

ABSTRACT

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This collection of short stories focuses on post-religion in the modern-day South. It follows the lives of characters faced with the struggle between hedonistic desire and following their fear-driven Christian upbringing.

INCHING TOWARD SALVATION

By

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BATHTUB BAPTISMS

This Easter Sunday, my 22nd, marks the first time I've not attended church on Easter. It is also the first time I haven't been crammed into the home of a family member, helping peel potatoes before Easter service, trying not to sweat through my Sunday best while shoved with the rest of the women in the family cooking the family feast. There was one exception that involved a hospital stay when I was 16, and even then, when the doctors were confused and the nurses were convinced I was in labor, and they all finally decided it was kidney stones, I was propped in a bed at Children's Hospital, all their faces staring down at me. "We've got a big Easter basket waiting for you," they said, as if this was the most important matter on my mind. "Don't worry. And we'll make sure to bring you back sermon notes."

Having not yet passed the stones, I only grunted. I raised an eyebrow at my mother who was dressed in a pantsuit rather than her typical dress and she glared at me and patted my head and they all scurried out the door.

I was raised in the church of Christ, a conservative, fundamentalist, New Testament church most commonly found in large pockets of the Bible Belt. These churches were sometimes small, with nothing more than a sanctuary and pulpit, and sometimes huge, a facility that could house all activities any member may want to participate in and could otherwise be deemed heathen outside of the church—a gym, a nursery, a knitting club—secular memberships just weren't permitted. Until I was around 18, I attended church every time the doors were open: Sunday morning, Sunday night,

Wednesday evening, and any other times required in between. My grandparents and cousins attended the same church and on Sunday mornings we took up a whole pew in the large sanctuary. When I think about my family, I cannot separate the church from them.

The Church of Christ, it is important to understand, is not a denomination exactly. They are Christians, of course, but they believe that God set out only one path to righteousness—that there was no room for various denominations or sects. There was only one *true* church. All other denominations, then, were rendered null and void by God if they didn't follow the proscribed rules of the New Testament. This meant that all other Protestant groups were out (in terms of entry to heaven, or into our homes for that matter): Baptists and Methodists, Pentecostals, and most community churches. Of course, the church's stance on Catholicism was nothing less than favorable. . This is how it came to be called, at least by my family, as "*the* Church", rather than "*a* church". As in, "Oh Meredith, I'm not sure about having that girl over to the house—I don't think she's a member of the church." Or, "It wouldn't be right to keep inviting the Jones' over—they left the Church years ago." If I was to question this reasoning I would be reminded of 2 Corinthians 6:14. Once prompted, I would recite it along with my father or grandmother, usually, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" Oh yeah, I would think to myself, what a dumb question—and remember that the answer was always in the Scripture. This particular verse was unique because it could apply to various relationships and friendships—unequally yoked did not just apply to

different denominations (forget about other religions), but to race as well. Indeed, “what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

When I was in elementary school, both of my parents worked late and one of my grandparents used to pick me up from school. On the first days of a new year, my grandfather would always ask me for the class counts: “How many blacks are in your classes this year?” he would ask, referring to my 98% White school as if it were deep in the middle of inner city Birmingham. “You know that Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, don’t you? You need not be getting near them.” I would giggle nervously and dutifully report back, wondering if other races should be counted in these numbers. Asians *looked* white, I thought, but most Indians seemed definitely *black* to me. Regardless, as long as the number was under five, he was usually satisfied.

I had more important things to worry about though: memorizing Bible verses so that I could be the leader on my Sunday School’s memorization board, too busy worrying about when I would reach the mysterious age of accountability—the age when I could be baptized—saved from an eternal life in the fires of hell—and if I didn’t play the cards right and died before then.

In the Church, the age of accountability is the age one reaches when he becomes accountable for his sins. This is not a specific age, but rather a mysterious and elusive maturity level that is hard difficult to define. As a child, this was even harder to understand. All I knew was what I heard at a sermon at church camp when I was six: “The CHILDREN WILL be SAVED. The BABIES. Christ loves the LITTLE CHILDREN. You all will KNOW when you are no longer a CHILD. At that time, you will need to question deep inside yourself and decide if you are going to save yourselves

from Hell—if you will accept Christ and be baptized.” The eight and nine year olds, the “old” kids, were nodding their heads, drawing little hearts around the words “saved” and “eternal life” in their Bibles. Inside my head, I thought that I might KNOW. That I might no longer be a child. That I might understand what it meant to be saved. But later that night, when I asked one of the camp counselors, on the way to Girls Swim, as we took the long path around camp so that the bathing suited girls wouldn’t be seen by the boys, if it was time for me to be saved, she just laughed. “Oh no, no, no,” she laughed. “You can’t be baptized so young.”

But as I got older, the words of that camp preacher continued to haunt me. In Wednesday night Bible class, a more informal setting, I began to get bolder with my questions: “If a person knows in their heart that Jesus is the Son of God and died for us,” but is still really young, I guess, will they go to hell?” I would ask. The answer was always, undeniably yes.

This age of accountability is a tricky thing, though. If you’re too young at baptism, the members of the church will whisper and poke each other’s shoulders while they crane their necks to see the little kid’s head above the wall of the baptismal. “Oh what a shame,” they’ll whisper as they turn their pages to the next hymn, “His parents don’t have any control over him—they don’t even know that he doesn’t understand. It won’t take. It will have to be done again.”

When I was 13, an age my grandmother, the premier authority mainly because she had memorized the most Scripture of all of us, deemed the appropriate age to begin thinking about baptism, I started getting the nods during the invitation—the song sung write after the sermon—Baptist churches call it the altar call—the song invites those lost

souls to come to Jesus, to make a public confession of their faith, or to make a public confession of their sins: or the most-desired by me and my cousins for after-church gossip, a combination of all three: a written testimony about a life of sin and short skirts, a tearful choked out plea for prayers, a desperate request for a new baptism—to be washed clean and rededicated after life on the edge. These were often performed by aspiring drama students, seventeen and eighteen year olds with little to do other than approach the altar with admissions of cussing too much and maybe dancing in front of boys at a school prom. But they were fascinating just the same. But I would slouch down low in my seat when I heard the words to “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling”, trying to avoid the pinch by Gran, to avoid making a confession of something I was certain I hadn’t done. After all, I had been living a life devoted to Christ, I thought, from the time I was out of the womb.

One Easter Sunday around this age, my grandmother presented me with an Easter basket that she said was just for girls my age. It had a few pieces of candy, some lipsticks from an Estee Lauder free gift, and a handful of clippings from sermon notes on baptism as well as a note card filled with the Scripture commanding baptism: Acts 2:38, Mark 16:15, Acts 22: 16, and so on and on.

Plagued with confusion and fear of approaching a church full of people in order to be baptized, I often stayed up late at night, trying to fall asleep, and considering my options. I had horrible visions, in these midnight hours, of a gang of murders breaking into my house, ready to kill the whole family like the killers from “In Cold Blood”, which I had recently read. Since I was on the second floor, I figured I had enough time in between hearing the intruders downstairs and them reaching my room to possibly save

my eternal soul before they got to me. I improvised a plan in which I would baptize myself in the bathtub, usually referring to the required scripture with which to perform this task at least a couple of times a night, checking and rechecking the words, knowing that if not just right, it could most certainly not *take*.

In the end, my baptism came out of an attempt to save my relationship with my then-Baptist boyfriend. He had been baptized a few months before, and not only could I not bear not to keep up with him, I feared he might not want to be “unequally yoked” after a while. I had recently learned that the baptism didn’t even have to occur at the church—although that it wasn’t ideal since I was skirting the “public confession of sin” issue—but could be performed at the preacher’s house if I so wished.

So, in the end, I wasn’t even in a church, but in the Jacuzzi hot tub in the backyard of the preacher’s house I had known all my life. I felt slightly ashamed of this, but I was pleased to look around on that spring afternoon and notice that there wasn’t a single church member watching, not a single hymn prodding, but just a quiet breath of relief that can now only be explained as incredibly creepy. My eternal soul was saved somewhere in the middle of a five-seater hot tub in the back of a two acre lot in Shelby County, Alabama, while my mom and my grandmother sat on the edge, watching as my preacher’s glasses fogged from the steam, and snapped pictures with instant cameras, trying to capture that precise moment when I rose, anew from the cleansing water.

SNAPSHOTS

Baby Picture

In a small suburb outside of Birmingham, the biggest city in Alabama, a medium-sized house sits at the top of a precariously steep hill. In it, a young family sits, husband, wife, and five year old daughter, watching a television screen in a wood-paneled den. In the picture, you can't see the outside of the house, of course, but you can sense an awareness of this first home in the pride on this young family's faces.

In the center of the picture, the girl sits, tentatively perched on her father's lap. His hands hold her, loosely, around the Minnie Mouse t-shirt pulled tight across her five-year-old belly. The hair on the father's hands stands out dark and coarse against the harsh flash lighting of the picture, little black C's that look like ink scratches. Behind the father and daughter, the wood grained walls of the den in which they sit seem to close in, the late afternoon sunlight providing dim enough light to hide what exists in the shadows, behind them.

In the father's hands, the girl. In the girl's hands, the book.

In the corner of the picture, the television screen plays a University of Alabama football game, the white lines of the field blurred in motion, the players in crimson and white jerseys froze in mid-tackle. The University is the alma mater of the mother and the father.

In the father's eyes, there are glints of anticipation directed toward the television screen. The father isn't posing, but he is aware of the camera, devoting part of his attention to the game, the other to the viewfinder. In the cock of his head, vanity. In the girl's eyes, there is a blank stare, eyes slightly turned toward her book. The flash turned her eyes red, and later, when she saw the picture, she began to cry.

In one corner of the picture, the mother's leg pokes out, dangling in mid-air above the father's head, toes flexed toward the television. The chair on which she is seated cannot be determined from the framing of the picture, and later inspection by the family produced no answers. So, in the picture, there is only her leg, calf muscles flexed, the foot curved downward, in an arch that reminds the girl of the tiny Roly Poly's she finds underneath the rocks outside of her house and collects as pets in old Land of Lakes tubs with holes gouged in the top. The mother's foot is flexed, kicking something the camera couldn't capture. And still. In the space beyond the picture we can sense a contentment and restlessness in that flexed foot, a young mother tired but happy, watching her husband and daughter relax on a weekend afternoon.

The girl is patient. Her tiny index finger waits, marking the page in her picture book.

Christmas Card

A rusted swing set. A confetti of typed stories on square white pages covering an uneven lawn. Just beyond the swing set, in the back left corner of the picture, the tail and strong hind legs of the family's Labrador Retriever nearly disappear into the dark woods that lie behind the fence under which the dog is escaping.

In dusty afternoon light in an Alabama August, the girl, now seven, hangs upside down from a swinging bar. In her hands, a worn piece of paper, crinkly from sweat and being clutched in the afternoon's humidity. On the paper, a lot of words for a girl of seven to read. But she will, hanging upside down from her rusted swing set while her father videotapes her. Her mother's presence with the Polaroid camera is in the girl's strained forehead, the attempt to keep her cheeks from sagging down with gravity, from flushing bright red. The flash of the camera whitens and smoothes the color of the girl's face, but because of the angle of the bar, the slant of the sun, a narrow strip at the top of the girl's head remains red, like a headband, and there are two creases there. She is being recorded on both video and snapshot film, and she is determined to make an impression.

The girl, turned upside down, waves of hair straining toward the leaves of grass below. The gap between her two front teeth is wide, a tiny opening that begins to sing her story out loud.

Gifted

In the back of a dark classroom, the girl and a boy sit, heads looking down at the table in front of them, brows furrowed. Underneath the table, their little feet belie their serious impressions; both the children's feet are turned up, jubilantly, as in mid-kick. Behind the girl and boy's heads, outside the square, smudged window of the elementary's only gifted classroom, a class of third graders run and jump on a schoolyard playground.

In the picture, a white orb, a smear the size of a pencil eraser glows above the heads of the children. Though the flash of the camera made it, many believe that these orbs indicate the presence of something beyond human—in the orb, then, there is

longing. And frustration in its ragged edges, blurring down upon the children's worksheets, math problems years beyond their actual age.

The teacher sits at a desk in the edge of the picture, a women's magazine atop her grade book, the glossy pictures glinting in the background. Against the teacher's lip, a red pen, pushed against the center of her thin, flat lips. Her stockinged feet poke out from underneath the desk, the soles turned upward, as if in prayer.

The girl and the boy look down at the table in front of them, the whites of the pages before them smudged with dark eraser flecks that even the camera couldn't miss. Over the papers, they lean, heads down, brows furrowed, fingers tightly gripping short, often sharpened pencils with little more than nubs of erasers sitting on top.

Baptism

The girl has reached the age of accountability, or 13 years of age. Not in this picture: the girl's face at the last church revival on spiritual warfare that scared her and her eternal soul out of nearly 7 nights of sleep before her mother led her to the preacher. Not in the picture: fear.

In the picture, there is a hot tub full of water, tufts of steam dancing at its edges, the afternoon's light fading into evening. Beside the tub lies a Bible. In the steam, the girl's discomfort mixes with the relief of salvation, of the promise of sleep. In the fog around her questioning brow, there is a defiant tilt in the girl's head, her eyes looking sideways and upward, deliberately away from heaven. Later she notes that there is menace in her eyes, and resents the photograph, for its cruel, dare she say, sacrilegious interpretation of her salvation. Every time she looks at the photograph later, she

questions her baptism's authenticity. She wonders if there was something in her eyes that spoke what her heart was trying not to feel: uncertainty and, in the tight smile, a hint of self-satisfaction.

In the picture, which the girl cannot destroy, for the girl's mother keeps the negative, the preacher, bald and owl-eyed, perches on the tub's edge, hand outstretched, as the girl cocks her head to listen to an ambulance, racing outside of the picture's reach.

Funeral March

On a day when the sky is bright but not blue, and there is not a cloud in the sky, three rigid bodies pose for a picture: the girl, now 14, her father, her mother, her brother. In the tightness of their jaws, in the smears of mascara across the mother's hand, in the forced flat expressions, in the darkness of their eyes, not a sparkle among them, death whispers off of the picture.

The family stands on the wraparound front porch to their house, paused near the bottom of the stairs leading toward the driveway. Behind them, to the right of the front door, the girl's grandmother, the father's mother, can be seen from one of the house's front windows. Her shadow is barely visible behind the imposing scene of black they create, but she is there, her dark form nothing more than shades of grey. In her rigid stance there is an aura of heartbreak, and too, the beginnings of a hunch to her once straight back, like that of a widow's.

A stack of Bibles sits on the porch's railing, their shape visible from the corner of the father's head. The four bodies are nearly down the porch steps, headed to the cemetery, dressed in black, the Bibles left behind.

In the corner of the picture, a bluebird sits in one of the ferns that hangs from the porch's ceiling, its beak open, mid-song.

Space

A close-up of a face and shoulders. The girl grins, crookedly, strangely, with freckled skin and eyes not quite looking at the camera. Her chin points toward a distant memory, her hands casually tilting her diploma in front of her chest, with little concern for its presentation.

In the slightly blurred edges of the otherwise attentively framed shot, there is a tangible irritation on the part of the photographer, as if he has become impatient, tired of holding the camera for so long. Behind the picture, in the album, there are 10 more just like it, each ruined because the girl moved at the exact moment the camera's flash went off, resulting in smeared blues and golds and a large halo of red hair around the girl's face, whose features were too blurred to be distinguishable.

But, in this final, most still shot, caps and gowns blur together to form a haze of royal blue with flashes of gold. Tassels waving softly in the May breeze flicker across the picture like the lightning bugs which usually didn't appear in Alabama until mid-June.

Look closer. In the girl's eyes, that are only downcast upon closer inspection, there is loneliness, despite the insistent size of her smile, with her orthodontia-perfected teeth.

Friendship

Five friends stand in a line in front of their freshman college dormitory at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. The girl stands in the middle of the group; perhaps she stands a little taller, a little prouder than the others. In each of the girl's open, uninhibited smiles there is freedom. In each of the girl's eyes, there is a tiny white or gold or red fleck that spells rebellion. Each of the girls holds the other at a slight distance; the extra space between these girls is jarring, unexpected. And in the space between their bodies, the rolling green lawn of the dormitory and the campus building beyond that slips in, opportunity. The leaves on the ground in front and behind and to the sides of them are yellow, red, orange: October, or two months that the girls have lived here, in this dormitory, all on their own for the first time. They are from different worlds, some religious, like her, some agnostic, a new and indifferent position the girl must learn to understand.

Behind the girls, their honors dormitory, a statue of Aristotle, a poster of E.O. Wilson.

In front of them: the world.

Red Bird

In a small nursing home in the center of Haleyville, Alabama, the girl and her great-grandmother sit, staring out a window. From the picture you can see their faces, only a slight flash of sun reflected in the glass from which their curious eyes peer. On the window's ledge there sits a red bird, poised for flight, a drop-in visitor for the faces behind the window, staring into freedom beyond the nursing home.

In the girl's eyes, contentment, holding her grandmother's hand. In the grandmother's eyes, sadness, as she realizes the bird will soon take off in flight. Beyond their bodies, the door to the room in the nursing home has swung open, revealing an Exit sign just beyond the frame.

Creativity

In a dark corner of the girl's favorite bar, the girl sits with her legs curled underneath her, her flip-flops visible underneath the table. Smoke curls up from the cigarette-filled ashtray in front of her, a single puff cutting across the center of her face. In the window behind her table, sun streams in, bright, as in early afternoon.

Next to the girl are four empty bottles of beer; two cups swimming with melted ice and the dregs of Jack Daniels, straight; and in front of her are a notebook and E.O. Wilson's *Consilience*, Darwin, Thomas Kuhn's *Theory of Scientific Revolutions*, and a worn copy of Roland Barthes' *On Photography*. If you squint your eyes, you can see almost see learning here, across the girl's determined face.

Not on the page are the things the girl has learned on her own, at college, things that refute her fundamental Christian upbringing—things that scare and excite her. Not on the page is the struggle to put this into words, for her senior thesis, without betraying her family, herself, or even, her God.

The physical strain is evident: in girl's finger clutched around her Flair pen, in the balled up papers around her. And in the slackness of her jaw, the glaze in her eyes, the alcohol makes sense. It erases, for this day, the contradictions of the girl's fundamental

upbringing that clashes with nearly all she has encountered over her four years at the university.

The girl sits, under the light of a bar lamp, the knuckles of her hand white as she clenches the pen poised over the page, ash falling and smudging the stark, white page.

Learning

Eyes closed shut, the girl has her arm wrapped tightly around her mother. Their bodies are turned toward the side, facing each other, with their heads angled toward the camera. The stance is uncomfortable, rigid. The mother's eyes are wide with surprise, delight, maternal instinct. She leans into the girl with her entire body, the wind ruffling their hair, so that each of the mother's hairs, even, curl and wisp sideways toward the girl, who stands straight up, at attention. There is a tightness to the girl's eyes, a weariness mixed with fear.

Behind them, there is a car packed full, with not even a single inch of a side or rear window in sight. On the car's hood, a new Bible and an old Bible, passed down from her great grandmother; a devotional book; and the presence of her church that will follow her nearly a thousand miles away from her life in the Bible Belt, to graduate school, where the Bibles and devotions will mean nothing.

Atop the girl's closed eyelids, there are the beginnings of deep wrinkles, strained, of fear, not worry. Her mother's eyes look straight ahead at the camera, the flash from the expensive diamond cross necklace she always wore not matching the shine of her teeth in the white sunlight.

Independence

In a studio apartment miles from Alabama, in the state of Maryland, the girl and her dog stare at a stack of books. The dog perches on the girl's desk, his little chin resting on the stack of books tabbed with Post-Its and slips of paper.

The girl, alone, has to take the picture. But if you look closely, she is reflected in the computer screen that sits to the left of her dog. She is there, and not there, her and the camera a shadow over the computer's desktop background: the photograph of a child, sitting, with her father, holding a picture book, begging him to read to her, while he sat unresponsive, trying to watch the game of football on the television.

Weight

For five weekends in a row, Allison had vacationed in Rosemary Beach, Florida on the Gulf Coast with Katy, her sometimes friend, oft-times coke dealer. Allison wasn't ashamed of the fact that Katy sold drugs, but she sometimes found Katy obnoxiously self-absorbed and a little too manic for her tastes. At the same time, though, Katy's family's million-dollar beach house sat right on the water: 3 stories, filled with antiques and Crabtree & Evelyn toiletries rather than seashells sitting on little piles of sand and discontinued bottles of White Rain. And, it was free, with a stocked bar and unlimited access to whatever drugs Katy had her hands on at the time.

Katy's stepfather had money in pockets all over the Gulf Coast and above, in the small towns of lower Alabama and suburbs of Tennessee: car dealerships, beer distributorships, an award-winning barbeque franchise. Bud had worked his way up to good ol' boy status by playing football at the University of Alabama under Coach Bear Bryant, a man second only to God to so many of the state. (Allison had often told her boyfriend Christopher: "Find a way to become that man, and I'll be your slave for life." Whenever she asked this, Christopher's eyes would grow dark as he smiled and said "Aren't you already?") Katy was a good friend to have, for the perks alone, although Allison always sensed there was something underneath her pleas for attention. Lately, though, Allison had begun to understand why these trips, this friendship, seemed too good to be true. Every time they arrived at the house, Katy was thrilled and kind, thoughtful, even. But as the trip progressed, she became more demanding, a day at the beach filled with Allison traveling up and down the steps for the things she asked for:

“LETS GO here! Don’t bring HIM. Buy me some more champagne. Go pick up the coke down the street. Bring me a new towel.” Allison usually obliged if it was just the two of them; she felt guilty for using Katy if she didn’t; but with Christopher in the house too, the tensions were running high and Allison felt the same feeling she felt before an afternoon thunderstorm: off-kilter and unprepared.

It was Saturday afternoon and Allison was in the bathroom right off of the den that overlooked the ocean. She was hopeful that a stomach cramp and a slight dampness in the crotch of her bathing suit were not merely the byproducts of a sweaty afternoon hangover. She stood in front of the bathroom mirror and sprayed an expensive room fragrance spray into the air several times, trying not to cough as it filled the room. She turned around three times. She willed her period, now two weeks late, to begin.

In the den around the corner from where Allison waited, Katy and Christopher were cutting off lines of Lortab and cocaine, respectively, scraping single blade razors along the long glass-top coffee table. Allison could hear Katy cackling and ranting on about how much more “glamorous” her coke was than Christopher’s painkillers. Allison could hear one of the blades scrape and squeak against the glass faster, more carelessly.

“Where do you even get all those ‘tabs anyway?” Katy prodded. “Why don’t you ever want to get jacked like me and Ally? It’s so white trash to do downers. Like every pill head you ever meet is always country as fuck. Unless they have the good shit, like Oxy, and your shit’s not even close.”

Allison feared Christopher’s reaction. He didn’t take kindly to being talked down to. She heard him say loudly, but not angrily “Why don’t you worry about your own and shut the hell up for once?”

Allison heard the scraping stop and then nothing for some time, except for the occasional sniffing sound, and a few weak coughs. Allison hoped that they wouldn't kill each other before the weekend ended. She sat down on the toilet with her bikini bottoms still around her waist and considered if she might *will* the possible baby to simply stop existing.

She stared hard at the lock on the bathroom door, craving the uncomfortable tension between she, Christopher, and Allison. Ultimately, she felt safer locked in, because if she was alone, she might be able to forget it ever happened, forget what wasn't or was to come.

Allison was reminded of a time when she was six or seven and Cap'n Crunch cereal was running a contest that advertised the possibility of finding a neon green disc worth \$1,000 within the box of cereal. There were five, or perhaps ten, Allison couldn't remember, discs in all the cereal boxes all over the country, but at the time, Allison was sure that that contest was for her. She had convinced her mother to let her use all her saved allowance to buy five boxes of Cap'n Crunch, all displaying the contest information on the outside. When she got the boxes home she took them to her room and closed the door behind her, nonchalantly emptying the bags as if less attention to detail would make one of these discs appear. Allison emptied the bags slowly, but not carefully, certain any hint of hope in her actions might jinx her chances of winning. When the floor was covered with cereal, not a disc to be found, Allison had walked out of her room head held high, leaving her bedroom door open so that the golden retriever could come in and eat the evidence.

She went and stood behind her mother in their den, watching the commercials on the television screen.

Her mother didn't turn around, or move her eyes from the screen. "No luck?"

Allison shrugged, turned to walk away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her mother turned the volume down, looked down the hallway toward Allison. "What would you have done with all that money anyway? You're just a little girl."

Allison had walked away without giving the answer: as many Cabbage Patch Kids dolls as \$1,000 would buy (after she gave 10% to the church since her preacher said it was a sin not to tithe).

Allison now wondered if that childhood wish had something to do with the absence of blood in the crotch of her bathing suit. "Goddamn baby dolls," she cursed and stood up and pulled her bathing suit back on, rearranged her skirt.

