

ABSTRACT

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What follows are three short stories and a novella, all currently in progress. “The Fourth Tap” pours beers with a brewpub owner who finds a long-forgotten, dusty bottle. “Pella” collects truffles with an American and his hound in the oak groves of southern France. “Forecasting – A Collection of Vignettes” plummets through the roof of a gymnasium in Loma Linda, California like an inexplicable ice block. “The Pursuit of Rivers” proceeds in four parts, beginning with a trip to the Delaware shore.

THE FOURTH TAP, AND OTHER STORIES

by

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The Fourth Tap

Six months earlier, Saul Keller had been inspired. In a corner of one of the bottommost shelves of his local distributor, hidden between a half-stack of napkins and a boxed wine, he had found a seven-year-old bottle of a Flemish sour ale, dusty and faded. He'd never noticed it before. Saul decided to give it a home (figuring that it would be oxidized and undrinkable) only because it was sitting on the sale shelf, and because it was essentially orphaned, and because it happened to have been bottled in the very same year he first opened shop. A sheet of white paper covered its outside (to prevent the contents from being lightstruck), there was gold foil crinkled over the top of its cap, and the picture on its curled front label showed the head and shoulders of a serious-looking man wearing a scarf. There was something to be said for the last bottle of anything.

It was just before eleven a.m. on a Thursday, when the respectable people of the world were sitting inside their offices instead of standing in the checkout line of a bottle shop wearing jeans and slippers and a Hair of the Dog t-shirt, holding one small bottle of beer. Saul's work obliged him to remain semi-nocturnal – but, despite having just woken up, he decided he at least looked better kempt than most of the other customers standing in line that morning (“The Breakfast Club,” as Peggy liked to call them).

“So you think this is the one, Saul?” the woman behind the counter asked him.

“Peggy, have you ever seen a more miserable looking bottle of beer?”

“That’s the spirit,” she said, grinning widely and squinting at her checkout screen.

Saul knew that she would see him as more than a little hopeless for purchasing old beer, and for this reason alone he had twice left the checkout line to return the bottle to its hiding spot. At least the people behind him were buying alcohol they could be certain of drinking at some point, and this made him wonder whether he was more or less hopeless than the Breakfast Club. But he’d already tried all the other beers.

Peggy tried scanning the bottle of Flemish sour half a dozen times, as though Saul were trying to purchase a whole six-pack of it. “It’s one of those mornings,” she sighed, pressing her nails along the bottle’s back UPC label and making another attempt to scan it – only to find that the item no longer appeared in the shop’s inventory. She then tried browsing through the pricelist line-by-line, looking for something similar.

“Whoops,” Saul said, shrugging to the person behind him.

Peggy had made it through the first couple pages when one of the Breakfast Club members at the back of the line groaned impatiently, holding up his plastic bottle like it mattered, like a clear-colored talisman, and Peggy (for a moment) looked as though she were going to crack Saul’s bottle against the counter and start something.

Instead, she exhaled softly, as if blowing away a feather.

She punched in a price of sixty-two cents.

“My age,” she whispered to Saul, who put away his credit card.

“We’re both going to laugh,” he said, “when I open this later tonight and find it’s absolutely wonderful stuff.”

“Or I’ll read about you in the newspaper,” Peggy said, sliding his purchase into a small paper bag. “I’ll have to deny everything.”

Out in the parking lot, Saul tucked the bottle into his car’s glove compartment, wedging a roadmap underneath it for safekeeping. He pressed the radio’s play button and headed for home, tapping against the wheel and thinking about the upcoming night. In a few hours the streets would be packed again, and the respectable men and women of the world would loosen their suits and stretch their limbs and feel a deep thirst in their bellies. By then he would have last night’s glassware cleaned up. There was just enough time for lunch, then a quick read through the latest Ale Street News, then some pushups behind the bar, and finally a few calls to his regulars to remind them that he’d be tapping his new IPA.

Saul pulled into a brick-lined alleyway, parking close to the wall. He walked up the front steps of *Saul’s Artisan Ales*, with its metal sign screeching overhead, resting the dusty bottle on the windowsill as he fished out his keys. His business had no other employees, so there was no one to help him with the door – it was basically a one-man show – and, as such, each evening called for his utmost attention and resolve.

Once inside, he put his bottle into the countertop fridge and forgot about it.

At exactly four o’clock, feeling no difference between himself and the gravitational center of a small universe, Saul returned to the front door and propped it open, finding Naven and Jim-Jim already smoking outside. “You look like a

penguin,” Jim-Jim told him. Saul excused himself to make sure things were settled inside, kicking his pointy slippers (a gift from a friend traveling abroad) into a corner behind the bar. He poured out a small sample of the IPA he’d just tapped, allowing its foam to accumulate and curl up the sides of his glass. He inhaled deeply, checking to make sure that it had turned out well enough to sell. By the time he finished his sample glass, his first official customers of the evening were already hanging up their coats in the foyer.

Saul had always enjoyed such moments: the rumbling silence of the barroom as it opened, the young and unfamiliar (and mildly attractive, to be sure) bartender smiling and checking the tap lines and, for all intents and purposes, looking forward to the bright company of new people. It showed an optimism that ran contrary to most things. There was a sense of fullness, of warmth and possibility in each evening – and Saul had always appreciated being the vehicle for such nights. He felt a tingling at the tips of his fingers, like the onset of frostbite or the know-better giddiness of a child, as he asked the night’s first customers whether they might be at all interested in trying something new.

“I keep those first three taps for the uninspired,” Saul said. “Try this.”

By seven-thirty, every barstool and couch and booth was full. Excess coats were piled onto a folding chair just inside the foyer. Regulars brought their empty pint glasses back up to the bar, instead of stacking them or lining them up or putting them into their pockets, and Saul loaded up the dishwasher in-between pours and handed out clean, full pints. His beer sold well that evening, such that he barely served

anything else. He even slid his pointy slippers back on, feeling more comfortable in his movements.

He felt alive and purposeful and attuned.

By eleven o'clock the crowd began to disperse. Couples and groups departed with an occasional shared pleasantry or kind word about Saul's new IPA, commenting about how it tasted a bit like oranges, and how much they liked oranges, dropping tips on the inner lip of the counter as they went to collect their jackets. Saul began heating up two pots of water on the stovetop, wiping off empty tables and collecting up dirty glassware, patiently waiting for his last customers to determine that they were fully sated.

By twelve the bar was empty. The water reached a low boil just as he was waving goodbye to the taxis carrying off his closers. Saul closed the front door and shuttered the windows and settled himself into a long, quiet night of brewing. It was only then, as he was searching for inspiration, that he remembered the fridge.

He took down a clean mason jar from one of the bar cabinets. He allowed the bottle of Flemish sour to warm up on the counter for a few minutes, near the stove. It opened with a light *pop* of carbonation. Almost immediately, there was an unusual scent of tart cherries and something that reminded him of lemon juice. With his nose scrunched up like a mouse, Saul poured the reddish-brown liquid into the bottom of the mason jar. He took the tiniest sip possible (assuming that it would either kill him or amuse him, easily) and was confused to realize that this was exactly what he'd been looking for.

Six months later, after searching out other brewer's recipes on the style, after trying other bottled versions that Peggy was able to specially order for him, after consulting an acquaintance from college (now distant) who had first gotten him interested in brewing, after deciding upon an authentic rendition of the style for his regulars (trying to mimic that inspired moment after everyone had left), after purchasing a French oak barrel from a distant vineyard (driving two hours out, then two hours back with an oak barrel rolling around in his trunk), after cultivating wild yeast strains and performing the initial brew over a period of two days – after patience, sanitization, and a hopefulness that he hadn't before known – Saul carried the finished keg of Flemish sour ale up from his basement, hooked it up to the fourth tap, and knew in his heart that he'd made a terrible mistake.

There was nothing to be done.

Jim-Jim asked him if he was trying to be an asshole. Naven took one small sip and looked at him as though Saul were speaking a foreign language at the far end of a tunnel. “What were you thinking?” his customers asked him. “What did you expect?” Some of them left. Some curtly requested a glass of something else. Saul was soon the only person drinking the Flemish sour ale – refilling his mason jar in an irresponsible fashion while serving glass after glass to his customers from the first three taps.

Just before midnight that evening, feeling lost and contrary to himself, Saul singled out an attractive older woman sitting by herself at the far end of the bar. He'd never seen her before. She appeared to have traveled a significant distance to be there, and, instead of the blue jeans and t-shirts and relaxed appearance of his bar

crowd, she was wearing an expensive gabardine suit with a thrilling neckline. She wasn't drinking. He noticed her attempt, unsuccessfully, to hit on some of his female customers, including Jim-Jim's loud-mouthed wife – such that he knew that this woman wouldn't return to *Saul's Artisan Ales* anytime soon. She was the only person having as equally poor a time.

Saul whispered to her that they were both hopeless, that she could stay as long as she wanted, that he'd see out his regulars after closing and then show her all the things that were percolating downstairs. He had to explain this, slurring the final syllables of each detail. He agreed to drive her straight home once he had sobered up. She told him that she wasn't interested in men, and he replied that they were two peas in a pod.

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When Saul returned from seeing out his closers, latching the front door behind them and straightening things in the foyer, she was standing behind the counter pouring out small helpings from each of the taps. “And I've already been replaced,” Saul decided. He sat himself down at the tavern's front windows, trying to look preoccupied while she played bartender, peering out across the avenue as he waited for his water to boil.

It was shortly after one in the morning. The sidewalks outside were empty, and the only light came from the antique streetlamp hanging directly across from Saul's bar. He soon turned from the window and instead watched as she finished filling up

the bottom quarter of each glass, arranging all four into a line atop the mahogany bar before seating herself. He could see the little cloud-like puffs of smoke rising up behind her and could hear the roiling of the two pots.

He had decided to brew a simple, harmless pilsner.

He wondered what he had said earlier, or at least how she had interpreted his offer. She barely acknowledged his presence, even as he began noisily piling glassware into the dishwasher, and he wondered whether he had said something foolish. Perhaps she figured that they would merely be sharing the same space quietly, that this was a special extension of drink hours – that she could perhaps sit in a corner and ruminate to herself as he cleaned and measured and cooked. Her body (perched high atop one of the bar’s straight-backed stools) seemed to be attached to his own by some sort of cantilever device, such that her shoulders gently shifted away from him whenever he walked past. He would soon be clear-headed enough to drive her home, and, in spite of himself, he was looking forward to finishing up the night’s brewing quickly.

“You seem like the kind of guy who doesn’t need any help,” she said.

“Precisely,” Saul replied. “You just sit there and look pretty.”

She gave a short laugh – a snort, actually – pleased he was willing to humor her.

Saul turned the front two burners down. He poured a bag of powder into one of the simmering pots, measuring its temperature and continuing to stir as his company quietly sampled her line of beers. He regretted his earlier, muddled intentions, whatever they’d been. He knew that if he’d left her alone she would probably be feeling better by now. If she were home, she’d have already forgotten the failed

evening, about spending her night at a foreign bar, putting herself out foolishly and having nothing to show for it.

“So what’s this?” she asked him, tipping the rim of her glass forward. “Is this beer?”

The remaining foam was pink. He could smell sour cherries and lemon juice, even from across the bar, and he was amazed that she had finished the glass.

“A beer that only fools like,” he reassured her, forcing a smile.

Saul reached around the steaming pot with his sleeve in his hand, wiping away a circle of condensation from the bar-length mirror. From where he stood, he could see his own reflection alongside that of his slowly wilting audience: head down, her chin resting uncomfortably atop an elbow, exhausted, eyes peering down into the foam at the bottom of her first glass, watching the bubbles pop. She noticed him looking over, and responded by flicking her finger against the glass’s side, making them pop faster. He realized that he had just unintentionally called her a fool.

“Madame,” he asked her, “you do realize why we’re here tonight, don’t you?”

“Elise.” She tilted her gaze up and over the remaining foam, keeping her chin tucked. She had the look of someone who had just been called on unexpectedly.

“Madame *Elise*,” he corrected himself. “You know why we’re both here tonight?”

She hesitated. “The cabs don’t run as far as my house this late. And you live downstairs.”

“Wrong.”

She flicked her glass again, nearly tipping it over this time, startling herself.

“The reason you and I are here tonight,” he continued, “against all odds, despite countless unspeakable dangers and obvious mortal peril – fully aware of the hardships, the insurmountable fissures, the misalignment of certain distant planets, etcetera – despite knowing far better, you and I are here tonight, together and fearless in our foolish efforts, to brew the greatest beer in the world.”

He puffed out his chest and slapped the mahogany bar, for effect.

“Well,” she said, sipping her second glass, “I hope it tastes better than this one.”

Saul deflated and went over to unlock his tall cupboard of ingredients at the far end of the room. “That’s one of the macros,” he hissed. “If you’re going to play bartender, you need to pay better attention to the tap handles. ‘B’, ‘M’, ‘C’. Then my beers, which only go through the furthest one. You’re drinking them backwards.”

“I may have mixed these up...” she started to say, but Saul was already noisily sorting through the shelves of the cupboard, moving aside glass jars, modified shakers, bags full of powders and grain. He returned to the stove momentarily, turning the flame to its lowest setting before taking up a recipe book and flipping to an empty page.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, scribbling down a few initial notes.

“Haven’t you already started cooking something else?”

