

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE
Shanna Yetman, Master of Fine Arts, 2012

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English

How do you deal with the biology you are born with; the parents you are given; the religion that is handed to you; and the ideologies you inherit? *Absent Without Leave* is a short story collection that explores the anxiety that erupts when life's natural order fails. The characters in these stories all grapple with someone or something missing in their lives: parents who have chosen work over children, mothers who can't mother, children that never were, and religious beliefs that no longer ring true. There is Olivia Turnbull, a mother, who wonders if her biology has failed her because she cannot bond with her child; Tilda Bond, a ten-year old, who roams the food bank warehouse as her father works to feed the hungry; and Micah Gallivan, a Mormon, who searches for a way to tell his father that he is not going on his mission.

ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE

By

Shanna Yetman

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2012

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2012

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Les Fenêtres Simultanées 1912
by Robert Delaunay



Window

Olivia Turnbull looked out Robert Delaunay's *Window* and saw her reflection. Barely recognizable, but as she meditated on the colors her lips appeared out of the orange, her eyes (although blue) became hauntingly apparent in the yellow. Yes, there she was, staring back at herself—caught in the act of seeing. As though this painting were a real window. She knew the artist liked to play with these themes, but never before had she seen her reflection. This was just a moment in a museum though, and soon she was left with her view of the outside world.

She turned her head slowly to the right side. This time, the orange looked like a sunset. She concentrated on the soft supple-edged orange triangles; noticed the yellow, similar to the swaths of orange composing her sunset at the end of the canvas. The yellow was edgy, poking the orange, pushing it to recede into the linear border. This reminded her of the Grand Canyon. Not the color really, more the way it claimed its shape, delineating itself from the vast expanse before it. Like those canyon cliffs. Olivia wondered if Delaunay had any landscape in mind when he painted this picture. The views outside most of his windows were Parisian cityscapes—some even gently featuring the Eiffel Tower. She'd grown accustomed to meditating on these colors, looking through his windows and creating whatever landscape came to mind.

She shifted her weight. What was she thinking? When the Baltimore Museum of Art announced this Orphism exhibit she'd been overjoyed. Purchased tickets a year in advance and waited patiently. Geometry to meditate on, she'd told her students. She'd even designed a whole course around it, focusing on the techniques of

cubism and the correlation of color and music. But now, standing in front of Delaunay's *1912 Window* all she could see was a vast precipice. Edges on rock faces that led nowhere.

Her students were gone, receded into the background. What lay before her was that frantic fast-paced emptiness of first-time motherhood. That feeling—emptiness—had been shocking to her at first. There was a strange loneliness that accompanied it too. She hadn't really given too much thought to being the primary caregiver of a child, until it was upon her, until the day after she'd left the hospital: Joe's first day back at work.

Emily slept in a co-sleeper next to their bed. Olivia fed her at six, then again at nine. Between nine and ten, Emily was awake and Olivia dressed her, changed her tiny diapers and tentatively touched her. Caressed her small fingers, tickled her toes, kissed her on the cheeks. Her emptiness was growing. Her actions began to feel like an out of body experience. All she could do was go through the motions of what she imagined mothering to be. She wasn't sure she was doing any of it right. Her own mother died before she could remember anything at all about her, leaving Olivia, ultimately, with her paternal grandparents. Her father left early, cracked under the pressure, she told herself now. For the first time in her life she understood her father's compulsion to run away.

During these early days with Emily, Olivia's routine was alarmingly similar. At about ten, Emily took a nap and when they are both up again, Olivia panicked. She had no idea what to do with her child. On that first day, Olivia planned to go to a breastfeeding support group, but she felt paralyzed. She worried. The road,

immediately outside of her house was a busy one—what if somebody hit her? Would she be able to properly secure her child in the car seat? Worries about leaving the house flooded her mind. How was she going to feed the child when the time came? She wondered about taking her daughter to a place where there were other babies. What if Emily got sick and ended up back in the hospital? So, on that very first day, Olivia stayed home, trapped, staring down at her newborn daughter. Watching Emily's eyes flutter open when she was awake, spending a long time trying to figure out the proper positions for breastfeeding. Feeling completely on her own, and wondering how the human race had survived at all, really.

In three weeks' time it wasn't any better. Olivia could leave the house with Emily, but she found herself scared to death to do anything. She would make it to the grocery store only to realize that she felt ill at ease putting the car seat on the shopping cart, worried that even though Emily was strapped securely into both she might fall. Olivia tried to play it cool, but normal every day experiences were becoming impossible. Taking the child to the doctor was even worse. She'd wonder when the ball would drop; when her pediatrician would tell her something was irreversibly wrong with her daughter. Something that would either leave Olivia and Joe grieving for Emily or have Emily strapped to them for all eternity, always a baby, completely incapacitated and devoid of normal human function.

She was defective. Nature could only go so far and her biology created a child, but maybe it couldn't make her a capable caretaker. This idea was new to her. Sometimes she would even let whole sentences form in her mind about this subject, telling herself that she had been wrong. Motherhood did not come naturally. That,

she, a parentless child could never replicate or imitate what came naturally to other families. On those days, she would let herself believe that she could remedy this mistake and save three lives in the process. Of course, as soon as these thoughts came up, she'd guiltily push them back into the farthest corners of her brain, making them inaccessible again. But they'd been resurfacing more lately. And, every interaction with her daughter was becoming panic-laden. She knew she loved her daughter. Her consuming anxiety about parenting revolved around love and was about not knowing how to go on if her daughter were to die, especially if she were somehow negligent and responsible for this death. And since right now she was a stay-at-home mom and always with her daughter, this worry seemed like a future-reality to her. This panic always rang in her ears. *Oh my God what if she dies, what if she dies. I don't know what I'll do if she dies. I don't know what I'll do.*

What she missed most was the ease of painting—that self-assuredness that came with knowing exactly what to do. She hadn't picked up a paintbrush in months. In fact, she'd almost forgotten what it felt like. The smell, the bristle tips dipping into the paint, the intense high she'd have for days when she got it right. To be able to perfectly replicate an image from her head onto canvas was satisfying. But, what she needed was that up-at-all-hours-of-the-night-rush of discovery. She wanted her half-known world.

She examined Delaunay's shapes once more. In reality, all she saw were a bunch of formless half circles, triangles, angular round lines and solid colors. Some window, she thought. She'd hoped that a little time away from her daughter would erase these thoughts. But, she supposed these feelings would never go away.

She moved away from Delaunay's window. She remembered the other reason she liked museums: the controlled, slow-moving crowd. Olivia often pretended to look at a work of art, using it as a guise to stare at strangers. There weren't many places where people were just given permission to gaze. For her, people-watching was only a natural extension of viewing artwork. She enjoyed examining people's features and behaviors and fantasizing about their lives. Some days, her observations would make it into her journals. This happened a lot when she was viewing abstract or modern art. After a time, her eyes would wander and she would look beyond the painting or sculpture. In those moments, she would often meld the works of art into the people she saw. Sinewy, pointy-nosed women would become Degas' ballerinas or Miro's sculptures. It was a game for her, something to occupy her mind.

She played this game now. The room was white with hardwood floors that crankily announced the presence of each visitor. It was one of those middle rooms in a museum, containing entrances on two of the four sides. Most people entered and exited by following the natural flow of the exhibit, but some always moved against the grain. She chose to focus her eyes on that exit, the exit through which people would be pushing their way into the room. They would be seeing the exhibit backwards, upside down, even. She moved to a cushiony sofa in the center and let her eyes follow the floor to the edge of the white walls. This was where the security guard stood.

The guard was dressed in a museum uniform, a nicely pressed blue jacket and beige slacks. He wore a wire that connected the ear piece on his right ear to the radio at his side. He was standing still, but shifting uncomfortably on his heel. To Olivia, he

looked like he had to go to the bathroom. His nose was flat and his eyes barely registered the people in the room. Occasionally, he would nod to a visitor and only once did she see him leave his post to tell someone they were standing too close. Most of the time, he would play with his hands, and pull out what looked to be a photograph. Each time he did this he smiled and tapped on it with his forefinger. Then, he would look up, look around, and slip the picture into his rear pocket.

Olivia wished she could see the guard's picture. She wanted to move behind him so the next time he'd pull out the photo she'd be there to see it with him. She decided against this. Observation wasn't meant to be interactive, but it could be imaginative. She wondered who was in the photo. She imagined he needed money and the person in the photo was the reason he was working this extra job. A child, perhaps? This guard was confident in his role as a caretaker, eagerly willing to make the sacrifices that came with parenthood. So, she pretended that every fifteen minutes or so this guard took out a picture of his 9-year old son, Mikhail. The guard was Eastern European, so his son's name came easily enough to her. Being a single dad was tough, but certainly worth it. A child, in his mind, was reason enough to do anything.

Olivia thought about her own life. Being a full-time mother, disappearing into your child for the better part of twenty years seemed like a blessing—a purpose, even. When Emily was growing inside of her, she imagined herself drinking coffee with other mothers, sharing recipes or pediatricians, taking Emily to play groups, yoga and story time while Joe was around on weekends and evenings. She hadn't really

comprehended the reality of it all. The complete and utter panic that came with the weight of another human being.

Olivia decided it was time to go. If she was lucky, she'd have a couple of hours at home by herself before Joe and Emily finished their daddy-daughter day. She left the museum through the double doors near the visitor's entrance and was struck by the bright, cold day. The wind pressed harshly against her body, piercing her dry skin. The cold air caused her hands and face to redden. She'd planned to walk the fifteen or so blocks from the BMA to her home, stopping for lunch along the way. Now, she wasn't sure she could make it. The wind made her nose run and she couldn't feel her face. This momentary numbness coupled with the nerve-damage she'd experienced as a natural complication to her C-section made her think of death. To feel absolutely nothing, no pain, no tingling sensation to remind her of her physical self, was a great relief. If she poked her abdomen or rubbed her cheeks right now she couldn't even be sure she existed. Or at least there was no physical notion of her existence. With her head towards the ground she walked forward.

Olivia stepped off the curb to a loud honk and a nerve-jolting knock to her body. This hard blow left her entire left side screaming—taking her numbness away. Her left hand hit a car hood, smacking it, and almost upon impact began to swell. She found herself twisted on top of a sun faded 1987 Toyota Camry Station Wagon. Her parents stared out at her through the grainy glass window of the car. She had to shake her head to get rid of the momentary vision—to realize that it was her imagination. Of course these people weren't her parents. By the time her parents were in their thirties her mother was dead and her father momentarily saddled with baby Olivia. But, the

likeness was uncanny. She could see the woman's face clearly now, and this woman, with her long nails and wild eyes, was gesturing at Olivia. As if this accident were Olivia's fault.

Olivia began to remove herself from the car hood, but the painful jagged rage that had been stirring inside stopped her. She could feel the rocky feeling in the pit of her stomach, pressing through her damaged nerves. Sharp and angular like the Delaunay landscapes she'd seen this morning. The feeling of a serrated knife cutting through her began to move up her stomach, through her esophagus, past her voice box until finally it reached the inside of her mouth and she could feel a thousand little spikes of steel in her throat.

She faced the car window she sat in front of and screamed. At first, she put both hands on her face inadvertently mimicking Edvard Munch's famous painting. But then her scream became something else entirely. Her throat began to pop, and with each rattle of her voice her left hand, already swollen, clenched into a fist and she hit the hood of the car. Pop. Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop. Bang. She was quickly losing her voice, losing the momentum in her throat, but her left hand was still moving. Fist tight, each pound on the metal of the Camry was life-giving. Her knuckles began to bleed and her index finger became more mangled and misshapen with every powerful hit to the car.

Finally, she stopped. She stopped when she could not take it anymore, when the pain in her hand, the pain radiating from the left side of her body, from her fingers up her wrist and arm was too much to bear. She could feel the reverberations of her pounding on the car hood in her shoulders and neck. The couple stared back at her

through the window. The woman's pale face was made brighter by the mascara streaks marking her cheeks. Her lips were red and when she frowned Olivia could see tiny cracks in her skin. Her eyes searched Olivia's face—asking Olivia if it was okay to come out. This notion, this searching made Olivia laugh. She felt calm, happy; the pain reaching through the left side of her body took away all that terrible numbness she'd been feeling. Olivia moved off the car to sit on the curb.

It took only ten minutes for her couple to come out of their car. In that time, Olivia sat and watched the colors reshape and form on her hand. She could barely move her fingers and when she tried there was an exquisite, luscious pain that ran through her, making her tingle. She kept this pain close to her, and when it began to subside she'd move her fingers as hard as she could. Her hand was bright red, cut, ruined. There was such effort in its architecture and construction, tendons to muscles to bones to fingers, fingernails and cuticle beds. So carefully tended to and protected. She thought about her daughter, the hands she had created, the hands that, with proper nutrition and care, would grow long and thin like her own.

What if Emily grew up perfectly healthy? What if there were no physical ailments—if she grew up smart, doing perfectly well in school, but was unhappy anyway? What if she grew up with intermittent moments of complete and utter emptiness, like Olivia had? And if she couldn't invent her own happiness, couldn't decide what parts of the world to be happy with and what parts to ignore, her life would be unmanageable. Olivia couldn't bare this responsibility. That was just too much. To take such careful care as a parent and still have a child who wasn't happy.

I cannot be this child's mother. She turned her hand over slowly, watched the blood drip onto the ground. She said these words louder. "I cannot be this child's mother." And again, "I cannot be this child's mother."

"What?" Her couple was finally out of the car.

She had the momentary compulsion to tell her couple everything, to show her true vulgar self to them. To be both judged and condemned. They would be perfect too. This couple already reminded her of what her parents could have been had their lives taken a more normal path. It started with the physical-likeness, but after that, she began searching for other traits they might share with her parents. The woman might well have been her mother at age thirty. She had the same dark features and pale face she'd always imagined in her mother based on the couple of photographs Olivia had. The man had that same dull frantic expression that she'd pinned to her father. His eyes looked blankly into the world, but those eyes still held shadows of light that reflected their former curiosity.

She stood up and walked towards her couple. She held her left wrist up like a defiant shield. The woman stepped back.

"Help." Olivia's first words to her couple surprised even her. Her voice was meek, reflective of her utter exhaustion. She tried again, hoping to ask this couple why they didn't stop, why they hadn't seen her. Why, they'd almost run over their daughter. But she knew that would be going too far; reaching into the recesses of her muddled mind and pulling out broken pieces that even she couldn't make sense of. She'd never felt crazy before, but now every thought she had seemed ludicrous. These people as her parents, her abandonment of Emily, the thought of starting over

without a child. She wondered if she was working backwards in some sense; making herself crazier than she actually was because her last thought was so logical, made so much sense to her, was the only real solution that existed. But she was wrong to even think about leaving her child, wasn't she? These are thoughts that people weren't allowed to have—thoughts that were shamefully discarded before even fully forming. So she must be crazy, she told herself. So, she might as well be crazy.

She spoke again. Repeated the same word to her couple. She showed them her hand. They didn't know what she was asking, really. Had no idea that she didn't care about her hand, no knowledge that when she was asking for help she wanted an absolution of sorts—something much greater than these two could ever give her. Instead, the woman took off her sweatshirt and wrapped Olivia's hand expertly in it. The man reached into his coat pocket and pulled out some Tylenol. His hand was unsteady and stiff as he offered her the pills.

The man proceeded cautiously with Olivia. She'd never been treated so carefully by anyone, never warranted it, really. He was much bigger than her, but she supposed in her anger she'd revealed something to them. She took the Tylenol. She wanted to ask him if he had something stronger, but that didn't seem appropriate. Her voice was hoarse and she was tired. She sat back down on the curb.

The woman spoke first. "You should go to the hospital." She pointed to Olivia's pinky and index finger. "Your fingers are broken." Olivia blinked at her, hoping that was a response enough.

The man's face was scrunched up and he squinted to shield his eyes from the sun in front of him. His voice was sharp and high-pitched, surprising for his appearance. Not at all like her father. "We didn't see you."

"I know." Olivia touched her tightly wrapped hand.

Her couple exchanged a glance at each other. The man looked at Olivia. "What?" His voice was tense, loud and angry.

His companion moved her head back, like a clucking chicken. "Robert." She clucked her head. "A little rude?"

"Anna. What do you want from me?"

Anna moved away from Robert and towards Olivia. "The hospital's on our way out of town."

Hospital? She wasn't ready to go to the hospital, wasn't ready to admit that her anger and anxiety were more than a small break in her demeanor, instead of the fault line it was becoming. She still wanted to be on one side of that fault line—the side that safely contained her good moral judgment. She knew this was rapidly slipping away. But then, she paused. She realized they weren't talking about her mental state. They were concerned about her hand.

She shook her head at the couple. "No."

Anna frowned. She moved closer to Olivia.

"Look, you hit me with your car." Olivia paused on that point for emphasis and noticed that both Robert and Anna winced, "I want to go home."

Her couple began to confer. Anna was emphatic, shaking her head, waving her arms; while Robert would carefully consider each of Anna's statements and then

nod or shake his head in response. Finally, Anna gestured for Robert to get back in the car. She turned to Olivia and opened the car door, “Get in. It’s the least we can do.”

Olivia wanted to say no; to turn around and walk away. But it was cold, and as the wind hissed in her ear, she heard herself agree to the ride home. Sometimes, she did this. She agreed too quickly and then regretted her decision.

“Where to?” Drivers were honking for the three of them to pull over, move to a side street, do something, do anything, except stop in the middle of the road.

“Cathedral and Eager. Around there would be great.”

Robert nodded. Olivia got a whiff of the car even before she stepped inside. The Camry smelled of dog and bourbon. Dirty dog prints stained the interior. She used her good hand to brush off the dog hair before she sat down. When she sat her whole body sagged, and as she leaned against the back seat, the pain of her hand became so intense her ears began to ring.

She made a sucking sound, and Anna turned back to face her, “You’re sure you don’t want to get that looked at?”

Olivia shook her head, “Later.” She sucked in some more air, paused to look at Anna, “It’s comforting.”

Anna frowned. “What?”

“The pain,” Olivia shrugged and held on tighter to her left hand. Too much, her head began to spin. She loosened her grip.

Robert stopped the car at the light on 28th street. Olivia felt her body make impact with the cushioned seat in front of her. She should put on her seatbelt, but she

didn't want to let go of her left hand. He looked in the rearview mirror at her. "You okay? You don't seem okay."

"Robby?" Anna's voice attempted a whisper, but of course the car was too small for that.

"What?" Robert began weaving in and out of traffic and looked at Olivia through the mirror once more. "You're not going to go on a murderous rampage and kill us are you?"

Olivia smiled, feeling shy and small. She sat up and arched her back against the seat, like when she had indigestion. "No. One rampage a day is good enough."

This made Anna laugh.

The car was silent and Robert drove faster than was necessary. Probably for a quick exit. Olivia watched as landmarks she was very familiar with sped past her. There was the gas station off of Mount Royal and St Paul, taxi cabs and busses lined up near the train station, that strange half man-half woman interlocked monument with its bright purple heart. Olivia loved that sculpture, not for the design, but for what it meant: an arts district finally coming into its own.

Art, wasn't that how she'd started the day? Wasn't that why she was here to begin with? The Delaunay exhibit seemed so long ago.

Suddenly, she felt like it was important to know if her couple was at the Orphism exhibit. Had they seen Delaunay's paintings? They'd hit her as they were coming out of the BMA's parking lot so it was quite possible. She started to tap Anna on the shoulder, but just cleared her throat instead. "Did you see the Orphism exhibit?"

No answer.

Olivia tried again, “You know the Delaunay exhibit, the BMA? You were driving out of there.”

Robert finally registered Olivia’s voice. He stopped at a light and turned to her. “Yup. Delaunay’s my namesake. My mother loved him.”

Oh. So they had been at the exhibit. “What’d you think?”

Anna put her hand on Robert’s knee. She momentarily adjusted the rearview mirror so she could see Olivia through it. Strange, Olivia thought, why doesn’t she just turn around? But when Anna looked at Olivia through the rearview mirror it made Olivia look at her eyes. Green, something she hadn’t noticed before. Reflective surfaces, just like Delaunay.

