

ABSTRACT

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In this collection of fictional short stories, we meet people who are stuck: in unfulfilling jobs, unsatisfying relationships, and other moments of their lives that they suddenly cannot bear any longer. There are psychics and sex changes and hysterical pregnancies, weddings and babies and funerals, and through it all, a destabilizing sense of failure as each character falls from grace or cannot reach those prescribed cultural marks of young adulthood.

MIDTOWN HOLDING PATTERN: STORIES

By

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Table of Contents

Sedona / 1

Fridays with Frank / 20

Flight Risk / 35

Everything Surprising / 45

The Order of Things / 63

Midtown Holding Pattern / 80

Sedona

We were driving around Sedona, Arizona in a rented mid-sized Chevy, our vacation roles defined without speaking. His friends were getting married; this designated him driver, decision- maker, country music demander. I was his guest, his girlfriend: passenger, map-reader, country music finder. We were objects in a painting, riding along the streak of black tar highway sliced between red sandstone formations that shot up into the atmosphere. We might have aimed for that horizon point forever and never reached the end.

“Find us some real country, you know, songs about dogs dying and pick-up trucks and drinking whiskey,” Brad said. I pressed the tuner’s scan button until the static settled comfortably into an acceptable warble and twang. He nodded his approval, and I cupped my chin in my hand and turned to watch the mystical landscape speed past my window.

“I missed driving,” he said. “In California people drive everywhere. Sometimes I would get in my car and just go, you know, anywhere.” He draped one arm over the wheel and pressed his back deep into the seat. I hate driving, mostly because I’m bad at it, but I was happy cruising through this alien landscape with him, our whole future full of possibilities stretched out before us. Brad accelerated, testing the Chevy’s pickup, grinning in satisfaction at the results. Huge saguaros stood like sentinels on the roadside, their thick arms reaching for the sky. I had never seen a real cactus before, at least not one growing in the ground. My mom kept a Christmas cactus in a pot in the corner of the living room, but the plant was confused – it always bloomed at Thanksgiving.

“Why do some of the cacti have more arms than others? Does that mean they’re older, like the rings of a tree trunk?” I asked.

“What? Oh, I don’t know.”

I squinted at him, silently calling his west coast expertise into question. I wanted to tell him that I would look it up later, but I didn’t. He would have told me I was being *cute*, and the way he said *cute*, his voice pitching on the “u” sound, made me not want to be it.

Brad and I had been dating for nearly a year, a length of time that made me anxious and hopeful. That marker always felt like an important milestone to me, the anniversary hurdle I had never passed with any previous boyfriend. I was convinced that if I could last that long with someone I could probably last a lot longer, maybe even forever. So for me this trip to Sedona became a sort of test of our relationship, a trial run. We’d get dressed up and go to the church together, only with someone else saying the I do’s. Then there was the wedding night, our own pretend honeymoon. A week before the trip I went to Bloomingdale’s on my lunch break and bought a black lace teddy to surprise him. It was the first piece of lingerie I ever owned, and I felt a little silly in the thing, an impossible tangle of ribbon and mesh that cut away at the stomach, but it made my small breasts look larger. As I slid my credit card to the cashier and she wrapped the teddy in light pink tissue, I wondered how a few inches of lace could cost so much.

Brad was a journalist, a sports reporter for a big paper not known for their sports column. To me, he seemed like a grown-up: while I spent my days as an editorial assistant and rented my sixth-floor walk-up apartment, he had a byline and a two-story brownstone with a backyard. We were both road cyclists, vain about our legs and our

carbon bicycle frames, and we met while riding in Central Park in the early spring. I was alone on a chilly morning when his noisy training group overtook me; annoyed, I stood up out of the saddle and pedaled hard to break away from their pack, but after half a lap they caught up to me again, and it was easier to join them than continue racing them. I thought Brad was good-looking, and when we discovered we both lived in the same neighborhood, we made a date that weekend at a bar on my side of Ninth Avenue.

After a number of dates, at a dinner party on his patio he introduced me to his friends, most of them fellow journalists, and told his version of how we met.

“She picked me up while riding in the park,” he said, wrapping a long arm around my shoulders and tugging me close to him.

“I tried to ride away from you,” I pulled back playfully, still within his embrace.

“Well, it was the off-season, we were riding slowly.”

It was a history he’d created for us, our origin story that we could retell for many dinner parties to come. I didn’t mention that when I arrived at the bar for our first date I didn’t recognize him without his helmet and sunglasses. I didn’t know that his dirty blond hair was so long, his blue eyes so close together. But I was wearing a new dress and my arms were tanned from the summer sun and with Brad’s arm still around me I decided that I felt like a grown up, too.

Now, the weekend spread out before us like the landscape, full of mystical energy. There were no high-rises to hide behind, no cool relief from the shady side of a city block, just the saguaros standing guard against the red rocks. I wanted to be in on the secrets those cacti were keeping within their spiny arms.

“Where to?” Brad asked. We had reached the main part of town, a dusty pastel shopping center with red ceramic roofs and bright blue garden umbrellas to shade the cafés.

“We could walk around here?” I said, and Brad swung the Chevy into a parking lot. It was Friday; the wedding was the following afternoon and we had all day to explore the town. Brad took my hand as we walked past gift shops and art galleries. I fanned my face with my free hand as the summer Arizona heat radiated around us. It was a dry heat.

“Psychic readings?” Brad said, pointing to an oversized purple building with an orange sun painted above the entrance. I smiled and followed him through the doors, a trickle of wind chimes announcing our entrance.

I expected more from the New Age Center of Sedona than glass display cases lined with geodes sliced in half like grapefruits, split open to reveal the sparkling amethyst crystals clustered inside. Similar crystal pieces had lined the shelves in my childhood bedroom, trinkets purchased at museum gift shops on school field trips. I still knew all their names, the dark blue lapis and the golden brown tiger eye, smoky quartz and milky quartz, but didn't people grow out of collecting glittering geological artifacts? I never really collected anything, not souvenir shot glasses or state quarters or model cars or the beach glass my mom gathers into mason jars on the kitchen hutch. I take matchbooks from restaurant foyers, two if they're the little boxed kind of wooden matches, but they just end up scattered in drawers and spilled out into purses because I don't smoke or light scented candles.

Brad and I wound our way past the display cases full of semi-precious stone jewelry, amber pendants on black leather cords with silver clasps, the kind I would have saved up my allowance for in sixth grade. Laminated “Do Not Touch” signs were taped along the shelves, but still I ran my fingers over the sharp angles of each crystal. In the far corner of the shop a woman glared at us from behind a computer screen, her desk scattered with binders and pamphlets.

The woman might have been old, but she had flecks of silver tinsel scattered in her mousy brown hair like an old Christmas tree on the curb, which made her look young and absurd. She reminded me of a Barbie doll I loved as a child, whose pink lamé ball gown skirt came off to reveal a silver minidress underneath. There were silver streaks in the doll’s hair too, which was pulled up high into a glamorous ponytail and I never changed her out of that silver minidress. All of my Barbies wore their original clothes and I never had any Ken dolls and some day a therapist will probably convince me that this is to blame for my relationship problems.

“Do you want a couple’s reading?” Tinsel Hair asked. She handed us a black binder full of laminated pages for each of psychics at the New Age Center. The ones on duty were flagged with hot pink post-it notes.

I looked at Brad. He rolled his eyes closed, raised his eyebrows, and opened his mouth to reveal big, square teeth, remnants of breakfast stuck in his canines. He always had food stuck in his teeth but I got sick of telling him so sometimes after dinner I’d ask if I have anything in my teeth just hoping he’d ask it back. He never did.

“Well,” he started, and I could see the sentence hang in the air before it was fully formed in his throat.

“Let’s just get our own readings,” I said quickly. I pulled his words down from the air and made them my own. Brad flipped through the pages, pausing over the ones who looked the most authentic. I looked up from the psychic binder and watched a tanned, toned woman in coordinating athletic apparel bounce around a small room to our right. Aura Photography, the sign said above the French doors to her studio. A couple sat very still on a bench in front of a white screen while the fit woman adjusted lighting equipment and flashed the camera on them. She probably taught yoga on the side to the fat, unhappy women who come to Sedona to energize their souls and weigh down the pink Jeeps. Or maybe the aura photography was her side gig, but I imagined being a psychic reader took precedence in the Sedona job market.

The truth was I was afraid to get a couple’s reading. I turned back to the binder, jealous of the pair getting their aura photographed. His hand covered hers on the bench between them and their knees were touching. What would our aura look like?

We flipped through the pages, reading each bio and list of psychic powers. Tarot cards. Clairvoyant. Clairaudient. Palmistry. Animal whisperers. I didn’t like the idea of choosing a psychic from a binder.

“What do you think?” I whispered to Brad. Tinsel Hair’s eyes were fixated on her computer screen, but I was sure she was listening.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I want a real spiritual connection. You know, I want her to say, ‘Hello, I’ve been expecting you’ because she’s psychic.” I smiled at Brad. I wanted him to love me for that kind of joke.

He laughed, but he didn’t look up at me. “I like the look of this one, Rima. Oooh, she’s got Native American Spirituality,” he said.

I followed his finger across Rima's page where it listed her expertise. "And thirty-five years of professional experience," I added. Rima's picture showed her with dark bangs that brushed her eyelids and she wore a heavy turquoise and carnelian necklace. He was right; she looked like a real psychic. I wanted to believe in psychics, or at least, I wanted to believe that they believed in themselves and this wasn't just a tourist trap, a fool and her money soon parted.

As I flipped through the pages again, a petite woman with white-blond hair pulled back into a low ponytail entered the shop and whispered something to Tinsel Hair, who reached across the desk and added a hot pink post-it note to Madison Morgan's page. The Madison Morgan in the binder wore mauve lipstick and her piercing blue eyes weren't traced by crow's feet, but the same wisps of white-blond hair framed her smooth face. This Madison Morgan wore a white t-shirt under a heather gray sweat suit and her face was bare. She looked disappointingly normal, yet familiar.

"What about her?" Brad asked. She looked like Irene French, the receptionist at the office where I worked. Irene, who wore her own platinum hair in a low ponytail and cried in the bathroom with alarming frequency until her boss would tip-toe over to my desk and ask if I would please go in there and get her to stop wailing. I would rub her back and hand her tissues between her sobs, but I envied Irene for crying there in the bathroom when she was frustrated with work. She wasn't afraid or ashamed of her emotions like I was; I always waited until I got outside to cry.

"I don't know," I said. Maybe it was a sign that she came in right as I was searching in the psychic binder. Maybe she was expecting me after all.

I followed Madison Morgan through a maze of hallways to her office, where she motioned for me to take a seat across the desk like I was sitting down to a job interview. On the wall hung two decks of playing cards, the first one arranged in order by suit and the second one shuffled indiscernibly. A single yellow legal pad set beside her desktop computer. The room smelled a bit musty, like dust on fake plastic trees. Where was the burning incense and voodoo candles, the black lights and bright silk throw pillows? Where was the crystal ball?

“Don’t tell me his name, but the man you came in here with, the man downstairs, do you love him?” Madison Morgan asked. This wasn’t how I imagined psychic readings began. I scanned the room for an answer. Yes. No.

“I think so,” I said.

“He’s not the one for you.” Madison Morgan said.

My face felt hot and I knew a bright red blush was creeping out of my tank top and gripping my chest and neck. I clamped my molars together and puffed out my cheeks while I faltered for a way to defend my relationship to Madison Morgan. She didn’t even know his name – how could she know he wasn’t the one for me?

“I want you to keep eye contact with me while I ask you some basic questions,” she said, oblivious to my frustration.

I met the icy blue of her eyes and waited to feel our psychic connection. Her pen moved over the yellow legal pad but she kept our gaze locked. Name. Birth date. Address. Madison Morgan added some of the numbers together on the notepad while I watched her through narrowed eyes, straining to read her inverted scribbles. She pointed her pen to the decks of playing cards on the wall.

“You’re a Five of Spades,” she said. “The genius card.”

I breathed out a loud laugh. “What does that mean?”

“Well, the Five of Spades is a great card. It corresponds to the Ten of Hearts, see?” She pointed her pen this time to the second deck, the shuffled one. The Ten of Hearts was in the same position as the Five of Spades. “You’re a born leader and influencer. People take their cues from you. You don’t like people making decisions for you, right?”

“I guess not.” Was I really a Five of Spades?

“What do you do for a living? You should be in sales with those cards.”

I hesitated.

“I want to be a writer.” Had I hesitated too long? I wanted to make her work for my answers.

“Good, good, I can sense that writing is a good career for you.” She glared at me. “You have a strong aura, I can sense it. Has anyone ever told you that you’re a transmitter?” I shook my head. “Well, you are. You probably have a lot of those moments where you just know something without knowing how, right?”

“Sure.” I nodded. I thought about that feeling of déjà vu that made me breathe in sharply and wonder, did I dream this before? I wanted that to be more than just intuition. And those times I knew what someone would say or do—I wanted that to be more than just predictability or habit. I wanted to be a transmitter.

“It’s your aura,” she said. She closed her eyes and traced circles on the notepad with her pen, drawing a swirling doodle like a flattened Slinky of my future. She stopped abruptly partially through one of the loops. “Your head color is a sort of white-red –

that's a good thing. It means 'majestic' and it's the highest of the color order. Good, clear mind." I opened my mouth to ask more, but she kept her eyes closed, her hands groping at my invisible aura from across the desk.

Madison Morgan opened her eyes and reached for my hands. She held them in hers, palms up. Her skin was cool. "Now, I've been reading palms since I was four years old." I tried to imagine her as a child prodigy, a toddler insisting on her psychic ability. When I was four, I begged my mother to get my ears pierced; Madison Morgan wore small gold hoops in her ears, but she was probably never a little girl like that. She probably never played with Barbie dolls, either. She ran her index finger over the two parallel lines of my right palm. The touch felt intimate, almost illicit, like we had built a fort using blankets and sofa cushions and were now sharing secrets inside.

"See this line that curves across your palm near your thumb? That's your lifeline, and yours is long and deep. You'll live a long life. And you'll have two children." Her finger followed two smaller tributaries branching from my lifeline. I nodded again, swallowing all of these facts written in the folds of my skin. When I was in first or maybe second grade, I made a life timeline in school with crayons on green construction paper. Long before I was a transmitter, before I flew to Arizona for a wedding with my boyfriend, I decided I would have three children. At age thirty I would move to Washington, D.C., and by thirty-two I'd have my first daughter and name her Nicole. Baby Eric would come along at age thirty-five, followed by Katie at thirty-eight. I had it all planned out back then, but now I wasn't sure what I wanted. How had I gotten here, twenty-five hundred miles away from Manhattan, with this man who had food stuck in his teeth?

She traced the faint curve closest to my fingers with her thumb. “Your fortune line, here, it’s unbroken. You’ll always be financially secure.” My childhood timeline had made no mention of money. “And see this deep groove that leads to your index finger? That’s your heart line, and it’s not complete yet.”

“Right.” It came out with a little laugh, more sarcastic than I meant to sound. I was revealing too much.

“He’s definitely not the one for you. I see someone else in your future, someone who will complete your heart line. Palms change over time, and your heart line has a long way to go. Stay open for someone new.” She stopped talking and she seemed to leave the room momentarily, as if the person holding up the light behind her eyes had wandered off for a quick smoke break. Then, suddenly she was back. Madison Morgan walked me out of the office back to Tinsel Hair’s desk. She pulled me in for a sympathetic embrace, as if we had just survived a traumatic experience together and emerged unscathed but still reeling.

“Call if you ever want a phone reading,” she said, handing me her business card. I nodded and traced my fingers over the gold embossed letters spelling out her name.

Brad was on the phone when I found him outside the New Age Center. He smiled at me and said goodbye, flipping his phone closed with his chin. “Is your future going to be everything you hope for?” he asked and kissed me on the cheek.

“And then some. How was Rima?”

“Very spiritual. Who would believe any of this new age nonsense?”

I slipped my hand into my pocket and ran a finger over the business card again.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Tara, my friend from college. I told you about her, remember? She and her boyfriend want to have dinner with us tonight. You don’t mind, right?”

“Sounds great,” I said, and clenched my jaw. I wondered if she had called him, or if he called her. He had told me about her before; she was a lawyer in Chicago, in Sedona for the wedding too, and I had made up my mind not to like her.

“You’re going to love Tara,” he said, and started up the Chevy.

We were late to meet Tara and her boyfriend Hanny at Oaxaca restaurant, and they had already ordered pitchers of margaritas. Tara was short with rounded features, softly sloping shoulders leading down to large breasts and heavy arms. Hanny was thin with dark skin and black curly hair falling in front of his tortoise shell glasses. We drank our margaritas while Brad kept calling Tara his old nickname for her, T-Bone, and laughing at her stories about college.