“Madame Elise, that is pilsner malt.”

She stepped down gingerly from the barstool, ignoring him temporarily, smoothing out the front and back edges of her skirt. She carried her second glass over to the shelves of ingredients, placing it on the floor before moving canisters around carefully, peering into the cubic fridge at the cabinet’s bottom, reading labels

aloud. Ground Vietnamese cinnamon. Oak chips. Dried mint. Edible flowers. Blue Mountain Coffee, whole bean. Coriander. Buckwheat honey. Smoked beechwood. Cloves.

“Why do you have all these?”

“Because it’s impossible to know my mood ahead of time. ... Strong or weak?”

“Weak,” she replied.

“We’ll be making something strong then: a brew sturdy and potent.” He scribbled a few lines of ingredients into his notebook. “Sweet or bitter?”

“I didn’t think I’d be spending the last hour of my night with a male brewer.”

Saul put his pencil to his chin and considered this. “We’ll be making something sweet tonight: a barleywine, or maybe a Baltic porter. ... What about spices and fruit and so forth? Feel free. Does anything in there strike a chord? I obviously don’t have to encourage you to rummage. This isn’t a museum.”

On the top shelf, using the lower rungs of the barstool to give herself a boost, behind boxes and a cotton mesh pouch, Elise spotted a tall, cylindrical jar holding what looked to be black licorice hanging down from the center of the top lid. She took the jar out and gave it a shake, causing its contents to bump together like wet leaves.

Saul winced behind her back, adding the ingredient to the growing list. “Vanilla beans: Madagascar’s Bourbon Mountains, organic,” she read. “Will these work?”

Upon turning, she noticed Saul’s concern with the way she was handling the beans’ fragile casing (holding it up to the light with three fingers; peering in with one eye kept closed as she shook). She put her hands firmly around its metal base and

carried it over to the bar with her arms outstretched, setting it down next to the other ingredients.

Saul wiped the dust from its top and sides with a towel.

“You are an aficionado, Elise – a connoisseur through and through. Let no one tell you differently.”

“Now you’re just making fun...”

“I’m serious,” he insisted, “of course, these will require a bit more time.”

Elise shut the wooden cabinet and carried her barstool back over to where she had been sitting at the beginning of the evening. She removed her jacket, folding it carefully and laying it on the barstool beside her, feeling more at ease with the situation. Her top underneath was less formal than the rest of her outfit: a simple long-sleeve cardigan, the kind of thing that one would normally wear to a bar. “What can I do?”

“In a few minutes, I’ll turn this down and begin adding the hops.”

“Right, but what can I do? I can’t just sit here looking pretty all night.”

Saul grinned. “I’m serious,” he said. “There’s really nothing else for you to do. I’ll just turn the heat low and let the hops do their thing while I take you home.”

She looked appalled, as though she had swallowed a bug.

“The ingredients were the important part,” he assured her. “The rest is just waiting around for the brewpot to do its thing. I’m sure you’d rather get to sleep.” He knew that she was only trying to humor him – a kind show of company after a long night. It would have been all but guaranteed: he’d screw something up with her

constant, curious eyes behind him, watching as he performed what was normally an intimate, solitary process.

It just wasn't something he felt he could do tonight.

Saul stopped stirring and walked over to sit beside her at the bar, realizing her had hurt her feelings. He wiped his hands into the clean side of the towel, then draped it over his shoulders. He sat silent for a moment, looking at their ingredients, then smacked her lightly on the thigh with the towel. "I don't know what to tell you," he said.

Elise looked up at him slightly stunned, then rubbed her leg in mock agony. "You promised you would show me what you have going on downstairs."

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He descended the fifteen steps in complete darkness, counting them so as to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe at the bottom. Elise was wearing her jacket again, as he had advised her of the cooler temperatures downstairs. She was a few steps behind, carefully walking in her heels, and he considered quickly tossing some of the dirty clothes (or anything else on the floor) into the hamper, just to tidy up the room in the simplest way possible. He didn't want her to think of him as a cluttered person.

He wondered why he had never told any of his other customers that he lived in the basement. Was it really that strange? He decided that it was simply a matter of keeping things separate, of maintaining a professional distance. There was a time

allocation involved with these sorts of things – if one spent a certain amount of time with another person there would be a breakthrough, a transitional point that didn't have any sort of return – a threshold, a personal Rubicon – whereby people would be able to make that sort of information known to one another. "I live downstairs," he whispered to her.

"Duh."

The light switch didn't help much, and the far corners of his room were illuminated only by the small window above his bed, looking out onto the avenue and the streetlamp perched just in front of his bar. The twin bed fit snugly in the corner, perpendicular to the stairwell. On the left-hand wall were two large dressers that looked featureless in the auxiliary light. The central feature was the arrangement of two long, aluminum shelves, perhaps two feet above the ground, upon which were more than a dozen batches of beer that Saul had fermenting, percolating like teapots gone mad.

He knew, of course, that she wouldn't be back anytime soon. He had estimated the length of time that the fermentation would require, and perhaps they could establish a particular day to get back together to see how their beer was doing. They'd talk about a tapping event on the way to her apartment – something to celebrate Saul's first collaborative brew, even if most of the input she gave was, at best, inspirational and driven by whimsy. But it would end up being of little importance. She wouldn't return. Or she'd forget the designated evening, the planned tapping occasion – unintentionally, of course; without malice – and only later would she recall the appointment. Perhaps she'd return many months later, out of a

curiosity that wouldn't subside entirely, given the chances and their original professed aim (maybe it would come up in a conversation, and she'd tell a joke about the short time she'd spent here), and Saul would later tell her how well their beer had been received by his customers, and she wouldn't feel a thing. It would be water under the bridge, and she'd smile and apologize before leaving. Each night afterwards, he'd pause momentarily and be slightly worse off for this night.

"So what's this one? This isn't much of a tour so far." She pointed to a carboy near the left side of the room, filled with a cloudy, golden liquid. Bubbles had accumulated in the glass container, and the little water-filled airlock was percolating loudly.

"That's a German hefeweizen," he said. "It would prefer to be cooler."

"And this one?" She pointed to a very light one, almost clear, at the far end.

"I got into an argument with a customer a few weeks back. That's a light lager."

"Ah," she said, no longer surprised by anything. "This last one?"

In the back corner of the aluminum shelving, at the darkest end of the spectrum, sat an imperial stout that Saul had been waiting on for quite a while, nearly as long as it had taken him to make the Flemish sour. While it hadn't tasted as well as he had expected right after brewing it, he remained hopeful. "This one's interesting," he confided to her. "It will be good when it's finally ready."

"But not as good as ours, right?"

Saul hesitated for a moment. "By definition." He walked over to the small window at the other end of the room, facing away from her, looking out at the streetlamp and the office buildings. He wasn't sure how to properly phrase it. "It

simply can't be as good as the greatest beer in the world. So ours will be much better, necessarily."

He was, if anything, confused. He felt angry with himself and terrified and guilt-ridden, for no good reason. He decided that, once he dropped her off, perhaps he would continue driving, never to return to such a hopeless vocation again.

He stood silent. He wanted to say something memorable to her, something that would somehow prevent her from forgetting him, any series of words that would fill the void between them before they went back upstairs to the car and left for good.

But he got sidetracked or confused, and he instead ended up talking about the plans he had for future recipes, things that his customers had suggested or that had been running through his mind for a while. "I've always imagined having my own bottling line," he confessed. "I've always wanted another employee." His arms felt heavy at his sides, and for the first time that evening he felt as though he were suddenly much older than Elise, as though she were suddenly invested with life and he were an elderly man living out his last days in isolation. "I don't know what I'm doing sometimes," he said. "Sometimes it feels like the long nights and constant entertaining aren't worth anything, like I'm just fumbling for words in the dark." He mentioned how hopeful he'd felt when he first purchased the bar, and how it felt to be at the epicenter of attention, channeling that energy and making people feel good and sociable and in high spirits, if only for an evening. He paused, faltering and sick with himself, sweating even in the cool air. "The beer we are making upstairs," he confessed to her, "can't possibly be the greatest beer in the world. There's no such thing. Honestly, ours was muddled from the start."

He waited for her to say something, then realized that there was really nothing to say after that. Case closed. End of the line. He was actually kind of relieved that it was all over now, that all of his concerns were now unmoored. Who cared?

“I’m guessing you want to go,” he murmured. “I’ll start up the car and warm it up a bit before we head out. I’ll shut the stove off on the way out and let things settle.”

When he turned, she was curled up on his bed, just beginning to softly snore.

He considered waking her. He even put his hand on her elbow. They would laugh about the circumstance and head upstairs, slightly disappointed but also entirely relieved. A pressure valve would be released somewhere. Things would be settled. Instead, Saul folded the comforter over her and took one of his pillows, leaving the lights on when he left so that she wouldn’t wake up in an unfamiliar place.

Upstairs, Saul turned down the burners and took up a seat near the front windows, looking out towards the streetlamp outside. He held his half-full pint glass up towards the light, savoring the calm of the evening, noticing how the bubbles rose energetically from the bottom, forming a head that reminded him more of snow-capped mountains than clouds or pillows or foam. He wrote these things down.

As he tilted the glass away from him, pearly remnants stayed affixed to its side temporarily, resisting the fall, before slowly cascading downwards and glistening. “Nice lacing,” he wrote in the margins of his recipe book, recording the Flemish sour ale’s attributes so that he would be able to compare it to future batches. A dark-red core. Translucent, golden-brown color along its edges. Raisins and tart cherries and

lemons in the aroma. The vanilla from the barrel. The snow-capped mountains, slowly fading.

He turned and imagined Elise taking up her place near the brew pot, stirring and readjusting the flame to prevent boilovers, as he would suggest, occasionally looking at him as he stared out the window through the beer he'd been serving all night.

Pella

He is pulled through silent woods past midnight by a coal-black bitch. The pair heads east, away from the edges of the town of *Uzès*, away from the light and slight pollution and trampling of feet. Moonlight pierces the clipped tree-growth overhead, illuminating the ground in oblique patches, which they know enough to avoid. The moon, he imagines as he peers up between the limbs, is slightly larger on this continent, and thereby harder to keep from. Oak branches are swept aside without sound. The air is still. Pella presses forward with a slight limp, keeping her nose a few inches off the ground, examining trunks as she tugs the nylon leash.

La Pelleteuse. His coal-black excavator.

For minutes at a time there are no sounds aside from his boot scrapes and the snuffling of Pella, who is famished. The remainder of the village sleeps, save for those moving elsewhere in the forest – also being led by leashes through the sparsely-planted oak groves. The village of *Uzès* is surrounded on all sides by these connected patches of trees, bequeathed as public property when families collectively departed or reached the ends of their lineage, and he and Pella have spent each night surveying as much ground as they could cover, since the beginning of November. The collimated trees allow sound to pass through easily, channeling voices and distant footfalls, so hunting pairs will typically hear one another well before they ever come face-to-face. He's never actually seen another soul in the groves at night. Sometimes he desires to hurry in a sound's direction, to clasp the encroaching individual by the collar and push him or her into the nearest patch of moonlight, merely to exchange glances –

simply to establish certainty that the sounds he hears actually come from other human beings. Perhaps he has always been mistaken in the things he's heard, and is instead entirely alone each night. Pella's stomach groans quietly, and he regrets the necessity of starving her before each hunt. She is his only company in Uzès.

A leather drawstring satchel hangs loosely from the interior of his jacket, hidden from view, and has remained empty ever since the two left their apartment in the village shortly after nightfall. He holds tight to Pella's leash with one hand, while in his other he carries a small green flashlight, the portal of which is covered with a single layer of butcher paper to dim its glow. In his back pocket is his trusty *picon* – a tiny, two-pronged shovel, resembling a pointed door handle. The knees of his jeans are dirty and slightly wet. He wears short-sided boots, and his collar is upturned. There is a bag of sliced table cheese in one of his pockets.

In spite of the small concerns he carries with him from their apartment (the unopened letters, the stuck chimney, the regular list of monthly expenses), he finds himself easily distracted by the sections of moonlight looming overhead, like stained glass windows – letting Pella lead the way and imagining himself in exactly the same place without an apartment to return to. He has never regretted his decision to move here. His eyes are a light blue, or grey beneath the moonlight, and dark curls peek out from beneath the edges of his woolen cap. His feet are quick, awkward. He catches his toes on a low-lying stump as the pair passes through a section of brush.

He looks for tell-tale flies or a moonlit outcropping, though Pella is responsible for most, if not all, of their finds. She moves from one tree to the next, inspecting without lingering, pushing back the undergrowth with her front paws before smelling

a second time. It's infrequent that Pella's owner (a term he hates for himself, but which remains true: he paid €2,900 to one of the departing *truffiers*) is of any use in finding the appropriate locations for digging. Their livelihood depends almost entirely on the efficacy of Pella's nose.

A dry shift of wind passes through them as they reach the top of the main embankment, one of the few notable features of this ground beneath the oak groves. The winding mound of earth, extending a few kilometers east-to-west, once supported a chalky roadway that connected two of the larger rural properties. Now, like everything nearby, it's scrubland dotted with oak trees.