“We bought three tickets. The third one was supposed to be for his mother.” Anna gestured to a cake box that Olivia saw on the floor. Olivia looked at the plain white box wrapped loosely with string.

Anna didn’t stop to let her reflect on these facts. “She loved to talk about his windows.” She turned to Robert and he readjusted the rearview mirror before driving on. “What did she say?”

Olivia shifted her legs to give the cake box Mom a wider berth. She waited to hear what Robert had to say, but her ears were burning and she began to sickly examine the box, looking for visible signs of ashes or bones—almost hoping to see it, really.

Robert spoke, “That sometimes Delaunay’s paintings could be so transparent you might actually catch a glimpse of yourself. Like a window.” Olivia looked at the

back of Robert's head. She noticed that he was balding in the back, his blonde hair receding into nothingness at the tip of his head.

“Did she say what would happen if you saw your reflection?” She wanted Robert to give her some meaningful answer—something that might give her life a purpose other than her daughter. This, of course, was absurd.

Robert laughed. “She did. Actually, she used to say that if you saw yourself through his window and felt peaceful your life was going in the right direction.”

“What if you weren't?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don't know. I could never see my reflection at all.”

This time it was Anna who laughed. Olivia was close enough to smell the mint she'd been sucking on. “I saw your reflection,” she joked, “it looked great.”

Robert playfully poked Anna. “It's just modern art anyway. Isn't it supposed to make you laugh or think about the absurdity of life?” He turned to face Olivia, stopping the car. “We're here.”

She was surprised by this, hadn't even noticed that she and her couple were finally at the corner of Cathedral and Eager. She got out of the car and shut the door. She was about to walk away, but stopped and faced her parents again. “I saw myself today.”

They both looked confused. She readjusted her statement, shifted from her left to right foot. “I saw myself in his window, you know, Delaunay's window.”

Her mother played along, “How'd you look?”

“Not happy.” They didn’t look as surprised as she’d expected them to be. She supposed it was because happy people don’t bang their hands into a bloody pulp on top of their parent’s car.

“Why not?” Her father asked out of genuine concern.

Olivia attempted to smile, but it was more in her head than anything else. Her face didn’t really move at all. “Is your mother really in that box?” She aimed the question at Robert, turning back to the reality at hand.

Robert gave a perfunctory nod and frowned, “We’re going on a road trip.” He paused, “To spread her ashes all over the American West. You know. The Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Lake Tahoe, the Wasatch Range, the Pacific Ocean. Everywhere she loved.”

“That’s a long trip.” A lot of effort too, Olivia thought. “Why?”

“She was my mother.” He shrugged, “It’s just what you do.”

“What was she like?” Olivia knew she was pushing the limits of intrusiveness, but her couple still played along.

“She was just there. You know like a mother.” This struck Olivia as ridiculous and insulting— that somehow women ceased to be when they became mothers, existing solely for their children from then on. And that once you cease to be, you enter the exalted status of motherhood; a place where your children feel obliged to revere and honor you, even after you’re dead. Because as mothers most women’s lives become so small and self-contained that their children are the only ones who can even remember them properly. Absurd. Didn’t they realize that some women just

have babies? All it took was one simple act, no experience necessary. Motherhood shouldn't come with so many unintended consequences.

But then he continued, "She should have been a Park Ranger. She was for a little while after we all left. She would take us on these epic camping trips. For weeks, really, during the summer. We'd fish when we could, eat at the National Parks, grill over the open fire. She loved the West. Loved the emptiness. She used to drive us all the way out from Baltimore to Arches National Park in Utah. It was straight through, no dilly dallying. After my brother and I could drive, we didn't even stop."

"What did you do when you got there?"

"Well, she had these crazy back country camping passes. So we'd camp right in that Goblin Valley, as soon as you got in. Flat and open, full of cactuses."

Robert laughed. "We'd leave the car at the visitor center and then be on our own. Those rock faces were like her home. She was so comfortable there."

Olivia thought about her own experience with the West. It would be a good place to start over: canyons, vast expanses, nothingness. When she was a girl, she had tiptoed to the very edge of the Grand Canyon during a walk on the Southern Rim Road. The buses traveling along the road got close to the edge, teetering only yards away from the cliffs. But it hadn't been close enough for her. At her first chance, she'd jumped off the bus and ran towards the abyss. The way she darted towards the vast opening had frightened her grandmother. She remembered watching the hawks as they let the wind push them over the ridges of the canyon. Wobbly birds that seemed so graceful when they caught the right wind-gust. She wanted to join them.

“I just had a baby.” Olivia blurted out, responding to Robert’s question from minutes ago. She thought back to Delaunay’s picture. There had been a magnificent reddish brown swath, really redder than brown which sat across the canvas from the yellow that had so mesmerized her. Perhaps she should have meditated on that color more. Earth mother, maybe that edgy yellow was making her impulsive and crazy. She shouldn’t really blame the painting though, her inadequacies were just bubbling up, everywhere. She thought about the Grand Canyon. The mesas would be blanketed with a small layer of snow this time of year. It would be nice to paint.

“I hate it, I can’t do it.” She could feel her words prick the air around them. She felt disoriented, like an abstract painting, she was composed of too many messy lines and bleeding colors. Her couple wouldn’t know what to make of her. So she kept talking. She told them about her own painting, and her first morning alone with Emily. She told them about this morning. How even still, almost a month into having a child, she had no idea what to do with her baby.

To this, Anna stopped her, “They’re really just peanuts at the beginning. You can do whatever you normally do.”

Robert nodded, “Go back to painting. Set up an area where you can put her. Emily, right?”

Olivia nodded, but Anna spoke again, “You know my sister has two kids and she told me all you need is a routine.”

Robert butted in again. “Or you could get up in the morning and paint. Maybe your mother-in-law or your husband can take her for a couple of hours.”

These were such reasonable solutions being thrown out at her by perfect strangers on a street corner in Baltimore. As if anyone could come up with solutions to her problem, as if she just needed to talk it out— to make some logistical life adjustments to her schedule, and everything would be okay. None of the answers, of course, dealt with her emptiness.

More honking. Robert turned on the Camry's hazard lights and pulled up closer to the curb, startling Olivia. In fact, almost hitting her with the car again. But she readjusted and walked alongside the car for a second or two. Didn't really stop talking either.

So then Olivia told them how she felt. She told them about worrying if Emily grew up perfectly healthy, but sad and worrying about Emily getting sick or dying.

They both brushed this off as being typical parental worries, nothing out of the ordinary; something you just eventually deal with or try not to think about. They were starting to get fidgety, looking at each other, becoming more abrupt in their responses. But still, they talked to her.

"You know what I think you have," it was Anna again, "postpartum depression. Your hormones are all out of whack. You should definitely go to the doctor."

"I don't think that's it." Olivia looked down at her hand; it had begun to bleed again. "I think I made a mistake."

"Why did you have Emily?" Robert was uncomfortable—tapping his foot on the brakes and gas—making the car move forward ever so slightly then stopping.

Olivia had ceased holding onto the car, figured at some point she would say something and he would just close the doors and drive away.

“Because I thought it would come naturally.”

It was Anna who finally shut down the conversation. Olivia supposed she was afraid of what would come next, not willing to be complicit in orphaning any child.

“It comes with time,” Anna turned to Robert. “We should go.” Then she turned to Olivia, “You know, you guys will grow into each other.”

And with that, Robert shut his car door, rolled up his window and merged into traffic as quickly as possible, leaving Olivia alone in the middle of the street.

She never did go to the hospital to have her hand looked at, and now, two months later, the bones were healing crookedly. Her pinky and index finger were permanently misshapen, which pleased her. She liked the idea of having a mark on her body to remind her of the past. She was thankful that she was right handed, because it was very hard to hold anything at all with her left hand. She'd spent the last two months watching Emily grow, looking for her first smile and those more intentional gestures with her hands and feet. She'd begun painting again— and each day when she got up at four or five in the morning to paint—she replayed that conversation with Anna and Robert over in her head. Each time she thought about it, she would tell them something different, something more honest and pointed. She would tell them about the empty flat feeling framed by perpendicular lines and tiny arcs. She would tell them the truth about looking into Delaunay's window. She

would tell them she was afraid of being a mother—of the mistakes she would make when somebody else’s life was involved and of the art she wouldn’t paint and the things she wouldn’t do because she was too busy tending to a child. She would tell them she’d looked in his window and saw her mistake. So, her life become like one long interlude; even when she was staying she knew she was leaving.

The clock next to her read 10 p.m., and it was time for Emily’s last feeding. She fed Emily expertly and quickly. The baby attached instinctively to her nipple. As Emily nursed, Olivia couldn’t help but play with her hands, interlocking her fingers with Emily’s. She’d gotten in the habit of tickling her toes too; the child would almost immediately fall asleep anytime she nursed.

She shifted Emily from her right to her left side. At this moment, it didn’t seem so difficult to imagine staying with her. Introducing Emily to solid foods, seeing her toddle around, watching her go to pre-school and kindergarten. They were only this small and incapacitated for such a short time. Very soon, every day would be different. Olivia touched Emily’s cheeks and straightened her small tuft of hair. She wondered how long it would take her breasts to dry up—for them to forget that they were supposed to be feeding a child. She’d already experienced breast engorgement and it was painful. In a day or two, she knew her breasts would be leaking hard rocks—a fitting punishment for a mother who was about to walk away from her child.

She put Emily back in her co-sleeper. Olivia was ready, but Joe was in bed next to her. He hadn’t even stirred while she was nursing, probably because he’d gotten up early last night with Emily. They’d been splitting the late-night feedings so each of them could get extra sleep. Now, he was sleeping in a heap of disarray. His

glasses were still on, tilted to one side and his computer sat on top of his lap. She picked up his laptop and moved it to the dresser. Then, her hands reached for his face to remove his glasses. He was always doing this, sleeping with a perfectly good, expensive pair of frames. She paused; this was no longer her problem. More importantly, she shouldn't wake him. She should leave. She'd already withdrawn the cash she would need, and packed enough clothes for a couple of days. Anything else she could get when she reached Arizona. When that ran out, she would figure out what to do next.

But she couldn't help herself. She reached towards Joe's face and gently began to remove his glasses. He had a pointy European nose—just enough of a tip to kiss. She lifted the glasses from the bridge of his nose and as soon as she did that, he moved his head towards her and opened his eyes.

“What are you doing?” He shifted in the bed and began to sit up.

“Go back to sleep. You fell asleep with your glasses on, again.” Her voice was calm, although she was jittery inside.

He gave her a half sleepy smile with squinty eyes, “Did you feed Emily?”

“Yup. She should be good until 3 a.m. or so. There are some bottles in the fridge.”

“You're so good.” Joe rolled over onto his stomach and patted the bed next to him. “Where are you going?” he mumbled into his pillow.

“I can't sleep. I'm going to paint.”

His head shot up off the pillow. She turned to him.

“Can you turn the light off in the hallway on your way out?” His face was back in the pillow.

She nodded.

Olivia was dressed underneath the robe she wrapped herself in, so it only took her a couple of minutes to gather her things and leave the house entirely. When she left, the door slammed a little louder than she would have liked, and for a moment, she thought she heard Emily whimper. It was soft and barely audible. A sigh, a breath. Perhaps, Olivia’s imagination entirely. She was outside when she heard it, so she figured it was probably in her head.

The walk was brisk and exhilarating and left her eager to see more clear skies. She would catch a taxi cab to the airport and then wait until the morning to catch her flight. She hoped to be in the sky by the time Joe awoke. She looked up, watching the stars in Orion’s belt as they followed her along her journey. It was cold, probably in the teens, and there was a light dusting of snow on the ground. She noticed her footsteps as they turned down one side street and then along another.

The snow on the ground was untouched and her shoeprints left a definitive mark. For a minute or two, she walked stepping down on the ground as hard as she could—leaving a good, solid footprint in her wake. She did this numerous times with first her right and then her left foot. When she pressed one foot down hard, she found she was using her whole body. Her knees bent from the pressure of her foot slamming down; her arms clenched tightly by her side and even her face was contorted. With these few steps, she used every muscle she had.

She wondered what Joe might think; if he would see these footprints and realize they were hers. She wondered if he would know what they meant.

Small Bites

Thanksgiving

The late afternoon daylight is covered by a thin fog that ebbs like ocean surf. It moves swiftly over the rock face and then dissipates into nothingness as it hits warmer air. Celia watches the fog from a small dining room table at her sister's house in the Shenandoah Valley. She cannot see the fog completely, because every so often her left eye spasms and she blinks uncontrollably. She cups her hand over her eye in an attempt to calm the spasm. This stressed-induced twitch returns to her when she spends any time at all with her parents. She arrived with her daughter Penny in Front Royal on Tuesday from Washington D.C., and already she has begun her other family-induced habit— eating. And yet, she has spent hardly any time at all with her parents. Tuesday and Wednesday were spent with her sister Natalie.

“Why can't we just call this Thanksgiving?” Celia took a long sip of her beer and peered over at her sister, “Look, I'm breaking bread with my family.” She gestured over to Penny who was playing with fuzz on the floor. “And, no nervous twitch.” She stared, unblinkingly into her sister's eyes.

Natalie laughed. “Because that's not how it's done. There's a turkey, some stuffing, a whole lot of alcohol, and we get to sit in awkward, uncomfortable silence with everyone we love.”

“Love is relative,” Celia reached over for another slice of pizza.

“What does that even mean?” Natalie was tall and thin and peckish with her food, so she was currently blotting off her pizza's extra grease.

This annoyed Celia. She and her sister had such vastly different approaches to food. Natalie seemed to get comfort out of a more restrictive diet, while Celia used food as an emotional crutch, to provide unending hours of comfort and entertainment when she was writing her romance novels or parenting her daughter. She was aware of the stereotype she was creating for herself: the fat fantasist who was unlucky in love. But, she corrected herself; her love life was her choice. Greg, Penny's father, had proposed marriage to her, still adored her even after all the weight she'd put on, would marry her in a hot second. Celia was the one to say no. He'd wanted her to stop writing romance novels and write something more literary, like she'd done in college.

Celia took a large emphatic chomp out of her slice. "Who orders pizza and doesn't eat the grease?" She chewed loudly and thought about her mother, Maya. Her mother always sided with Greg, urged Celia to make her work more meaningful, more like Maya's own research in math. When Maya would say this to Celia, Celia would roll her eyes. How useful could the obscure math her mother was working on ever be? At least Celia was making people happy, and she wasn't spending any real time away from her daughter. Maya's research had taken her away so often that the girls had dubbed her Missing Maya. She'd never wanted to use the words missing mama, because it seemed too sad. And, the truth was that Maya had never actually abandoned them. She'd just been chronically absent in their lives—except on Sundays and holidays.

Celia spoke. "Do I love her because she's my mother? Because she's brought me into the world and," Natalie interrupted, "has the scars to prove it." They both laughed.

“Yup. She might as well be a stranger on the street for all I care. Some days, that’s how much I like her. As much as I like every other damn stranger,” Celia paused for emphasis, “which isn’t very much.”

Natalie shrugged, “A little dramatic don’t you think? She was always home on Sundays.”

“To harp on our eating habits.” Celia quickly finished her slice. “The University got her the other six nights,” she pointed to the breadsticks in the corner. “Pass those bad boys over.”

“And our school work, and our outfits. Sometimes, I thought she was competing with us.” Natalie tossed her a breadstick and took a sip of her own beer. “What can you do? She’s not the worst mother.” She thoughtfully considered her next statement, “Look at it this way; she’s so consumed with her work that she barely interferes, anymore. Now, we’d probably need help with a damn good math problem to get her attention.”

Celia laughed and rolled her eyes, “Or our shoes.”

She spoke again. “She’s so weird. I remember when we were little I would read those books about your teacher being a space alien and for a while I became convinced that this was exactly what was wrong with our mother.”

“That she was a space alien?” Natalie reached over to Penny to pull some fuzz out of her mouth, “Would explain some things.”

Of course, Celia and her sister always have these conversations about their mother. And Natalie has never been as cynical as Celia. She was, just by her very nature, more forgiving. Plus, Natalie is not a mother. It is just her in this fantastically

big house. But she is wrong, Celia thinks. When you have children you sacrifice for them, you don't always put your own needs first. This is also why, lately, she has been rethinking Greg's marriage proposal. Wondering if two parents who live together are better than two parents who live apart. No, this is not true. Penny will appreciate her choices later. She can be Penny's superhero, an attentive mother with a satisfying career and no real male interference. These are the types of characters she creates in her romance novels anyway: strong female protagonists with big sexual desires and ample control over their lives. She creates beautiful princesses with the ability to rescue the vulnerable men in their lives.

Now, she is back in the present. Her parents are here and her mother is cooking. The simple fact that her mother can cook amazes Celia. But she supposes that it is analytical enough for her mother—full of precise measurements and mathematical equations when you are reducing or doubling the recipes. Easy stuff that her mother can do automatically. Something that Celia has to write down and double check before she even begins cooking.

Celia looks down at her sister's table. The table is worn, full of knots from old wood. She can see impressions from math assignments. Her mother's handwriting with scribbled signs and numerals, pressing down hard on the paper through to the oak. Explaining to her daughters everything she knows about numbers. Sines, cosines, multivariable calculus, equations and proofs are all unproblematic for her.

Celia uses her index finger to trace over an equation that contains a square root sign with both x and y variables. *Was that a polynomial? Binomial?* She couldn't remember. She never finished her college calculus course; it had moved quickly over

her head, and she couldn't bring herself to ask her mother for help. She'd taken the incomplete and chalked it up to another difference between the two of them.

Celia's hands are neatly manicured with pink polish, and her fingers catch her attention. I am Miss Piggy, she thinks. There is no definition in her hands or anywhere else on her body. She cannot find the place where her wrist once was, cannot even feel the wrist bone. Just globs of flesh signifying where her bones connect to each other. Maybe a more restrictive diet would help.

She rises from her chair to reach for the bottle of Chianti that has been placed just out of reach by her mother. Her hips hit the table, and it sways, more so than usual. Her pants are tight, and the chairs and table are too small. She has grown wider in the past few years, jumping from a size 10 to a 22, partly because of her recent success as a novelist—those parties, that food, the traveling, and partly because of her new role as a mother. She is overwhelmed by her physical appearance, but finds it strangely comforting. She has somehow, for god knows what reason, begun to model her current life in direct opposition to her mother. She is fat and frazzled while her mother is thin and meticulous. There's more to this though, her mother, if it weren't for the cracked family she created in the wake of her career, might be a character she'd invent on her pages. She is strong willed, luxuriously thin and beautiful, and a mathematical genius. These are the types of attributes Celia likes to imbue her women with. Brains and beauty are an ideal combination. She feels like an ancient Greek sculptor, well aware of the ideal proportions that create beautiful pieces of art; only her work is more practical than art— its fantasy.

She begins to top off her glass with wine when something metallic catches her eye. Celia recognizes the silver foil and the bold cursive script. It is her novel, her first published book, and it is doing the work of balancing the far right leg of the table.

“Real-ly?” She hopes that her voice will carry to the kitchen. Celia pours more wine into her glass and drinks quickly. The version of the book that is propping up her sister’s furniture is the hard cover. She snatches it from underneath the table and watches as the place settings dip unevenly towards the right side of the table. She wishes that each plate and glass would slowly teeter towards the edge and crash to the floor. The title of her book, *Dig Through My Heart*, and that shiny purple metallic cover brought such joy to Celia. As corny as it sounds, that book was her baby, just as legitimate in her mind, as her ten-month old daughter. She is not interested in writing literature, in agonizing over every word and unraveling the world and reinventing it, or not, through character, narrative, time and space, and anything else those writers like Robert Coover and William Gass could think of. She doesn’t want her plots to unravel into reality. With Celia, there is no playing with prose, no Vito Acconci like architecture on the page. Words and images mean exactly what they mean, with no underlying symbolism or literary trappings. She loves writing romance novels, indulging in every ridiculous female fantasy is surprisingly satisfying.

