks about Paul's face in the crowd as she lost. And that look in his eyes, that horrible look. Pity. Oh god, that look was pity. She pushes into the stand with full force and it tumbles, splattering mud across her new pants.

There's a tarp tucked under it and a quilt, too. There are pictures taped to the plywood, the woman with friends, the woman with a dog. On old, torn postcard of a beach. She rips up the quilt. No woman. Rain dances on a plastic bag that holds a bar of soap, a cheap tooth brush and a pair of socks.

"Oh," she says.

She blinks, twice, three times. She smooths her damp hair, and gets back into her car. She turns on the radio and changes the station. Classical. At home, she'll take off her muddy pants and hand wash her blouse. She'll call work, and tell them that she's had a terrible migraine. She watches the woman's blue tarp blow in the breeze. It all makes sense. People who can leave the stand have barns and homes to go to, and wives to make them pie.

"Mothers"

This is how Sharon imagines it:

On a cold February morning, a woman pulls over her car. Her three children are swinging their legs in the backseat. The woman turns up the radio, Fleetwood Mac, and then faces her children.

"Do you like this song?" she asks. They can't hear her. Her youngest daughter has picked out the eye from her bunny doll.

She repeats the question. Still no answer. She opens the glove compartment and takes out her ex-husband's gun.

The woman turns to the back seat to face her children. In the darkness, their eyes could be fireflies.

"It's the best," she says.

The woman tells the police that a bearded man had walked over to her parked car and shot her children, leaving her terrified. Twelve-year-old Sharon had watched the woman cry about it on the news. She watched the next week, too, when the woman held up an artist's rendering of the alleged assailant and begged anyone who knew anything to come forward.

The police only discovered the truth because the oldest daughter had left that car still breathing. The bullet had severed her spine. The doctors put her in a medical coma in the hopes of her eventual recovery. When she awoke to find her mother smiling sweetly at her bedside, she screamed.

Sharon would often think about this girl when her mother told her the story of her own birth. Sharon was a surprise, a trap that held her mother in place. Sharon's mother would open her mouth wide so that Sharon could see the bridge of her dentures. Then she would tell

Sharon that her barren gums were Sharon's fault, that after the doctor had removed her from her mother, all her mother's teeth had fallen away. Sharon would close her eyes, and think: *at least that woman is not my mother. If someone has it worse than I do, this cannot be that awful.*

Still, she thought of that woman on the news, and not her own mother, when she opened her front door on Wednesday to find a police officer on her doorstep.

#

In New Mexico, the sentence for rape can be up to 9 years in prison and a \$10,000 fee. You must register as a sex offender, and in New Mexico, that means your face, name, and home address are public information.

Greg Taylor explains this to Sharon and Ben on a cool Saturday morning. Shawn has not been arrested yet, but he is "a person of interest." The lawyer, a thin white thirty something, tells them that he believes that Shawn will be arrested, since the victim has identified him by name.

Ben is sitting beside Sharon, his hand settled on his beard. Sharon takes notes on everything that Greg the Lawyer says. Her handwriting is chicken scratch, barely legible even to herself. She was meant to be left handed, but as a child her Mother had forced her to use her right. Still, she must put everything down, she remembers better that way.

"Now, this part is important," Greg says, leaning towards the couple. His green clip-on tie brushes their kitchen table. "Do you think he did it?"

Ben shifts in his seat and looks to Sharon. Sharon immediately tells Greg the Lawyer that Shawn couldn't possibly. Ben takes his hand off his beard.

"Anything is possible," Ben says.

Sharon's head snaps in his direction, but Ben is looking ahead at their apple-print wallpaper. *That's our son*, she thinks. *It's our only fucking son.*

"Okay," Greg says. He looks between them, hands rested on what will, someday, be a pot belly. He sips his coffee from a mug covered with Shawn's pee-wee league baseball pictures. Ben has still not looked at Sharon. "You know the girl, right?"

"Yes," Ben says. "She lives across the street. We consider her and her father family friends."

"We did joint birthday parties when they were kids," Sharon says, "Shawn was such a good sport. One year, we did a princess themed party. He even wore a tutu." She laughs at the memory, but quickly quiets herself. For a moment, they are left with the ticking of the kitchen clock.

"And do you think she's the sort of person to lie about stuff like this for attention?"

"No" is the answer that comes instinctively. Sharon catches herself before the word rushes out of her mouth. She is reminded, then, of her mother's wide back. The thin line in her brain has already been drawn. The image of Shawn and Christina running hand-in-hand as children has been sliced up the middle. Someone has thrown away a half of it, and Sharon is left to guess which half remains. The choice is as instinctual as rutting.

"Okay," Ben says. "Now do you talk to Shawn?"

"Yes," the lawyer says. "Sounds like a plan."

Ben puts his hand on Sharon's shoulder and shuffles away to get Shawn. He doesn't have to go far. Sharon and Ben are wearing a matching set of pajamas they bought for Valentine's Day the previous year.

Shawn enters the kitchen without Ben. He's tall and just shy of handsome, with a moppy head of hair Sharon has been resisting for months.

"Hi, love bunny," Sharon says, "This is Greg, our lawyer. He just wants to ask you a few things, is that okay?"

Shawn scratches his leg through his basketball shorts. He looks anywhere but at Sharon.

"Do I have to do this, Ma?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"Could you like, leave?"

This hurts Sharon more than the police officer's flaccid attempt at a hand shake.

She leaves the kitchen. She walks first to the bathroom and then quietly circles back around, getting just close enough to listen. Greg explains what he knows. His voice goes limp. Sharon's heart is racing. She digs her nails into the wallpaper beside her.

"Are you listening, Shawn?"

She doesn't hear a response. After a long moment, Greg asks Shawn if he did it.

"I had sex with her, yeah," Shawn says.

"Anything remarkable about the sex?"

"Uh, not really. I mean, I forgot a condom, but I pulled out, so. She asked and I got her Plan B the next day, like, that's some expensive stuff, you know. I wouldn't shell out if I didn't like her."

"How long ago was that?"

"Like, the first weekend I was back? So, uhm. Two weeks ago, yeah."

"Well that fits the timeline. And she didn't say 'no'?"

"No."

"And she didn't struggle at all?"

"Why would she?"

Sharon waits for something else, anything else, and then releases the breath that had been building inside her. They were just having sex. It was sex. This'll be nothing. It'll all get sorted out. Her son is still the son that she remembers.

"Mom?"

Shawn is standing in the hallway, too, now.

"Were you there the whole time?"

#

When she gets in bed that night, she watches Ben's profile for a long time. His cropped black hair that hasn't changed since college, the new creases at the corner of his eyes.

"Why are you staring?" he asks, putting his book down. They've been married since they were practically children. When they first met, Ben used to chew with his mouth open. She thought it was cute for the first year or two.

"I have to be looking at something to think."

"It's late, Sher."

She rests her hand on the fur topping his belly.

"Ben," she says. "Why'd you say that?"

"Say what?"

"That anything was possible."

He pats her hand with his. His palm is sweating.

"If he didn't do it, he'll be fine," he says before sucking in a breath. "If he did it, he did it. And if he is that person, that's not a son that I want to help."

"You will always help your son. That's being a parent."

He rolls onto his side and puts the book on the nightstand.

"Go to sleep, Sher. We'll know more in the morning."

She gets out of bed and turns off the fan. She tells him that it's cold in here. He doesn't say anything in response.

The lights are off soon after that. She wakes up a few hours into the morning and finds that Ben is moving in and out of her at a snails pace. He does this from time to time, or really, more than that, but she rarely wakes up to notice. In thirty or forty minutes, he'll finish. When they were young she would reach around to tangle her hand in his hair, and crane her neck to kiss him, but she finds that idea much less exciting now. Sharon lies as still as possible. Outside the window, dawn is breaking. She falls back asleep, even as Ben's moving, and dreams of her son and her husband, standing side-by-side on top of a tall pile of her furniture. She had never imagined that, even all together like that, that it would stand so tall. She waves up at them, slow, as if her arm were caught in molasses. They wave back, their faces barely distinguishable in the daylight.

#

Every Thursday morning, Sharon wakes up early to put out the garbage. She rolls the wheeled beast down to the curb, and pauses to enjoy the early morning. She waits until the smell becomes too much to bear. Often, the Jones' garage door will open and out will come Christina, the high school aged daughter of their neighbor, Juan.

On the days when they meet at the curb, Sharon invites Christina inside. She makes her a cup of espresso and offers her an english muffin with butter. In return, Christina listens to Sharon gab about poetry, and lets Sharon lend her books she will likely never read. It's always a pleasant surprise when Christina returns a book to her with a grin, and they discuss it until Christina has to get ready for school. It reminds Sharon that books are lovers you can always return to. Sappho is Christina's favorite, and Sharon listens to her excitement and remembers that she too was that excited by Sappho once. She had taken out a copy from her library, but her mother found it nestled at the bottom of her desk drawer and took it. Sharon didn't notice it was gone until dinner, when her Mother brought it out at the table. *Do you know what this means?* Sharon's Mother asked, *everyone in a small town sees things like this.* She hadn't actually hit her with the book, not that time, but she had carried it in her hand the following week like a warning.

This Thursday, Sharon brings out the garbage and waits. She does not know what she expected. The garage door on the Jones' house remains closed. Sharon heard that Christina is staying with a friend. She imagines Christina, sleeping soundly in a guest room with a warm, wide window. Shawn hasn't slept in days. They unplugged the television because Shawn couldn't stop watching the news. His body was wrapped in

his mother's blanket, a quilt covered mountain dry sobbing at 6 in the morning. What a mess. When Sharon comes back inside, she sits down beside him and puts her arm around her son.

"Can I get you anything?"

He shakes his head. He smells a little.

It's not laundry day, but she decides to wash his clothes anyway, something she hasn't done since he was in middle school. She goes into his now sparse room, more motel than childhood home. His purple suitcase is open in the corner of the room, still full of unfolded clothes weeks after his homecoming. Shawn told her a few weeks ago that being in his own room makes him feel like a little boy.

She looks at the dirty clothes already piled on the bed and sighs. The water bill will certainly feel this one. There's a photograph of Christina pinned to Shawn's cork board. Christina and Shawn. She remembers how insistent she had been to set up play dates. How she had bothered and bothered Juan about it. Only children need socialization.

She stumbles upon a t-shirt she missed. It's a plain white undershirt. She tosses it on the bed. When she goes to dump another handful of clothes, she notices the stain. She drops the clothing in her hands and grabs the shirt. It smells like rust. He must have cut himself shaving. The stain is the size of her hand. She clutches the t-shirt to her chest and brings it to her bedroom. When she calls Ben's name, there is no immediate answer. She rushes to the wicker laundry basket by the closet door and pulls garment after garment onto the floor. When she can see the white cotton lining at the bottom of the basket, she drops the t-shirt in.

"Sher?"

She snaps her head and there's Ben, standing in the door way. She hates the summer because he is always home. During the school year, when he teaches, their home is hers. She has not realized how much she has hated it until this moment.

"Yes?"

"Hun," he raises his hand like a lion tamer. "Everything is fine. What's going on? It's not laundry day for another week."

She looks down at the clothing thrown around her feet, then back at Ben.