Upstairs, she heard Christopher's footsteps and checked the lock on the door again. Christopher was certainly not the kind of man she wanted raising her child. He was good in bed and never too needy, wasn't afraid to fight and had no problem putting Allison in her place. Christopher talked a rough, rural lower Alabama grammar and kept a spit cup permanently by his side. He was everything Katy was not and yet they weren't exactly opposites, Allison thought. Allison felt she needed him, in some way, but she also realized he was replaceable, dozens more losers like him out there, with a biting tongue and a hard edged handsome face, eager to take his place. With his unpredictable moods and strange sense of morals, Allison didn't want to know his thoughts on terminating a pregnancy; she wasn't sure she would like either side he took.

Allison gulped down the last of the mimosa she had carried to the bathroom and unlocked the door. She heard Katy turn up the volume on a Willie Nelson song and she decided that she would forget what she hadn't seen in that bathroom. She decided her calculations were probably wrong, that she couldn't be certain when her last period had occurred because she hadn't written it down, and if you factored in stress, alcohol, and everything else, Allison wasn't even sure that she was late at all. She felt lighter just thinking about it and as she walked by the mirror opposite the French doors opening to the balcony, she twirled around in her skirt just once, confident in the way the sun through the thin white cotton and glinted off the tan on her legs. She walked around the corner toward Katy and Christopher, headed for champagne, cocaine, Christopher.

“Your boyfriend wimped out, dude.” Katy said, staring hard at a spot on the marble near the sink. “Are you sure he can even hang?”

Allison moved toward the bar, poured the last of an open bottle of champagne in her cup, “I don't give a damn,” she said, and moved toward the coffee table where she did three lines of coke, fast, and then stood up and headed toward the balcony, stopping at the opposite end of the table to brush some of Christopher's crushed Lortab into her drink, to take the edge off the coke and the swiftly setting sun. Allison and Katy sat opposite each other at a wrought iron table on the balcony, their feet propped on the table's surface.

For a few minutes, they listened to the ocean, and when Allison felt the champagne and coke hit her in a bubbly rush of enthusiasm she asked Katy: “What would you do if you got pregnant?”

Katy gulped her drink too fast and drops splattered across her white t-shirt. “What? What do you mean? You already know. You take care of that shit. It’s not bad. Mommy got me one in high school because she said Bud wouldn’t marry her if he knew she raised a delinquent daughter.”

Katy put a finger to her left nostril and sucked in, hard. “Its no big deal. And it’s a damn better weight loss plan than even the Ipecac I used to drink until I got kicked out of boarding school. Shit.”

Katy rubbed at something invisible above her eyebrow. She grabbed their cups and raised them in the air, motioning that she was going to get another round.

Allison sighed and leaned back in the chair, the iron pattern cool against her bare thighs. She felt over-burdened by this information and wondered when Christopher would wake up, at least to change the direction of the conversation that she wished she hadn’t begun.

When Katy returned she sat down slowly. She said, softly, “I’ll never have kids though, will I?”

Allison started to speak and Katy began again “Well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to have my own. I want to marry some rich older man like Mommy who already has kids that are old enough to take care of themselves. And goddamn, if that redneck fuck in there made you pregnant you better not even be questioning what to do. They have a pill. It’s easy. I’ve taken it twice since I came to college. Fuck I hate condoms. Plus, there’s the weight loss to consider.”

Katy’s mood had changed rapidly, her voice increasing almost to yelling.

Allison looked out at the waves. Someone had left an umbrella on the sand and it was a dark crooked shadow in the dimming early evening light. She took a sip of her drink, stared down at her cigarette.

“I was just wondering, like, hypothetically. I saw a pregnancy test out near the trash on the beach today,” Allison lied. She knew Katy wasn’t listening enough to consider the absurdity of her remark, and when she felt the bitter drip in the back of her throat she glanced in at Christopher, snoring now, on the couch, one foot hanging over the back. “Hell yeah, I’d probably abort it too. And no one would ever know but me. I couldn’t deal with other people knowing.”

Allison heard a grunt from the den that opened onto the balcony and was surprised to see Christopher stand straight up, face red. “What the hell are you talking about out there? The only one deciding the fate of my offspring is me, I don’t care whose pussy it grew in. You’re a dumb cunt, just like your bitch friend, Allison, and you can find someone else to fuck with because I’ve had enough.”

He slammed his fist onto the glass table hard, and Allison and Katy watched him walk toward the bottom floor of the house, out the door, the blood dripping from his cracked knuckles spattering across the light oak finish of the hardwood floor.

Katy and Allison hardly spoke as they watched Christopher speed off. Allison was embarrassed. Katy didn’t even have the heart to say, “I told you so.” They spent the rest of the evening watching soft-core porn and listening to dance music, inviting over local boys Katy knew. Allison drank more and more until she felt the tension in her head grow lighter, the name Christopher sound foreign, and the only indication that anything

had happened at all was a lingering twitch in Allison's right eyebrow, and a tear shaped drop of blood across from the bathroom door.

RINSE CYCLE

When it was finally the day that Granny Bert was to lay a corpse, as she always had termed it, at the head of the sanctuary in Haleyville Church of Christ, no had quite expected it. It was the running joke in Allison's family that Granny Bert would be the last of them to pass, seeming to outlive decade after decade, losing first her husband, then her sister, her only sibling, and finally the many other ladies like her that lived alone in dilapidated duplex houses off of the main streets of Haleyville. Granny used to tell her great-granddaughter Allison and her cousin, Katie: "Now, y'all's best make sure I look good when I'm layin' a corpse up in that church. Mary Ila Robertson looked deader'n a doornail at her funeral, and I'd rather be buried in a graveyard full of coloreds than look like her." Allison and Katie were young, and they'd smile and pat Granny Bert's hand, reassuring her that her fate would be different; although, truth be told, neither of them could ever imagine the day Granny Bert would pass.

This summer, Allison was put in charge of Granny Bert, and she was headed to the nursing home armed with fresh laundry and a birdhouse in hand to help cheer her Granny, who had fallen and broken her hip again. Her parents had put her up in Haleyville, just an hour away from her old college town, claiming she could live in Granny Bert's house and spend her days taking care of her grandmother. Allison was giving her grandmother, Billie, a break, and earning a little of what her father called "life experience" in the process. Allison didn't mind too much, as she figured she could take the trip back to her old alma mater on the weekends, to drink and live like an undergraduate for one more summer before she finished her masters in Baltimore.

Granny Bert didn't require constant care so much as she demanded attention, and Allison figured weekends off wouldn't hurt anyone. She had her summer party plan all worked out, and she wasn't going to let Granny Bert get in her way, even if she had caused inconvenience for the rest of the family.

For years Granny Bert had been a sort of burden upon the family, refusing to live anywhere but Haleyville, the town in which she had grown up. Haleyville was an hour outside of Birmingham, the city where Allison's family lived, the biggest city in the state of Alabama. Haleyville would have been easy to reach, if they could fly across the state as crows, but as it stood, the city lie unconnected to Birmingham by anything but long, troublesome winding rural routes that stretched across the state, kicking up flecks of grass and dirt on the car as they drove out to visit. And Granny Bert often got herself hurt, fell while getting the mail, fell getting out of bed, needed assistance in just about everything after a while; and finally, Billie, Granny Bert's daughter-in-law put her in the local nursing home, although she had always promised her husband she would never do it. Billie, frazzled and run down after her husband's death, even years later, had resigned herself to taking care of Granny Bert with the devotion of an emancipated slave who couldn't leave her master even after she was freed.

Allison had always loved her Granny, but wasn't strangely close to her. Granny Bert would sometimes come to the house for Christmas, if she was well enough, and stay there long enough to complain that Allison's mama had cooked a turkey, instead of a "good ole hen". Then, she'd arch and moan, until one of the relatives took her back to the nursing home, and a visit with Granny wouldn't come until the next major holiday.

It was a hazy, humid June morning in Haleyville, and the sky was heavy with gray clouds and a dark metallic smell that filled Allison's nostrils as she wove her car toward Nursing Care, the nursing home where her Granny Bert had just took up residence after the second fall on her hip in the past two years. The nursing home was just three blocks over from Granny's house, easily walking distance, but Allison opted to drive, telling herself it was to keep Granny's laundry clean and fresh when it had a lot more to do with her own laziness. When she approached the parking lot she sat and watched as the rain began to fall slowly up on her windshield and across the sleepy town, big, heavy droplets that slid slowly in front of the glass in front of her. She watched a redbird perch on a bare tree limb and then fly off, a bright flash of color in the gray smearing rain.

Haleyville was a small town that, to Allison, seemed to be stuck in a different, older, simpler time. The houses were small, set on wide lots with cracked stone angels and plastic lawn chairs speckled across the sparse, brown-spotted lawns. Stray cats and long-legged mutts wandered the residential streets, poking their noses around old lawn mowers and Christmas decorations that were tucked underneath the front porches of these old homes. The people of Haleyville seemed reluctant to forget an earlier age, evidenced by the mere clutter that surrounded their homes, their insistence in holding on to the items they worked hard to purchase in the years earlier. This was a town of churchgoers and factory workers, farmers and quilters. It was a small town that believed in itself, and seemed to exist in the defiance of a larger, outside world that moved far ahead of Haleyville's ideals.

It was starkly different than the city where Allison now attended graduate school, in Baltimore, miles from the state where she had grown up. Being born in Alabama she

took pride in her southern heritage, but still often found herself embarrassed that her family referred to Baltimore as the North, always italicized and capitalized in their voices, a foreign other they couldn't imagine her wanting to visit, much less occupy. Maryland was, after all, included in the *Southern Living* magazine's planter's map of the South, and didn't *that* mean something, she would ask them.

Allison attended art school in Baltimore, working toward a masters in art history and she secretly loved *Southern Living* magazine, although she wouldn't dare admit that to her hoity-toity graduate classmates, who spent their spare time poring over Artforums and tattered French paperbacks. Allison didn't even know a second language, another fact she kept to herself. But now, back in Alabama, quarantined in Haleyville, she stacked up copies of *Southern Living* with gusto, taking pleasure in the shabby chic decorating tips, the down home recipes. The pages of the magazine showed glossy, expensive homes with a touch of the South that escaped the rough ruralness of Haleyville, but still had the gentleness of a time unburdened by city life.

Allison sat in the car until the rain stopped, as she knew it would—summer showers in the South only lasted 20 minutes at the most. She carefully took out the birdhouse she had purchased at Home Depot the night before and drug a bag of off brand birdseed behind her. Allison had no clue about birdseed, but that it was expensive, and she figured birds couldn't tell the difference between the cheap and expensive seeds anyway. She trudged through the damp grass in front of the one story brick building with the brick roof and bars on the lower windows and stopped in front of her Granny Bert's. Yesterday, they had selected a tree from which Allison would hang the feeder, and Granny had been careful to give her special instructions:

“Don’t even think about hangin’ it from one of them low branches, Allison. You know them birds won’t come if you do that. They don’ want to have to work for it. They like it to be ‘bout mid height, so we can peek up at ‘em a little bit out this here window. And make sure you get that feed with them black seeds mixed in. If you don’t, there won’t be no red birds. And that’s the one I’m waitin’ for.”

Allison had agreed, but she had a feeling she would screw it up. She stood on her tiptoes in front of the tree, droplets of rain falling into her hair and eyes. She cursed as the limb she had attempt to hang it from snapped and hung down toward her, an outstretched hand. She saw her Granny sitting at the window watching her, picking at her fingernails and mouth in a flat line. Allison smiled and waved with her free hand, looking up at the tree for another branch on which to hang the feeder. When she finally found one, she hastily hung the house up by the string, careful not to spill the birdseed with which she had filled it, and wiped the raindrops from her face. She smiled at Granny Bert through the window, who looked back at her with a flat expression and a creased forehead, her lips puckered inside of her mouth.

Allison was frustrated, her Granny was rarely happy with the tasks she performed, but Allison felt compelled to do them just the same. But today was Friday, and she had just straightened her hair to head to Tuscaloosa, her old college town, that night, and the rain from the tree had left her looking limp and wrinkled. She braced herself for just an hour with her Granny, and then she could get out of there, free of the nursing home with its diaper smells and toothless jabbering patients who grabbed at her arms as she walked down the halls. She just wanted a few beers and a taste of freedom for the summer,

rather than a lonely summer in Haleyville, exiled from all of twenty-something civilization.

Later that day, Allison sat in the room with Granny Bert, the both of the peering out the large window that opened into the nursing home's parking lot. They looked out at the bird feeder shaped like a little house, and together they stared at the full feeder and waited for the birds to come. "I was hopin' one of those purty red'un's would come visit me, Ally," she said, and cleared her throat. "What kind of seed'd you go and put out there anyway?"

Ally had brushed off the question, and stood up and started to arrange the pictures of family that lined the walls around Granny Bert's bed. There were several pictures of Allison's first cousins, Chris and Katie, in various stages of season and apparel. She brushed some dust off a large glamour shot of her cousin Katie, which was framed in a plastic gold colored frame in direct eyesight with Granny's bed. Allison thought her cousin looked gaudy, her thin brown hair was teased beyond command and her lips were nothing more than a line of sticky hot pink lipstick. Her jaw was offset by years of sucking her thumb past childhood, and the result was a sort of crooked clown, dressed in her mother's makeup. Allison giggled to herself, as she knew she was Granny Bert's favorite, and knew that her aunt, Katie's mother, burned with jealousy that Allison had been offered up to take care of Granny Bert, rather than her own daughter, who was more than a little risqué. Katie had even been kicked out of the Kappa Kappa Gamma house when she went down to the University Alabama, a family secret that no one dared speak of.

Granny Bert looked at the picture of Katie and frowned. “I wish you’d take down that picture of that little hussy great granddaughter of mine. She’s an embarrassment standing up there on my wall, lookin’ like a streetwalker. No. Take that down.”

Allison smiled and replaced the picture with a picture of herself, which was tucked behind pictures of her cousins on Granny’s nightstand. “I think that’s better, Granny.” Granny squinted up at the picture and grunted. She looked back out the window. “Aw, that feeder out there didn’ bring nothin’ but a lil brown wren. Did you get the right seed?”

Allison was about to answer when the phone rang, which woke Granny’s roommate, Mrs. Diegas and it started the regular phone fight they usually had. Both of the women became terribly excited over phone calls, but neither wanted to show it, so they would often sit there, stubborn, in their separate beds and fight it out while the phone continued to ring.

This afternoon was no different.

“I think that’s some of your’n.” Granny Bert said, looking over at the phone “You get it.”

“No, no,” Mrs. Diegas would say, feigning politeness, glaring past the phone “I have no relatives who would ever want to call me. Why just look at all the pictures on your wall, all those people you have to call you, Bertie. Just look.”

Granny would look at Allison and say, “See, that Mexican woman don’t even know my name. I bet it’s some of her’n anyway.”

Allison ended up answering. It was someone for Ms. Diegas, which made Granny mad, and continue to fuss.

“I told you it was some of her kin. Now won’t you listen to them Allison, they don’t even talk English, all jibberdy jabberdy on that phone and this is an American nursing home. All she does is get on there and talk crazy.”

Mrs. Diegas was not talking in Spanish, but a fast accented English Allison didn’t know was possible for a woman of her age. She pretended not to hear Granny Bert, but Allison could see her fists clench while Granny ranted.

Finally, after *Jerry Springer*, Allison switched off Granny’s television set and told her she had to go. She had replaced all of her Granny’s laundry while they both watched her Granny’s favorite show, and had filled a new bag with more dirty clothes. She bent down to give her Granny a kiss on the cheek and told her she’d see her tomorrow, walking out while her grandmother continued to ramble about the birds and Mexicans.

“I better see a red’un out there tomorrow, Allison. I better.”

Allison looked at her frail and sickly Granny, smaller than she had ever seen her there on her bed, and took a Christopher bear down from the shelf. She had a mean mouth, but she was a good Granny, Allison thought, and she looked so helpless and wishful for that red bird. She tucked the little bear beside Granny’s shoulder and said, “I’ll be back here tomorrow, Granny, I promise. And this time, we’ll spot us a red one if we have to wait all day.”

Her Granny had started to drift off to sleep but she let her lips move into a half smile and said, “Yeah, I guess we will. But get that Christopher bear off of here. It came from some of that one’s kin, it’s dirty.”

Allison sighed and looked at Mrs. Diegas to apologize, but found her asleep too, and she tucked the Christopher bear into the laundry bag and slipped out of the room, leaving the two old women to sleep off their attitudes until dinner.

Allison left, then, walking briskly out of the nursing home, excited to leave town for the night. She maneuvered the car into drive, and pulled out of the nursing home parking lot, her right arm stretched across the seat to steady the bag of Granny's laundry.

Now, the sky darkened again as she headed down Main Street toward her Granny Bert's home, the one had lived in for the past 70 years. She was lucky that the house had a laundry machine. She decided to go ahead and put it in before she headed out to Tuscaloosa that evening. It was still early yet—3:00—and she could get the laundry done before she headed out for the evening.

When she got home, Allison realized she not only had her Granny's laundry, but great mounds of her own to do. Big huge piles of it, and she was glad she had decided to come home early or she would have nothing to wear tonight. There seemed to be loads upon loads of laundry. Allison had so much laundry she didn't even know where to begin, she felt alone and overwhelmed by it all, in the small cramped house off the main streets of the small town. There was a claustrophobic still heat in the air, and Allison couldn't shake the rain from her hair no matter how many times she dried off. There was her own laundry, four baskets full of articles that had been worn once, and then discarded into the pile. Allison wouldn't wear an item after it had dropped to the floor, and because she seemed to resist using clothes hangers, her life seemed to be consumed by laundry. And then there was her grandmother's laundry, the big drawstring cloth bag with a faded

calico print that Allison brought home from the nursing home each week. Allison didn't know where to begin, so she stared at each pile, weighing her options.

She finally decided to do her grandmother's first, even though it could wait. After all, her Granny was in the nursing home and didn't wear anything but gowns anyway. But still, she was remarkably astute, and she seemed to know when Allison was slacking, even at her old age of 95. Allison held her nose as she sorted the piles, lights and darks, knits and delicates. She always did underwear separately, in scalding water with a heapful of Oxy Clean. And she never used anything but Tide.

Allison looked down at the piles, trying to decide what should go first. She opted for the underwear. Always the grossest, and plucked each piece between two fingers up and into the machine, watching the water swirl it around. She considered throwing in some of her lacy thongs along with her Granny's panties, but opted against it. Something about it felt sacrilegious.

She placed the final wide banded high-waisted pair of panties into the machine, and stared down into the water. There was something that didn't seem right, she thought. The smell was off. She wasn't sure if it was the smell of dirty laundry around her, or if there was a difference in the air, but an uneasy feeling crept over her. She shut the washing machine lid, and glanced at her watch so she would know when to return to put in the fabric softener. After estimating a time to return to the small laundry room in the corner of the small house, she wandered into her den, and looked down at her dog who sat on the kitchen table, defiantly, staring at her.

Her mother had decided she'd just stay in Haleville, in Granny's house, rather than commuting a few times a week, even offered to pay her extra. *We just don't really*

get along enough to live together again, do you think?, her mother had asked, handing over the key and a electronic fob for access at the local Gold's Gym.

“And you'll get to use the gym every day. That's something you never do in grad school, huh?” her mother had continued, looking at Allison's hips and then down at her own, slimmer figure. “We'll see what we can do about that this summer. And your daddy and me are always just down the road.” Allison had taken the key with a strange feeling. It seemed curious that her parents didn't want her in the house, to watch over her every move, but whatever the reasons, Allison didn't mind much, except for the loneliness that she had become used to since leaving Alabama for graduate school in Baltimore, and the isolation felt like more of the same continuum.

Allison looked down at her dog on the kitchen table and was glad her mother wasn't there so she wouldn't have to scold him. She patted his head, and sat down at the table with him, considering the tasks of the day. She had begun to make a shopping list—she seemed to have an insatiable urge to clean lately, and the list was a page long with cleaning supplies—when her phone rang again.

Allison stood up to answer it, ready to yell at her sometimes boyfriend, Gavin, for calling her when she was doing chores. She knew he was just trying to rush her to get to Birmingham “like now”, and she was annoyed at the interruption. Besides, she didn't feel like explaining that she was going to Tuscaloosa instead. She hadn't exactly told him that her plans for the summer had changed. Really, she only liked talking to him in the evening, when they were making plans for something, ready to go somewhere, and she found herself bored with him all the times in between. He was her high school boyfriend, someone easy to return to after the lonely year away at school, and even

though Allison hadn't really liked him that much to begin with, he was available, and was part of her plan to live a better, cleaner life.

In college she had spent her nights drinking and consuming whatever pills and party drugs she could find, her days chain smoking and coming down from the alcohol and painkillers. The years had been a haze that felt like a cheat: they were a direct defiance to the Christian upbringing her parents had given her, and beyond that, they were a haze that still resulted in graduating magna cum laude, with offers at both law school and graduate programs. Her parents seemed none the wiser, and this disappointed Allison somewhat. Looking back, she had worked so hard on being bad, that to go unnoticed seemed an awfully big disappointment.

Gavin wouldn't have dated the Allison from college. But he didn't mind the Allison she was now. She was quiet and reserved, contemplative. She often felt like her life had been put on hold, and that fun had passed her by after she received her degree. Graduate school was a series of readings and tasks on a subject she no longer cared about and all in all Allison had never felt less like she had a place in any world.

Allison picked up the phone with a huff. She didn't look at the caller ID, only answered, "What?" She was agitated and didn't like to be interrupted while doing laundry. Her mother was on the other end.

"What do you mean what?" she asked, her voice a soft Southern drawl that spoke not of farms or hicks but of genteel Selma and old Montgomery, a South that no longer existed, and left her mother's voice warm but slightly tense around the edges. "You better get on down here, now," she said, ignoring Allison's agitation, "We got the call. Granny's gonna die today, and we gotta go watch."

Allison nearly dropped the phone. “We have to go do *what?*”

“Well, watch, of course,” her mother said, and Allison could sense a smile in her voice, “You don’t want her to die alone in that room, do you?”

Allison didn’t. But she wasn’t ready to watch someone die, either. “Well,” she hedged. “I haven’t finished her laundry, though. Maybe I should just do the final loads, you know, just in case, and head up there when I’m done.”

“She won’t need any clean clothes at the end of this day, honey,” her mother said, her voice becoming firm. “I know you don’t want to let your Granny down, but there’s no time. No time for any of that. We just need to go up there and sit with her. And we’ll pick her out a new outfit for the funeral anyway. One of those sets from Macy’s that she likes so much.”

Allison didn’t understand how her mother could sound so positive, responsible. Granny was her mother’s mother-in-law, and not direct blood relation, but still, she thought, the tone in her voice was heartless.

“Fine.” Allison said. “Let me just—“

Her mother cut her off, “I’m already on my way over there to pick you up. I’ll be there in 10 minutes. And put on something blue and color your eyebrows in. You know she likes you to look like Elizabeth Taylor.”

Allison obeyed.

Allison, her mom, and a hyperactive hospice nurse spent most of the morning staring at her grandmother on her deathbed. Two weeks earlier, her Granny had fallen and broken her hip for the fifth time and the doctors had failed to see her “Do Not Resuscitate” sign. She had been resuscitated after all, against her wishes, and the next

week she had been sitting straight up in her rocker saying, “I wanted to die then, Ally, I did. I sure do wish the Lord would’ve taken me a long time ago. “

She looked around the little square room then, and pointed to the woman with whom she shared a room, who sat in a rocking chair covered with crocheted blankets and watched, her beady eyes rolling slowly like marbles in a funnel, the weather outside. Every so often she would say “Mmm Hmmm” to no one in particular and Allison’s granny would cut her eyes at the other woman and say, “You shut that up now.”

Granny nodded her head with certainty. “She’s crazy. Always asking me to look out that there window at some birds or the sky or something. I always tell her ‘I know what’s out there. I been seein’ it for 97 years now. Heh Heh. She’s dumb, I tell you. And at the Bingo, she loses every time.”

In the past few weeks, Allison had thought that Granny was taking a turn for the better, but as the afternoon turned into evening, and Allison and the nurse and her mother stared down at Granny, she had become worse, and laid on the bed with her eyes closed, a machine doing most of her breathing for her. Allison watched as she worked her thumb and forefinger together, back and forth, a nervous habit her Granny had done ever since she first knew her. Her father would tease Granny sometimes, asking, “Mama, how come you keep doing your fingers like that?” He would grin, and wait for her response, always the same.

And Granny would look down at her fingers and say “Huh. Well I guess I don’t rightly know.”

Allison had never seen her Granny angry, but she never saw those fingers still for long, and the slow turn of her thumb around the nail of her index, even though she could barely breathe comforted Allison.

Allison stared at her grandmother and stared down at her own fingers, wondering how Granny had become so ill so fast. Her mother got up to freshen her lipstick, call her father who was at a deposition in Mobile, and Allison was left in the room alone with her Granny.

When Allison's grandmother finally died she was right there, in the room, staring down at her face, which pretty much just looked like sleep, but a little more rigid. Allison took one look at her, patted her grandmother's hand, and pressed the call button for the hospice nurse to come in from outside the door. If she had looked, she would have noticed the red bird that had stopped by the bird house outside, just briefly to grab a bite of the seed inside, before heading back out into the drizzle of the warm night.