She looks around the room. Her sister’s house, especially the dining room, is awash with books. There are many other sturdy books that could prop up wobbly tables. She eyes one of the civil war books by Shelby Foote, why couldn’t they use that? Celia sees Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or better yet *Anna Karenina*, notices

Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. For heaven sakes, Margaret Mitchell even used the manuscript for that book to prop up her dining room table for years. Why not that one? At least she'd set a precedent.

Celia's is considering what book to prop up the table with when her mother walks in. She is wearing an apron that completely covers her short black dress, black nylons and tall red shoes. Around her neck is a white strand of pearls that Celia and her sister chipped in to buy a number of years ago. She looks like a perfect housewife, Celia's target audience. Only, Celia knows better.

Maya places some garlic bread on the table. Celia reaches for a piece, but Maya swats her hand away.

"Ow! You're brutal." Celia reaches back into the bread basket and retrieves a piece, keeping eye contact with her mother while doing so. She has already been chided for drinking too much wine, told to wait until dinner is ready, told not to consume too much too early.

"Save some for dinner," Maya says and then sees Celia holding up her book. "Whatcha doing?" Her tone is playful as if she always jokes with her daughter. Celia notices she isn't really keeping eye contact—a telltale sign of her mother's culpability.

"It's my book." Celia chews the bread, like a cow chews cud, lewdly and purposefully. She tastes the garlic butter on her tongue. It makes her feel better. "It was propping up the table. Who put it here?" She repeats the statement to make sure that it is not lost on her mother.

Maya's manicured hands move inside her apron's pocket. Even through the apron's fabric, Celia can see that they are clenched. "Shoot, Celia. I didn't realize that was yours. I didn't even look at the cover. I just grabbed the closest thing that would work."

She believes her mother. Her mother never pays attention to details when it doesn't surround her work or herself. She wonders which is worse, doing it on purpose, or not noticing at all. Celia reaches for the nearest wine glass. She is ready to drink out of all four of them if she needs too. "Have you read the book?"

Maya nods slowly and then rethinks her gesture and shakes her head. Her blonde hair bounces with her. "I've started it. I'm about 20 pages in, but I did bring it with me. It's interesting."

Celia sighs and takes a sip of her wine. "Jesus, Ma, it's been out for a year. You've only read 20 pages?" She grabs another piece of bread and stuffs the entire piece ferociously into her mouth. She can feel the toasted corners of the bread pinch her gums. She finishes chewing dramatically, "Next time take some care."

She wants to say more, but won't. Her profession and her appearance are the two aspects of her life her mother has the most trouble swallowing, and sometimes she thinks she says enough just by standing in front of her.

"Soon," she says to herself, "I will diet." Not today, though. Today is Thanksgiving, and Celia has already begun to stuff herself silly, eating and drinking through the torturous interactions of family.

She suddenly wishes she were more like the women in her romance novels. A little more self-control would be a good thing. She could be Anna. Anna was by far

her favorite, and it was her story that her editors at the Passionate Pen fell in love with. That story, they told her, was a perfect first book. The others could come later when she had a solid fan base. Anna was an archeology graduate student whose professor, Patrick Callahan was head over heels in love with her because she was his intellectual superior. That story had ended after a raucous sex scene in an excavation site where Patrick and Anna's animated lovemaking uncovered a new species of Homosapien. Of course, Anna was the one to realize it; Patrick had no real idea what he was looking at when he picked up the bone and examined it for the first time. That story was fun to write, but required a little more research than usual to get that lusty archeological scene just right.

“Your child,” both Celia and Maya turn to face Natalie, who is holding Penny as far away as possible. Oh thank god, Celia thinks, somebody other than my mother.

Natalie hands Penny over to Celia, “Take her, she’s toxic.” Penelope is dressed in the red velvet overalls that Celia has bought for the holiday. She puts her arms out wide and smiles when she sees her mother. She almost giggles. Penny’s hair has grown into reddish blonde ringlets that Celia recognizes as her own. The child’s happy personality was Greg’s contribution. It certainly wasn’t Celia’s. Physically the child carries only a few characteristics outside of the hair that Celia sees as her own. Penny’s nose is long and pointy, unlike Celia’s flat button of a nose, and she is incredibly tall for her age, residing somewhere near the ninety-ninth percentile. Celia stopped growing when she was about ten and is only a couple of inches above five feet, herself. However, Penny does have Celia’s gray-blue eyes and short temper.

“Where’s the diaper bag?” Celia takes Penny from her sister and feels relief with her daughter in her arms. Penelope is an entertainer and once she is in Celia’s arms she begins to coo to her. She attempts to bite Celia’s nose, a slobbery welcome kiss.

Mothering for Celia is enjoyable and comforting. She revels in the idea that she is good at being a mother, that she is already more loving and conscientious than her mother ever was. Penny is easy to change, and soon they are both back at the dinner table. The plan is to let her sit in an infant chair for as long as she will take it and then rock her to sleep.

Dinner is ready. There is no turkey; instead it is her mother’s Spaghetti Vongole and mussels. There is not a drop of Italian on either side of Celia’s family, yet they haven’t had a traditional Thanksgiving in years. This is the one meal that Maya has always felt obliged to make for her family. When they were growing up, every other meal was prepared by their father. During those dinners, Celia imagined her mother hunched over her desk in her office at the University of Chicago, scribbling out math equations. Who knew if that image was actually true, but it was one of the few of her mother that stuck with Celia. It suits Celia that this image is completely imagined. On Thanksgiving, a mother appears where one wasn’t, and disappears when the clock strikes midnight. Just like Cinderella.

Maya begins serving the mussels. She is wearing her once-a-year apron, not at all worn, even though Celia cannot remember a time her mother did not wear this same apron. It is a fall apron, white with golden leaves and orange trim. This apron completely covers her short black dress. In her imitation of a mother, she is precise

and meticulous. She counts out how many mussels each person will get. The bowls are huge and her dad gets a heaping portion of the shellfish and white wine sauce. Next is Natalie's serving, just as much as her father. Maya places the final bowl in front of Celia, and it is inconsequential: three or four mussels and a little bit of sauce for a piece of bread.

"Unbelievable," Celia thinks to herself, "has judgment day begun already?"

Natalie looks at Celia, "You weren't hungry were you?" She giggles and spoons some of her mussels into Celia's bowl.

Celia laughs, "Nope. Mom's spot on, as usual. I can't stand those mollusky, grotesque, eat-and-shit-out-of-the-same-orifice creatures." She reaches for a piece of bread.

"Your language Celia. You don't want Penny growing up with swear words. She'll repeat them before you know it," Maya sits down and places her napkin on top of her skinny legs. She has not given herself anything, claiming that cooking has made her full. Self-control, something Celia abhors, thanks to her mother. Maya has nibbled all day on carrots and celery, drank wine and eaten bread.

"You are a rabbit," Celia says to her mother in her head, "pure and simple. A little drunk mean rabbit."

Natalie finishes dividing the mussels evenly between the two plates and gets up to open a bottle of wine. "I think we'll be needing this," she places the bottle between the two of them. "She's on a roll today."

Maya looks at her two daughters. "What? Natalie, you know as well as I do, that Celia doesn't need any more to eat or drink. She's going to die of a heart attack

right here on the dining room table, and we'll all be to blame. Who will raise Penny then?"

Celia imagines herself dead, slumped over her chair, face first in the bread and mussels. "Could be worse," she says and laughs. "At least I wouldn't have to listen to this anymore." She pours a generous portion of wine and offers some to her sister, who nods in approval. Celia then chews on her bread thoughtfully and extravagantly. "Maybe you can take care of Penny when I die, Ma. Third times a charm."

Maya rolls her eyes.

"Stop bickering. I'm getting a headache from all of this." It is Gary, Celia's father.

"And the sleeping giant speaks," Natalie laughs.

Gary has finally sat down at the table. He has been hiding in the television room watching football, just staying out of the line of fire. "One day a year—just one day a year."

"Oh please, Dad," Celia wipes her mouth with her hand.

"Lipstick, Celia," Maya points to her teeth. "You have a smudge on your teeth."

"Thanks Ma," Celia looks at her father and wipes the lipstick off her teeth. "How's that for civility?"

He gives her a you've-got-to-be-fucking-kidding-me look. That face with his green eyes narrowed to slits really made him look old. Way too many wrinkles. Good thing he dyed his hair or he would look his age. Gary put his wine glass up for a toast. "I'm changing the subject. I'd like to make a toast to our budding author!"

“Here, here,” Natalie raises her wine glass.

Gary takes it one step further, “Read us your favorite scene in the novel Celia!”

Penny coos, as if to echo this sentiment.

Celia laughs, she does love the attention. She is not sure what page she should read. She fingers the purple cover of her book. There are plenty of scenes in the novel that further the plot with only a hint of sex. Celia views these scenes as necessary foreplay with the reader. A mention of sexual tension, a desire, a fantasy. She briefly imagines herself reading the part when Patrick kisses Anna on the back of the neck while she is pouring over some site maps. Anna is completely caught off guard, the hair on her arms stands up, his lips tickle her body and very soon they are in the throes of passion. The scene ends with Anna bent over the table crumbling in orgasm after Patrick has forcefully, but gently taken her from behind. She thinks that may be too much for her family.

Celia begins to flip through the pages of her book to find an appropriate scene. There is the scene with the chalk in the empty classroom. No much too risqué. There’s the strawberries at dinner, that’s nice enough, but then that leads to a steamy bathtub scene. Probably not good either. There’s the actual discovery of the Homosapien. That’s kind of interesting, and she can skip over the little bits of sex that peppers that section. She’ll make it PG. It can be dinner table appropriate.

She clears her throat and looks at her family. Her father is smiling mischievously and her sister, who helped Celia edit the book, looks as though she is

running through the scenes of the book in her head deciding which one she might read to her parents if she were Celia.

Celia is about to start, but stops when her mother walks out of the kitchen to bring two plates of spaghetti. Maya places the plates in front of Natalie and Gary. She has heard everything. “Can we do this later? I am not sure any of Celia’s writing should be read at the dinner table, much less on Thanksgiving.”

Celia’s father frowns and picks up his fork to start on the spaghetti. “Oh Maya, it’s only the four of us. It’s fine.” He nods at Celia to give her the go ahead.

Celia begins to read and is caught up in the impromptu editing she must do to make her entire family comfortable. She is wrapped up in her reading and acting out of the scenes she has written that she does not notice that her mother has slipped out of the room to continue serving the meal. She will not realize this until she is done reading, sits down to her meal and wonders who put it there.

Celia does not taste her dinner, chews mindlessly, and eats until she is so stuffed that she must unbutton her pants to sit comfortably.

Dream

That night, Celia dreams. She sees her mother while she is hiking in the National Park. Celia is walking slowly up the granite staircase. She is usually slow on these walks, but she is slower than usual and wonders why. She sees that her shoes are the problem. They are the bright red sandals with two inch heels that she bought for her first book signing. They hurt her feet as she climbs up the mountain, the strap digging into the top of her foot, the heel causing her to twist her feet more than she

should. She keeps moving anyway. Celia hears the soft hum of cicadas and smells organic soap. It is her mother's.

The scent is in front of her, maybe fifty feet or so. The air is crisp, amply filled with oxygen and that sickeningly sweet department store smell. Her lungs fill with a strange mixture of mountain air and her mother's scent.

Her mother is ahead of her and out of reach. She can see her back. Maya's short blonde hair has grown longer since Thanksgiving—the last time Celia has seen her. They have not seen each other in a long time. There is an abrupt crackling sound. She looks down and sees that she has stepped on the spine of her book, forcing the cover and the pages to crumble under her weight.

Celia begins to run, sprinting to catch up with her mother. She recognizes the trail she is on. It is the steep ascent up to Mary's Rock. A trail she has always taken with her father. She knows that her mother is still in front of her because of the smell, but it is becoming hard to see. A cloudy vapor has begun to appear in front of Celia, obscuring her view.

Maya is moving fast. Celia yells to get her attention, but is unable to increase her pace anymore. She yells again and this time she reaches out to her. There she is. Celia touches her head, grabs her hair, yanks her right shoulder. Celia's fingers reach, stretch, grow longer as her mother becomes within her reach. Celia clutches at her shirt, pulling her back so that she will turn around. She wants her mother to look at her.

Celia's mother turns to face her. There are white teeth between gray stricken lips. Her face is long, and Celia can see the filaments that form her muscles through

her translucent skin. She is a half-formed misshapen skeletal version of herself. Celia can see inside of her mouth. The jawbones for chewing, a distended grayish purple tongue, white teeth. Other features of her mother's face are either vacant or missing—the eye sockets above her yellowed-cheeks, a hole where her nose should be. But, she is still wearing her pearls.

Her mother looks down at Celia's feet. "Nice shoes."

Black Friday

Celia walks down the winding staircase that leads into her sister's kitchen. Maya is sitting at the kitchen table reading a book. She is leaning over the book the way she used to lean over Celia when they were doing math homework. Maya's legs are bent underneath her, as if she is kneeling on the chair. This always looks uncomfortable to Celia, but this is Maya's reading position. Attentive and ready to pounce on a stray word at a moment's notice. She is dressed in her running outfit: long tights, super-expensive silly looking tennis shoes and a sweater.

Her mother looks up from the book and nods in her direction, "Where's Penny?"

Celia moves towards the coffeepot. "Still asleep by some minor miracle. What are you reading?"

"Yesterday was a long day for her." Maya reveals the book cover, "You know, I like that picture of you. You look so dressed up. Who took it?"

Celia shrugs and her eye begins to spasm. "Just some place at the mall. Underneath that headshot, there is a totally pregnant woman. What about the book?"

The question is more accusatory than it needs to be. Her mother always does this to her. It's like she puts herself on antagonized auto-pilot when she's around her. Celia pours some coffee. She does not give her mother much time to discuss anything at all. Instead she jumps into the next question, "What are you still doing here?"

"That's a welcome good morning for you," Maya makes a face, "right now, I'm reading."

"I didn't mean it like that. Usually you and Dad are out the door by Friday morning because you've got some math problem that seeps into your brain like a tumor."

"A little dramatic—don't you think?" Maya places her mug towards Celia. "I'd love some more coffee, thank you so much for offering."

"Oh sorry," she pours her mother the coffee. "Where are Dad and Natalie?"

"Can you get me the nonfat milk?" Maya points to the fridge. "It's Black Friday; they've gone where every good red-blooded American goes—shopping."

"Why didn't they wake me?"

"They left at three this morning. They probably thought it was too early for Penny to be up."

Celia is panicking. Her strongest reaction is to retreat, to know that she cannot spend any more time alone with her mother. That already, this breakfast interlude has been too much. Is this the way it is always going to be? Maybe she should make an effort, just a teensy-tiny piece of conversation that doesn't get blown out of proportion or turn into a commentary on her weight or novel writing. She wonders if

it is too late for that, especially because her mother has already gone back to reading her book.

“What’s a matter?” Perceptive, Celia thinks, the beast is surprisingly perceptive.

Celia shakes her head and pours a very small amount of milk into her mother’s coffee. “That good?” Maya nods.

She examines her mother once more. Physically, she mimics the self-control she exhibits in her profession. Precise, meticulous. Nails neatly polished, curly locks pulled back in an appropriate ponytail for a run, just enough blush on her cheeks so she doesn’t look too pale when she leaves the house. Her mother has hairstyles for every occasion. When she is hard at work on her research, her hair is pinned back into a half-bun, and she keeps several different types of pens and pencils next to her. She would use a yellow highlighter when she had a particularly vexing question that she needed to ponder further. Sometimes whole pages would be yellow. Obsessive-neurosis certainly ran in the family.

Celia considers her attire for a moment. A sweatshirt with milk stains under her breasts, hugely baggy sweatpants and unbrushed hair. To be fair, she did just get up. She hears her cell phone ring upstairs. It is right next to her sleeping daughter, and it will probably wake her.

Her mother’s posture at the table does remind her of something. She will speak and say something substantive. She will be kind and compassionate. “You’re sitting funny.” That didn’t come out right.

Maya frowns.

“I mean,” Celia moves closer to her, “you’re sitting like you used to when we would work on my math homework. You always kind of took in the entire table, on your knees on the chair and just leaning over.”

A smile. A nod of recognition. “That’s when you were little. You didn’t want my help once you hit the sixth grade.”

Celia frowns, “That’s because you were confusing. You didn’t simplify enough. You knew too much, and I couldn’t follow any of it. You went too fast.”

“You could have told me to slow down,” Maya shrugs.

“I was twelve, Ma. And it was your subject. You loved it. I just thought I was really bad at math.”

Maya sips her coffee thoughtfully. “Remember Suzy and Billy?”

“Yup. Our go-to couple.” Suzy and Billy were probably the last time Celia and her mother really communicated with each other. Each giving just a little bit so the other one would be comfortable. Of course, Celia was twelve then.

Suzy is ten years older than Billy, and next year, she will be twice as old as Billy. How old are they now?

“How are we going to do this, Celia?” Her mother’s voice was patient, but hinted that this math problem was completely in the realm of Celia’s capability.

Celia took another avenue completely. “I want to know more about Suzy and Billy.”

“Okay then,” her mother tried to turn that statement back into the math question before them. “We could find out their age first by doing a little algebra.” Her hand reached towards a sharpened pencil.

“That’s boring. Do you think they’re dating?”

Her mother frowned, “Probably not, because if you read the problem it sounds like Suzy is a lot older than Billy.”

“Do you think they are mother and son? Or does Billy just like older women?”

Even as a child, Celia had a fascination with stories— with the intricate and intimate details surrounding people’s lives.

Maya paused for a second, tapped her pencil against the table. Finally, she reached for Celia’s notebook and pulled out a blank piece of paper. “Let’s develop a story around them. What do you think Suzy looks like?”

Celia’s eyes brightened, “I think she is about thirty-seven with curly short blonde hair.” Celia touched her mother’s hair. “She looks exactly like you.”

Maya laughed. “We don’t know that for sure. Before developing a good description, we should probably be sure how old she is. She could be like 55 or something.”

Celia sighed, “So we should solve the problem to find out?”

“Yup.”

Turns out, Billy was nine and Suzy was nineteen; this threw Celia’s original description of Suzy out the window. So they developed a new Suzy, who happened to be Billy’s babysitter. The math assignment was fun that day, and Celia remembered being proud that her mother was so smart. That she could ask her anything when it came to math.

Maya is back to reading Celia's book. She does not look engrossed, she is sort of carefully thumbing the pages, perhaps even skipping the sex scenes. What fun is that? Celia thinks.

Then a child's cry and a beeping of her cell phone's voicemail.

"Penelope." Hallelujah.

"I'll go get her." Her mother is quick to climb the stairs to the second floor. Celia finds herself picking up the book that her mother has discarded mid-page. She turns to her opening lines.

Anna Hathaway sat in Professor Callahan's class and let her eyes wander. His jeans fit too tight and when he turned around a sharp tingle went through her body. He was an attractive man with a rugged complexion, stubble on his chin and a nice sun-burned tinge to his skin. She had been fantasizing about him lately—really deep naughty ones too. He'd just announced that he would be taking his graduate students with him on an excavation this summer. She had to go; the chance to be alone with him was too enticing to resist.

Okay. So maybe it wasn't the next Pulitzer, but it was something. Writing was challenging and time consuming, no matter what label they put on it. She loves her characters, and romance novel writing is something that she is good at. It is nice to be good at something.

"Celia? Where did you go?" Her mother is bringing Penelope down the stairs, and she has dressed her in baby overalls. Maya has even found the baby tennis shoes that Celia brought with her.

“You should get dressed. We can go for a hike. It’s a beautiful day outside. Warm enough even.”

Bad idea. Was she going to relive that dream? She hoped not, because it seemed as though her mother would have to rise from the dead to play that part. “We can’t take the baby with us.” She also adds, “I don’t even have the right clothes for hiking.”

“Nonsense. I saw the baby carrier upstairs. What you’re wearing is fine for hiking. Just put on a bra and your shoes. You’ll be good to go. It will do us all some good.”

Exercise with her mother. Bad. Very bad.

She gives up too easily, like usual, “Fine. Fine. We’ll go.”