After the waiter arrived with our meals, T-Bone turned and set her round eyes on me. “So Brad tells me you’re a writer. Are you a famous journalist, too?” She gave Brad a gentle nudge with her elbow.

“I’m not actually a writer. Not yet anyway,” I said. I blushed and the room suddenly fell quiet. “I’m an editorial assistant.”

“You should go to law school. Best decision I ever made,” she said. She hadn’t heard a word I had said.

She turned to Brad with a forkful of enchilada. “Mmm, Brad, you just have to try this. The avocado in here is to die for – I know it’s your favorite.” She held her fork out for Brad, and he leaned toward her so for a second it seemed like he might let her feed

him. He glanced at me then reached instead for her fork. I hope he could feel the strength of my glare on the side of his face. I wondered if they had slept together in college, and tried to decide if it mattered or if I even wanted to know at all.

“Oh, that is good. You know, avocados are grown in California.” Brad smacked his lips loudly and talked while he chewed T-Bone’s enchilada. I looked at Hanny, but he kept his eyes focused on his plate. I took a long sip from the straw of my margarita and welcomed the sharp, familiar pain that pulsed through my temples from the frozen drink.

On the drive back to our hotel after dinner, Brad said, “Hanny and Tara are such foodies together. All they do is eat. She’s really put on a lot of weight since college.”

“Be nice,” I said, but I knew he wasn’t calling her fat for my sake.

It was a dry heat.

The next morning, Brad and I headed to the Sedona Bike Shop, where Brad had scheduled a guided mountain bike tour. The tour guide wore baggy brown cargo pants and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. He took one look at me in my cycling shorts and Brad in his full team uniform, the baby blue and orange spandex stretching over his shaved legs and torso, the matching helmet, socks, and gloves, and decided that we would be able to handle an advanced trail. We rode along a rocky path that dipped and twisted without warning. Thorny desert plants, always on the offensive in such an unfriendly climate, reached out and scratched at my legs and I rode past. My stomach lurched at each downhill as I watched Brad and the guide descend and climb the uneven terrain. I tried to ride down the steep slope with my eyes open, but I couldn’t stop, couldn’t unclip

my feet from the evil pedal traps quickly enough. I fell onto the hard red sandstone, twisted and stuck under the weight of the mountain bike.

“Shit, are you okay?” Brad asked. He stopped and stood a few feet away as I held my right arm tight to my body and waited for the pain to radiate from my elbow and subside. Tears streamed down my cheeks and mixed with the dust that had settled on my skin. “Do you want to go back?”

“No, I want to stop falling.” My voice came out sharp and piercing, and Brad looked at the guide. Turning back wouldn’t be any easier, the guide explained. We had to get through this section and then he’d take us on the beginner trail back to the shop. I wanted Brad to be proud of me, to brag to his friends at the wedding about his sexy mountain biking girlfriend, but I was failing. I thought about quitting. I saw myself leaving the heavy mountain bike in the red dirt; I heard my shoes’ metal cleats clicking along the rocky terrain as I walked back to the shop. Somehow quitting would be worse than the oblong purple bruise already forming on the inside my left thigh, the exact imprint of the bike’s downtube.

At a clearing I let Brad take my picture in front of those burnt sienna rocks shooting into the cloudless cobalt sky, my helmet cocked to the side slightly, my hands on the mountain bike’s handlebars. I posed there against the Sedona scenery, a smile plastered across my face as a river of thick brown blood trickled down my thigh.

We met T-Bone and Hanny in the hotel lobby to drive together to the wedding. In the back seat, they created an imaginary wedding menu for their imaginary wedding that seemed infinitely possible at that moment, in a rental car in Sedona. Hanny said he

wanted filet mignon, but T-Bone wrinkled her nose and declared that they just had to have lobster tail. Brad said he wanted a breakfast buffet at his wedding, an omelet station and a make-your-own-waffle station, and to me that sounded perfect, but I said I didn't care about dinner; I just wanted an open bar. Brad grinned and placed his hand on mine lightly.

The bride and groom had decided on chicken. When it was time for the bride to throw the bouquet, I lined up alongside the bridesmaids in their sea foam green strapless gowns. It was just a silly tradition, but a little part of me wanted to be the one to catch it. I could picture myself sitting on a chair in the middle of the dance floor, my dress hiked up high, and smiling at Brad as a sweaty groomsman ran his hand up my leg to place the bride's ruffled garter around my bruised thigh. The bride sent the roses flying, and I spun around to see T-Bone holding the bouquet high over her head in triumph. She strutted around the dance floor as the bridesmaids tugged up their dresses and retreated to their tables, surrendering, and I returned to Brad with my bottom lip turned out in a fake pout.

"Let's get out of here," Brad whispered in my ear. He took my hand and we slipped out of the reception hall, past the other wedding guests who lingered on the patio, and down the few stairs to the hotel pool. He pressed me up against a fence and kissed me hard. His palms ran down my sides until they settled at my hips but his hands didn't quite hold on to me, those hands that were large and muscular but always at odds with the world. His fingers flared out straight when they should have curved around my body, and at all other times he kept them tensed like he was hauling around an invisible bowling ball. We paused, gasping at the air, dry heat.

“I love you,” I said, feeling the blood rush to my head as the words passed over my lips. It was the first time I had said it to him, and I liked the tingling sensation behind my eyes that blinded me for a second. His face came into focus again.

“Really?” he said.

“Yes, really.” My lips were still frozen in a smile. Wasn’t this how it worked? You fly across the country together for a wedding and you sneak off to make out by the pool and then you confess that you love each other.

“I think you’re drunk,” he said. I didn’t argue. Instead I let him lead me by the hand back inside, his drunken girlfriend who thinks she loves him. I said it and I meant it and now I felt like a fool.

The bride and groom were dancing together, perfectly in step, gracefully but without any sort of forced flourish that comes from six weeks of ballroom dance lessons. She was holding a cosmopolitan or maybe a cape cod, something magenta and dangerous in a white dress. The only time I ever wore a white dress was for my first Holy Communion and I spilled ketchup down the front of the poufy satin skirt. She made me nervous with that drink.

“How did you two learn to dance like that?” Brad asked when we joined them on the dance floor.

“Oh, we just dance all the time,” the groom said. “You know, in the kitchen when we’re making dinner together if a good song comes on, that kind of thing.” In that instant I wanted it to be me in that white dress, married now to a man who danced me around the kitchen while we made dinner and argued only about cute, silly things like what movie to rent that night or whose turn it was for a backrub or what we’d name our children.

We woke up with hangovers on our last morning in Sedona. We had loud, frenetic sex the night before, fueled by too much whiskey and wine and wedding cake. But it was just sex, not making love. There was no pretend wedding night to the start of any pretend honeymoon; the new black lace teddy stayed tucked away in my suitcase, another failure.

“We could take a pink jeep tour of the vortices?” I suggested to Brad as we checked out at the hotel front desk.

“It’s *vortexes*,” the orange-haired attendant said, correcting me. She had lipstick on her teeth. “They’re hot spots of spiraling spiritual energy. Sedona is just famous for them! The tours run every hour!” She handed us a pamphlet with the schedule circled in yellow highlighter.

Maybe the vortexes could prolong our redeye flight back to New York, our painful return to our regular lives. Brad would go back to his sports reporting, I’d go back to my job, but maybe we had one last chance for Sedona to work its vacation magic on us, to convince Brad that he loved me, too.

“Let’s just hit the road,” he said. “It’s a long drive to the airport.”

I wanted to run out of there, to climb to the top of Sedona’s Red Rocks and maybe never come back down, but I followed him to the car and let him heave my suitcase into the trunk.

We drove along the main street, past the cafés and shops again, and when we were just about to pass the New Age Center realized what I wanted.

“Wait, stop the car,” I said, and threw open my door. “I forgot to get something.”

I ran into the purple building, the wind chimes crashing harshly against the door this time. Tinsel Hair looked up from her desk with raised eyebrows, but she didn't say anything as I darted down the hallway to Madison Morgan's office. *Please be here*, I thought over my pounding heart, and I rapped on the door with my knuckles.

"Yes?" she answered, opening the door just enough to show a sliver of her face. Her sharp eyes softened when she saw me. "He's still not the one for you, but you know that," she said, amusement in her voice. She left the door open for me and returned to her desk chair. The room seemed different today: lighter, happier maybe, like she had opened the window to let in a cool breeze that had accidentally wandered into Sedona in July.

"Why do some saguaros have more arms than others?" I asked. As my cheeks flushed, I wished that she had been expecting the question, but she looked surprised. Then I saw a slight smile slide across her lips.

"More arms mean more flowers. More flowers mean more seeds to pollinate, more chances for the future."

She flicked her wrist and shooed me from the room.

I walked outside into the dry heat where Brad was waiting in the Chevy with the air conditioning at full blast.

"What was that all about?" he said. He looked at me strangely.

"Postcards," I said. "I wanted to get postcards." I patted my purse, but I knew he wouldn't ask to see them. As we settled onto the highway, lurching one last time through Sedona's mystical red landscape together, I felt relieved. We passed a one-armed

saguaro on the side of the road, and I held my hand up in farewell, my palm facing out the window.

Fridays with Frank

Mornings in the summer at the shop, the radio was always turned to AM, Sinatra's voice mixing with my father's and the whirr of power tools. My dad was a mechanic and his shop was called Bob's Auto Body Repair, even though his name was Frank. He used to listen to this radio show called *Fridays with Frank* that played all Sinatra songs. When I was a kid, maybe six or seven, I thought the show was named for my dad. After all, he was my father, the only Frank in my life, so the show had to be about him. Maybe their shared first name was one of the reasons he liked Sinatra so much. He loved the classics, "Come Fly With Me" and "My Way," but he'd shake his head when the host would play the show tune stuff like "Luck be a Lady." He'd wrap his arms around Mom's waist in the kitchen and sing "Stranger in the Night" in a deep baritone and my brother Sam and I would join in with our *dooby-dooby-doos* even though we didn't understand the lyrics. Sometimes it feels like those memories of Mom and Dad belong to someone else, like I borrowed them from a book or movie. But then I hear them in my head singing the same songs and the memories are mine all over again, except now they're both dead.

The sun is streaming through my windows, warming squares on the bed. Lucy, my nine-year-old golden retriever, is sprawled out on her side in one of the sunny spots and the light catches her fuzzy body so she looks like she's glowing. She has her legs fully extended and her paws press against the side of my leg, claiming the bed as her territory even in sleep.

“Bed hog,” I say, and try to push her over with my knee, but she’s too fat. She stands up, turns a circle, then flops down again, this time directly on my leg. Her face is propped up on my knee and she yawns and looks at me before closing her eyes again, contented.

Normally I’d get annoyed with her and take her outside, but this morning I pat her head and tell her, “Good dog.” The arthritis in her hips makes it tough for her to jump up on the bed anymore, but every morning around six she migrates from her own bed on the floor to mine. When Kelly sleeps over, Lucy will wedge herself between our bodies, wiggling and grunting until her nose is between our shoulders. I don’t really mind it, but I know it pisses Kelly off. “We could have morning sex if it weren’t for the dog,” she’ll say when she wants to pick a fight, which lately feels like all the time, but we both know the reason we don’t have morning sex has nothing to do with Lucy.

Six years we’ve been together now, and we used to shove Lucy off the bed when we wanted to make love in the morning, but all that feels like a long time ago. I don’t know how we could even start to untangle our lives from each other after so much time together, every birthday and graduation and holiday, the milestones filling up our photo albums like alibis, proof of a shared past and future. Now with my dad gone I’m too tired to start that conversation, too tired for anything really. I know she’s waiting for me to catch up with her, to get down on one knee and *commit already* but she won’t say anything, not while I’m going through this *rough patch* as she calls it, as if sadness is a tunnel or a path with a beginning and an end. I don’t know how to tell her that there is no end.

Lucy yawns again, letting out a squeaky roar, and nuzzles her face deeper into the blankets. I pull a pillow over my head and hold it to my ears. The pillow is cool and if I could just fall back asleep maybe everything would return to normal.

Down the hall, I hear the toilet flush and then Sam's heavy footsteps walking back to the living room sofa. He's home from Thailand where he lives now, here for a few days to help me clean out our childhood bedroom. Annette, my father's lover, lives in the house now and thinks we should sell it. She doesn't want to live there anymore, not since she found Dad dead in the backyard from a heart attack, and I don't know what else we'd do with it.

I toss the pillow aside and Lucy looks up at me with her sad, hopeful eyes. "Outside time," I say as I reach my arms under her heavy body and lift her from the bed. She grunts and shakes off, casting blond hairs all over the room.

Sam is lying on the living room sofa in front of the muted television tuned to some news station. Paper plates are scattered on the coffee table, remnants from whatever leftovers he found in the fridge. He eats while I sleep. I stand in the doorway for a few moments before saying anything and he doesn't look up. His face is puffy with dark circles under his eyes, and he's put on weight since he was home last for Dad's funeral. We're still the same height, but he looks shorter now, rounder. We started out as one egg, one zygote, two brothers with the same DNA, but I barely recognize him. I don't know when I ate last, or when Sam slept.

"The shower's all yours if you want to get in there first," I say to him. "I'm going to take Luce out. Annette said to be there at ten."

Sam glances at the clock on the cable box. “God forbid we keep Annette waiting. She’s not even part of the family.” His voice has an edge to it and I think about how long this day is going to be.

“Look, this isn’t going to be easy for me either. Would you rather she just threw all your stuff away? Gave it all to charity?”

“Maybe!” he yells.

“Fine,” I say. “Fine. We’ll throw it all away.”

Sam shuts the bathroom door too loudly, and I wait until I hear the water running to go outside.

Lucy tugs on her leash when we reach the sidewalk. It’s a gorgeous spring day, sunny and warm and completely wrong. I feel like the world should be cold and gray for days or months after someone dies. When Mom died it rained for six days straight, and we nearly couldn’t have the burial because they were afraid of mudslides and erosion. Sam and I were thirteen, and back then I thought that cancer was the only reason anyone died. Mom was sick for a long time, and just when it seemed like she might get better, she went in for an operation and never woke up. My uncles pulled my father aside and spoke in low whispers of a malpractice suit, but he just shook his head as if to say, what good would it do?

Lucy is moving slowly, trotting heavily along the sidewalk toward the baseball fields on the west end of the neighborhood, but that’s fine with me because my legs feel heavy like someone unhinged me at my hips and filled them with sand. She squats on Mr. Torino’s lawn, two houses down. I expect him to rush out the door like usual and yell at me about the cost of lawn care and how the nitrogen in her piss burns the grass,

but today he just gives me a little wave from behind his screen door and I nod back. I don't really want the sympathy, but it's a relief not to have to deal with him today. If I could get her to do her business in the backyard I would.

"That's a good girl," I say and think about how Dad always liked Lucy. Now I feel him in my head, settling into my brain like he's moving in and redecorating the space. He rearranges my thoughts and memories the way he spent his Sundays organizing the garage, replacing all of the tools he'd used that week to their proper hooks and drawers.

Back inside the house, Sam is showered and dressed and back on the sofa. I scoop a few cups of food into Lucy's bowl and nudge her toward it with my foot. "Breakfast time," I say, tapping my nails on the side of the dish like I'm preparing to give a toast. She just looks at me, then trots down the hall and I hear her jump into the bed with a heavy thump.

In the shower I stand very still and let the water run over my head so the noise fills up my ears. I wish Sam and I could talk about things the way we used to when we were kids, but even as I think that I'm not sure if we ever really talked about things, and maybe this is another memory I've made up or borrowed from somewhere else. I read about twins with special powers, how sharing a womb made them understand each other better than regular siblings. Twins separated at birth could sense that they were incomplete, that they had another half out there in the world. This one set of twin sisters would wake up and remember each other's dreams. I used to wish for that kind of twin magic with Sam, but it all seemed to pass us by. We couldn't read each other's mind or

remember each other's dreams; we never even made up our own language together. We're just brothers who are the same age, and as we get older we just grow father apart.

Every few months he calls me up with a new life plan and they always start out the same way. "Well you know, it's always been a dream of mine to be an organic beet farmer in southern California" or "It's always been a dream of mine to study meditation in Tibet or build houses in Panama," and I don't remember ever hearing him talk about these dreams. As I stammer my congratulations over the line my mind flips back through time, scanning for any shared memory of his dreams. No, Sam, I want to say, I didn't know that was your dream. I thought your dream was to be a police officer or maybe a firefighter, someone who rides around town in a sired vehicle rescuing the world from harm. Sam was supposed to stay home, like I did, and become a local superhero. I wanted to be a history teacher, but then I got promoted to manager at the Rusty Nail and even though it's a dive we've got a steady base of regulars so the pay is enough to get by.