Two days later, Allison and her father were asked to write her eulogy by the young preacher at Granny's hometown church, a place she had not attended in a decade, since she moved from her own little house into a nursing home closer to Allison's family, in Birmingham.

Allison and her father sat across from each at the round table in the breakfast room, stared at blank pieces of paper, and chewed the ends of pens and thought. "That preacher better not think I'm doin' his work for him," her father said, gesturing Allison to move her pen, to get started doing *something*. "What have you got? You're supposed to be the writer."

Allison's mother poked her head in from the kitchen. "You know he's fresh out of the ministry school, Rick," she said. "How are you going to leave your grandmama with a half-assed obituary like that."

"I'm goddamned busy with work," her father grumbled. "I don't have time to write a story about how they're going to put Bert in the dirt."

Allison was embarrassed to admit she knew very little to write about Granny other than a few lines about her tenacious, if not kind, spirit, and her survivors, of which there were few. Allison watched as her mother giggled and said "Bert in the Dirt" to herself, over and over again, laughing each time as if it was hysterical. Her father went back to dictating a closing argument for the trial he was currently working on into this Dictaphone. Allison packed her stuff away, listening to her father's deep voice craft argument like stories, and wondered why he couldn't write the simple story of his mother. She looked at the two of her parents in the kitchen and said nothing as she pushed away from the table, leaving her mother watching *Dancing With the Stars* and her father hollering at the dogs to stop pissing on the oriental rug.

The following day, Allison sat in the church listening to the scared pissless preacher giving his first sermon: her Granny's funeral. Granny Bert, of course, went to a church much like the one Allison grew up in, rigid and fundamentalist. It was a small, country church that upheld the modesty and close-mindedness of the churches of Christ denomination that were peppered along the South. Allison thought about Granny Bert's church, and about her own and pulled out her pencil to draw it. She thought if she could picture one of them, it would make things clearer.

On the first page of her otherwise empty notebook, Allison began to sketch a church. A church that sat toward the edge of the small town of Haleyville, Alabama, a place that, to Allison, always seemed stuck in a different, older, simpler time. It was a small town that believed in itself, and seemed to exist in defiance of the world that moved far ahead of its ideals. But Allison couldn't capture that on the page, not quite. When she looked down, she found she had drawn the church of her childhood, with its cross-shaped sanctuary, and wide rows of pews opening into the pulpit, where Brother Wayne gave his sermons Sunday after Sunday. On Allison's pulpit was the altar table reading *This Do In Remembrance of Me*, and gold plated offering bowls. In the aisles, the pews were empty. Allison was afraid, she reckoned, to dirty this church with the frailty of humans.

But when the preacher finished up his awkward, stuttering rant, and the sixteen non-family members in the pews stopped dozing; Allison was surprised to see him move away from the coffin and toward the lectern. "I think I'll lead y'all in song, today, to celebrate Bertrie"

Bertrie was not Granny's name. It was Bertie, like Gertie, and Allison had been irritated that he botched it when the speaking started, but after the first few sentences the mispronunciation had become almost comical, and Allison had to clench her fingers to keep from laughing. When the preacher began with "Amazing Grace", Allison couldn't hold in her laughter anymore, her body shaking to the missed notes and pitiful acapella singing of a small congregation with an average age of 70. She started laughing then, and couldn't stop when the song was over. She had to excuse herself to move past the guests and to the car, and wasn't able to make the walk to the grave, she had become so tickled.

She prepared to be scolded on the trip home by her parents, for defacing the funeral, but dishonoring her Granny. But the ride was silent, and every so often, her father would hum a few bars of Amazing Grace. Not a tear had been shed that day, and Allison watched the sunset as they approached Birmingham and wondered if the funeral had even been real at all, if Haleyville wasn't just a figment of her imagination.

When her parents dropped her off, they waved and said to eat a good dinner later, to get a nap in. They seemed to think that the afternoon had been spent in a marathon rather than four hours greeting Granny's few elderly guests, and a prolonged sit at a funeral by an idiot preacher. Allison wasn't sure whether to laugh or smile. Her future seemed different in the light of it: her Granny could die and her parents wouldn't cry, she could break out in laughter at church and her parents would make her dinner. Her former life seemed overturned, and she wasn't sure where to go. So she said her goodbyes, and hopped out of the car. "It still would have been better with your obituary, though, Ally," her father called, reminding her that life was not entirely different.

She sighed and walked upstairs to her lonely apartment just miles from her parents, the memory of the home she once knew fading again from her mind. Allison went home and greeted her dog, who was barking and jumping like he was crazed. Normally, she would have been annoyed. But today, he didn't care, and, as she picked up the little Chihuahua and hugged him to her. He licked her face and she said to him, "We've got something to take care of now, babe. His ears perked and eyes got wide. She knew he understood. She shifted his weight to her hip and carried him like a child to the laundry room with her while she restarted the washing machine, untouched since her Granny's death, and began to finish washing her Granny's laundry.

RASH

On Monday morning, four months, three weeks, and two days after Allison met Christopher, the only potential father of the baby she had learned two days ago was growing inside of her, Allison sat on the lid of the toilet in the basement of the Kappa Kappa Gamma house, where she was living for her senior year at the University of Alabama. She stared straight forward, trying to work up the courage to check the pregnancy test she had just taken, trying to work up the courage to refuse the abortion that Christopher wanted.

Allison had locked herself into the small bathroom at the bottom floor of her sorority house in the hopes that no one would find her taking yet another pregnancy test. The first had been a group event, Allison remembered, her two roommates Ann Margaret and Mary Liz standing in front of the open door to the stall in the 2nd floor bathroom. While they waited for the stick to turn, Allison and her friends danced around the bathroom in a circle, trying not to peek, a kind of reverse fertility dance. She couldn't help but catch a glance at the test that lay on the corner of the long row of sinks in the center of the bathroom. She sensed the two dark pregnant lines before she even got a good look.

And she was right. She and her friends gathered round, wide eyed, open mouthed, and stared down at the little test. Allison sighed and said "Well, that's that." Ann Margaret and Mary Liz put their arms around her. "You can get an abortion," they said.

“It’s easy. Not bad at all,” Allison whispered. “Just go early. It’s like, I don’t know, nothing worse than when you wake up with bad cramps and a hangover. You hardly even notice it. Just pop a few ‘tabs and you’ll be *fine*. Besides you *know* you can’t have a baby right now. What about graduation? What about law school? What about the Undertakers party at the DKE house? What about—What about your fucking parents?”

And they led Allison back to her room and out to class, building dozens of reasons why this child wouldn’t fit into Allison’s schedule, the intensity increasing with each new idea, and she had listened as they grabbed her by the elbows and pushed her along Sorority Row toward the Corner Store to get a Coca Cola, while they changed the subject to Mary Liz’s double one-night-stand- *Like, I was totally taking one for the team! Two guys in one night, can you believe it?* Allison could barely hear her. And then Ann Margaret was talking about how she exchanged “road head” to a guy she had met at a bar for community service hours for her DUI—*It wasn’t that big of a deal, Allison. I mean it was a hell of a thrill. And besides, if I bring someone with me to trash duty, I get double the hours He was a KA, y’all, it’s not like he was dirty or something. I may even try him again next week and then my hours will be finished. If he’s not free, I bet his roommate would be in. I should’ve thought of this weeks ago. . .* All the while, Allison swung in between them, listening this way, turning their stories over and over again in her head, cringing at how far she seemed to have fallen.

And so, Allison had decided to take the third pregnancy test alone, in the hopes that it would be different if she was alone, in a different mindset, on a different day.

Perhaps it had been defective, she thought, or perhaps her body had already released the fetus, like magic of some sort. While Allison waited the excruciating three minutes for the stick to turn, she crawled onto the counter that held the sink and pulled her legs up toward her, letting her feet dangle into the cool marble of the sink basin. She squinted down at her unpainted toenails and wondered if she would be able to see the baby after they sucked it out of her. At least that's what she thought they did. Or maybe it was scraped. Either way, she shuddered to think about it. The bathroom was cold and the overhead light flickered in need of a new bulb, bathing her legs in a dance of strange shadows. She heard the cooks banging around as they came down the stairs to sneak a smoke out the side door before starting dinner for the girls.

Allison pictured a tiny, plastic baby, a doll from a twenty-five cent machine plopping out of a vacuum hose into a clear jar filled with preservatives and chemicals. Although she knew a fetus didn't look like that, that's how she wanted to picture it. Disposable. A cheap plastic toy stored inside a bubble of plastic at Kroger. Allison laughed at the thought. Her mother would shit, she thought. Literally shit, if she heard Allison speak such hateful things.

As if her mother had heard her thoughts, Allison felt her phone vibrate in her pocket, knowing without checking that it must be *her* calling. She sighed and picked up, leaned back against the mirror that topped the counter, closed her eyes.

"Hello, Mama"

"Hi Darlin," her mother drawled, "You just wont believe what I've heard. Just won't believe it. I'm going to need you to check a few details for me, but this is something crazy."

Allison's mother almost more than she loved the world, so Allison knew that this upcoming tidbit must be something good. "Go ahead, Mama."

"Well, Ally, that friend of yours from high school, Katie Wilkes?" she asked in a question, but she knew Ally knew her old best friend. "Well, I heard from Ms. Hart, who heard from Ms. Anderson who heard from Mama Wilkes herself that Katie has done gone and broken off her marriage with that sweet boy from Annapolis and got herself pregnant with a boy she met while waiting tables down at the Hooters. And I heard she wouldn't even give the ring back."

Allison could hardly remember the last time she had talked to Katie, her close friend from grade school, but she wasn't too surprised. "Well," she said to her mother, "how about that? Is she going to keep the baby?"

Allison's mother gasped. "KEEP it? Why, what else she would do? This is the South, honey, we don't just toss babies down the toilet. But Lord, can you imagine what that poor girls mama must be thinkin' right now? What if that were you?"

Allison's mother took a sip of something, an iced tea vodka, Allison suspected, and Allison sighed. "Well ,it's not me though, Mama. That's a relief, huh?"

"Sure is," her mother said. "I'm late for bridge though Ally, I must go. Love you."

"I love you too," Allison told her mother. But a strange silence told her she had already hung up. Allison hopped off the bathroom counter and looked at the positive pregnancy test she had set at the top of the toilet. She hadn't quite expected anything different, but it didn't take away from heavy weight that was spreading across her abdomen, a still and deadening cramp that reminded her of what was to come. She

clasped a hand at her stomach and stared down at the pregnancy test. She reached to throw it out, but then thought better of it, and left it sitting atop the single toilet in the basement of the sorority house where her mother had once lived. The overhead light continued to flicker and to Allison it seemed to be pulsing the word Pregnant over and over again. She hit the switch and left the room in darkness, the two lines on the stick reading pregnant still glowing behind her eyes.

Unnerved by the conversation with her mother, Allison decided to head out for a drink, wondering how much alcohol it would take for the fetus to abort itself. She headed out of the Kappa house, bummed a smoke from Sandra, the head cook, and walked toward the strip of bars that edged the college campus.

Halfway there, she felt a sudden urge to urinate, more pressing than she'd ever felt. She considered the walk ahead and decided to stop in the Biology building, which lie on the corner right before the bars began. She found herself pacing the hallways of the building, searching for a bathroom. The building was new and the air conditioning was frigid and she liked walking the long halls, examining the plant charts and the human skeleton diagrams, despite her increasing urge to go. After she found a bathroom, she walked toward the nearest exit, passing the Reproductive Sciences room quickly, turning her head away from the posters of developing fetuses that lined the walls. She tried to sear the images of the plastic baby from the quarter machine to her brain, tried to picture crushing open the plastic bubble with her foot. It's *disposable*, she told herself aloud. Once she had passed the room, she sunk down into the floor and pressed her forehead to the tile and when students walked past she ignored their questions, waiting until the halls

had emptied again before she rose, dizzy, and stumbled out into the open April air to think.

An hour later she was sitting with Christopher at the Houndstooth, their favorite bar on the University's Strip, peering down at the screen of his Blackberry, the web browser pulled to the local Planned Parenthood website.

"I found it for you, Allison. Christ, do I have to do *everything*?" Christopher asked. "You're supposed to be the smart one."

Allison stared at the cars driving down University Boulevard. "Yeah," she said, "I guess you do." She began to peel the label on her bottle of beer.

"You know what they do, don't you?" he asked, chugging back a long swallow of Bud Light. "They take a long tube that's curved on the end and scrape until they pull out all of the baby tissue. Then they take a little vacuum and clean you out, so there's no baby left. Sometimes they fuck up and mess you up down there though, so you have to be careful."

"Christopher," Allison said. "They do *not* stick a vacuum up there."

"They do," he said, and Allison watched a slow grin emerge on his face. "I bet it hurts like hell. Pity being you, huh?"

He used a toothpick to clean between his teeth and watched Allison as she paled. "It's your fucking baby too, Christopher. Your baby scraped to bits."

Christopher didn't flinch. "I know," he said, "But what can you do?"

He stood up from the small table. "I'm guessin' you're going to be wantin' another drink."

Allison didn't answer.

Sometimes Allison wondered if she would have been so intrigued with Christopher if her parents had raised her differently. Her parents pictured her with a good Church of Christ boy, they said, one who was “handsome” and came from a “good family”, boys who had goals and values like working as doctors and serving as elders in the church in their spare time. Allison had yet to meet one of these. All the men Allison knew from her church were quiet, greasy-faced, foggy-eyed wanderers, lurking between their parents' house and the Church of Christ school three hours away in Nashville, choosing majors like Missionary studies or Biblical Criticism. Their fingernails were always cut too short and Allison hated the starch in their collars, their cheap shoes. They would offer her dirty mints from their pockets when she sat beside them during the Sunday sermon, and she would take them, shoving them deep into the corners of her purse, pointing to her teeth and mouthing “dental work” before scooting away, leaving a tangible distance between herself and them on the pew.

Allison considered how she might explain Christopher to parents who expected more than just a Christian suitor, but one who had career potential, good looks, country club upbringing. Christopher was none of these things. He worked on cars in the day. He stripped off his clothes for other men at night. He had been married once, when he was twenty. He had declared bankruptcy. He had dirty, jagged fingernails, a jaw with a glint like an ax, and an unruly eyebrow that Alison thought of as a third eye; it seemed to twitch whenever she had done something wrong. He was meaner than sin, brutally, hatefully honest, and despite his blue collar jobs, he had a brilliant wit that both entertained and frightened Allison.

Part of her couldn't stay away from him though. It was as if she craved his meanness, the absolute opposite of what she was supposed to have, to want for a boyfriend, husband, life partner. She liked the rebellion, and that's why she stayed. But she was irritated with him now, and while he went to the bar, she slipped out of her chair, told him she was heading home, and left the bar alone.

She kept thinking of her bathroom at home. About a pink index card her mother had taped to the mirror. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Phillipians 4:13" it read. Allison hated that card, and she was sure that thinking of it now was some sort of self sacrilege. But she knew she had to be strong enough to do this, or her parents would disown her forever, and she couldn't bear that *and* a life chasing after a series of Christophers. Life suddenly seemed to be very real, and pressed against her stomach and brain and mood like a thundercloud, ready to burst.

Allison began the path toward home and was nearly halfway across the Quad when she bumped into a flustered little man in a wrinkled suit, tie loosened, wisps of brown hair tufting all around his head. He was doing his best to tear down the signs for Planned Parenthood that had been papered to every lightpost, telephone pole, and car window on the whole of campus. The man was carrying a black garbage sack full of these pink fliers, which kept fluttering out, one by one, as he drug the sack across the concrete behind him.

Allison nearly tripped over these fliers, in her haste to get home, and when she saw what they were, she squatted down and picked up a few of the fliers, ignoring the man's questions. When she read the information, she became anxious, felt her stomach grow heavy, her breasts ache. She stood up quickly. Turning toward the flustered man,

away from the strip of bars, Allison reached out her hand and said, “You look like you could use some help. What’s your plan of action?”

The man grunted and said proudly, “I do the work of the Lord.”

Allison nodded, taking the garbage sack from him and slung it over her shoulder. The bag was much lighter than she had imagined and as Allison began walking toward the next cluster of fliers she turned back and looked at the strange little man, who was around thirty, slightly balding, with a long blonde goatee, trailing behind her. “The Lord’s work,” Allison said, starting to smile. “I know.”

Allison ripped a flier off the tree in front of her, taking the staples along with it and looked back at the man again as she stuffed the advertisement into the bag. She found him watching her, tentatively, a breeze lifting the few tufts of white-blond hair that he had left. He smiled, finally, and she said again, “I know.”

Allison walked the campus with the quiet, strange little man until the sun fell completely behind the horizon. Together they marched up and down the fraternity and sorority rows, the parking lots of the freshmen dorms, circled tree-lined Campus Drive, and plodded through the trees on the Quad, swatting away gnats and mosquitoes as the sky shifted into darker shades of blue. The static, high pitched hum of the crickets’ songs grew louder than the sounds of the passing cars and served as a soundtrack for their mission.

As Allison walked, she repeated the word pregnancy to herself over and over again in her mind, daring to whisper it, even, often, in different tones, shifting the syllabic emphasis: PREG-nancy. PRE-gnan-CY. Preg-NANCY. There were three or four times that the word leapt away from Allison’s mouth louder than she expected, like a belch

during a prayer. This startled Allison, whose attempt was to erase the very notion of the word from her mind by drowning it in repetition, matching it to the song made by the wings of many crickets, when rubbed together, after night falls.

When Allison neared Christopher's apartment, she handed the bulging bag to the young man, whose tie had come undone and hung around his neck like a garden snake: limp, ends curled, and the little blonde tufts of his hair had flattened to his head, resembling an odd patchwork quilt of skin and hair. They hadn't spoken as they trudged along together, and the man seemed to understand Allison's quiet insistence to carry the bag of ripped-away fliers, to move quickly with purpose along the campus, to not explain.

When she handed the bag to the man and smiled a thank you, he tapped a finger, bloody with papercuts, to the brass cross he wore pinned to his shirt pocket. "This was the Lord's work, ma'am," he said.

He heaved the bag onto his shoulders and nodded his head toward the cross again, turning to leave, saying again, "The work of the Lord." Allison stared at the smudges of blood around the cheap pin that hung at a crooked angle across his chest and couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Allison watched the little man walk away and decided to go inside and face Christopher. Her face was sweaty with the Tuscaloosa humidity, late April was nearly the beginning of summer in Alabama, and she wanted a shower and a quiet place where she didn't have to think. She felt quietly resolved about her decision to abort the fetus, and wondered to herself if the work she had done with the little man might absolve her in

some way. If she wanted to get pregnant, later, when she was ready, she thought, would the Lord look down and think differently?

Christopher wasn't home yet and Allison sat outside his apartment, sinking down to the granite of his balcony, letting the grit pinch her bare thighs, uncovered by her cutoff denim shorts. She watched two girls in miniskirts prance after a couple of boys that were headed down toward the house next door. Foggy swarms of insects hung, magnetized, to the glare from the street lamps that burned almost orange and lingered in the stagnant humid air. Tuscaloosa was an industrial city, of sorts, and on warm humid nights the air pollution and chemical waste from companies like Gulf States Paper and B.F. Goodrich seeped into and around the air, permeating the entire city with a sour melancholy stench that crept off of the still waters of Lake Tuscaloosa to the dry muddy hills and Indian burial grounds of Moundville. Allison felt stick and had the urge to drink. And drink a lot.

It was the haze and stench that defined these summers in Alabama's industrial cities that Allison so often felt the urge to drink. There was something in the air that was her childhood afternoons, spent skipping stones across the creek that ran just a few yards from her grandparent's house; and too, the air was redolent of games of Red Rover played on sticky summer evening in the parking lot of Allison's church, which sat upon a hill, and the memory of running toward the crest of the hill watching the colors of the sunset rather than pushing through the chain of sweaty, dirt-stained little hands. The older Allison became, the more she hated the humidity. It made her coarse hair grow fat and puffy and then fall flat, in strange crimps. She hated how the humidity made her sweat in odd places, at the worst time, like during her "first time", on an unseasonably

warm afternoon in early October, in the back of her boyfriend Greg's pick up truck, the first fall of autumn leaves crunching under her bare back while her boyfriend laughed at the moist sweat beads that popped up above her top lip. That kind of humidity made Allison think of "heavy petting" and the things her mother always forbade her to do: wear short skirts, do anything but kiss her boyfriends, spend time with known "fast" girls. And she couldn't bear it.

Christopher came roaring into the parking lot, then, his muffler damaged and grunting and chugging through the heavy night air. He made his way up to the balcony and looked at her sitting there. "Here," he said, "Sit up, let's go inside and I'll tell you what I've done." Allison was surprised to look up and see he had offered her a hand.

In his small studio apartment, the wood paneled walls seemed to close in on the two of them as Christopher explained that he had made the appointment for Allison for the following morning, that it was the best and easiest plan, and that, he grinned when he said this, he would even be there with there while she got it done.

Allison was quiet and sunk down in the chair, her stomach and abdomen bloated with guilt. She felt a great pressure begin to creep from inside of her to the edges of her skin, distending her stomach. The guilt reminded her of a sermon she had heard when she was eleven on spiritual warfare and the first time in her life she had felt the real presence of hell. For three weeks following that sermon, Allison had hardly spoken, hardly eaten, hardly moved, paralyzed by the fear of committing that one sin that would cement her place in eternity. At night, she would lie in bed and try to imagine a lifetime in hell until the sun came up. Although the feeling passed her conscious thoughts after a few month, Allison supposed it was always there, lingering, waiting to scare her back.

“That’s fine, Chris. That’s fine,” she told him. “I’m tired now. And I’m sleeping here.”

He looked at her more gently than she expected, “That’s fine Ally. All this will be behind us tomorrow. We’ll have our lives back.”

Allison never knew they had really lost them. She nodded and swallowed. Yes, she told herself, the baby would be taken care of tomorrow. And with that, she went to bed.

The next morning, Christopher woke up, itching.

The sound, and not the shaking of the bed, woke Allison and she sat straight up, her hair falling over her face in tangles. She pushed them back and sighed. She reached down and pushed at Christopher’s arm.

“Quit,” she told him, nudging his elbow. “Today is not the day. That sound makes me want to heave.” Allison could stand nothing more than the sound of skin scraped underneath fingernails. She watched red streaks bloom across Christopher’s chest as he continued to scratch, more quietly, and she refused to believe that this was some sort of sign.

“What?” Christophehr asked. “I’m itchy.” He started up again, his scratching shaking the whole bed. Allison stared down at him and blew air straight out of her mouth, a loud blast, in the way that Christopher hated.

Outside of Allison’s bedroom window, Allison watched students walk up and down 12th street in various states of 8 a.m. hangover, their backpacks hanging down their backs. She rubbed her hands over her stomach, peered down beneath her breasts, looked

for signs of life. Satisfied at her belly's flatness, Allison plucked a pair of jeans off of the carpet and slid them on, buttoning them with ease. As long as it was still flat, she thought, it meaning nothing had happened yet—not life, at least. As long as it was still flat, it meant that “getting it taken care of”, removing the slowly developing fetus as nonchalantly as one might freeze off a wart, didn't count.

She walked back to the bed and Christopher reached out his hand and patted her stomach, his hand moving downward. Allison became aroused and was horrified, guilt twinged her in odd places, behind her ear, for example, and deep inside of her nose.

“Get up,” Allison told Christopher. “Now, Christopher. You know this has to be taken care of today.”

Christopher looked up at her, his eyes scrunched nearly shut, one hand scratching his neck, the other tearing away at his chest. Allison watched red splotches spread from his bare chest to his shoulders and neck and felt her stomach turn.

“What's going on Christopher? You're making me nauseous.”

“Fuck it. I don't know. I'm just itchy,” he said, and picked up a Marlboro off of the bedside table. He made the motion of flicking a lighter with his fingers and looked at her.

“You were tired. I thought it would be good for you to sleep.”

He glared at her. “I couldn't fall asleep for all this damn itching.” And Christopher began to scratch again, this time at his throat, and when Allison looked more closely, she could see drops of blood beading up there, where he had scratched too hard.

“Christ, Christopher, be careful, would you? You're drawing blood.” She threw the lighter she had been searching for at his head, aimed right between his eyes. He

caught it and pretended he didn't notice; he stood up, one hand down the front of his boxers, scratching.

Christopher looked down at his growing erection. "Hey baby," he said, "want to try to make one more, for memory's sake?"

Allison didn't answer him. She picked up her purse, put it over her shoulder, and looked at him, daring him.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and said, "There, I'm ready enough."

"Please. You have to wear a shirt. Don't be disgusting."

"Where I'm from, we never have to wear shirts," Christopher said, pulling a wifebeater over his head.

"I don't know why you're always talking about 'where you're from', Christopher," Allison said. "I'm from Alabama, too. And everywhere I've lived, people wear shirts."