Shenandoah National Park

They are on Skyline Drive before 10 a.m. The small Corolla moves up the mountain slowly and deliberately. Every so often, Celia hits the gas pedal so that the engine revs enough to propel the car up the mountain. There is some lag in the car, and both Maya and Celia lurch forward each time she presses down on the pedal.

“We can stop at mile 50,” Celia says to her mother. She thinks that as soon as Maya gets out of the car, she can just drive off. Easy enough with Penny still buckled in. “There’s a lodge with some trails and we can decide what we want to do. We can either go up the mountain or down to the waterfall.” Penny is cooing in the back seat, chirping loudly with every turn of the car.

Mile 50 arrives sooner than she expects. Celia puts the car into park and looks out at the vast expanse of open land. It is cold, but there is no snow on the ground, the grass is yellow and the trees have lost most of their leaves. Mostly, the land is barren. She sees a deer or two with their heads down, ears twitching, tongues out searching for food.

Celia looks at her mother. She is busying herself with Penny, removing her out of the car and arranging her in the carrier. Looking quite motherly actually. This makes Celia chuckle. Maybe she was just better with the babies. They don't occupy so much mental energy, she supposes. Or, she wonders, and the thought is alarmingly absurd. Maybe she's never given her mother enough credit.

They will take turns carrying Penny, and Celia will be the first. "Which way do you want to go?"

Maya points up. "We should hike up the mountain."

"Unbelievable," Celia thinks to herself. She is already tired; she should have suggested they go down to the waterfall. Then her mother could carry the baby back up. But she just smiles and says, "Let's get started."

Penny goes on her back easily. She is warm and pulls at Celia's hair every couple of feet. The trail marker by the parking lot indicates that it is going to be a two and a half mile hike. It promises a walk along portions of the Appalachian Trail and then a view from a rock face where they could look over the entire valley. They would be in the clouds. Celia briefly recalls her dream and wonders if her mother will walk ahead or beside her. Her mother is not wearing any perfume, so there is no sweet-sickening smell like in her dream.

“I can carry the baby too for a while,” Maya insists.

Celia shrugs, “At some point.”

They walk in silence for a long time. Celia hears herself breathing and is embarrassed. It is louder than usual, more pronounced, more asthmatic. Wheezing already? She can feel the climb coupled with the baby’s extra weight in her hips. They see hikers make their way past them. One woman even stops.

“Your baby is so cute.” Celia is about to interrupt, when the woman adds after noticing Celia’s belabored breath, “You can do it. Just take your time.”

Celia’s quads and hamstrings are working overtime to move her body up the mountain. She knows that she needs to work out more and vows to do so, if she survives, and doesn’t die on this mountain.

“There’s a log a couple of feet up,” Maya says to Celia. “We can take a break there and switch if you’d like.”

Celia nods, “A break is good. No switching, necessary.”

They reach the log and Maya helps Celia remove Penny from her back. Penny sits and begins to play with the ants on the ground beside her. Her fingers reach out to touch them. It is lucky for them that they are fast and tiny and Penny is still awkward and clumsy.

There is a sheen of sweat on both Celia and her mother’s face. When Maya is not watching Penny, she looks up at Celia and attempts to wipe the sweat off of her face with a tissue. Celia moves her head, like a child, and Maya looks upset.

Finally, her mother breaks the silence and turns to face her, “What? What is it Celia?”

Celia just shakes her head. She is tired and angry. Angry at her mother for making her climb up this godforsaken mountain. Angry at herself for being so fat, eating so much and writing so little in the time that Penny has been born. They continue walking. Their silence is broken by nature. The crunching of sticks, an occasional bird flitting past, Celia's breathing, Penny's cooing.

Even though it is cold, she is hot. She is beginning to feel dizzy and wants to find another log to sit on. She gestures for her mother to stop. Maya does.

"I need a break." She is breathing uncontrollably fast now and has to bend down so that her head is at her knees to catch any breathe at all. This tips Penny over too, and Celia momentarily loses her balance and almost lands on her face. She catches herself. She is burning up; her hips and lower back have a long filament of pain extending almost the entire length of her lower body. Her legs are spasming. She must remove her baby from her back and does so fairly quickly. She reaches for her water bottle.

"This is not good, Celia. Not good," Maya puts Penny on her back, and looks around. Penny is happy to play with Maya's fingers for the couple of moments she is out of the carrier. Maya seems to be an expert at this baby carrier stuff, because she is able to hold Penny with one hand and hoist the carrier over her small frame and buckle it across her waist, with the other hand. She gives Penny to Celia and Celia places her in the carrier. Maya then gestures for a place for Celia to sit, "You're not healthy."

Celia ignores her mother's comment, closes her eyes until the pain begins to subside. This is a long time. Seconds stretch into minutes and Maya and Penny sit too.

Then, Celia opens her eyes, looks across at her mother, "I can't do this anymore." She stands up, jumps almost, and lunges for her mother. She begins to unbuckle the straps on her mother's waist that are part of the baby carrier. Maya tries to walk away, but Celia pulls her forcefully back.

"Celia!" Her mother pushes Celia's hands away, pushes her out of the way, and begins walking. "What are you doing?"

Celia runs in front of Maya, "Stop." She puts her hands out to her mother forcefully. Touches her and pushes lightly. "Stop," she pauses to breathe in and out. Maya looks at her questioningly.

Penny is crying now, full blown sobs and wails, reacting to the voices she is hearing. Maya begins to take Penny off her back, but it is difficult, because the baby is squirming. She finally succeeds and holds Penny close to her, rocking her forcefully.

Celia steps back and removes her defensive gesture, "Look at me." She turns around in full circle, making sure her mother sees every pale, white-fleshy part of her. She pulls her shirt up and exposes her loose stretch-mark ridden belly. She ties her shirt at her waist, just under her chest in a knot. Her stomach still looks like she is pregnant, only worse. There is not a ball of uterus giving it some definition. Just rolls. She also pushes her sweat pants all the way above her knees to reveal her fleshy thighs, "You can't even look at me."

Maya shakes her head, continues to rock Penny back and forth. The baby stops crying, “I don’t accept this.” She points at Celia. “You could do better.”

“Like you?” Celia feels crazy and nervous. “Look if we were characters in one of my novels, we’d have our heart to heart, say how we feel and make-up. Or I’d assault you.” She brushes her right hand against her face; her left hand is touching Penny. “But we both know that neither of us will say anything to each other. We’ll just pretend.”

Maya moves Celia’s hand away, “Pretend what?”

“Pretend that I want you in my life.” Celia removes her defensive gesture and continues to walk, only much more slowly. She does not see the rock her foot hits, and she surprises herself when she catapults forward and lands on her face.

Celia is startled to see that she has ended up on the ground. But she is more startled to see her mother and Penny begin to walk in the other direction. Celia takes off her shoe and she can see that her toe is broken. It is her pinky toe and the bone is sticking out strangely through the skin.

Her mother is walking away, almost running away with her daughter. It takes a long time for Celia to get up; she must concentrate on balancing with one foot and hopping forward, because the other one is too painful to put any pressure on. By the time she is up, she cannot see her mother or Penny at all. She must sit every minute or so, because her legs are tired and her ears are ringing.

She briefly wonders if she will die on this mountain. No, she knows she will not. Death is too easy; death is something she might assign one of her characters to get out of a conflict. She knows that she has the car keys in her back pocket; that her

mother and Penny will be waiting for her at the bottom of the mountain, stuck down there, like she is stuck up here. She knows that her mother is just as stubborn as she is and they will both feel foolish for acting so brash.

She also knows that nothing will change, she will continue to feel an antagonizing neurosis every time she is with her mother; but she will continue to see her family. After all, family is family. This is why she does not write literary stories; she likes clean lines and happy endings. She wants to fantasize about perfectly beautiful capable people getting exactly what they want. She wants people to smile and laugh when they hit the last page of her book. In her own way, she knows this desire is sick and twisted, but it is better than this. Better than a story about a woman who can't come to terms with herself or the ideal she presents for herself. Better than writing something self-reflective like a woman who is fat and can't talk to her own mother. No, none of this. Maybe one day she will tell her mother the real reason she loves writing romance novels.

Probably not.

After about a half an hour, she is able to put some pressure on her broken toe. She picks up her pace, walks more normally, and continues her descent down the mountain.

CanStruction

The bee buzzing sound stopped, making way for the seconds of silence that signaled the end of the day at the food bank. Really just the beginning for her, though. This was the moment Tilda waited for. First, she listened for the hum of the lights to stop. Then she waited the forty-five seconds it took to be knee deep in total darkness. It was that same knee deep her mother used to tell her about. She knew it took only forty-five seconds because when she was seven she used to count up from zero until the warehouse lights automatically shut off and the alarm activated. Now, at ten, she practiced little rituals in that less than a minute time; sometimes running along the far wall of the warehouse as fast as she could to see where she'd end up. Her legs were longer now, so it was becoming a real competition for her. To one-up herself. Other times, when she didn't feel like running she would skip or twirl and one time she even jumped rope.

But today, she went straight for the storage room in the far right corner of the warehouse. She crossed her fingers and looked down at her feet. Step on a crack, break your father's back. The warehouse floor was concrete and there was one long thin crack that ran diagonally along the floor, stopped and then started again. She avoided it like the plague. The more good luck the better when it came to her first food sculpture. Three nights ago, Tilda placed the beginnings of her sculpture on four pallets that she could easily pull in and out of the dark black storage room. She reached for the pallet jack that Johnny, the warehouse manager, had jokingly given her. He'd shown her how to press the little red button and maneuver the handle so

that she could pick up multiple pallets at once. Of course, the reason he'd given her the jack was because it was nearly dead and needed to remain plugged in to work. This meant she couldn't move anything very far unless she had an extension cord. She used one now.

Her skills with the pallet jack had improved over the last couple of nights and this time she ran over the cord only once when she brought her sculpture to the center of the room. She removed the three smelly-old cobwebby blankets and boxes she'd used to hide her sculpture and placed them carefully in the corner. It really is coming along. Early on in the process, she'd decided to stack her tuna fish cans at an angle so that each one didn't quite sit directly on top of the one beneath it. That way it would look three-dimensional. She thought about this for a second. Aren't all sculptures 3-D anyway? Hmm. Still looked cool, though. She'd stacked the cans four high and they'd already begun to form a partial plate. She'd glued them together with some really good metal adhesive she'd found so that it was easier to transport in and out of hiding. Any rethinking about how to change the sculpture wouldn't work now. Tilda was in glue and go mode. As her father would say— looking back was for losers.

The real goal with this sculpture was to make it life-size. She'd spent the last couple of days collecting tuna fish cans out of the food drive storage bins and thinking about how to make her sculpture really big. She wanted to make sure she could lie in the middle of the plate with one side touching her head and the other touching her toes. A life-size sculpture, just like at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Now, she lay flat on her back in the storage room with her head against the tuna cans

she'd glued together. She stretched her legs to the opposite end, eyeing the spot on the wood where her toes pointed to. Perfect. That will do. A Tilda-size plate.

Tilda estimated she would need 200 more blue label albacore tuna fish cans to finish her plate. But she had plenty of Del-Monte mixed fruit cups for the utensils that sat beside the plate. Like all place settings, there would be a knife, a spoon and a fork. And, of course, they would be silver. She just had to decide which side of the plate each of these utensils would go on. She closed her eyes to try and picture the place-settings her mother would make for their family dinners. Nothing. Should have paid more attention. Her dad didn't set the table. They always just ate on paper plates over the sink or with napkins. Anyway, pizza and sandwiches didn't really need a knife or fork. She still couldn't quite remember whether the knife was on the left or the right side.

She'd starting thinking about this project two weeks ago, after her class had visited the sculpture garden at the Baltimore Museum of Art. They'd spent the day talking about art installations and the type of material that some artists like to repurpose for their sculptures. The idea hit her like a thud and she liked it immediately. She would make something out of the cans of food. Something big, maybe even something they could display in the building somewhere. It would be a fun productive way to spend her evenings while her father worked.

Tilde heard the rolling aluminum truck bay doors hit the concrete floor. She stepped out of the storage room quickly. The metal clamp of the padlock was the second to last sound before the food bank was all hers. The last sound would be Johnny's voice telling her good night. She closed the storage room door and began to

absentmindedly peel the label off a Del-Monte mixed fruit cup. She loved to drink the sweet syrup in the can, before she even touched the fruit. But she wouldn't be eating this fruit tonight. This can had a higher purpose—art. She was hungry, though. Is this what they mean by starving artists? She giggled to herself. She'd need to spend tonight searching for more tuna fish cans in the food drive bins and then, if there was time, she could peel the labels off the fruit cups so she could have some nice silver silverware.

“Tilda , what the hell?”

Her hands froze mid peel and she inadvertently scrunched her shoulders up. Shoot. She hadn't really been aware of what she was doing. She turned to face Johnny, dropping the partially ripped label on the floor besides her.

He picked up the label and waved it at her. For a second, she replaced his face with her cat Amar—both—had pointy features and friendly eyes. He was saying something, but all she could hear was Amar's gentle purr. She focused on his lips, but still only cat sounds. She shook her head and placed her finger in her ear to clear out any clutter. There, now, she could hear him.

“Are you stealing food?” Johnny's accusation came out softly, but it still caused her to open her mouth wide and shake her head.

No. Certainly not, but Johnny won't understand. She decided to lie boldly. The words came out easier than she should have felt comfortable with. “I forgot to pack my lunch for school today.” She gulped and continued, “I spent the entire afternoon thinking of fruit syrup.”

Johnny frowned and placed her hand on Tilda's shoulder, causing her to jump. Tilda decided to say something that would rid her of any responsibility, whatsoever, especially in this place. "I was hungry."

He adjusted the simple black frames on his face, shifted his weight from his left to his right foot and made a pointed, exhausted parent-like sigh. "Why didn't you say anything this morning? I could have made sure you had something."

She took a breath, then another, "I didn't even know until lunch." She looked up at Johnny. Fake hunger or not, she was off the hook. "It was okay, though, my friend Missy shared some of her lunch with me." She looked at the half peeled can of fruit Johnny had in his left hand.

He rolled the label into a ball and tossed it towards the trashcan. Tilda watched as he made a perfect basket. "Slam dunk," she said cheerfully.

Johnny popped the lid open for her revealing an array of golden colors with a hint of red. She took the fruit cup from him. I guess I'll be eating this one.

"Next time you forget your lunch you come to me. You can't go around taking food out of this place." He grabbed both her shoulders and made her face him. He had onion-breath. She tried not to inhale too much or make a face. "You remember Mrs. Norma Jean?" She nodded. "She orders 150 of these fruit cups every week for Helping Hands Mission." He paused, "Before you take one think about that."

Johnny let go of her shoulders and stood up. He smiled at her and she could see that he still had those friendly eyes. "How late do you think tonight will be?"

Tilda lifted the can of fruit to her lips to taste the syrup before she responded. She would have to wash her face after; the fruit cups were always so sticky. “Don’t know. Last night we left at 9.”

Johnny shook his head and began to walk towards the office doors. “I’ll remind your dad that tomorrow is a school day. Maybe he won’t keep you so late.” Tilda watched as he walked the fifty or so yards toward the offices then turned around, causing her to jump. “Oh and Tilda.”

“Yes,” she chirped quietly.

“If I catch you doing that again, there’s going to be some real repercussions.

“What?” She frowned.

“Punishment,” Johnny reached the heavy office door and slammed it shut. Tilda’s body shook from the noise that echoed in the warehouse. That was close. She began to pick up various fruit pieces out of the fruit cup and dangle them above her mouth once the syrup had pretty much been squeezed out of the fruit. I’m going to have to be more careful. She didn’t want to waste any more fruit cups than she had to. She dumped the rest of the fruit in her mouth and chewed greedily.

Tilda listened to the silence. Then she made her own noise, “I’m the Queen of the Warehouse!” She felt better after her syrupy concoction and relieved that her art project was still hers alone. She took a moment to run around the warehouse screaming. Tilda banged her hands against the makeshift shelves that housed boxes of packaged product ready for the soup kitchens and food pantries the food bank served. Providers, her dad called them. She watched as one rack of product lurched precariously forward as she ran full speed into it. Only slightly concerned, she placed

her hand on the frame firmly to stop it from shaking. She hadn't knocked down one of these racks yet.

Time to get to work. First, she had to walk over to the weigh station to get her flashlight. She loved her flashlight. It wouldn't actually matter if she turned on the two lights directly above her, but she liked to be secretive, and a flashlight was the perfect tool for a secret. She just didn't want to take any chances. A good flashlight was important, and this one was better because it wasn't even battery powered. Just a wind up that made a cool clicking sound when it needed more juice. Juice was the word her dad used when he wound up the flashlight for the first time, and since then she'd adopted the word for herself.

She juiced up her flashlight and aimed it at the bins overflowing with glitter, handwriting and a very random assortment of non-perishable goods. Whenever people conducted a food drive for the hungry in Baltimore it ended up in this absolute mess of a pile.

"Food Drive!" She said loudly to the empty room. Tilda loved the boxes that came from the community food drives. People went all out when they were collecting jars of peanut butter or macaroni and cheese for the hungry. She always looked for boxes she thought were particularly well decorated so that she could add them to her collection. She was picky and so far, she'd only found a couple she really liked, but she looked just the same.

"Blimey, where to start?" Tilda liked the sound of her own voice, so she often talked to herself when she was patrolling the warehouse. She loved rolling r's under her tongue, or pretending she had a British accent, which she'd recently discovered

because of one of the volunteers, Roy. She also discovered that she liked words like blimey so she tried to use it as much as possible. She wasn't sure what it meant, but she was pretty sure she was using it in the same context as Roy did when he said blimey.

The food drive bins were hit or miss. Some of the stuff was really good like the albacore tuna she'd been using for her sculpture and other stuff was just, well, crap. People liked to donate their five year old beans or their expired tomato paste or strange items like couscous and gefiltefish. Exotically useless foods, her dad would say when they sorted through the bins to weed out the expired food. Back of the pantry food sucks. She'd decided a week ago that she wasn't going to use any of it for her life-size plate because she wanted her plate to look uniform and be a representation of the items the food bank liked to receive. She'd even tried to find a place for macaroni and cheese and peanut butter, but their shapes were fundamentally boring and therefore useless. At any rate, the food in this pile of community food drive hadn't even been officially logged into the food bank inventory—making it available for her use.

“Blimey, blimey, blimey.” There was a neatly wrapped box with yellow paper and a pink ribbon decorated diagonally along the bottom and then crisscrossing along the sides. Expert ribbon work. Written along the ribbon was a message that started at the bottom center of the box.

Tilda read the ribbon out loud, “Each year blends into the next without you.” This made her sad. She imagined that this note probably didn't end well. Death or Divorce. Tilda wasn't sure which one was worse—they both ended in a

disappearance. But death must be better. At least then there would be nobody to blame for the leaving. It was either cancer or a car accident or too much smoking or too little dieting. Sad sure, but no blame. Unless of course the doctor messed up or something. Then, at least, you could blame the doctor. She turned the box over to the left side so that she could continue reading out loud. “Just finishing up the project you started years ago. 25,000 pounds and counting.”

That’s a lot of food. She wondered how long this loved one had been gone. She felt bad about rummaging through this particular box for her art work. She pulled the box to the side; placing it carefully away from the other food drive boxes. There was a missing person in her life too. She thought about where her mother might be right now; whether she was still cooking for strangers every night. A year had already passed since the last time Tilda saw her.

Ann had picked her up from school that day. This was not unusual. In some sense, Tilda imagined she had five parents, two biological and three inherited. Very often, her inherited parents were the more responsible guardians: Johnny, her father’s right hand man, and Ann and Rudy, the two women her father developed the concept of food banking with, ran her to her ballet and swimming lessons; whoever was available took the job. Johnny might drop her off at school and Ann or Rudy would pick her up at the end of the day and shuttle her to her next appointment. Rarely, did she see her father. And her mother worked as a chef so her day would start in the early afternoon and bleed into the late night.