"Nothing, nothing. Have you seen my pink blouse?"

He gestures to the closet. Sharon's pink blouse is hanging right in front of her face.

"Oh," she says. "I'm sorry."

She picks all of the clothes up from the floor. Ben comes down to help her.

"No, it's fine," she snaps. "Please don't. It's fine. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's fine."

From the floor, she looks up at him. He has his eyes closed and he's pinching the bridge of his nose. He tells her he is not angry.

Her body relaxes immediately when he leaves. She looks at the wicker basket. It's not laundry day, and it won't again be for another week.

#

On Friday, they arrest Shawn. She makes a scene, following Shawn to the car right behind the officer.

Momma is right here, she kept chanting, *Momma is right here*, love bunny. After the police car drove away, she stood in her drive way for an hour. Then she turned inside and called Ben to tell him the news. Shawn hadn't quite been struggling. He had been crying. *I don't really wanna hear it right now*, Ben said, *I'm tutoring. Tell me at home*.

She sits at the kitchen table and looks at the childhood doodles that are still on the fridge, held up by magnets. If you tried to pull any of them free, they'd fight you to remain. At this point they must be fossils.

She watches home videos for hours. They're from the years before they moved to this house, before they knew Juan and Christina. There's a whole tape full of the summer they lived with Sharon's mother at the lake. She watches Ben in the water with Shawn. He has these bloated floaties on his arms. She can see a sunburn forming on his little neck. Years later, he still has a smattering of freckles there. Her mother, the filmmaker, puts down the camera and sulks towards the water. You can just barely see her varicose covered legs in the frame. "Ron," she calls to Sharon, "you forgot the sunscreen. Are you a city kid now, or something? Can you do anything right?" She turns off the home videos.

It's dark now. Ben is still not home. She takes out a pen and sits at her desk. She writes down ten names: family, neighbors, some acquaintances. She grabs for the yellow pages settled deep in her junk drawer, and then she writes down numbers. She takes out a fresh piece of paper, and writes a script.

Hello [NAME], it's Sharon.

I'm calling because I'm not sure if you've heard about what's been happening with my son, Shawn. [PERSONALIZED ANECDOTE]. He's being falsely accused of assault, and we need all the help we can get in putting the word out. If we can put just enough pressure on the department, we might be able to get the charges dropped. Please, please, please. Call and talk to 5 other friends about this. It would mean the world. He's my only child. My only son.

#

"How'd it go?"

"It would have been better if you were here," Sharon says, careful to keep her voice even.

"Yes, sure."

"He's your son."

"Well, I don't have to like him, Sher."

She pulls the phone away from her ear. The screen comes away clouded with foundation. She can hear his voice far away. He's talking about something. They've had this conversation before. He is so uneasy about being seen here. His students will ask, he says. Their parents will ask, too, and it has been bad enough already. She doesn't hang up the phone, but she puts it in her purse.

Attempting to leave the station, she passes the receptionist. She's an older woman Sharon sometimes sees in the town library. She furiously knits a green hat while taking a call.

"Yes, Shawn Watts is in custody," the receptionist says, "yes we have plenty of evidence, no we can't disclose that. I have heard that he is on the Varsity Track team at UNM."

Sharon pauses. This is the first time that she's overheard a phone call made on her behalf. From the look on the receptionists face, this is not the first time they've called.

Shawn has refused to speak since the official arrest was made, so when she comes, she just sits with him and buys his favorite snacks from the vending machine. He barely looks at her.

Round the corner, the person waiting in the seat towards the door looks up at Sharon. Sharon responds with a smile in passing, but stops when she sees that it's Christina. She's hunched over, playing with thick, black strands of her own hair. The air around Sharon flees, and she expects anger in its place. Christina is usually such a pretty girl. When she was little, her front teeth grew in too fast, and quietly at night, when they were alone, Ben would call her "that sweet donkey girl." Christina grew into those. She has picked a zit on her chin recently; it's still bleeding. Sharon folds the corners of her mouth away.

"Hi," Sharon says.

"Hi," Christina says. Then, she begins to cry.

The officer sitting behind the receptionist stands up.

"Why are you crying?" Sharon says, clutching her purse with both hands. Inside, her phone is vibrating. She imagines that it must be Ben.

Christina has stopped looking at her. Her little hands are shielding her face. The nail on her right index finger is broken, the others are bitten to the quick. She is near wailing now, and the sound is awful, like an animal stuck in a trap.

She imagines this girl, standing outside the high school waiting for Shawn to pick her up. She imagines her leaning into his car window, smiling, meaning and wanting two different things. In most languages, the word for "No" is the same. Sharon thinks of the cold metal bed where they take rape kits.

"Why are you crying?" she repeats.

The officer from the behind the reception desk appears beside Sharon.

"Ma'am, I think it's time you leave," he says. He has his hand on her shoulder. Christina has stopped moaning.

Sharon steps away from the officer with a hand on her chest. She turns to the door.

She sits in her parked car for a long time after that. They're playing a Stevie Nicks tribute on the radio. She opens the glove compartment. Ben's shoveling gloves are inside. She takes them out and runs her hand along the stiff leather. She bought them for him years ago. There's a lighter and their registration, but besides that it is empty. She closes the glove compartment, and then looks to the back seat. She shivers. The air conditioning is off. In the dark, outside of the car, she counts the deliberate shine of fifteen fireflies. She finishes Shawn's leftover Cheetos, and drives home with orange finger tips.

#

She's at the pharmacy picking up Ben's prescription when Holly crosses her path. Holly was a special needs aide at Shawn's elementary school. Her hair is an absurd nest pinned in every direction on her head, brown down at the roots, and platinum blonde everywhere else.

Holly asks her how she is. She recalls Shawn in elementary school, and tells Sharon that he was the sweetest boy.

"I'm fine, thank you for saying so. How are you?"

"No, no. Sharon. You don't have to ask how I am! What you're going through is crazy. I thought they were friends – did you know I heard that she used to be an awful cheater. You know, in classes and stuff."

"They were friends growing up," Sharon says.

She remembers watching Shawn and Christina in her backyard playing pretend. Christina lying on her back with her eyes closed, playing "dead." Shawn, humoring her in his sweetness, would surround her body with flowers he picked from Sharon's garden. When Christina fidgeted to fix her blue plaid shorts, all the flowers danced away from their careful placement. Sharon watched from the kitchen window, mottled with spiderwebs. She remembers Shawn returning with armfuls of dandelions and finding the flowers displaced. He dropped his arms, and tens of dandelions fell to the grass. His back was towards Sharon and she couldn't see his expression. As he marched away, he crushed the yellow dandelion buds under his keds, leaving Christina alone in the yard, with violets in her hair. Christina had come to her crying, and she had given her an Oreo, and driven her home.

"Pickup for Ben Watts?" The pharmacist calls. Sharon raises her hand and takes the little paper bag from the man in the white coat.

#

Ben and Sharon are eating chicken parmesan at home. They're both in their pajamas. They each have a bottle of wine. Every once in a while, they will lock eyes as if to say, *yes, I still know you're*

here. Sharon asks him about what he's reading. She's been staying up long after him, and he no longer touches her at night. Ben turns the fork in his hand but doesn't answer.

There's a knock at the door, and Sharon stiffens.

"I got it," Ben says. She watches him move to the landing. The back of his shirt is dampened with sweat. He looks through the peep hole, then turns to her and mouths something.

She shakes her head. He tries again.

"I don't, I can't," she says. "I can't hear you! Say it out loud."

He opens the door. It's Juan.

"Ben. Is Sharon here?"

"It's not a good time—"

She stands from the table as the two men ascend the stairs. They all stand in her living room, Juan's boots leaving mud in the fibers of the carpet.

He's not an attractive man, but sometimes, thoroughly drunk at block parties, she's found herself thinking him nice enough to look at. His features are slack. When her mother was mad, truly mad, her jaw would push forward and her nostrils would puff up, as if trying to ward off predators.

"Hello, Juan," she says.

"This has to stop."

"Can I get you a glass of water?"

"I'm not your house guest. This has to stop."

"You've known Shawn practically his whole life, he would never—"

"Sher," Ben says.

She blinks and Juan is in her face. She tries to step back, but she's stopped by the china hutch.

She freezes. She is not looking at him. He could be hitting her and she wouldn't know, she wouldn't feel it. It makes her smile a little, the thought that he doesn't know that he can't hurt her, not really. She wonders what Juan would think if he saw the scars on her back. She wonders if Juan would think then that she was weak, that she couldn't take a punch. She prided herself on her stamina. As a child, it was always her mother who got tired of hitting. Her breathing is heavy. She hopes he does not notice.

"Your people are calling my house, for Christ's sake."

He hits the wood frame of the hutch, and the china inside shudders. Sharon does not move.

"She got asked to leave her summer fellowship. All these calls, they said. All these emails. Sharon, this has to stop."

She returns when she hears Ben's voice calling Juan towards the door. *I'll talk to her*, Ben soothes. When he steps back into the living room, and they are alone, Sharon is sitting on their couch.

"You had her kicked out of summer camp?"

"No! No. I just made a few calls."

"To who?"

"Just some people around town who cared about Shawn."

"Sher. You'll ruin her life."

He turns from her and goes to the hutch. He stands for a long moment, inspecting. He sighs and opens the doors, pulling out blue shards of their wedding gifts. He disappears into the kitchen. All the

lights are off in the living room, and she watches his shadow move in the light streaming from the door.

"It's out of my hands now," she says, "I'm sorry."

#

Shawn waits for trial in jail. The GoFundMe for his bail payment is only \$1,000 dollars away from its goal.

In the evenings, Sharon reads newspapers articles on the computer. She could do it for hours. She does this so she doesn't have to watch Ben taking his things from their house, box by box. A month will pass before everything is gone, and a week after that before he is gone in his entirety. When he finally goes, he waves to her from the bottom of the landing. She's talking on the phone to their State Representative, so she stays tied to the wall phone, and returns his wave.

She especially likes to read the comment section. Every possible ally has crawled out to defend her son. Teachers, college friends, coaches.

After breakfast, she reads a comment thread started by an anonymous grey face. It says: "she's telling the truth, he raped me too."

She shakes her head, and sips her coffee. Within an instant there's another commenter, this time one with a full, human face. She clicks on it, ravenous. This commenter's name is Amy Lowrey, and she writes that she too refuses to be silent any longer. And then she says Shawn raped her in high school. They had been smoking together after a track meet. She had refused sex, and he had become enraged and had held her to the grass, tearing off her gym shorts. She had laid

completely still when he did it, afraid he'd hurt her worse if she fought.

By dinner time there are 3 other commenters on the thread that claim that Shawn had raped them. Sharon sits in front of her computer. Her hands are aching. She gets up and goes to the laundry, pulling her own clothes off themselves until she reaches the dark stain at the bottom. She doesn't pick it up.

When she was a child her mother would have her invite all of the neighborhood kids to her house for dinner. Her mother would make a big, fatty feast punctuated with chocolate cake. At school the next day, they'd all coo over how "nice" Sharon's mom was. How kind. She remembers her mom feeding cake to all those kids and how not one kid realized that she never gave Sharon a piece. *Ron, invite more friends this Friday.*

She imagines herself at the table now, looking up from her plate. Her fork is covered in dark chocolate. There are five empty plates ahead of her, and behind them are five pretty, unsmiling faces.