Pella slows her pace and directs her attention to a clump of trees further down the road. He lets her wander along the length of the leash. He stares down the hill, perhaps a fifteen-foot drop, and finds himself transfixed by a large, illuminated section, uncovered by tree-growth. He hears gentle sounds in the distance and tries to get Pella to cease her movements. She sneaks her nose into a patch of briars, and her sound is unintentionally muffled.

It occurs to him that perhaps this is how other truffiers handle *his* sudden presence: standing there in the darkness at a distance, encouraging their animals to settle, waiting for him and Pella to go about their business – allowing them to sniff the area, then head elsewhere – before moving on themselves. Perhaps they watch him at night, when he thinks he is alone in the groves of Uzès. They have likely noticed his dimmed flashlight, his professionally-trained digger. Can they hear the commands he gives, in English, to a French hound? Do they joke of this clumsy foreigner, trudging through their forest haphazardly? Do they delight in his missteps?

He wouldn't blame them.

He imagines there to be an adequate distance from the approaching pair, and crouches low to remove his head from the moonlight. He will wait for them to pass. Pella tugs insistently at her leash, hoping to continue forward. He pays her little attention.

In the clearing, the head and front legs of an animal slowly materialize, then its hind quarters, followed by a drooping leash that extends back into the shade. The owner stays hidden just behind this white-haired mutt, keeping to the edges of the glade. The recurrent sound of metal pressing into topsoil flickers in-between the trees, as though the pair's shovel is being used for balance. It floats just behind the unsupported end of the leash: ghost-white knuckles curled around its handle; the blade catching sections of the overhead light in its arc. The periodic scuff of rust hitting dirt. Pella tries to tug him in the opposite direction, hoping to edge towards something aromatic in the thicket nearby. But he continues listening to the pair's tin-like marching tune, their whispered exchanges growing louder, echoing through the groves. "*Truffles, Margot. Allez aux truffes.*" And he remains crouched, holding tight to Pella's leash, waiting for this pair to leave.

They pause at the bottom of the embankment, just below him, allowing Margot time to sniff and inspect some of the larger trunks. For a moment he is fearful that Pella will react to this animal's foreign scent. When he turns, however, she is looking past him with her nose kept low and her front paws outstretched, silently inching forward on her belly. Together they watch as Margot leads her owner further down

the clearing, following the lower edges of the overgrown road before finally fading in the distance. Eventually, their noises subside.

After a few minutes he smiles, rubs Pella behind the ears and taps her rump, letting her know that it is time to continue their nightly walk. The emptiness of his satchel, hanging limp at his side, is not his foremost concern right now. There is still time. It is only two o'clock, perhaps three in the morning after the Carpentras market, and many hunting pairs from Uzès will likely be taking the night off, leaving their regular sections of the forest unpicked.

He decides that they should head further away from the town limits, perpendicular to the roadway, in the direction of Sagries and, ultimately, the Mediterranean. The conditions will be better there, he expects; the overhead shade more complete. He listens for the different footsteps, trying to maintain in his head the syncopated march of Margot's owner. He can clearly discern his own: the coarse crunch of leaves and acorns underfoot; the give and push of the soil. Pella's steps are more gentle: four paws, one slightly behind the others in touching ground. There are further sounds, too – more than Margot and her owner could account for. He counts them unthinkingly, relishing these deviations from the nightly silence of the groves. He's lost in thought when Pella starts to lengthen her strides, causing him to lose the marching tune and return to the forest. Is it raining?, he asks himself. Perhaps soon. Perhaps once they are back in their apartment sleeping, their full satchel resting on the kitchen counter. He is reluctant to admit further delays. They manage to make it a few meters down the steep embankment, pushing past limbs and wet brush, making all efforts not to tumble forward, before he is convinced that they are being followed.

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The first thing he thinks about is that Uzès has been good to him so far. He is especially fond of the oils infused by the truffle harvest, the scented scrambled eggs each morning (which he'll often split with Pella, maintaining the shine of her coat); the measured respect he is given by the men at the shop selling oils and sweet Breton pancakes and licorice. These men know he is a truffier, albeit an imported one: he carries his groceries under one arm, trying to keep Pella down from the shelves with the other, gently refusing to leave her tied outside. They give him the proper change and seem honest in wishing the pair a successful hunt. In another country he would try to tip them. Instead, his apartment pantry is overflowing with groceries he doesn't need. The second thing he thinks about are these spoiled groceries.

The third thing he considers is how hard the ground is here. While he can easily dig down a foot or so with his *picon*, into the dark mixture of topsoil and clay and tangled roots – beyond that, anyone shoveling will soon be stopped by the shelves of limestone underneath. In Uzès, even the plots of land set aside for the cemeteries must be quarried out beforehand. Closer to town the soil is the worst: suitable for vineyards and foundations, though hardly for digging. Before the season began, he would often bring Pella out to the village green at the southwest corner of Uzès, leaving her tied to a tree nearby as he struggled to dig down half a foot. He carried along a bag holding truffle slices and adulterated chunks of sausage, soaked in Bixtrex. Into these small holes he would toss one piece of each, often looking back at

the tree Pella was tied to, using his *picon* to smooth over the dirt at the top of the buried things, hiding his work. He would manage this successfully perhaps half a dozen times (a labor of love), hitting limestone too soon on countless other occasions before finally giving up, throwing down his *picon* in disgust and going over to untie Pella. All of their early training sessions began this way. He allowed her to navigate as she wished through the area he had just implanted with truffles, sniffing the ground and digging small exploratory holes, then searching again.

He had overheard reports of untimely meetings in the groves: stories often ending in violence or strychnine-dosed animals. A well-placed bit of poison could destroy both the hound and, from the missed season, even the most successful of truffiers. While he refused to carry any sort of weapon along with him at night, he had taken all reasonable precautions for ensuring Pella's safety, in the form of these practice hunts. After she had made the mistake any number of times, successfully locating and gobbling down and then spitting up the unbearably bitter traps he had left for her, buried in these holes beneath the park, Pella refused to eat from anywhere other than his hand or her food bowl in their apartment. He's not sure what else he could do to ensure her safety besides muzzling her, which he is unwilling to do.

The final thing he remembers is the market in Carpentras, or how little he would miss this aspect of their work. While most of their daylight hours were spent sleeping in, or loping around Uzès with Pella, or playing fetch on the pebble beaches near the *Pont du Gard*, waiting for night to come – their Fridays existed inside an unventilated warehouse an hour's bike ride away, trying to sell the truffles they had collected that week. He had been asked to provide his name and passport earlier in the day,

struggling to keep his patience while local hunters brushed Pella aside with their soiled boots, walking straight in. The muscular officials guarding the door, small eyes focused over their clipboards, soon located his name, then asked him to hold Pella still while they examined the small tattoo on her inner thigh – proving (as it had every time before) that she had been a purchase from a well-known, local breeder. They acted surprised as they wrote down his information. He requested a space, as always, near the market's center, near the other professional truffiers, where the distributors would head first. He would be able to command better prices there, allowing them to perhaps take the night off. They were instead allocated one of the square tables near the exits, near the very back of the warehouse, next to the dog-less, part-time hunters bringing in no more than a handful of stale tubers each week. These men looked at him as though he were lost, until they noticed his hound and the fullness of his leather satchel; then they looked at him with malice or not at all. On top of his assigned table were a stack of note cards and a red marker, as well as three blackened wicker baskets with holes in the bottom. He had started bringing his own.

It had been a relatively good week for them, and he sold off most of their haul by the early afternoon. The distributors could be, at times, overwhelming: cheap and conniving, undercutting the posted prices, smoky, sharp within the bounds of their trade, generous with their sounds. He didn't mind haggling with them, playing along – allowing them to squeeze the wrinkly black tubers sitting in his basket, putting them up to their noses and inhaling the smells of soil and dried leaves, the hints of garlic, indicating freshness and proper storage. Even at the very back of the warehouse he was able to pull in a decent price, scratching Pella behind the ears, signing the

paperwork to formalize their sales. He generally tolerated the distributors, though there was one he disliked and often argued with: a bulbous and effusive woman from up north, near *Puymeras*, known for her ability to quickly insult both the quality of the truffles and the pair that had found them. After she had approached their table, scratching off the dark shell from a few of their tubers, checking the flesh inside, turning with a snort – as though their items had profaned the interior of her nostrils – after she was some distance away from them, he bent down to Pella and whispered, “Some day you and I will find a truffle as big as that fat woman’s head.”

There was something about the sales in Carpentras that offended his general sense of things, something about the noise and the way the other truffiers were ill-suited to argue with the distributors: quiet and solitary by nature, normally taciturn, many still wearing their quilted vests and ragged corduroys from the night before, trying to keep their animals humored. In determining the value of the things they had found, however, they often became loud and unsettled, illogical in their arguments, sweating and banging their fists on the tables, shaking their baskets. He always tried to leave before the very end of the Carpentras market, when these exchanges would be at their worst. “This,” he said to Pella. “This isn’t what any of them have come here for.” He wondered how many of these people he had come close to meeting out in the groves at night, and whether he would ever meet any of them. He then marked down his prices and left.

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The night has grown slightly cooler, and he holds the collar of his jacket shut with his free hand. They pass over the top of a stone-built walkway, rounding the bend and examining some of the oak trees at the base of the bridge, before continuing on. Pella is animated in her search, sniffing at as many trees as he will allow, both of them aware that they are losing time – that there exists the possibility of returning home empty-handed tonight. Though the ground is still wet from an earlier storm throughout the day, a light drizzle has taken up once more: filling the groves with the sound of slow, channeled water. He can still see a short distance in front of them, despite having hidden away his flashlight earlier. Even amidst the rain he thinks he can hear footsteps.

A few meters ahead Pella catches a strong scent, pulling the leash taut and nearly causing him to lose his balance. He can see it from here. The moonlight hits a rocky outcropping just ahead of them, showing a pair of flies buzzing quietly above a small bump in the ground. He thinks, finally. He thinks: this is what we have both come here for. Even as he and Pella get closer, the flies refuse to abandon their place over this mound of unturned earth, reluctant to leave certain smells behind, casting their speck-like shadows over the contours of the surrounding rocks. They continue their droning surveillance even as Pella puts her nose down, crunching leaves and brush with the soft pressure of her snout. She begins to dig at the top layers with her paws, belly down, and all he can do is watch. He thinks, everything has been worth it. The both of us, here. But even as she digs down towards something aromatic and hidden beneath the brush and topsoil – the rain falling in-between the buzzing of persistent flies – he knows that he will probably never make it out of these groves, that the

following sounds have gotten too close to them to be haphazard, that he will soon lose her to this world he has chosen to inhabit for his livelihood. He watches as she pushes dirt aside, looking back at him once or twice while continuing to search. He will revive next to this outcropping of rocks, the swollen ground beneath him empty, and she will be gone.

Forecasting – A Collection of Vignettes

On a Thursday morning in the town of Loma Linda, in southern California’s San Bernardino County, a block of solid ice the size of a small television set fell from the sky with the sound of an artillery shell, puncturing a gymnasium’s roof. The plummeting ice block passed through the corrugated metal like a wet marble through toilet paper – before dropping into the polished gymnasium floor, scattering opaque shards everywhere. By the time local maintenance officials had arrived, there was water water everywhere.

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I’d spent the morning patrolling down Barton and University (better than sitting inside a sweltering office with Denise and her overzealous thighs, let me tell you something), finding nothing more than a few kaput registrations and a domestic over along Oakwood, which had turned out to be nothing terrible. The short transmission over the laptop screen – “big ice hits gymnasium,” with a nearby address – was heads and tails above any competing interests. Being the first to arrive on-scene, I took a short statement from the two startled tennis players who’d been on an outside court (one of them had first phoned it in), before letting myself into the vacant gym through an unlocked side door. I felt like Jonah for a moment – the overhead lights were switched off (the students, I believe, were on their spring break), the windows had all been closed and shuttered, and the only beam of sunlight came down through the

newly-made hole in the roof, maybe two feet across – as though I had just entered some sort of whale. I collected up some of the larger unmelted chunks for evidence (careful not to slip and get an icicle up my end), sealing them into plastic bags I'd pulled from the cruiser's trunk, expecting the FAA to pop by any moment expressing interest. I was still the only person on-scene (it's amazing how slow some of the locals are, like life's one big quiet siesta) when the beam of sunlight fell along the same straight-shot path that ice missile must've taken twenty minutes earlier, lighting up the impact crater near the center of the gym – like something out of Indiana Jones. I don't need to know where it came from. It was purer than anything else I saw that Thursday.

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Teddy locked away all the water-suckers over spring break, taking along his storage keys – off on another one of his little grab-ass “fantasy trips” out to Reno, high-rolling with the rest of our staff's paychecks. We should mutiny the bugger whenever he gets back. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he came back here roaring on-and-on how he won some “drop a huge ice meteor anywhere you damn well please” jackpot, and how he'd felt generous all of a sudden. If it hadn't been for that other ice block falling up near Frisco a few days back (and Teddy doesn't know anyone up near Frisco), I'd have counted him as a prime suspect. He must be laughing his head off at a roulette wheel right now, thinking how much of a headache

it was for me to hand-mop all that melted ice up with only a wringer and our staff's clumsy push-bucket.