Even though Allison knew that they didn't. Sometimes, when she wasn't at college, but at home in her upper middle class suburb outside of Birmingham, she would drive out toward poorer counties, and there, nearly year-round, everyone seemed to be shirtless. There were big, fat men with arms plopped out of truck windows. There were skinny hard-boned girls in bikini tops with red-brown tans and chests so flat that they looked like boys, so the tops seemed to be pointless anyway. There were children, boys and girls alike, who ran through sprinklers in the yards in front of double-wide trailers, laughing and slinging around popsicle juice. No, Allison knew what he meant, but she didn't want him to be one of *those* people. There had been times before that she had seen him walking down the bar strip in Tuscaloosa, his bare chest puffed up proud, his

wifebeater tucked into his jeans pocket; and whenever she saw, out the bar's window, walking like that, she would crouch underneath the table, slink down low in her seat.

"Don't let him see you," she would tell her friends. "He's looking like trash again."

"Fine. Today, I'll wear the shirt." Christopher said and grabbed his wallet and they headed to the door.

The sun was beating in the windows and becoming hotter and now there seemed to be even more students outside. Allison closed the blinds and picked up her purse from the floor. Christopher stopped in front of the mirror by the door, singing "Sharp Dressed Man", leaning toward the glass, his face nearly smudging it.

Allison grabbed Christopher by the forearm and was surprised to learn that it was hot to the touch, and when she looked down, she sees long rows of scratches, welts even, that look as if something inside of his skin is trying to claw its way out.

They drove up three blocks to the Clinic on 15th Street. They had an hour to kill before it opened, so they go to a shopping center across the street. Christopher wanted to go into the outdoors store to look at guns, and Allison opted to wander up and down the strip of stores, looking in windows.

She stopped at the Hallmark window, looking back and forth at the different cards about love, friendship, family. She noticed a religious section near the front of the store, it's "spiritual" nature indicated by a large wooden dove nailed to the display. Allison turned away from the bird, and started to walk away, but her feet wouldn't move. The heaviness that began in the chair in front of her apartment the night before started to wash over her again, and she leaned against the window looking at the employee inside. The

woman, the only worker in the shop, glared at the smudges Allison is making as she held on to the glass for support.

The heaviness began to lift, slightly, and Allison pushed off of the glass with the palms of her hands. She held them in front of her face and then pressed them to her stomach, testing again, its flatness. Allison stared again at the saleswoman as she rubbed her stomach, curious for reaction. Inside the store, the saleswoman became bored, and started to pick apart a sandwich she was holding, tearing off the brown crust, pinching it into small bits, and, after putting it into her mouth, she used a small screwdriver to clean the remains from her long acrylic fingernails. Allison hated her and her meticulous pinching and cleaning, she hated her control.

Behind Allison, Christopher stood, fidgeting, waiting for Allison to notice him in the reflection of the mirror. She watched him shuffle from foot to foot, sticking cigarettes behind his ear, kicking his shoe against the concrete. Then she turned around.

“You seem to have stopped scratching,” she said.

“It’s probably because I got away from you.” He said, and took a toothpick out of his pocket and began to pick at the crevices between his two front teeth. Allison frowned and stepped backward, closing the space between her and Christopher. They stood, together, staring at the employee with her sandwich, avoiding their next task.

As they walked together back toward Christopher’s truck, a woman and child walked by, the child was licking a chocolate popsicle which dripped down the front of his white sailor suit and left behind him a tiny trail of chocolate spatters.

“It’s a little early in the morning for ice cream,” Christopher whispered in Allison’s ear.

She paused, about to nod, but stopped instead. Christopher looked at her with the same look he gave her last week, when she was sitting underneath him on the couch, cleaning his toenails. She had finally worked up the nerve to ask Christopher what he would do if she ever became pregnant.

Then, he had said, “No, Allison. No. That is not even an option. I can’t even pay rent on my apartment.”

Because Allison knew that was true, and because her period was three weeks late, she took the little tool she was using to clean Christopher’s toenails and jabbed it a little harder, causing him to curse, and Allison to look down at the floor and grin.

He was right though, Allison thought. Which was why they were on their way to “get it taken care of”. Which is why they were standing in a Hallmark store on 15th Street, staring at Jesus birds, and chain-smoking Marlboro Reds. Which is why Christopher couldn’t stop itching.

After the boy and the mother pass, Allison sunk down to the sidewalk. She pressed the pads of her fingers into the spatters of ice cream that are beginning to disappear into the concrete and, tasting nothing, she found herself crawling backwards, trying to follow the trail of ice cream back to where the boy and his mother began.

Christopher stood above Allison and tapped his foot, scratched at the side of his nose.

“It *is* beautiful, isn’t it? Don’t you think?” Allison asked him, looking up, sucking the remaining ice cream off of her index finger.

“No,” Christopher said. “I don’t think.” He sucked his breath in hard.

Allison looked Christopher right in the eyes and licked each one of her fingers slowly, daring him to say something else.

Christopher sighed and looked out over 15th Street. He said, “Oh. Alright. Get up, already.”

Christopher used his right leg to rub at the calf of his left leg, and then reached his hand down toward Allison to help her up. Allison rubbed her sticky fingers against his and they looked down the street, toward a billboard for used cars, a blinking traffic light. Ahead of them, the clinic loomed, and they were silent.

When they reached the clinic, Allison and Christopher sat two seats apart in the waiting room. Allison felt her stomach grow more and more heavy, reaching down toward her feet. She looked down to see if it had bulged, if the baby had suddenly emerged, like the way a clock changes when you blink, even if you’re watching for the numbers to change.

To combat this heaviness, Allison unlaced her chunky boots, eye by eye. Allison peeled off her thin socks and looked down at her toes, relishing in the cool air between each one and the sudden feeling of lightness it brought.

Two seats over, Christopher looked down at his lap and Allison watched a redness creep up around the top of his collar and around the cuff of his shirt, spreading over his skin. His hands are clenched into fists, presumably to avoid the scratching. He looked down at Allison’s bare feet and grunted.

Allison felt the air grow heavy again, and her stomach pulsed. She looked up at Christopher from underneath her bangs. “Can I borrow your nail clippers?” she asked.

Christopher glanced down at Allison's feet and shook his head. "Are you fucking nuts?" he whispered. He reached out his hand to Allison, the underside of his wrist a battlefield of welts and scratches. "Pull yourself together."

Allison looked down at his hand and didn't move to take it. She was consumed by this weight, this urgency to grow lighter, pressing out from her insides. She looked down at her toenails and wondered how much lighter removing them would make her. She wondered how she could have gone to church every time the doors were open until she was eighteen, and nearly as soon as she stopped, she ended up here.

At the front of the office, the receptionist nodded toward Allison and Christopher and said, "You're next." Allison was reminded of summers at a water park in Tennessee and the lifeguards who sat at the top of the slides, faces blank behind their sunglasses, absently pushing kids down the slides every few seconds. "Your'e next," they would say, and give the kid at the top of the slide a push, sending them down a dark tube into rushing water. Allison got up and moved to the seat next to Christopher. She told him, "I feel so heavy all of a sudden. Maybe we should—"

Christopher patted Allison's head, used the palms of his hand to flatten the hairs that have sprung out of her ponytail. "It will be fine," he said. "It's not even a big deal. People do this all the time." And then he began to scratch at his leg so vigorously that another patient near them, head buried in a textbook, cringed and moved to the far corner of the room.

Christopher's words echoed in Allison's head as she closed her eyes, pressing her face into his collar, imagining the air in the room infused with helium. Allison pictured herself floating out of the window, above the clinic, holding Christopher's gaze as she

watches the splotches on his face and neck become smaller and smaller, fading from red to pale pink, the uneven shapes curving into the shape of a tiny hand.

GROWING PAINS

The morning after Christopher stormed out of the beach house, Katy had already packed their things and loaded the car. “Get up,” she told her best friend, Allison, standing over the couch she had passed out on. “We’re leaving. We have to get to Pumpkin’s.”

Katy had asked Allison to accompany her to Pumpkin’s house, her coke supplier, to help her count out bag after bag. Allison hate the claustrophobic feel of trailers, even if they were double-wides; and she wasn’t thrilled with spending all afternoon with Pumpkin. Katy hadn’t asked, so much as commanded, though, and while they steered their way off of the interstate and onto the county road they would follow for the next hour home she threw out comments like: “I bet our parents would shit if they saw us now. We’re gonna be like those people on *Blow*. That was my favorite movie in high school, no lie. Wasn’t it yours?” And without waiting for Allison to answer, she threw her head back and cackled, offering Ally a line of the white powder she had edged onto the lid of a McDonald’s cup that had been floating around the car all weekend.

Too, there was this growing suspicion in Allison’s mind that the situation with Christopher had nothing to do with her but with Katy instead, and her insistence on talking to him like he was shit. The longer they rode, the more Allison became convinced of this, and she began to get angrier, convinced that her relationship was ruined because she had brought her two worlds together. Christopher wasn’t the love of Allison’s life, but she cared about him; although, when she thought about it, she conceded to herself that she did like his just *being* there, for her self confidence if nothing

else. As they moved up Highway 82, passing Montgomery and heading west toward Tuscaloosa, Allison decided to press the Christopher issue with Katy, because she was infuriated by her missing period, missing boyfriend, and growing discomfort with her current lifestyle.

“Hey. HEY.” Ally had to yell over the Britney Spears album that was blaring from the car’s stereo.

“What?” Katy was busy tapping out another clump of white powder onto the back of a C.D. with her right hand and then dividing it into lines with the Platinum American Express in her left. She used her knee to keep the wheel steady and when she arranged the powder to her likeness she took a rolled dollar bill tucked into the CD sleeve on her visor and leaned down. “GET THE WHEEL, BITCH!” Katy yelled and laughed.

“Goddamnit, Katy,” Allison said below her breath as she kept her left hand on the wheel at an awkward angle that didn’t look safe. Katy emerged from the CD fast, knocking Allison’s arm out of the way.

“I saved you some,” Katy said and then made a pouting face. “I don’t want to do it alone.”

Allison took the CD from Katy gently. “Calm the fuck down, then,” she muttered. Kaitlin only laughed again. While Allison located her own straw Katy returned the volume to Max and lit a cigarette, every so often lifting her arm to ash out of the open sunroof.

Allison stared down at the powder in front of her, hesitant. This past trip with Katy had made her forget, temporarily, that her period was two weeks late. She wasn’t invincible, after all. She sighed and blew both of the lines, licked her finger and rubbed it

along the remaining powder before Katy caught her. She turned to face the window, away from Katy, and rubbed the remaining powder along her gums, content in the bitter taste as well as the numb sensation it incited.

“Listen,” Allison began. “Hey. HEY. Turn that shit off and listen—“

“Whaaaat?” Katy asked, rearranging her sunglasses, the tinted lenses didn’t disguise the fact that she was checking herself out in the mirror for a good part of the drive. She lifted the stem of her glasses to pick at a scab underneath her nostril and when she started to lift it away from the skin she lost her grip on the steering wheel and the car began to veer off into the grass in front of the Jesus billboard that Allison always thought of as a halfway point between Katy and home.

“Jesus, Katy. Watch it.” Allison felt the coke begin to drip down the back of her throat and she wanted to sneeze but there were no kleenex. The car was moving faster now.

“I want you to be nicer to Christopher next time,” Allison said, loudly. “It’s not fair to treat him like trash just because he’s poor. And look what it made him do. He wouldn’t have cared about the abortion thing if you hadn’t pushed him about the Lortab. And he says he won’t get you any more methadone, either, if you don’t start being nicer to him”

Katy’s mouth dropped open. Allison saw, for an instant quicker than a blink, the glint of fear in her eyes. But she turned and smiled. “Get real. There won’t be a next time.”

“God. Please don’t use that baby voice. It’s so annoying.” Allison said, nonchalantly, and then more assertive: “You never do. And I know it’s because he’s –

well, whatever, poor, redneck, trash. But he's always been good to you. I'm not trying to bitch, I mean, I'm grateful, hell, but he's starting to get pissed and he's all I've got. Shit. And I don't want to—“

“It's my goddamned beach house, isn't it?” Katy asked.

Often Allison wondered how she'd ever become friends with Katy. “Well I mean it's your parent's, actually, and you know you invite so many people every weekend, Christ, right there in front of Chris, and then nobody ever—“

“FUCK IT.” Katy growled and her eyes grew wide behind her tinted lenses. She fumbled around the console for another cigarette. “He can come for the day some time,” she said, her eyebrows arched. “And then, he can drive home after it gets dark.” She turned her eyes to the road, straightened her neck. “Are you happy now?”

“Are you out of your mind? Seagrove is 5 hours away. That's the most—“

“Well, he can sleep in his truck, then. Mommy doesn't like me to have boys in the house. She would kill Christopher with her stepfather Bud Bud's shotgun if she found out. I mean, fuck.” Katy's laugh sounded evil, like a cartoon.

“She's never come down and shot any of your parade of men, has she? (Jesus, you're selfish.) But I'm sorry, then, I can't go back to the beach next weekend for July 4. It's not fair to him.” Allison waited, chewing at the inside of her lip. She wasn't even sure if Christopher was going to talk to her again, but she hadn't told Katy that.

“FAIR? He's a goddamned white-trash fucking uneducated half retarded fuck. Can you imagine what y'all's kids would look like?”

Katy's laugh was louder and longer and she was too busy looking at herself in the rearview mirror, sucking in her cheeks, proud, to see the look on Allison's face.

In hostile silence Allison watched run-down fruit signs and counted Confederate flags pass by the car window while she smoked Marlboro Mild's quick, one after the other, chewing a single piece of Winterfresh gum until her jaw ached. Katy turned the Britney Spears back to full blast and the scratch from the blown speakers only seemed to urge her to sing every song at the top of her lungs.

About ten miles before they reached University Boulevard—home!—Katy made a sharp turn into a trailer home subdivision on the outskirts of town.

“We’ve got to stop dude. Quit being such a pouting bitch and come in with me. Get over yourself. We’re getting a shit ton of blow. It’s a make-up present.” Katy threw open the car’s door and marched up to the front door of the trailer. Allison, sore and fussy from the coke comedown, took her time exiting the wagon, sighing loudly. She was short and square next to Katy, who stood 5’11” and had a face like a model: striking. Ally took comfort in the rest of Katy’s issues though: her mannish walk, the insecurity she wore as prominent as the Gucci sunglasses perched atop her head. As Allison crept up to stand beside Katy she compared their footprints in the dusty dirt path that led up to the trailer’s door. Katy’s were long and narrow, Allison’s still long, but wide. She focused on the black and white photograph stuck in the artificial wreath spray painted with a garish sparkle green paint on the trailer’s door. It was stuck in place by a single straight pin. The picture was of a child with a big grin, a can of Coca Cola in one hand, a toy gun in the other. The boy had to be no older than 4, but to Allison he seemed even younger and she felt a burning in her abdomen thinking about the probable fate of the possible baby.

“I still think you’re a bitch,” Allison said rubbing her hand across her stomach, while she tried not to consider Christopher’s reaction to the pregnancy and the drops of blood that she couldn’t get out of her head.

Katy turned. “Well, look, Mommy said I can’t have boys there. Bud Bud will get mad and drink too much and be mean to us.” She was matter of fact, succinct, and she took the bag of coke from her purse again and said to Allison “You think we can do a line of this little shit railing?”

“No,” Allison said, distracted by the way her stomach seemed to vibrate with every mention of Christopher, “And how is Bud Bud going to even know? He’s old as shit. He never leaves the couch.”

“He just is. Because he’s Bud Bud. And Mommy always knows. Duh.” Katy insisted with a finality to her head nod.

Allison was touched by this information, although she knew Katy was overdramatizing.

“Seriously,” Katy said, quieter this time, and banged on the door again.

The girls both jumped when they heard a series of loud barks followed by a clashing of metal and looked up to see the door finally opened by an enormous, balding man with a gold chain straining to circle the folds of flesh on his neck. Allison looked away when she noticed the shaving rash that covered half of his face, the other half unshaven.

Katy pushed past him and plopped down on a chaise lounge that sat right in the middle of the living room. “Where’s Pumpkin?” Katy demanded of the stupid looking man, smacking her gum.

He opened his mouth and Allison saw drool and Cheeto's crumbs on his wet sausage lips. "Out round the back there," he said, his breath labored as if mere conversation exhausted him. He turned and waddled down the small hallway toward the back of the small trailer, the cheap carpet covering the floor not enough to diffuse the creaks that came with each step. When Katy heard the bedroom door ease shut she hopped out of the lounge and the vinyl strips squeaked across the back of her bare legs. "Well, goddamn. Ha. I'll be back. Don't fucking move."

"Fine," Allison said, and began to move toward the chaise because it looked to be the cleanest thing in the trailer. "I'm calling Christopher." She pulled her cell phone out of her purse. She got to the last digit before she felt the phone fall from her hand while Katy looked at her with disgust.

"Oh Christ, him again. I never knew you'd be such a cunt about his coming to the beach. I mean, honestly. "

"Well. Now you know."

Allison opened her cell phone. She held it close to her face, pretending to be engrossed until she felt Katy's gaze move away from her. When she heard her friend stomp down the wooden steps, she put her cell phone down on the floor right beside her. She looked around the room, wondering how furniture could get so dirty. She was curious, still, about the little boy in the picture on the wreath on the front door. There weren't any pictures of him on the walls. There wasn't room. The walls were crammed full with little shelves hung without order, unevenly spaced. Little ceramic figurines of dogs sat atop these shelves, each shelf so far that several of the dogs' paws or heads hung over the edge. There were two fake trees, faded to a dull green, on either side of the

television and in their pots, a collection of pop-tops from aluminum soda cans. It was pretty trashy, Allison thought, but there was something painfully domestic about it, too.

Allison heard a motor slow and stop outside. From the back bedroom, the wobbly man called: “Git that door will you, missy? I’ve got the knees, you know. It’s just Trevor.”

Allison exhaled loud enough for the wobbly man to hear. She got up slowly, taking the time to smooth her hair, adjust the vee of her coral pink tank top. She moved toward the door and opened it just enough for the man to enter, swinging her hips willfully as she walked back to the chaise, turning for a half second to glance over her shoulder, to see if the man was watching her.

A young man wearing sunglasses on a Croakies chain and a Budweiser t-shirt walked toward her with his head tilted, his slightly stubbled face red from the June heat. “Oh. Damn. I thought you were going to be Trevor. Shit or that other. Whatever the hell his name is.” He tilted his head toward the back of the trailer, where the wobbly man had disappeared, and puffed out his cheeks. He continued to walk closer to Allison in this fashion until his face was right in front of hers. Allison held his stare and snapped her gum. He jumped back and made a sound like a hiccup and began walking around this “living room” of the trailer, patting all the little shiny heads of the ceramic dogs that lined the cheap shelves. He was rough with some, and when he brought his hands upon them the weight shook the shelves and the trailer walls vibrated.

“I have a brother named Trevor” Allison thought, aloud. “But no one but me and that man have been here, other than Katy.”

He stopped in front of Allison's chair, three feet away, facing her. He was clutching a little pug dog with a chipped head. Allison stared at him. "You're pretty weird. And that damn pug was covered in dust."

The man looked at the figure in his hand with wide eyes and shrugged. He slipped into the pocket of his jeans and sat down across from her, on the floor, his back against the wall. While Allison watched the man, curious, he took a finger and scraped it along the inner rim of his nostril. "Ever get a sore inside your nose? Like, one of those hard scabs that burns and won't budge. Like a damn boulder?" His voice was casual, familiar, and while he talked he twitched his nose from side to side.

"I don't think so. Why?" Allison asked, looking at the empty place on the shelf from where he had removed the dog.

"Just hope to God you don't. That's all," he said. "Got any Neosporin? Fucking cocaine makes my nostrils a war zone." His voice was monotone, betraying the movement Allison watched as his nose and mouth continued to twitch like a seizure in slow motion. She felt ill, and her stomach felt like lead.

"Stop. It will never go away. Just, I don't know, hold still. How long's it been there?"

"Goddamn if I know," he said, looking down at the carpet. "My girlfriend's got the Herp, ya know? And you can get fever blisters inside your nose, I've heard."

Allison shifted in her chair, crossing her legs. "So what are you doing here then, if the coke tears you up like that?"

"Shit, man. My wife stopped breastfeeding last week. She wanted a little present."

“Your wife has a baby, herpes, and a cocaine habit?” Allison asked, her voice flat, and as soon as she spoke she looked down and began to pick at the cuticles of her fingernails.

“Naw. My girlfriend has the herp. My wife’s got the baby. Although I guess she could have it too, according to what all those brochures at the Health Department say. I don’t really give a fuck.” The man rubbed at his nose fast with his palm, moaning. When he pulled his hand away a trickle of blood fell down his face and stopped in the stubble on his chin. He swiped it in vain.

“Who are you?” he asked, holding his hand up to the light to examine the smear of blood across the back of his palm.

“Katy—“ Allison stopped.

The man nodded. He gave her a little smile and when Allison crossed her legs again he suddenly yelled out “W” in the direction of the back of the trailer.

The fat man waddled out. When he made it to the living area, breathing heavy, hands on hips he asked “What?” in a voice so high that Allison let slip a giggle.

“Throw me a chair out here, wouldya? Be a goddamned host.” The man leaned his head back into the wall and waited.

“W” went into the bedroom and reemerged dragging a wicker rocking chair behind him. He stopped at the end of the hall and wiped sweat from his greasy head. “I don’t even live here,” he gasped and wobbled as fast as he could back to the rear of the trailer.

Allison and the man looked at the rocking chair. Allison felt her skin warm and a strange burning in her stomach when she saw it, something peculiar, perhaps longing.

She sniffed. It was the cleanest chair in the house and they both knew it. When Allison turned to see the man's reaction his head was down and he scratched at his neck. He looked at Allison, stepped back from the chair and nodded. She didn't say anything as she got up from the chaise and walked around the chair, running her hands over its arm rests and back. She finally settled into it hesitantly, looking empty-handed.

The man reclined in the chaise and Allison popped her knuckles to fill the empty space. The man had reclined the chaise to the flat position and was lying all the way out, his arms raised above his head playing with the peeling plastic strips that formed the mat of the chair. Allison tried not to look at the way the muscles in his arms rippled as he picked at the plastic, thread by thread, until it started to ravel, slightly, away.

After a silence he clapped his hands together above his head and then brought them to his sides. "I *do* know Katy." He grunted. "Bitch." Then he grinned and from Allison's angle, his head upside down from her line of sight, it was garish.

"Oh," Allison said, drawing out the sound at the end of the word, leaving it the judgment for the man. She leaned forward to hear more and when her arm grazed the side of her right breast she felt a shot of pain tingle from her side toward the nipple. She gasped.

"What?" the man asked, back to fiddling with the chair.

"Nothing. Sunburn. I *have* been to the beach, you know."

The boy snorted.

"It hurts, though. I've got fair skin, see?" she asked him and pulled down the sleeve of her shirt, careful not to graze her breasts.

He tilted his chin toward her, squinting. “Nah. It’s not even peeling.” He returned his head to its previous position. “It’s alright, though.”

“Whatever. Where’s my goddamned friend with the blow, Christ.” Allison said, more toward the door than the man on the floor whose name she still did not know.

“It won’t help with that sunburn though.” The man rubbed at his nose with his palm.

Allison looked down at him again. “To hell with you then,” she said slowly, sitting up straight as if she were about to leave, reaching for her purse and phone that she had moved to the corner of the rocking chair.

He sat up and arranged himself in Indian-style. He closed his eyes. “You’re a feisty one, huh?”

She relaxed. “You’re going to break the chair if you sit in it like that. Besides, it’s squeaking, you hear it?” She stared out the open screen door. He was quiet while he watched her. She felt his stare but didn’t meet it and rubbed her arm against her breast, just to see if the last pain was a fluke.

This time, she didn’t wince, but the pain was still there, and she began to tap her foot against the chair leg, wondering how she might get out of ever telling Christopher. As the sun began to set a little further, and Katy was gone a little longer, Allison and the man sat in the little room of the trailer, in silence for several minutes. When Allison heard Katy’s voice coming from the driveway she came to as if she had been asleep. When she looked down she was surprised to find the man’s hand around her ankle, his head bowed down, waiting.

She picked up her phone again, dialed Christopher's number. She motioned the man for a cigarette while she listened to the phone ring, he pushed it toward her with his free hand, and when Christopher answered, Allison felt his hand grow tighter around her ankle.

"Where the hell are you?" he asked. "I thought you weren't going back to that beach with that cunt. And I need you here. I've got laundry. And I haven't been laid in four days. And I need you to find me some 'tabs.'"

Allison opened her mouth to answer and closed it again when she saw Katy burst through the door, a little boy with a cap gun in his hand close behind her. She leaned over Allison, whispered in her ear: "We've got to get the hell out of here. That fucking kid won't leave me alone. The cap gun smells like shit. And Pumpkin still cutting it because he says its too pure for any of these dumb fucks in college, so I'm done."