"The Death of Cam Rowe"

Kaleigh has two cats. One is named "Moose" and the other is named "KitKat." She didn't name them; she picked them both up at a local Animal Shelter, pre-named. She had wanted to find a local kill shelter and adopt from there, but there weren't any around, so she settled for the perfectly pleasant shelter two blocks away.

On Tuesday, Kaleigh gets out of bed as usual. She opens the curtains in her bedroom and faces the morning, naked. Moose and KitKat wait on her bed. She puts on her slippers and goes to the kitchen, makes herself and the cats breakfast: pancakes. She washes her dish in the sink. She has one cupboard for her dishes. She has one of everything.

She does a little work from home. She puts on her pencil skirt, her green collared blouse. The cats laze on her bathroom counter top while she does her makeup. Every one in a while, she brushes her hand across the top of their heads.

At the office, Kaleigh sits at her desk. She's a copywriter. She reads the reports given to her and she puts them down again, renewed, in paragraph form. As always, she eats her lunch with Andy..

Andy slices up his browning banana so they can share. They sit at a metal table near the office parking lot. Andy is short, shorter than Kaleigh would prefer, but he's got a boyish face and great taste in ties. They talk for a little bit about vacation spots. She tells Andy that it's very hard for her to take vacations, because of the cats. She shows him pictures. After work, she drives straight home.

In the lobby of her building, she says hello to the guard and goes to her mailbox. A few bills, her copy of *OK!* magazine, and a letter. The name on the return address is Rowe. She leaves the *Ok!* and the bills in the box and heads up the stairs to her apartment.

She puts the letter on her coffee table. She looks at it for a long time.

Eventually she pours herself a glass of water. She drinks the whole thing in two gulps. Kitkat and Moose watch diligently. The letter is still waiting when she gets back to the couch.

The letter is written in a thin, wavered hand. It starts with "Dear Ms. Kaleigh Keane." It ends with "Yours, Mrs. Anne Rowe."

Anne Rowe and her husband adopted Kaleigh's son sixteen years ago. There hasn't been a single communication exchanged between them since. No pictures, no updates, no birthday presents. She didn't know how tall he was or how he was doing in school. She had never seen his grown face.

She remembers with the last moment she saw him: looking through the nursery window, her hand pressed lightly against the glass. As if pressing any harder would break the tiny beings within. She could tell his squalling face out of the bunch. He looked like an oversized eggplant. She was sixteen then. They hadn't let her hold him. In

closed adoptions, they do everything they can to make sure the biological mother doesn't get attached. Sometimes girls ask for their babies back, they're allowed to do that for up to a year. She remembers her mother saying sternly: "that won't be you, Kaleigh. You cannot do that."

Weekly, she'll go to one of the playgrounds near her apartment. She rotates: if she goes to a park too frequently, somebody will put two and two together. It has happened before. She talks to the other mothers and babysitters and when they ask *which one's yours?* She points to the one most closely resembling herself.

It's what's best for him, her mother had said, him and you, you'll see.

Finally, she reads the letter. She reads it until she can recite the words with her eyes closed:

"Cam Rowe, the son you gave me, died this Friday."

#

She calls Andy. He's happy to hear from her. She's never called him outside of work before. She asks if he would mind taking her cats for a few days. She puts her cats in a single crate, because she only has one. In her back seat, she has their food, their treats (3 kinds), and their bowls tucked into a cardboard box.

When she pulls up to his house, he's waiting outside. His blue jeans don't fit him very well. He waves at her when she pulls into the drive way. Together, they carry her things inside.

"I thought you said you had two cats."

"They're both in there," she says. "They're just quiet."

"Great," he says. "I could use the extra company."

She puts the crate down in his foyer.

"Hey," he says, "did you bring a litter box? I don't think I have one of those."

Kaleigh counts her things, and sure enough, she had forgotten it. "I'm sorry. I'll pay you back for one."

She tugs on the sleeve of her black dress.

"It's okay," he says. "You look pretty."

"I better be going," she tells him.

When she starts her car, she looks back at Andy's house. He's standing on his porch again, the front door is still open. He remains until she drives away.

#

It's early spring. The trees are just beginning to sprout leaves. Kaleigh has trouble merging, her hands are shaking, so she stays in the far right lane for 500 miles. When she gave up her son, her family was rooted in Maine, but Maine is a big state, one of the biggest, and she has never been where she is going.

She stops for gas and buys a water bottle. She takes the time to check her map and wishes she wasn't so close.

Kaleigh looks down at the black cotton covering her lap. It's her best dress. Her mother used to say that this was the dress that every woman has, but no woman ever wants to wear.

In high school, Kaleigh wore black a lot. Her parents were divorcing. Her Dad wouldn't answer her calls. She sat in the back of classes and kept to herself. That's what Reno liked about her. He said that she seemed "internal." He was a military kid, in and out of town in under a year. She liked him because he had been everywhere, and she

liked that he was named after the Johnny Cash song. Reno could spend 20 minutes telling her what she was thinking. On the rare occasion he would be right, her heart would bloom. She was stupid and 15 and it went just like it always does. When his family moved away, and she discovered her son, she sat in her room and didn't eat for days. She thought that would be the worst part. One afternoon, She had written Reno's name on every page of her notebook. She had to buy a new notebook.

She rubs her hand along the black cotton. She should call him. She never told him. Her mother never called his family. She turns the car on. She's not sure if she remembers his last name.

#

Sherman, Maine feels further away from home than any place Kaleigh has ever been. The houses she passes look tragic. The lawns are covered in rusty furniture and the bones of broken cars. She passes three clean-looking mobile homes.

Her fingers curl tight around her wheel. She catches a glimpse of her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her mascara has smudged beneath.

She finds the address from the letter and stops her car. This is the place where her son grew up. It's a lot nicer than most of the other houses: well kept, recently painted. There are large flowers out front, just beginning to wilt.

She is suddenly aware that hasn't brought anything, no casserole or flowers. She wants to feel embarrassed. She tries to rub away the mascara under her eye before getting out of the car.

Anne Rowe opens the front door.

She is a middle-aged woman wearing glasses too big for her face. When they first met, years ago, she had been twenty pounds heavier and a little prettier for it. She looks at Kaleigh, chews her bottom lip, and embraces her.

Kaleigh is so surprised she keeps her arms at her sides. Anne's head lands between Kaleigh's breasts.

"Kaleigh Keane," she says, pulling away. "You've grown up. So nice to see you."

"Mrs. Rowe—"

"Anne, please."

"Anne."

Kaleigh takes a step away from Anne and pretends to look at the flowers. She takes a bud into her hand and lifts it, as if tilting a lovers head to face her. When she turns back, Anne is standing a few feet behind her on the lawn. She's got mud all over her slippers.

"This was quite a drive," Kaleigh says.

"I apologize for that. Sherman is a nice town."

Not so nice, Kaleigh thinks, kind of shitty, actually.

"It seems lovely," Kaleigh says.

Anne brings her hand up to her forehead as if blocking the sun. It is overcast.

"Do you have any bags?" Anne asks. Kaleigh shakes her head. She had forgotten them by her door. When she discovered her error she had already driven two hundred miles. It was a lost cause, and maybe a nice water cooler story. Something she might have laughed at with Andy, if it happened to somebody else.

"How is your mother? I hope I made it clear that she was welcome too."

"She died five years ago. Can I come in?"

"I'm sorry," Anne says.

"It's not a big deal anymore."

Without waiting for Anne to gesture for her to go inside, Kaleigh scales the front steps into the small ranch. Anne follows and shuts the door.

The interior of the house is near spartan, but the carpet is full of must, and the smell hangs thick in the room. The couches look recently vacuumed. The knickknacks on the coffee table are placed just so. Kaleigh can't help but imagine Anne perched over the little porcelain rabbits with a ruler.

Anne sits down on the couch and pats the space beside her.

"Thank you so much for coming," Anne says.

"I wish I wasn't here," Kaleigh says.

"I'm sorry, I know it isn't much, I tried cleaning before you got here, we kept things a little cluttered, I'm afraid —"

Anne bounces her leg under her long skirt. It was an anxious habit that her father used to have. Kaleigh just wants her to stop talking.

"No, I mean. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Our loss." Anne says. She looks up from the floor and fixes her glasses. She pats the couch again. Kaleigh suspects she's been practicing that line all day. Kaleigh is wearing high heels, they hurt like hell, but instead of settling beside Anne, she turns towards the wall behind her.

This is it – her son's living room. This is where he lounged after school and watched baseball games on TV.

She examines the pictures on the wall. A wedding day photo. She glances back at Anne and then to Anne's younger doppelgänger in the photograph. There is a generic picture of a potato farm. There are no pictures of children.

"Is your husband here?" Kaleigh asks.

"He left a few years ago. Take off your shoes, Kaleigh. Sit down. Let's chit chat."

He left? All of the air pushes out of her body. She remembers the day her Dad finished packing his things. He had their desk top computer in the back seat of his car, and while he drove away, she complained to her Mom that she wouldn't be able to IM Reno. Her mother told her to go to the library. Her mother stood on that porch long after Kaleigh went inside.

She tries to imagine Anne Rowe explaining what a condom is. She takes her heels off where she stands and keeps them in her hand.

The wall behind the couch is devoid of Cam. Square ghosts give the suggestion that photographs once hung there.

"Can I get you coffee?" Anne asks.

"If you have a pot brewed."

"I hope you weren't expecting a Catholic funeral, or anything. Like a wake and what not. We don't really do that up here. There'll be the funeral, and then something at the gravesite."

"I'm not Catholic."

"Oh? I'm sorry. What are you?"

"The family name is Catholic. I'm agnostic."

"That's interesting. Tell me more?"

"There's not much to say." The carpet feels almost gritty under Kaleigh's toes.

"Do you take cream?"

Kaleigh nods.

Anne shuffles to the kitchen. Before following, Kaleigh puts her heels beside the door, where a pile of worn loafers sits. She settles at a card table that's been corralled into a corner. She sits in a wooden chair with tennis balls on its feet. Anne puts a coffee mug in front of Kaleigh, and sits down. Kaleigh sips her coffee. It's barely warm.

She tries to imagine her son in this room. Maybe he was too cramped for the doorway. Her own apartment has wide, tall door frames.

Kaleigh pulls at the torn plastic strands that dangle from the tablecloth. She tears a long strip up to the center of the cloth. The table beneath is stained. She looks up at Anne, expectantly. Anne just smiles.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Kaleigh says.

"Well, you know small towns. It started with the zoning laws. The Fosters decided that they had to, well, they wanted to move their camp — we have a lake in town — no, no, they wanted to do some renovations, sorry. Anyway, because of the zoning laws, if they wanted to expand what they had, they had to push the house back up the hill."

Anne starts turning the little plastic spoon floating in her own cup. Kaleigh does not want to hear about zoning laws. She does not want to hear about that. She wants to hear about her son, and this is

all too long winded. She would have preferred a memo or telegram, so she could just hear all the bare facts.