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On Thursday morning, April 13th, 2006 – only five days after a nearly identical event had occurred a few hundred miles northwest in Oakland, California – a giant block of ice fell onto Loma Linda University's empty Drayson Center, putting a two-and-a-half-foot-wide gash in the roof and damaging the wooden flooring. In both cases, the ice blocks were composed of clear water and were quite massive: facts which significantly diminished the possibility that these slabs could have fallen from airplanes flying overhead. Ice created by leaks in airline bathrooms is typically blue, from the methylene glycol. Ice chunks that accumulate on an airplane's exterior are typically no more than a few inches thick and usually require "visible moisture" to form. In both above instances, the skies overhead were reported as clear to partly cloudy – nothing special.

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Pat Robertson, after a recent and poorly-annotated conversation with his Lord Almighty, firmly reasoned out that the ice-block incident at Loma Linda was undoubtedly a sign of divine retribution for that institution's singular role in churning out secularized and ghastly-liberal atheistic misfits. When a member of the audience

gently noted that Loma Linda U was predominantly composed of Seventh-Day Adventists, Robertson fell to his knees in rapture, praising the missile-like appearance of the fallen ice block as an obvious sign of God's good grace. When another audience member noted that she was pretty sure that still didn't mean all homosexuals were immediately castigated upon entering the campus limits, Robertson slowly returned to his feet, rearranging his wardrobe and shuddering, as though he were trying to shed an extra layer of skin. Assuming a different tack, he tearfully begged forgiveness for being so blind and pigheaded, when obviously both of those recent ice blocks were a demonstration of direct military aggression by none other than Fidel Castro and his red-belly comrade Hugo Chavez, and (after Robertson had gotten himself sufficiently worked up) all the socialists and pacifists and progressive activists, generally speaking: the very terrorist organizations responsible for supplying the necessary mineral water for this new form of frozen ballistics. Dr. Castro, preoccupied with trying to maintain universal health care in his country in spite of a certain neighbor's fatuous embargo, declined to comment. Mr. Chavez, in a similar vein, merely suggested that Robertson should perhaps exercise a bit more, ideally in an environment as prone to natural disaster as Loma Linda's gym.

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1829 – Córdoba, Spain: 2kg. 1849 – Ord, Scotland: suspicious origins, 6m across, including congealed hailstones. 1851 – rural New Hampshire: 1kg. 1928 – Potter, Nebraska: 0.7kg. 1970 – Coffeyville, Kansas: 0.8kg. 1973 –

Manchester, England: 2kg. Late 1990's – southern Brazil: 181 kg, Mercedes-Benz factory. January 8th—27th, 2000 – Iberian Peninsula, Spain: 0.3 to 3kg. 2003 – Aurora, Nebraska: 0.5m across, house's gutter. 2006 – Leicestershire, England: “football-sized.” 2006 – Oakland, California: 90+ kg. 2006 – Loma Linda, California: 0.8m across, gymnasium. This preliminary listing is only as accurate as its sources, and shouldn't be considered exhaustive.

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The term “megacryometeors,” coined by scientists Jesus Martinez-Frías and David Travis in 2002, refers to atmospheric ice conglomerations that – while appearing similar to hailstones both structurally and chemically – don't depend upon cumulonimbus cloud-cover for their generation. In their recent study “Oxygen and Hydrogen Isotopic Signatures of Large Atmospheric Ice Conglomerations,” published in 2005 in the *Journal of Atmospheric Chemistry*, Martinez-Frías, Travis, and other leading atmospheric scientists used hydrochemical comparison tests in an attempt to determine the origins of the megacryometeors that fell on Spain's Iberian Peninsula in January of 2000. While the group settled upon the general location in the Earth's atmosphere where the megacryometeors were formed – somewhere in the upper troposphere, approximately 10km above sea level – they were less inclined to reach full agreement regarding exactly *how* the heavy ice accumulations were created. Martinez-Frías, from the Planetary Geology Laboratory in Madrid, proposed that these falling ice chunks were formed through an as-yet-unknown physical process

similar to hail-formation, though requiring terrifically-strong updrafts and increased moisture content in the uppermost levels of the troposphere. Travis, from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, suggested that the megacryometeors instead accumulated along unprotected sections (such as the landing gear) of airplanes passing through similarly-turbulent sections of air. Whatever the methods, the collaboration of scientists agreed that significant increases to the height and folding of the troposphere over the last twenty-five years (largely attributed to decreased ozone levels, and global-warming effects) wouldn't be without some unexpected precipitation.

The Pursuit of Rivers

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I was quite young when it first happened, no older than six or seven. My family was vacationing on the shores of Delaware in late May, as we did nearly every year, so this in itself doesn't help in fixing on an exact date. But I was no older than six or seven. My parents and I were staying in one of the two-room bungalows just north of where the shoreline begins to curl away from the water, after which one is forced to drive across a lengthy suspension bridge with the Atlantic and Indian River Bay on either side. Our vacation house was just north of this bridge.

The house itself was small and set two blocks from the water. But the wind carried along the sand from the beach, and the sidewalks in front of the house, even two blocks away, were not so very different from the sand-covered pavement near the boardwalk. The first time we had left our neighborhood in northern Virginia for vacation, my father had told our family's friends that we'd be staying on beachfront property. Even after we had been there that first year, the first of many, and found that it was actually two blocks away from the beach, nothing changed.

"Beachfront property," he insisted, pointing to the sand on the sidewalks.

There were resort towns a few miles in either direction, with cheaper prices and weekly specials for that time of year, in those last few weeks of spring, but my father had found a quiet pocket of beachfront property that he felt was ideal for our family. I spent a great deal of time at the beach, of course, and inside the attic of the bungalow, or just walking from the beach to the house and back, both blocks, with the

excuse that I had left something behind and needed to find it, whether this meant a return to the vacation house or to the island of blankets that one of my parents had set out. It depended on where they were. Even now, I'm reminded of the necessary walks that helped to pass the time I spent with my family at the Delaware shore.

It says little of a person, what they are like as children. They can be precocious, and curious, and bright-eyed to an utmost degree – yet still turn out to be terrible people when they are older. It predicts next to nothing. Nearly all people in the world are precocious and curious and bright-eyed at one point or another, especially when it comes to evaluating the perimeters of their lives, yet reach that point where they suddenly stop doubting themselves and imagine their world as a closed set. It's a natural state of things, this process of settling. It's also comfortable, this most pleasant and forgetful of states, and each time I've felt settled in my life, I've related this general feeling with our time there on the beaches of Delaware: our blankets laid out on the sand, the translucent canvas of an umbrella overhead, the warmth of sunshine at our feet, all silence. There's that feeling of contentedness, as though the entire world now mattered much less than it did moments earlier, as though we were forgetting something, and my parents would encourage these pauses. I'd mention to them that I'd forgotten something back at the house.

The first time it happened, I had left them to retrieve a book. I don't recall the book's exact title, or even whether or not it was mine, or if it interested me, but I do remember that I was carrying a book of some sort in my hand at the time. It may have been one of my father's historical tomes, which he never really finished. My parents had been talking with one another on the blanket, alternating between hushed

tones and voices that traveled down the shoreline, seemingly unaware that they weren't alone. They were vacationing. I walked the two blocks from the beach by myself, past the fourteen houses that separated ours from the waterfront, past the pastel storefronts and bike shop and ethnic food stores, blaring foreign news.

I walked past an empty lot that had housed an elementary school the year before. And in spite of the heat that year, when I was no more than six or seven years old, that heavy warmth from the beach refused to follow me as I walked beneath the shade of the pine and cherry trees lining the sidewalks, with the lifted sand and the pits crunching underneath my feet. If anything, returning to the house that day felt like the onset of a cold.

I searched out the first item at hand when I reached the house, something to validate my seeking desire to return and leave my parents, or to at least prevent them from asking why I had wanted time to myself in the first place. I left behind sunscreen, hats, towels, and beach toys. I'd hide them in the drawers of the end table nearest the door, so that there would be a habit in place to keep me from forgetting to bring something back.

One of my parents had left a book sitting on the end table. I had been leafing through it earlier in the day while I waited for them to finish their breakfast. The house, in the middle of the day with neither of my parents there, had assumed its own damp quietness. There were no lights on. The living room and kitchen were both visible from that front foyer, where I left my sunscreen and towels and toys, and where one of my parents had left their book behind. I picked it up and, for a moment, considered going up to the attic instead and wasting time there with my pen drawings

and comic books. It was already late in the afternoon, and the rooms were darker than normal, and I felt as though there could easily be someone else in the house and that this would fit just fine with the day so far. The fact that I suspected danger, of course, shows no more than that I had an imagination appropriate for a child.

Outside again, I pulled the door closed behind me, and the trees stood very still and few sounds made it through them to our house. For a moment, I understood why my father liked this place so much: its serenity, the shaded bowers of pines that populated its backyard, the two hammocks near the flower beds. But for some reason I wasn't settled there, or most other places, and perhaps I didn't find our home to be so stressful that I was in need of the same sort of escape as my parents. We were different people. At the time, I simply felt unappreciative. It was only after I found a reprieve in a patch of warm sunlight that I bothered to look back towards the beachfront, past the shops and food markets, and for the first time noticed a small discoloration lining the grey sidewalk, as though it had been painted with a stripe. I didn't then understand the cause of this discoloration: a thin channel of water stretching along the middle of the sidewalk on our side of the street, two feet wide, extending back to the shoreline and beyond my view.

It looked like a flat blue snake, or a long tire mark flecked with the bright grains of sand that floated on its surface, shimmering. It looked like the smallest river.

For a while I looked back out towards the water, trying to make out the outline of the exact umbrella that my parents were sitting underneath. I wondered whether or not they were done. I wondered, too, whether or not we would be going home soon, back to our actual house. The people that walked past on the opposite side of the

street had no visible channel of water on their sections of sidewalk. I called out to one of them, a middle-aged grocer who looked like he was local to the area and who probably wasn't much older than my father. I said to him, please come look at this. He walked across the street towards me, and I could hear voices carried from beyond the shoreline and the sand scuffing beneath his feet.

The channel of water, thin and cool, no more than two inches deep, had managed to stop at the place where we were both standing, so that my ankles were wet and slightly chilled, as they had been for some time. I tried explaining this. "It's nothing," he told me, looking down at the places I tried to point out. "There's nothing there." He was trying to be helpful, of course, and when I looked down again there was nothing there but my feet and the book in the sand.

When we first met, I was sitting on a hill in the southwest corner of campus, watching a man juggling three colored balls. Our college had a rolling, sloping hill near its perimeter, and there was a cement stage of sorts near the hill's midsection, so that it looked like there was a basketball court sitting for no reason there in the middle of a hill. Only there were no hoops or lines on this cement stage of ours, and there was only a man juggling three colored balls.

I was done with classes for the afternoon, and I had hoped, instead of heading back to my apartment, to lie in the sun for a while and come to a decision. At the time I had already been at college for a few years, a small technical school in western Pennsylvania, and I couldn't say for certain that I had been spending my time well. I was nineteen. I had grown my hair out for a while, perhaps as an experiment in solidarity towards people with long hair, but I'd shaved it all off earlier that morning, despite the fact that I believed my head-shape to be irregular. I was sitting in the sun watching the people below, their blankets spread out and the juggling man. I was wearing a baseball cap to keep the glare from my eyes. Across the street at the bottom of the hill, there was a small botanical garden with greenhouse wings.

When I first met her, I was sitting on this hillside trying to determine where exactly I wanted to head afterwards, after I was done with school and had earned a degree in engineering, or economics, or what have you. This was part of my decision. My parents had said, "You will go here, and we will be proud," and I did and they were, and here I was on a hillside with a split river in the distance behind

those greenhouse wings and the juggling. In the distance, a river split in two and surrounded the campus on both sides. I wasn't concerned.

There was a road perpendicular to the base of the hill, with ethnic food trucks parked there, steaming. The prices were clearly marked on the sides of these trucks: \$4.50 for chicken or beef dishes, \$3.50 for noodle platters, \$3.00 for small containers of rice. She was working in one of the trucks serving ethnic food, ringing up purchases at the truck's passenger window. Her mother worked at the stoves near the back, listening carefully for the words she shouted back once each person had ordered. There were two propane tanks attached at the rear of their truck, and steam rose out through the side window where her mother poured and dished the pan-fried meals into containers, shouting out numbers. After customers paid their money, they walked over to this side window and waited for their number to be called. Names weren't useful here. I never heard her mother speak in anything other than numbers.

I had eaten earlier in the afternoon, but felt that I would do better on a full stomach, in making these decisions, and that this would work well in the warm sun and perhaps I would fall asleep watching an old man juggle. This seemed like a pleasant thing: sitting along a hillside watching a man perform, eating my second lunch and falling asleep with my hat over my eyes. I'd lie back on the ground with a container of food beside me, and I wouldn't wake up until the juggler and the crowd and the trucks were gone for the night. I'd wake up to grass in my hair and lines imprinted on the back of my arms. I would be able to hear the rivers.

I waited in line at the ethnic-food truck, behind a professor and three college-age girls who appeared to be sisters. I stood with my back to the truck, waiting my turn.

I watched as the man on the cement stage put each of the colored balls – one red, one black, and one white – into the air in turn. In the air one could smell the hyacinth and roses coming from the gardens across the street. It was late in the spring, just as classes were letting out for the summer, and instead of making a decision I stood in line and watched them go up into the air, two at a time, in pairs: red and black, black and white, white and red. Then again. Then again. I watched the performing man as his hips stood motionless and his arms moved in circles, hoping to mesmerize the crowd in front of him. I wondered if he smiled. I wondered how the crowd appeared behind the heat of the cement stage. From my position at the base of the hill, I could see the waves of heat rising off that stage, blurring and hiding the faces of a small crowd. I imagined a statue juggling.