Allison stood up slowly, a tingle went through her chest. Her nose began to burn. "But don't you think—"

Katy grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her down the steps of the trailer, knocking the tacky wreath off the one nail that pegged it to the door to the dusty clump of grass below the stairs. "Oops," she muttered, and pulled Allison close, whispered her breath sticky-hot on Allison's cheek: "I ganked like a fucking purse-ful out there. No lie. Don't worry, you'll get yours. And your brother called me, he wants us to bring him an eight-ball to him before his keg party starts"

Allison didn't say anything, instead considering where her younger brother got the money for such things, and how fast Katy would dip into the stash. They paused outside of the trailer, just for a second, for Katy to readjust the strap of her tank,

straighten her neck, look at herself in the reflection of the car's windshield. Allison pulled at the split ends on her hair, ignoring that Christopher was calling her back, the phone's ring growing increasingly louder in the sparse land that lie between the trailers and the county road, piercing the dull hum of the crickets that had just begun to sing.

Katy turned the music up even louder than possible as they drove away from the trailer, Katy's coke supply resatiated. She didn't talk. Allison stared out the window at the dust that blew up off the road and onto the windows. When she reached into her purse to answer Christopher's phone call, finally, her hand ran across something unfamiliar, smooth, gritty. From her purse she pulled out the picture of the cap-gun shooting boy that had hung on the wreath at the trailer, failing to notice the nail still attached to its center. It's tip scratched the inside of Allison's forearm and she watched, silent, as a drop of blood fell on the picture, right over the face of the little boy.

EVASION IN JASMINE

MOTHER

You can live an entire life without being true to yourself. You can exist for sixty-three years, even, without exerting one ounce of control. But I wouldn't recommend it.

It was a time bomb and a snow globe all wrapped into one. This thing. From the inside it seemed perfect. But, from the outside we knew we'd soon explode. And when I look back on it, I wouldn't have it any other way.

I used to go to this little coffee shop by the river. It was small and quiet and full of those dark-haired poet types staring at nothing and scribbling on paper napkins. A vacuum filled with infinite possibility. That's what coffee shops are for, I think. Staring into your cup: using caffeine for sustenance, like minds for validation. I wasn't any of these things. Just a lost soul made miserable by a resistance to change.

I remember this day in particular because I think it marked the beginning of the end. I had been there since the early afternoon, watching the ducks. It was rhythmic, almost, how they marched up and down the highway assembled in proud but crooked lines. They were like tiny feathered soldiers. What struck me the most was how fearless they looked, even though they were so far from their home. I think, in a different time, in an earlier life, those ducks would have given me hope. Now they just made me feel empty. And really I just wondered why I was always so scared.

Even though a coffee shop by the river sounds like a lovely and romantic notion, it wasn't. It was starting to get dark and the trees blocked the sunset and the lights from the highway glared in. When it got late the cars started to go by faster and the ducks

would begin their march back to the water. As it got darker and the headlights of cars bounced off the window and distorted the night, I noticed my reflection in the smudged pane. I traced the outline of my hair. I touched the nose in my reflection, the flat mouth, the faint skin. But no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find my eyes. I became frightened then. If I couldn't see my eyes, what else could I not see? I searched the window. My reflection was gone. The ducks had moved back into the shadows of the night.

COLLEEN

Sometimes at night I lie in bed with my eyes wide open and the room pitch dark and even though I can't see a thing, I can see it all. I wish that I didn't think about eternity and I wish that I didn't have a weakness for repeating mistakes and I wish that I was there and never here. Sometimes at night I lie in bed with him and wish I could be anywhere else. He's just always *there*, with his hand rubbing my stomach and his leg wrapped around mine. I hate his hand but I don't move it. He starts to talk and I try not to listen.

He asks, "Don't you remember how it used to be? I just don't understand, Colleen, why you don't want to go back. I don't understand how you can't remember. You always think you know everything. But one day it's going to come back around and I'm not going to be here and you're going to be alone. And doesn't that scare you, Colleen?"

It didn't. But I didn't say anything. He creeps his hand around me again and it feels like sandpaper and dreams. And I can't help but remember.

So I lie there and take his hand off of my stomach and wish I had something to erase everything. I ache for a drink, I yearn for a cigarette, I need a painkiller. A reprieve. And you may think I'm an addict. But I'm not. I just need something to get my mind off of all this dissonance inside of my head. And the more he talked, the louder it became.

But he didn't stop. He just kept asking, "Don't you remember the times we had? Don't you remember how we used to fucking love each other? Don't you remember everything I did for you? Don't you remember when it used to mean something?"

I do. But I don't say it.

And so he started up again.

"Colleen, what in the hell is wrong with you? I don't understand why you have to be so goddamned frigid all the time."

Every night he does this. And every night I take his hand off of mine. I uncurve the snake of his leg. I sigh and turn over. "Brian," I always say, "You just don't even know."

So I lie there and close my eyes and think about jasmine, the flower that blooms at night, and try not to listen. But sometimes I do.

When he finally stops talking, I stare straight ahead at the ceiling and listen to the mosquitoes sing. I shift in the bed and hold his hand and think that I want to be anywhere but here. But the harder you fight something, the more likely you'll end up trapped. Fighting emotions is imprisoning, and intoxicating. It can't be stopped because something about it just feels so right. He'll squeeze my hand letting me know that he

doesn't mind. The fights, the absence of communication, the inconsistencies. A drop in the bucket. Insignificant things to him. And I squeeze back.

Brian was tired. And he knew Colleen was stupid. They went through the same exact routine every single night. Her coming in the middle of the night, crawling into bed and thinking that her didn't know. She thought she could use him for sex, for comfort, and leave before the sun came up. And she thought he didn't care. But she was stupid. And he was tired. So he never said anything about it.

Brian didn't love her. But, like an addict, he sensed that he *needed* her, if only for the nights more than anything else. He would lie there in bed with his legs around her and would soak in the presence of her body, get high off the touch of her skin. It was sick. But he also knew he couldn't stop it. And yet, Brian didn't love her.

In some ways, he sensed his mother in Colleen. The same things that went wrong, the same things that stayed right. Every night she would pull away from me, get quiet and tense. Every morning she would leave without telling me and then come back again, hours later, fresh hair and makeup, to make breakfast, drop off muffins, pick up dry cleaning. This was the way she was with me. And this was the way my father was with my mother. He wanted her nearby, he wanted those comforts of home, but he didn't want her illness, her mood swings. Even I could see that he treated her like shit and the way she never asked for anything at all. This was what I saw in Colleen. And in me. My mother wouldn't leave him. She needed him to be there, yelling, angry, telling her she wasn't good enough so she could keep trying. And in the evening she would stay

with him most of the night, but an hour or so before the sun rose I often heard her rise from bed, listened as the floorboards creaked, and peered out the crack of the bedroom door down an empty hallway, her soft footsteps echoing in my mind. The only trace of her might be the crush in the pile of the carpet, a lingering scent of jasmine that wafted through the small space of my open door. Sometimes she went to the arms of others, something I found out later, but mostly she went to her garden.

My mother used to plant jasmine. Gardening was really the only thing she knew and cared about. I would look down from my bedroom window into the garden at night. It was the only time to garden, she always told me. She was beautiful and haunting in the moonlight.. Planting things was when she was the happiest; it was the only thing over which she ever had any control, at least in our home. I could tell she always wanted to leave. That's why I waited by my door so often at night, wondering if the jasmine that lingered in the hallway might be her last parting gift. A memory that bloomed at night, like the flower itself.

There were times I would lie in bed before Colleen woke up and I knew she was there even before I saw her. She always smelled like jasmine. I told her it was strange, at first, that she wore the perfume of my mother. It burned my nose at first, hurt to smell my mother's scent on this lovely woman. It felt like an imposter. Like a ghost that came to life. The perfume was strong, not delicate. When Colleen closed her eyes, I would lean over and play with her hair, inhale her scent. She was a drug.

COLLEEN

He told me not to say anything. And I didn't. Even though I wanted to. He thought I was dumb. And maybe I was. But I didn't say anything. Not really.

It had been going on for quite some time. This thing with their mother. She was losing her mind, or maybe she never had it to begin with. She had never really been there for her boys, but they had this hang-up, Brian and Aaron, about pride.

We were at Brian's and she had come because she said she was scared.

So when she started screaming we gathered her into the car. We took a bandana from an old closet. It reeked of mothballs and memories and we wrapped it around her eyes. We thought if we kept her in the dark that she might quiet down. Kind of like a bird in a cage. We often did this at night when she would wake up, screaming, asking where everyone was, where had her little boys gone, where was her husband, why was she alone. She knew to call Brian's number, but on nights like these, in her mind she returned back to the nights of her as a young housewife, and woke up confused and split down the middle, an twenty five year woman trapped in an elderly, hardly mobile body. So if I was with him, we would go and gather Aaron, and pick her up. She liked the drives, if it was dark, and we would put her in the backseat and play soft music and sometimes it calmed her. I often sat beside her, holding her hand, and even though she was blindfolded, I sensed that she knew I was an outsider. Her palms would sweat and clench coldly, as if she resented that comfort.

And that night, it was raining and she was crying and Brian was yelling and I just wanted quiet. We were driving fast, dodging in and out of invisible shadows and I was trying to plug my ears.

My hands were sweating and I clutched the piece of jasmine I had picked from the garden. I held it to my nose and tried not to listen. The petals had wilted and it didn't even make me sad. And when she wouldn't stop the screaming, I handed the flower back to her. "Jasmine is supposed to improve mental clarity and calm the senses. It will help, really," I told her.

She poked her head around the seat. I looked at her and an old photograph by Belloq flashed in my head. A masked nude in a New Orleans brothel. The subject looked so vulnerable, so trapped. And yet I wanted to be her. It just seemed so *easy*. To know that no day would be better than the next, that you would have this constancy of misery. Another day, another body. You give yourself up until there isn't anything left. If you have nothing, what do you have to lose? I stared at his mother and pushed the flower into her hand.

"You're an idiot," she cried. "Don't you know that jasmine only blooms at night? Don't you know anything?"

I didn't want to tell her that it was hours past midnight. I didn't ask her why she thought it was day even though her world had been blacked out by the musty rag. So I said nothing. She ripped at her blindfold. She screamed again and I think that if we could have seen her eyes we would have turned back. I think we covered them because *we* were the ones who were scared.

I looked out the windows and wondered what had happened to all of the stars, if maybe God had forgotten about us, or maybe it wasn't really night after all and I just couldn't see the light. The night is full of illusions and I wondered if maybe she wasn't so crazy after all. I wondered if she was overwhelmed with all this, like, *knowing*, about

the world around her, of just seeing too much. If the more she realized about life, the worse things became.

Later. I sat in the backyard of their mother's house, watching them but removed, like in a dream. One of those moments when you think you're caught between sleep and consciousness and can't move, but wake hours later only to realize that you only imagined it. It's mind-numbing when it happens, that moment of pseudo-paralysis.

Brian stopped outside of his Mother's because he couldn't get the screaming out of his head. The vision of that blindfold, the cries to make it stop. I followed him to the garden around the back of the house. I sat down on a stone bench. I shut my eyes. I opened them. And I stared when I saw their silhouettes in the garden.

The light was shining on the flowers and I saw her sitting there, the ratty rag used for a blindfold (Christ, I swear I can even smell the mothballs now), the same withdrawn acceptance, her legs curled around the legs of the chair, hands folded in her lap. But I couldn't get that screaming out of my head.

I watched Brian above her, shovel in hand. Poised like one of those statues they keep in gardens just like this. I blinked twice. I thought I had mistaken him for a figure of stone. And Brian's brother was there too, crying. I couldn't hear but I knew her body language: the shrugged shoulders, the way she pulled the hair over eyes to hide her tears.

Somewhere in the middle of the car ride, a decision had been made. Brian said something about this car ride being the last, that he couldn't handle mother's suffering anymore. I stayed quiet. I rarely questioned him. I thought he meant he was taking her to a home. Something. Certainly not to the backyard with a shovel.

BRIAN

And even though she knew what I was going to do, she didn't stop me. . We all wanted it to be over. Brian remembered all the times when things used to be normal. When she would take them to the zoo when we were kids. Teaching them how to pronounce the real official Latin names along with the every-day. She loved the house with the reptiles and amphibians the best. It was always dark, and she would inch slowly through the exhibits, trailing her finger along the glass. Sometimes she would become so engrossed with staring inside those cages that Brian and his brother would have to run back along the hallways in the dark to find her, startling her out of a deep trance. Brian thought she liked the dark because it hid everything. That way they wouldn't have to see her cry. One time he asked her what she was looking at and she just smiled and patted my head. She said something under her breath about wanting to escape and being scared. Brian remembered looking around at snakes hanging from branches behind dusty glass, lizards crouching under shadowy leaves, and feeling terrified. He never asked her again.

COLLEEN

And when things started to go downhill, they were older. Teenagers, but they were older. She started to lose her mind slowly. She gradually faded from reality, losing sense of her place, her purpose. She just stopped pretending that things were all right. The doctors couldn't explain it and we didn't want to ask for help and we didn't want to give her up to some hospital. Christ, she was all he ever had and we were all too ashamed to admit that we had failed her. So we tried to make it right, but in the end she just wouldn't stop screaming. And she would never explain. So when I saw what Brian was going to do, I couldn't help it. The word *mercy* comes to mind.

He killed her in the garden along with the night blooming jasmine and the trailing morning glories. Those elusive peek-a-boo flowers that only open their eyes for half a day. Maybe those flowers had the right idea. The ability to just quit *being* whenever the sun moved past the horizon.

I watched Brian stretch his arms above his head. He had stopped crying and was pausing from the dig. And I swear to Christ he didn't even flinch when he lowered her body in the ground. When he was done, he pulled me to him by my shoulders. I looked over him, into the grave, saw her shudder, then. Then I looked down and stared at the empty space between us.

AARON

I don't think he knew that I knew. I guessed that he wouldn't have. She wasn't supposed to tell me. But she never held anything back. The truth was, our lives were chains of paper dolls made with tiny chinks in the scissors, tiny tears in the paper. It was this rip that would break us apart. And she wasn't supposed to tell me.

She came early in the morning, leaving him, coming to me. She loved me, she needed him. She came in crying about finding him in the garden, seeing him with the shovel. I didn't ask her any questions.

I pulled her close. Smelled the jasmine in her hair. Told her to be quiet. I thought about what it would be like to be blind. Wishing I hadn't seen any of it, just so I could hear it told from her voice. Just so I could pretend that maybe it was only a story. Just so I could pretend that it wasn't so.

And so she told me, in that quiet and lingering way that she has, the story I already knew. She had found him in the garden, mud streaking his face, Mother's hair glowing in the floodlight. She had seen him out there with the chair, that same blindfold. He always tended the garden at night because he said it calmed him.

She said that she didn't try to stop him. "I mean, God, Aaron," she said, "it wasn't *my* mother and who was I to interfere?"

COLLEEN

I wasn't supposed to find him there. But I did. I watched him dig the grave and didn't say a word. I never understood how he could be so removed that his own mother's death hardly affected him. Not a death, even, but a murder, nonetheless. I was tired. And I realized that an addiction to someone else can be so powerful it can make you do more than kill. It can literally make you blind.

I had known he was going to do it. It didn't even bother me. What do you tell someone that has lost everything? You tell them nothing. You step back and watch them try to gain control.

We were out at the river near the coffee shop that she used to love. I looked out at the water and how it rippled. I wondered about all the things that the water had passed through. The sewers and raindrops and bathwater and drinking fountains and people, even. It was kind of strange, I guess. I remembered my grade school days, learning about how matter is never created or destroyed. And all I could think about was when we were younger and we were in love and things were different. When we didn't have things weighing over our heads but we thought we did. We thought everything would stay exactly the same. But we mostly spent our time trying to forget.

I wondered about the matter that never goes away, that only changes forms. Does it work the same way with love?

I remember popping muscle relaxers like Sweet-Tarts. Bottles of tequila followed by cases of beer. Cough syrup. Acid trips. Anything, really. We thought we were cutting edge and we thought we were cool. We thought it meant everything in the world to live for erasing the present. To live only to get rid of that pain that we thought we had.

We didn't realize, I don't think, about matter, about that atom that doesn't ever go away. One way or the other we would still be here. So would our memories. And we smoked and snorted and coughed and swallowed. But it never made anything go away. It wouldn't now. It couldn't then.

I looked out at the water and wished that I could go back to the days when we loved each other and the days that I didn't know what he was capable of doing and what I was capable of not. I wished that I didn't know that I didn't have the power to leave him; that I didn't know that he could get rid of, so easily, anything he couldn't control.

I lit a cigarette and wondered if I was scared. But then I realized I wasn't even like her. I had settled, but it was from the onset. Was it any different? At least I wasn't blind.

BRIAN

We were down at the river watching the sun come up. He had never seen her at the break of dawn. She was always gone before the sun broke the clouds. As he watched the light dance across her face, she threw bread to the ducks like pennies in a fountain. They were mostly asleep but she caught a couple that were early risers cawing

over pieces of old crusty bread. He watched her throw the bread and asked her if she was making a wish.

She cried, "Be quiet now, the ducks are moving in."

HOARDING

Sally was up all night Thursday, lying in bed, looking from corner to corner of the mess she had created in every inch of the empty space of her apartment that lied beneath her parent's house. She had gone to bed early, at 10 p.m., turned the television to VH1, and watched four straight hours of reality television. She was faced with the reality of her situation when the television switched from regular programming to infomercials, marking the onset of the coming morning. Sally didn't rise from bed, though. She lied there paralyzed, staring at the empty fast food cups that were stacked on every surface she could see, the mounds of crumpled papers and the books and magazines strewn across the floor surrounding her bed. There were plastic bags from convenience stores, Wal-Mart, the drug store that lined the floors like used Kleenex, all filled with things Sally considered dirty, which was different than messy, she was sure. These bags held food wrappers and empty soft drink cups, wadded up napkins with ketchup stains. She had to clean the mess soon, before tomorrow, she knew, but she had been saying that for months now, and she didn't know where to begin. So Sally stayed in bed all night, staring at the television, surrounded by three months of trash and hoarding.

Sally's fiancée Griffin was flying in from Mississippi that afternoon, returning home after a ninety day stay at rehab and Sally was far less excited that she should be. At 4:30 a.m., she once again took a look at the mess that had accumulated over the past 3 months, since Griffin left. She was never a clean freak, but the room did seem different, smaller. Her bed was a hidey-hole in the maze of it all. On the television, a middle aged woman came onto the screen. "My husband used to sleep in a different room. He was

looking at porn almost 6 hours a day. He started hiding my food,” the woman exclaimed with glee. Sally stared at her mouth, anticipating the sure to come “before-picture” that always accompanied the testimonies on these weight loss ads. Sally watched while the woman tossed her head, the sprayed bob motionless. “But that was THEN,” the woman practically squealed. On screen, the picture flashed of an enormously fat woman with the speaker’s head. She was lying on a plastic beach chair in front of an above ground pool and the chair sagged under her weight. She held a margarita in her hand and a Fitness magazine was lying on the ground beside her. Sally looked down at her stomach, which lapped over her underwear strap more than a little, and frowned. “Oh, goodness me. Look at that fatty,” the woman continued. “That was before the AB-BLASTER!” Sally hit the mute button. She thought of Griffin and how he wouldn’t even care if she looked like the before picture of the woman in the bathing suit. She wanted him to care, she thought.

Sally wished, too, she could clean up the mess that had accumulated in the last three months, greet Griffin at the plane, and dive headfirst with joy into plans for their wedding. But every time she stopped to pick up a piece of trash, to gather it up, she put it down again. She told herself that it could be done later, or it she shouldn’t start small but take the trash with one big full forced clean sweep. If she had a full day to do it, it would be perfect, and Griffin would be thrilled and her mother would smile and say, You deserve something extra special for all that work babe. But she liked the mess, a little, because it let her hide, focus on other things, and forget about Griffin. So long as she stayed in her little trash filled hole, then life would stay exactly the same.

At nine a.m. Sally finally made her way out of the bed, eyes gritty from staring at the television and aching from moving but not resting. She navigated her way through the piles and stepped over the moldy towels in the bathroom. She slipped into flip flops so that her feet wouldn't slide in the mildew and scum that lined the shower floor, and turned on the hot water. In her head, she prepared a list of supplies for cleaning: Lysol, rubber gloves, garbage bags. She had a few hours, but she felt sure she could tackle it. When she emerged from the shower, she took careful time blow drying her hair, applying her makeup, selecting an outfit. She pulled out a red halter dress for later that afternoon, one of the few clean items in her closet. She had been saving it for this day, although the dress didn't have much importance any more. Sally loved the way it hugged her curves and flaunted her breasts, it reminded her of the way she felt when she was nineteen and out on the town on a Friday night. She could just imagine all the guys she could pick up. But now it made her sad, because Griffin would love it, but wouldn't care. There wasn't much thrill in that.

She found a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt that had only been worn once or twice, and pulled them on to gather the cleaning supplies from a nearby store. She would stop at Sam's Club and get an economy sized bag of garbage bags and just toss the whole lot out, pick up some candles to make the room smell clean. It would only take an hour or so, Sam's was only right down the road, and it would leave her at least four or five hours to clean, she decided.

But it took Sally longer than she had thought. The Sam's Club wasn't crowded, but the store was bright and inviting, and before she realized it, she had spent an hour wandering the aisles, selecting several items to fill her cart: Clorox wipes, a 5-pack of

Glade air fresheners, a gallon of Febreze, a 5 gallon vat of Lysol, 2 boxes of contractor bags, a set of designer candles.

She was exhausted when she returned home and stood for a moment staring at her bed, unmade, and the television that was still on from the evening before. Sally thought about going upstairs for a beer. Just to get her started. One or two wouldn't hurt, she decided.

On most Friday afternoons, a few hours before sundown, Sally would be at Pepito's drinking margaritas and chain-smoking with her friends, a precursor to a nearly lost weekend that would ensue. But on this Friday, Sally paced the spacious garage apartment up and down—all 3 rooms. She lived in the basement of her parents' sprawling home, which was set into a lot they had cut into the side of Red Mountain, an ostentatious plantation style home set way down the crest of the mountain and overlooking the city of Birmingham. An elevator connected her apartment to her parents' home, but she rarely used it, and they stayed out of her apartment as well. She put the bags down and stepped around the McDonald's wrappers, crushed beer cans, empty wine bottles that covered every inch of the floor. She wasn't sure where to begin. She was used to moving around the maze of debris, from front door to bed and out again, hoping to avoid the fact that she was living alone, with her parents, and would soon be marrying a man who had just gotten out of rehab, whom she no longer loved.

Sally returned to the bathroom after setting down her bags. She would begin to clean up soon. She just needed to freshen up first, to brush her hair, reapply perfume, eyeliner, lipstick. Griffin was arriving this afternoon and she had to be ready, she supposed, to leave at any moment. And her mother wouldn't let her leave the house

without lipstick on. She would begin the cleaning directly after. She couldn't be unprepared. Sally was only a little anxious for her fiancée to see the apartment, although he was aware of her messy habits. He didn't even mind them. He had told Sally that he loved that about her. She hated that too. She could get away with anything with him, he would always see her as perfect regardless of her faults.

She pulled a lipstick from underneath a blotting Kleenex beside the empty bottles of Listerine that sat upon her sink. Sally stared down at the lipstick: Royal Red. It was a power color, her mother said. Even after she smeared the lipstick onto her lips, she still felt ashamed of what she had become, worried that even Royal Red wouldn't change that. She hadn't had sex in two months and when she shimmied her breasts into the halter dress she felt a tingle in the pit of her stomach. Sex, she thought, might could change her feelings about Griffin. Yes, she said out loud. Sex could change everything. That's all I've needed. She looked once more at the mirror and rearranged the vee-neck of her knit dress. Her hair was dishwater blonde, shoulder-length and flat, her stomach was round, and her legs were pale and short, but her breasts were good, and she felt secure in that. It's all I've got, she thought, and she hoped that would be enough.

A car horn beeped outside, once, long and jolting, and Sally's heart clenched. Her mother was waiting and she hadn't yet moved from the mirror. The mess was still there and the cleaning supplies remained untouched. There was no chance of changing it before Griffin arrived. She swallowed the bile that had begun to rise in her throat and decided that she could persuade Griffin away from her home long enough to clean it up later. Later. She practiced breathing a few calming breaths and dutifully marched outside, avoiding getting her heels caught on any of the papers that lined the floor.

In the car, Sally's mother finished up a phone call while Sally fidgeted in the front seat beside her, wishing for a cigarette. While her mother sped out of the driveway—*We're going to be SO late. What took you so long? A lady wouldn't make her husband to wait like this, Sally, you know that!*—Sally stared out the car window as the car makes its ascent up the long driveway that wraps its way up to the top of the ridge on which they live.

Her mother giggled a little, when she noticed Sally fidgeting, and Sally knew it is from one too many vodka sodas at the bridge room in the country club.

“Are you drunk?” Sally asked, quietly.

“Heavens, no. Would I ever drink and drive? You know how I feel about that. I just had a drink. One drink! at the club. You know I am when I'm with the girls.” Sally knew. She was obnoxious, and tried too hard. She laughed at the wrong jokes and she dished out vicious snobbery with the rest of the country club bitches. Sally's mother giggled again, and fluffed her hair. She punched the radio on the stereo a couple of times until a Nelly song started to play.

“You wanna see my grills,” Sally's mom sang along and bared her teeth like she herself was a rapper in the rearview mirror.

Sally slammed her hand into the stereo, a reflex, all the while examining her reflection in the small visor mirror. “Seriously, mom, are you kidding me?”