"It's easier than you'd think to move a house. Since Fre— my husband, left, we didn't have a whole lot. I was working, of course. Last thing I wanted was for him to, but as soon as Cam turned sixteen he was out looking for work. He was — he did well with construction. It was an accident on site — the Fosters were really nice about it, they sent flowers. Would you excuse me? For a moment?"

Without a true image, Kaliegh sees a little head matted with blood, and a body strewn with pine needles and dirt. The spoon in Anne's mug continues to spin. Anne leaves her in the kitchen for ten minutes. The sink is dripping. That year Kaleigh spent, that first year, without her son: she woke up everyday and considered going to get him. If only her mother knew that this was the place. *A promise is a promise*, she repeats. She would have put him in the room she uses now for an office. She would have painted the walls green, with dinosaurs. They would have watched TV together, late into the night, mother and son on her leather couch. Her Mom had told her once, before she died, that Kaleigh was always too distance. She had thought of her son and retorted that she had never been allowed to get close.

By the time Anne get's back, Kaleigh has finished her coffee. Anne changed her shirt, and is no longer wearing her glasses. She doesn't look any better.

"I don't have a guest room. You can stay in my room, if you'd like. I'll take the couch."

"I'm really not comfortable with that, Anne."

Anne pats Kaleigh's hand.

"I thought you might say that. I tidied up Cam's room, you can sleep there, if you'd like."

Her son's walls are blank. His bedside table is empty. She frantically turns her head from object to object, hoping to see something personal. She is not rewarded.

"His room had more stuff in it, then," Anne says, "but this is where he slept."

Panic wraps itself around Kaleigh. It runs through her to her finger tips.

"You put it all away already?" Kaleigh says. She can't help herself, she continues:

"Doesn't it feel a little... soon? To do that?"

Anne has her hand on the doornob. Without saying anything, she braces herself against the frame. When she speaks again, her voice is quiet.

"I'd appreciate if you drove me to the service tomorrow. I don't have a license."

"Okay." Kaleigh says. This room does not smell like moth balls. "I think I have to lay down."

Anne nods but stays at the door.

"Anne, I need to be alone."

"Oh, shoot," Anne says. "I'm sorry."

She leaves without shutting the door. Kaleigh closes it.

Kaleigh puts her hand on the wall. She prays to her son. She chants her apologies. She opens all of his drawers. They are empty. At the bottom of one, she finds Cam's name carved into the wood. She

takes out her pocket knife and carves her own name beside it. The wood splits like cold butter.

She's not sure how long she's in here before somebody knocks at the front door. There's a loud greeting and a little conversation after the door is opened. She hopes Anne will not come to the door and ask her to meet this person. Her heart beat fills her whole body. She shuts the drawer and puts her knife away. The anxiety goes when Anne and this person have settled. She can hear the two talking, but can't make out the words. She hates the cheer in the other woman's voice. She imagines Anne's friend as rotund, as so large she takes up the whole couch. She imagines Anne and her friend standing together in a room, how awful they'd look. She laughs a little, quiet to herself. Eventually, the woman leaves.

Anne knocks on the door and opens it a crack. Kaleigh is still sitting on the carpet by the bureau. Anne looks a little startled to see her there. It's dinner time. Anne's friend has delivered a casserole. She follows Anne to her messy little kitchen, passing the empty walls, and smelling the rotten carpet.

"Ah, uhm. I'm a vegetarian," Kaleigh says when she sees the casserole. She is not a vegetarian. The stink of the beef from the white cracked dish keeps her at the doorway.

"Oh," Anne says. "I see. Let me make you something else. Is a PB&J alright?"

"Yeah."

Anne apparently keeps the peanut butter in a jar on the top shelf of the highest cabinet. Kaleigh would be able to reach it with little effort but she leaves Anne to fend for herself. Anne gets one of the

folding chairs from her table. She stands on it to reach the butter. She grins triumphantly. Kaleigh claps.

When they sit down to eat, Kaleigh looks at her sandwich. The bread looks pretty fresh, but the smell of the casserole overwhelms her. She watches Anne take a spoonful.

"So, tell me about yourself, Kaleigh. What do you do for a living?"

Kaleigh takes two big bites of her sandwich and chews before answering. If she continues at this rate, she'll have the sandwich done in twelve bites.

"I'm a copywriter."

"Oh, a writer?"

Two more bites. Kaleigh shakes her head but doesn't actually answer the question.

"And do you like it? Being a copy writer?"

This time she takes three bites. She nods.

"That must be nice. Any men in your life?"

"Did you bother him like this?"

Kaleigh hears Anne's fork drop. She takes another bite of her sandwich. Anne is looking down at the sugar bowl. An ant has crawled inside it.

They eat the rest of the meal in silence.

Kaleigh sleeps on top of her son's covers that night. She slips off her black dress and sleeps in her underwear, letting herself feel the Maine cold in its entirety.

She dreams of her son lying where she lays now. She dreams of him writing down everything that he knew about her. He would have looked

for her, he must have looked for her. She dreams that by some force of magic, when he opens the bottom drawer of his bureau he sees her name there, too. He traces his thin hand over it.

She dreams that she's home now, and that a boy just growing out of pimples opens the fridge door. *Ma*, he says, *can my friends come over?* She tells him yes, love dove, they can all come – and there'll be pizza, too.

Her Mom used to call her love-dove. She wakes up and her (Cam's) pillow is damp. She thinks about calling Andy on her cellphone, just to make sure her cats are okay, but she does not.

#

On the drive to church the next morning, Kaleigh barely drives straight. She manages to keep her foot from pressing too hard on the gas pedal.

Anne sits in the passenger seat, hands delicately crossed in her lap.

"This is a nice car," she says.

The parking lot in front of Our Lady Grace Presbyterian Church is small full nearly to bursting – there are only 10 spots. Kaleigh parks on the road. Funerals must be like passing circuses here. Come one come all, come see the spectacle. Local adopted boy dead. Adoptive mother arrives with real mother in tow.

They get out of the car and walk to the church. She's so ready to hate all of them. Roly-poly women hiding under black coats and hats. Tall, work-worn men with jittery hands and yellow smiles.

Six people wait by the door. Two men are wearing jeans. They call out to Anne, and she offers a little wave. The cracks in the pavement

make it hard for Kaleigh to walk in her heels. She keeps pace with Anne. She cannot fall behind.

Anne introduces her to all of them. Heather, Josiah, Michael, Garrett, Lloyd, Gabrielle. They know who she is without Anne having to tell her. She must look like Cam, surely. They all seem startled.

"The doors to the church are locked," one man, Garrett, says.

"Pastor Tim will open them when the time is right."

"Is this it?" Kaleigh says. "Is this everybody?"

Nobody answers her. She looks at the door of the church. The paint is chipping. She wants to scrape it off with her hands and feel the lead paint under her nails.

"I knew you were young, but gosh," one woman says. Her voice is a car horn. "You're young enough to have been Cam's sister!"

Anne puts her arm around Kaleigh. The door to the church opens. She steps away from Anne and bites back the urge to scream. To yell. She spins with a force that knocks her off balance. She grabs the iron railway, but steps on Anne's toes with the stiletto of her heel. Anne stumbles, falling down the two steps to the cement. She cries out.

Kaleigh looks down at Anne from the top of the steps. She turns and looks inside the small chapel.

She blinks.

On the walls, between the tall, old windows, are all the missing pictures of Cam Rowe.

The baby she knows, the child and teenager she does not. The boy has glasses and a slopping smile. He's short, but muscular for his age. His hair is brown and thin. He looks like her father.

He's beaming in all of the photos. She finds one of him as a child of six, maybe seven. His eyes are shining. She wonders if her eyes have ever looked that bright.

Below the casket are things of his: balls, action figures, and notebooks. She remembers reading somewhere that this is how the Egyptians used to bury their dead. Surrounded by the things and people they knew and loved so that they'd be safe and comfortable in the afterlife. There are dozens of yellow tulips resting on a wide oak casket.

She turns back to the door. The group of folks is huddled around Anne on the ground. The one named Heather is helping her up. A school bus pulls into the parking lot. A hundred students and parents file out onto the asphalt. When Anne enters the church, nobody is talking. Somebody is rubbing Anne's back. Others are making their way to their seats. They pass Kaleigh.

"Anne," she says. "Anne, I'm so sorry, please."

She stops Heather and tells her that she's got it. She takes her heels off and leaves them in the aisle. She puts her arm around Anne and helps her to the very front pew. Anne looks up at Kaleigh. Some of the wrinkles on her face are crusted with dust. She is starting to cry.

Kaleigh looks back at Cam Rowe. Right next to the casket, there's a picture of Anne holding Cam as a toddler. They are standing in a wide field. He has his face hidden in her chest, his little hand is clutching her dress. Anne is kissing the top of his head. He's clinging to her. Kaleigh wants to call her Mom. She wants to have been married. She wishes she could have brought something, anything, here.

She wishes she had something to show him. Maybe she could have made him laugh, maybe she could have convinced him to stay in school. A visit or two a year might have been enough. To know that there was someone else. That he didn't have to take care of his Mom all alone.

Somebody puts their hand on her shoulder. It's the pastor.

"Miss, would you mind sitting down?" he whispers, "we are about to begin."

"The Boy with the Gardener's Hands"

Mother Superior's illness began in early summer. Until then, she was a mindful, strong woman. Death rarely takes that into account.

From her bed, she hears one of the younger Sisters, Sister Mary, wondering aloud when Mother Superior will be with God. Mother Superior has seen girls like this come and go. She chastises her for not being more considerate. Sister Mary's turns her face to the ground. Eventually, Mother Superior takes Mary's hand in hers. Sister Mary's hand is small and smooth, like a stone at the bottom of a lake bed.

Mother Superior has grown tired, but God is her constant companion. It won't be long, now.

#

She finds solace outside her bedroom window. Years ago, when she picked her room, she was sure to secure the best view of the garden. From its window, she can see the pale pink of the summer roses and the green-white of the hydrangeas. She settles in with a blanket a fellow sister had made. This view will be her last one, and she is gladder for it.

In her youth, she had planted the Potentilla that now stretches up brilliantly towards the first floor windows. Every morning for years, she would run her fingers against the small, yellow flowers.

They no longer allow Nuns to do the yard work. They've hired a group of locals. The courtyard is small, and only requires one person to tend it, a teenage boy. He toils in solitude while his friends work and laugh on the main lawn.

The boy returns every Tuesday. Every Tuesday, he bends to work the earth with his heavy hands, hands gnarled already with hard labor.

A dark down covers his neck. His shoulders are slight and dotted with freckles. Every now and again, he stands, wiping his brow and closing his eyes. She knows that feeling well: the thrill of being alone and yet not lonely.

She asks to have a spare pillow propped beneath her, a luxury few are granted. With the extra height she can see the heaviness of his trousers. Brown corduroy, like her father used to wear.

On the first truly hot day of the year, he removes his shirt. His back is long and taught. Sweat glimmers between the sharp blades of his shoulders. There is a mole on his back, just along the crease of his spine. She looks away and calls to Sister Mary. She asks that the boy be told to put his shirt on.

She watches as Sister Mary approaches the boy in the courtyard. Sister Louisa walks beside her. Their arms are linked, and they face away from each other so as not to mistakenly look at the boy. She tries to keep her eyes on the Sisters' shoulders. Her eyes lift towards the boy. Sister Louisa's eyes are closed. Sister Mary's are wide open.