Where did Sam's wanderlust come from, when did it start? As he moves from one country to the next, I wish for those twin powers so we'd know what the other is thinking even when we're miles apart. Then I wish we were kids again, holding tin cans to our ears instead of phones and relaying our hopes and dreams over the vibrations of a string. But Thailand is an ocean away and I'm not sure we'd understand each other anymore anyway.

Kelly lets herself into my apartment while I'm fumbling into my jeans.

"I'm in here," I call out to her, and I hear the sofa springs whine as Sam stands up to give her a hug. She peeks her head into my bedroom.

“Almost ready to go? It’s nearly ten.” She looks pretty and serious in a black t-shirt and jeans. Even from across the room I can smell her shampoo, something fruity and sweet. I want to hold her and bury my face in her hair, I want to tell her that I’ll be happy again some day and see if that’s enough for her to still love me.

“How was your flight?” she asks Sam, always the peacemaker.

“Oh, peachy,” Sam replies. Kelly turns from him to me, as if sizing up our differences or maybe our similarities.

“The pair of you,” she says, and opens the front door. “You two look like hell.”

Sam looks at me strangely, but I just shrug and we follow her to the car. I hadn’t told him Kelly was coming with us. She offered to keep Annette distracted while we worked and I didn’t know how to tell her that we don’t need her help without hurting her feelings. And of course she’s right, she’s always right, I do need her help. But Sam’s look makes me feel guilty for not mentioning it, and for having her there at all.

We drive over to Dad’s house in silence, and that’s okay with me. Kelly sits in the back and Sam steers his rented Pontiac with his knees as he lights a cigarette. His hand shakes a little as he holds it to his lips then pulls it away, exhaling. Smoking is another thing he’s picked up living in Southeast Asia for these past few years. I press the button to lower the window and let the cool air hit my face until my eyes water.

Annette greets us at the door and wraps her arms around Sam and me, wedging her small frame between us. Kelly stands to the side, waiting for her turn.

“Oh kids,” she says, and pulls away to look up at us. I can see her eyes start to well up, and she quickly turns away and heads into the house. Please let her keep it

together, I think. We follow her inside and into the kitchen. Annette is a few years younger than Dad, somewhere in her early forties, but she's toned and healthy, one of those women who does Pilates with her trainer and looks like she might live forever. She's an easy target, and I don't know what Dad saw in her; her hair is her only redeeming feature that I can think of. It's completely gray and falls straight to her shoulders, and something about the boldness of the gray with her young face makes me like her just a little. She makes wreaths out of dried flowers and sells them at local craft shows all over the state; the kitchen is lined with wrinkled bouquets hanging upside down from small hooks.

"Coffee's hot if you want some," she offers. I open the cabinet to the right of the stove to pull out a mug, but find spices and mixing bowls instead. I try the next cabinet over where the plates should be and find stacks of clear blue drinking glasses.

"Who moved everything around?" I say and slam the cabinet door harder than I mean to.

"Here," Annette says sharply and pulls out some mugs from the cabinet that used to hold baking dishes.

"Thanks," I mumble. Kelly shoots me an angry look.

"I put some empty boxes and garbage bags upstairs for you. Just yell if you need anything," Annette says.

"How about I stay down here with you while these two get started?" Kelly pulls a chair from the kitchen table and sits down with her coffee, motioning with her hand for Annette to join her.

Sam looks a little frightened as he follows me upstairs to our old bedroom. “It’s weird being here without Dad,” he says.

“It’s weird being here with her,” I say. I know Sam’s right, and she isn’t really part of our family, but the good part of me inside knows we should be nicer to her.

The door to our bedroom is closed, but inside the room smells fresh and there are vacuum marks on the carpet. Annette had set out a roll of packing tape, some tissue paper, and permanent markers on one of the beds along with the stack of cardboard boxes.

Sam looks around the room. “What are we supposed to do with all this stuff?” he asks. I don’t know either. The furniture is arranged exactly as I remembered it: two beds, two desks, two bureaus, two bookshelves, everything in pairs like Noah’s ark.

“Maybe we’ll find some old treasures in here,” I say. I’m trying to stay positive, but the thought of packing up my childhood bedroom makes me want to curl up in my old twin bed and sleep for a year.

Sam hands me a cardboard box and gestures toward the bookshelves as a place for us to start.

“We’d be better off with the garbage bags,” he says, but I know neither of us can think about throwing anything away right now. I pull a stack of books off the shelves, a few *Hardy Boys* and Matt Christopher sports books. I hold up a worn copy of *The Kid Who Only Hit Homers* and Sam smiles. The pages are soft and on the inside cover I had written in pencil, “Property of Jake and Sam Morris.”

Sam holds up a picture frame of us in our graduation caps and gowns.

“Remember how much we hated coming home in college?” he says. “I still can’t hear a

Patsy Cline song without thinking about trying to fall asleep while Dad and his friends partied downstairs.”

“It’s not a party if it happens every night,” I say.

I was sad when Mom died, but thinking about Dad and packing up the room makes me feel angry now. I should have done more for Dad, should have gotten him to quit drinking and smoking so much, and maybe start exercising more, little things like walking to work and cutting out the booze. But I thought he had plenty of time left to quit his bad habits and live until he was eighty. His heart just fucking stopped working and now he’s gone and Sam and I are orphans at twenty-five and the sun is shining brightly outside.

“It’s not fucking fair,” Sam says. I just nod and nod and keep packing.

I stack books into the box while Sam wraps sports trophies and toy trucks in tissue paper. We work like that for a while, filling garbage bags and boxes with all the stuff of our childhood, each object a choice between keep or lose, remember or forget.

I wish Dad would come back and tell me what I should do. Instead I just feel this nagging pressure, like my parents are inside me and disappointed that I’m not doing better things with my life. If they were alive, we could talk things over, and I could explain how I ended up as a bar manager instead of a history teacher, and why I’m not married to Kelly yet and maybe they’d understand. Maybe just by trying to explain it to them, I could even understand myself. And now I’ve missed the chance to talk to them about anything important and all I hear are those same Sinatra songs over and over in my head.

“I just thought we all had more time together,” I say. “Now what?”

Sam has his baseball glove on his hand and he's pounding his fist in to the webbing. "Let's take a break. I want to go by the cemetery before I leave." It wasn't the answer I was looking for, and I don't really want to go back to the cemetery, but Sam is already calling out to Annette and Kelly that we'll be back in a little bit and if they need anything while we're out.

The cemetery is just a few minutes away, but Sam smokes two cigarettes in a row as he drives. I stare out the window as we drive past our old high school and the new football stadium they built a few years after we graduated. I think about pointing out the pizza shop on the corner that we'd stop at on our way home from school to buy a walking slice, but Sam doesn't seem to notice any of it. With him here, this town feels smaller and more disappointing.

We pull into the cemetery and Sam navigates the winding narrow roads to our parents' plot. It always seems so strange to me that you can drive in a cemetery, disrespectful almost how you can pull the car up close and barely have to walk at all to get where you're going. We should have buried Dad at the top of a mountain so we'd have to climb up to see him and maybe that effort would remind us that we're still here, still alive. I hate being here at the cemetery, and if I thought about it a little more, I might have pushed to have Dad cremated. Sam and I could have traveled somewhere together, and it could have always been a dream of ours to scatter our father's ashes across some vast countryside. But Dad bought the plot and headstone years ago for Mom, and when it came to making decisions for his funeral, I ended up just nodding and agreeing and signing my name. "Together in God's Love" was the epitaph Dad chose, and on the top

edge of the stone were Sam and my handprints, our fingers starfished and facing each other. I place my hand in the grooves, too small now, and Sam does the same on his side. His hand completely covers his childhood imprint.

I read an article in the paper a few months ago about a woman whose husband was a film buff. His favorite movie, same as me, was *The Wizard of Oz* and when he passed away she wanted his epitaph to read, "Somewhere over the rainbow." Only the church at the cemetery wouldn't allow it because that wasn't a line from the Bible. I don't know what makes me think of that now. A lump rises in my throat when I think about all the *Wizard of Oz* posters and trivia games stacked high in the closet, collectibles Dad gave me every year for Christmas waiting to be packed away into boxes when we return. I wonder what other family traditions I have forgotten about and I feel heavy all over again when I think about this sadness lingering around every holiday.

Sam shuffles his feet around the headstone. Next to a bundle of dried roses there's an empty can of Budweiser pressed into the ground, an offering I guess from one of Dad's buddies at the Legion. He nudges the can with his toe.

"Buddhists believe in rebirth," he says quietly. He's not starting an argument, not exactly, but I can feel the anger swell inside of me. He's been away for so long, and now he's talking about Buddhism, as if that's going to bring Dad back.

"I don't know," I say, the lump in my throat growing hot. "Remember how he used to tell us that Mom was watching us from Heaven and how proud she'd be? Maybe they're up there together now."

"Mom's probably giving him an earful about Annette," Sam says and I let out the breath I was holding with a laugh.

“Now what?” I ask. “You’re going back to Thailand to your dream jobs and leaving me here with what, all those boxes of our stuff to deal with.”

Sam shoves his hands into his pocket and crouches low to the ground. “So?” he says. “What’s keeping you here? Come to Thailand if that’s what you want.”

“But Kelly’s here, and what would I do with Lucy?”

“Lucy won’t be around forever,” he says. He picks up the beer can and pinches in between his fingers. “And Kelly, well Kelly probably would be around forever if you asked her. What’s keeping you from doing what you want? Hell, what do you want?”

But I don’t have a good answer for him.

When I wake up in the morning, Lucy is curled up in between my legs as usual. “Good girl,” I say to her, reaching to pat her head and just barely swiping an ear. She lifts her eyes toward me, then closes them again and stretches out her legs even more. Lucy’s body is like a furnace and I’m getting hot as hell, but I try to keep my eyes closed against the panels of white sunlight streaming through the venetian blinds. If I can just drift back to sleep without checking the clock or my cell phone to confirm the date, maybe I can hold onto this wish that I traveled back in time and any moment now I’ll hear Dad and Sam pouring cereal into a bowl and clinking their spoons against their dishes. But my cell phone is blinking at me green green green with new messages, and I know there’s no milk in the refrigerator, just a few leftovers that Sam didn’t finish and I’ll never eat.

I listen to the messages and the first one is Sam saying his flight landed safely. Then Kelly says good morning and tells me to call her back if I need her. I should call

her right now, ask her to come over, to move in, to stay with me forever. I turn my phone facedown on the nightstand. It's nearly nine and Lucy's bladder isn't so reliable these days.

"Come on Luce, let's take you outside." She opens one eye to look at me but doesn't budge. Now I'm up, pulling on some sweats over my boxer shorts and covering my matted hair with an old baseball cap. Lucy stretches again but doesn't get up until I reach for my sneakers, which is how she knows I mean business. She limps off the bed, front paws first and starts whining at me like now she's the impatient one. "Go get your leash," I say to her in my dog command voice, but she just whines more at me and lays down by my bedroom door. She's a smart dog when she wants to be, but I never was too successful with teaching her tricks like fetching her own leash or the newspaper or a beer from the fridge. She can sit, stay, shake, and jump pretty high if you hold a Milkbone in your hand, but that's about it.

Outside it's hot, way too hot for the beginning of April, and I'm wishing I wore shorts instead. I know as soon as I get back inside I'm going to lie down in bed again.

We walk to the end of the block and Lucy's pace starts to slow down. I try making a deal with myself and with Lucy, that if we can just make it around the whole block this morning then we can both sleep the rest of the day. We walk about six more feet until Lucy does her crouch-walk trick where she stoops low to the ground so you don't notice that she's about to lay down and just give up. I try pulling on the leash a bit to get her up but she just rolls onto her side. I could drag her like a sled until she gives in and starts walking again, but we're on the sidewalk and I don't want to scratch her belly all up.

I crouch down and try to wrap my arms under her body to scoop her up, but she's too heavy. It would be so easy just sleep here for the rest of my life, to give up entirely like Lucy. The pavement is hard against my shoulder as I curl my torso around her and nuzzle my face into her warm back. She gives a few guttural grunts the way she does when she's cuddled against her will, and we lay like that a long time.

Flight Risk

Jeannie Gallagher didn't have to open her eyes to remember where she was. She recognized the scent of Rudy's truck immediately: sawdust mixed with Old Spice and worn-in leather. She had lost her virginity in this truck. But that was a long time ago, before she married his brother. She sat up and stretched out her bare legs against the floor, suddenly aware of her nakedness. Guilt filled her mouth with a metallic taste, like sucking on a copper penny. Her head spun for a moment and she closed her eyes, letting her memory linger on the feeling of Rudy's hands on her body. Rudy was gone. He couldn't have really left, she thought. Not now, not without this old rusting green Ford pick-up, his beloved Bessie, the only girl he'd never leave behind.

Jeannie lifted her hips off the seat and pulled her jeans up around her waist.

Where the hell was Rudy?

Bessie was parked in a dark corner of the hospital visitor's lot. The fire chief had gotten Jeannie a special permit. "Just in case," he had said. In case of fire, break glass. Jeannie looked at her watch. It was just after five, and the first hints of sunrise were casting glances off the mountain snow in the distance. She watched as her breath fogged the passenger window; February in Denver meant freezing mornings giving way to mild afternoons, but Jeannie knew this was the last of the sunshine she'd see today. She'd slip back inside the hospital, past her parents who would be sleeping in the waiting area, past the nurses who would think she had been at the cafeteria, and back into the chair by her husband Mitch's bedside. No one had noticed she and Rudy leave the hospital last night, and even if they had, what would they see? The firefighter's wife and brother,

comforting each other during a tragedy. They had driven calmly to the liquor store, and sipped their beers in the truck bed as if trying to wait out a storm. Now there were six empty beer cans lined up on the dash, each one squeezed at their center into a sharp, upturned bowtie.

Jeannie tugged the rearview mirror toward her and ran her hands through her shoulder-length hair. She looked terrible; at least that was one thing she was doing right. Her husband was in a coma, tubes and cords snaking out from beneath his pale blue hospital gown, tethering him to life. Now Rudy was back, and Jeannie was the one feeling untethered.

A tap on her fogged window made Jeannie jump.

“I thought you might want some breakfast,” Rudy said through the glass. He had four cups of steaming coffee balanced on a cardboard tray like a peace offering to draw her out of the truck.

“I was afraid you left,” she said. She pulled on her parka and opened the door toward him.

Rudy and Jeannie had been childhood best friends, high school sweethearts. They grew up on the same street, in identical brick Colonials with dormer windows and a postage stamp of aluminum siding on the second floor. Jeannie thought about the summers they spent together at the Gallagher’s lake house, those long days of swimming, fishing, and skipping stones. When they were ten, her first summer there, Rudy taught her how skip stones. He was patient with her, positioning each smooth, oblong stone between her thumb and forefinger and letting her flick her wrist to send it bouncing across the lake. When they were teenagers, they spent the star-streaked nights lying

together on the dock, skipping bottle caps instead of stones. The heat between their bodies was new and exciting; Jeannie thought about that first time Rudy rolled toward her on the dock and kissed her, how silly she felt when their tongues touched and then how normal it all became. She had laughed and shucked off her clothes before diving into the lake with Rudy on her heels. On the night before their high school graduation, Rudy laid a warm blanket down in the back of the truck and they made love for the first time. Rudy was hers, and she had her entire life ahead of her to love him.

But then his parents passed away in a car accident and Rudy left her. For a week, while Jeannie helped Mitch make the funeral arrangements, Rudy locked himself in his room and refused to eat, refused to listen to their promises that everything might be okay again, someday. Even as Jeannie said it, she wasn't so sure herself. She watched him, load up Bessie with duffel bags of clothing and gear. He hadn't even changed out of his suit from the funeral. Her throat was raw from crying all week as she asked him where he was going. Staying with some cousins near Grand Junction for a few weeks, he said, while he figured out some things. Jeannie didn't understand. They still had each other, so what was there to figure out? She wanted to shake Rudy by the shoulders, laugh at his impulse to jump in his truck and head west like a prospector in search of gold. Instead she threw her arms around his neck and hoped that would convince him to stay, but after a minute or two he slid out of her embrace and started the truck.

Rudy would call her a few times a year to check in: winter months in the mountains, bouncing between resort towns teaching ski lessons to wealthy mostly-female clientele, and roofing in the off-season. He never mentioned where he slept. Jeannie would tell him about teaching biology at the high school they attended, or whatever

movie she and Mitch had seen that week, but she couldn't find the words to tell Rudy that she was falling in love with his brother. At first, she and Mitch were bound simply because they both missed Rudy. Slowly, the dinners and late nights together turned into romance. Mitch was a firefighter like his father, a shoe-in for captain someday, and unlike Rudy, he wasn't going to leave her.