Tilda was used to seeing the dark blue minivan with a dented bumper sitting outside the front entrance of the school. This was an in-between time for Ann, she was finished with her lunch rush, and hadn't yet started thinking about her dinner deliveries or late afternoon pickups. On Mondays, like today, Tilda would accompany her on these pickups and drop offs—helping when she could: carrying small boxes of food or trays of bread and dessert. Other times, she might pretend to be busy with a particular math or science problem and watch Ann. Ann liked to work by herself.

Her hands were particularly sticky and the door to the blue minivan always stuck. It was hard enough for Tilda to get in and out of the van because it was so high off the ground, but there was the added trouble of actually opening the door and pulling it back so that she could sit in the front seat. The sticky hands were her fault, she'd put Elmer's glue on her fingers during class and waited until the glue dried to peel it off. She'd gotten so good at this trick that she was often able to get her whole palm or a palm and a couple of fingers peeled off in one piece. When that happened she was inclined to save it because it looked like her own skin—little cells of herself picked way from the rest of her. Her tablemate, Neil, loved to watch her. She would sometimes even let him put the glue on her hands; the key of course, was not to use too much. Just enough to peel a thin neat layer off. This last time though, Neil had used way too much and she was forced to run to the bathroom to wash it off. Never again, she said to herself, would she trust a boy.

Tilda held up her hands, showing Ann her sticky palms when she couldn't open the door. Ann removed her sunglasses and frowned. Tilda shrugged her shoulders.

Ann stepped out of the car. “What’s wrong with you that you can’t even open a simple door?” She walked around the front and opened up the passenger door. Although what she said had her usual bite to it, her tone was nothing but friendly and cheerful. Tilda relaxed a little. Good mood Ann.

“Glue,” Tilda hopped into the minivan and dumped her backpack on the floor in front of her.

“Glue?” Ann shook her head and closed the door. She lit a cigarette and leaned her body against the side of the car. She inhaled and exhaled the smoke slowly and deliberately. Like a dragon. Sometimes Tilda imagined that instead of smoke, actual flames came out of her mouth.

Tilda rolled down the window. “You know you shouldn’t smoke around children?”

Ann exhaled methodically and started to put the van into gear, “Oh yeah? What do they say about smoking around smart asses?”

“Not them either. Are you going to drop me off at home or the food bank?” Tilda smiled at Ann in that sweet, fake childish way that showed her teeth and scrunched her eyes.

Ann sighed and tapped out her cigarette, “Neither.” She pulled the van out of the school parking lot slowly and then hit the gas so quickly that it almost flooded the engine. “Now, roll up your window.”

“God,” Tilda said to Ann more out loud than she had meant too.

“Your dad’s running the dinner at Helping Hands Mission today. You know Mrs. Norma Jean’s place. He wanted me to drop off some stuff.”

There was something wrong with this car. There was always something wrong with this car. Tilda could feel every bump in the road on the top of her head. She was going to get a headache, “Ouch.” They never fixed anything that wasn’t in absolute need. Her father always said that this way there was more money to spend on feeding the hungry.

She tried again, only this time much louder, “Ouch.”

Ann ignored her. Tilda figured she’d have to be bleeding to stop this food run. They never stopped, no matter how anyone was feeling, especially Tilda. It was a long drive from Tilda’s school to Mrs. Norma Jean’s place in the city. Or rather, Mrs. Norma Jean’s place in the ghetto. Her friends were always teasing her about the ghetto. As in why is your family always hanging out in the ghetto? Was it sunny in the ghetto today, Tilda? It’s sure sunny outside the ghetto.

As Ann drove on, the streets began to change. It was easy to tell where the ghetto started in the city. The first sign was the concrete. There was a lot more concrete and a lot less trees. It seemed like the trees just disappeared when you got to the poor parts of the city. Concrete replaced grass. Also, the type of people changed. In some parts of the ghetto, nobody was out. Not a soul. Just trash rolling around empty street corners. It was a specific kind of trash too, junk food wrappers like potato chip bags or anything that you could buy cheaply and quickly at a corner market. According to her father there were no real grocery stores in these parts of the city. In other parts of the ghetto the white people completely disappeared, replaced by black people. She could just tell when they got to a poorer part of the city, maybe it was because the streets were empty or maybe it was because it was full of people

who didn't look like her. They looked more worn and tired, liked they'd just jumped out of bed and had no real time to get ready before they left the house. Sloppy. You had to look closely at the people to realize this though. From a distance they looked normal, but then you might see the symptoms of poverty as her dad would call them. For one thing, there wasn't a lot of smiling. Also, sometimes you saw people pushing around whole carts of stuff, carrying everything they owned with them all the time. Sometimes it would look like a lot, but then she would say to them in her head if this is everything you own it isn't very much. It was never very much for real life. Or you would see a young woman, a teenager even, and she might have one or two children with her. The children always looked cute to her, they were usually happy. Not really aware of what they'd been born into. Sometimes she thought she was like them. They'd been born poor in America and she'd been born to someone who served the poor. She was poor by choice. That's much worse than being poor.

“Ann, do I have to go? Can't you just drop me off at home?” Home wasn't that far away from Mrs. Norma Jean's anyway. It was in a safer neighborhood, just across York Road, but still near all the action. At any rate, she was getting tired of this whole ghetto-thing. She was tired of feeding these stupid poor people. On days like this, she wished they'd just go away and feed themselves; then her life could be normal.

It was too late. They were already pulling up near the Episcopal Church off of Howard Street. Tilda could see a couple of very able-bodied volunteers pulling food out of the food bank's only truck. Her father was directing traffic.

Tilda recognized her father's business-mode. It was at these times his tall lean frame looked bulkier to her. Like he'd grown some muscles overnight, she supposed being in charge did that to some people. He nodded at Tilda, giving her a wink and addressed Ann.

"You've got the mac and cheese, right?" He reached over and touched Ann on the elbow very gently. She giggled softly. Tilda frowned.

"Sure do," Ann opened the van door and began pulling out huge aluminum trays. "I was able to finagle two kinds of mac and cheese from my caterer friend."

Boring. Boring. Boring. Right now her dad was talking about the salad and the types of dessert they'd have for the dinner. He was leaning in very close to Ann so that their noses were almost touching. Her dad always did this with Ann—talked too close. She hoped his breath was okay, because she was certain to get a whiff of it. She didn't understand why they always had to be so secretive when they were talking about a dinner service. Tilda looked around her. The church was connected to a rare tree-lined street. She watched as a robin, carrying a worm, returned to its nest. The robin added real color to the street. She decided to go over and get a better look.

The street ran perpendicular to the back entrance of the church and Tilda had to cross the parking lot to get to it. There were at least twenty trees on each side of the street and they were big enough so that they created a canopy effect and provided tons of shade on the street. The street was aptly named Baxter Way. She knew it was in honor of Mrs. Norma Jean Baxter, as her dad would say, this church's patron saint of food. She wondered if this was the church's private property? How else would they get the city to name a street after the church's very own food saint?

The houses on this street were in various modes of repair and disrepair. The three or four houses closest to the church were well taken care of with gardens out front and well-put on roofs and bright front doors to contrast the brick building. Beyond that, the houses became more typical of their surrounding neighborhood. Some of them were clearly boarded up with the names of charity organizations slapped across the plywood on the door. She saw a number of houses with the name People's Homesteading Group, a local charity responsible for getting people in the neighborhood to rehab these houses. The way her dad explained it to her was that the people in the neighborhood worked for two or three years on the house and then after that they received their own home. Sweet equity? Doesn't sound right. Anyway, it must be what's happening to some of these houses.

Tilda walked further down the block and saw number 1924. 1924 was her address, only she lived at 1924 Rolling Court Way. This 1924 was a brick house, just like hers, but parts of the front near the top floor window were burned. Dark black brick stretched from the far right window on the top floor to the window above the door. She wondered what a house that had caught on fire would look like inside? She walked along the cement walkway to the front door. Her house was lined with azaleas that her mother had planted a couple of years ago. Those bushes were just blooming now. It was so pretty to walk by them with all the bright purples and pinks. This walkway wasn't surrounded by flowers, everything just looked charbroiled. The front door was a piece of plywood nailed to the frame, but she saw a couple of places where somebody had clearly pulled out the nails, loosening the plywood considerably so she could just fit inside. Here goes nothing. She crawled in.

The first thing that struck her was the staircase that led to the upstairs. The railing was falling onto the floor, but it was the same staircase in the same location that sat in her house. Even through the dark wood paneling and the boarded up windows she could imagine her living room. There was probably a bathroom tucked right near the top of the stairs. The next thing that struck her was the smell. The house smelled like a toilet mixed with ashes. She swore she could still smell the smoke. She could see how the fire had ripped through the front room; there was trash everywhere, pieces of furniture, papers, magazines, baby's shoes, a dart board still hung on the wall. Like one day someone was living here and the next day they were gone, leaving traces of everything they owned in one smelly burnt up pile.

She felt nervous and excited all at once, she wanted to examine the house room by room, see if she could make up a story about the family who used to live here. A thought struck her and she felt sick. What if somebody died here? In Baltimore there were always house fires because when it got real cold and people had their electricity turned off they would light candles or run electric heaters and then bad things might happen. She wondered if she'd heard about this particular house on the news? She imagined that at least four people were affected by this fire. She heard what sounded like footsteps coming from upstairs. Somebody must be in here with her. She knew that sometimes people squatted in these burnt up old houses. She looked down on the ground for more clues as to who these people were. There was a needle on the floor. This was bad, really bad. She should definitely leave. In all her time with her father, she'd only ever heard about the types of drug abuse some of the poorer parts of Baltimore had succumbed too. She'd never actually seen evidence of

it. While, maybe, once or twice, she'd see somebody swaying back and forth or rocking out to themselves, and then she would wonder, especially in neighborhoods like these, if they were on drugs. She heard a flushing. The upstairs' toilet definitely just flushed. Time to go.

She was able to quickly get back underneath the plywood to the outside world and she ran. Her long knobby legs kicked into full gear and she sped down Baxter Way to the corner of York Road. This section of York Road was busy and she ran past the corner market and the African bakery. She tried to run as fast on the sidewalk as the white car she saw next to her on the road, but soon it sped up and left her in the dust. So then she tried to run as fast as the MTA bus that was next to her. Buses were easy to beat, because they were slow and made lots of stops. Very soon, she outran the bus. Finally, she turned down her own street and reached her house.

She was about to pull the key off of her necklace to get in when she realized she didn't need to. The back door was wide open. The back door led directly into the kitchen and as she walked in she could hear the sound of her mother's chopping knife hitting wood. This image of her mother standing next to her cutting board in the center of the kitchen was so commonplace that she almost didn't register what was significant. Her mother was a short woman, standing only about 5'1 and normally when she worked she stood on a step stool, with her dark long black hair up and one of her many aprons tied to her waist. Now, Tilda noticed that her mother was barely dressed. She was in a silk night shirt with no pants and bare feet. Her hair was flowing around her face, getting in the way and forcing her to occasionally stop and whisk her hair out of her face. Her head was down and her hands were moving

unsteadily. They were shaking considerably. The hum that usually accompanied her mother's cooking was replaced by a soft mumble and an occasional snuffle. Her mother had yet to notice her presence and when Tilda stepped closer she could make out one or two words of her mother's mantra. Stupid, stupid, stupid Ann. Sitting next to the cutting board was her parent's wedding album and it was partially empty. She watched as her mother pulled a picture out of the album and carefully began to julienne it, first using the knife to cut the white border around the edges and then chopping it into small strips. After this, her mother grabbed a pile of the strips that were sitting on the side of the cutting board and put them in the blender which she then mixed with a whole package of processed cheese from a box of macaroni and cheese, a jar of peanut butter and some tuna fish.

All food bank staples.

Now, Tilda looked down at the boxes of food from the community food drive she was rummaging through. She really did hope that her father would like her art project. She hoped he would see its importance as a piece of advertising for the food bank. They could use it to show volunteers what type of food they really needed more of. She reminded herself that she was creating this sculpture out of love, so her father would definitely be happy with it. She wasn't doing what her mother did, ruining the food because she was upset and angry. She was making a gift for the food bank.

The one thing Tilda remembered about that night was that her dad had been livid about all the food her mother had wasted while destroying their wedding album. Every piece of fruit, vegetable, dairy, cheese and jar of canned food had gone into one

of three entrees. Wedding Album Carrot and Apple Soup; Wedding Album Peanut Butter and Cheese Pie (the concoction Tilda had witnessed being made) and Wedding Album Pork Tenderloin. She supposed it was one way to get her father's attention.

Another food drive box caught her eye. She picked it up and squinted her eyes to replicate a magnifying glass a jeweler might use for fine jewels.

"Beautiful!" She couldn't help herself. The donor had taken macaroni and dipped it in red, green and blue glitter. The macaroni then formed the words "Help the Hungry." The red glitter was particularly bright and stood out as the capital "H" in "Help" and "Hungry." This one was a keeper for sure.

Tilda glanced at her surroundings again. She wanted to finish her sculpture soon, which meant that she might have to forego just picking out the blue-label tuna fish cans. 200 blue label premium albacore tuna might take her a week or two to find. She simply didn't have that long. She began to lean over the first bin, and realized very quickly that even standing on her tip toes wasn't going to allow her to dig down to the bottom of the bin. Still, she'd already seen about ten cans of tuna fish and scooped them up. 190 to go.

She pulled a stool over so that she could reach deep into the bin. There were more Del-Monte fruit cans as well, but she reminded herself to take only the bare minimum because she would be ruining these cans by peeling off the labels. They could never go back into inventory. Not that they would need too, her sculpture was going to live front and center in the lobby of the food bank. For everyone to admire.

Turned out there were plenty of tuna fish cans in the three bins. She placed them in a box and put them between the second and third rack of donated packaged

product. She did this as a precaution, her dad never really walked back this far. She'd already pulled out the partially constructed sculpture and had set up what would essentially be her canvas and paint. She would need a good couple of hours to glue the cans together and finish the set up.

She got started.

Hours later, after eating a couple of slices of pepperoni pizza with her dad, her food sculpture was complete. Her plate was shimmery like the ocean and she was pleased with the effect of combining green chunk light tuna fish cans with blue albacore tuna fish cans. She'd even gone through the supply closet and covered the single layer of tuna fish cans in the middle of the plate with a perfectly formed four-foot circle of white construction paper. This meant she had a white plate with a blue-green outer edge. She wished she had some glitter, but maybe next time.

She'd decided to place the knife on the left side and the fork and the spoon on the right. The symmetry just looked right to her. It had been a little bit difficult to create a perfectly oval spoon, so she'd made a spork instead. Her utensils were a knife, a spork and a fork. She realized the sporks were mostly plastic, so it probably should have been white as well. Oh well, it was pretty good.

Tilda signed her name boldly to the white construction paper.

He was opening up the warehouse when he happened upon it. Sitting obtrusively between the A and B racks. The poor child had used some type of adhesive too; this sculpture wasn't coming apart anytime soon. It looked to him like a place setting, but Johnny couldn't be sure at all. There were certainly plate-like

qualities to the sculpture, most notably the concave layer of tuna fish cans covered by a single somewhat round piece of white construction paper.

He stood inside the center of the plate. Very sturdy, she'd created an even enough layer so that Johnny could easily jump on the tuna fish cans without any wobbling. He did so now. Awe-inspiring. How long had this taken her? Hundreds of chunk light and albacore tuna fish cans were glued curiously together with no attempt at precision. The child had gone so far as to peel off the labels of the cans for the silvery effect of the utensils. Johnny recognized those cans immediately, Del-Monte mixed fruit in the most ungodly sweet syrup he'd ever tasted. The same fruit cup he had given her yesterday when she claimed to be starving. Unbelievable, not only had Tilda lied to him, she'd signed her name to that lie.

He moved out of the center of the plate. These cans were good and stuck together. He couldn't pull any one away from another. He had some mind to ask Tilda exactly what type of adhesive she'd used, but decided not to. She would ask too many questions, like why he wanted to know and what he was planning to do with the sculpture. It was a shame too; they really could have used these tuna fish cans. Their sorted salvage product had been short on protein for a couple of weeks now. Providers were calling him to ask when they could get more protein in their boxes. Where in the hell was all that tuna fish they usually got? Tuna fish, they'd tell him, was so easy to use and went so far. Mix it with some mayonnaise and slap it on a sandwich and you had one satisfying meal. He told them he'd look, make a plea for it with some of the grocery stores that regularly donated food; try to get them more protein somewhere. He also told them to make peanut butter sandwiches instead.

“Have you tried peanut butter?” he’d say.

They’d laugh at him; it was always that loud gregarious wheezy laughter that came from older people, “Oh, Johnny. You’re a funny man.” But then, they’d pause and say in all seriousness, “When’s the last time the food bank’s given us any jam?”

He sat inside the forklift and turned it on. He slipped the metal arms under the pallet the sculpture was on. He lifted the pallet as high as the forklift would allow. It looked to him like it was about eight feet or so, and he removed the arms and dropped the pallet. There was a large boom in the warehouse, but nothing else. No loose cans of tuna or fruit cups. He tried this a few more times. Nothing.

He picked up the sculpture one more time and drove the forklift past the truck bay and outside the warehouse. He stopped in front of the largest blue metal dumpster the food bank owned. He dropped the pallet into the dumpster. He had some mind to peer over into the dumpster, to jump in and see if that had shaken any tuna fish cans loose. But he didn’t.

He shook his head. Sure was a shame, losing all that food; but these were the boss’s orders.

Mission

Micah was searching for a book that refuted the existence of God, but he'd settle for one that questioned the value of organized religion. So far, the metal bookshelf labeled *Religion* with the inked in graffiti of "Who needs it?" was bare.

"Who needs it?" Micah said these words out loud, rolling them over on his tongue. The words he needed just had to be here. Red Emma's was the only leftist co-op bookstore in the Valley, probably in the entire state of Utah, and it was located off a grimy alley near South Temple Street in downtown Salt Lake.

"Who needs it?" was the phrase he knew he couldn't use to tell his father he wasn't going on his mission. "Who needs it?" was simply too uncaring. Words that were especially harsh, considering that to his north, two blocks away, were the white spires of the Mormon Temple. Downtown Salt Lake had always been like Disneyland to him. Only now, he recognized the irony of his comparison: instead of joyful delight, he saw only fake majesty.

He moved to a second bookshelf. The few book titles sitting before him weren't right. He considered the first one. *Why I became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity*. No. A complete rejection of Christianity wasn't necessary right now. He wanted to let his father off easy, and didn't want every member of his ward praying for his soul. No, no soul-praying yet. Not going on a mission was a far cry from rejecting the religion he'd grown up with.

He received his "call" for his mission months ago and now it stood looming over him—only a week away. Micah was to report to the Mormon Missionary

Training Center in Provo, Utah next Wednesday. There, he would spend twelve weeks learning Portuguese and church gospel to prepare for his mission in Brazil. His life would be regimented. For two years, he would dress in suits and sensible shoes, and always travel with a companion.

Again his search. There were plenty of books that claimed to be about religion, but were clearly more about self-help. *The Meditator's Atlas* was for serious beginners, but beginners of what? He scanned other titles: *The Lives and Legacies of Dogens and Other Zen Masters*. He was unsure about how Buddhism (especially the Japanese variety) would help him. Anyway, he was looking for the opposite of enlightenment. Was that un-enlightenment? He wondered if any Zen Masters reached Nirvana that way. There was the *Tao of Pooh* and the *Te of Piglet*, which seemed to be more about embracing the Tao in your everyday life rather than refuting a Judeo-Christian God. He wondered if he was in the wrong section completely; if there was a reasonable refutation of God in the hard sciences. No. He wanted someone his father would believe. His father was religious, but he also responded to a good argument. If Micah could make a good argument just this once, he might be able to continue his time at the University of Utah, uninterrupted.

Religion had always fascinated Micah. When he hit high school, he began devouring religious texts like the Koran and the Torah, simply because he felt so comfortable being Mormon. He never questioned what he was taught or what the other texts were teaching. He always thought he had enough room in his mind for it all. He felt like he could view these texts with a fresh eye because he wasn't in search of anything. It was like the morbid curiosity that came when passing a deadly

accident on the highway. Relieved and a little bit curious about just how dead those people actually were. Now, looking at these texts, he felt a void. He felt like one of those passengers in a multivehicle accident—the dead one that everybody stared at. Pretty soon, he knew he wouldn't be able to breathe anymore.