I then felt myself grow cold, as though a cloud has passed overhead. I heard the sound of voices coming from far away. I heard the sounds of campus and, I thought, the soft impact of those juggling balls being caught and released, caught and released, even at this distance.

“What are you looking at?” she asked me.

“Nothing,” I said. “That man on the pavement.”

“He’s here all the time.”

I turned, walking up to the window to place my order. She looked small in this window, as though she had just replaced someone much more significant than herself. I wondered if they took turns: she and this larger person for whom the window was built. She leaned forward and balanced with her arms stretched out to the countertop, where she took people’s orders. She had thin arms and a mouth that curled up

sharply at its corners, as though she were smirking all the time. Her hair was tied back with a piece of string that reached to her shoulders. The smallest dark eyes. Built like a swimmer, with curved shoulders and a breathless look. Her t-shirt hung close to her frame, and there was a small patch of sweat near her torso from the heat of the cooking. I feared stepping too close, worried that she might fall and injure us both. She carried a broad, close-lipped smile, this balancing girl at the window. I wondered to whom it was directed, or whether it was simply because of the heat rising off the cement. She looked so young.

“Are you staring at me?” she asked.

“I’m not sure what to order.” I looked down both columns of the menu, which was suspended against the wall directly behind her. It was hand-written, hanging down from two pieces of string that attached to the truck’s ceiling. “Is it still lunchtime?” I asked.

“I’ll check. Don’t leave.”

When she returned to the window, I paid for my order and waited beside the truck for my number to be called. I was number seven, though they could have given me any number. The sun was falling behind the greenhouses as the juggling man slid his equipment into a cotton pouch, and I was the only one still waiting for lunch. I waited to hear my number, watching the girl who worked the register tilt herself forward out the window of the truck, balancing. I asked her where she was planning on going, once she finally tipped herself out onto the ground.

“Oh, nowhere,” she replied. “I’m not going anywhere today.”

“It’s an important day.”

“Is it?” She looked back towards the empty cement stage, tilting her chin forward.

“You’re probably right,” I told her. “It’s not that important.”

“I told you, he’s here all the time.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

In the distance, I could see the topmost spires of some of the campus buildings. There were trees dotting the edges of the hill itself, far away from the cement stage near its middle, not so densely that one couldn’t see through the trees to the cars parked beneath them and the marble steps of some of the campus buildings. The cars baked in the afternoon. But the cement itself had cooled, and I could again see clearly the plot of grass near the top of the hill where I’d been sitting earlier. There was no longer anyone there, so that I would be able to eat my second lunch in peace and make certain decisions and fall asleep as the sun descended into the greenhouse. I felt a chill again, anticipating the thought of waking up on a hillside.

“You should ask her.”

“I’m sorry?” The girl at the register pulled herself back in, muffling her voice.

“You should ask her if I can go with you. She won’t mind, as long as you ask.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You should ask her if your order is ready.”

I walked around closer to the back of the food truck, standing on my tiptoes and peering into the cooking area. Her mother stood with her back to me, her hips motionless, her arms and fingers reaching out from shelf to stovetop to cabinet and

back, as though her feet were affixed to the ground. Even from behind, I could see the roundness of her cheeks and her heaviness. She did not appear to be an unreasonable woman, or even a woman who could be easily surprised, as she stood there with her back facing me and the hill and everyone else.

There was no one behind me in line. It was past the time that people normally ate lunch, and the other trucks nearby were closing their windows and the smoke from the pipes at the top of their trucks subsided. They looked like little steam engines, all lined up in a row at the bottom of the hill, puffing to a halt. The last thread of grey smoke left their exhaust pipes and I thought, it can't be long now. The juggler had left and the smoke was trailing off and the sun descended behind the greenhouse wings and I thought, it can't be long now.

“Eight.”

“I'm sorry.” She had already turned back to the stove.

“Eight.” She insisted, and I looked behind me and there was still no one there. No one close enough to the truck to have ordered while I wasn't looking, to have waited on the grass or nearby for their food, having a late second lunch like myself.

“Seven.” I said. “My number is seven.”

On my tiptoes again, looking over top of the white container that she had placed on the countertop, I could see her putting away utensils and trying to scrape away the residue from the bottom of the pan. She shook her head, no. I stepped back, and looked for the young girl at the front window to pop her head out once more, to lean forward on her arms and seem to float out the window and up the hillside, as though

she were swimming. But there was no one there at the window, and it seemed impossible to float up a hillside. “Eight.” she repeated, simply. “Eight.”

“I must have misheard,” I said.

I looked behind the food truck to see the sun setting now, behind the curved glass panels of the greenhouse, passing through foliage and water ponds. There were birds in there, I could see, hidden in the rafters of the greenhouse, making nests, and I wondered whether the botanical gardens would close for the evening, and if I weren't too late. I could see a small row of women leaving from the front entrance, tickets in hand, with small potted plants tucked into their purses, having paid. I could see the sun passing low back behind the glass and the foliage with its deep leaves, shining through in greens and oranges and blues, illuminating the horizon like a torch.

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Beneath the sounds of the city, one could hear the paths of channeled water off in the distance. It wasn't far, I thought. It wasn't so far from being at the beach as a child, with the water cool and tugging at my ankles, my heart sinking each time I felt the desire to return to our vacation house alone. I felt this same coolness on my feet when I awoke that night. I could hear the sounds of the river beneath the hum and chattering of the city.

It wasn't unheard of to sleep in the park, or even all that exceptional. I knew people who had done it, who refused to pay their rental fees at the university and were obliged to sleep in the park. They described it as something that built character,

as though character arose through their feet by osmosis while they lay on the ground, sleeping on the hillside that sloped at the college's southwest corner, waking to the sounds of trash collectors and truck engines at their feet. It was described as just another step, just another perturbation along the way to somewhere else. I would wake up differently. I believed them, too, that things would change overnight.

Along the bottom of my feet I could feel the slightest pricks of grass brushing up against that portion of skin, heel to toe, in circles, wondering if this was what they'd been talking about. Is this their osmosis?, I wondered. Is this all it requires? I opened my eyes to the pinprick of stars overhead. To the sound of rivers splitting off from one another in the distance, and felt changed. Is this all there is to it?, I wondered, as these pinpricks did circles along the bottom of my feet.

“What are you doing?” I yelped, pulling my knees in.

“I'm sorry,” she said. She looked older in the evening.

Even with plugs of grass between her fingers, with the corners of her lips upturned, smirking from having woken up someone with blades of grass across his feet. Even then, as she sat cross-legged nearby, she looked older. I wondered if this weren't some trick played by the moonlight, or an older sister of hers I hadn't yet met. She could have kept hidden in the back with the mother, cooking without my knowledge. In the window of her mother's truck she had looked small, smaller than any of the girls I knew and had known at the time, with her narrow features and small chest and the lack of return in her face.

But I'd been mistaken. I'd been looking at her the wrong way.

“I thought you were going nowhere tonight,” I said.

“That’s right.”

She tossed the rest of the grass away and lay back on the ground beside me, our arms barely touching. I could still smell the warmth and spices from the stove, though the trucks were gone. I wondered how long it had taken her, whether she’d taken her time at home and changed and hesitated, perhaps doing other things throughout the late afternoon before deciding to return. I wondered how long it had taken her. The piece of string that once held her hair back had been removed and instead hung loose around her wrist, like a bracelet.

There were other times in my life, later on, that felt similar to this one. Four nights spent sleepless in a hotel near the mountains of Switzerland, sitting naked on its gravel rooftop beside a pleasant woman, drinking from bottles of Côtes du Rhône and absinthe. She recited, over those four nights, a libretto by Berlioz. There was the time that my ex-wife, following our divorce, met with me late one evening near an empty barn just north of our hometown, just before she was to be remarried again, just for each of us to be held as the owls jostled in the rafters near our heads, as we thought of the many places we had never traveled to with one another, worrying the entire time that we’d already made too many mistakes to move forward. There was one night between those two, recently, when I drank until I thought I fully understood such moments.

Each of those nights, I remembered this one.

I turned on my side so I could face her properly. She was staring upwards with her hands behind her neck, tilting her head backwards as though she were trying to look at the pine trees lining the top of the hill. Her chin pointed up towards the moon,

and I could see the soft reflection of light across her cheeks and in the whites of her eyes. She had changed out from her t-shirt in the time since I had last seen her, wearing a hooded sweatshirt instead. She shivered in the evening air, then tried to hide this by pulling her elbows close to her.

“Can you feel that?” she asked me.

“Feel what?”

“There are drills and bulldozers behind the gardens. Can’t you feel them?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and she turned away.

All that I could see was her outline. She lay curled on the grass with her back towards me, her knees tucked, her shoulders shaking because of the cold, a thin sliver of skin illuminated below the hem of her sweatshirt, and I wondered what she’d been thinking. What had she told her mother when she went out, on a night when she was supposed to be going nowhere? What did she say to assure this woman that everything would be alright, that she was just changing clothes and going out for a late walk? Did her mother say “Eight”, the only thing I could imagine her saying, or did she say something else and tell her daughter that she was or wasn’t too young for certain things. I thought, we’re never old enough for certain things. Perhaps she explained to her mother that she was going to see the college, to see what it looked like at night, with its spotlights glowing and the yellow marble illuminated like a Roman metropolis. Perhaps this was how she explained it, or she described it as another city. I hoped that she had said something like this to her mother, at least, so that she wouldn’t worry. There was no reason for worry.

“Did you ask her?” I said, pressing my hand around her shoulder.

“No,” she said. “I told her I was going to see the lights at the college.”

“Will you ask her tomorrow then?”

“She won’t understand any better tomorrow.”

“She will be like us, then.”

She elicited a short, nervous laugh when I said this, and I knew that I had said something wrong. There was no one else on the hill with us, but I still felt as though someone was listening in, as though my words were a private joke somewhere. There was nothing there between us and the starlight overhead, even here, even on the sloping hill to the southwest corner of campus, nor was there anyone curled up with us on the hill for the night, avoiding rent and being changed overnight. No trucks sat idle in front of the botanical gardens. The noise of drills and bulldozers had subsided, causing the ground to grow still.

“Can you feel that?” I asked her.

“Yes.”

I put my arm around her waist and pulled her closer, hoping that she wouldn’t find a reason in her head for leaving, or that I might at least have time to subvert any such reasons that crept inside. There was nothing else possible for us that night, other than a long walk back to my apartment on the far end of campus, past the luminous buildings that reminded me of things I was involved in, from birth until now, and served as part of the reason why the decision I needed to make that night was so difficult and yet still couldn’t determine much.

I considered, for a moment, what I’d left behind at my apartment, the book stacks and the hum of electricity from the power lines running nearby. The neon lights from

the theatre across the street. I thought about whether anything would change once I left.

Her hair was soft and still smelled from the kitchen, so that I knew she hadn't showered since the afternoon, or that she at least hadn't washed her hair. It was comforting, the knowledge that this balancing girl I had seen at the truck window was still very much the same beneath her clothes, exactly the same as the one curled up in front of me now. I wanted to touch the parts of her stomach that had been sweating lightly when I first saw her, as I tried to examine the menu behind her. I could feel the angle of her hair where the string had been, which had allowed her to lean forward out the window like a swimmer and not look undone. The corners of her shoulders, the smells within her hair, and the space between her jeans and herself.

“Not like that,” she said. “I want to face you.”

The look on her face when she turned around is the one I remember. There was something feverish in those eyes. I could see, reflected around the edges of her dark eyes, the greens and oranges and blues from the garden in the distance, glowing dimly from the lights of construction work. A line of perspiration formed along her upper lip, which she wiped away and smiled, the corners of her mouth upturned as though she'd just heard something amusing. Her thin pink lips, dark skin, and a black line drawn around each eye: a disk surrounded by fire, with only a thin black line to contain it. I wanted her to blink. I wanted her to do something childlike at that moment, to circle the soles of my feet with grass and pretend the world was safe again, and that the rest of the world was no different from this hill. I wanted her to lean back again so that I could kiss those parts of her stomach. I wanted to see only

the top of her chin as I kissed her there, away from those feverish eyes and the line of trees behind her.

“Isn’t this better?” she asked.

She whispered in a different language as I put my hands around the small of her back, arching her face away from me and kissing at her neck. Her voice softened as I moved down. She tugged my hat away and tossed it on the ground beside us, putting her hands to the sides of my head, breathing softly and whispering something like an incantation.

Then nothing. She pulled my head up from where I was kissing her and leaned back, the corners of her mouth upturned, her eyes looking sinister and lost in thought, looking back at the trees behind us both, the circular curves of her breasts hardened in the cool night air. She had me pause for a moment, then bent forward to unclasp the front of my belt. I couldn’t tell what parts of her were shivering and what parts of her were doing other things. All I could do was hold her shoulders and rub the small of her back with my finger and think of how she had balanced herself on the countertop of a truck that had once sat at the bottom of the hill. And nothing.

“It’s alright,” I told her.