Jeannie led Rudy through the maze of identical hallways to the trauma unit on the third floor. In the waiting room at the end of the hallway, Frank and Sue Ellen Robertson slept in adjacent leather chairs. Jeannie felt Rudy give her shoulder a quick squeeze at the sight of her parents. Jeannie knew that she should feel happy to have them there, but instead she felt angry. Even asleep they looked tan and absurd in the dim waiting room; retirement in Florida had been good to them. It was twenty degrees outside, but there was her father in a bamboo printed short-sleeved shirt and her mother wearing a low-cut blouse in a bright melon color that matched her lipstick and manicure perfectly. Where were their cardigans, their chilly hospital clothes? Just being in the hospital made Jeannie feel like she might never be warm again.

"Mom," Jeannie said, touching Sue Ellen's shoulder lightly. Her mother jolted awake, startled.

"Where have you been? Any news? Where's the doctor?" Sue Ellen gave Frank a poke in his arm. "Wake up, Frank," she said loudly. Frank blinked a few times behind his glasses.

“No news, Mrs. Robertson,” Rudy said. “We just took a walk to get some coffee.” He handed her a cup. It sounded so rehearsed, complete with props. Her mother would take one look at her and know something had happened.

“You two, peas in a pod back together again,” Sue Ellen said, sipping her coffee. Jeannie kept her eyes on the floor. She drank her coffee quickly and tried to wash the metallic taste out of her mouth, but it lingered on her tongue.

“Mom,” Jeannie said again. She pulled out her small spiral notebook where she’d been writing down everything the doctors told her.

A routine rescue gone wrong. That’s what Captain Bill had called it, when his phone call startled her from sleep at two o’clock on Tuesday morning. It was the phone call the other firefighter wives had warned her about at summer cookouts, dropping their voices low and hiding their mouths behind plastic drinking cups. Jeannie wished she had somehow recorded that phone call so she could just press ‘play’ instead of repeating, over and over, what happened to Mitch. The fire started in the kitchen of an old house on the other side of Ridgewood Park, and spread more quickly than any of them expected. In the confusion no one had seen Mitch take that misstep and fall through the splintering floor into the cellar. It was Bill who noticed him missing, who jumped through the flaming floor planks, but it took two more firefighters to lift the heavy joist off Mitch’s legs.

“Will he ever walk again?” she had feebly asked one of the doctors, and the pitiful look he gave her made Jeannie realize she had asked the wrong question. They had induced a coma to closely monitor his brain activity. His broken bones and burns would heal, but none of the other firefighters knew how long he was trapped down there without

oxygen. She wrote it all down in scattered medical lingo she processed without understanding. She had nodded as each different doctor rattled off the diagnoses, but none of them said what she wanted to hear: that Mitch was going to live. They gave her percentages, and meager ones at that, and promised that they were doing everything they could for her husband.

“Here.” Jeannie handed the notebook over to her mother. Sue Ellen excelled in tough situations like these – she knew the right questions to ask, and she didn’t know how to stop until she got the answers she wanted. “Maybe you can make sense of all this. We’re going back inside with him now,” she said.

Sue Ellen brandished the notebook like it contained a secret message that needed to be decoded. “I want to track down his doctor and see if I can get some answers.”

“You kids go ahead. I’ll just wait for your mother to get back and then we’ll go in and say good morning to him together,” Frank said, returning to his seat without waiting for anyone’s approval. He seemed relieved at the idea of a few minutes alone in the waiting room, and Jeannie marveled at how patient he seemed with her mother.

In the vestibule outside of Mitch’s room, Jeannie and Rudy washed their hands and arms like the nurse had shown them and pulled on sterile gowns over their clothes. It seemed amazing to Jeannie how quickly they adapted to these new procedures and rules.

“Hi Mitch, it’s me. Rudy’s here, too, Mitch.” She spoke loudly and clearly, addressing her husband like he was a young child. The neurologist had told her to use his name frequently to stimulate his brain. Why couldn’t it have been anyone else in that fire instead of Mitch? Rudy broke her heart when he left years ago, but even then Jeannie wasn’t surprised, only hurt. He was always looking for the next adventure, the next

mountain to climb up or leap off. It was bravery mixed with stupidity, while Mitch was a different kind of brave. At least he wore a helmet when he ran into a burning building. She counted on Mitch to always be there with her even when everyone else seemed to leave her, and she didn't know what would happen if he were gone, too.

Mitch's hands were resting at his sides against the mattress. Jeannie laid her hand down and carefully laced her fingers around his.

"Do you think people dream in comas?" she asked. Rudy just shook his head, unsure. Mitch looked like he was asleep, the hard angles of his face softened and pale. She looked across the bed to where Rudy sat wearing Mitch's sweatshirt with the firehouse emblem on the chest. He was wearing Mitch's jeans too, a fact she ignored when she was unbuttoning them in the back of his truck last night. Some betrayals were more visible than others. He had arrived the day before empty-handed, no toiletries, no change of clothes.

"Where's your stuff?" she had asked. He grunted and shrugged his shoulders.

"Didn't bring anything. I just pointed old Bess east and drove through the night."

It had taken Jeannie hours and several disconnected numbers to reach Rudy because he didn't own a cell phone and the house number she had written down in her organizer was from three girlfriends ago. Finally, tracing his trail through every ski town between Boulder and Breckenridge, Jeannie reached a woman who didn't immediately hang up at the mention of Rudy's name. "Come home," she had said on Rudy's answering machine. It was the one thing she had never said to him in all the years he had been gone. She didn't have to say anything more.

Rudy had white-blond whiskers on his face, his cheeks pink from sun and windburn on the mountain. His hair was light brown while Mitch's was dark, but in that moment they looked so much alike that Jeannie felt dizzy, as if the room had tilted and spun like a carnival ride. It felt like being swindled, tricked into an unfair trade. Rudy was a few inches shorter and leaner than Mitch, with narrow shoulders and muscular legs. In high school he had been a distance runner, while Mitch's broad back and chest better suited him to play shortstop on the baseball team. Rudy looked the way he appeared in Jeannie's memory, that still-frame image of him in his only suit after his parents' funeral when he packed up Bessie and ran away from her.

How many times had she imagined telling him how much she hated him for leaving? Part of her wanted to pummel his chest with her fists until she couldn't stop sobbing and he'd have to scoop her off the ground and hold her tightly and promise never to leave. Now that anger felt thin and distant, as if it didn't belong to her, like a story she had heard from someone else.

"We had a good life together," Jeannie said. She felt her voice crack and rise, that anger bubbling to the surface for a brief moment.

"I know we did, Bean," Rudy said, using his old nickname for her. Dizziness swelled in her gut, and she felt like a young girl again, swinging as high as she could on the school playground and then throwing her head back and closing her eyes. She was infuriated at Rudy's ability to topple her equilibrium simply by showing up.

"I meant me and Mitch," she said quietly.

"Oh." Rudy looked at his hands, then pushed his chair back with a screech across the floor and walked to the window.

Jeannie closed her eyes. Her eyeballs burned her lids but she kept them tightly closed. Were they on fire from barely sleeping for the past three days? She wished she could cry, as if her tears might extinguish the flames. She sighed and opened her eyes, studying Mitch's hand. It was stained yellow from the iodine beneath a bandage and the tip of an IV.

Jeannie thought about the way things were with Rudy when they were younger and how she imagined they had so much time together in the future. But it had been the same with Mitch. They had all the time in the world to have kids and fill scrapbooks with pictures and postcards from family trips to the Grand Canyon and Disneyland. It was a future she could picture with Mitch, always Mitch, but never Rudy. For so long, she had wished that Rudy would come back to her, but she didn't consider at what price, and the guilt that had lingered on her tongue all day trickled down to her throat. Jeannie let out a sputtering cough and the tears flowed freely now. She buried her face in her hands and Rudy moved to her side, pulling her tight to him.

Jeannie knew how the rest of the story went. Tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that, Mitch would die. Her parents would stay for the funeral and then return to Florida, back to the safety of their lounge chairs by the club pool and their tropical wardrobes. The firefighters would take turns checking on her or dropping off a casserole in a disposable tray. Contents and reheating instructions would be dented into the silver foil lid with black magic marker: Lasagna, 45 at 350. Shepherd's Pie, 1 hour at 400. Chicken Noodle, 40 at 375. The casseroles would pile up in her freezer, crammed between ice cube trays and forgotten bags of frozen strawberries and she didn't know who was going to eat them all. Jeannie didn't even like most casseroles. In the cabinet,

next to the stack of her mother's white Corelle dishes, were Jeannie's thick cardboard Chinet plates with their three telltale compartments so her foods of different consistencies wouldn't touch or blend on her plate.

She'd offer them coffee, a seat at the kitchen table, but they'd never accept. "No thanks, Jean," they'd say to her, mustering a smile then. "Didn't want to bother you, just thought I'd bring this by and see how you're holding up." Then they'd lean forward on their toes and glance around the living room inspecting it for any sign that she was not, in fact, holding up. Satisfied, they'd nod again and say, "Better be getting along to the station," and she'd follow them out to their trucks while still clumsily holding the warm casserole. "It's a terrible thing," they'd say, their heads bobbing over the cabs, protected from her emotions behind their heavy trucks.

Jeannie understood this unspoken agreement among the firefighters. It was exactly what Mitch would have done if it were any one of them in that hospital room instead of him. As each man backed out of the driveway, his arm slung casually behind the passenger seat headrest, Jeannie would feel the urge to hurl the casserole like a discus at the retreating headlights.

Everything Surprising

“Huge,” Missy said. I’d called my pregnant sister to ask her how she was feeling. In the background I could hear the sizzle of something on the stove. It was nearly eleven at night, but I knew she’d be up. “Everything about me is big. Kyle started calling me Jumbotron.” She and her husband had a house in a suburb of Philadelphia, near our parents. I lived in New York and hadn’t visited her in a few weeks and tried to picture her petite body swollen and round.

“That’s sweet, I guess. A little mean, maybe.”

“He was calling me a blimp, but I made him change it. I’m so uncomfortable. Why did I think it would be a good idea to have a summer baby? She was kicking me right in the bladder this morning.”

“She?”

“Or he. I think it’s a girl, but Kyle thinks it’s a boy.”

“Right.”

“How’s work? How’s Adam?”

I looked at my boyfriend sleeping on the sofa while the news flashed on the television. Stacks of his middle school students’ math papers were scattered on the coffee table next to him. His head was propped up on a stack of cushions and his hands were tucked awkwardly under his chin. Soon he’d be snoring and I’d have to click off the TV, nudge him to wake up and go to bed. I couldn’t remember the last time we made love at night before falling asleep together.

“He’s fine.”

“Are you okay, Sal? Your voice sounds funny.”

“Just tired from work,” I said. I didn’t tell her that I thought I might be I pregnant. She would have been worried, or maybe angry with me for being *irresponsible*. So I kept the idea to myself and tried to hang on to the dizzying feeling of not knowing for a little longer.

“I gave Mom a list of dates for my shower. Don’t tell me when it is. I want to be surprised.”

“Okay.”

I decided to knit a blanket for Missy’s baby shower. I hadn’t knit anything in years, not since my grandmother moved in with us when she was fighting a losing battle with breast cancer. Missy was eight, too young and energetic to sit still for long, but I was thirteen, patient and meticulous. Grammy let me pick out a bright purple skein from her collection and I remember admiring the intricate woven pattern that zigzagged as I unraveled the yarn. She lent me a thick pair of needles with white plastic caps and I copied the movements of her soft, veined hands as she taught me how to knit and purl a simple scarf. How hard could a blanket be? I bought a book and flipped through the pages, running my hands over the glossy pictures of perfect sweaters and hats. On the page for a baby blanket, there was an image of a mother holding her newborn in a rocking chair, the blanket draped gracefully across her chest. Her eyes were closed, a half-smile on her face. It was the look of complete assurance, of perfect motherhood. That’s what it must feel like, I thought: protective and warm with a baby on your chest.

I took the subway downtown after work to a yarn store called The Knitwit. It was a clean, modern shop with bundles of yarns grouped by color and material in square cubbies along the walls and counters, and I felt like I'd stepped into an ice cream parlor in another time. Premade sweaters dangled delicately near the register and two women sat at barstools in a café area near the entrance, oversized strollers by their sides, their white ceramic mugs rimmed with lipstick marks. One woman was using her foot to push the stroller back and forth slowly. The shop smelled of eucalyptus and I watched the woman for a moment, enjoying the lazy movement of her foot against the stroller and the sound of her busy knitting needles.

When Missy and I were young, we loved wandering around craft stores while our mother picked out bolts of fabric for her latest quilting project. Every aisle felt like a new adventure full of interesting hiding places for little girls, and each department had its own distinctive smell. There was the burnt plastic of silk ferns and roses huddled in wire bunches, and the crisp earthy smell of recently-sanded jewelry boxes and step stools. Rubber stamps were my favorite: the smell of erasers and all those wooden blocks neatly arranged in rows, alongside mysterious bottles and vials of embossing powders and inks.

But now I was in unfamiliar string territory. On those shopping trips with Mom, the pristine piles of color-coded yarns had bored me. I couldn't see how the bundles could become anything new, could be twisted and looped to create patterns and shapes. Where was the adventure in cottons and wools?

I made my way over to a counter where the needles were clustered into mason jars like bouquets of wildflowers. The book suggested a fine gauge for a baby blanket, so I chose a pair of gleaming silver size ten needles. They were thin and expensive, even a

little dangerous, like a weapon, I thought for a moment. Then I felt nervous about making the baby blanket. I figured that knitting would be just like riding a bicycle and it would come back to me once I had all the supplies. The shower was a month away, and I hoped that was enough time.

The directions said to start with twelve ounces of light-to-medium acrylic in a soft pastel color. I had expected cotton for a baby blanket, and wondered if acrylic would seem cheap. I ran my hand over the skeins and agreed with the directions. The acrylics felt soft, softer than the cottons, and were much shinier. I decided on yellow, since pink and blue were out of the question. Everything with Missy had to be a surprise. But there were two dozen different shades of yellow to choose from, and they all seemed so feminine. Ambers and apricots mixed with saffron and citrines. I didn't know what to choose. Missy and Kyle had chosen a Noah's Ark theme for the baby's nursery. I pictured stenciled animals: boy and girl tigers with their tails linked together, pairs of penguins marching along the wainscoting. I imagined blue carpeting and wood paneled walls, a dove and olive branch mobile dangling over the crib. When had Missy gotten so biblical? Even the names they had chosen were straight out of Genesis: Jacob for a boy, Ruth for a girl.

We were raised Irish Catholic, indoctrinated with equal parts appreciation for hypocrisy, guilt, and booze, the holy trinity. But sometime in college Missy joined a Presbyterian congregation. Her new religious zeal baffled me. Where had it come from? Certainly not from our parents who sent us to public school and kept their beliefs quiet except to hang a crucifix above each of our closets. We went to church on Christmas and Easter, began Thanksgiving dinner with *Bless us our Lord and these thy gifts*, and drank

too much on other holidays. At times, I felt envious of Missy's convictions, her self-discovery of sorts. It hadn't occurred to me to seek out a new religion.

Every December for the past three years, Missy's holiday newsletter would arrive in the mail bearing photographs of her and Kyle looking into each other's eyes on their wedding day, then standing together in front of their new house the next year, then crouching around their yellow Labrador puppy last year. Missy would write about how God had blessed Kyle with a successful business trip to Tampa and how the new shrubs they planted along the side fence were thriving and she'd always close with a psalm. My first instinct was to mock Missy's suburban life, her faith, and her overuse of exclamation points. But she looked genuinely happy in those pictures. I could imagine how that year's photograph would look: Missy and Kyle holding their new baby next to their dog on the front porch of their nice house, the perfect little family.

When we were kids, all of the stuff in the craft stores held so much potential to become something new and wonderful. Those silk flowers might be trimmed down and stuck with care into a Styrofoam ring to make a holiday wreath. Rubber stamps could be pressed into ink, rolled along heavy card stock and held delicately over the toaster oven until the dusting of embossing powder bubbled and hardened. I didn't realize then that Missy and I would grow up to become something else, too. I thought our lives would continue along parallel paths, the five-year distance between us getting narrower as we aged. But with each passing year, the gap seems to widen and the possibilities shrink. Missy was ticking off these milestones with every Christmas card, but what was I doing?

I peered down the rows of yarn and considered abandoning the entire project, but my finger was still pressed into the spine of my book, that perfect image of motherhood.

I didn't have a good reason to think I was pregnant. I didn't keep track of my menstrual cycle, didn't mark off the dates in my calendar like Missy. But I felt a stirring inside me, a nervous bundle in a place I never considered a womb until right then.

I sighed, pulled two skeins of lemon yellow off the shelf, and headed toward the check out.

"Will that be all?" the cashier asked while shooting the scanner at the bar codes with a series of satisfying beeps. She wore a knit vest in marled blues adorned with dozens of buttons in all shapes and sizes. I thought about exploring those craft stores with Missy and how we'd pick out our favorite buttons from the rotating racks. A pink heart-shaped button with white scalloped edges hovered on the woman's left lapel, and I wondered if that one was her favorite. The vest looked heavy, but I liked the plastic clicking sound the buttons made as she scooped my yarn and needles into a canvas shopping bag. The noise and the vest reminded me of high school proms, of heeled satin sandals on linoleum and pinning on boutonnières.