Sally's mother sobered, her voice turns sweet. “Oh, honey, you're right. I know this is hard for you I'd be nervous, too. You just haven't seen him in so long. And I know he went away for so long, but I just know this is going to be right. And your daddy

and I are planning the perfect wedding for you. Everyone who's anyone in Birmingham will be there. You know that! Here! Take a happy pill."

She slid a small blue tablet to Sally. Sally felt calmer already, and pressed it to her mouth quickly, chewed it even to get the job done faster. Sally knew the plans for the wedding, but didn't care. Her mother could plan it.. At least there was one good thing about her mother drinking in the afternoon. She would prefer to celebrate with friends in Vegas, sign a certificate at the courthouse, and forget the whole ordeal. The thought of marrying Griffin wore her out

"I think it will be good for you though, baby. I know Griffin had his problems. I know. But it's been 2 months, and I just know y'all are going to be perfect now. You're going to do everything right, aren't you?"

Sally looked out the window and sucked her teeth. She stared at the passing road and tried to breathe normally, waiting for the happy pill to work. She noticed that the wind was blowing hard, and the branches of the trees moved back and forth like the arms of a person drowning. Leaves had begun to scatter the neighborhood roads.

The car was silent for a while, the only sound the tinkling of ice cubes in a glass on the dash and the sighs of Sally, staring at the leaves and the trees out the window.

After a while, Sally's mother turned to her daughter with wide eyes. Sally blinked at her while her mother contemplated whether she should say what she was about to say. Sally knew that look of her mother's all too well, and it never meant anything positive.

“Sal, baby, you know your daddy and me are having that basement cleaned while we pick up sweet Griffin. That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it? Him seeing you living in that filth? Honey, you know we don’t live like that.” She whispered this, as if someone could overhear her: “You weren’t raised like that. You know that.” And then she gave Sally a little swat on the thigh, a mock spanking.

“Enough.” Sally said, with more conviction than she felt. “Enough. And all of that stuff was mine. I didn’t want it gone.” Her heart had started to beat faster, anxious about taking Griffin home to a sparkling clean basement apartment that wasn’t hers, but the empty rooms of a stranger. She didn’t want the mess, but she didn’t want it gone either, she didn’t think. Sally had been building the moment of Griffin returning to her home with her for weeks now, and she had pictured many visions, but this wasn’t one of them.

“But why?” her mother asked. “You’re being absurd. But it doesn’t matter what you want. Because I didn’t raise a daughter who would live in that filth. What would people think?”

Sally’s mother turned up the music and Sally stared straight ahead. She knew better than to back-talk. She yearned for a drink. She hated that Griffin had to stay clean. His trip to rehab was required by his job as a real estate agent a big Birmingham company. They had swept the issue under the carpet quietly. “We know about the back pain,” they had told him. “We’ll get you the help. No worries. You’re a good man.” Sally knew nothing about back pain, but she was angry at Griffin’s job. She was angry that he became sloppy when he mixed alcohol and pills, that he couldn’t maintain composure, couldn’t hide it from his job. She wasn’t embarrassed for him. She was

disappointed in the loss of a lifestyle. Would Griffin be the same? What would they do at night?

Sally drummed her fingers against the car's door. "This pill doesn't WORK." she screamed, her rage pouring out of her voice in one sudden swoop.

Her mother took another gulp from her drink. She smiled. "You're just lovesick, baby. Lovesick is all."

As they neared the train station, Sally leaned the car seat back so that all she could see from the interior of the car was the sides of the doors and the glovebox in front of her. She had no desire to look on at the waiting airport as they circled around waiting for Griffin to arrive, no desire to appear hopeful or excited. The car came to a quick stop and Sally's mother stopped the car in the no-parking lane. Sally heard her mother turn the emergency flashers on, and grimaced, wishing for another one of her blue pills. She heard her mother hesitate, slurp the rest of her drink, and open the door to get out, but Sally kept her eyes tightly shut, her hand over her eyes. She didn't understand the escalating anxiety. It was confusing, uncalled for. She had everything she had dreamed about as a child: the perfect fiancée who loved her and her faults, the perfect parents who gave her a generous allowance and who were planning her a fairy tale wedding. And yet, she wanted none of it. She wished for her bed, her cluttered apartment, and the drone of VH1.

Sally heard her mother return to the car and she groaned, anxious. She heard Griffin's voice and her stomach knotted again; but she raised the car's seat, assumed a forced smile. She waved from the front seat. Grinned. Griffin ran to the car's window and tapped at it, kissing the outside of the window sloppily, leaving marks on the glass.

Sally looked away, disgusted, and pretended to fidget with the door locks. She threw her hands up in false confusion.

“So let’s go for a drink, why don’t we?” Sally’s mom said as she hopped into the car, after letting Griffin into the back seat. He was weaving his fingers through Sally’s hair as she stared straight forward. He would understand her silence, if she explained it later, she thought. She could always just explain it later.

“I’d love a Jack and Coke.” Griffin said, grinning. “And of course I can’t wait to catch up with beautiful Sally and her gorgeous mother here. I’ll be damned if I thought I was never going to see you again.”

“You just got out of rehab, Griffin,” Sally said, angry. Irritated at the two of them.

“Oh phooey. You know that was for the pain pills the doctor gave me. It was just a little vacation is all. A little time to detox. I never had a problem with drinking, did I ole Sal? Never, did I?”

Sally didn’t answer and considered that she would certainly like a drink herself, but knew that she had to get home before the cleaners finished the apartment. There were things there that she *needed*. She had to return to the disorder, or she couldn’t face the rest of her life. It seemed irrational, it was, in fact; but Sally didn’t care. She knew what she must have. And she plastered on a false smile as she reminded her mother that she had forgotten her ID at home, and there was no reason they couldn’t run by for a minute could they?

Sally's mother hesitated. "You don't need all of that. You're with me."

"I really do, though," Sally said, "And I have something for Griffin. Something I wanted to give him right away." She looked over at her mother, touched her arm.

Griffin leaned between the two seats. He kissed Sally on the cheek., and then her mother. "I want to see the present."

Sally's mother sighed, but smiled too. "Oh, yes. I should have thought to ask you. You might have wanted to freshen up."

Sally looked back at Griffin and smiled.

When they arrived at the house, Sally hopped out of the car. She stared at her watch. They had been gone an hour, no more. And if the cleaners hadn't come until later, there might be something left, she thought. She wanted to walk through the clutter once more, to step over the bags of trash, and fling things out of the way. She eased the garage door open, tiptoed toward her apartment door, anxious. She didn't hear Griffin's footsteps behind her. He was light in his step and always seemed to just appear, Sally used to complain. She opened the door slowly and turned on the light. She feared what she would see.

The air smelled different, she thought. She opened her eyes to an empty apartment. Everything was gone, the floor was empty, even the furniture was gone. Griffin stepped behind her, touched her neck. Sally jumped.

"Bare bones, huh?" he said, and pulled something out of his pocket. "We got a big surprise baby. A big one." He held up a key.

Sally said nothing.

“Your parents bought us a house. They have it all ready for us to move in now. To- day.” He drew the last word out in a way that made Sally know she could never marry this man. He grabbed her hand.

Sally felt sick. She pulled away from Griffin. She ran up the stairs and out of the garage. She turned her back to her mom’s idling car, a deaf ear to Griffin’s questions, as she moved toward the large trashcan that sat right outside of the three car garage. She moved toward the trashcan, took out two of the bags that were stuffed on the top. She pushed the can against the side of the house for leverage and climbed inside of the large bin, her heart rate finally slowing , her nerves now calm as she felt her body fall against the weight of the bags.

EDGES

The strangest part was how familiar it all felt: the sun and the ocean and the heat. But when I looked out over the waves, it felt like I was seeing the ocean for the first time, like a child. My heart started to beat fast and I reached my hand out to the boardwalk railing to steady myself, wondering why I came back at all. In my hand I clutch a charred piece of fabric and despair, and as I feel the late afternoon sun warm the back of my neck, I force a smile. My bare foot scuffs over the wooden planks of the boardwalk, a single splinter working its way through the thick skin of my big toe, the pain piercing me to pause. But I don't remove it. I watch the sun begin its descent over the water and I dig my big toe into the wood once more, wanting to feel that pierce again. Satisfied, I begin to walk.

The sand of the beach looks whiter than I remember, though I know that it's not possible. I look down the stretch of sand to the end of the cape, eager to see the sun beginning its descent into the horizon. Its warm orange glow anchors me, startles me.

A group of children run by, kicking up sand as they go, grains settling in my eye, blinding me for a moment. I sink to my knees and press my palms to my eyes, feeling the grit press against my lids, remembering the first time I felt sand, the first time I came here so long ago.

When I was five she packed us up and moved us down south Port St. Joe, a strip of land situated right between the Apalachicola Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Back then,

it was scarcely populated, and her father had left her a cabin near the bay, a leftover from his days in the oyster industry.

My father had passed out on his orange La-Z Boy and she grabbed me out of my little room, pulled me away from my toy trainset and “Come on, hurry, tiptoe, we’re leaving.”

I put down the caboose I was holding and stood up, knowing better than to ask questions. And even though I was five, I’m telling you, I remember.

We had a run down bayside cabin with duct taped windows and holes in the floor, She had a bottle of whiskey and I had a plastic pair of Mickey Mouse sunglasses with chips at the corners. She had brought a plastic bag with a sweatshirt and swim trunks for me, a sundress for her, and six cans of tuna. I still remember the way the sand blew up around our car when we pulled down the unpaved path toward the cabin. The seagrass was high and cattails stood tall around the cabin. I could see the water in the distance and thought maybe this was some kind of adventure.

The cabin was actually a wreck, with duct taped windows and holes in the floor. I could tell from the way her face fell that it wasn’t what she remembered. Mice glared at us from the corners of the main room, daring us to invade their home. I looked up at my mother then, I tugged at her skirt, “Mama,” I said, “What are going to *do*?”

She knelt down and kissed my face, she grabbed my hand, and said “Come on baby, we’re going to sail until we reach the sun.”

I was five, but I’m telling you, I remember, I grabbed her hand back, tucked my smudged palm into her leathery, nicotine stained hand and thought that life couldn’t be more grand. And what a picture we must have made, the two of us, hand in hand,

heading toward her father's oyster boat with a sackful of tunafish cans and a couple of plastic ponchos.

Our adventure lasted two days, or a little more, I guess. My mother passed out from drinking too much whiskey and luckily the weather was calm and the shore was near. I was too young to do much good with a paddle, so I sat in the boat and waited. Finally, we got close enough to another boat for me to call out for help.

It ended up being just a couple of drunk teenagers, but they said they would take me to shore. I agreed, and they left my mom out there on the water, on that awful boat, to sleep it off and I didn't know what else to say. I was only five, but I'm telling you, I was scared, and I remember.

So when we got to shore, I told the teenagers I knew where we lived. It wasn't far. And that my mom did this all the time, that it would be fine. I didn't know any of those things. But I was scared and wanted to be alone more than anything in the world. They tousled my hair and left me alone on the beach, where I lied down and watched the sun set at the curve of the cape, hoping my mother would find me soon.

She didn't. But a family did, a few hours later, and my father was called and the adventure was over. My mother came sulking in a couple of weeks later, thin and apologetic and worn out. My father put his hands around her shoulders and told me to "Be quiet now, Alexander, your mother needs her rest."

We never talked of that time again. And until they died, I scarcely remembered it.

A breeze settles on my skin, beckoning me to the waves below. I begin my walk again, heading toward the edge of Cape San Blas, the edge of Florida that juts back

westward underneath the panhandle. The sun is my destination – and the turn of the cape. The stretch of beach is short ahead, I think, although the shifting sands and rising tides are always elusive.

I step around a man and wife, holding fishing poles in one hand and cans of beer in the other, floppy hats pulled down low over their foreheads. They notice me and the woman crouches down and pulls a catfish out of a cooler.

“See this?” she asks. “That’s catfish, there.” She nods again, urging me to act surprised.

When I say nothing her husband chimes in, “Isn’t it amazing? The catfish can survive in these salt waters. Who knew?”

I think that pretty much anything can survive if it must, but I keep that to myself.

The couple chuckles to themselves and the wife hands her husband a bottle of Corona. “Here, Hon,” she says, “Have a seat and I’ll cut us up some lime. The fishing’s getting to my back anyhow.”

Until then I hadn’t noticed their matching beach chairs, loungers crafted with bright orange fabric.

I suddenly feel every grain of sand upon my feet, my fingers throb and pulse from the salty air, and I want to scream. I close my eyes and begin to run, swiftly, kicking up piles of sand as I go, the rolling surf nipping my feet, teasing me further.

Even though my eyes are closed I still see that chair. This time, my father’s chair. Untouched, unmarred as the day we brought it home from the showroom.

I was ten and my parents weren't fighting and I was proud. My father had won the La-Z-Boy from a raffle at the Service Merchandise, but he let me pick out the color. My father had stopped drinking that year and my mother had started again. But it didn't matter, because I was still young and they were happy and I thought they believed in me. So I was proud.

I still remember climbing on each chair, testing out the colors. I closed my eyes and waited for the right one to wash over me. I remember thinking, when it did, I would just know it.

When my mom asked me what I was doing I told her that colors weren't just about seeing, but sometimes feeling, too. Like the way my green t-shirt made me happy because my father bought it for me on a business trip, or the way brown made me scared because mom hated dirt, and the way that red made me think of safety and hiding, like the pews at my grandmother's church.

She sighed and waved the store paperwork in front of her face like a fan and said, "Alexander, I'm getting tired."

But this is the moment I remember most vividly. My father put his arm around her and dipped his head into the bend of her neck. She made a noise I hadn't heard before and I was pleased.

I closed my eyes and sank into the chair, knowing already that it had to be color of the warmth that was swelling inside me, the glow pulsing through my veins, urging me that this chair could bring my mom and dad together, push the fighting away.

“This is the one,” I said, loudly, as I jumped up from the chair. But it was too soon, and my gangly legs activated the recliner portion, sending me sliding down over the footrest railing, the metal bars etching tracks down the inside of my thigh.

I cursed myself for speaking too soon, for moving too fast, as I was prone to do when I got excited. I saw my mother’s head turn from my father’s neck. Her eyebrows were raised and a vein pulsed in her forehead.

She said, “Alexander, I’ve really had enough.”

My father stepped toward me and pulled a napkin from his pocket. He handed it to me and said in my ear, “Son, you haven’t done anything wrong, but your mama’s real tired now, and why don’t you just go to the bathroom and clean yourself up?”

We brought that chair home that day. It was my father’s favorite. Something I’m still proud of. My mother, on the other hand, hated it, of course. But that was no surprise. Not then. I was no longer mad at her for leaving me alone in that water, that beach. But something about it changed her. And even though sometimes I closed my eyes and try to bring back that memory of her hand in mine, leading me to that boat, all the hope in the world in front of us, I couldn’t. The edges blurred and her face got mean again and I had to open my eyes and stare at the sun just to make it stop. So I never thought about it.

I stop running when I stumble over a dead fish that has washed up on shore, it’s slimy body giving way to delicate bones underneath. I curse and look down, staring at the crushed fish and feeling bile rise in my throat. The sun seems to be setting faster and I want to get to the end of the cape before then. I just want to get to that place where the

sun reaches the edge of the water and I know, if I walk a little faster, push a little harder, I can do it.

I rinse my foot in the salt water and look ahead toward the curve of the beach. About a hundred yards in front of me is a young girl zig-zagging across the sand, a stick in her hand trailing the path behind her. I wonder what she could be doing alone on this area of the beach.

I see her sit down at the water's edge and as I get closer I can hear her humming. Usually, I loathe small children, but today something feels different. I sit beside her because it feels more natural than anything else and ask her what she's looking at.

"Just the sun," she responds.

"Me too," I say, "Me too."

She turns to look at me, a tangle of hair blowing across her face. I think she can't be more than seven. She asks, "What do you think is out there, past that water we can't see? Do you think it's another world, like one we'll never see?"

I don't want to break her heart and tell her that pretty much everything that's out there has already been seen by someone, at some point, so I say, "I think there probably is."

She grins and says, "I wish I could get there."

Something about this triggers me and I remember my childhood cabin. If I can get to the edge of the cape and work my way up on the bayside a bit, I can get there soon. I wonder, excitedly, if the oyster boat might still be there, docked and never used again after the incident with my mother.

I look at the little girl and say, “You want to go on a boat ride? That is, if your parents say its ok?”

I suddenly realize something about this is probably not quite right, a grown man asking a child he hardly knows to go alone with him on a boat, but something about that girl pierced me, and I knew she would say yes.

She stands up, brushes the sand off her hands. She gives me a sad, grown-up look, and she walks away, as if she’s disappointed in me.

After that, I don’t get up. I sit and watch the waves until the sun starts to come up. I don’t realize I’ve fallen asleep until I feel the sun beating hard on my chest and a small hand tapping on my shoulder.

I look up to find the young girl from the day before. She beams down at me. “Can we go on that boat ride now?”

I don’t have the heart to tell her the boat may not be there and that I can’t take her and that I don’t have that energy I had yesterday, that determination to reach the end. So I close my eyes and say, “Not now. The tide’s coming in.”

BACKSTEPS

In a tiny office cubicle in the back of a fluorescent-lit room filled with rows of cubicles just like hers, Allison stops wiping away the soda stains from her white leather purse, stops pretending to stare at data on her computer, and checks the text message alert on her cell phone. She hopes its from Christopher, her boyfriend, perhaps apologizing for throwing that two-liter bottle of Coke at her the night before—missing her right ear by a hair and bursting all over the bedroom, leaving little brown stains everywhere, stains she is still trying to wipe away. Allison hopes Christopher is either apologizing or asking to break up—because she thinks a text message would really be the simplest way to be rid of him.

Yesterday morning, Allison pushed her nose into the crook of Christopher’s neck, in between the T and the R of the tattooed initials there, trying to nudge him awake. She whispered into the crease where his hairline met bare skin, “You’re the only one I’ll ever love, the only one I’ll ever want to be with.”

And Allison meant it, at that moment, the early morning light shining like a promise across their bodies sprawled across the bed.

Christopher grunted awake. He said, “Allison, you’ve got to quit this. And will you please close the blinds.”

Twelve hours later, Christopher and Allison are back in Allison’s bedroom, a room on which only Allison pays rent, but a room in which they both live. Christopher

never asked if he could live there; but instead showed up one evening with a big black duffel bag and just never went home. Allison, thrilled by the security Christopher offered at the time, didn't think enough to refuse him.

That evening, the same day that Allison said she would never leave him, Allison was watching Christopher unpack a large tote bag. When Allison's mother came to visit, all of Christopher's things, the proof that he lived there, were packed back into the bag, hiding their living situation.

Though Allison thought she probably loved Christopher, she wasn't sure he was "the one"—Allison wasn't really sure that she believed in all of that anyway, not for her. But as she watched him line up the bottles of cheap cologne—Stetson, Old Spice, stuff that he had never even worn—she felt her stomach turn over. To herself she thought, *I don't know how I could be with someone who wears that tacky crap.*

He lines up his bottles of cologne along the dresser, next to Allison's one nearly empty body splash, and turns to her. "I don't understand why I have to unpack every single time she comes here. You're a grown ass woman. Why don't you just tell her I live here?"

Allison groans. "You know why," she says. "And besides, maybe I don't want my parents to think I'm a whore, living with some guy before we're even married. Besides, they don't even know that I'm dating anyone."

"That's my point exactly," Christopher says.

Allison has always found it complicated to explain to Christopher why she cannot share him with her parents—the demands they place on her and the company she keeps.

Christopher, with his mechanic job and GED, would not sit well at family night at the Kappa Kappa Gamma house, that's for sure.

"No. I mean, they... know. Of course they *know*. Remember that time you came to Montgomery with me?" she asks, wondering why she even bothers lying, since she is so bad at it.

"That was so I could help you move your bed up here, and because I had a truck. It's like you're embarrassed of me, or something."

Allison doesn't really want to deal with this again, tonight. She can hardly remember why or how Christopher came to live with her, and right now, sitting on her bed surrounded by schoolbooks and unfolded laundry, she feels decidedly trapped.

Allison and Christopher both look up when they hear Allison's phone ring.

"It's just a text message," Allison tries to calm Christopher, who doesn't like Allison to receive calls from anyone but him.

"Who was it?" he asks, grabbing at her phone.

"Don't worry about it," she says, dodging his arm, slipping down to the floor, the phone cupped in her hand, so she can look at it quietly.

Christopher stands over her and Allison concentrates on the worn out knees on his jeans. She looks up, coyly, knowing how to push his buttons, "God, Christopher, I thought you were staying at your parent's house tonight. You still are, aren't you?" she asked, knowing, too, that he knew what she doing, and that he would react just the same.

This bought her some time so she could look at the message which was from Katy, her roommate. Allison presses her chipped fingernail on the button that allows her to read the message. She blinks at the tiny words staring back at her: "Andrew was

murdered last night. :(“ She doesn’t even look at who it’s from, but instead mashes her thumb on the power-off button, pushing herself up from the floor.

“What is it?” Christopher asks, reaching for her.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Allison says, deciding that now is not the best time to deal with such news. And so she stares at an empty space on the wall, hardly listening while Christopher’s voice gets louder and louder.

The next thing she knows, the bottle of Coke comes flying past her head, busting against the wall and falling down onto the floor, spinning and spewing foam everywhere. She looks back at Christopher and together, they look at the white space on the wall, the slow way the Coke drips from the white paint.

After a while, when the Coke has dried, Allison gets up off of the carpet and pulls her shirt over her head. She comes to bed, watches Christopher’s arm reach out for her. The drops of Coke are sticky between them. She licks the side of his neck, whispers in his ear, “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

She reaches her hand inside of his boxers, feeling him grow. She cringes, but sex seems like the simplest answer now.

As he moves inside her, Allison tries to push away the pictures of Andrew from her head, tries to stop the comparisons her body is making between Christopher and him.

“You do love me, don’t you?” Christopher asks, pushing harder. In the parking lot outside the bedroom window, a car alarm finally stopped ringing.

Allison breathes a sigh of relief and she might have nodded, she didn’t even know. She closes her eyes and turns her head into the pillow.

Now, hours later, at her cubicle, Allison returns to the text message, She feels her breath catch in anticipation as she works her way back to her text message inbox. Allison wonders if perhaps because she hasn't slept much lately and perhaps because she has been sober for three months and perhaps because she has been a little, well, *off* lately, if this was maybe just an hallucination—a crazy dream that occurred because she felt guilty about not calling Andrew back, because she felt guilty for betraying Christopher for Andrew and Andrew for Christopher. She stares down at the phone to find the message is still there. There are no new messages from Christopher; and a new alert now fills the screen. . Allison slams her phone closed and figures she has done enough “personal” time for the day anyway, and should probably get back to work.

Andrew wasn't even a good friend, Allison thinks, not really. He was a friend of her roommate's, a boy to whom she grew close for a while, and then he was gone from thin air—on the move from cops and drug dealers and more trouble than Allison cared to register. Andrew would pop back into Allison and her roommate, Karen's lives every now and again—in phone calls or surprise visits, but Allison hadn't seen him in at least three or four months, since last July.

Allison and Katy had let Andrew stay at their apartment for a couple of months, shortly after he fled charges of kidnapping and extortion in Texas. But he left almost as soon as he arrived, Allison thought, and besides, he probably got what he deserved. No, Allison said out loud, surprising herself, trying to erase a thought that hadn't even been spoken. She meant that she wasn't sure, she guessed, but a line about lying down with

dogs and waking up with fleas, something her Granny Bert always said kept floating through her head.

Allison gets up abruptly and heads to the office bathroom, presumably to clear her head. A slight throbbing has begun at her temples, and while she tries to push Andrew out of her mind, she can't, not quite, and instead is stuck somewhere between tears and exasperation. She passes the bathroom she usually uses, the one nearest to her desk, passes the executive secretaries in their sensible shoes and blazers, ignores their greeting, and stops for a minute, on the way, to watch a plastic bag floating across the street, the wind pushing it up and down, inside and out.

In the bathroom stall, Allison bypasses the toilet and sits right down on the tile floor, pulling her knees to her chest, trying to think of anything but the phone call she received from Andrew a couple of nights before.

“Do you have a minute?” he had asked, breathless, a noise in the background buzzing like mosquitoes against a screen door, and before Allison had time to answer: a dial tone. Christopher had given her that question-mark look that meant “Don't even think about calling him back” and so she didn't.

For a while, Allison sits on the cool tile floor and concentrates on counting the number of tiles on the floor below her, tracing her fingers up and down the long smudged rows of squares. When she looks down, she realizes she has been tracing the word regret.

She tells herself that if she had been working like she was supposed to, instead of rummaging through her purse, she would never have found that message, and the day would have been considerably different.

For the next two hours, Allison builds a database for the large accounting company that she works for. As she writes formulas and pushes numbers around on the screen, Allison tries to push out the slow, loudening white noise that is beginning to fill up the inside of her head, not unlike the filling of a pail pushed under a leaky faucet, a dull white blur beginning to haze over her thoughts.