#

Sister Mary lauds her for her strength.

She thinks about the boy and joins hands with Sister Mary. Pimples huddle together below Sister Mary's lip, but even with them, the young Sister is near-lovely. She doesn't quite fill out her robes.

The Mother Superior pulls Sister Mary's hand close, as if preparing for prayer, but she keeps her eyes open, and asks the Sister to bring her the boy instead.

Sister Mary flushes, reminding Mother Superior that unsupervised contact with men is not allowed. Mother Superior knows the rule well. She instated it herself. She keeps Sister Mary's hand close to her chest. She can smell the soap that Sister Mary uses in her hair, and another scent, something earthy. Like rain on hard cement.

"There are not exceptions, Mother Superior," Sister Mary says. "Would you like to pray?"

#

When the boy leaves for the day she imagines herself following him. He finds her a beach. They sit, side by side. He teaches her to tie knots, and he has her practice by tying their hands together.

In the garden the next Tuesday, he laughs, responding to some far away call. It bothers her that she has never heard him speak. She likes to think his voice sounds the way God's does.

She sins: she desires the boy's hands on her. She has never felt the touch of another person. She only gets as far as imagining his hands in her hair. She leans her head back into her pillow. That is enough.

The following week she again asks Sister Mary to bring the boy to her bedside. It's evening, outside the sun is setting. There is a hot water bottle on the Sister's lap – it's meant to go in Mother Superior's sheets. Sister Mary's legs shift to avoid the heat. She tells Mother Superior about something else, she tells her about the herb garden that she's putting together, and all of things she thinks that you can use Rosemary for. She likes being outside, she says. Close to nature. She knows that Mother Superior likes that, too.

The next Tuesday, she closes her left eye and imagines that her outstretched fingers are giant claws, capable of picking him up and pulling him to her bedside. Up close, his face is wondrous. He listens as she tells her favorite joke. The next week, her joints aren't strong enough and her fingers remain curled against themselves.

#

When her daily food comes, and she's faced with the taste of ash, she imagines the boy eating warm bread with butter, bright, green apples, cotton candy. When she was a child, her father had often bought her cotton candy on the pier. The strands melted on her tongue, sugar made of air. The boy would wonder at the mystery of it too, like she had.

On the next Tuesday, the dirt in his hands seems far away from her. When he sips from his water jug, his Adam's apple dances.

He sees her and waves. She raises her hand, as if blessing him. He returns to his earth while she soars. Does he think, she wonders, of the little woman lying grey in her bed?

She spends the following Tuesday with her head turned from the window.

#

Her health deteriorates. She sinks into her bed. She is built of feathers and springs.

She prays, because that is what she has always done. The beauty of this: she never runs out of things to pray for. She prays, and in a moment of weakness, she asks Him to erase the boy from her mind. She prays for the removal of his crooked, blunt hands. She prays until Tuesday at noon.

#

When Mother Superior was a child, her father had grown ill. While her siblings slept, quietly unaware of their father writhing in his room, she remained, cleaning his face with a cool cloth. He was a small man, with dark, thick hair and glasses. His glasses lay at his bedside. He hadn't worn them in weeks.

"Father," she asked, "what is it like?"

"What is what like?"

He turned and saw her face, embarrassed to have asked the question at all.

"Darling," he said, "it's a relief."

Her father had lied.

#

When the doctor asks her how she's feeling, she can't decide what to say. The doctor is a sallow man accompanied by two little nurses. They wait for her words with pencils in hand. How can they understand that she wants life, but not *this* life?

The doctor tells Sister Mary that the Mother Superior only has weeks left. Why not hours? The nurses say a prayer beside her before leaving.

When Tuesday comes again, the minutes fly and she is no longer agile enough to grab them. Summer is ending. She can no longer open her eyes without immense strain.

It is not hard to die. Death is a part of God's plan. She has lived selflessly enough. She has given herself and wanted for nothing. Only now there is the boy in the garden, with his wide knuckles and sharp, boney shoulders.

#

She dreams of Christ as a young man. She dreams that Christ is making a table. That he runs his hands across the grain of the wood first, without sanding. Christ works all day at the table, shirking nails for simple, interlocking notches. When he is done, she dreams that Christ walks outside and drops his tunic. When she awakens and her arms refuse to move, she knows that God is close to calling her home.

On Tuesday, when she should ask for last rites, she asks instead for the boy. The older Sister tending Mother Superior that day does not know the boy, but goes off in search of him in any case.

The floor creaks to announce the boy's presence. He is dirtier than she imagined him to be. He is younger, too, 16, perhaps. He is trying to grow a beard, but the hair is only present in patches. His hands are shaking, and he takes short, heavy steps to the bed.

"Mother Superior?"

His voice is just as she imagined.

She beckons him closer. She can smell something on him, rank, and unfamiliar – perhaps, but surely not, just the sweat of a day. He kneels beside her and the smell fills her bed. The smell is lilacs and the Earth, cotton candy and the Eucharist.

"Mother Superior," he says again. "I'm sorry."

She cannot bring herself to speak to him. His irises are ochre, but in the whites of his eyes, there are red, anxious lines. He wets his lips.

She is too weak to make the sign of the cross. Her love remains heavy in her chest, but it is not for the boy who sits here now, nor for the things that boys like him do.

She finds the strength to reach up and caress the brown of his hair. He bows his head, expecting some sort of forgiveness. She does not offer it.

In the doorway, Sister Mary stands, holding her coif and veil in one hand. Her lower lip is swollen: a flower petal poised, just set to drift. The boy's body stills beneath Mother Superior's hand.

Sister Mary stands for a long moment at the threshold, wishing to speak. Instead, she ducks into the quiet hall behind her. The boy begins to stand, but thinks better of it and remains on one knee. They are left with the sound of Sister Mary's fleeing footsteps, made awkward by the mis-fit of her habit.

"Iris' Mail"

Laura imagines Iris' uterus as a field. As long expanses with nothing but brittle ground. And it's weird to think about a part of her partner like that. It's weird to think about an organ at all.

But, then, it's not always a field. Sometimes it's a craggy mess of jagged pieces: broken bottles and barbed wire. Laura even draws it once, but when asked, refuses to show the drawing to Iris.

It first happens a few months into their relationship. Laura wakes up to the sound of Iris' heavy breathing, and finds Iris curled around herself, languid features pulled together in pain. Laura panics, a full fury, yanking on her pants, thinking of all the terrible things that could be happening to her girlfriend. Wiping the sweat off her own brow, Iris tells Laura through gritted teeth that it's called endometriosis. Around ten to twenty percent of women have it, nothing for Laura to worry about. Laura remembers standing on Iris' shag rug, looking first at Iris, and then down at her toes in the rug, wiggling them to remind herself of the ground.

This is a repeating event, a night Laura plays through a thousand times. It's a cycle of getting up to get the heating pad for Iris' back, to get the cool cloth for her neck, and to sit beside the bed while Iris writhes and weakly thanks her.

Iris never complains about the pain, only about children: because of those little barbed orbs that Laura had drawn, Iris, despite herself, would never be able to breed.

#

Their anniversary comes with the beginning of fall. They work all day together in the kitchen, filling their home with warm smells: a huge feast, just for the two of them. The fourth anniversary is the flowers anniversary. Iris stuffs poinsettias and hydrangeas into vases and drinking glasses. There are two pink roses swimming in an empty salsa jar.

Iris puts on Billie Holiday's cover of "Our Love is Here to Stay," and twirls toward Laura. Billie Holiday reminds Laura of a big, aging home: creaking vocals with an expressive warmth that makes you feel known. Iris is like that too, a big Victorian manor. Small, cracked hands but soft, comforting palms.

"I have to get the butter for the rolls," Laura says, smiling.

"Roll your hips a little, then."

"Bad," she says, trying to make her way to the fridge. Iris stands in the empty space between the counter and the appliance, blocking Laura's path. Iris apologizes and scuttles out of her way.

Laura opens the door to the fridge and grabs the little glass butter dish. She puts it down on the counter beside the dough.

"Can I ask you a question?" Iris says. She's looking at the wine glass in her hand, meticulously, as if looking for something lost in the murky water.

"Shoot." Laura tires of rolling awkwardly with one hand, so she bashes at the dough, using the pin like a club.

"Have you thought more about kids?"

Laura puts down the rolling pin.

"We've been together a long time. My parents are asking."

"Let them ask."

When they first lived together, Iris had probed Laura gently about children. Laura had told her a story. This story was simple: when Laura turned 18, her mother sat her down and told her that she loved her, but that she regretted being her mother. Her mother had just dyed her hair blonde. She had reached her hand across the table to take Laura's hand in hers. When she pulled away, some of the dye from her mother's hands remained on Laura's skin. Laura's mother was gone for a long time after that, and had only returned to Laura recently in e-mails and "Happy Birthday" phone calls. Her Dad, embarrassed, hadn't even divorced her. Laura looks at Iris a long time, and doesn't know if she should bring this up again.

"I don't plan on going anywhere. Do you?"

"No," Laura says, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Then why not? Why not do it?"

"Iris, I've told you."

"We have the extra rooms, we're in the suburbs now. We've got access to a great school system," Iris says. Her eyes are wide with excitement, she has practiced this list before.

"Iris—"

"It's the logical next step for us."

"Why steps at all? What about what's going on right now?"

"What's the point if there's nobody to take care of us when we're old?"

"Iris, please."

"We're a normal couple, Laura," Iris says, standing a little taller. "We should do what normal couples do."

The first time they kissed in public, Iris' eyes had darted around the restaurant, eager for disapproval. *Relax*, Laura had said, *We're a normal couple.*

Iris wipes her hands on the dish towel in front of her. When she drops the towel, her hands are red from the coarseness of the cloth.

"I don't — you're asking a lot of me, you know that?"

"It'd be both of us."

"Yeah, but I'd be the one having the baby."

"I haven't asked you that. We could adopt"

"Do you know how hard it is for a gay couple to get a baby?"

Iris looks away. Laura presses on:

"I have a life, Iris, I do things, you know? And I need to be able to walk around a bit. Stretch my toes."

"It wouldn't matter. I could do it. I'd do it—"

"On your own, Iris?" Laura says, "I'm not going to make you do that."

"Then why not let us do it together?"

"That's not the way this works."

Iris picks up her own glass of wine and sips from it. She pauses with the glass close to her lips, then drinks again.

"Let's talk about this later," Laura says. "I have to get the rolls in the oven."

#

Laura stands in the driveway for a long, tired moment. Through the little kitchen window facing her, she looks into their house. Iris is hunched over the sink washing dishes. She's scrubbing too intently

to look up and notice Laura standing in the driveway, sneakers held loosely in her hand.

The pavement feels rough under Laura's bare feet, so she shifts her weight back and forth. Iris looks pretty this evening, she decides. Like a favorite t-shirt.

She knows if she goes inside, Iris will smile and wipe her hands clean of dish soap to embrace her. She knows that she will say: "miss me, today, lovie?" And Laura will reply: "of course, pal," and kiss her. And then Laura would look down at the wooden countertop and there would be a brochure on IVF or a mailer from a sperm bank. And Iris wouldn't say anything about it. She would smile, as if that was just how the mail always was.