"I like your vest," I said. I smiled, afraid for a moment she might think I was making fun of her.

"Hot glue," she said. "It's a girl's best friend." The cashier pursed her lips and gave me a knowing nod. I considered buying a hot glue gun. Glue sounded more like my ability level; maybe I could glue together a baby blanket. I wondered how the cashier saw me, standing there in my suit clutching my book, possibly pregnant, but earnest in what I realized at that moment was a ridiculous plan.

“I’m knitting a baby blanket for my new niece or nephew,” I blurted out. It felt good to say it aloud, to create some accountability for myself. I had a plan and the supplies now, and there was no turning back. The cashier’s eyes softened.

“Well, you’ve chosen a lovely color,” she said.

On the platform waiting for the subway home, I peeked into the shopping bag. I pictured myself whipping the yarn into a flawless blanket as if the needles were magic wands and I was a fairy godmother. Missy and I watched Cinderella a hundred times at Grammy’s house, singing “bippity-boppity-boo” and turning sofas into castles with the wave of a spatula. Would Missy ask me to be the baby’s godmother? Or would she choose someone more religious, someone more reliable from her own church? I was surprised to find myself hoping she would choose me. I was even more surprised to find myself hoping that I might be up to the task.

At home I spread out the yarn, needles, and knitting book on my bed, atop the pinwheel quilt my mom made for me, my own baby blanket. Adam was in the kitchen chopping carrots and peppers for a stir-fry.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just buy her something for the shower?” he said over the hiss of simmering vegetables in the wok.

“Of course that would be easier,” I said. “But anyone can just buy her something off her registry. She’s my sister. I have to do something special. Besides, all the good gifts are already taken.” I left the supplies in the bedroom, evidence of my efforts for the day, and joined Adam in the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator and considered a bottle of

white wine resting on its side on the top shelf. I closed the door and sunk down on one of the chairs at the kitchen counter.

“It just seems like it will be a lot of work,” he said, and slid two steaming plates of stir-fry across the counter. He squeezed my shoulders as he moved to sit down in his place next to me.

“Can’t you just be supportive of me?” I said. I felt like pouting, but I couldn’t argue with him. It would be a lot of work, but I pictured Missy’s face when she opened my gift at her shower, how much she’d appreciate my dedication and creativity. I thought about my mom and how happy she’d be to see her daughters sharing a special moment, a moment I had created with this baby blanket. I reconsidered the wine and returned to the fridge. I was about to pry the cork off with my molars when I caught Adam’s disapproving look and handed the bottle over to him to open. Lately I had been buying the big bottles of wine, the double-wides, but they never seemed to last twice as long as the regular ones.

“It’s just that you’re really good at buying things.” Adam grinned and patted my hand. He shoveled a forkful of rice and onions into his mouth.

“I already decided. I’m knitting her a baby blanket. I used to knit all the time as a kid, it’ll be a breeze.” I took a long sip from my glass.

In bed later that night, I studied the knitting book and thought about Missy’s baby. Adam was already asleep, his mouth hanging slightly open and still wearing his glasses. I closed the book and lifted the covers to look at my own stomach. Missy was thin, always thinner than me, and she didn’t show until her second trimester. I wondered what

it felt like to grow and stretch like she had, to experience your body creating something new inside you.

I carefully pulled Adam's glasses off his face and tugged at the chain on my bedside lamp.

"I love you goodnight," he mumbled as he rolled against me. What did Missy and Kyle's nighttime routine look like? I wanted to call her to ask her how she knew he was the person she wanted to marry and have babies with. How did anyone know? Was this what I wanted, this snoring man who cooked me dinner and argued with me about my ridiculous idea to knit a baby blanket? We had a nice life together, a comfortable understanding of each other's routines and quirks. I loved the way he misplace his keys or his glasses or his phone, and how I'd know exactly in what jacket pocket or corner or crevice to find them. I loved the way he curled his body against mine with his arm draped across my ribs when we fell asleep together, and that he turned the kettle on to boil for me when I was running late in the morning. What else was there? Would a marriage and a baby make us a family?

The next night after work, I studied the directions in the book on the loveseat while Adam loaded the dinner dishes into the sink. He refilled my wine glass and placed it next to me, giving me a quick peck on the cheek.

Step one was to determine the size of the blanket. The book suggested thirty-two inches wide by thirty-six inches long for a baby blanket, and though this seemed disappointingly small, I didn't know how to resize the dimensions on my own. I had imagined knitting would be like baking a cake, but I realized I didn't know how to double

the recipe when it came to stitches and inches. I followed the guide for my yarn and cast on one hundred and twenty stitches with my right-handed needle, counting aloud with each overhand. Casting on was harder than I remembered – Grammy had only taught me how to do this once, letting me try before pulling out the stitches and doing it over for me. It hadn't occurred to me to be hurt by this at the time; in fact, I liked the idea of working on something my grandmother had started. But now I wished she had given me more of a chance. I barely got to stitch sixty before I pulled it all apart and started over again, this time pulling the yarn more taut around the needles and spacing each stitch evenly. It took me three times until I felt satisfied with my needles wrapped in orderly lemon yellow loops.

Next, I began alternating between knitting the odd rows and purling the evens according to the directions. The book suggested I use a knitting row counter, but I had missed that step and didn't buy one at the shop, so I had to count the rows to remember what I was on. After seven rows of knitting and purling, my eyes were getting tired and I realized I had been frowning in concentration for over an hour. I could feel the deep checkmark-shaped wrinkle between my eyebrows loosening but lingering. Those seven rows barely materialized into an inch. On the sofa, Adam had fallen asleep with his hands behind his head and his feet propped up on the armrest. I was suddenly angry, the heat building in my chest. I shook his shoulder.

“Wake up. When are you going to make love to me?” I said. Adam opened his eyes and blinked them a few times. He always seemed so surprised to find that he had been sleeping.

“What? I don’t know, tomorrow. Come on, you were busy over there and I’m sleepy.” He yawned and stretched his arms behind his head. Even as I heard my words I knew it was an absurd argument, but I couldn’t stop myself. Somehow in this moment his sleeping seemed like the ultimate selfish act, the ultimate rejection.

“You always fall asleep on the sofa and then you’re too tired to make love. It’s been what, a week? Why don’t you want to stay awake for me?”

He sat up and looked at me through bleary eyes. “Sal, I want to make love to you. This weekend, okay?”

I nodded and wiped my face with my sleeve.

Each night for the next three weeks I knit an inch or two while Adam dozed on the sofa. Sometimes I’d forget to concentrate and would drop a stitch, and then I’d rip out all the rows I had just finished. I’d smooth the blanket out on my lap, uncurl the edges and press down the places that stuck out where the stitches were loose or uneven, while Adam would nod and murmur compliments on my progress before following me into the bedroom to fall back asleep. We made love four times, and I tried not to pick a fight with him about it. Still, I worried over every small pang in my abdomen, hoping it was a cramp, a warning signal, but nothing came.

A week before the shower, I went to the drug store on the corner of our block on my way home from work and paid cash for a three-pack of pregnancy tests. I wrapped the plastic bag around them, stashed the package deep in my purse, and I walked quickly the rest of the way home.

I locked the bathroom door and opened the box. The directions said to test yourself in the morning, when the hormones were the strongest, but I didn't want to wait until then. In the movies, women were always pacing around the bathroom with their best friend and flailing their hands, afraid to look at the results. I held the stick under myself, then just sat there alone on the toilet with my pants around my ankles and waited for the pee to seep into the stick. The first line appeared quickly, but at the end of two minutes, the second panel remained empty. It was negative. I hid the box with the remaining tests deep under the sink and washed my hands.

I tried again the next morning, following the directions exactly in case I missed anything before, but again only one line appeared, negative. I crawled back in bed with Adam and pulled my quilt over my head. I began to cry, quietly at first, and then louder as each sob wracked my chest and shoulders.

“What's wrong?” Adam asked, turning me toward him by my shoulders.

“I took a pregnancy test,” I said.

“And?”

“Negative.” His body relaxed.

“That's a good thing, right? No babies?” he said, his voice gentle. I nodded against his chest.

“So why are you crying? Were you scared?” He held me and planted small kisses on the crown of my head.

I nodded again, tears streaming down my cheeks and dampening his shirt. I couldn't tell him that I wasn't scared of being pregnant. I was scared of not being pregnant, of never being pregnant. I was scared of not being able to have babies, to have

a family. What if those tests would always reveal a single line but never a double? I didn't want kids at that very moment, but I wanted the possibility of them in the future. It was as if pregnancy, like her faith, was another thing Missy could be assured of, could add to her Christmas newsletter, while I was left wondering.

I thought about Christmas Eve, all of us sitting in a circle in the living room exchanging gifts, Kyle and Adam holding up the sweaters Mom had gotten them and Dad snapping pictures. Missy had wrapped up her positive test in a jewelry box and gave it to Mom. "Is this what I think it is?" Mom had shrieked, then burst into tears while Dad looked on bewildered. Gross, I thought, but Missy seemed so excited and proud of herself that I couldn't help but laugh and cry along with them.

On the morning of Missy's shower, I drove south on the turnpike toward our parent's house. The unfinished yellow baby blanket was shoved furtively into a gift bag printed with a pink elephant linking his truck around the long neck of a blue giraffe. What little I had completed was lumpy in the middle and shaped more like a rhombus than a rectangle; worse, it was still attached to those expensive knitting needles. I couldn't cast off. I had failed.

As I drove, I felt like I was fourteen again, sitting with Missy at the funeral home, the bright purple bundle of yarn heaped across my only black skirt. Grammy had passed away before she taught me the finishing stitches, so I just kept knitting row after row until the yarn ran out. Somewhere in my childhood bedroom closet, a violet too-long scarf was still hooked to Grammy's needles. Now I was on my way to Missy's baby shower without the perfect blanket I had imagined, without a gift at all. It was too late to

buy anything or ask my mother for help. I already dreaded the look she would give me at the shower, that mix of frustration and confusion that I could be her daughter. I hadn't mentioned the blanket to her for fear of that look, and because I knew she'd try to talk me out of it. There was no way now to avoid her "I told you so," even if she hadn't actually told me so.

Dad was sitting at the kitchen table with his newspaper and a bowl of Cheerios when I got home, his usual Saturday morning pose. His weekend whiskers made him look older than I expected, and I remembered with a start that he was about to become a grandfather.

"How was the drive, sweetie?" he asked. I kissed him hello on his sandpaper cheek.

"Fine. Traffic around the tolls but I got an early start." I was his spitting image, all dark eyes and fast metabolisms and argumentative personalities. He was a lawyer too, and whenever we got together Mom would throw up her arms in exasperation at the thought of two lawyers in the house, giving our closing arguments about even the smallest decision.

"Where's Mom?"

"Downstairs in the sewing room, working on some project as usual," he said, returning to his cryptogram on the comics page.

I filled my mother's kettle with water and placed it on the stove's glowing burner. The house was spotless, the living room decorated with clusters of pink and blue balloons and the dining room table set with the good china. I left my present on an end table and returned to the kitchen. When the water boiled, the kettle whistle sounded its alarm and

as if on cue, Mom came up the steps from the basement. She gave me a hug before filling a large teapot with the boiling water.

“I was going to do that for you,” I said, but she waved a hand in the air, brushing off the thought.

“How was the drive?” she asked.

“Oh, you know.” I leaned against the kitchen counter biting my cuticles and watching her rearrange dishes in the refrigerator and pull out serving utensils from drawers. She caught sight of me and said, “Sally,” a warning. I dropped my hands from my mouth.

“How are you getting Missy here? She told me she wants to be surprised.”

“I asked her to come over and go through boxes of baby clothes your father pulled down from the attic to see what she wants.”

“What if I wanted some of those baby clothes?” She looked at me strangely.

“When it’s my turn, I mean,” I said.

“I’m sure she’ll save them for you. You know, when your aunt Cherie threw my baby shower when I was pregnant with you, she asked me to come help her wallpaper the bathroom. I was seven months pregnant and I showed up in an old sweatshirt and maternity jeans. I could have killed her.”

I tried to imagine my mother back then, thin and short like Missy. She was still short, but she had grown rounder and softer, her shoulders and arms covered in light freckles just like Grammy.

The guests began to arrive, each bearing large boxes and gift bags in bright pastels. Missy’s mother-in-law Gail arrived with her daughter Denise, who was pushing

a huge stroller topped with a purple bow. I had met Missy's in-laws many times, yet it seemed strange to me that she now had this entire other family besides us. When my mother announced it was time, we huddled behind the doorway and waited. Moments later, Missy walked through the door holding Kyle's arm. "Surprise!" everyone shouted, and Missy seemed elated, truly surprised in a blue sundress stretched to the limit across her vast belly. I couldn't believe how pregnant she looked. It just didn't seem possible for bodies to make such a transformation and ever go back to normal.

Over lunch we played silly shower games like Guess the Baby Food. My mother had peeled the labels off of baby food jars and we passed them around, jotting down our guesses.

"What do babies eat anyway?" I asked and everyone laughed. But I was genuinely unsure. I could think of peas, carrots, and pears, but there were a dozen jars to guess. Squash? Apples? I got most of them wrong. The one I thought was pear was actually chicken with gravy. For some reason, I thought babies were vegetarians.

Next we played Guess the Old Wives Tale. Did craving salty foods mean she was having a boy or a girl? What if she slept on her left side, or looked bigger from the front than the side? I tried to think if I had any cravings lately, but couldn't come up with anything. I filled out my worksheet with random guesses and won a baby bottle full of pastel M&M candies. I shook the bottle like a rattle and wondered if I would ever have a use for it.

We moved into the living room and took our seats in the circle around Missy. I felt a flutter of nervousness in my belly and forgot all about competing at Baby Gift Bingo, neglecting to mark an "X" over the squares for diapers and onesies as she

unwrapped them. My mother handed her packages and wrote down who they were from for the thank you notes, and I cooed along with the other guests as Missy tore open each package to reveal tiny socks, teddy bears, and duckling bath towels. As each package was removed from the table, exposing the elephant and giraffe bag, I felt the growing urge to run from the room. Adam was right; I should have just bought her something and been done with it.

“This is from your sister,” my mom said, handing the bag to Missy. She peeked inside, then carefully lifted out the mess onto her lap.

“It’s a baby blanket. I mean, it will be one, it’s just not quite done yet,” I said. The other guests laughed a little and gave a polite murmur as they had done for the other gifts. I felt my shoulders drop and the smile fall from my face. “I’ll finish it,” I said, my voice small. “Really.”

“I’m sure it’ll be great, Sal,” Missy said, and returned the heap to its bag and added it to the pile of other gifts. I felt deflated, all my failures unwrapped and put on display.

My mother reached behind one of the sofas and pulled out one last gift. It was a large gift bag, nearly waist-height, printed with a whole Ark full of animals. Of course my mother would find such a perfect bag. After tossing the tissue paper aside, Missy unwrapped a large color block quilt adorned with appliquéd animals, pairs of lions and horses and bears. She stood and held it out like a matador, shifting left and right to display the blanket for the crowd. The guests cried out their “Aww” refrain, louder than they had for any of the gifts.

“It’s beautiful,” Missy breathed and she was right. It was perfect, the exact baby blanket that I wished to be able to make, that I could picture in her Noah’s Ark themed nursery and would be passed down from generation to generation in Missy’s family. I should have guessed Mom would make a quilt for her first grandchild, just as she had done for her daughters. My mother patted my arm and said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” but I couldn’t find the words to respond.

All the guests gathered around Missy for a group photograph. My mother held a poster that said “Boy?” and on the other side of the group, Gail held the matching “Girl?” sign. Everyone staked her claim and clustered around the sign that matched her gender prediction. I stood in the middle and faked a smile as one of Missy’s cousins flashed a series of photographs from the half-dozen cameras dangling from her wrist.

The Order of Things

I saw it on the cover of the *Washington Blade*. Friends had told me about it, but I couldn't believe it. Or, I didn't want to believe it. Something caught my eye as I passed a fleet of newspaper stands. A man posed with a drag queen under a bold headline: "Revelers celebrate at a pride event over the weekend." The man's arm was outstretched as if raising a toast to the photographer, and on his inner forearm there was a tattoo, a series of four figures drawn in neat black lines, a paper airplane unfolding into a five-pointed star. I knew that tattoo.

It was a Sunday and instead of church I took a walk to the farmer's market in Dupont Circle. I played this bartering game with God every week, trading church for bike rides or museum trips. Back home my mother prayed double for me, so she said. The rosary beads on her bedpost glowed in the dark so she could trace her fingers along each station before the sun rose. Autumn was showing off her warm colors, the coffee shop on the corner was adding pumpkin spice to everything on their menu, and it all made me ache for the back-to-school butterflies.