It wasn’t alright, of course, and she looked up at me with a hurtful look and a flare of anger, as though I were hesitating on purpose. As though I were the one who had woken her up, only to leave her shivering there alone on a mountainside, unable to awaken her from sleep. She took me in her hands and tried once more, but nothing. Never in my life had I been so aroused, so completely and fully aroused, and still there was nothing.

“I don’t know why,” I said, trying to reassure her.

“Doesn’t this make sense?” she asked. And I said, “Of course. This should work.”

“Then why?”

I could see myself aroused. I could see the both of us, in a nearby place, naked and firm and embracing within a warm pocket of air, feeling the stars on our backs in one another’s arms, as we should have been, exploring one another carelessly. I could’ve said this to her, or I could have instead said, this happens all the time. This isn’t you at all. Yes, it’s a normal occurrence in cold weather. You feel how cold it is? Nothing works in this kind of weather. I might also have said “Eight! Eight! Eight!” and ran coursing down the hill like a child, swimming over the grass with my pants at my ankles and my arms straight out like a plane. I could have done that, and maybe it would have actually helped us both more easily forget that evening, or at least allow us to file it in a different place. She sat in front of me with her arms folded in her lap and fire still flickering in her eyes, and I should have run down that hill like a child. I did, the next morning, and for much of the rest of my life. I descended with the wind rushing along my privates, rigid as an ocean liner, confident as an admiral. I flew. But not that night, the last night I would see her like this. And I knew, and I wanted her to keep trying and to not give up so soon, but she simply shook her head, no, and looked at the lights coming from campus and wept for reasons that had very little to do with either of us. I kissed at her neck as she cried softly to sleep that night, thinking that it would be good, in that other place where we had just tired ourselves out for the evening, for us to run down the hill together like

spitfires, our pants at our ankles and our arms outstretched. Instead I lay on the grass in silence, listening for the rivers nearby.

When I was twenty-four, I met the American woman who I would eventually marry. We'd met while traveling across Europe separately, in the small mountainside town of Entrevaux. Things had gone well during our first day together, when we had first met inside the walls of that mountainside town, and we decided that our itineraries were flexible enough to head out in the same direction, splitting travel costs and heading towards the Mediterranean. Sara was twenty-seven at the time, three years older than me. She was fair-skinned, muscular, and somewhat awkward around other Americans. She was an amateur photographer who'd saved up enough money to quit her daytime job and take a shot at pursuing her interests professionally. She'd flown to Europe to document the residuals of empire, as she called them. Broken monuments, war zones, empty prisons, immigration ports: she'd begun with a broad, eccentric scope, with the intent of discerning patterns in her photographs once she returned home. I was interested in her work, but also aware of my limits. When we first met she was taking pictures over the parapets of Entrevaux, and I'd walked up behind her as she was changing film to ask if she was enjoying the scenery. I said those exact words: "enjoying the scenery." After retrieving a roll of film from her pocket, she squinted over my shoulder and replied that half the population of the fortress we were standing in had been slaughtered by Roman troops in the 16th century. It had last been used to house German prisoners during the Great War. "So, no," she said, "but I'm enjoying your innocent questions." We had lunch in a small café outside.

We headed south by car, toward the Mediterranean. We followed the curves of the Var River below. Sara preferred to drive, which allowed her to choose where and when we stopped, which I didn't mind at all. We traveled mostly at night. We traveled when the roads were empty and the headlights of the rental car brought something new to our eyes every few moments: corners doubling back on themselves unnaturally, guard rails shining in the moonlight, the loss of a side-view mirror on the fourth day. We found hidden lakes that seemed motionless.

The car itself was quite small, a two-seater with limited trunk room that Sara had picked up in Geneva. We were traveling light. She had only her camera bag, a foldaway tripod, and a cylindrical duffel of clothing, while I had my backpack and a few books. We barely knew one another. We had become caught up in the pleasantries of speaking English again and finding another person who might be accessible once we returned home, and we perhaps overextended ourselves in those first few days. I propped my feet up on the dashboard as Sara pointed out sites along the road, asking me to make myself useful by keeping track of our location on the map and letting her know whenever I saw any castles or churches or broken buildings.

Neither of us had been traveling well. I had been existing on the fumes of my savings since the beginning of the summer. I'd lost weight, subsisting mostly on bread and olive oil and whatever fruit was cheapest from corner vendors, which had taken its toll. I'd been traveling alone for eleven months. My hair was frantic, my electric shaver worked only when there was a place to plug it in, and I constantly felt the desire to shower somewhere private. There were few amenities available on the

roadsides of southern France. It was no different for Sara, whose darker roots were beginning to show through and who, though she'd never admit it, had started to show a lack of resolve in her project. I'd watched her snapping photos of hotels and cheese shops, neither of which, to my knowledge, could be easily interpreted as residuals of empire.

I made efforts to assist her, but it was hard to seem useful sitting idle in the passenger seat, flipping through pictures she'd taken months ago, unable to distill any convincing patterns from them that would satisfy her. I noted superficial details: architectural flourishes, the nearness to cities, the impression of timelessness. "Yes, yes," she would say, "But what else?" She smiled at me while she was driving, because we were traveling together, and because it's important to be happy while traveling together. We slept on gravel pits at night, laying out our air mattresses on the side of the road whenever she became tired of driving, trying to limit our expenses until we'd seen our fill and reached the Mediterranean. We weren't lovers when we arrived in Nice.

I planned to visit the water, first and foremost. Sara had her photographs that she was interested in, and her larger project, and she showed a renewed energy as the landscape began to level out. She was hopeful. She talked excitedly of the Monument aux Morts and the scattered cathedrals to the east of the city, hoping they might provide some of the architectural subtleties that would finally bring her project together. I was looking forward to spending my afternoons by the water, indulging in the sounds of the shoreline and the rushing of waves over the pebble beaches, before heading west down the shoreline until I finally decided to head home.

Sara dropped me off near the boardwalk. She pulled the rental car over into a handicap space, parking just long enough to say goodbye. I could smell the sea salt and the floral character of the water down below, no more than fifty yards away from where we stood. I waited, though, and instead watched as she snapped a few quick photographs of the crowded esplanade and moved her black hair back behind her ears and out of her view. Sara's skin looked pale in the reflected sunlight from the Mediterranean. She still wore the fitted grey t-shirt that pinched her arms and the khaki shorts with pockets, the same clothes she'd been wearing when I met her in Entrevaux, back when I had approached her. The back of her shirt was darkened from the heat of the car, as was mine, and she tugged at her sleeves in-between photographs.

Neither of us had been traveling well.

She put one arm around my shoulder and touched her cheek to mine, wishing me luck and allowing me to wish her the same before turning away. She nodded to me with a determined look of hopefulness and a smile, then her eyes moved to something behind me and she turned and stepped back into her car. It didn't start for a few moments, which I took as a hopeful sign before noticing that she was struggling to put away her camera equipment on the passenger seat. Then the sedan started up and she gave a wave out the window, turning up one of the side streets and heading off in the direction of the provincial cemeteries and Monaco.

I stood there for a few minutes, with the midday sun beating down and the blue banners advertising a nearby private beach flapping in the wind. There was a corner market near where Sara's car had turned away from the esplanade, and I figured this

would be a reasonable place to get lunch later in the day, if I were hungry again. The sunlight shone off the pebbles down along the beach, stinging my eyes even as I looked towards the empty parking spot and the corner shop across the street. I decided that I'd take the afternoon to recline against the warm pebbles along the shoreline, soaking up the water and trying to decide upon an itinerary for the next few days. I figured I would be able to make it back to the States within the week, bringing a long period of personal wayfaring to a close. I hadn't found anything useful during my time abroad, or at least nothing to provide any clarity for returning home. But I recognized this.

There were a group of American students crowded together on towels at the bottom of the steps leading onto the beach, drinking out of bottles and talking like no one could understand what they were saying. Some of the boys in their group were playing shirtless with a football, kicking it back and forth near the cement walls and churning up sand onto the backs of their girls nearby, who didn't seem to notice. One of the boys called over to me. They wanted to fill out their teams instead of kicking a ball back and forth, and they had noticed the English lettering on my shirt. They were polite to me, outgoing in a way they might have normally held themselves back from at home. They asked me, "Haven't you heard?"

I put my hand to my ear and squinted gently, showing them that I didn't speak their language. They asked: "Haven't you heard?"

I walked further down the beach. I had taken my shoes off, feeling the pebbles rearrange themselves underneath my feet. I hadn't known that there would be a pebble beach here instead of a sand one, and I wondered how far I would have to

walk down the coastline before I found sand again. I hoped it wasn't far. There were bleach-white fences separating the private seating areas from the public beaches, and each time I approached one of these fences I was obliged to put my shoes back on and walk up the stairs and back onto the cement walkway. There were canopies to match the fences down below, providing shade to people just stepping out of their cars or walking from one patch of public beaches to the next. There were tour groups on benches and crowds encircling street performers, rattling their coin boxes and baking underneath makeup and sequined dress. I walked until another set of stairs appeared on the opposite side. I repeated the cyclical pattern of approach four or five times, approaching the white fences before ascending the stairs once again to move further down the coast, finally identifying a suitably quiet spot near the water, sitting myself down on one of the emptier pebble plots. The shoreline there looked much darker and seemed to detach itself from the esplanade. I sat near the water, taking off my t-shirt with its English lettering and folding it and setting it back behind my head.

I had put myself in an ideal place. I was sitting with my legs outstretched, lying on the sun-warmed pebbles of the Mediterranean with the water licking the bottoms of my feet. It felt osmotic, in a sense. It felt as though I was being heated from beneath, yet the bitter coldness of the seawater caused my teeth to chatter. I was lying in the sun, shaking. I wondered whether or not I'd come at the wrong time of year for this sort of thing, reclining at the shore with the waves at my feet in the wintertime, but no, there were children swimming and building moated sand sculptures nearby without a second thought to the temperature. It was still early September, and no one else seemed to notice how cold it was. I would get used to it.

I wondered whether Sara would have seen any of her residuals of empire in their crumbling sandcastles.

I decided to go back and get something to eat at the corner market before I fell asleep. I figured it was just an empty stomach, as was often the source of discomfort over the past eleven months. I wasn't eating well. I counted through the money in my wallet as I walked back along the esplanade, this time without ducking into each separate patch of public beach. The smooth benches were still full beneath the canopy, overlooking the tour groups and the street performers and the jugglers, passing by a casino and grey hotels. Finding no one at the corner market when I returned, the doors locked and no one there inside, I continued walking up the Boulevard Jean-Laurès in the direction of the museums and the plaza that housed the city's acropolis. I went to the parking areas and modern art museum before heading south, in the direction of the flower market and the shore. The sun had already fallen below the height of the palm trees lining the boulevard, bringing out the deep green veins of their leaves. It was late. By the time I decided that I'd walked far enough, having seen enough vestiges of empire and other scenery, it was too late to bother locating a hostel room for the night. This saved me the trouble of deciding whether or not to spend the money on a room, and I returned to one of the empty plots of beach and tried to settle there for the night, ignoring the bright outcropping of stars overhead. I used my hands to smooth the patches of rounded stones. But the fanfare on the esplanade overhead was just getting started for the evening, it was still early, the carousing and the markets and the public spectacles, and I was awoken more than once by someone stumbling nearby.

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That night, the second time it happened, I returned to the Delaware shore.

The sun was shining there, while I lay beneath the bleaching moonlight and the sounds of the Mediterranean, sleeping in patches and being awoken more than once by spillover from the esplanade. I drifted. My parents had one of their striped blankets laid out and an umbrella stretched taut overhead. I watched their blanket being slowly covered in sand, carried grain-by-grain with each gust of wind over the water, drifting inland and slowly covering my feet and theirs and our blanket. My parents were discussing how good a time they were having, how everyone in the world should have this good of a time, sitting with their umbrellas stretched taut. I was much older in this dream than I ever was in Delaware. I no longer fit comfortably on the blanket with them. My legs poked out and sand covered everything in sight, slowly. My legs reached the water and, in the midst of this dream, I wondered if the tide were coming up in the Mediterranean as well, as I saw myself in two places at once.

There was no one else on the beach with us, and I remembered that I had left something behind on the end table. The wind was sharp and I thought I could see a pebble beach across the water. But I was only imagining things. I had left behind my backpack and the few books that I had chosen to carry with me, so that I would have something to return for. I thought of the attic and the sand on the sidewalks and our beachfront property, and felt so proud for a moment when I realized that we were having such a good time together at the shore, the three of us. I turned to face my parents, wanting to thank them for the time we were spending away from our real

home, but they looked so small when I turned. Their voices grew tiny, and all I could see in my parents' beach chair were two grey pebbles, rounded and dull from the tide. I told one of them that I had forgotten something, that I needed to return for it, and my father the pebble asked whether or not I planned to ever return. "Of course," I said. "Where else would I go?" And they laughed and laughed. I left the two pebbles sitting beneath their umbrellas, their voices growing, booming like megaphones into the wind and the sand and the surf. I started walking back.