He stood in front of a bookshelf that contained a myriad of interpretations of God. Gospels, Proverbs, Psalms, Testaments (old and new), edicts, commands and prayers. Somewhat askew and at the end of the shelf was the Book of Mormon. The plastic wrap was ripped off this version, so Micah thumbed through it quickly, creating a fanning effect. He felt the breeze of the soft thin pages and ran his fingers over the book. Behind him, he heard the bell of the front door, and the high-pitched voice of a woman.

“Somebody help me here.”

He had to look twice to confirm it. Turning quickly to look at the woman coming through the door with a large white table, and then simply looking over his shoulder. It was Audra Harrison, SM. She was older than he'd pictured her; she looked to be nearing forty. She had short, tightly curled hair and a scarf covering her chin and mouth. Her face was familiar, except for the nose. He'd imagined that nose much more impish than it actually was. She was the *Skeptical Mormon*. Or at least that's what she claimed on her blog, *Left of State Street*. She was also the reason why he was at Red Emma's. This was her bookstore, the place where she wrote her blog posts, planned her protests, promoted her books, and drank her coffee. He wanted her advice. He'd considered writing in to her blog, but had worried about his privacy. In his mind, he'd hoped to run into her, be forward enough to buy her a cup

of coffee, and articulate enough to explain his situation to her. She'd respond with perfect advice and then they'd become friends; he might even become an occasional guest contributor on her blog. He would be a correspondent in skepticism.

He knew her only from her blog posts and books. It looked, to him, like she was promoting her latest book. She'd set the table down in front of the bookshelf marked Anarchy (there was that Red Emma sense of humor again) and was bringing her books in now. The box she was carrying tilted towards him and he could see her face on the back of the book jacket. Her writings were like manifestos for those living just to the left of Mormon conservatism. Or as she said those "outside the Valley haze."

"You." She'd noticed him staring. "Can you blink for a second and help me?"

Micah turned his gaze towards her shoes, in a feeble attempt to disappear back into his surroundings. Nice shoes. Fancier than he would have expected. He'd imagined her in tennis shoes. Ready for activism and to kick butt at a moment's notice. He sounded absolutely ridiculous, even to himself.

A lanky long haired man wearing an apron, long jeans and a black shirt moved past Micah and into Audra's arms. He kissed her on the cheek. "Audra. Stop harassing the customers. I'll help you out."

"Jerry!" She leaned into him. Micah caught a faint whiff of her soap. Probably organic. Softly perfumed and lovely. He knew he had developed a strange sort of horny teenage crush on her.

He watched her. He watched her laugh, shake her head, touch Jerry's arm. He moved closer to the Anarchy bookshelf. Some of her books were out on display near

the white table she was setting up on. He reached for her newest book, and flipped to her biography at the back. He'd been reading her blog for more than two years now, and each day her comments about her faith rang more true for him. She questioned everything. Skepticism was the right way to be, she'd often said on her blog. He'd wished he'd been skeptical much earlier on, because it sucked to do it all at once—in a panicked haze. She was a relief for him, though. Despite all of her questioning, she was still Mormon. Maybe he would be okay after all.

He began to read. He'd read this all before, but he was wondering if he could attach more meaning to it now that she was in front of him.

AUDRA HARRISON, Skeptical Mormon was born in Salt Lake City but grew up all over the world. Her parents, devout Mormons, felt compelled to spread the gospel in far-away places like California, Alaska, New York City, and Sao Paolo, Brazil. Her father now sits on the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. As a young child, Audra accompanied her father on speaking assignments while he was a high councilor in northern California. It was here, she began to question her religion and only value the teachings that stood up to her rigorous round of questioning. She realized she wasn't so much interested in faith and gospel but the truth that can move people ahead in their lives. She believes that all Mormons should open up their hearts and minds to the values taught by other religions, other cultures, and that as long as you don't kill somebody in the process you should be free to explore all avenues of experience in your life. Audra studied religion and English at Wellesley College in Boston and then went on to get a degree in Journalism from the Medill School of

Journalism at Northwestern University. She was a television reporter for a time on KSL5 News in Salt Lake City. She has written four books.

Micah stopped reading. He began to tune into the conversation that Audra and Jerry were having.

Jerry was speaking, “How long it take you to find out that Huntsfield had his head up his ass with that ObamaCare bill?”

“ObamaCare? Jesus Jer—you’re starting to sound a little right wing?”

Jerry laughed and scratched his head.

“That wasn’t even a good piece of reporting! The end result was okay.” She shook her head and sighed sweetly, “Pretty much just handed to me.”

Audra began taking her books out of a box and arranging them on the table.

“What do you mean?” Jerry grabbed a couple of chairs in the cafe corner of the shop so they could sit.

Audra laughed and reached into her purse for a cigarette. “He really pissed off his healthcare advisor. You know that guy Ericksen? It was like the Governor’d given him bad head or something. Used his teeth maybe?”

Foul-mouthed for sure. Hard to believe she went to a women’s college and her dad was a church Apostle. But then again, they probably didn’t talk much. It had taken Micah a while to get used to the uncensored nature of her blog. At first, it made him squirm, but now he just glossed over it, even laughed sometimes. He’d have to go home and catch up on the latest news.

Jerry laughed heartily, “How about that Dick Gallivan too, huh? Won’t be buying my groceries from him anymore.” More laughter.

Had he heard that correctly? “Wait?” Micah turned around to face them, hitting his hand on the Anarchy bookshelf. Ouch. He shook his hand hard, clenched and unclenched his fists. Had they said his father’s name?

Audra raised her eyebrows at Jerry. She inhaled her cigarette slowly, “Dick Gallivan, you know the grocery store owner?”

Micah nodded. Even despite himself, it excited him when she said his last name. He felt hot behind his ears.

“Turns out he’s a real son of a bitch, cheating on his wife, going to strip clubs. Boozing.”

“Taking the Lord’s name in vein,” Jerry laughed at his own joke. He gestured to the book Micah was holding in his hand. “You should read her blog too, kid.”

“I don’t understand?”

Audra rolled her eyes at Jerry. “You up on politics?” She continued before he could answer, “Gallivan’s one of the sordid four on the Governor’s healthcare advisory committee.” She stretched out the words so they rang in Micah’s ear. She puffed smoke in his direction.

Jerry interrupted, “Got a cig, Aud?”

Audra handed Jerry a cigarette. He took it thoughtfully. “You come up with that name?”

Audra nodded. Jerry lit the cigarette, “sordid four?” He blew some smoke into the air. “Poetic.”

Poetic? Micah was overwhelmed. His father's indiscretions were poetic? Is this why his mother left? Is this why he was stuck taking care of both his dad and his younger brother?

Audra continued. "Oh and that's not the worst of it," she chuckled, "he's been regularly pocketing his profits and skimping on his employee's benefits packages for years." Again with the emphasis, "proudly contributing to the underclass."

"Unbelievable," Jerry shook his head and got up from his seat. "How many you think he has?"

"Stores or mistresses?" Audra joked.

Fifty, Micah said in his head. Fifty stores. 200 employees or so per store. He knew the math. His father wanted him to run the place someday. Mistresses? Mistresses, oh God. How gross. He felt itchy all over. He scratched the side of his face and his neck.

Audra blew a little smoke in his direction, "You okay?"

Micah nodded. He felt vindictive and itchy. Right now, the tingling had begun to permeate his whole body. He often broke out into hives when he was stressed or overwhelmed, but it usually took days. They would start out slowly and develop over time. An allergic reaction like this had never happened to him before.

He looked at his watch: 3 p.m. Time to leave. He rushed out past Audra as she continued her conversation. About his father. As he opened the bookstore door he caught a glimpse of himself in the glass. His face was red and bumpy.

Micah's house was about a half an hour from Red Emma's if he drove quickly down I-15. On the drive home, he worked consciously to put the afternoon out of his mind, but couldn't.

When did his father have time for a mistress? There was the grocer's yearly convention in San Francisco, which he'd promised to take Micah to one day. There was his trip with his buddy's to the Adirondacks. Had all those been more "sordid" meetings?

And then there was his mother. When she'd left six months ago, he'd become convinced that his dad had the moral high ground. That she'd been faking her piety all along. She hadn't even tried church counseling. And his mother never called. Never. He had spent countless nights wondering how you can go from being a good family-oriented church-going Mormon to nothing? The revelation would have to be apocalyptic. Earth shattering. He supposed his dad's cheating qualified.

He was unlocking the door when his brother's school bus arrived. This house is vacuous, Micah thought, as Jared, Micah's nine year-old brother flung his way into the living room. Besides college, Jared was the primary concern in Micah's life and Micah didn't feel comfortable with his current latch-key kid status. Their dad had been somewhat flippant when Micah suggested that Jared attend the after-school program. The program ended at 6, and Micah had encouraged his father to leave work, like a normal person, and pick Jared up then. But, he'd said it was impossible and asked Micah to be there instead.

More time to do work.

Or meet with mistresses?

No. No more thoughts like this.

Micah shook his head and touched his face; the Benadryl was finally working. He didn't feel so hot and red anymore. He looked up. Vaulted ceilings, stuccoed interior, emerald green carpet. The three of them certainly didn't need this much space, especially if it came at a cost to other people. The monstrosity, as Micah was now prone to call it, stood at the end of a cul-de-sac directly in front of the Wasatch Mountain Range. In seconds, he could walk up the Corner Canyon Ridge Trail to the Bonneville Shore Line that circled parts of the Salt Lake Valley. He could climb above that if he wanted to; he often did. The summit of the mountain was 4,000 feet up, beyond his house, making it 8,000 feet above sea level. Getting to that height would take him all day, but he would camp at the top and then walk back down. His lungs always felt tight walking up the dirt path, but there was a point when that stopped too. There was a lone desert tree about a mile past the first marker of the Bonneville Shoreline that brought the breath back to him. A weight was lifted when he reached that tree. There, he could watch and survey the world.

Jared dumped his backpack on the floor and ran towards the kitchen. His backpack took up half his body and he looked more than a little goofy anytime he wore it. His brother was a miniature version of their father. He was tall and clumsy and all knees. Jared usually looked thin, but he looked worse than usual. Pizza tonight, for sure. Jared loved pizza and could eat slice after slice of it. Something to fatten up those legs.

In contrast, Micah had his mother's physique. He looked just like her. He was short standing only about 5'7" and came with a lot more flesh on his bones. He wasn't fat, but would probably be someday, or at least plump like his mother.

"Micah!" Jared yelled from the kitchen. If his voice got any higher, he would shatter glass.

"Jared!" Micah mimicked his brother's excitement, which made Jared's eyes roll. Micah walked towards the kitchen and opened the back door to let their dog, Missy, out.

"Are you excited?" Jared opened the fridge. Micah knew he was looking for soda. The kid loved to drink coke.

"About what?"

Jared pulled a coke out of the fridge and opened it, "Your mission. You're going in a week." Missy was pawing on the door and whining softly to be let in.

"What do you think if we order pizza tonight?" Micah opened the back door.

"With just pepperoni?" Jared smiled, but it wasn't a full smile. Micah knew he was thinking about the extra vegetables that he'd have to have on his pizza. Pizza always came with a price—bell peppers, onions, or mushrooms mostly.

Micah placed his hands on Jared's shoulder. "No veggies tonight—whatever you want."

Jared jumped up, and Missy leapt up with him. One thing that dog could do was leap; she licked Jared's nose and mouth as they both jumped. Jared grabbed Missy's front black paws and danced with her. He also began to sing, which had

Missy wagging her tail all the more. The song surprised Micah, because it came out with a rhythmic Motown quality, although much worse. Jared was tone deaf.

“You’re going on a mission.... A mission from God. You’re going on a mission... A mission from God,” Jared sang this song as he danced with his dog.

Micah fixed his brother a snack of peanut butter crackers before climbing the two flights of stairs to his room. He needed to look at Audra’s post, unravel it. See if it made any sense at all. He still had a couple of hours before his dad got home.

He scanned her posts. There was the post from a couple of days ago—aptly titled: “Governor Slams the Underinsured & Never Intended to Fulfill Campaign Promise.”

Red lettering. Yikes. Audra only reserved colors for the real troubling news. The article was an interview between Gregg Eriksen, Utah’s Health and Human Services Secretary, and Audra.

He began to read. Okay, boring. Boring. Boring. He continued to scan down the interview. His stomach turned. Most of the interview consisted of Eriksen outlining his plans for his job. But then he saw his Dad’s name. There it was, also in red.

GE: There were a couple of key business leaders that the Governor wanted on my Healthcare Advisory Committee. Dick Gallivan of Gallivan’s Grocers, Chris Stevenson of Chris & Dick’s Hardware and Johnny Lowe of Lowe’s Furniture.

AH: Uh, huh. And what was their role?

GE: Well. How do I say this.... I think they were there to slow me down. They road-blocked me the entire time.

Micah's stomach began to settle. That didn't sound so bad, pretending to be on an advisory committee was different than the debauchery that Audra had mentioned at the bookstore. He read further.

Nope. There it was, with his father's name right next to it.

"Strip clubs. Tweeting naked pictures of himself to store employees."

Micah corrected her. *Uninsured* store employees. The interview ended with Eriksen stating that he had never been around more morally reprehensible men than these four Utah businessmen. And after he realized that they had no interest or intention of working with him on providing healthcare for the uninsured, he went public.

Micah felt empty. He looked around his room. It was a big room with a fair amount of crap. He got up and began gathering all of his electronics to put in a pile. It would all have to go. His parents had always just given them things, as if they deserved it. Could it be that all of this stuff was at the expense of someone's health? That people weren't going to the doctor because he had an iPod? He would keep his computer, but nothing else. He had a nice set of speakers that hooked up to his iPod, a flat screen television in his room, a beautiful sofa to hang out on. That TV was going to be a bitch to get out of the room, but it had to go.

His dad's accumulation of things was even worse than Micah's or Jared's. He owned snowmobiles, cars, a motorcycle. It would be harder to get rid of those items, they would be noticed when they were gone. But then again, who cared? Everybody seemed to think his dad was a son-of-a bitch anyway.

But did he?

He was going to have to go through the entire house.

Left of State Street had a following—a lot of people in Salt Lake were reading it. Audra’s blog, with some editing, was even being picked up by a local news station. She was big. And she was coming after them. He looked at his watch. His father would be home soon.

“Micah! Dad’s home! I’m soooooo hungry!”

Jared’s voice was followed by a thump, which caused Micah to run down the stairs quickly. Jared was on the stairs with his tongue hanging out and panting like a dog.

“What are you doing?” Micah reached his hand out to Jared.

Jared brushed it away, “I’m on a hunger strike. Where’s the pizza?”

“That’s not what a hunger strike is. You’re doing the opposite.”

Jared frowned and put his head back down on the floor, “Hungry.”

Micah grabbed his phone. “I’ll order it right now.”

Micah’s father appeared out of the kitchen with a glass of water. He’d loosened his tie. He looked alarmingly like the Devil. His ears even seemed a little pointier—a little more like horns than usual. Micah shook his head to get the image out of his mind.

“Where’s the food?” His father picked Jared up off the floor by grabbing him playfully by his feet. Jared pretended to be dead for a little while longer, but responded to the tickling with tiny giggles through his closed eyes.

“Pizza’ll be here in twenty. Were you able to go grocery shopping?”

His dad looked at him curiously. He had a long beakish nose when he tilted his head a certain way. “We’re ordering pizza. I’ll bring stuff home tomorrow.”

Micah didn’t respond. Just stood there, staring into nothing. His ears were red. If he looked up at his father he might explode. Not yet. He still wanted to process his feelings.

His dad noticed nothing and switched subjects, “Are you still going to class? You’re calling is in a week.”

Micah shrugged and looked down at the Spanish tiled floor. No words came out. Nothing. He felt himself getting warmer, he could feel hives begin to form on his skin. So much for the Benadryl.

“School will be here when you get back. Your Mission is now.” Micah’s father paused and adjusted his wire glasses. “You know these callings are important.” His father began to walk up the stairs, but then turned around slowly, “Micah.”

“Yes.” His father’s thoughtful tone was never a good sign.

“What do you know about this Audra Harrison person?”

Micah was taken aback, but only momentarily. He was glad his father was aware of her. “She’s a political activist, a journalist. She writes a blog.” He began to walk back up the stairs with his father. “Why? What do you know?”

His father reached the top step and put his hand gently on Micah’s shoulder. He shrugged, “It’s nothing really. I know her father a little.” He looked closely at Micah, “Your face is all red. Take something.”

His father went into his bedroom, “Call me when the pizza’s here.”

Micah wondered how much his father knew about Audra, and if he really knew her father. It was possible. He wondered if his father was really a religious man. Is it just a front? If it was, he was willingly sacrificing his son. Just like Abraham and Isaac. But a lot more sinister, especially considering that his father might be faking it. Micah shook his head; where was that angel when you needed him? Was he just going to let this happen? Jeez. No. Jesus. Jesus.... Jesus... Jesus. It was about damn time for him to start swearing. He was going to Brazil so that his father could appear to be a good Mormon. Sending his son on a mission. Donating to the church. And all that debauchery. No healthcare. It was so much worse than he ever thought possible.

He decided to call Audra.

That evening and through the next afternoon, it snowed. It had been unseasonably warm in Salt Lake during November. The temperature drop wrenched Salt Lake City's residents back inside their winter parkas, knit gloves and under garments. Before the snow fell, a perceivable chill was in the air, and those who might have been dressed in short sleeves or flip-flops felt the wind bite at their bare skin. The snow started as rain, changed to ice, turned to flurries and ended with a culmination of big dry flakes that would stick to the ground for days. The snow whitened the Salt Lake Valley, hitting the peaks of the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains.

By the afternoon, when Micah was scheduled to meet with Audra again at Red Emma's, there was a foot of snow in the Valley and the ski resorts boasted of a new base of 30 inches. Enough for those avid skiers to skip work. Micah wondered if

Audra would make it out. The roads were always a little more treacherous with fresh snow, but most Utahans owned four-wheel drive vehicles and SUVs just for this purpose. Micah knew Audra did not. He recalled a series of blog posts on gas-guzzlers around this time last year.

He was very early for the meeting. Each time someone entered, Micah looked up from his paper. He pretended to sip his coffee. He hated coffee, but decided that he was going to embrace his new rebellious, possibly father-hating, self. So he'd ordered a latte and sat with it in front of him. It was already cold, too.

Audra walked in, looking more serious than the last time he'd seen her. She recognized him immediately.

"Hey, you're that weird kid that was here the other day for my book signing."

"No." Micah was flustered by her use of the word "weird." He was already being categorized in her mind. "I wasn't here for your book signing, I was here looking for a book."

She shrugged and sat down, "Semantics. Who knew you were Golliver's son?" She laughed and lit her cigarette. "I guess you knew." Her voice tilted upwards. "I thought you looked kinda sick when you bolted out of here the other day." She tapped her fingers on the table. "Sorry 'bout that."

Micah frowned. His lips curved downwards, his cheeks held less of an arc; his eyes faked a menacing stare. Audra saw his look and tapped some ashes off her cigarette.

Her nearness caused him to sit up straight. He was uncomfortably rigid in his chair. They both sat together, on opposite sides of the café table, knees touching

slightly. His body tingled. Micah's chest moved up and back like a wave coming to shore.

He wondered, just briefly, if she was his problem to begin with. As though, he had betrayed Mormonism and his family the minute he'd begun reading her blog. Time to take charge. He wasn't even sure what his plan was. Wasn't sure what he was doing here.

He decided to ask the question that he might have asked the other day if she hadn't just ripped open his entire world. "Do you believe in God?"

Audra looked at him. Micah repeated his question, only this time it was almost inaudible.

She sucked in her cigarette, long and hard. It looked to him like she just might swallow the whole thing.

"Well do you?"