I pulled out the paper and held the cover at an angle to get a better look. The man in the picture stared out at me, mischievous eyes, short curly hair, broad shoulders. His face was strong and angular, handsome really. The man was my friend TJ, but it had been nearly five years since we'd talked, when she was still a woman. When *he* was still a woman, I thought, already correcting the pronoun.

I didn't know what to think about it. I didn't want to think about it, and now it was staring me in the face. I couldn't find the right words to describe the peculiar and

prickly anger that ran down my arms. TJ had moved to Florida for rehab and began seeing a therapist, a woman who apparently encouraged her sex change; last I heard she was dating the therapist. It all seemed so wrong, not necessarily the surgery, but also the order of things. She had moved away, had stopped returning my phone calls, and when I heard that she was going to become a man, it became even clearer that TJ was someone I used to know but didn't anymore.

I squinted at the picture again before tucking the paper into my bag and turning back for home. The truth was, I barely recognized this person in the picture, this man with his firm jaw line and cropped hair and grin. Where were TJ's puffy cheeks, her unruly dreadlocks and those safety pins she wore as earrings? What had she done to herself? I imagined pills and injections, surgeries to flatten, stretch and reshape. What did her weekly negotiations with God sound like?

When I first heard about it, when TJ was still a she in my memories, I wondered about her name. What does she call herself now? TJ could go either way, really. It seemed to me that a name change was the final step to her transformation. But "TJ" wasn't so feminine, or so masculine for that matter. Was she still TJ, or something entirely different? I imagined the simple name changes: Christina becoming Christopher, Stephanie to Stephen. Her real name was Tanisha Jade, but not many people knew that about her. She had revealed this secret over one of our many lunches together at Gonzalez y Gonzalez, a shitty Mexican restaurant on the corner of Broadway and Houston that announced its location with a huge neon-lit sombrero over the entrance. We'd meet her friend Maggie there and drink margaritas in the back of the restaurant at our favorite table under a thatched tiki-hut roof. They'd talk about dates with women

who wanted to have sex in bar bathrooms or who introduced them to coworkers as a “friend” because they weren’t out yet. They described the latest reading or lecture or gallery opening they’d attended to keep up with “lesbian banter,” as TJ called it. “You have to go to these stupid events if you want to pick up women in New York,” she said. “That way you have something to talk about while you get drunk.” But she had never mentioned any desire for a sex change, any feeling of being a stranger in her own body. What other secrets had she been hiding?

I fell in love with her that summer, the summer I was surrounded by lesbians. My sophomore year of college was over and I took a job in my college’s athletic offices rather than dutifully return home to my parents in southeastern Pennsylvania. I went to school in New York City, a place that immediately felt like home for me, until it didn’t anymore. I fell in love with New York that same summer, and the feeling of being home in the world, a home shared with eight million other people, became tangled up and knotted with TJ. I hadn’t known anyone like her, and it was the first time I started to understand that you couldn’t help who you love. Maybe that’s what TJ was thinking, too. Did she trade her gender out of love for the therapist? But I had loved her just as she was, and I knew gender didn’t have anything to do with it.

The summer before I had worked the same job I had all through high school, waiting tables at an upscale retirement home. I didn’t have a car, so I’d borrow my younger brother’s Chevy that reeked of hash and floral air freshener and arrive at six for the breakfast shift where I’d slice bananas into corn flakes and poach eggs on a huge industrial burner. The old ladies called me Kathleen, dragging out the “e” with a genteel

lilt, as they demanded more salt on their home fries. It wasn't a hard decision to stay in New York instead. My parents, on the other hand, required a bit more convincing.

"In this family, we do things in order," my mother said on the phone. This was her answer to anything that made her uncomfortable. "Is this about a boy? You *know* how we feel about sex before marriage."

"I'll try not to have any premarital sex at my job at the gym," I said through my teeth. It was after dinner, and the dishwasher door whined as she opened it in the background. I had heard all this from her before. She passed the phone off to my father. This was how most of our phone calls ended, with her angry and sending Dad in as peacekeeper.

"Why did you say that to your mother?" he asked in a tone that wasn't quite scolding, then let out a long sigh. "Be judicious," he said finally, his lawyer's response to everything. I had the sense my dad didn't feel one way or another about sex before marriage, so long as he didn't have to talk about it.

I paid my ex-boyfriend five hundred dollars a month to sublet his studio apartment on Greenwich Street in Battery Park, told my parents I was living with a girl friend from my dorm, then wheeled my oversized suitcase downtown. My ex was a film student, interning at some production studio in Los Angeles, and he didn't need the place until August. All he asked was that I didn't share his bed with anyone else, and that seemed like a fair request. I guess it was a strange thing to be living in his apartment without him, only it didn't feel all that strange. I felt comfortable there in his high rise surrounded by his movie collection and vintage liquor posters and yellow leather couch, and in the mornings I would look out the windows and watch the parking garage men

below maneuvering expensive cars onto rusted lifts, loading them on top of each other like groceries in an overcrowded pantry. I was always amazed at the ways New York handled its limited space by building up, stacking up, upwards to the sky without regard to gravity. It was 2003, and a few blocks north construction crews were driving bulldozers and excavators in the hole in the ground where the World Trade Center had been. The sound of rebuilding reassured me, as it must have done for so many New Yorkers at the time, and already I thought of myself as a New Yorker even though I didn't come to the city until 2002. At night though, when the crews were gone and the Caterpillars stopped frozen in their tracks at awkward angles, the lower part of Manhattan felt very lonely.

I had a new boyfriend by then, David Woodglen, though he insisted that everyone call him Woody. He was a nice Catholic boy from a good family in Rhode Island, exactly the kind of guy my parents would want me to date. He was funny and smart, tall and lean, opinionated and argumentative: all the qualities I valued in myself and thought I required in a partner. Like New York City itself, Woody was great until he wasn't so great anymore and I left him. It seemed that was always the way it went with my great loves. He also had certain feelings about sex before marriage, but they seemed to apply to everyone else but him and he was rather willing to suspend them on my behalf. He was spending the summer working in his parents' restaurant and he had this habit of calling me every day at three o'clock when he was taking his afternoon shit. Somehow I found this all very charming and intimate at the time. We can share anything, I'd think. He took great pride in the regularity of his bowel movements and when it came to Woody I seemed to absorb and mirror his enthusiasm.

The athletic offices where I worked that summer were on the main floor of the recreation center. Instead of building up like the rest of the city, the gym was built down, sunken deep into the earth, glossy hardwood basketball courts three stories down below the entrance atrium. On the roof, a rubber track circled tennis courts, six laps to a mile. I liked to run up there in the evenings when the summer humidity began to fade with the sunlight. In high school I was a good runner, a scrawny teenager of sixteen or seventeen, just a pair of legs and lungs, but I had slowed down in college and became one of those steady, plodding runners. As I'd circle the track, I felt very small, just this tiny slow-moving being against the city's skyline.

I arrived on my first day of work to the human resources cubicle in the far corner of the office. Trine, the supervisor, sat closest to the doorway, a shock of blonde hair her most prominent feature. Crow's feet lined her eyes and she wore a fleece vest over her heavy torso. TJ was sitting in the far corner with her back to the doorway. She was thin and boyish, wearing a white men's undershirt over a sports bra and navy blue work pants. Her head was covered in a mess of disorganized dread locks clamped down under big headphones. Most of her hair was a mousy brown nest, but the ends of her dreads were white-blonde, as if she had dipped them in a bucket of peroxide. She had a tattoo on one of her forearms, four small figures in a row. The first was a paper airplane, and the next two showed the airplane unfolding into the final figure, a neat geometric star. Even though she was sitting I could tell how tall she was, well over six feet. She didn't look up from the computer when I tapped lightly on the cubicle's doorframe.

"Ready for me?" I asked. I had the feeling that TJ might ignore me all summer, but something about her auto mechanic outfit and her bored attitude made me want her to

like me. My clean hair pulled into a low ponytail and khaki skirt that seemed neat and appropriate at home now made me look like I was trying too hard.

Trine stood and directed me to a stack of employee time sheets to be filed. She pulled out a set of keys from somewhere inside the fleece vest and unlocked the filing cabinet drawers. “Everything’s confidential,” she said, turning her head to me sharply. “Got it?”

I nodded.

“Good. Looks like you two have things covered around here,” she said and squeezed past me out of the cubicle. I stood in the doorway for a moment longer waiting to see if she’d come back.

“Don’t worry about her,” TJ said. She took off her headphones and swiveled around in her chair. Her face was round with pimples on her cheeks, but I was surprised to find her almost pretty.

“Is she coming back?”

“Who knows? She’s probably off her lithium today. Bipolar,” she nodded for emphasis.

“What’s she like the other half the time?” I said. TJ laughed.

“Worse. And she keeps talking about getting a guide dog.”

“For what? She’s not blind.” I didn’t know they had guide dogs for crazy people.

“I don’t know. Maybe the dog would stop her from walking out into traffic.”

“Would she do that?”

“Last time she had a breakdown she wouldn’t leave the gym for two days and they had to cart her out in a straight jacket.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Just don’t work too fast, you’ll make me look bad,” she said. She turned back to her computer and snapped her headphones back over her ears. I watched her for a moment before sitting down at the desk next to her to alphabetize the time sheets. We worked without speaking the rest of that first afternoon, but it wasn’t an unfriendly silence.

Technically, TJ was my boss, but at least one of us would have had to give a damn about the job for that fact to really matter. She was the payroll manager, I was the payroll assistant, and mostly our job was to click a few buttons on a computer program every other week, print the payroll, then forge every student employees’ signature on their official time sheet before sending them off to central billing. She had chicken scratch handwriting, so the forgery job fell to me.

She was a basketball star, a minor celebrity around the halls of that gym really, her name painted on a 1000-point game ball in the glass display cases. She was a few years older than me, recently graduated with a degree in comparative literature and she seemed to hate her job. I understood that, but why stay?

“What do you want to be?” I asked her early in the summer when we were still navigating each other’s personal history.

“When I grow up?” She laughed. TJ had this ease about her, as if she never really worried about having to grow up eventually. I felt foolish for asking, for worrying for her, for worrying about myself. “Be a fucking payroll manager, that’s what,” she said, and laughed again. I must have still looked uncertain.

“Come on, let’s go meet Maggie for lunch. It’s two-for-one margaritas.”

I looked at my watch. “It’s eleven-thirty.”

“Great, we’ll beat the lunch rush.”

“You’re right, she does look normal,” Maggie said to TJ the first time she brought me along to lunch.

“Since when is TJ is the best judge of normal?” I said. TJ laughed and I was happy she had said anything about me at all. Lunch felt like initiation, a special dispensation they extended to me, the straight girl.

When the waiter came, we ordered our drinks. TJ got hers on the rocks with a lot of salt; Maggie went for the fruity margaritas like strawberry or mango; I got mine frozen with sugar around the rim instead of salt. Gonzalez y Gonzalez served their margaritas in pint glasses with a thick colorful straw that all but guaranteed brain freeze.

I never learned much about being a payroll assistant, but I learned a lot about lesbians during these lunch trips. Usually I just sat back and listened to their stories, trying to keep track of the list of characters in their circle of friends. There was Deena, TJ’s roommate, and her sister Cascade. They called Emilia “Mars” behind her back because she was so spacey, and Sarah was Maggie’s ex from college.

In July we sat outside, a cluster of pint glasses crowding our table. The conversation had shifted to our most embarrassing sex story.

“I’ve got one,” I said, emboldened by the drinks, or maybe my desire to prove to TJ that I wasn’t a complete prude.

I told them about a trip I took with my ex, the film student. He was from Long Island and one weekend we rode the train out to his parents’ house for a family get-

together, celebrating some relative's birthday or anniversary, I can't remember. They were always celebrating events in his family with these lavish parties. At night, he snuck into the guest bedroom so we could have sex. We didn't want the squeaky bed springs to give us away, so we spread a blanket on the carpeted floor and started going at it down there instead.

"He was behind me, you know, and I guess all of our movements made us slide off the blanket because when we were done—well, when he was done—I went to the bathroom to clean up and there in the mirror saw a bright ring of pink rug burn on my cheek."

TJ and Maggie looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"That's it? Your sex story is about rug burn?" Maggie was nearly crying from laughing so hard.

"Hey, it was really embarrassing! I had to face his whole family the next morning at breakfast with rug burn on my face!" I was starting to feel hurt. "Just forget I said anything, it was stupid. Sorry I don't have any stories about wild lesbian sex like you two."

"Aw, don't be mad," said TJ. "Our little Rugsy." She patted my shoulder across the table.

"Maybe I just need to hang around more lesbians," I said.

Maggie raised her nearly empty glass. "To Rugsy," she cheered. "An honorary lesbian who needs a better sex life!"

Margarita lunches turned into more invitations to hang out together as the summer went on. I felt like I had passed some sort of entrance exam with the Rugsy story, and now TJ had let me into her world. I can see the beginnings of my friendship with TJ so clearly, but it's harder to say where it all began to unravel. We bought scalper tickets to New York Liberty basketball games at the Garden and I sat next to her in a long row of lesbians drinking beers and catcalling the players without paying attention to the score. We spent late nights in cramped, dingy bars downtown that I had never heard of and could never find again, taking shots from bartenders with Sinead O'Connor haircuts. Everywhere we went, people knew TJ and greeted her with hugs. She'd always catch my eye with a wink over their shoulders. I never told Woody where I went with her, and instead made up elaborate lies about taking yoga classes and all the great books I was reading. Lunch was one thing, but I knew he wouldn't like the idea of me hanging out with TJ and her friends.

Late in August, TJ invited me to her birthday party. "Saturday night, come on over, Rugs. We're having a keg and Cascade is baking cupcakes," she said. When Woody called that afternoon from his perch, I felt the flutter of nerves in my stomach that always accompanied my lies. I decided to casually mention the party and brace for his reaction.

"Must be three," TJ said when the phone rang, getting up from her chair. "Coffee?" she said, leaning her dreadlocked head back into the doorway next to my computer screen. I shook my head no with my chin cradling the receiver to my shoulder and my fingers still held at the ready on my keyboard.

“No thanks,” I said. I had told her a hundred times that I didn’t drink coffee, but TJ couldn’t hold on to information like that. Birth dates and drink preferences slipped through her fingers like grains of sand, a character trait I blamed on the pot she smoked every morning in the gym’s emergency exit stairwell.

On the other end of the phone line, on a toilet in Rhode Island, Woody was waiting for me to say hello.

“Are you going to visit me this weekend?” he asked. My stomach turned a cartwheel.

“I’d love to, but TJ is having a birthday party and she invited me.” I tried not to sound as excited about it as I was.

“Of course she invited you, she wants to turn you into a dyke,” he said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She knows I’m not gay, and besides, I’m dating you, remember?”

“Just you wait. The second circle of hell is reserved for sinners like her,” he said. I could feel one of his rants coming on and I held the receiver a few inches away from my ear until he finally paused to take a breath.

“Fine, baby, I won’t go. But I have yoga this weekend. How about I visit next weekend?”

“She’s trying to recruit you.” The toilet flushed. “Be a good girl now. I love you.”

“Love you too,” I replied. The words rang hollow over the phone like a broken church bell and I knew I didn’t mean it.

TJ had written out the subway directions to her apartment in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn.

“Call me when you get off the train, and I’ll come meet you,” she promised. “It’s not the best neighborhood for a woman to be out walking alone.”

“What about you?” I asked. I didn’t really think of her as a fellow female. She was tall, tough, untouchable, even in a bad neighborhood like Bed-Stuy.

I called her as I stepped out of the G train stairwell onto a poorly lit street corner. “Come save me. I’m between the empty lot and the decrepit gas station,” I said.

“Be there in a sec.”

When she reached me she bent down to hug me, then seemed to change her mind at the last moment and instead just leaned one shoulder into me like a weak hockey check.

“I wasn’t sure you’d actually show up,” she said.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I replied.

I followed her through a wrought-iron gate into a large, sparsely decorated living room. Two women sat on the thick futon sofa that leaned against the wall, one bending over the coffee table packing a bowl and the other lying with her legs flung across the first woman’s lap. Laughter floated up from a cluster of people in the kitchen amidst red solo cups and handles of vodka and jugs of juice. A heavy bass line thudded in the basement. TJ gave me the grand tour of her apartment, introducing me to each group with a sweeping arm gesture. “Everyone, this is Rugsy. Rugsy, everyone.”