The water followed me closely. It was reassuring, though, even as it chilled my ankles and lapped at my feet slowly and washed away only the lowest layers of sand. My shins and legs were still covered. I wonder if my parents noticed, if they saw this small river following their son as he left them behind at the beach. We hadn't spoken in years. It was more likely that they weren't there at all, and there were only those pebbles and their umbrella. The voices must have traveled across the water somehow. I could hear sounds in the distance as the river and I made our way down the sand-covered sidewalks of my childhood, past the foreign markets and the townhouses and the empty lot where an elementary school had once been, near the pine and cherry trees, leaving a shallow trail of water behind me so that I could find my way back to shore. There were other empty lots where there didn't used to be, more than I had ever remembered as a child, and Sara was across the street taking pictures of each of them, standing in plots of sunlight and adjusting her camera. She wore her pocketed shorts and her pinching t-shirt, pulling it down in-between shots, sweating and shivering from the heat. I wanted to walk over to her and kiss that soft space between her shoulder blades, as I had wanted to do when I first saw her

changing film in Entrevaux. I called over to her, pleased that she had made her way back from the cemeteries and the cathedrals so soon, wanting to hear whether or not she had made it as far as Monaco. “Haven’t you heard?” I called out. “Did they tell you I was looking for you?”

I followed her as she went from block to block, snapping photographs of the abandoned properties, the cracked foundations, and the signposts identifying the side streets. She stopped for pictures of the gaps in the sidewalk and the sand that was slowly filling them, drifting from the beach. I couldn’t look anywhere else. I watched as she adjusted the feet of her tripod, examined her light meter, switched lenses and captured each image. I wouldn’t have known how far we walked, but I felt as though we’d already passed the vacation house and that I had missed out on the chance to collect my things. There will be time later, I thought. Once we reached the end of the block, where I had never been before and which simply looked like the end of the world, like the emptiness at the end of a long street, Sara started to pack away her camera equipment, having documented everything she could. She folded the tripod and emptied her pockets of loose film. She sealed up everything into her camera bag, strapping her lenses next to albums of old pictures she carried, which I had flipped through in the car, and then looked across the street.

Her duffel and camera bag hung loosely over her shoulder as she stood there, squinting over at me with her hand trying to shield the sun from her eyes. She waved a little bit, a quick hello, then I realized that she was asking me to move without saying so. “Just a little,” her hand said to me. She was trying to look a something behind me, at something that interested her.

The stream of water at my feet was cool to the touch. I put my fingertips to the ground and could feel the gritty wet sand at its bottom, glimmering like little stars in the afternoon. I noticed that there were stars at my feet, bending close to the water and tucking my legs beneath me. I wondered if this was typical, if the entire world would be beachfront property in due time. This would be wonderful, I thought, as I balanced on my fingertips and tucked my head, trying to make myself as small as possible. Sara still waved her hand gently.

A little more.

If she were able to hear me from across the street, over the sounds and the distant voices following the sand and water along the pavement, I would have told her that I was forgetful, that I couldn't even remember how movies ended, that we could start over and be more like ourselves this time. We could be a little more cautious on the car ride down. I untucked my legs, sticking them out in the direction of the shoreline, trying to flatten myself out as best I could. The back of my shirt absorbed the moisture like a wick. I tried to remain still, content with the feeling of stars on the backs of my arms and legs, cooling the palms of my hands. I could feel my back start to tighten from the cold. I tilted my head one last time in Sara's direction, hoping that she would at least give a sign to let me know whether or not it worked. She gave one last look in the direction of the beach, and then turned up a side street with a closed market on its corner. She paused at its far window, looking inside, but its doors were closed and there was no one inside. It didn't belong here, I thought, and I at least recognized that it was misplaced, or that the two of us were, and I realized that that in

itself was something. There was a recognition of errantry there. A row of trucks, exhaling puffs of smoke like locomotives, followed her in the direction of Monaco.

When I awoke from this dream, the second time it happened, I was back on the coastline of the Mediterranean. There were stars overhead when I awoke that night, and the first thing I thought of was that I couldn't count them all. I could hear the sounds of the esplanade and the street performers and the whispers of people surrounding me, blocking out some of the stars at the perimeter. So I couldn't count them all. I recognized the moon and thought it was a pebble at first. I could hear the crashing of waves in the distance and hushed American murmurs, and I was concerned for a moment. I feared that I had suffered through some accident and was only now recovering. There were pebbles pressing against my back, as there had been when I'd first gone to sleep hours earlier. There was water as well, filling in the spaces between my back and the pebbles, chilling me as I lay there. I could barely move my neck, it was so cold, so I just lay there on the shore as a semicircle of dark American heads looked down. "It's nothing," they told one another. I recognized them as the group I had seen and ignored earlier in the day. "There's nothing to see." I could hear someone crying softly. I wanted to believe I'd simply fallen asleep too close to the shoreline, or that this was just a continuation of the same dream.

I wanted to stand up quickly, to wring the water from my shirt and shoo away these people who had been watching me sleep. But I couldn't move, the second time it happened, and so I just lay there shivering, counting the stars within the confines of a shallow river in Nice.

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Even now, I'm not entirely sure what I had expected to find. It wasn't a soft, wandering urge that moved me. This wouldn't have hinted at anything else. It was more like a sharp emptiness, a forgetfulness, and I was unable to shake the feeling that I was missing something. It followed me. I would be having dinner with someone back at the university, friends or a female interest, as we often went out for pizza or noodle dishes at the restaurants just south of campus, or to the food trucks near the botanical gardens. And I would simply trail off. We'd be having a perfectly good conversation, discussing our classes or futures or local politics, and my attention would collect its things and walk out the door without another word. I'd be left sitting there, having lost track of minutes at a time, as I was thinking of something else, trying get a feeling for the edges of an emptiness. It felt tangible, as though I could actually close my eyes and rub its edges between my fingers if I wanted to. In poetry, it would be a widening gyre of sorts. In the sciences, maybe a false vacuum. It was a feeling of slippage, of falling off the face of the earth without leaving.

And perhaps it took a tangible sense of that emptiness, but once I had one I was gone, confident as an admiral. I had flown to the west coast when I was nineteen with a red backpack, an extra pair of shoes, and my birth certificate. I worked multiple jobs throughout the northwest, landscaping and design work and administrative tasks, where my time at college was sufficient to easily replant myself every couple months. I could take on much of the computer work and managerial responsibilities, living simply until I'd saved up enough money to leave for another,

further place. I felt the constant need to engage something else, to address whether one could physically cross the line that enclosed one's sense of emptiness, whether on a plane or by foot. I traveled around Europe for eleven months, visiting quiet towns and historical buildings and soft landscapes that occasionally moved me. Not far. I was in the mountainside town of Entrevaux when I met the woman to whom I would later become a husband, then an ex-husband, and then the man who held her tightly next to an old barn from her childhood, while the owls chirped in the rafters nearby. I felt that she, too, had understood this same feeling of loss.

I didn't see her again for four days. I didn't find her. I had been walking along the esplanade on my way to the tourist center just west of the beach, planning to purchase my ticket home. I had very little traveling money left, and I was still feeling tired and off-balance from lack of sleep. I wasn't looking for her. The heat was terrible that day, and I was keeping my head low and my shoulders were sagging. I'm not sure how she noticed me, or what her chances were of looking back from her towel as I was walking past. They weren't good. I could have hesitated to look at one of the street performers, dropping a small amount of change into the felt-lined boxes they kept open. I could have struck up a conversation with one of the heavysset couples sitting quiet and smoking on the benches with their legs intertwined. I could have decided that today was not the kind of day that I would be traveling down the esplanade of Nice at this exact time, and she would have been looking elsewhere as I walked past.

But I heard my name being called, thinking that it might be one of the American girls from the group I'd met on the first day. I was hoping that it was not. I almost

didn't turn around at all, thinking it would be better to pretend that I couldn't hear this time either, that I was simply a deaf man sweating terribly on his way to buy a plane ticket home. I would never have forgiven myself, had I found out afterwards. There was a certain longing in the voice that I heard, which made me think of the American girls from that group. I thought, for a moment, that there was someone else in trouble, perhaps, that some accident had occurred along the beach and that I was somehow a person who could alter the situation. They also could have been calling for someone else, another traveler with my name, and I could at least correct them. The voice grew louder, and I thought that I could hear a long, sustained tone that suggested necessity, that hinted at pleading, which wasn't possible here. I wasn't walking in a place where people made those sorts of sounds, or even somewhere that those sorts of sounds could have existed. It didn't fit. Not with the soft, pebble-lined beaches or the casinos down the street or the cosmopolitan feel of a city facing the Mediterranean. When I finally turned around, fearful of not fulfilling some vital role that begged for my attention, she was standing right behind me. I didn't recognize her. I thought to myself, who is this beach person? She was wearing a pair of broad sunglasses, and her skin looked countless shades darker than it had been the last time I'd seen her. I wanted to ask whether she had spent four days on the beach. But she was smiling widely and looking out at the water, and I remember the sun caught the edges of her shoulders, and I could see that there was a certain unsteady energy present in this woman that I had not seen before, or that I had only gotten hints of at the end of our trip towards the Mediterranean, when she was talking about the cathedrals and the war memorial. She wore a one-piece bathing suit, pastel with

small yellow flowers around her waist. It tied behind her neck and accentuated her in a way that I wouldn't have guessed possible, not even from the pinching grey t-shirt that I'd grown accustomed to. There were light patches of pebble dust along her arms and legs, as well as a little that had accumulated just below her neck, because of the wind or for some other reason, and I was left speechless. I wanted nothing more than to bury myself in a little hole in the pavement. I felt awkward, terrible. I knew that I could never possibly look as well as I wanted to at that moment, and it seemed almost as though this slender beach person with pebble dust near her neck had just walked up to me and punched me square in the throat, smiling the whole time. I was human, and I thought to myself when I saw her like this: I should never have stopped looking, not for a moment, not a second, not to pause on the shoreline for sleep, and not now.

“Couldn't you hear me?” she asked.

“I figured you'd be in Monaco by now.”

She bent forward, puffing lightly and holding her side. For a moment I could see her light grey eyes above the rims of her sunglasses, peering up at me as though we had just shared a joke. She motioned with her head in the direction of the beach. “I shouldn't leave my stuff.”

It was the middle of the day, and the esplanade was empty. I considered what might happen if I simply turned on my heel and left her standing there, huffing with one hand on her hip and watching a man with a red backpack and sweat marks walk away from her down the esplanade without another word. Maybe it was the heat. I could feel the straps of my backpack digging into my shoulder blades, pressing sharply into the damp fabric of my shirt, and I worried that I would have red marks

there, along my back and shoulders. I couldn't have known in those first few moments of seeing this woman again for the very first time. I should have taken the heat as a precaution. I hadn't a clue what this out-of-breath woman wanted.

“Where were you headed?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” I told her. “To get some lunch at the market.”

“Let me grab my things first.”

If I had been feeling more comfortable, I would have been polite and walked back with her while she went to gather her things at the beach. Instead I just watched as she ambled away down the walkway, lifting her feet quickly from the grey cement and hopping down the stairs to the shore. Her belongings were still there. Nothing was lost. I set my backpack down on the bench nearby and leaned out over the railing to watch her, pulling at the front of my shirt to let some air in, balancing myself against the metal railings with my arms outstretched. I felt like a runner. There was nothing between the people vacationing and the sun that day, only a few narrow wisps of cirrus clouds hanging over the water. I felt as though it was I who'd been running, as though I had been the one constantly looking up from the beach.

“You don't mind, do you?” she asked when she returned, wearing a starched cotton shirt over her swimsuit. “You don't mind that I'm just inviting myself along like a needy person?”

We started walking in the same direction that I'd been going before I'd heard someone calling my name, in the direction of the outdoor market and the tourist center, where I wanted to buy my plane ticket home. The light grey cement of the esplanade disappeared as we entered one of the cultural centerpieces of Nice, with its

line of watercolor galleries and the opera house facing the shore. There were no explanations required. We had parted ways just as easily as we had first come together, as people normally do when they think they are looking for very different things, and Nice was not so large of a place. We walked close to the shoreline, although the city sounds and the street traffic drowned out the sounds of the waves crossing pebbles, and it didn't seem like we were close to the shoreline at all.

“It's too hot to do much of anything today,” I said.

“Did you really not have plans?” she asked. “Nothing at all?”

“I need to stop by the tourist center to get a plane ticket home.”

We reached the periphery of the farmer's market, standing still and silent for a moment beneath the brightly striped tents, trying to figure out which direction we wanted to head. I had purchased most of my recent meals here. There were patio restaurants surrounding the perimeter of the market, with settings of wrought-iron furniture and wait staff hovering underneath shaded canopies, serving the few tourists who actually went through the trouble of eating a formal lunch. I'd spent no more than a few Euros each day on baguettes and soft cheeses and one or two citrus fruits, which was enough to sustain me. It was easier. Even at the edges of the market, looking in at the shaded aisles of produce and seafood and prepared meals, and all the attendant scents, with a light plume of smoke arising from the market's center, it was difficult to come to terms with the variety of foodstuffs inside. I could have said something then.

“Let me pay for lunch today,” she said. “It will give me something to do.”

I told her that I would meet her at the opposite corner of the market, where we would find a place to have lunch together. There was a wide grassy area, the length of a football field, between the two lanes of traffic running up and down the promenade, with a series of separate marble alcoves near the shade of the poplar trees and the sound of the fountains. I mentioned a few places that she might want to check for food, but she just hurried off into the bright blue tarps of the market, waving back in my direction and encouraging me to leave her for the moment.