She brushed some ashes off the table. "Oh God," she sighed in exasperation. "Leave it to people in this state to want to talk about God." She put her head on the table and hit it to be dramatic, "Repent this. God that. Jesus here. For Christ sake, I'm so damn tired of it." She adjusted herself in her chair, bumping Micah's knees very lightly. "You know who my father is, don't you?"

Micah nodded, "I've read your book jacket. One of the apostles, right?"

She laughed at the casual way he said it.

"One of the apostles," she repeated, and took another drag of her cigarette. "Or," she pointed her finger at him, "just somebody whose beliefs I've been contending with all my life."

She shrugged, “I do believe in God. Just not in the way you might think about it. Or the way my father might think about it. More like a force of nature—like lightening or rain. Or birds maybe.”

Birds? Rain? She must have something better than that. “You think God is rain?” His head was spinning, what was he doing here?

“Um,” she frowned. She fidgeted in her seat and kicked him in the shin. “Something like that. Anyway. You can’t just ask those kinds of questions and get real answers. You have to find them out for yourself.”

He sighed. He wasn’t getting any answers. “What do I do?”

She patted him on the shoulder and frowned. “Have you talked to your father?” He hadn’t really noticed her lips yet, and they were the unifiers. Her lush full lips complemented her big blue eyes while lessening the severity of her nose. He decided he liked her nose. It may have been a little too big for her face, but it had sharp angular features that highlighted the seriousness or frivolity of her expressions.

She smiled with those great *unifiers*. “You know, you could take your name on the road. Use it to do what you think is right.” She placed emphasis on the “you” as she twirled a pencil in her hand and put the end thoughtfully in her mouth. Her eyes began to light up as she considered the possibilities to herself. Her hand moved under the table and touched his knee.

Tingling touch.

“Like you did?” He looked up at her.

She moved her head back slightly and shifted in her seat. “Look, kid.” Audra puckered her lips in thought, just enough, so that Micah could see little frown lines.

“My dad and I have our differences. We didn’t talk to each other for years.” She shrugged, “It gets better with time.”

“Are you talking now?”

She smiled, “On birthdays and holidays.” She ran her hand through her hair. She was playing with her hair a lot, which made Micah think she was uncomfortable.

Audra spoke again. “Ultimately, he realizes the work I do is about advocating for those who can’t do it for themselves. That’s why he can sleep at night.” She laughed, “And, I’m still Mormon.”

Micah wasn’t sure he could live like this. He wasn’t sure if he or his father could have an agree-to-disagree type of relationship. Even if he put all the cheating aside, his father put business in front of his employee’s well-being. The thought made Micah nauseous.

“Look, I’ve already donated almost all of our personal belongings to the Salvation Army.” He sighed and slumped down into his chair. “What else is there?”

Audra laughed. “You’re not serious—are you?”

“He’s never home. And I’m leaving for my mission in a week.” Micah paused on that fact. It didn’t faze Audra. He continued, “He doesn’t know what he has and doesn’t have. I called The Salvation Army, and they picked up a bunch of our furniture this morning.”

“Well, that’s one way.” She sat back in her chair. “But, you should think bigger.” She was quiet for a couple of moments, rolling ideas around in her head. As she did so, she stopped twirling her hair and began jotting down notes.

She finally looked up. “What if we did a good old fashioned protest? You could be sort of our center piece.”

Was he ready for that? Micah relaxed a little. “I’ve been thinking a lot.” He looked down at her issue of *The Nation*. That magazine always looked so homegrown to him. The paper seemed to be recycled, reused, but still serious. He continued to stare at the cover of the magazine, “He deserves what’s coming to him.”

Audra tapped out her cigarette, “Don’t we all?”

Micah looked out the window. “He’s taken care of his family.”

“Is that why your Mom left?” Audra squeezed his knee, making him jerk his leg inadvertently. He hadn’t expected her to know about his mother. He supposed his father’s life was now under public scrutiny. She laughed when the table jumped in response. “Would you be willing to speak at a rally?”

Micah couldn’t believe this was where it was going. Protesting his father’s store would certainly tell him something, he just wasn’t sure it was the right something. Did he even have a right to do this? After all, until six months ago, he and his brother lived blissfully under the same roof with his parents.

Could he speak out against his father? Not speaking out seemed to be his primary problem. Just letting things fall as they may was sending him to Brazil. A rally was big. He hesitated. “If you’re going to organize a rally, I think you should protest the main branch in downtown Salt Lake.”

She nodded, kept silent, which he supposed was an old-standby reporter technique. She was allowing him to think out his position. She was smart. But he found betraying his father to be easy; the words just poured out of his mouth. Pouring

out into an endless stream. “His office is there. It’s near a news station.” He wasn’t sure what he should do with his momentum. He began to get up to leave, grabbed his coat and gloves. He could do this. He could do something about his father. “You should do it soon, though, I’m supposed to report for my mission next Wednesday.”

She chewed on the end of the pencil thoughtfully. Made some notes. As he left, he swore he could see his whole life opening up before him.

Audra Harrison was good. She’d managed to organize the rally for Monday. Two days before Micah was scheduled to leave. Now, it was Sunday night and Micah was still trying to get rid of as much stuff as he could. He surveyed his room—still strangely full. Every time he thought he’d eliminated a layer of materialism, another one sprouted up to replace it. He’d gotten rid of his flat screen TV, only to discover a perfectly good regular television set in his closet. Piles of electronics. It was disgusting. His dad thought he was just packing up for his mission—putting the boxes in storage somewhere. Micah was waiting until Wednesday morning for the last charity pick-up, the one that would contain the entire contents of the living room and dining room.

There was a loud scrape of a car going over the speed bump near his house. Was his father home already?

Micah looked out his bedroom window. A mess of curly hair appeared from a clunky VW. Audra emerged from her car carrying a couple of protest signs. She waved at Micah. Oh. Wow.

He looked around his room. Had he brushed his teeth today? He ran his hand through his mess of blonde hair.

The doorbell rang. Jared would answer it. Micah changed his shirt and put on some cologne.

Footsteps and Jared talking excitedly. “You caught Micah just in time. You know he’s going on a mission.” Jared began his Motown rhythm, “a mission from God!”

Audra’s voice was singsong. He opened the door and walked into the hallway that led to the stairs. He smiled at Audra. Pretended to look casual. “I was just panicking,” he paused when he realized what he said, “packing.”

Audra punched him in the arm and laughed. “No time for that. Battle-plan night. You still up for it?” He ushered her into his room and closed the door.

“Nice meeting you Audra!” Jared yelled through the closed door.

“Bye, Jared!” Audra sat down on the mattress. “Still planning on that mission?”

He nodded, “Got any better ideas?” Micah sat down next to her on the mattress. He grabbed one of her protest signs and turned it over in his hands. “These are really serious.”

“That’s the other reason I came.” She picked up a sign. “I wanted you to see these before you got there tomorrow.”

She had three different protest signs with her, all with clever backbiting slogans. The first one was the most innocuous. *Health Care for All*. The other two

made his stomach turn. *Real Men Don't Sext*. And the final one played off of his father's company tagline. It read: *Dick: Don't Get Fresh With Our Healthcare*.

"There really not that bad. It's all just a game anyway. To get under his skin." She places her hand on his back and rubs in a circular motion. "Anyway, we've got you for that."

Headache. Audra is forceful and charged.

Warm breath. He leans into her. She kisses him, but then pushes back, "You're a lot like me."

She rubs his legs some more, kisses him a little more forcefully. What little inhibitions she has, evaporates. It is clear to Micah that she wants to be his teacher. His hands move up and down her body, like a newborn's fingers, they do not know where to go or how much pressure to apply. Clumsy. His fingers move to her nipples and she laughs.

"You and your father will work it out." Tug of pants. Zipper down. It is snowing outside.

Full white big Utah snowflakes pile up against his window. The edges of the daylight fade away with the snow. Tongue. Slight touch. Shaking.

The Blue Spruce that his family planted when his brother was born is twenty feet tall; its branches bend down with the snowy accumulation.

A groan.

His pants are up. He is out of bed. His eyes are cloudy, his chest heaves uncontrollably. The protest signs that litter his room begin to grow in his mind,

occupying the entire floor space instead of just the corner. The words on the sign float in the air—*Dick...Fresh...Uninsured...Sext...*

He runs towards the door, opens it and before he clears the room, heaves over the stairwell.

The protest information was posted on Audra's blog, and by Monday at noon, more than 150 people were on site, with more arriving every few minutes. Micah recognized some faces, some store employees, some neighbors, even some of his college classmates. Most look confused to see him, some assuming the truth and patted him on the back in solidarity, others just shook their heads at him.

He supposed he could hold his head high for two more days, and then there would be his mission. Right now, the mission was an easy way out. Something he'd been used to taking over the years. He wondered if he could go in for a couple of months and then sneak out—just leave one day. Run away. Maybe he could stay in Brazil; he'd know Portuguese by then. He could fake being pious. Hadn't his family done that? Maybe it was just in his blood.

At any rate, he might need to repent after what he was about to do to his father. He really did just want to stay in the sidelines for this one. After last night, he would prefer to watch from his car down the road, but he knew that wouldn't be possible. He needed to confront his father. He wanted to do something. Audra had been incredibly gracious after he'd thrown up. She'd patted his back, told him that if he didn't want to come to the protest, he didn't have to. Told him that this conflict was good for the family, he'd come out stronger on the other end. Just like a mother

comforting a child. She'd even offered to help him clean up. But Micah shook his head, told her he'd be all right. Told her to leave. He was tired of being a silent child. But he was also terrified.

The grocery store was an 87,000 square-foot converted warehouse that seemed more like a Costco or Sam's Club than a specialty grocery store. He remembered when his father opened the store. It had only been a couple of years ago. Micah and his whole family had walked down the aisles of the store, sometimes even ran and tested all of the free samples. He'd remembered how his father had told him that one day he would own all of this. Micah had been excited about the prospect, vowed to study business in college, began spending more time at the grocery store to learn the ropes. But after a while, that had worn on him and he stayed at home to play video games. Like a spoiled child.

The crowd was dressed in their warmest winter clothing: hat, scarves, full coats, gloves, jeans. He scanned the crowd to find Audra. She was in a long black winter coat; her face was pink from the cold air, and she looked elated to the point of goofiness. The crowd was big enough to hide in, but she saw him immediately.

Audra waved at him and began to move down the stairs. He gestured for her to stay where she was, and he walked over.

"You came." She gave him a concerned look, which was the only reference to last night that either of them made. "We're going to stay out here and chant until we draw your father out of his office. I want you to be in the middle by the podium."

Micah nodded, pushed the words out of his mouth. "I guess."

Audra smiled, “If you want you can even do some news interviews. We’ll start in about fifteen minutes. Where does he work?”

Micah pointed to a building caddy corner to the grocery store. “His office is on the second floor.” He looked at her. She was pretty. He suddenly felt a surge of courage; he wanted her to like him. “I’ll start at the loudspeaker.”

He regretted the decision almost as soon as he said it. He couldn’t even tell his dad he wasn’t going on his mission. Only now he was. How could he tell him this?

“You’ve got the prime spot then. All you’ve gotta do is start chanting your dad’s name.”

Micah sucked cold air into his lungs. Could this be any worse? If he shouted in the loudspeaker his father would certainly recognize him. He imagined it now. He’d poke his head out the window, looking confused and say *Micah is that you?* Yeah, it was him.

Audra looked at her watch, “Time to start.” She pushed Micah to the center of the protestors and handed him a portable microphone. The microphone was plugged into an electric generator that she brought with her. Micah briefly considered tugging the cord, unplugging it so nobody would hear him.

He spoke slowly into the microphone at first. Low enough so that nobody could really hear. He whispered, “Gallivan where are you? Gallivan come out.” He moved his lips, but said nothing. People caught on.

“Speak up,” a woman with a blue knit cap and short hair yelled. Micah sighed loudly into the microphone. The sigh swooshed through the airwaves causing the

crowd to pause. He looked for Audra, who was standing next to him. Audra spoke into the microphone to begin the rally.

“What do we want?” She asked the question and turned the microphone on the crowd.

“We want Gallivan.” The crowd cheered as she began the chant.

“What do we want?”

“We want healthcare!” Suddenly the microphone was back in Micah’s hand.

Audra winked at Micah and moved away from the stage and into the middle of the crowd. The crowd kept the chant going as Micah considered his options. They creatively added epithets he could never associate with his father. Words like bastard and capitalist cocksucker came out of the crowd. The voices carried a surreal forceful tone that made his head spin. Were all of these people really yelling at his dad?

He felt sorry for his father.

He looked at the microphone. The black head of the speaker stuck out at him. He looked around him. Handed the microphone to the emphatic women next to him. He wasn’t going to do this. He didn’t need to call his father out in public— or in private for that matter. He could be different. He could live his life differently. He gradually moved away from the crowd. He placed his back against the brick building and watched the rally. The crowd was angry, and it chilled him.

He watched as Audra was pulled back into the crowd, back into the chaos and ether where she belonged. Micah didn’t want chaos anymore. He wanted order, but his own personal order. He briefly wondered if he could make up for his parents sins

by working harder than they had. By believing more than they did. Believing in what? He didn't know. He supposed he would have to come up with that on his own.

He began to leave the rally. Although, the day was chilly, the temperature sat around forty degrees. When it began to rain, the drops hit his skin lightly—touching him like a kiss. His immediate reaction was to speed up and run to his car, but then he stopped. Paused for a moment, listened through the rain. Even on this cold Utah day, he could hear the soft sound of a warbler, becoming audible enough to surpass the chanting crowd calling out to his father.

Expected

“Push. Push. Push.” The glass doors of the hospital’s East Pavilion shuts behind Eliza, catching the right sleeve of her red hoodie. She feels the sharp tug and pulls hard—ripping the sweater she’s worn for days.

“Let the waves of energy wash over you.” Eliza focuses on the long hall ahead of her. She tries to close her ears.

“Remember our sounds.” A loud guttural “ahh” taps at her eardrum.

Now “mmms” and the Doula’s voice again. “Take a breather, mama. He’s almost here.” Eliza’s slippers drag on the tile floor. She holds her breath.

“Push. Push Mama. Push.”

Silence.

Gut-wrenching silence.

Soft cry. Laughter. She frowns and looks down the gray hall. This hospital is odd. Only one entrance and right by the labor and delivery suite. It is as though the hospital is a department store that puts all of its trash on display in the front window. Even goes so far as to decorate it with Christmas lights. Eighteen beautiful laboring rooms—right next to the visitor’s entrance. Intensely personal moments showcased for all.

She continues along the hallway. Down the long hall, past the neonatal unit, hang a right at the well-baby nursery, stop before you hit the soon-to-be parents fretting over how to diaper their soon-to-be newborns. Okay. Good. Her feet are moving. Her legs wobble, but she is upright, and she reminds herself that her feet are

moving. These floors are nicely waxed. She barely has to lift her legs. Her own moving walkway.

Stop. Here we are. CR24.

The sign hanging over the door is big. Bigger than she's ever noticed before. The words float around her. Pregnancy Loss.

Barren, she thinks. A white piece of laser jet paper with four words. Pregnancy Loss Support Group. No images like the rattle and stuffed animal that appear on CR23 announcing the hospital's parenting class. There certainly isn't a five-armed birthing goddess with a protruding belly greeting her either. No, that image is for the women in her prenatal yoga class. She looks down at her belly and then back at the white paper. Her uterus is starting to shrink, her breasts are painfully engorged. This is her sign—and no image can accompany it.

She's worn her Yoga pants today, convincing herself that if she dresses the same way she does every Tuesday, she can get through this day. This day—four days after the birth and death of her child—will pass. The same routine might be deceptively simple and easy to navigate through. Instead of turning left into the Yoga room, she'd just stop short and make a right.

She reaches for the door, pushes it, and peeks inside. A circle with five chairs. Five seems like a lot. Impossible. She's imagined this as a one-on-one with the grief counselor. Her upper body leans into the room, but her feet are stuck. She is halfway in, halfway out. Her feet do not want to cross the line; she moves back into the hallway.

A tall dark woman wearing stretch pants and one of those maternity t-shirts with extra elastic on the sides walks by her and smiles. The woman's hair is pulled back in a ponytail and Eliza recognizes her from Yoga class. Twins. She remembers that Twins is two weeks behind her in pregnancy. What had she said the last time Eliza attended Yoga class? Oh, yes, a yoga-confessional that felt so strangely hippy-dippy she'd made fun of it for weeks. Twins had wanted nothing more than to take both her son and daughter to the beach so they could feel the eroded earth on their skin. Not sand—eroded earth. Seriously, Eliza had laughed to her husband, seriously? Now, Eliza thinks this is not so terrible. The beach is nice.

Twins' belly obscenely announces the presence of three hearts beating in one body, three of nearly everything. A perfectly round symbol of success. Chalk one up to biological superiority.

She turns to face Eliza, "We missed you in class last week. Anaya did some amazing stretches for the back." She is one of those racially ambiguous people whose features fit a number of cultures. Eliza momentarily wonders what her children will look like—what culture will finally reveal itself. What she can recall of her own child's skin is limited. Her fingers carry the most memory; she circled her fingertips over every inch of her daughter's face. Soft, surreal, pale porcelain—no flush cheeks announcing circulating blood. Doll-like even. A full head of hair, tufts all of it reddish brown.

There is soreness in Eliza's throat. "The doctor's got me on moderate bed rest." Not an outright lie, this was once true.

Twins nods and places her hand on Eliza's shoulder, "Oh Geez, that'll probably be me in a couple of weeks." She pats her own belly, "These little peanuts are feisty. Blood pressure's already risin'." She begins to move away, but adds, "Yoga's down the hall today. Change of scenery, I guess."

Eliza shakes her head and moves away from the Pregnancy Loss door. Twins frowns and Eliza quickly points to the room across the hall. "Infant care. Gotta start somewhere." She crosses the hallway and touches the knob on the door of CR23. "Anyway. I should go."

"See you sometime." Twins' laughter rings with jittery-excited, mother-to-be anticipation.

Twins waddles down the hallway and sways her belly like an elephant might sway its trunk. Such purposeness in her body's movement, an absolute certainty in her role. Eliza was never that certain; she has always felt like an orphaned parent. Her loss and emptiness seems expected. She feels guilty about doubting her body's ability to sustain something other than herself. It is as though she drove her body to fail.

Positive thoughts create positive outcomes—a mantra from her mother. But it has never really worked this way for Eliza. Negativity has always seeped into her brain, like a disease, and it had worked its way around her pregnancy with such force that she had come to recognize this moment as true. Worries, like the ultimate placental abruption and subsequent suffocation of her daughter in utero, littered her mind obsessively throughout the first thirty-five healthy weeks of her pregnancy. Then, there was this past week: week thirty-six.

She slips into the Infant Care classroom before she is fully self-aware. The fluorescent lights please Eliza. Painfully bright and uncomfortable. She feels exhilaration that she can only liken to a raw nerve, not fully anesthetized, being cut into. That tingle of pain is present to remind her she is alive.

She walks towards the back of the room where the hospital has set up a nursery. There is one large rug that sits in the middle of the furniture. It is dark blue and pictures a frog bathing in a tub. The nursery rug on Eliza's floor at home is much less whimsical and features a sturdy oak with tree branches weaving together in an intricate design. Eliza's nursery has already begun to take shape. With each successful passing week of her pregnancy, she allowed herself one purchase for the nursery. First, the small items: baby nail clippers, shampoo, lotion, diaper cream. The first week of her second trimester she bought a baby carrier. Just recently she'd purchased the rug, a changing table, and even a couple of cloth diapers.

Voices. The first of the parenting class couples walk into the room. A very pregnant woman in purple sits down at the table closest to the door. She throws off her flip flops and puts her swollen feet on the table. Eliza's feet are also swollen, a mark that will stay with her for at least a few more days. Another couple walks in, and this woman seems to be handling her pregnancy a little better. She is glowing, just like the old adage says. Eliza avoids eye contact, not willing to have these people play any role in her life. Instead, those entering the classroom take a seat, continue their conversation or begin following Eliza's actions by examining items in the nursery.