In the basement, blue and green crepe paper hung from the pipes along the open ceiling and a keg sat in its large blue bucket of melting ice, thick-coated ropes for

handles. On a small folding table sat a bowl of orange slices and more sleeves of red plastic cups. “Beer?” she offered, reaching for a clean cup with one hand and pumping the keg with the other. “It’s Blue Moon, which cost a fuckload in a keg.” She plunked an orange slice into my drink and handed it to me before wiping her hands on her jeans. She had pulled her dreads up into a ponytail with the kind of rubber band that came wrapped around newspaper deliveries. On one side of the basement, two women were shooting pool on a large black felted table. “See that chick in the leather pants about to sink the ten ball?” TJ whispered to me. I glanced over and nodded. “She played one of the outfielders in that movie *A League of Their Own*. One of Deena’s friends from the restaurant.”

“You didn’t tell me there’d be celebrities here. I would have dressed up,” I said, and TJ laughed.

“Rugsy!” Maggie threw her arms around my shoulders in greeting. I glanced at TJ while I patted Maggie’s shoulders, but it was nice for that moment to feel like I belonged there. Maggie was bouncing on her toes and she pulled me over to three other very tall girls that I assumed were fellow basketball friends. Besides Maggie, everyone at this party was extremely tall. I was pretty tall too, five foot ten in shoes, but these women were amazons and I stuck out. What was I doing in this damp basement full of lesbians swaying to hip hop music and playing pool and ping-pong?

TJ introduced me to Deena, who had platinum hair and black roots and a tattoo of the word “Cascade” peeking out from below the right sleeve of her gray t-shirt, then Mars and Sarah, who had a sleeve tattoo of a tiger and Asian-looking flowers that began on her collar bone and wrapped down her arm to her wrist. Cascade had three little blue

asterisks tattooed in the center of her chest, where her cleavage might be if she had been wearing a bra.

“Lesbians have interesting tattoos,” I whispered to TJ and nodded at the four figures on her arm.

“What, are you taking notes?” She looked down at her tattoo with her head turned slightly, like she hadn’t noticed it for a while. “I just walked into the tattoo place one day and asked for someone who could draw a straight line.”

“Does it mean something?” I had wanted to ask her about it all summer, but it hadn’t come up.

“It’s just supposed to be silly.” I couldn’t imagine getting something so permanent that was just for fun.

We drank Blue Moons until my cheeks flushed and my voice grew loud and I forgot about feeling like I didn’t belong there. TJ and I teamed up for a game of pool, and we sang happy birthday around a tray of Cascade’s chocolate-iced cupcakes. Everyone was nice to me, but I knew that to them I was just TJ’s friend, and worse, her straight friend, my sexuality following me around the party like a spotlight. I had been given a pass into TJ’s world, but I didn’t know when or if that pass would expire. Eventually we made our way back upstairs to cluster around the coffee table and share a joint. “Skip Rugsy, she’s a square,” TJ laughed in her low, guttural way when I declined my turn, but her voice was affectionate and she leaned into my shoulder like she had out on the street. The room swirled around me like a carousel and I understood what a gambler must feel, pushed all in on an off-suited pair and just trying to hold on for one more hand. Was Woody right, was I being recruited by lesbians? My heart sped up and I

closed my eyes against the thought. When the party died down and most of the guests had gone home, TJ folded down the futon.

“You can crash here. It’s better than waiting for an hour for the G train,” she said, chucking me a blanket off her bed. “Just don’t mention it around the office, Trine would be jealous.”

She stood opposite from me, and I felt a wave of dizziness surge down my legs. I thought for a moment that she might actually kiss me. I wondered what it would feel like to kiss her, to kiss another woman. Would her lips be softer, gentler? I wanted her to kiss me. I closed my eyes and held my breath, but instead of kissing me she wrapped her ropy arms around my shoulders and drew me in for a hug. My head rested against her chest for an instant and I breathed in her smell, a mix of pot and oranges like the inside of my brother’s car. She pulled away and the moment passed.

“Night, Rugsy,” she said, and left me alone in her living room.

And then, without warning, she was gone. No note taped to my office chair, no phone call.

“Rehab,” Maggie said. We were sitting at the bar in Gonzalez y Gonzalez; it didn’t seem right to sit at our table without her. Maggie sipped her margarita while I rolled my glass between my palms and tried to remember where I went wrong.

“Rehab for what? Smoking pot? Drinking? That’s not so bad,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Maggie shook her head. “She just said she needed to get help.”

“I would have helped her.” I slammed my drink down on the table. I couldn’t understand how I hadn’t seen that TJ was struggling, or how she could just leave without saying goodbye.

At home in my apartment in D.C., hundreds of miles and minutes and years away from TJ and that summer, I thought about all the secrets she had shared with me. Had she hidden her darker, rehab-worthy behavior from me, Rugsy the square? The man in the picture, the man my friend TJ had become, smiled out at me. I’ve thought about that tattoo on so many occasions, doodling it in the margins of my notepads during boring phone calls at work, but I can’t seem to get the order of it right. The airplane never becomes a star in my version, and I am always left disappointed.

Midtown Holding Pattern

For exactly one year in my early twenties, I worked for a small company called Myers Capital. I don't know exactly what Myers Capital did – it was something financial – and if anyone asked me I'd just blankly string together phrases I'd overheard like “subordinated debt” and “second lien loan” and confess to being an English Major. It was just a job for me, a way to pay my rent for my fifth-floor walk-up, until I could figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

The day of my job interview, I wore a suit for the first time in my life, navy blue with narrow lapels and faint pinstripes, bouncing my heel against the hardwood floor while the edges of my resume curled in my hands. In the lobby where I waited, the reception chair sat empty, a black computer monitor peeking out above the desk's ledge. Across from the desk, a huge oil painting hung on the wall, and I guessed the man in the painting was Mr. Myers. He looked uncomfortable, as if embarrassed by the artist's attention, with worried eyes and a crooked smile painted across his wide face. The artist had used the wrong shade of red for his lips; they looked feminine and delicate. His dark hair was parted at the side like a little boy's. He wasn't old, maybe forty, but something about the haircut and red lips made him look younger.

The office manager corralled me into a conference room and asked all the usual questions, but her voice was weary and thin and I guessed that reception desk had been empty for too long. I breezed through the interview, smiling at the right moments, regurgitating all the promises of enthusiasm and dedication that the staffing agency had

coached me on, but I kept thinking back to the portrait hanging in the lobby. Who could love a man with that haircut?

My first day I was running late, so I took a cab across town to the office on Madison Avenue. I stood in the street outside my apartment on Ninth Avenue with my arm outstretched to hail a cab, my blouse coming slightly untucked from my skirt, and felt mature and sexy. I imagined how I might look to the swarm of businessmen in taxis careening down the avenue. I was a young woman in a skirt suit, someone to take seriously, and I could afford to take a cab if I wanted to. Of course I couldn't really afford the cab and I had charged the suit on my credit card, but those were worries for another morning.

From the cab window I watched all the beautiful people marching to their offices carrying coffees and briefcases and expensive handbags. My gaze followed a woman who looked about my age as she walked quickly through the crowd. She wore a pencil skirt and pantyhose with bright white tennis sneakers, and I vowed that would never be me. I looked down at my own shoes. They were black leather pumps with narrow pointed toes and slim high heels; they made me feel very grown up. I remember thinking I could take on the receptionist world in those shoes.

I arrived just a minute before eight and caught the elevator with the man from the portrait, Mr. Myers himself. He was taller than I had guessed, maybe six-four, and his height commanded attention. There in the elevator, he seemed uncomfortable just the same, and there was no mistaking that wide face and side-parted hair. But he didn't seem full of himself, like the kind of man who would commission a portrait for the office of his

company. I figured someone must have put him up to it. Or maybe he thought it was just one of those things presidents of finance companies did, like golfing and flying in private jets. In my new work shoes, I stood only a few inches shorter than him. The elevator crawled upwards and in became clear that were going to the same floor.

“Hi,” I said, extending my hand to him. “I’m Becky Dillon, your new receptionist.”

He raised his eyebrows, then smiled slowly and took my hand in a firm handshake, one that he had perfected at hundreds of business meetings.

“Arthur Myers. Nice to meet you.” He turned his attention back to the elevator doors, and I wondered if I had made a mistake. Were receptionists supposed to introduce themselves to him? Or even talk to him? Edna, the office manager, had described him as “particular” in my interview. Particular, I understood. His name was on the door, after all, and I imagined he had worked long and hard to earn his particularities.

I waited for Edna to walk me around the office and introduce me to my new coworkers, but she just showed me to the reception desk and handed me a phone list of everyone’s extension.

“You can take your lunch at one, after I take mine. Let me know if you need anything,” she said, and shuffled back to her cubicle on the other side of the office.

Myers Capital was a small operation, just thirty of us on the top floor of that Madison Avenue office building. There was a kitchen with a large refrigerator for general use and a small refrigerator for Arthur’s private use, a cupboard full of mismatched coffee mugs and abandoned Tupperware, a dishwasher, and trays of soda cans stacked against the wall. There were three conference rooms near the lobby, a large

photocopier buried between over-stuffed supply shelves, and a huddle of cubicles for the analysts. You couldn't go anywhere in the office without passing my desk first, and I liked feeling like the first line of defense, the gatekeeper for Myers Capital. At the desk next to me was Diana, the administrative assistant to the managing directors. The desk outside of Arthur's office in the corner sat empty.

That first day I dropped calls and signed for a delivery of the wrong kind of copy paper. I overflowed the coffee machine and couldn't send international faxes. By six o'clock, angry red blisters formed on my heels and my pinky toes where my new receptionist shoes rubbed the skin raw. I limped home across town as each step sent my feet a new pinch of pain. In my imagination, the Manhattan business world was glamorous, where women wore pearls and men wore sharp suits and everyone went out for martinis after work before returning home to hearty dinners with their families. That night I returned to my narrow little two-bedroom apartment tucked between an Afghani restaurant and a nail salon.

"Hullo, Becky," Ravi called from the doorway of the Afghani restaurant. "When are you coming in for dinner? I make you special." He smiled at me with crooked teeth and ran his hand through his hair.

"Maybe next week, when I get my first paycheck," I said, and turned my key in the lock. In the vestibule I stepped out of my shoes and climbed the dirty steps in bare feet. "Stupid shoes," I muttered, and flopped down on the futon in the living room.

"Jane?" I called out but I knew she wasn't home. Jane had just gotten a waitress job at a new wine bar on the corner of our block, and she was probably there. I was

relieved not to have to tell anyone about my first day just yet. I thought I was going to be the perfect receptionist, but instead I felt like a failure.

I woke up three hours later when Jane came home. My shirt had come completely untucked and my skirt was wrinkled and bunched up high around my hips. I sat up, the prickly taste of sleep still resting on my tongue, and smoothed down my hair in the back. “I brought us some leftover mac and cheese, but from the looks of you, I should have swiped some wine, too,” Jane said and sunk down on the futon next to me.

“You’re a lifesaver,” I said and accepted the fork she held out for me.

I was a lousy receptionist. I improved, but after two weeks, Edna called me into her office. She was going to fire me, I just knew it. I sat in the chair on the other side of her desk and tapped my fingers nervously against the edge. She cleared her throat.

“As you know, the desk outside of Arthur’s office has been vacant for some time now. He needs a new assistant, and he’s asked for you.”

I didn’t say anything. He wanted me to be his assistant? I had just barely figured out the coffee maker. There must have been some mistake. I wasn’t being fired; I was being promoted.

“Junior assistant,” she added. “Since you don’t have any actual experience. So we’ll keep looking for a senior assistant to work above you and handle the important things. What do you say?” I was uncertain, but flattered, and I couldn’t say no to a raise. It was still just a job, but being an assistant sounded much more glamorous than being a receptionist. It sounded like a real job with real responsibilities beyond filling out FedEx mailing labels and ordering printer cartridges.

“Great,” I said, “I’ll do it.”

Edna handed me a thick spiral-bound booklet labeled “Arthur J. Myers Assistant Guide.” I flipped open to the table of contents and scanned the pages. It was 58 pages long. I looked up at her expectantly, worry already forming in the wrinkled bridge of my nose.

“You’ll want to memorize this,” Edna said.

I hadn’t decorated my reception desk like the other admins, pictures of their pets and children tacked to the fabric backboard, inspirational notes and stickers framing their computer monitors. I had brought in one personal item, a framed photograph of my family the beach the previous summer, all five of us against the backdrop of the ocean, tanned and squinting into the camera. I moved the picture over to my new desk outside of Arthur’s office. Diane followed my movements with her eyes, a sly smile on her face.

“They really got their claws in you,” she said. It was probably the most she had ever spoken to me.

“I think it’ll be great,” I said. I sounded a little smug, but I meant it. Overnight I had been launched from the lowest rung on the office ladder to the president’s right hand. I mattered now, and she knew it. She smiled again.

“Oh sure, it’ll be great. The assistant before you only lasted three weeks. And he sued the one before that.” I put down the picture frame and looked at her. She had my attention, and now she knew it.

“Sued her? What did he sue her over?”

“Who knows? Arthur just loves to use his law degree whenever he can.”

“How long did she last?”

“Six months, maybe seven. She was good, but he’ll like you better. Dark hair, long legs—you’re just his type.” Diane also had dark hair and long legs. Was this how it actually worked around Myers Capital? Did Arthur just pluck me from the reception desk because he thought I was attractive? I felt foolish for thinking I’d been promoted on merit alone. I began to realize how wrong I’d been about the business world, and just how much I had to learn.

“I’m not a quitter,” I said, and turned back to my computer monitor.

As Arthur’s assistant, it is your job to keep him happy. Remember, he is a very busy man with many people counting on him everyday. You will manage his business and home schedule, as well as the schedule for his three nannies (Home, Schoolwork, and Weekend), four children (two sets of twins, James and Alice, 10, and Nick and June, 6), two dogs (Dalmatians Hunter and Dax) and various tropical fish. Ask yourself: Does he know where he is going? Does he have everything he needs? Have you confirmed all appointments at least 24 hours in advance? How can you make his life easier today?

It wasn’t all that bad in the beginning. It wasn’t really all that bad until the end, when it was really bad. In June I studied the Assistant Guide, committing to memory his family history and credit card numbers. There were spreadsheets listing social security numbers and contact information for everyone in his family. Every medical ailment and prescription was accounted for, Alice’s allergy shot schedule to Arthur’s most recent periodontist results. Birthdates and cake preferences were mixed in with a list of

approved friends for play dates for the younger twins. It was an identity thief's dream, a golden ticket. There were lists and rules for everything, and it was my job to keep it all straight, which was at once relieving and unsettling. The Assistant Guide took the guesswork out of my day, but how easily could I be replaced? How quickly could another dark-haired, long-legged young woman memorize Arthur's preference for small stickie notes and blue roller-ball pens?

First thing every Monday, Arthur led the staff meeting in the large conference room where the analysts and managing directors would discuss the status of their upcoming deals. And every Monday, around 8:30, my inbox would ping with the coffee email. In the subject line, Arthur would write, "French Roast Decaf." Sometimes he'd write "please" or "thanks," sometimes he'd write out the whole phrase including verbs. There were rhetorical variations on the theme, but the message was always the same: bring me coffee, now.

I wanted to hate the coffee email, to hate feeling all those eyes on me when I entered the room. I knew some of the guys were thinking, "I'm glad I don't have her job," while others thought, "I wish I had an assistant who'd bring me coffee right about now." Arthur was thinking, "Look what I can make her do." The thing is, I didn't hate it. I liked feeling needed, wanted. I liked the panicked rush I got the instant the email arrived in my inbox; I made it a game, trying to see how quickly I could prepare and deliver the coffee each week. I knew Arthur had a mental stopwatch on me, and I played right along. I'd dress in something a little more eye catching on Mondays, a low-cut sweater or button-down shirt that was just sheer enough to show a lacy bra underneath. If he wanted an attractive assistant – and who didn't? – I could be that, but I would still be

replaceable. If he wanted an attractive and effective assistant, well, maybe that was my way to outlast the others. I would need to be pretty and perfect at every turn.

Lunch is the most important meal of the day for Arthur. Avoid lunch meetings wherever possible. If he is dining in the office, order one of the following to arrive at noon SHARP:

- 1. Large romaine salad with grilled chicken, shredded carrots, and cherry tomatoes from Midtown Deli downstairs. NO DRESSING, NO BREAD. Salad must be served on a tray with balsamic vinaigrette, Grey Poupon Dijon mustard, a can of Canada Dry Seltzer, napkins and utensils.*
- 2. Three (3) orders of steamed vegetable dumplings with sauce in a separate container in a separate bag from Joe's Shanghai. Dumplings must be served on a tray with sauce, a can of Canada Dry Seltzer, napkins and utensils.*

When Arthur finishes his meal, he will dispose of his tray and condiments in his outbox. Retrieve immediately.