Iris turns from the window. Her mousy, curling hair is pulled behind her in a mess of braids, each pinned to her scalp with bobby pins. Laura used to believe it was easy and effortless, but now knows that Iris takes an hour on her hair every morning.

Laura walks back to her sedan and gets in. She drops her kicks on the seat beside her and drives into the garage.

By December, the subscriptions for the baby magazines begin. Iris doesn't say anything to Laura. She just reads "Motherhood" or "Pregnancy" magazines at the breakfast table. Laura says nothing in return, quietly sipping her coffee.

Iris begins sleeping in one of the guest rooms. In the morning, when Laura wakes up, she finds herself rolled over on Iris' side, as if she had never been there all.

#

Laura's studio is two towns away, settled on the third floor of a tall brick building. In any other situation it could have been a loft apartment. Iris used to pay for it. When Laura began making good money off her art, she had started to pay her own rent.

For the past few months, Laura has been working with clay. In college, she had been a painter. Her favorite part had always been at the start of it, when she would go to stretch the canvas over her constructed wood frame. She loved that moment of control, of force.

She strips down to her white cotton underwear and sports bra. She likes the air on her skin. She wets her hands, slices a wedge of clay and holds it. Iris wants a baby. She throws the clay to the floor, expecting a wet sound like galoshes through the mud. Upon meeting the floor, the clay barely grunts in response.

Laura closes her eyes. There are too many windows for it be truly dark. She remembers her mother chanting *grandchildren* like a prayer, until she didn't have a mother anymore. How her mother thought that girls should wear pink and wait sweetly for boys to settle on top of them. But, of course, that was before her mother cut off all her hair, and ran to the woods. Laura kicks the clay block, but it's adhered to the floor and she covers her toes with crud in the attempt.

There is no "bathroom" in her studio, just a toilet and sink saddled to the far wall. She turns on the sink and grabs her bar rag, rubbing it along her foot until the clay is gone. She squats on the toilet and checks her e-mail, and finds an inquiry about one of her pieces, a sculpture she had made about a year ago. The e-mail guy wants to buy it, or at the very least, see it in person. It's a plain e-mail. *Hello, my name is.*

She sculpted the bottle a few years ago, when she and Iris had first moved in together. She spent the first three months completely artistically dead, stomping around the apartment, re-wearing unwashed socks. She wasn't even totally sure that Iris had noticed, but Iris had. She came home one day with the most expensive bottle of wine from her Dad's cellar, sat next to Laura on the couch and said:

"We're gonna drink this entire bottle, and then you're going to plan your next step."

So she did, and the next day, she drew the mark-ups for the giant wine bottle. Laura had even managed to offer Iris a thank you.

Iris texts her. She's wondering when Laura is going to be home. Laura reads it, knowing that her read-receipts are on, and then returns to the e-mail. Laura responds and tells him that the sculpture is at a gallery uptown, and if he'd like, she could meet him there and discuss it.

#

She meets him at the gallery, which is much too stark for her taste. She wears her favorite sweater and puts on a little of Iris' make up. She waits for him with the Gallery attendant, a college-aged brat with pierced eyebrows. In a flash, a tall, pale man in a pea coat appears at the door. He's covered in brilliant freckles. The center button of his coat is undone.

"Are you Laura Evens?"

Laura nods and reaches out her hand. Her heart rolls over. His fingers are soft, softer than she expected, and elegant.

"I'm Stephen, Stephen Germaine."

"You wanna see the piece, or?"

"Very much."

It's not all her work. She's got her pieces scattered here and there. She has a show coming up in about a year, a big one, just for her, in a gallery nicer than this. Stephen Germaine tails her. She can feel him there without having to look. The sculpture is showcased at the back of the gallery, three feet tall and welded together out of metal.

"I'm curious how you found it, honestly."

"I was in the market for something like it. My mother makes glass beads out of old wine bottles."

"Your Mom's an artist?"

He shakes his head without breaking eye contact with her work. He looks at her. She creates a string of his possible thoughts. Lovely. Ugly up close. Talented, talentless. A prodigy. A hack.

"No," he says. "She was fond of hobbies."

"Not all art has to be hung up."

He looks at her with a soft, thankful glance that is almost too much for her to bare. She feels herself stuffing a morsel of plain affection into her mouth. She has forgotten how much she likes it, how familiar it tastes.

"How much?"

She gives him the number. It's high, but he smiles.

They shake on that, and she can't help but think of the softness of his hands, like fresh washed sheets.

#

Laura spends longer and longer hours at her studio, furiously producing a lot of little good. When Iris asks her why she's coming

home clean, Laura starts rubbing clay on her skin and clothing, if only to stop the question.

Stephen Germaine leaves another message on her phone, asking her out to drinks.

Iris fingers her the next day when she comes back from the studio. Laura is at the sink, washing off her freshly painted hands, when Iris appears behind her.

"Don't move," she says. Laura remains still, her hands warming under the running water.

Iris pulls down Laura's old grey sweat pants. Laura knows she shouldn't say anything. She would die before she'd give up the touch: Laura needs Iris like a distraction. Needs to count the strokes of Iris' fingers flitting inside her. Comfort returns to her again, a small thing that had burrowed itself away inside her. But Iris hasn't clipped her nails recently, and they scrape at Laura's insides. Laura widens her stance. When Iris and Laura first started dating, Laura had to teach Iris to cut her nails. *Gay ladies can't have pretty nails.*

When it's done, and Laura's leg is shaking the baggy, earth-covered pants at her ankles, Laura turns to grab Iris. To say thank you. I've missed this, I've missed you, let's never fight again, let me make love to you, but as soon as the words are there, Iris is turning, retreating to some far corner of their house.

"Go get the mail, please," she says.

Laura's heart thumps in her chest. She gets the mail, three new magazines.

She texts Stephen Germaine, and invites him to a gallery party the following week. If not Stephen, then somebody else, she thinks.

She looks at the magazine. If not somebody else, she'll go to somebody else. The comfort in her has gone cold. She will go to other people but she will never, never go to the sperm bank.

#

A lot of disappointed eyes have looked away from the sold sign beside her sculpture. It's the most expensive piece in the installation.

"This room is very crowded," a voice from her side says. She turns her head to face it, and it's Stephen Germaine, pea coat tucked under his arm. He's standing too straight, with a dress shirt and a black knit tie.

"Yes! It is. Hi. You know they have free wine here, or something."

"I just thought I'd pop in and say hello. You look nice."

He looks at the part of her chest that's exposed. There's no cleavage, not really, just a stretch of skin, but still, she finds herself flustered. She didn't have anything to wear, so she's wearing Iris' dress. She can't remember the last time she wore a dress.

"I really liked that thing you said."

"What thing?"

"What you said about my mother. About her being an artist."

"I'm sure it's true."

"Yes," he says.

They stand next to each other in the crowd for a long time, facing the sculpture he purchased. She thinks about Iris, who hardly ever looks up from her magazines anymore.

"How long do you have to be here? I can make you a drink."

Stephen Germaine says.

She looks up at him. His eyes are almost black.

#

His hotel room is small and well decorated. There's reproduction art on the walls. He drops his keys on the desk, next to the promised bottle of whiskey. Iris and her had fucked in a hotel once. It had been gimmicky and cheap, with a creaky heart shaped mattress. She sits on the bed. Down comforter.

She watches him pour whiskey into a plastic cup. No ice. No water. He hands the drink to her. She follows the line of his pale hand all the way up to his face. He looks tired, too. She stands, takes the drink. Laura doesn't like whiskey but Iris does. But Iris doesn't fuck random men in hotel rooms.

She walks behind him, resting her now empty cup on the bedside table. She puts her arms around him. He breathes out a long sigh.

"Why are you doing that?" he asks.

He had put back on his pea coat before they left the gallery. The wool irritates her cheek, but she lets her face rest there anyway.

He looks over his shoulder and turns.

When they kiss, his lips move in little jumps, unsure of how to stay in one place.

#

When it's done, and he's asleep, Laura gets up and goes to the bathroom. She climbs into the shining bathtub and lays down, lifting her hips and cradling her legs to her chest. She pretends she can feel it working. She sits there for ten minutes and then washes her

face in the sink. Beside the single-use hotel toiletries is a program. She picks it up. It's from a funeral, the Catholic type, and has a quote from some saint on the front. It says: "convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire; on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh."

On the front is a photo of a pale, grinning woman with crooked bottom teeth. She's wearing glass bead earrings.

#

She takes the pregnancy test in her studio. She looks at the exposed brick while she pisses. She knows it didn't work. Her period has always been a little irregular. She watches the stick the whole three minutes anyway. When it reveals a single, small pink strip, she throws it in the trash.

Stephen Germaine lives two cities away, she knows this, it's where she shipped the sculpture. She hand wrote the label. It's not too far. It's been so long since she's been attracted to a man, she can't lose this chance. She calls him.

"Laura?"

"I'm gonna be in town tomorrow night. Are you busy?"

She walks towards one of the three wide windows in her studio and watches a grey Toyota roll down the street. It's moving at a snail's pace.

"No," he finally says, "I'm not busy."

"Good."

If she had known then that there'd be three more months of this, maybe she wouldn't have called. Iris picks her up from the studio that night. Laura's car is in the shop.

#

"Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?" Laura asks. She's putting on her socks.

Stephen's hand is warm against her back.

"Take so long in the bathroom."

"Women are supposed to pee after sex," she says. When she's done putting on her socks, she stands.

"I know," he says. He always looks so helpless without his glasses.

"I read something recently, about your new show?"

"What did you read?"

"I read that your partner is co-hosting it."

She suddenly feels so vulnerable, standing naked in his wide, empty bedroom, wearing just her wool hiking socks.

Stephen is watching her, expectantly.

"You didn't say you had a partner."

She bites her lip.

"I don't appreciate being the 'other woman.'"

She smiles. She can't help it. She doesn't know how to explain that this isn't an affair. She suddenly has to pee, but she can't go back to the bathroom again so soon. She clenches her fist.

"I should go."

"You can't go."

She sits down on the bed, he sits up and puts his arms around her.

"I don't care," he says, his face turned into the crook of her neck. He's kissing her shoulder. "I don't care, Laura, let's fuck, I'm sorry. I don't care."

She's never noticed how thin his lips were before.

"That's nice," Laura says.

#

Those two pink strips have never been more welcome. She can't believe it. It's been four months since Iris has slept in her bed. On their lawn, little purple buds have sprung up. It will snow again, soon.

After Laura tells Iris, they make love. Iris can't get enough of her, they don't leave the bed all weekend. And there's not even guilt, in the bones of the bed, there's just love, and the stupid smell of sex. *Thank you*, Iris moans when Laura fucks her, *Thank you, Thank you, Thank you*.

When Monday comes, Iris makes Laura breakfast. All organic, she tells her, I got up early to go get it because that's what's best.

"Sure," Laura says. "Wanna have coffee?"

"No, no. We shouldn't. I mean, you shouldn't, but I won't do it either. Solidarity," Iris grins, her eyes wide. Blue and round, two gorgeous marbles. "I already took it off the counter."

"Oh. Okay."

There is a small vase of poinsettias where the coffee machine used to be.