Finally, Allison reads the next message. Andrew, it reads, is currently an unidentified murder victim, a nameless white male with a recent rhinoplasty and a blown away face found shot to death in the woods of the Talladega National Forest. Andrew had been excited about the rhinoplasty—thinking that a new nose would help him to hide from the FBI officials that were closing in on him for counts of extortion, kidnapping, assault with a deadly weapon. It didn't matter now, Allison thought, angry for even thinking it.

She coughs and throws her phone across the cubicle—which really isn't very far, given its size. It wedges itself between the shredder basket and the trashcan and she doesn't pick it up.

The noise in her head begins to grow louder and she starts to think of the bar down the street and remembers her three months of sobriety and she suddenly feels trapped. Allison quit drinking three months ago not because she wanted to, but because she had to. When she thinks about her sobriety, which is often, she likes to pretend it was her decision. But, really, it involved a possession charge, an embarrassing referral to the Employee Assistance Program at her new job, and a color coded system that demanded she be drug and alcohol free for three months. She scribbles a note on a Post-It and sticks it on her boss' computer: Personal Emergency. *Taken a half day.* After a second, she

takes it back, picturing the onslaught of phone calls from her boss and more referrals to counseling, and adds a smiley face, satisfied.

In the warm air outside of her office, Allison rushes to her car swiftly, ducking low in the seat, in the hopes that her boss wouldn't see her upon returning, Allison feels that the noise inside her head has gotten louder and wonders, what exactly, she plans on doing on this "emergency" day, not really feeling right going home and going to bed, and knowing she shouldn't get a drink and break her sobriety.

She stops, first, by habit to the local convenience store on the corner near her office. It's earlier than her usual time, but when she hears the single bell on a Christmas rope tied to the door ring behind her, she looks up at Gene. He holds her cigarettes, the exact order, up in the air like a trophy.

Gene is the perfect convenience store employee—he has long shaggy hair, loves NASCAR, and can give you the plot synopsis of nearly every soap that's ever been on TV. He also remembers his favorite customers' orders, like a bartender. If he really really likes you, like he does Allison, he'll even let you go in the secret employee bathroom when you can't even make it home from the bars without stopping.

"Can I get you anything else today, gorgeous?" he asks.

"Yeah," Allison says, not thinking, "A new life."

Gene closes the cash drawer and comes out behind the counter, his wide arms reaching out for Allison worries is a hug.

She takes two steps back, considering her options. She fake-spots something outside the window. "Oh! Gene! The time! Here's a ten. See you."

From the corner of her rearview mirror, Allison watches Gene's reflection as she drives out of the parking lot. He is talking and laughing with other customers, not even waiting for her to drive by, to wave as is their ritual. Allison wonders what could have been so hard about a hug and turns the radio dial up to the maximum.

She drives out to the river and sits on a dock that edges out to the water, her legs dangling over it. She chain smokes cigarettes and watches the circles of water the fish make as they swim up to meet the flicks of ash. She stares at the blank legal pad in front of her and thinks that if she just does something, writes something, her head will stop buzzing. She's sure of it.

Allison's therapist told her that writing was what could heal her—of her alcoholism, of her insecurity and commitment issues—and Allison believed her. She thought she only had to fill up pages with something, and the problems would go away. The only problem, Allison thought sadly, as she inhaled on her cigarette, was that she hadn't yet written a word. Not this afternoon, or last week, or any time, really, since she even started seeing that odd little man every other week.

She could sense the tension between her and Dr. Bob from the beginning. She didn't want to see him anyway, but her job had enforced it, so she slunk down to his tiny office located in the basement of a university building. He let her know from the beginning that he would not be prescribing any *drugs*--- even if that's what Allison had always been prescribed.

Instead, he came up with other ideas to reduce anxiety, to promote self esteem. Silly things that reminded Allison of high school: journaling, scraps of self-affirmations tape to the mirror, the alarm clock, the last pair of socks in the drawer. Allison wonders

how these are going to anything at all but hassle her; reminding her of girls she had known in high school. Yearbook staffers or band students perhaps—cheesy and self-satisfied. Even at the ripe age of 16, Allison knew that the ability to manipulate through social groups was the key to success.

Allison isn't certain, even, of where her story might begin. How to write the story of Andrew. How to make it look right. How to arrange it so that, God forbid anyone ever found it, they would see him as more than a white trash drug dealer and more than a terrified middle class white boy from the suburbs who got mixed up with the wrong crowd. She thinks, if she could just write it, that somehow his story might change, even though she wonders if by thinking those things about him—so shortly after his death—makes it even worse.

She thinks about starting with the first time they met. The cocky, witty guy with a wad of cash as big as her fist. He came to visit Allison and her roommate, whom he was friends with in high school, shortly after Allison began college. At eighteen, Allison was naïve and green, knew little about Andrew's involvements in drugs and violence, but she liked his jokes and they found a quiet kinship in each other. They were both rather serious types, when they calmed down from all the partying, and when he visited they often would take drives in silence, letting down the windows and smiling at the air blowing in the wind. Allison grunts and thinks that sounds ridiculous and scribbles out most of what she has written, turning the page to start anew.

She can't think of anything to reconcile it really. She remembers a beginning, she remembers their friendship, but the story seems impossible to tell, now, because she doesn't want to think that there is an end.

Allison tried to think of a different way to approach it. Certainly, she told herself, if I just put it down, it will all make sense. She began to write about Christopher's impression of Andrew. She wrote about the first night they had met: their two alpha-male, itching to fight personalities hadn't mixed well, and Allison remembered trying to appease Christopher. She wrote about how Christopher had handed her a bump of cocaine off his apartment key while they stood in the locked bathroom of a friend's house. He had told her she couldn't spend time with him because he was trash—I mean, he sells drugs, he had said, pushing the end of the key under Allison's nose. Allison, at the time, she decided not to write, was too busy worrying about getting high than learning who she could and couldn't hang out with. Allison looked down at the scene on the paper and decided that might not be the best way to begin.

The sun began to get less bright as Allison drew circles and doodles across a blank sheet of paper, finding the longer she kept the pen to paper, that the noise inside of her head could be deafened for a moment. A sudden breeze chilled her to the bone and she suddenly got an idea. She thinks about the three things that remain of him in her own house: a photograph, an episode of the Sopranos, and an old t-shirt, which she keeps tucked inside of an underwear drawer, wrapped in a garbage sack, tight. At night, sometimes, she has gone to the garbage sack and ran her fingers along the air trapped underneath, careful not to let any escape, but she never really knew why.

She thought about that garbage sack when she started to write:

“But, you would do the same thing, wouldn't you?” he asked, “If you had to choose between your freedom and jail. It's not that big a deal, is it?” His voice echoed

across the room, lying still on the full ashtray in the center of the table into which I am flicking the ash of my last cigarette.

Earlier, they had sat three feet apart, on a stiff couch, determined not to touch.

“What if there was something more to it?” she breathed over his face, watching a grin spread across it, like raindrop on fresh ink, blurring across his blank face as she moved on top of him, bristling as her nipples brushed across the tattoo across his chest.

He flipped her over, pressed inside of her, deeper than he knew she liked, “Do you believe in all of that,” he asked, “heaven and hell and all that bullshit?”

She tried to push him out of her. She closed her eyes. “I’m scared not to,” I admitted, “I don’t want to go to hell just because I was too stubborn to ignore all the signs that maybe it was there.”

He frowned and rolled off of her. “The thing is, Allison,” he said. “Like, we all do things that aren’t right. All of us. Like remember that Sopranos we were watching earlier? Like, Tony had to kill Big Pussy—even though he loved him, he didn’t have a choice. It was the same for me.”

Allison reached over and traced the curve of his jaw. In the light from the window she thought he was probably more beautiful than she had ever seen him. She wondered how much longer he would want to talk and when they might get back to the sex.

“I had to kidnap that guy,” he said. “Had to. Robert would have had me popped if I didn’t. And I needed the money for my sisters—my twin sisters—I wanted to get them something nice for their birthday. And besides, it was only meant to scare him. He

wasn't supposed to get hurt. And now all I have to do is stay on the run for like, seven years or something, then the statute of limitations runs out and I'm good to go. I may just go down to Mexico for a while. Come back tan, speaking Spanish, and ready to get clean"

In her head Allison thinks that is what they all say. In her head she tries to tune him out because she thinks this may make her an accessory, or an informant, or something about which she's not quite sure, because really it doesn't even matter—the truth is, Allison is harboring a fugitive and will probably go to jail if found out, and the thrill of it all is so exciting that she can't really turn it away. Besides the free drugs: the xanax to drug my boyfriend so he'll pass out and Allison can hang out with him. The cocaine so she can stay awake after class all day and a part time job at a deli most nights. And everything else in between.

At this point, Allison stopped writing for a moment, breathless. She felt like she might have found the beginning. But she worried that in telling Andrew's story, she was revealing too much of her own, and was concerned that, in fact, this writing thing might be making her head buzz louder than ever. She picked her pen back up.

"Shhh. I know." I say, "Let's not think about it."

"That's what you always say," he says and pulls her on top of him. "You never want to talk about it. But that's alright," he says, his tone changing, "Talking isn't really your strength anyway."

A few days later, he was gone. On the run because the heat was closing in, or so he thought. Allison was not one to risk her life on paranoia, so she sobered up, stopped drugging her boyfriend, and returned to a more normal life.

Allison looked down at the paper and frowned. She thought maybe she looked even worse than her friend, on paper. She didn't even have a motive for the hurt she caused, like presents for family, or anything else. She had lied and cheated and gotten fucked up because it felt good—and she was always one for feeling good.

But what, then, she thought to herself, can this mean? She wondered if it was a sign from God to go back to church—that the realization that Andrew didn't believe in God and, now dead, was probably going to hell was supposed to make her return to church. But when she began to contemplate this, the buzzing inside of her head became so loud that she started to scream, just so she wouldn't have to think about it.

Allison thought about cold beer and knew that would make the noise stop. She wondered why her actions were always selfish and never motivated by helping others. She checked the time on her watch. Her favorite bar, her old haunt, opened in fifteen minutes. If she hurried, she could be there before anyone else, could probably score some free drinks from the opening bartender.

She looked down at all the full pieces of paper—the attempts to construct a life and sighed. She figured that trying to make storytelling solve anything was pretty stupid anyway and packed up her bag.

She let the paper drift one by one into the waiting lake, watched them sit on top of the water, the black ink blurring until it looked like nothing more than trash.

Allison left the lake and headed to the bar. She ordered a beer and when she tilted her head back to drink it, she felt the dull hum in her head get softer, and softer, until finally, it was hardly there, nothing more than the white noise put off by a television on mute. If she drank a little more, the pictures of her former life blurred, like the words on the paper before.

A little later, Christopher showed up at the bar. He spotted her in the back and grinned. A little later, he pushed a bottle of beer at her and said, “Sorry ‘bout last night. Tried to call. Where the hell have you been?” He paused, looked at her, and added, “But it’s nice you’re drinking again—you’re nicer that way.”

Allison opened her mouth to tell Christopher about Andrew and thought better of it, picturing the sheets of paper now dissolved in the water of the lake. She understood, now, she thought, why some things were better without endings. She grabbed Christopher’s hand under the table and squeezed and then went back to wiping away the Coke stains on her new white purse.

“Christ, Christopher,” she said, “That purse was brand new, I’m never going to get it back to how it was.”

MELTING IN FLASHES

REFUGE

And it didn't seem like much, really, when I thought about it. I always smoked when I finished reading and all she wanted was a place to sleep. She came in the winter, balancing a cigarette in one hand and a bulky photo album in the other. I could tell because pieces of pictures peeked out from the sides, dog-eared. (And for a second, all I could think about were those pictures, and whether the people who had posed for them knew the travels they would make on those shiny squares of paper; and how long did they want that moment, immortalized in the wink of an eye, to last?) When she caught me looking she clutched it tight and the snow littered her hair like dandruff. It could have been dandruff. But I didn't care. She didn't have a purse, a jacket, a smile. But she had a lighter. Which I needed. So I let her in.

I asked her, Do you want a bed? Because it's kind of dirty and my dog sleeps there and I haven't had enough money to do laundry in a while and it's rather small, even though I guess you're pretty small, so you should fit, and nevermind, do you want it?

And she just looked at me and with her eyes she said yes.

So I put her in the bed which really wasn't dirty or even small and she motioned for an ashtray and said, Can you put out the fire? I gave her one and told her that I didn't even have a dog.

And she looked up, shifted the cigarette between her lips, and said I know.

(But I don't know why I told her all those things about the bed because, really, from the moment I let her in, I knew I would give her whatever she wanted.

PHENOMENON

People might have said that the snow stopped for a minute when she walked up the steps. This is not a grasping fantasy or a reaching metaphor. It's not even about the snow. It's about two people who stopped the weather when their eyes locked.

BLIND

Sometimes when the camera flashes, in that split second right after the forced emotion and the candid glare and the eternity of the moment, I think I go blind. So I lied in bed with my clothes off and my memories covering my fears. When I heard the shutter, I already knew what to do. (I had lost pride a long time ago.) I closed my eyes. And tried to forget.

After a while, he brought me a cup of coffee and told me he was an artist.

I looked at the shadows playing on the wall and thought about my life and I asked him what he meant and he didn't even smile. (I liked that, really, because I've never understood why some people are so goddamned smug.)

He looked at me. He brushed the snow out of my hair. He said, I guess because I want to see the world for what it is. I just want to take those realities and run with them. I'm not looking for the emotion. It finds me.

I looked down at my picture album and my fingers started to get nervous, I think. They raced up and down the cover, tracing the invisible letters of his name. I didn't feel nervous, but sometimes my body betrayed me.

He asked me, Could I take your picture while you're sleeping? Because I find comfort in refuge here, the peace in people like you.

I said, People like me?

(People like me lived on the street and snorted and smoked their way through survival. We sold our bodies not to feel alive but to stay alive and we didn't have much left as far as pride. But it was funny. We wanted, we ached, we desired. We were just like everyone else. And sometimes, even though the last thing we could think about was other people, we fell in and out of emotional response with people that were entirely separate from our level of understanding. Love. Hate. They are the same. It all comes back to desire. And what you don't have.)

So why shouldn't he take my picture? I didn't have anything else to lose.

He bowed his head and coughed. He said, Nevermind.

But somehow, I think he knew I had already said yes.

RECOGNITION

The picture was published six months later. It was in a book full of sleeping prostitutes and addicts, interspersed with nursing home patients and those in the burn ward, all lost in the throes of sleep. (I had tried to capture peace among these people who spent every waking minute of their lives fighting to survive. Looking back, I don't know what I found. But I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.) When she saw it, she cried. She never asked for a copy.

I hadn't meant for *us* to happen that way. For me to use her. For her to use me. I don't believe in mutual relationships. The symbiotics of being. But something about her was different. And I never wanted her to leave.

KALEIDOSCOPE

I mean, we were trying to get there, really, and I kept telling him what it was like. How you turn off the road right past the church. And how the church, one time, had this incredible bake sale. I mean, really incredible.

That it made me think about the burnt cookies, the lumpy cakes, the undercooked casseroles that my mother used to make. It was something, really, how she was always trying to make something from scratch. (It was an obsession of hers, I think. Cooking to keep my father there and us kids happy and our house a home and cooking, just cooking. It was to keep control, I guess.) But without that preboxed mix as a guide, she just got lost. My favorite picture of her is there, trying to recall her mom's recipe like a picture in her brain. A whisk in one hand and a wish in the other. She never had a good memory. Not everyone can make something from nothing.

So I was telling him how I had been headed out there to see her when I saw the bake sale. It was a living Candyland, really. These huge stacks, castles even, of brownies and painted cookies and porcelain petit fours lying there like a candy-coated dream and I had to stop. I had to stop because candy just heals me, you know, and I had to have something. So I was saying how I stopped and I was alone, I remember, and it was a Sunday afternoon. It was sunny, I think, and the brownie, it tasted just like your mother's. Except for the pot, of course.

And that really, I liked that about your mother. Her own way of healing. Like my mom's cooking, a way to make those shadows go away. And you gave me that look, but I didn't care.

My own mother wouldn't even touch a Tylenol. A fucking Tylenol. I remember being nearly sixteen or so, dancing around the house like a kid on Christmas, my camera

around my neck, snapping her and him. Them together. Them apart. I never wanted to forget. I have this picture of her, this really great shot, dimly lit, on the couch. I think she had a headache that day and told me to stop, and the picture isn't even that good, but her head kind of glows or something. Like a beacon surrounded by shadows. But really all I remember about her headaches is how she didn't believe in stopping the pain. It was as if she thought she was a stronger person by actually feeling every burn, every *pain* dealt in her life. And then I was sad.

I remembered how my mother always got that cup of sugar mixed up with that teaspoon of salt. She would cry and I would crouch under the table, the camera huge in my five year old palm. Always taking pictures, even then. I don't think I ever trusted my memory. Not then, maybe not ever. And it probably wasn't right, trying to capture it. But that's what I did. Lying on my stomach under tables, snapping pictures, devouring my mother's monstrous creations while my father roared about her stupidity. (Now that I'm older, I can think back and laugh, I guess. It doesn't seem right that my mother never got used to it. Maybe because she was weak and maybe because she was hurting and maybe because I couldn't see it any other way. And I swear, it seemed like she never stopped crying. Like crying ever healed anything.) And so I'd snap the camera, the flash matching their figures dancing on the wall. A violent tango soundtracked by kitchen timers and muffled sobs, timid roars and sexually charged frustration, a dance punctuated by shrieks and apologies.

Back then, I liked to think the shadows weren't real.

Now, whenever I eat a piece of cake, bite into a cookie, all I can taste is the salt; and even though I know it's the wrong taste, it's how I remember it. It's funny how those

insignificant habits, those trivial memories make you forget the little things. It makes you wonder how important they really are. The more she tried to remember about making the cakes, the more she forgot. And every time I look at the pictures, I think I forget the salt of her tears. Memory is funny like that. Give it too much and it loses its way. It is a rambling and shifting kaleidoscope of the mind, changing colors, swaying emotions.

We were driving faster now, past the church and the farmland and the broken down vegetable stands and I was thinking about how my father was always angry and how my mother, Christ, was always sobbing about *something*. And when I became so consumed with these pictures, staring out the car window and only seeing them; when I couldn't stop the slideshow in my brain, I asked, Doesn't your mother ever cry? And you said, Only when she makes those brownies. And I just looked at you and said, Oh.

GETTING THERE

We had been trying to get there. A trip that should have taken thirty minutes had already taken us an hour, and I already knew we wouldn't be there any time soon. But that's how it was and that's how she was and that was fine with me. I wanted to take her out there just one last time. Maybe just to see if, together, we could bring this situation out of the dark and maybe to see if, somehow, we could get rid of those pictures. If I could stop closing my eyes and watching those ridiculous flames lapping at those ever persistent shadows.

So she kept trying to tell me how to get there in that crazy way she does, always getting distracted and rambling about her mother and delicately avoiding her father and clutching that old photo album with clenched fingers, nervous sweat smearing the worn

leather cover. And we kept getting lost and really it reminded me of Us. How *her* parents kept trying to tell us what to do and how *my* parents always hated her and how none of them wanted us to be together. But we were young and all we wanted was space. So we broke up. And got back together. So many times I can hardly count. One of those Scotch-taped relationships held together by tears and frustrations. True love dangling by the flimsiest of threads. An inability to live with or without each other.

I watched her tap out the rhythm of *Ode to Joy* on the dashboard, her fingers flying like she was playing a piano. And it *was* a piano, really. To her. She had this habit of playing these songs, little hymns and tunes learned from lessons in childhood. Tapping them along whatever surface she found hard enough to hear her fingernails clacking, to match the rhythm of her thoughts.

I looked over at her and smiled, What is it this time?

And she said, Stop. My fingers will forget.

And while she was talking, while she was tapping, I kept thinking of how her mother wanted us to go to counseling. She thought it would help us forget. But I didn't know if I wanted to. Sometimes, I wake up in the midst of ash-covered dreams, where all I can see is flames and I wonder how long we'll be stuck in the shadows. Always tiptoeing around the graves of our past.

After the fire, her parents wanted me to convert to Catholicism. The opiate of the masses. I did. I kept thinking about all our fights, the time I wanted to leave her stranded on the sidewalk and the times I wanted it to be all over for good and the time that I realized, in an instant, that it was all worth it. She was crying now, and she never cried. Never at sappy movies and not even when we first met, when she was so goddamn cold

and needy, and not even at funerals. Except for now, as she went through her pictures, tears staining their shiny surfaces, smearing the faces of her past. They were pictures she had looked at a thousand times before and until now, she never cried.

Then I thought about my parents. My mom was a photographer, which I guess was ironic, when I think about *her* obsession with the pictures. She did still-lives and feature art for magazines, those great food layouts and arrangements of high-tech goods you'd see in the pages of *Gourmet* or *G.Q.* She never took pictures of us, though, not even as kids. I always thought it was because she didn't want to remember. Looking back, I realized she just wanted to forget about the paper and the frames, the camera and the tools, the whole job of it all. I think she wanted to see us how we really were.

And it wasn't until my father died that she started the deal with the pot. I guess it helped her cope. One time I asked her how drugs helped with anything. She said, What else am I supposed to do? And I said, Be a fucking mother, for Christsakes. And she only looked at me with glazed eyes and muttered something about healing.

We barely talk now.

But I still have Her.

So we're trying to get there, and I just keep thinking about our relationship. And how many times we kept coming back to each other. We always did.

COMMUNION

They never came to see me. Last time she came she carried wilted daisies and excuses. She knows I like lilies. She was trying to tell me that she never meant for it to end this way. It was then that I noticed the circles beneath her eyes. She never slept much. I tried to keep her off the streets and I couldn't and when she went from city to

city and house to house, sleeping wherever she could find a pillow, there was nothing I could do. (She left one morning when she was eighteen, tearing out of the house with her camera in one hand and hope in the other, and there was nothing I could do to stop her.) And it was only now that I saw the circles. Circles that looked like she had spent half of her life trying and failing to hide a terrible truth. But when I looked again I saw it was only the shadows of mascara smeared by rays of stress and sun.

She told me she didn't realize *his* father was like *that*. And that *her* father was like *that*. She said she guessed that parents aren't really supposed to be role models after all. And my cooking came to mind. My failure at being a good mother. I would have liked to explain. Instead, I asked why she thought I wanted him to join the Church. And even though she didn't hear me I could see her roll her eyes. I could hear her say, Oh Mother, like a fucking establishment would change things.

I thought about how she looked in her first communion dress, curtsying for her father and me. She had huge Band-Aids on her knees then and I begged her to take them off, just for the picture. But she wouldn't.

I loved that picture.

And when she left home, I kept it in my wallet. Asked people to pray every chance that I got. But those Band-Aids. God. Mama, she had said, Band-Aids don't hide the boo-boos, they only show you were able to survive it. She was smart, even though I didn't see it then. I remember being angry that she had skinned her knees in the first place. Now I know hiding the scabs was no use anyway. Christ didn't hide his.

Before the end I asked her why she thought I cried all the time.

And she said, I thought you were trying to deal with it, I guess.

I said, You're an idiot.

I watched her stare at the grave, wipe her eyes. I heard her say, If only you could have understood about the healing.

And if I could have, I would have cried.

HANGING

So I was telling him to turn past the church. It wasn't far now. I was telling him how sometimes at dusk, when the shadows peeked at the horizon making the light around the graves glow pink and purple, never black, the shadows made it frightening. And how one time, I came out here with your mother. She would feed me peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches and I would pretend she was my own. (My mother never gave me peanut butter. Even when I was in kindergarten and everyone brought sandwiches with crusts cut off in lunch boxes covered in stickers and the best homemade lunches you'd ever seen; even then, she wouldn't give me peanut butter. She said it was too sticky and too messy and my father didn't like it. One time I stole a jar from my friend's house. Contraband peanut butter. She found it and threw it out with the trash and I didn't cry.) It helped, you know, to talk to someone. Your house has those huge windows and while we talked I always stared at a rope swing in the backyard. When the wind swayed, it made me sad. And while we shared hits off of a joint, I always thought I'd like to try it. Hanging by a thread and having it take you as far away as heaven. I wondered if it would make you forget. But I never tried.

Sometimes we would talk about the fire while we wove our fingers through my photo album, stopping to point out birthdays and first communions, best friends, favorite uncles, our mangy pets. Sometimes we talked, but not usually. We always agreed it

wasn't anyone's fault. And even though it was terrible, it seems like it should have been exactly the same.

FIRE

And we were almost there. But we never spoke of it. About the fire. And how my father shot hers. It was an accident, of course. Even though they hated each other. My father, being the bragging man he was had gotten the gun out to show it off. He always had the guns around the house. A retired U.S. Marine, my father. He was proud of his title, proud of killing. He had been trained to do it. But outside of that brutal world of American robots, my father was confined to hunting to satisfy his urges. I think it killed him, in a way. That desire to destroy something so fully. Maybe that's why he was always yelling. He didn't know how to deal with the anger.