Fridays meant Pizza Lunch. I'd help the receptionist spread out vinyl tablecloths across the large conference room table, and we'd arrange the pizzas on the sideboard. The office staff gathered to chat uncomfortably about each other's boring weekend plans or the latest developments in reality television while the younger guys, most of them analysts, played musical chairs to avoid sitting next to Arthur. I always took the seat nearest to him, in part to spare everyone, but also because I felt a little sorry for him. We all worked for him, yet that fact alone wasn't enough to make anyone want to sit next to

him. I thought back to his portrait on the wall, his awkward gaze and posture alone in the frame. Why didn't he learn week after week and take a seat in the middle of the conference table instead of holding court at the head?

"Pass me the sausage," Nate, one of the analysts, would say as he entered the room every week. It was his running joke with himself; pizzas were allowed one topping only, and sausage was on the unacceptable list in Arthur's book. Arthur never ate the regular pizzas anyway though – he got his own small cheese-less pizza with mushrooms – so I don't know why he bothered.

Our first real catastrophe struck in the middle of August on a rainy Friday when the pizzas did not arrive at noon as scheduled. At a quarter after twelve, I heard Arthur pick up his phone in his office and immediately my phone lit up.

"Hi, Arthur," I answered as I always did, even though I knew what he was going to say. I could have scooted my chair four feet to the left and been in his doorway. Even if he had raised his voice slightly he could just ask me what he wanted, but no, that wasn't his way. Arthur was the king of "Tell so-and-so to do such-and-such," and as with everything else for him, I played along.

"Come into my office."

I closed the door behind me. "Where's your notebook?" he asked.

"Damn." I returned a moment later with my legal pad and pen ready for him.

"First, I want you to always bring your notebook when you come in here. I don't have time to say things twice."

"Notebook. Got it." He waited until I was done, then paused a moment longer. I could feel a deep blush starting to set up its splotchy camp on my chest. My hand went to

my throat as if to cover up the evidence, and I hated my body for refusing to blush like a normal person, on my cheeks instead of my tits. Arthur cleared his throat.

“The new receptionist—“

“Traci.”

“Right. Traci ordered the pizza very late today. Please make sure that for the next few weeks she orders it on time, or else you’ll have to order it for her.”

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again,” I said.

“This is a major productivity issue. Late lunch is bad for business. Hungry people made mistakes, and hungry people lose morale.” The only productivity issue, I thought, was that the analysts were sending me messages every two minutes to find out if the pizza had arrived instead of working.

“You’re exactly right,” I said. I tried to change the subject. “I called that guy about scheduling bowling lessons like you wanted.”

“Everyone says golf is the businessman’s sport, but they forget about bowling. Everyone loves bowling! How many bowling fundraisers have I been invited to this year? Tons! And I want to win. When can we start the lessons? Did he seem like a good instructor?” His voice was loud and excited.

“I just left a voicemail.”

“Oh.” He sounded like a child who’d been told he couldn’t have any more ice cream.

“But he sounded very professional on his voicemail message,” I said, which seemed to cheer him up.

“Great. And the invitation is still open for you to join me.”

“I took bowling lessons when I was a kid,” I said. “I’m practically already a pro.” I was terrible at bowling, but the part about the lessons was true, my mom hauling my younger brother and I to the alley near our house every week in the summer. I didn’t want to take lessons with him, but I remember feeling sorry for Arthur in this moment. Didn’t he have any friends? What about his wife?

“Do you need anything else from me at the moment?” I asked.

“Is the pizza here yet?”

“I’ll go find out.”

When planning a trip for Arthur (family or business), add yourself to his calendar for a thirty (30) minute meeting at least three weeks in advance to discuss his preference for this particular trip. Complete and submit a travel form at least two weeks in advance, including hotel, flight, and dining reservation; maps of the surrounding areas (NO MAPQUEST); contact and biographical information for all parties with whom he will be meeting; and return address FedEx labels for his luggage. Make six copies of the travel form and messenger it to his wife’s office, his parents, each nanny, and keep one copy for yourself at all times while Arthur is out of the office. Is there any construction surrounding the hotel, and have you requested a non-smoking king room on a high floor near an emergency exit? Have you verified that assigned airline seats are not middle seats or in the first row? Have you called ahead to the hotel to inform the concierge that Arthur is a platinum American Express cardholder?

I was surprised to discover that I liked running Arthur's life. He was predictable in a way that made sense to me, and meticulous in a way that only the very wealthy could demand. Empty tissue boxes in his outbox meant, "Get me a new box of tissues." A catalog in his outbox with "MC" scrawled above circled items meant, "Order me these things on my MasterCard." I liked the efficiency and understanding between us with these shorthand commands. His life bled into mine, and the shorter September days meant less daylight, which made my long work hours feel even longer.

On a Friday night in the beginning of October, I met Jane at the wine bar after work.

"We can go somewhere else," I offered, but she shrugged me off.

"Why go anywhere else when we can drink for free here?" she replied, and waved to the bartender with a smile. "Besides, we can't beat the commute. You can roll me home tonight."

I crossed my legs and absently picked at a frayed heel on my work shoes. The plastic caps were worn through, revealing a shiny metal nail underneath that clicked with each step and left indentations on the office hardwood floors. "Earth to Becky?" Jane waved her hand in front of my face until I looked up, and laughed as she dipped her nose into a wide wine glass and took a sip.

"Sorry," I said, and clinked my glass against hers. "Long week." My BlackBerry buzzed and skipped across the bar and I clamped my hand down as if trapping a wild animal.

"Can't you shut that thing off?" Jane said, and I scrolled through the new emails that had already piled up.

“He’s emailing me about Monday already.” Over the weekends, Arthur would send me emails with the subject line, “Monday.” These were task items, or things for us to discuss at our daily meeting. Sometimes it was simple things: “Add to your list of office supplies to order for the home: chalk, eraser, easel pad, fish tank.”

“He wants me to discuss his parents’ Netflix with him,” I told her. “Apparently their one-movie-at-a-time plan isn’t good enough for them.” She let out a long cowgirl whistle and slapped her knee.

“Tough stuff you’re doing over there at Miser Capital.”

“Myers.”

“Whatever.” She drained her glass. “Another round?”

“I’m done for the night,” I said, my jaw tense.

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Becks. I was just giving you a hard time.” Her voice was a song, pulling me back from the edge of anger. I let out a sigh and stood up, teetering slightly in my worn out shoes.

“I’m not mad. I know my job sucks. Forget it, I’m just tired.”

I wasn’t mad at her. I wasn’t even mad at Arthur for emailing me his every thought and carving out this strange space for me in his life, in his family really. I thought it would be the other way around, that I would be the one carving out space in my life for the job. On Monday I would call Arthur’s parents and set up their new four-movie-at-a-time Netflix account, probably even add whatever movies Arthur had approved to their queue. I talked to his parents almost daily, always both of them on the line at the same time, the same way my grandparents would answer when I called. I

pictured Grandmom on the yellow rotary kitchen phone, and Pop-Pop on the new cordless in his recliner chair. I hadn't called them in weeks.

You will maintain and update Arthur's files on a regular basis. He will indicate via post-it note how he wants each document labeled and filed. Practice correct binder clip usage and monitor his inbox for errors in binder clip placement and size:

- 1. Always use the smallest possible clip for the stack of papers.*
- 2. Binder clips MUST be placed as far to the top left of the documents as possible.*
- 3. NEVER use the very large binder clips.*

Remind and educate other firm members about correct binder clip usage when you encounter mistakes.

Then, somehow, it was November and I had been working at Myers Capital for six months. If there had been an office pool for how long I'd last, I'm sure I had exceeded everyone's bets. On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Arthur and I sat down for my mid-year review.

"You do excellent work," Arthur began. "Let's pretend I just spent the last ten or fifteen minutes telling you all the good things you do, and just get to the improvement part. It is my hope that you'll stay for at least two years here." I paused and tried to imagine two years with Arthur, two years of kids calendars and travel forms and coffee emails.

“I’m doing the work of two people, so I think it’s only fair if I got paid more. I’d like a raise,” I said. My hands shook so I wrung them tightly together in my lap. They had never hired any senior assistant, which meant I didn’t have to train anyone new to be my superior, and I remained Arthur’s one and only.

“How much?” he asked. I was expecting him to say no outright. I aimed high and said a number he would never agree to, a twenty-five percent increase. I didn’t have anything to lose.

“Done. Effective next paycheck. Now let’s talk about all the ways I need you to be more perfect.”

December flew by as I scrambled to plan Arthur’s annual family trip to his timeshare at the Sunshine Resort in Bermuda. I chartered private jets, shipped his golf clubs, secured dinner reservations at restaurants that didn’t take reservations, and arranged horseback riding lessons for the kids.

“We could probably fit you on the plane,” he said in our daily meeting when I handed him the travel form. I blushed.

“Thanks, but I think my mom would be upset if I didn’t come home for Christmas.”

“Oh, right.” Had he forgotten that I had my own family? “Did the kids tell you that we got our Christmas tree this past weekend?” He was smiling like a kid himself. I liked him when he paused during our meetings just to chat. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the stack of documents waiting for him to read and drop in his outbox for me to file. He was stalling, but I didn’t try to get him back on track.

“I didn’t know Jewish people got Christmas trees. What about dreidels and menorahs?”

“We have them, too, but the kids really wanted a tree. It’s a non-denominational Christmas tree,” he said.

When I went to his house that week to drop off the kids weekend schedule and check in with the nannies, there in his foyer was the tallest non-denominational Christmas tree I’d ever seen outside of Rockefeller Plaza. It was decorated with a few strands of lights, maybe a dozen ornaments clustered in the midsection, and the lower half was covered in tinsel. The top was bare, no angel, no star. It was a mess. I thought about my family’s tree, where every bough held an ornament, and every ornament held a story. Baby’s First Christmas. Glitter-coated pinecones from pre-school. The pickle ornament that my dad hides on the tree every year, and the person who finds it gets to open up the family gift. I couldn’t wait to get home for a vacation from Midtown and from Arthur.

My BlackBerry was quiet for that week while Arthur and his family went on the hot air balloon ride I planned and relaxed on Bermuda’s beaches. I had a hard time imagining Arthur relaxing anywhere, but no news was good news from him. Except part of me missed him. I felt lonely at home without the constant emails and phone calls and meetings to keep me busy. The quiet left me feeling uneasy and restless. Nobody at home needed me the way Arthur needed me. I went back to the office a day early to catch up on all the filing I had been putting off.

On my phone was a message from Arthur asking me to transcribe one of his voicemails. Usually he’d ask me to listen to the voicemail and send him an email with

the person's name, contact information, and reason for calling. But this message was different.

“Some day when you're a parent you'll learn how your children, even when they're being a little obnoxious, are adorable to you. Please transcribe the following message from Alice and add it to her personal file. Maybe I'll read it to her at her wedding.”

“Hi Daddy, it's Alice, but you already knew that. You better call me back because I want to know when you're coming home. Okay? Okay. Okay? Okay. Okay? Am I getting on your nerves yet? Well too bad if I am because you said you'd be home for dinner tonight so you better be on your way here. Promise you'll call back and come home and I don't care if you don't want to because you're going to. It's not a question, it's a statement. Bye. Love you. Call me back. Bye.”

I had to listen to the message at least a dozen times to get it right because she was talking faster than I could type. I don't think she took a single breath during the entire message, and my punctuation through her little tirade was editorial at best. Of all the ridiculous voicemails I had gotten from him, this one was possibly the cutest, not from what Alice said but from the sentiment Arthur attached to it. Sentimentality for him was something he could outsource to his assistant to transcribe, but I could see how he loved his kids in his strange Arthur way.

Of course, I was right back to swearing at my computer screen when he returned to the office in January and decided to change all of his travel plans for the month at the last minute. Two days after he returned, he was off to Atlanta for a conference, and I was outside again, shivering on the sidewalk for twenty minutes while I kept an eye on Town

Car 160 to make sure it didn't circle the block before he came downstairs. I would stand there and beg the drivers not to leave, but they were afraid of getting a ticket for idling. I don't know what I would have done if the car pulled away. Chase after it? The assistant guidebook, as thorough as it was, couldn't account for every possible scenario.

For my birthday in February, my mom sent me a care package full of Thin Mints and new running socks and the expensive brand of tampons, and I planned on meeting some friends downtown for dinner. I had barely seen most of them in months, my days consumed instead with coordinating soccer and t-ball camps for Arthur's kids and hiring contractors to renovate his parents' bathroom. From Arthur I received a different kind of birthday wish: "I noticed that my calendar has some staff birthdays on it. Please go through and delete them."

Already half an hour late for dinner, I leaned into his office doorway. "Do you need anything more from me tonight?" I asked.

"Here, treat yourself to a nice night. Happy birthday." Arthur opened up his wallet and handed me a hundred dollar bill. I had a momentary urge to invite him to dinner. What would my friends think if I brought him?

"Wow, thank you." I stuffed the bill in my pocket, embarrassed by the sum. Moments like this with Arthur reaffirmed that he was a person, not just an egomaniacal boss with a BlackBerry glued to his palm.

Arthur relies on you to keep his home running smoothly. All directives regarding the household staff should originate with you, and any issues that arise should be filtered

through you before involving Arthur. When planning the weekend activity schedule for Arthur's children, be sure each event has an assigned adult helper. If there are not enough adult helpers for each activity, you will need to make yourself available. Work with the nannies to ensure the children have a balanced schedule of athletic and intellectual activities. Emphasis on science and mathematics is encouraged. Remind the nannies to pack healthy snacks (i.e. fruit, granola) to keep the children energized between activities. No chips or soft drinks. Junk food is to be kept at a minimum, except at birthday parties and other special events.

March came in like a lion that year, slamming Midtown with ice and sleet for two weeks straight and cutting an edge into everyone's patience. Heather, the schoolwork nanny, started slipping in her work. First it was a forgotten vocabulary quiz, then a book report left to the last minute. It fell to me to tell Heather to shape up or ship out. I liked Heather. We were the same age, and we shared a bond as employees under Arthur's reign. I hated managing the kids' lives, and, by extension, the nannies, but at least I felt like Heather and I were on the same team. Arthur didn't care about teams; her missing work was unacceptable.

"Write her a stern email, and while you're at it, make a Craigslist posting for a new schoolwork nanny," he said. "Oh, and add me on the BCC."

"Dear Heather," I wrote, "Please remember that it is absolutely mandatory that every evening you submit to me (and Mr. Myers) an email listing your hours worked and the homework you completed with the kids. I do not want to remind you again, or call you at home at 11:00PM as I did last night. Put the date in the subject line of the email,

and send the email at 8:00PM each night after the kids have started quiet reading time. Please confirm that I have been clear about these job requirements.”

I sounded just like Arthur and suddenly hated myself for it. How had I let this happen? I made excuses for myself: I had no choice, since he was on the blind copy. I hadn't really become him; I was just playing the role he wanted. I wanted to make myself indispensable, and I succeeded. Moments later, I received a reply from Arthur that sunk me even lower: “Nicely done.”

Heather didn't wait for any more emails from me. She quit, and I realized I was envious of her ability to turn her back on responsibility and walk away. I wasn't a quitter, and I loved a challenge, but when was enough, enough?

Before me, his assistants had a three-week shelf life. It was just supposed to be a job, a holding pattern until I landed somewhere better, but I didn't know where that was exactly. When I was very young, I wanted to be a princess when I grew up. A little older, Olympic distance runner. By twenty-three, both options seemed equally ridiculous. I had said scientist, hairdresser, architect, writer, artist, and chef, but never Arthur J. Myers's assistant.

It seemed there were only two reasons to stay at a terrible job: love or money. I wasn't in love with Arthur, though it sometimes seemed that way. The reality was worse than love, something closer to obsession. Every day, from the minute I woke up in the morning to the minute my head hit the pillow at night, I thought about him, wondering if I did everything possible to keep him happy. Did the car arrive to take him to his meeting on time? Did his kids do all of their homework? Did he eat lunch today? Love would have been easier to manage, and easier to quit.

After work I took the subway downtown to Washington Square Park. It was May again, and all the college graduates were wandering around in their purple robes, leading bewildered parents past the ashen-faced men who muttered, “Ganja, ganja,” hoping for a quick sale. They posed triumphantly under the white marble arch at the corner of Fifth Ave, hugging their friends and exchanging giddy smiles for promises of lifetime friendships. A year earlier I had posed under that same arch with my arms stretched out wide as my mother snapped my photograph. I was ready, but for what? Every moment felt like a chance to define or redefine what I thought it meant to be an adult.

The following Monday, exactly one year from my first day at Myers Capital, I waited for The Coffee Email. It arrived a few minutes earlier than usual, at 8:23: French Roast Decaf. I went into the kitchen and began pouring the coffee.

With my heart pounding, I opened the Large Conference Room door with one hand while balancing one of Arthur’s lunch trays in my other hand. Arthur stopped speaking and the room fell silent as I circled the table, placing a steaming mug at each man’s place. I reached Arthur last and handed him his cup with a smile.