#

Laura receives an e-mail from Stephen Germaine. There are no personal remarks. He has written to ask if it would be all right to keep the sculpture outside.

Laura writes back to say that yes, that should be fine – though with weathering, over time, the varnish would fade.

#

Laura is eight months pregnant, and has to buy more new clothes. Iris had insisted they go out for them, that you could never tell the fit from buying online. They huddle into the front seat of bougie minivan that Iris had splurged on when Laura made it to the third trimester. They needed it “early,” so they could shop at Ikea for the nursery furniture. They have nested and baby showered. Every week, Iris explains what the growing thing looks like now. Oh look, this week it’s a cherry. Now it’s a watermelon. Iris has already framed all of the ultrasound photos.

On the way to the mall, Laura asks Iris if she’s thought any more about her gallery show.

“We’ll do it after the baby’s born, Laura.”

“I have a full show’s worth of work now, we have the space –”

“No,” Iris says, “It’d be too much strain. You’ve gotta get to that last month, Laura. We can’t take risks.”

“The show is already done, I don’t even have to go to the opening,”

“Look, you’d be there, making sure every piece is in the right spot down to the inch. Up on ladders painting walls. Come on. Laura, I know you.”

Laura rolls down her window.

They have to stop at a gas station for Laura to pee. I'm sorry, she tells Iris. Iris doesn't say anything, just smiles dimly and turns on the radio. Laura gets out of the car in her too-stretched pants and her taught t-shirt, and walks to the gas station. She asks the man behind the counter if she can have the bathroom key.

"Oh, hey now," he says. "Look at you all full up like that. When are you due?"

"Not soon enough," she says, and he laughs, eagerly. She turns back and looks into the car. Iris is reading *The Atlantic*.

The man follows her to the bathroom.

"Just holler if you need anything, the walls are real thin." He smiles. There's a wad of yellow gum in his mouth. Laura will have a son. The man smiles at her for just a moment too long. She thanks him and opens the door with the key he had given her at the desk.

She slips in and shuts the door, and is surprised to find the bathroom clean. The mirror is cracked, but the trash has been recently emptied, and the toilet bowl is stark white. She looks at herself in the mirror. She's sweating. Her face is bloated and her feet hurt. She's so top-heavy and silly looking, she laughs, she can't help it. It's all been so silly. She pulls off her pants, squats over the toilet and pisses.

When she's clean she returns to the van, Iris doesn't look up from her magazine.

"Are we still not talking?" Laura says.

"We're talking. Did you enjoy yourself? You took a while."

Laura doesn't say anything. It's not until they get to the mall that Laura realizes that she never returned the bathroom key.

"That's stupid. I can't believe I forgot it."

Iris gets out of the car, walks around and opens the door for Laura. For a moment, Laura stares at Iris. Her body is blocking the afternoon sun, and Laura can barely make out Iris' face through the glare.

"Don't worry about it," the shape says. "Small mistake."

"This is a Story About Phone Sex, and..."

On Tuesday, you died.

You used to say that I was the sneaky one — there was never any evidence of that, pal — but here you are, de-throning me. We were supposed to meet. I was stupid and picked up a dress and everything. The dress is too nice for work, and definitely too nice for grocery shopping. It's just gonna sit in my closet. You would have liked it; it's blue.

On our last call, I made you repeat the name of the restaurant where meeting. I didn't want to be left standing around at the end of all this. There was a whole four months of waiting, and I've been so damn anxious since we decided to meet, I've been like a shook up bottle of soda. Well, you know. Four months is a long time. I decided while you were talking that after our first date, I was going to take you back to my apartment. I would strip you down to your socks and just look at you. I wanted to take my time, I didn't want to touch you until I had gotten a thorough look at you. Knowing you, you'd probably have taken it in stride. You're so sweet when you want to be. But what were you even waiting for, huh? After all this time, and all this build up, you'd be bound to be, well, disappointed.

After I made you repeat it, you got quiet. You liked to listen to me, even if it was just to the sound of me breathing. I like to listen to you, too. When our time was up, you sighed, and then you said: "I should go, Dolly."

My Mom hated me. Well, no. She just named me after the stupid Barbra Streisand movie, which is basically just as awful. She'd sing

the title song to me every time I got home from school: "Hello, Dolly, well hello, Dolly, it's so nice to see you back home where you belong." You would have liked my Mom. She was a silly lady, and a bad singer.

In my college biology class, I remember them saying that a body rots slower when it's less humid. Here, the air is about as damp as a stack of brown cardboard boxes. How long did you wait before someone noticed? Was it your wife, was it right away? Where were you?

When I picked up the phone on Tuesday, I was cleaning (shocker!) the kitchen table. You didn't usually call on Tuesdays, I usually didn't have the day off. I used a sick day to clean because the whole apartment was such a mess. I was still sure that it'd be you because nobody else had the number to my burner (that had been my idea, remember?). I never bothered with yellow gloves, and my hands smelled like clorox when I answered the phone. But it wasn't you. It was your wife.

"Who is this?"

I didn't say anything. I tried to keep my breathing even, so she might think the line had gone dead. I didn't know, I didn't want to ruin anything for you, not this close to us finally meeting.

"Who is this, please?"

The bleach burned my nostrils. All those things are connected; your ears, your noes and your mouth, did you know that? I couldn't help but release a little breath. Barely even a whimper, but still, she caught it.

Then she told me that you were dead.

"What?"

I kept watching the calendar on the wall. I was counting down the days with a big, fat, purple sharpie. We used to joke that you looked like Cary Grant. I tried to conjure you, Cary Grant, in my doorway. I looked at my North by Northwest poster. Cary Grant was gay, I think. But that was a secret. I imagined Cary Grant with his arms around me, but the image didn't stick. Everything smelt like bleach.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't call anymore," your wife said. "There's no point."

I tried to wash off my hands, but they stunk for the rest of the day. Go figure.

You only talked about her once. I read your file at work, so I already knew she existed, and, by extension, what I was getting into. We had been phone-fucking for three weeks. I was sitting on my bed, looking at the shoes settled at the bottom of my closet.

"You know, I have a wife," you said. I said yes. Of course I knew. You were a patient at my boss' office. I had called you to reschedule a therapy appointment and from there we were off to the races. You told me my voice was so soothing, I should try working at NPR. I didn't like radio, and I didn't like the idea that my voice was soothing, either. I had laughed — hard, and told you that was the first time I'd heard anything about that. My boss'd be sorry to see me go.

Conveniently, you were always busy on the days I worked. You told me her name was Katie. She had picked up painting. Like every other bored housewife, I had suggested. No — you still loved her. You were kind. She did some volunteer work. I clenched my fist. It's called "grounding," when you try to lock yourself in to the world around you.

I didn't want to leave the phone call and go somewhere else, I didn't want to spend the rest of my day in my head, swimming through your marriage. But if you were there, on the phone, with me, that's where you wanted to be, right? Even if just on the phone, those two hours every other day, I was yours, and you were mine. God. I sound like Ingrid Bergman.

After I hear about you, I have two days before I head back to work. My bedroom is a thin room, a glorified hallway, really, with two big windows on one wall. I don't really sleep, even with curtains the room is just too damn light. I lie in bed. I don't eat. I think about the way that your voice would get low when you were horny. I'm sorry. I feel nothing. I mean, I expected to be like Sophie's Choice, Meryl Streeping it up. Your wife could be lying, but she's not. I know, I googled your name. I can't move from bed, my cat (Chara) doesn't even come in my bedroom. When I finally get up for work, I realize that Chara has torn into the trash and ate what she could find. She looks up at me from beside her food dish. I used to imagine you and Chara together a lot. A fantasy built into a fantasy, I guess. When I told you about Chara, you had whispered: "I love pussy, but I'm allergic to cats." I liked that, before you I only dated shy guys. Shy guy. Whatever. I drive to work hours early in my sweat pants.

I have the keys to our office and so it's no problem to get in. I sit behind the wide desk I share with two other receptionists. We don't ever work the same shifts, but we like to leave each other notes on Post-Its. *Call so-and-so, don't forget about this meeting.* Jenny always signs her's with a heart. Jenny left one about you. She has already sent flowers to the widow. *Love, Jenny <3.* You sent me flowers

once, but the only address you had was my P.O. Box (What? You could have been a psycho.) You didn't tell me they were coming. when I finally showed up a few days later to check the mail, there were fifteen wilted roses waiting for me (one for each week we'd been talking, you goober). My mom taught me how to press flowers, but I didn't really have the energy. I called you right away, left a message thanking you profusely, telling you that I'd run them in a bath and that I'd delicately lower my hand beneath the water and do something else. I actually threw them in the big bin in my P.O. Box office. It wasn't that I didn't love you, I did, I do. But something about dragging those dead roses home made me feel, well. Guilty. I go to my post office a lot more, now.

I punch your number into the my phone's dial pad. You used to joke that it had been years since you'd memorized a phone number. Me too. Sometimes I'd go through it in my head while I was brushing my teeth.

I open up the office database and pull up your file. I read your name. Your funeral was yesterday, I read it online. I waited for a long time, I waited to feel myself being ready to get up, but my comforter held my body to my bed, as if it were made of weights instead of feathers.

"Hello?" your wife says.

"Yes, hello. This is Evan Carter's office calling, is this Mrs. Slater?" I say, in my best receptionist voice.

In high school, I used to do plays. Evan hired me because he thought my acting skills would come in handy. I didn't have to

actually be nice to pretend that I was. It's what made me so good with you on the phone. You called me Chameleon.

"Yes. Thank's for the flowers, they were nice,"

"Of course. We just wanted to let you know about resources, if you were concerned —"

"Already called about that. Thanks. I'm seeing this grief group a town over. They seem really helpful."

"Is it one we recommended?"

"Yeah, Jenny whoever gave it me, I think. I have Yoga in twenty minutes — do you mind if I let you go?"

She doesn't wait for a reply, she just hangs up. I almost liked her for that. I pull up Jenny's sticky note and toss it in the trash.

"Hey, Dolly. Everything okay?"

I look up and Evan's standing there with one hand in his pocket, and the other on his briefcase.

I know I looked like a mess. I was wearing a blouse and cardigan over my sweat pants. It wasn't usual behavior for me. I never lied when I described what I wore to you: I like nice clothes. It's why I live in a shitty apartment. The pants, at least, are Lulu Lemon brand.

"Yes," I say, "I'm fine."

Evan is a nice enough guy, and a pretty good Doctor. I think you were introduced through mutual friends (me too. Different friend, I'm sure, mine played guitar with him in some band.) I've been working here for a few years. You told me once that when you came in, just before rounding the corner, you would pause, hoping to see my face. Eventually I just gave you my work schedule, unchangeable, but you didn't change what days you came in. Your fault on that one, love.

He's wearing his Nirvana t-shirt under a corduroy jacket. He is a man's man over-the-hill therapist.

"Are you wearing sweat pants?"

"I'll just keep my legs under the desk, nobody'll notice."

He raises his eyebrow.

"I mean, Dolly. Somebody always notices. Why don't you take the day off? I'll call in Jenny. Maybe go to a spa or something."

"I'm seriously fine. You had a patient die. That's hard, and you're still here."

"Yeah, tough thing. I don't mind. Really. Go on home. I'll call Jenny."