He brought out his rifle. I shot my first Yankee bastard with it, he said. (He really meant that deer he had shot in upstate New York. But her father didn't know that.) And her father, being the Yankee bastard that he was, was egging him on. Why dontcha getcha anutha one then, he asked. A poor parody of that Southern mask of chivalry. My father didn't answer. Truth or dare for grownups. And all I could do was stand paralyzed. Thinking about how I had forgotten to unload it the last time I had taken it hunting. But he didn't know that.

He cocked the trigger. Her father spread his arms. He looked like a cross and he laughed. My father aimed. And somehow it happened.

Her mother came running from the kitchen, knocking a jug of cooking oil right into the frying pan, to see what had happened. That was when the fire started. It roared

in from the kitchen like the 3 a.m. train, catching us off-guard. I think we all just stared for a moment, like it wasn't really happening.

My mother was in the bathroom upstairs, smoking, as usual. But we didn't remember until we got outside. Leaving her father's dead body to fry in the flames.

Devastating, really.

Her mother, though, ran back into the flames. And the last picture, the last image I remember, is her standing at the window, her face smudged with soot, her apron covered in her husband's blood. She held up the rifle and aimed at something we could not see. But when we went to look closer, the window had filled with smoke and shadows.

My mother removed all the pictures of him from our house. But she left the frames. Like if she wanted it bad enough, she could look into that frame and remember his face.

It threatened to break us up. But it didn't. We kept finding each other.

So this was the first time we had come together to the graves. And I was scared. But I didn't see the shadows.

I said, I love you.

And she said, I know.

DUSK

And they walked together from their respective graves at dusk, hand in hand. I always watched them from above. They don't come much. Never together. I think it's too hard. The power of both of their memories churning at once, trying to erase what happened. Trying to forget. I believe, when they think about it together, a fire grows

between their hearts so big that it could never be extinguished. And even though I know they're there, all I can see are the shadows.

IMPETUS

It was one of those moments that people describe as flashing before their eyes before they die. A picture you would brand across your forehead, if you had to, just so you wouldn't forget. It was beautiful and it was stupid. And at the same time, it didn't seem like much, not really.

I always walked when I was tired and all I needed was a place to sleep. I came in the winter, shuffling a cigarette in one hand and my memories in the other. I carried a lighter because I've found that somewhere, at some time, someone always needs fire. (The need for warmth is universal, I'd say. Maybe since the beginning of time.) But I didn't wear a coat, or even a hat, because I was never cold and I had all that I needed.

Snow dropped in my eyes, crystallized on my eyelashes, and at that moment, I wondered if this was what life looked like out of a snowglobe. If you shook me up, if you crushed my world, would I forget? (I carried the pictures because I think I was afraid that I would.)

So I walked up the steps to meet the man whose hair was covered in snow and whose hand was reaching for light. A normal person might have thought he was a man in love. Searching for a light in post-coital bliss. I knew better. He wasn't handsome. Or even attractive. But he had a bed. Which I needed. So I handed him the fire.

He must have thought I was homeless, a jilted hooker out of work. (Which I wasn't, not really, since I'd left home of my own accord. Packing my clothes on my back

and my memories in my hands. Hoping to forget.) He must have thought I needed something because he offered me a bed and a series of lies. He looked down at his feet and started mumbling something about a dog and laundry and I knew it wasn't the truth. So I just smiled and he knew I meant yes.

He put me in the bed which was modest and remarkably white. Candles lit the halls and I didn't ask why. I just asked him to put out the fire. It was burning too bright, and I think, maybe, it scared me a little. And when he did, I knew I would do whatever he wanted.

I lit a cigarette and inhaled, wondering if this was my destiny. I reached for the dog-eared copy of Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" lying open on the bedside table. I read the first sentence: "One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug." I brushed the snow off my shoulders and out of my eyes and thought that maybe I had been foolish because it was cold and I was never cold but he was there and I was alone. It may have *been* foolish. That I went inside. But it wasn't. Not really. Because maybe I was just tired of the street, and maybe I was feeling philosophical, or maybe even, like Gregor Samsa, I'd awoken from an anxious dream into a new life. It didn't matter. I looked down at the book and up at him and I thought that maybe this was my metamorphosis. And if I could have, I would have cried.

So I watched him turn out the lights and pull a flashlight from a drawer. The fire danced in his eyes as he began to make shadow puppets on the wall. A rabbit. A church. A chicken. Don't you just love these games, he asked, Don't they remind you of when you were young?

Stop it, I said; Don't you know those are only games of shadows and light?

SINGULAR EFFECTS

It was Wednesday morning and Brian and I were probably fighting about something insignificant when a flash of lightening flashbulbed the room for a second longer than usual and knocked the power out, throwing both of us into a darkness that seemed as stifling as the humidity. The storm wasn't quite a tornado, but it could have been, Brian said, as he pushed the windows open and waved the flimsy curtains that hung over the lone apartment window to get the air circulating again. But there was something cloying about that moist dark room, it hung over our shoulders and clouded our faces. I was glad that he couldn't see the smile that I couldn't seem to wipe away. Brian hated it if I didn't take these arguments seriously.

We gradually became miserable as the last cool air from the window unit air conditioning evaded the dark trap that held us in that room that night, pushing out the cracks in the floor, the netting of the screen on the window. Outside the rain drummed across the roof, pounded across the apartment's courtyard that lie on the first floor below. I stared from my position atop the bed straight out the front door and into the courtyard that surrounded the pool, watching discarded cigarettes and beer cans floating in a river of Tuscaloosa sludge.

Finally, I said, "Look out there, Brian. This town is a shit hole. Why do we have to keep the door open? It's so trashy that you can even see the front door from the bed."

"I like it," Brian said, flicking cigarette ash across the white sheet that he had pulled away from the mattress. "That way, I don't even have to get up when folks come

to my door. And it bothers you *that* bad, then I'm glad you don't have to make any extra effort on the way out."

"Shit hole," I said again, thinking it was worse than that even. The lightening flashed again and left the room even darker than before, and sheets of rain pushed through the screen, flinging cold pelts of water through the tears Brian never had taped up, soaking the floor beneath.

And as suddenly as the rain poured, it stopped again, and I listened to the water on the window sill drop to the linoleum beneath while I tried to peer through the haze of my flashlight at the book I had been reading. The book was a collection of Nan Goldin photographs, and while the flashlight seemed to be dying as the humidity grew stronger, I caught glimpses of the pictures in the glow of a few candles nearly burnt to their cores.

A friend had introduced me to the work a few months ago, saying "You'll love this shit. These bitches are crazier than us," and pointing out the pictures where cocaine, needles, rampant sex could be found on the page. "It's kind of like Where's Waldo. I look at it when I'm bored," she had said.

I never told the friend how much the book meant to me, for fear she would reclaim it as her own, would somehow mar the peace I found within the chaos that eked out the edges of each frame. I loved the work because it refused to hide—even when Nan and her friends were mere smudges of lipstick and shadow flecked against dive bar walls dark as night, a couple slouching into the dim glow of a tiny lamp that lit their bedroom you could feel the pain radiate from the page. In a way there was always something like a lampshade that was a little askew, perhaps cracked down the middle, that let in a little

more truth than anyone could have known. And it was these pictures that I took comfort in when visiting Brian.

I traced my fingers down an ear-marked page. With my arm I shielded it from the rain that had slowly started again, but I already knew that the moist air would fatten the pages, making them bubble and crease. Nothing remained pure inside this apartment.

I got up to close the window and as soon as I did Brian gave me a look that meant “Don’t even think about it,” and I slinked back to my place on the bed, holding the book to my chest. I know he has this thing about letting the rain in.

In my book there was a picture of a love-ravaged couple lying in bed, the air cloudy with despair. In the picture, the man sat on the edge of a disheveled bed, the sinewy muscles in his arm tensed as he propped himself upright, drawing in on a cigarette. His hair was mussed and even though you could only see his profile, the arch of his brow seemed apathetic, but melancholy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I looked at Brian, who was sitting nearly the same way and my hand reached, almost instinctively, to the span of his back.

But, in the picture, it was the woman’s face that pierced me. Her hair, frizzed around her head and sticking out in tufts. Her dark-rimmed eyes were distant with agonizing longing. She was clutching a pillow, and because I couldn’t help myself, I reached out and touched the inward curve of her thigh, the space between her foot and his hunched, unwelcome back. I felt I could slide into the rumpled, nicotine-stained sheets right then and there. I could be her. I measured the space between them with my fingernail and let it slide across the softened hues, wishing for a life not quite so vivid.

Brian leaned over me, resting his chin on the crook between my neck and shoulder. He looked down at the picture and blew a small stream of smoke from his mouth. His neck bumped against mine as he swallowed and I shifted away from his touch. He had never really wanted to look before. His closeness made the dark wet air sag down upon my shoulders, fester in between my bare toes. For some reason, I didn't want him to look at this picture, *my* picture, for too long. I covered the book with both hands and turned to look at him.

He was tossing a stuffed heart up in to the air and back again, swinging the little toy by its frayed tag. The heart had faded to a brown pink, and the seams pulled at the edges. It smelled like mildew and had several stains that mottled the nubby fabric, making it appear diseased. Brian had always told me that he found it outside his apartment one day, a little ways from his doorstep. "Wasn't left for me. But I took the motherfucker anyway," he told me, when I asked why he held onto a chewed up dog toy like that. I suspected there was something more to it than that, but I knew better than to push the issue.

I stared at the bouncing faded heart as he tossed it up again and again. Each time it seemed to fall a little slower, as if the air was slowing it down. Brian finally grew bored, and stopped abruptly. He turned slowly toward my face, held the little pillow tight between both of his fists, and stared at me. I looked down and rolled the word *love* over my tongue, stared at a drop of spit on Brian's lip. "When I think of the word love," I told him, "it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Like your first taste of coffee. Remember that?"

Brian's eyes grew small. He dropped the toy. He wiped an imaginary speck of dust from his eye. He said, "My mom didn't drink coffee."

I stared at him like this was supposed to mean something. Like I was supposed to believe him. Outside flood lights came on.

“But isn’t it hard for you, Brian?” I asked.

“Hard?” He held my stare.

“Yeah, like, to say love like it means something.”

He looked at me. I mean, he really looked at me. The words hung between us and the rain pounded louder and I looked down.

“When I say your name, Colleen,” he said, “when I really stop and taste it, I think about calling Poison Control.”

A grin grew across Brian’s face, I turned the page in my book and thought: *I asked for it.*

“Oh,” I said, “Well.”

In the silence and the humidity and the rain and thunder, I felt the empty space between us grow, bubbling like the pages in my book, felt the weight tangle up through the smoke and candle wax to spread out into the rain smearing across the pushed open windows.

The next day I was lying on the floor of my apartment listening to my best friend Lauren saying, “But, don’t you like having something there beside you in bed?” She sucked at her beer as if she were embarrassed for thinking it.

I stared at her blonde hair fanning over the arm of the couch and fumbled in my purse for a Valium. I told her, “I don’t know. It’s like, sometimes I lie in bed and think

about eternity and I wish that I was anywhere but with him. You're going to think I'm crazy, but, after a while, I'll start to think, What if I never fall asleep? And What if I never wake up? And What if I'm stuck here in bed with Brian, forever? And I swear to Christ, Lauren, it's terrifying."

Lauren had closed her eyes and pressed a can to the center of her forehead. "That's fucked up, Colleen. What in the hell is going on over there?"

"I don't even know," I said, and crunched the Valium in half between my teeth, thinking that this conversation would certainly be easier in a half hour. "It's just—sometimes at night I lie in bed with him and wish I could be anywhere else. He's just always *there*. His hand is always rubbing at my stomach and his leg will be wrapped around mine and Jesus, you know how I hate being touched. And I hate his hand, but I never move it, Lauren. I just lie there."

Lauren sat up. "Wait—" she said. "Give me that other half. I think I want to go out tonight."

I stood up from the floor and dropped the pill into her upturned hand and headed to the refrigerator for another beer. Lauren said, "But, doesn't Brian know that you hate that? Why don't you just tell him to move the fuck over?"

I lied back down on the laminate floor and propped my feet up on the arm of the couch, opposite of her head. I said, sighing,, "I don't know, Lauren, I don't know why I do the things I do."

"Are you going over there tonight?" she asked, scrolling through the text messages on her phone, half paying attention.

"He's working late," I told her, "I thought we were going out?"

She grinned, satisfied and turned the television on. For the next few hours, we watched *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?*, laughing when we knew more than the contestants, finally getting up when the sun began to set behind the horizon of the apartment building behind our window, a slow moving orange ball curved like the shape of a frown.

I remember a conversation we had shortly after Brian and I met, our first phone call. I had been looking in my bedroom mirror, partly at myself, partly at a snapshot tucked into the mirror's frame: a high school picture of me and an ex-boyfriend that I couldn't seem to take down, even though we had split right before high school graduation. I was surprised at Brian's phone call, and was staring at myself, half listening while trying to place Brian's face in my mind. The first time he called it was his voice I remembered the most. I had met him at a party, way after midnight, and at an hour when most people had passed out or coupled up. But yet.

Brian was the one standing by a picnic table who said to me: "Hey there. You're mighty pretty." His words came out slow, but hard around the edges.

I had rolled my eyes, but I was secretly pleased.

"Look here," he had told me, "I've got T.B.I., ok? It makes me not shy and I pretty much say whatever the hell I want. I can't help it."

"T.B.I.?" I had asked, intrigued by this acronym that could account for uninhibited conversation.

"Traumatic Brain Injury," he had said, fast, the words slurring together before he gulped down the rest of the beer sloshing in the Solo cup in his hand.

I remember thinking about this, wondering if it made him slightly retarded. I had still been thinking when I watched him shove away an approaching girl saying, “Bitch, I told you it wasn’t even like that. Now get the hell on.”

At that, I took a step closer to him, closing the distance between us.

And so, this first time Brian called me on the phone, he didn’t even mention that party, but instead gave me a running list of the things he was buying at the grocery store. I tried to picture him cradling the phone against his shoulder as he moved slowly through the aisles, pulling out boxes of Hamburger Helper, Vienna Sausages, Frank’s Red Hot. I stared at myself in the mirror while he talked, and I decided his list was endearing while I looked closer at my reflection, wondering when I had become the person staring back. My face then seemed unfamiliar, adult and unfriendly.

I turned away from the mirror and Brian had said, “Well. That’s about it. Those groceries cost seventy dollars. Can you believe it?”

I had said, “No.”

About a month after we started dating, we were at a party and Brian kept disappearing. I would get up from a game of cards, pulling my skirt down over my thighs, and wobble slightly toward the front porch, where he usually sat, smoking and bitching. When I didn’t find him, I didn’t care because it was summertime and not yet too hot and all around me was the smell of sex and rebellion and freedom.

When Brian did return, he had pulled me into a bathroom and before I knew it, he had pulled up my skirt and was pushing himself into me before I could even figure out he had gotten hard. All the while, I was trying to keep my cup of beer steady and grinning

from excitement. He had stopped suddenly and pulled a small bag of white powder from his shirt pocket. “Want a key bump?” he asked.

I was thrilled, strangely, but I didn’t say it. I pushed my hair behind my ears and tried to look stern.

“Get that shit out of here,” I said, my hands already reaching for the bag. He knew what I meant, though, and he took the edge of the key with the clump of coke and raised it to my nose so gently I forgot the gravity of the situation.

I breathed in.

A little later that night we drove across the bridge atop the Black Warrior River, the link between his world and mine, connecting a neighboring city with my college campus. Brian looked over at me and said, “I love you.”

Before I could stop the words from tumbling out of my mouth, I said, “I know.”

It was late and there wasn’t a car in sight. He slowed the car to a stop on the bridge and I looked out the window at the dim light of a steamboat, watching it flicker and cut out. Brian’s hand crept up the inside of my leg. “I know it’s early to be saying it, baby, but I just know it. It’s not the coke talking. You know this is right, too, don’t you?” he said.

I squirmed away from his groping hands, my body a deflating balloon. I didn’t answer him because the thought that he might be right scared me too much to put into words.

Several days later, Brian and I had gone driving around town, aimlessly, wasting gas and the afternoon. He was argumentative and demanded silence even though he insisted that I ride along so I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes and concentrated on the rhythm of the car and the inconsistencies of the road.

After a while I felt the car roll to a stop and when I moved the seat forward, I saw that we were at a clearing, an empty space in the woods that was surrounded by trees and I could hardly see the sky. I had no idea how we had gotten here and I wasn't about to ask. We sat in his truck, staring at the skeleton of a foot bridge, a former walkway that was dangling in mid-air, the shallow water of the creek below still aside from the leaves that fell, occasionally, to the surface below, rippling the water in slow spirals. The truck was perched near the edge of the fall, the wheels yearning for the memory of the bridge that once connected this abandoned clearing with the shady trees across the way. In front of the truck was a fifteen foot drop into this shallow creek, and around us, there were overgrown trees with sagging branches and people's old junk. To my left, there was a circular clearing and dozens of empty Natural Light cans, a party spot for underage country kids who knew the back paths to this clearing where the police wouldn't bother to find them. I still didn't know why Brian had brought me here, at dusk, on this Sunday afternoon in mid April.

"I will do it," Brian said, pushing the car's cigarette lighter to the cigarette dangling from his lip.

I blinked. I clutched my hand around the car handle and wondered if the truck actually could fall, if the brakes could hold it in place on this precipice.

"Do what?" I asked, like I didn't understand the implications.

Biran turned the radio up louder and my hands wanted to reach for the dial, because I was terrified the growing vibrations would activate in the wheels a kind of memory, and push the truck right over the edge.

I tried to imagine how long I could go without moving a muscle.

I failed. I tried to still my fidgeting and finally settled on picking, every few seconds, at a loose cuticle on my thumbnail, spot-counted the loose change in the console, watched sweat drip down a wax cup from Wendy's left over from earlier that afternoon.

"I'm tired," he said, finally.

"Christ, Brian, are you nuts," I asked, my breath coming now in spurts, as if I had just sprinted for miles. "Let's just go home."

He looked at me, and I watched confusion muddy his eyes turn a different shade of brown. Outside the window, a small stream of light moved through an opening in the trees ahead.

I pictured his clothes still hanging in my closet, his obituary faded and yellow on my wall. I wondered, Would I even hang it? I pictured an empty space and I reached over the center console and grabbed his hand.

Brian maneuvered the car in reverse and sped out of the clearing. I held my breath while he fumbled with a small canister, spilling out an assortment of pills into his palm. He plucked out a large white flat one: Methadone. He broke it in half and pressed it onto his tongue, turning it over before snapping it between his teeth.

I knew what would come next, that I would take the other half. I pretended that, like him, I could crush it. That I, too, could tolerate this test. What I really did was push

the wafer around in my mouth, the bitter taste as it melted on my tongue made my mouth water, nearly made me gag.

On the ride home my mind returned to the picture I had looked at in the Nan Goldin book several nights earlier. I thought of the woman. This time, I thought of her hair. The way it frizzed out and she didn't seem to care.

I reached over and touched Brian's hand, clammy on the gear shift. He grabbed mine back.

"You feel like a beer?" he asked.

I nodded, my body betraying me.

The night before, we were lying in bed and he had crept his hand around me and the raised scars on his wrist made me want to vomit. He had said, "I just don't understand, Colleen. You think you know everything. But one day you're going to pull this shit one more time and I'm not going to be here and you're going to be alone. And doesn't that scare you, Colleen?"

It did. But I didn't say it.

After the afternoon at the clearing, we headed to the bar and, a dozen beers later, we were finally back at my apartment, but still on a precipice. We were sat in plastic lawn chars on the balcony outside of my apartment and Brian bitched about my friends. "I don't want you talking to them anymore. I don't care if that pisses you off. It don't look right, on me, having you walk around like a tramp."

He was talking about my best friends, John and Chris, whom I had known for years. It didn't matter, really, because I wasn't paying attention, but instead, peeling the label off of a bottle of beer.

“That means you're sexually frustrated, you know that, Colleen? Goddamnit.” He kicked the balcony railing and the steel from the toe of his boot pinged and echoed in my ears. “You know you've really ruined my life, you know that?” Brian said, his voice flat, apathetic. “If I had never met you, I would never have had to deal with any of this shit.”

“What shit, Brian?” I asked. “For Christsakes, you're enough to drive someone out of their ever-loving mind, and anyway, if you think you're going to control who I do and don't talk to you've lost your fucking mind.”

On that note, I stood a little taller, feeling quite proud, and blew the smoke out of my mouth in rings and tried to hide the tiny smile on my face.

He moved toward me and before I knew it, he shoved me against the concrete wall.

I laughed and he slammed me back again, harder this time, his hands shoving at my shoulders. I strained to keep my face free of emotion because I knew it would make him even madder. But all I wanted to do, really, was curl up on the doormat in a tiny ball, to push myself into the rug, to force the fibers into my mouth just to keep from screaming. Just so I wouldn't have to think about how I had ever arrived at this point.

But then, just as quickly as he had come at me, Brian stepped away, willing the quickly spreading red marks of his fingers on my upper arms to fade. He took a deep breath and headed toward the parking lot where his truck was parked and as he turned the

corner toward the stairs I heard him mutter something how I had really done it this time, about how he'd just be better off dead.

I dropped my beer and trailed behind him to his truck, tiptoeing as if he couldn't see me. I watched him climb into the driver's side and fumble for the key to his glove box where he kept his gun.

I took one last look at him. I tried to cram it all into one image that would last forever: the diesel engine of his truck chugging, his hand on the glovebox, the oil and grease stains underneath his fingernails that were as much a part of him as the cluster of moles splattered across his right shoulder, his eyes glazed with alcohol and methadone, and his face a grinning death-mask. By painting this picture, I told myself, by searing the bad things into my brain, I could justify the sense of peace that continued to vibrate throughout my entire body.

I stood, still, propped against the door of the truck's cab, wondering exactly what I was waiting for. In the parking lot, the faint song of crickets haunted the air and the street light above burned amber and flickered in anticipation, burning a slow visible death. After a while, Brian's head dropped down against the steering wheel, one hand clutched so tightly around his bottle of beer you could see the whiteness around his knuckles, glaring bright against the dried blood from his earlier battle with the concrete wall.

Finally I said, "Brian, I think you left your cigarettes up there on the porch. Why don't I go and get them? I'm going to get them. How's that sound?"

Brian raised his head and looked me right in the eyes, staring hard with something close to hatred. I felt myself look toward the gun in the box, suddenly ashamed.

And then I ran.

I didn't get far because the air was thick, like trying to walk through glue, and it choked me, settled in my throat. I crouched in a corner outside of one of the apartment buildings, underneath the stairs, and dry heaved. I could taste the bile burning my throat, but I couldn't throw up. I knelt under the stairs, bent over and shaking for several minutes, and when I heard a car horn sound, rude and a second too long, I headed upstairs to call 911.

When the dispatcher answered, I couldn't say anything for a minute, the bile burning my throat again. Finally I managed: "My boyfriend's going to kill himself. Bring help." And then I hung up, sinking to the cold concrete of the balcony's floor, the grit pinching my bare knees.

When the police and ambulance arrived, I stood and watched from the balcony. I couldn't look at Brian. He was crying and I hated him. I closed my eyes and imagined *my* picture: the man's turned back. My stomach churned and I stepped away from the approaching police officers to vomit over the balcony, a flood of beer and panic splashing down onto the bushes below.

"When all is said and done," the policeman told me, "You should be happy. You could have been married to him. With children. You could have found him hanging from a hook in your bedroom. With the kids staring up there like it was just another day. Yep, you could have had it worse." He left the implication hanging and his mouth curved into a smirk. He said this like something had actually happened.

The policeman coughed and it jolted me. "Really," he said again, "you should be very happy." The word happy reverberated in the air that buzzed around me, bouncing

off the balcony railing, dripped from the wound on my head slowly, stopping only to graze my lips.

About a month after Brian's suicide attempt, I finally returned his phone calls. My hand paused over the send button on my phone, hovering somewhere between satisfaction and guilt.

"I lost my job," he said, when I finally answered.

"Oh, Brian. Again? You always say that. What are you going to do?" I asked, delicately avoiding the last time we had seen each other, where he had gone after the police and the ambulance and everything else.

"Kites," he said. "I've just been flying a kite, drinking beer. All day I sit in the bed of my truck, drinking beer. Flying a kite."

I am no longer startled by his simplicity.

"I know," I said, even though I didn't. "But kites? I mean, what are you going to *do*?"

"I'm going to buy a bunch of kites. Move somewhere there's wind, lots of wind, and then I'm going to fly them."

"Oh Brian," I said. "I miss us." I added, an afterthought that slipped out before I could stop it.

"Yeah. Well." He trailed off.

A little later, after we hung up, I heard a loud banging at my front door and opened it to find Brian shoving a pile of clothes at my chest, his eyes burning.

I put the clothes on my coffee table and tugged at his arm, “Why don’t you stay?”
I asked.

He walked back to my bedroom.

“A storm’s coming,” he said, pushing open the windows, looking right at me,
“And I want to listen.”

A low rumble of thunder echoed across the wood-paneled walls and I turned away
from Brian, curling into myself, facing the closed bedroom door. An unbearable weight
fills the room, trapped by the pressing humidity that has slipped in through the open
windows.