This nursery demonstrates two different sleeping options for newborns— a bassinet placed on the floor next to a fake window and a co-sleeper, which attaches to a bed. In her mind, she has already chosen the co-sleeper. She recognizes other items as well including her changing table and infant tub. There is a rocking chair seated next to the bassinet. She sits, putting her feet up on the stool, and rocks back and forth. The type of rocking chair has elicited long hours of heated debate with her husband. She feels that for some serious nighttime soothing to occur a cushiony rocking chair is in order. John, however, feels differently. He wants to use a more traditional wood rocking chair that has been handed down through his family for generations. The chair is worn, but it is the same chair his mother rocked him in when he was a baby. A music box hums in the background. As she rocks, she examines her surroundings.

A toy chest near the far right wall is overflowing with toys. Stuffed animals, children's games, play telephones and teething rings escape from it. Above the co-sleeper is a strange postmodern mobile. Not at all like the one she's envisioned for her nursery. This one looks donated—handmade—and is a strange replica of a Mondrian mobile. Must be a gift from an overzealous and crafty parent. It doesn't seem like it is something the hospital would buy.

This nursery is themed: forest creatures with a disturbing overabundance of smiling frogs. The theme for her nursery is functionality. Most of the items she bought have multiple purposes. Balloons and frogs cover this wall paper. She's planned to paint her nursery walls three different colors, one for each wall, with a tree in the back corner next to the window. There had been some light discussion about

extending the branches along the molding for an added effect. Opposite this nursery is a fake bathroom. The bathroom contains a medicine cabinet above the sink and she guesses that in a future class parents will be learning about children's medicine.

The classroom is almost full. Eliza moves from the rocking chair towards the table near the woman with the swollen feet. She pauses next to a set of disposable newborn diapers laid out on the table. She traces her fingers over the Velcro; Mickey Mouse stares back at her. The clock behind the table says 6:55—has she wasted all this time in that rocking chair? Her support group started twenty five minutes ago. Almost instantaneously she decides to stay. She can go to that barren, empty void of a support group next week. She just wants one more day. She sits down on the stool and smiles feebly at a young man and woman who can't be any older than eighteen. They are seated directly behind her. The boy has blonde hair and a face full of acne. The girl is slight; her pregnant belly overtakes her. They both look nervous and a little bit miserable, but Eliza wonders if she is projecting her own feelings on this couple. They have been obviously procrastinating this class—the girl looks uncomfortably big.

No. This couple is in their own personal hell and it is wholly different from Eliza's. She nods her head at the girl. "You're about ready to pop. When are you due?"

"Tomorrow," she places her hand on her companion.

"Oh." There is an uncomfortable silence, but only for a moment.

“Better late than never,” the young man says as he gestures around the room, “at least, that’s what the judge said.” Eliza is surprised by the comment and the girl’s face turns red as soon as the words hit the air.

“What about you?” The quick change of subject staves off embarrassment for the young girl and her cheeks resume their normal coloring.

“Just entering the second trimester,” Eliza does not feel ill at ease lying to this young couple. After all, she has granted herself one more day of motherhood. She can make up anything she wants and they will not know the difference. It reminds her of when she was a child and would make up stories about her father to her friends. The father that had disappeared early in her life and never reappeared. Even as her mother sent positive energy out into the world, Eliza lived in a broken home. She remembers the Space Shuttle Discovery. She spent all of 1985 convincing her friends that her father was on the spacecraft too. Blown to bits, she’d told them, never even reentered the atmosphere. When her friends questioned her story, she insisted that he was just like Christine McCullough. He was a teacher too, only an English teacher. He’d been picked by NASA to read Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* in a spacesuit. They’d laughed and she would add more information to her story with each passing news report. A lie can be someone’s saving grace. A lie can be more important than the truth. A coping mechanism, Eliza thinks.

The young girl is still speaking to her. Asking for her name. She opens her mouth to respond, but is interrupted by a low forceful voice at the front of the room. There is a shortish woman with bright red hair and a face full of freckles smiling back at them. Eliza has seen this woman before in the hospital. She is one of the four

lactation consultants that roam the hospital floors advising women on breastfeeding, infant care and motherhood. This woman, Dee, is not the woman who suggested sage tea to dry up her milk. She is not the lactation consultant who held her hand for a brief couple of moments after she saw her daughter. Or at least Eliza does not think she is, but she cannot be certain.

Dee's hair is tightly curled and layered around her cheeks. Her smile is comforting and softens the severity of her deep voice. She pauses thoughtfully when she sees Eliza, but it is only a moment and she moves on.

Finally she is ready to begin. "Welcome to Infant Care 101." She sips her coffee, "You know I've gotta a nickname for this class. I call it safe and sane. Does anyone know why I call it that?"

Eliza frowns and looks at her other classmates in the front row. She notices that the woman with swollen feet also has purple toe nails with little silver sparkles. Her feet are kind of gross actually—all fat and puffy. Why show that off?

Dee continues, "This class is all about keeping your baby safe while retaining your sanity." A couple of chuckles. "Remember, you are about to embark on the life-long journey of parenting. If I teach this class correctly, and even if I don't," she laughs, "Your children will be aweing and annoying you for the rest of your life." She pauses for effect. "You'll need some coping skills."

Dee walks over to the purple-toed woman next to Eliza. "You're going to need to walk around every ten minutes or so." She turns to the woman's husband who has just arrived. "Go get your wife some water. She's going to need lots of fluid and

movement to get those feet down to a normal size.” The couple nods and the man heads for the water cooler.

“Quick. Does anyone know how to get a baby to stop crying?”

A few people tentatively raise their hands.

Dee points to a Hispanic man in the far back corner of the room. He mentions swaying and shushing and she adds a few more tips to his answer. Her pop quiz continues for a couple of minutes and Eliza watches as some members of the class begin to take notes.

Dee takes another long sip of her coffee. She has been moving around the room, talking informally to couples as she lectures. She stops behind Eliza. Dee places her left hand on Eliza’s shoulder. This gesture startles Eliza and she momentarily feels she must run that she must leave this room as quickly as possible. Dee’s grip is tight, but gentle, and her nails press into Eliza’s skin. Touch, and the physical memory associated with it, is all Eliza has been able to rely on over the past four days. Touch is the only sense she has allowed in, and Dee’s touch is familiar.

There had been no conversation, or at least not one she can remember. Just the raw silence that can accompany reality. She recalls Dee’s voice being much more southern; but maybe the heightened drawl came from the strange syncopated pace of slow motion. *How ya’ doin’ , hon.* Now, she is certain that the question hadn’t been that informal. That there had been a careful reading of her emotional state by Dee followed by a carefully calibrated interaction. But, whatever had been said to her right after her daughter’s delivery was lost to her, and it is only the physical sensations that she can conjure up now. Dee’s nails are uneven, from the occasional

biting of them she must do, and when she pressed her hand to Eliza's skin that first time, Eliza could feel both sharp and soft spots. Much like now.

Dee strokes Eliza's hair before she moves on.

Class time passes in strange increments. Between lecturing, questions, and Dee's occasional side-long glances at her, it moves both monumentally fast and shockingly slow. Towards the end of the class, it begins to shift back into real-time. Dee brings out a cardboard box and pulls out six very life-like baby dolls.

"Catch!" She tosses the dolls like footballs to each woman in the room. "I love this part. The only time you'll be able to throw your child and not be arrested!" Eliza thinks this woman has a dark sense of humor— a little disconcerting had she not been so gentle otherwise. Dee throws a doll to the young couple behind her. "Meet your baby for the next six weeks. Take a couple of minutes to get to know them—and name them!"

Dee includes Eliza, tossing a Hispanic doll to her. Eliza catches the doll. She is relieved by the gesture.

"These dolls are anatomically correct and they cry, pee, sleep and will, like a parrot, eventually say a phrase or two. So welcome to parenthood."

A quick getaway with her new fake-child would not be easy. She is not sure she wants to part with her doll just yet. In the few seconds she has held it—this Hispanic doll—is the only tangible thing she has from her pregnancy. She sits up and awkwardly tugs at the zipper on her hoodie. She wants to give the doll a ridiculous name like Dora or Margarita, but she can't help herself. She settles on the name she would have given her own daughter, Isabella.

She turns to the court-ordered couple. “What name are you thinking about?”

The girl finally smiles, “For the doll or the baby?”

The young man interrupts, “No name yet.” He shrugs. “We only decided to keep the baby last week.” Too young to know when to keep quiet, she supposes.

The girl really is young too. Eliza thinks she looks like a panicked child when she frowns. This very young, very pregnant girl is tearing up—flustering before them. “Why do you have to be so open about everything?” She stands up, but she has not given herself wide enough berth and her huge belly knocks into the table. She is horrified and begins to cry loud, wailing sobs.

Dee takes this moment to walk over to them and begins rubbing the pregnant girl’s back. “What’s a matter, hon?” Eliza does not think these were the first words Dee said to her. Dee had entered the room, knowing what situation Eliza was in. But, she can imagine that exact phrase getting mixed up in her mind with a southern drawl. However, Dee has asked this question; it is honest and heartfelt, and the girl softens a little bit in response. There is no real conversation, not yet, at least. Dee must be very used to these types of conversations, Eliza thinks. The girl is unable to do anything but cry and gasp for air between sobs. Had she come undone like this? No, she doesn’t think so. Even, if she wants to cry she cannot. She is cold, and she feels only the edges of emotion and pain returning to her.

There is now a small conversation, a word or two here or there between Dee and the girl, but the girl is calming. Eliza can hear bits and pieces of it.

I had my first child young too....

You’ll be a great Mom....

You can even bring your little one to class and practice on him...

There's already enough love...

This girl's problem is in the realm of the solvable for Dee, a very pregnant woman coming unhinged is par for her course. Something someone can be talked down from. She, however, is in a completely different category. She is pretending, living life in that mid-air momentary suspension before she hits the ground.

She remembers the early months of her pregnancy. John had looked at her in a whole new light, with more love, even. She hadn't thought this was possible since they had already been together so long. He woke her up in the morning with a kiss on the forehead or gently rolled her to her side when she was in danger of lying on her back or stomach. Their reactions to the regularly scheduled prenatal check-ups were like night and day, as well. She would be nervous—anticipating the worst and making her blood pressure skyrocket and leaving her in tearful relief when the doctor found the sound of the fetal heartbeat, and John would be elated. Spending the rest of the day tapping his feet to the rhythm of the baby's heartbeat. Those days were nice. An afternoon doctor's appointment followed by a dinner and a conversation that revolved solely around the child growing inside of her. Baby Bell was the nickname they had given her.

“What?” She would say, pointing her fork at him and shaking her head. “You look positively goofy.”

He would sip his beer or wine, take a bite of food and smile back at her. “I can't help it! I'm in love.”

That always made her smile. “Do you think Baby Bell will have your eyes?”

This is when John would begin to tap his feet and say what became his mantra the entire eight and half months of her pregnancy. “She is going to have your eyes and my charming disposition.”

Then she would roll her eyes. “Drink your beer and shut up.”

These words or simple variations had become a well-run routine for them. The key was that she was doomed to provide the child with just physical characteristics, and he would give the baby all the traits that mattered: intelligence, wit, sense of humor, calm under pressure. In the end, Baby Bell did have some of Eliza’s characteristics, including her bluish green eyes. But those physical features can change over time, and of course, the other features, John’s features, take time to develop.

Eliza looks at her Hispanic doll, touches the tufts of its black hair. Places her fingertips on its eyelids—closes and opens them.

During the last four days, she’d barely been able to look at John, avoiding him in every possible way. Not talking at the hospital had been easy. Shock and confusion bred silence. Last night, when she was finally at home, no conversation occurred; just occasional sidelong glances at each other. Her restlessness was turning into endless walking. She was up this morning at 3 a.m. and on the treadmill fifteen minutes later. Finally at 5 a.m., when daylight began to break through, she moved her walk outside.

She touches her doll’s ears. For all of its realistic features, it still feels plastic. She looks at the young couple. The girl is finally calm, laughing even. They both

return to their seat. She has learned their names from the snippets of conversation; the girl is Jessie and her companion, Phil.

Dee calls the class to order. “Before I end the first class, I like to have each couple introduce their dolls and tell me what you hope to learn from this class. Also, I’d love to create a parenting support group. Can anyone be in charge of an email listserv?”

Jessie raises her hand and Dee nods in her direction. “Great.” She turns to the class, “Please put your contact information on this paper—so Jessie can create the list.”

Dee looks around the room and points to the Hispanic couple in the back. “You guys first.”

Names always evade Eliza, but she is usually able to identify people by their comments. She has an uncanny ability to hone in on the dumber things people say in these types of classes and give them nicknames. This, of course, means that sometimes people’s identifiers change with each passing week, and is also ineffective for first time classes. She never has any really good nicknames until week three or so. She listens as she hears parents-to-be detail their concerns about changing diapers, breastfeeding, formula making, this or that type of crib or stroller and every other ridiculous question in the book. Dee either has an immediate and helpful response or tells them to hold tight because these questions will be covered in the course of the class. She finally arrives at Eliza’s end of the room.

“You two,” she points to Jessie and Phil.

Jessie smiles, but is still wiping away tears. “Sorry for my freak-out.” She says this while mostly playing with the doll in her hand, not looking at anybody in particular. “Anyway. I’m Jessie, and this is Phil.” She turns to Phil. “Did we decide on a name?”

Phil shrugs, “How about Evan?”

She nods her approval and looks at the chalkboard behind Dee, “And this is Evan.”

Dee jokes with Jessie, “Jessie is due tomorrow, so we might all have a little one to work with over the next couple of weeks.”

“Yup. We’ll need the help.”

“You’ll be fine.” Dee’s reassurance is comforting. “What are you guys most concerned with?”

This time it is Phil who speaks up. “I just want him to be happy.”

Eliza thinks this is the most reasonable thing anyone has said yet.

Dee echoes her sentiments, “If you’re already concerned about his happiness then you are well on your way.”

She turns to Eliza and then abruptly segues into next week’s reading. It is one of those moments when a student is relieved to be passed over by the teacher. But, Eliza sees that this has not gone unnoticed by other couples.

Very soon the class is over.

Once again, she is herself.

Dee is at the front, slowly and methodically erasing her chalkboard notes. She is waiting for Eliza.

Eliza rolls Isabella's hair in her fingers. She can't decide what they've made the hair out of. When she touches it in chunks, it feels human, but each individual strand is stringier than normal hair. It is probably just string or some synthetic, flossy variant thereof.

Eliza approaches the front of the room. Dee is facing her, having given up her pretense of erasing this evening's lesson off the chalkboard. Eliza places the doll on the table where the newborn diapers sit. She does not say anything for a minute or two.

Dee moves to pick up the doll, but Eliza's hand is back on Isabella. "It's just that I never got to be her mother." This is the thought that has been unraveling in Eliza's brain. Her child never got to be her child. She picks up the doll and touches the tiny fingers and curly black hair. She then waves it frantically in Dee's direction. The doll begins to cry.

No heartbeat. She is certain that this is the one thing this doll and her baby have in common. Her Isabella didn't have these dark features. This doll is bronzed, nothing like her or John's family. Her doll is dressed in polka dot pajamas. Eliza reaches for a blanket and folds down a corner, she places the doll in the center of it and pulls first the left and then right side of the blanket around the doll, finally the feet. Her doll stops crying.

Eliza tucks in a loose strand of Isabella's hair. "I would have been good at this. I could have easily wrapped her up like a little burrito." She looks at Dee. Isabella is tightly swaddled and close to her chest.

Dee nods in the direction of the doll. "Maybe you should."

“Should what?” Eliza pauses and sits down.

“Be her mom.” Dee gestures for her to get up. “Take some time to get to know her. It might help.”

For a moment Eliza sits and stares at the doll. She imagines it squirming in her arms, suckling on her nipples, resting against her chest. Dee’s suggestion is not a bad one; she’s heard about women doing this before, even read an article once about a woman who took her actual stillborn home with her. She’d spent the weekend with her child-that-wasn’t before they’d put the little thing in the ground. Unbelievable, Eliza had thought then, but now she understood the impulse. It is incredibly hard to say goodbye to someone who, as it turns out, never really existed. All those preconceived notions of what your child will be like can never disappear because there isn’t some real version of your child bull-doing right through them.

The fake nursery is dark. Until this moment, she hasn’t thought about what nighttime ritual she would adopt for her Isabella. She’s known that rocking would be involved, but hasn’t pinpointed what else might be. She takes a seat in the rocking chair and nestles the doll’s head on her shoulder so she can place her cheek against its cheek. Very soon, she can hear Isabella breathing.

The song comes easily enough. It is the song her mother always sang to her as a child. She starts with the verse she always thinks of. “If you get to heaven before I do.” Eliza can see her daughter’s blue eyes pop open, fully aware of the world. “Coming for to carry me home,” her voice is low and is more a melodic whisper than true singing. “Tell all my friends I’m coming there too.” She continues, “Coming for to carry me home.” Isabella’s fingers are pinching her skin and she turns her head

and lets out a full blown wail every couple of minutes. Eliza wonders if she will always be this hard to put to sleep.

There is another verse about Jordan and a band of angels and Eliza sings that verse too. The version of Isabella she is holding in her arms is nearing the ten month mark and her language development has begun. Isabella smiles and coos syllables at her.

Finally, Eliza begins to talk to her child. “There were so many things we were going to show you. Like the ocean. When you stand in front of it, you can feel just how small you are. You just know you’re not important. After that you just feel better.”

Isabella makes a smacking sound with her lips, “Ba.”

“There are picnics and bike rides and ice cream. Oh, you’d love ice cream.” This goes on for some time. She tells her about the Tulip garden—Sherwood Gardens, the garden she and John walked to every morning when Eliza was pregnant. She talks about the tulips and how they too only last a short while; in a burst of pure floral power. Then you replant, and new ones come up in their place. She tells her she knows it is not the same though. Each one is special. Eliza discovers that when she places her nails underneath Isabella’s chin, the child screeches with laughter. Every so often, between breaths and her description of everyday life occurrences, Eliza tickles her daughter.

And then it is over.

She walks down the hall swiftly past the birthing and delivery suite. Where she once might have lingered, she picks up her speed. Once again, her slippers drag quietly on the hospital floor. She breaks into a run when she nears the automatic double doors at the entrance. Her arms are empty now, but her shoulders still feel weighed down, and she knows this feeling will never go away.

The cool May air hits her immediately. She takes a deep breath and picks up her pace until she reaches her car. But, she isn't ready to drive. Her legs tell her to keep moving—to stretch them out. She opens the trunk and places her purse in it.

She runs towards the hospital exit and up Charles Street towards Baltimore City. She feels like a thief, stealing away in the middle of the night. Her legs and hips open up with each stride forward. Her lungs joyfully accept the cool air. She runs in the middle of the street, which she knows is dangerous but doesn't care. She runs for two and a half miles to the tulip garden she has just told her daughter about. It is here she stops.

The tulips are already gone. They last only a short time. The garden is already far different from the April walks that were gloriously full of spring. It was on these walks—after they sat down on the park bench—that she would feel Baby Bell kicking. The walking motion must have been comforting for her, because when Eliza stopped to sit Baby Bell would protest.

She sits on a bench now. She closes her eyes to see if she can picture the garden as it was. Some of the tulips, the purple and the orange in the west corner of the park were in full bloom. She begins to feel an excruciating pain in the middle of her body. Her uterus is cramping, just as it did when they induced her. She feels

tightness in her middle that paralyzes her and extends to her groin and hamstring. She is momentarily frozen. She begins to breathe as though she is in labor. With some concentration, she is able to lift her body off the bench and onto the grass. She manages to curl into the fetal position and rocks slowly back and forth on her knees. She forces her mind to go elsewhere. She thinks about the garden. The yellow tulips were just starting to open up and then there were the bright pink azaleas. The pain is subsiding. She opens her eyes. In just two weeks, the garden has completely changed. Her favorite yellow and white tulips are the last to go and now she sees only green stems pushing above the ground. No flowers. Just two weeks.

She gets up. The doctors warned her against too much exertion so soon after her delivery, but she cannot help herself. She touches her ponytailed hair and begins a very slow jog towards the hospital.

She feels a little warmer, probably from the exercise.

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