He says it in that tone I hate. He's made up my mind for me.

"Just let me leave one note, and I'll be out of your hair, I guess."

He turns without saying anything else and heads into his office. I pull out our resource book and flip to the page with our list of grief groups. I'm not surprised that Jenny offered one to Katie, I don't like her, but she's thoughtful like that. I photocopy the list, return it quietly to its binder and go home. I guess that's a little evidence that I'm sneaky. 1 point for you.

#

In the movies, groups take place in church basements and rec centers. "Groups" of any kind remind me of the first twenty minutes of Fight Club. It takes me weeks. I shuffle through living rooms and, sure enough, church basements and rec centers. Finding your wife feels impossible, I don't know why I even started looking. But everyday I'm sitting in a different group in a different room, feeling stupid. Do I

look sad enough? The first group I went to I put eye drops in so it'd look like I'd been crying. But most of the people aren't perpetually sad in any case, most people are just normal.

I listen for everyone to go through their names, waiting, just waiting for a Katie. I knew there was a chance she wouldn't come at all, and that she had been like you, someone who didn't keep plans, but I kept going. I had a rotating schedule. If she didn't show up after the first round, the plan was to go through the list in a different order, in case the first time around I had just missed her.

I do find her, though.

The group your wife goes to is in a bookstore. On nights they have group, they close early. The person who works behind the cash register sets up all the chairs and pulls down the blinds at the front of the shop.

I'm not the first to arrive. I don't need to be so conspicuous. I'm comfortable. I know the drill, now.

Your wife is wearing a red sweater with a zipper running up the front. She has it zipped all the way up, the color matches the frames of her glasses. She looks a little awkward in the seat, like a fidgeting child. The glasses don't help. I can't imagine this woman ever doing anything sexual, she seems to exist in some strange vacuum where humans don't like to fuck. When we go around and introduce ourselves, and she comes out as Katie, I can't stop looking at her and her red frames.

The facilitator begins by welcoming new members (me) and asking if anyone wants to talk today. I look at your wife. She looks at the tiles, but then looks up, sweetly at all of the other faces. I imagine

her talking the way that you sometimes did, how you'd get on the phone with me and talk for hours, and hours, and I'd imagine writing down everything you said like a court stenographer, and keeping it in drawers so I'd never lose a syllable.

Megan, the woman talking, went to Costco and they were giving out samples of her dead nephew's favorite yogurt. She says she cried so hard that the person giving out samples, a meek little man with glasses, had to give her a hug. She says, "it was was very moving, to feel like I was heard."

The facilitator thanks Megan. I smile at her. She's sitting beside me so I rest my hand on hers briefly. Megan seems sort of awful. Katie volunteers to speak.

"I've been taking community college classes in art for a while, since before my husband died. My showcase is later tonight," she says. She's got a gap in between her teeth (though you know that, still surprised me). "Nobody is pretending we were perfect, but I really do, uh. I really wish he could be here to see this. I think he'd be proud of me."

The person sitting next to her, a slender man with acne scars, pats her on the knee. She looks around the circle and lets out a breath so forceful it puffs out her cheeks. She looks like a blowfish. Sorry. A cute blowfish.

I told you about a fantasy once where you painted me, remember? After so many calls you run out of things to say. There's only so many times you can say "mine," or "tit," before it gets old. We had made up thousands of scenarios for each other. Once you told me that you wanted just me, for us to say nothing and just drift and touch each

other, staying quiet, just... being together. I couldn't help it, after a few minutes I was down some rabbit hole, and you were a drunk Baseball coach, and I was Geena Davis, and we were on the back of a bus and you had your fingers where they shouldn't be. You had liked it too. But. You sounded sad at the end of it. That's when you asked to meet.

Your wife doesn't stay long after group ends. I watch her, the way she rushes to fill her bag, and push her arms through the sleeves of her coat. Other folks mill about, talk to each other, put their hands on each other's arms. One man tries to approach me. He seems nice enough, young, and handsome – but balding. I'm not interested in that, a sympathy fuck. I slip out just in time to watch your wife get into her car.

I'm not thinking of doing anything weird when I start to follow her. I think you should know that.

When I arrive where Katie is, I wait in the car for an appropriate amount of time (ten minutes). It's a big building that looks like a prison. Definitely a community college (I went to one. I can say that.) Inside, people are drinking boxed wine and eating Ritz crackers. There's laughter. There are paintings up all over the room. Some of them are bad, most of them are, but some of them are actually very good. Your wife is in the corner, chatting to a pretty woman with prematurely grey hair. She's not standing by her paintings. I kinda hope, despite myself that hers are the bad ones. People in the room keep looking at me, but I'm not doing anything, just standing here, nothing illegal about that. I'm searching and searching, and then there's her (your) name, and there's her painting. It's called "August

3rd". It's all blue sky, with deliberate, white, fleeing cranes. I look at it for a long time.

Your wife comes up behind me and says the name I gave in grief group. She asks me why I'm here. Did I follow her?

I tell her yes. I had a long night ahead of me, and I just wanted to be somewhere with people. She had mentioned this in group, and I tagged along, albeit uninvited and moments behind. She loops her arm in mine and leads me to her friend with the greying hair. The top of her head barely reaches my shoulders. Her fingers brush my arm. I like that she's cute and little. You were tall, I think, the thought of you standing beside each other makes me laugh.

She introduces me with the name that I gave in grief group, and calls me a friend, though we've never talked. The nice woman with the greying hair shakes my hand, and asks me if I've ever painted before. I shake my head. Your wife's arm stays looped in mine. I start smiling at the things that the grey haired woman says, but not in a bad way, the grey haired lady is actually pretty funny. She hands me a glass of free boxed wine. No good, your wife says, this is the stuff that smells like a coffin.

I ask her to tell me about the painting.

She seems surprised, but fixes her glasses, and walks towards the Cranes. The painting itself is larger than her. I want to pull her arm from mine, there's sweat where our arms are linked and I feel a little squirmy, but she holds me there.

She painted it five months ago. She had a dream where she woke up, naked in a damp field. Her entire body was surrounded by green, she told me. She had never seen so much green. She stood up and the

grass was up to her calfs, it tickled where it touched. When she looked down at herself, she was pregnant. There were cranes all around her, hundreds and hundreds of cranes, flying in every possible direction. Some were hitting each other mid flight and tumbling to the ground. Others were landing gently on the grass, pecking their beaks to the dirt.

Dreams are not as easy as that. But I liked the bit about the cranes flying into each other; something about that felt honest. I asked her if it meant anything, and she shrugged her shoulders.

"It made a pretty good painting."

That was honest, too.

I remember the first time you came with me. You made this sound, and I'd fail if I ever tried to get it right, or replicate it. I never told you how much I liked it. It's sort of why I kept calling at first, I wanted to hear it again. But every time it was a little lessened, until you had to tell me you had finished for me to know when to stop gabbing.

"When are you headed out?"

"Soonish," she says. She turns behind her and looks at the people gathered near the door, putting on coats. "Why?"

The words are out. I don't mean them, she's not gonna say yes, and I don't really know why they came out at all.

"I was wondering if I could uh stay with you a little longer?"

She untangles her arm from mine and backs away from me.

"Do you have a car?"

I nod.

"Alright, you can follow me."

#

You had money, love. Damn. Explains a lot, to be sure. The floors of your house are polished, the furniture is nice and modern. The back of the living room is decorated with cardboard U-Haul boxes.

"Moving out?"

"No. Just putting things away."

Once we both have our shoes off, she takes off her sweater. She's wearing a white t-shirt underneath. It suits her. I can honestly say I've never seen anyone look that good in a plain t-shirt.

She asks if I would like a drink. She tells me that she has a few nice bottles hidden around somewhere. I ask her if she has any Cabernet Sauvignon. I know that this is your favorite, see? She gestures to a sleek black leather chair in the corner, and I sit down. I run my hand along the arm of your chair. I try to picture you sitting here, in this house.

Your wife returns with the two glasses. She doesn't sit down, instead she leans against her wall and looks at me. She's standing underneath a framed photo of your wedding, the only picture on the wall. I can't make out the details of your face, but you definitely are not that tall. Hey, maybe she was wearing six inch heels. I find that pretty unlikely.

"I don't really know what you want me to say," she says.

She takes off her red framed glasses and twirls them in her hand.

I ask to use her bathroom.

She points down the hallway.

The hallway is long. At the end of it is your kitchen. Half of the lights are out; she must be too short to change them. I walk down

the hall with my hand against the wall, like an explorer. The carpet feels strange under my socks. All the doors are shut except one, but it's not your bathroom, it's your office.

I can't help myself. Your desk is clear except for a shining iMac and two black, plastic squares. Cell phones. I walk towards the desk and pick up the small flip phone. The other is an iPhone, but when I click the home button, it does not wake up. The screen is cracked. The flip phone is still powered on. I am the only name in the directory. Aww. Well. It's nice to know that I was something special, at least. You were stupid to use my full name, though. I guess you weren't all that sneaky, after all.

"Hey."

I turn around. Your wife is standing in the doorway.

"This isn't the bathroom," she says.

I don't respond (calculated — I don't know what kind of shit I'm in) and she continues.

"I guessed it was you. When you wanted to follow me home. I'm not mad at you," she says. "I'm not mad at you. Come sit down."

She pours me a drink, and then another and another.

We sit in silence for an hour, just drinking.

"We don't have to talk about it," I say.

"I don't wanna talk about him, honestly," your wife says. "I'm just enjoying your company. Want something to eat?"

I nod and she brings me an orange. She peels it for me, even. The orange is insanely sweet, and fresh. Instead of sticking slices in my mouth I stick three or four in at a time. The juice is running down my face, but I'm too drunk to care. I know I look ridiculous and for

whatever reason that makes me want to keep doing it. I ask her for another Orange. She comes back with two and this time, I don't let her peel it. I bite into it like it's an apple. I tear into it. My hands are sticky, the juice is getting all over the floor. I'm not looking at your wife but eventually I hear noises from where she's sitting. She's tearing into her orange, too. Ripping it. The juices drip from my face as I watch her, dumbfounded. She pulls a wad of orange peel from her teeth and smiles. I take a bit from the orange she peeled earlier, stick it in my mouth and smile. She snickers in response, and crawls across the floor to me. She crawls behind me and puts her arms around me. She rocks me back and forth, back and forth. Everything smells like oranges, but that's okay. She doesn't mind that my hands are sticky where I'm holding her, she doesn't mind when my body starts to shake.

This is where you go. Cover your ears.

We sleep together in the big bed. In the morning, when we wake up, on top of the covers with our arms wrapped around each other, we laugh. I'm so incredibly hungover she has to walk me to my car.

She gives me a little wave when I pull away. I was thinking about something yesterday, but today it is gone.

I drive home and crawl into bed without turning the lights off. When I dream, I dream I am laying in a parking lot. Grass sprouts from cracks in the asphalt, the asphalt is wet, but I can feel grass against my legs, against your wife's legs, and her leg beside mine. Together we watch as cars flood the lot. They've come to get us. We stand up and turn. People are shouting at us, but we're running, hand

in hand, full on sprinting, Thelma and Louise Style. I guess I've always had a thing for Geena Davis.

Tomorrow, I think I will call again. I'm calling for her.