I walked along the outer perimeter of the market, where it was less cramped and smoky, peering into the restaurants along the way and taking my time, expecting that it might take her a while to pick things out. There were only a few couples sitting alongside the wrought-iron tables enjoying a formal lunch, dabbing at their foreheads with napkins and discussing the hot weather. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. The bronze-skinned waiters appeared slowly from dark nooks leading into the kitchen areas, bringing out small lunch plates and carafes of chilled white wine. The line of restaurants, one after another, ended near the promenade, when the enclosed market area opened up to the far-reaching public gardens. There were no customers sitting down outside at the last restaurant of the row, only a thin waiter with his hands anchored at his apron, staring up at a television screen playing overhead, which looked out onto the empty patio area. The tiled floor of the patio looked as though it had just been mopped, slowly drying in the open air while the television played overhead. The volume was turned low, so I wasn't able to hear anything as I walked past, still thinking of travel arrangements and wondering whether I had enough money to pick up a clean shirt along the way. I could see the

male reporter talking into a microphone, holding one hand up to his ear. He looked disappointed. He had an unshaven chin, and he was wearing a dull-green army helmet which looked as though it were close to falling off. It didn't fit correctly. In the background of the screen were abandoned buildings and billowing plumes of smoke. I wondered where he was. The bottom of the screen wasn't helpful, showing football scores and the local temperature, as though everyone for miles didn't already know how hot it was outside. It seemed a waste to even have a television there. The camera started to pan around behind the reporter, who was still holding his ear and poking his chin to his chest, and it looked almost as though the cameraperson was forgetting about this news reporter altogether, as though he were just in the way. The television captured a long, silent panorama of the nearby area: burned-out apartment buildings, flashing red lights, tanks rolling over rubble and pavement in the background, ascending the far hillside. I thought that I recognized something familiar; the soldiers' faces in the far background looked awfully familiar, as though I had gone to school with some of them, but it was hard to tell anyone apart beneath those helmets. Even in the distance, standing at the edges of the patio area, they looked familiar. There was dust and smoke passing by in the scene between us, and at the time I didn't make any connection between the dust of that scene and the pebble dust I had seen coating the arms and legs of people along that beach near the Mediterranean. It was a soft grey color, almost like a touch of flour, as though this were a town of bakers and there were a cooking show on this television looking out silently over the recently-mopped patio area. I could all but feel the sharp edges of an emptiness between my fingertips as I stood there trying to listen, and it felt as though

this dark-skinned waiter and I were the only two people in the world watching this strange broadcast.

“Can you turn it up?” I asked him. “Doesn’t the volume work?”

“What are you talking about?” he said.

I realized I had spent too much time idling there, unable to hear a single word. My desire to return home was only encouraged by what I had seen, reminding me of people I knew. I understood that my time hadn’t been well spent, that no matter how much the dust on Sara’s arms reminded me of the dust floating on the television screen, they were not the same.

The line at the tourist center moved quickly, and I managed to purchase a plane ticket to Baltimore for less than I had expected. I could pay Sara for lunch. The air conditioning in the travel center seemed to be turned all the way up, as though I had just stepped into a refrigerator, and I felt that my sweat was more likely to freeze than dry there. No one else seemed to mind. I was actually glad to leave that place, in favor of returning to the heat outside. I planned to leave in the morning, just before noon. I hoped that I would be able to find a quiet place to sleep that night, either on one of the benches near the esplanade or a soft patch of grass nearby to where we would have our lunch together. I hoped to be able to fall asleep that night. I hoped that I would be able to separate from her without incident, that she wouldn’t ask me where I was sleeping that night and wait long enough for an answer. I hadn’t been sleeping since the first night.

I walked out slowly through the revolving doors of the travel center, my plane ticket stuck safely into the bottom of my backpack, as I walked out into the wide

portico that served as a central plaza for all of the office buildings nearby. I stood there motionless for a moment just outside its shade, with the sun pouring down on my shoulders and forehead, effacing the chilling effects of the air conditioning. I shut my eyes and stood there motionless and tried to understand the reasons that Sara was being so familiar with me all of a sudden. I couldn't explain why she would be so pleased to see me again, after we had separated so easily from one another, despite our initial optimism upon first meeting in Entrevaux. I was, not unreasonably, concerned that it had something to do with money or protection or something else that I would be unable to fully provide. I worried less about her motives, though, and more about the likelihood that I would be unable to fulfill them, no matter how selfish or terrible the motives of a beautiful American girl traveling abroad might be. I knew that I'd head back to Baltimore the next morning, catching a plane through Heathrow, sleeping soundly in the cramped quarters of an airline, sitting beneath the soft hiss of fresh air being pumped throughout the cabin. I reminded myself to get earplugs in the airport and to change into something clean.

The marble steps in front of the portico and office buildings led back down to the cement pavement and wide promenade where I was to meet her. Traffic was one-way around the grassy area. Between the lanes of traffic leading in and out of the city was an enormous field of grass in a park-like setting, with elaborate landscaping and tiled fountains and the ruins of chateaus at the northern end. It reminded me of the wide grassy areas beneath the shadows of the Eiffel Tower, where professional photographers charged high prices to couples and where the vibrant, incessant blink of flashbulbs and the light bulbs from the Tower itself brought an overwhelming,

unsteady glow to everything. The fountains sparkled. I was concerned about the lack of shade.

I heard my name being called again, and could see a tanned arm poke out from one of the alcoves, waving. Sara sat beneath one of the poplar trees, holding two grocery bags of food beside her. I wondered why we needed so much. As hungry as I was, there was only so much food one could eat at a time, and it was less than the amount of food in the two bags beside her. “I did shopping for the rest of the week,” she said. “When are you leaving?”

It was good to sit beside her. It was good to stretch my legs out in front of me in the cool shade, sitting beside a friendly woman wearing a flattering bathing suit beneath a thin, collared shirt. I set my backpack down on the colored tiles in front of me and put my feet up, closing my eyes and listening to the sounds of Sara unpacking our lunch. It didn't matter what she'd picked, and I could still smell many of the different stands in the smoking encampment across the road. It wasn't so far. I could still smell the rising bread and the smoked meat and the spice. It wasn't so far away that we couldn't still see it from that marble alcove. Sara took off her collared shirt, now that we were away from the eyes of the market, and I was happy to do the same with mine, laying the damp fabric out against the marble behind me, leaning back. I wanted to tell her that this was as pleasant an ending as I could've asked for while traveling across Europe, that this was a good place to sit and that she was an ideal person to be spending my last day with. I still wasn't sure what she wanted, exactly, if she wanted anything. But she'd bought me lunch and sat close beside me while we were eating, and for this I was appreciative.

“How did the pictures turn out?” I asked. “How are the residuals of empire coming?”

“Great,” she said. “I haven’t stopped taking pictures.”

She shifted over closer to me, trying to stay away from the path of the sun. The marble alcove curved around in a gray semicircle. There were columns at each end, connecting it to the next alcove over, each overlooking the spouting fountain and rose garden. The line of connected alcoves formed a light grey wall underneath the shade of the poplar trees. It was just after three in the afternoon when we were eating lunch, and the trees and spouts of water carried shadows over the dense patches of grass. I wanted to ask where her camera bag was, worried she might have lost it and was too embarrassed to say anything. She caught me looking. “It’s in the car,” she said. “I left it back in the car so that I wouldn’t worry about losing it on the beach.”

We ate our lunches quietly after that, together beneath the shade of the poplars and the sounds of the marble fountains. I wondered why it hadn’t been like this before between us, why she felt so at ease with me now. I thought about the restaurants and the waiter and the television, the familiar faces and the dust, and I wondered whether or not she had seen these things.

“When are you leaving?”

“My ticket is for tomorrow,” I said, nodding at the backpack underneath my feet.

“Oh,” she said. “Then I bought too much.”

I took a bite from the sandwich she had made for me, pleased to be eating a little more than soft cheeses and fruit. “I can give you some money for this. I’ll take some with me.”

“We should do something special for your last day.”

“This is good,” I said. “This is a pleasant way to spend my last day here.”

“We should get a nice room together.”

There was an older couple sitting along the edge of the six-spouted fountain just in front of us. The sun hung low in the west, to our left, and the shadows from the streams of water fell across the cement surface nearby as they sat near the fountain’s edge, dipping their feet. This seemed like a pleasant thing. They were eating prepared meals from Styrofoam containers, and I thought of the food trucks that had once puffed like locomotives. I remembered a girl who used to work there with her mother in one of those trucks, and who balanced her tiny body along the countertop where she used to collect money and call back to her mother working the stove. She had looked so tiny in the window. That was the first time I had visited their truck, wanting to fill myself with a second lunch and fall asleep on a hillside while I made an important decision. I remembered how pretty she looked beneath the moonlight later on, with her dark skin lit up as she curled up beside me, shivering. I remembered the pinpricks of grass at my feet that woke me, and how there was fire reflected around her dark eyes from the gardens below.

“We’d get two beds, of course,” she continued. “But it would be cheaper that way, to get a room together, and we’d get to finally take private showers and you’d wake up feeling refreshed instead of the way you feel right now.” She paused. “I just thought you might like that.”

“Alright,” I said, still watching the old couple. “We’ll see what we find.”

We sat there silently eating our lunches, looking out across the green space stretching out in front of us, listening to the spattering of the fountain water and the hum of afternoon traffic passing around the promenade. I couldn't help but think of the light-colored dust near her neck. I couldn't help but worry that I had traveled all this time without ever crossing the edges of that emptiness that I was hoping to understand. It was nothing. I got up and moved to Sara's other side, changing my seat so that I would be able to recline in the sun and dry my shirt a bit before having to put it back on. It was warmer on that side, and I had a better view of the fountain. It was pleasing to see that there was no longer any dust below her neck, and her arms seemed clean and slightly damp, also without any dust on them, as though she had just gone swimming while I was away. The old couple left their seat next to the fountain, and I asked her whether she would like to sit with me where they had just been, sitting alongside one another with our feet in the fountain. I helped her carry over the groceries she had just purchased, wanting to put my arms around her and kiss her just below the neck for not wanting anything I couldn't fulfill.

"Have you heard anything from home?" she asked.

"No," I said. I figured she might have caught me wasting time earlier.

"Because one of the vendors was very rude to me. I had already picked out the fruit that I wanted for us, holding it up for him and even putting onto the scale. But I accidentally took out a dollar bill, because it was right there next to the Euros, and he started cursing softly and refused to sell me anything. I didn't understand a word, what he was saying. He was so quiet."

“No,” I said. “I don’t know what he could be talking about either. He was probably just a crazy man who didn’t feel like selling his produce today.” We both laughed and watched the sun set in the distance, sparkling out in shades of reds and oranges from behind the fountain.

“I’m glad I saw you again,” she said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I don’t really think that man is crazy.”

“I know,” she said. “I don’t know what to do either.”

She smiled at me and squeezed my hand until the sun went down below the horizon. We sat there, watching the lights at the bottom of the fountain turn on beneath our feet, making the spouting water look almost like fireworks, lighting up the evening sky in a gentle way.

We collected our things and walked back in the direction of the shoreline. The lights of the other fountains and streetlamps guided us along the same path we had taken earlier, past the line of business offices looking out into an unlit portico. We entered the empty market area with its center still smoldering in the evening air, just slightly. The patios were closed. The wrought-iron furniture stood empty in the tiled patios, overlooking the market, and the windows looking into the restaurants were beginning to fog over from the heat of the cooking. There were tourists having dinner inside, sipping red wine and talking silently behind the glass panes. The television had been turned off, I assumed, though I didn’t look back to check as we walked past. Sara had put her collared shirt back on, sliding her arm into mine and trying to keep warm as the ground cooled off for the evening, leaving us frigid and alone in a darkening foreign town.

We walked through the performers and the vendors along the lit-up esplanade, beneath the strands of festival lights and around clouds of smoke and sidewalk painters and pottery shops set out along the sidewalk for the evening. We watched, arm-in-arm, as a man juggled knives in the air atop a stepping stool, putting himself high above the crowds that gathered near him each night. The stool allowed him a wider audience. There was the constant rattling of coins landing in the opened felt-lined boxes of the entertainers, the only way for many of the foreign tourists to express the fact that they were enjoying themselves. It was hard to hear above the music and the racket and the cooking of the food vendors and the shouts from the street dancers and catcallers walking up and down the promenade, drinking wine from their jugs and running past the police, everyone hungry and searching out other people and looking for some reason not to go home for the night. I slid my arm out from Sara's, putting it around her shoulder instead and holding her close, navigating us through the lively streets of the Mediterranean. We said nothing. The two of us continued moving forward without saying another word, not stopping until we arrived at a quiet hotel that sat in a small residential district overlooking the beach.

I asked for a room with two beds, but Sara interrupted to say that whatever they had was fine, she was too tired from walking to continue looking much longer. It was after eight, early for everyone else, and she just wanted to take a shower and stop walking for a little while.

We were given the keys to one of the corners rooms facing the beach, a small room with two beds and a thin, slatted doorway leading out onto a balcony. Sara unpacked the perishable foods from her grocery bags, making room in the small

refrigerator below the television set, as I stood outside on the balcony listening to the waves and the distant sounds of the city, wondering why I had booked a plane ticket for the following morning. I wanted so desperately to stay in one place. I stood on the balcony with my shirt off, letting the sea-salt air rush cool against my skin and listening to the crash of the waves pound the pebble beach down below, and I felt for a moment that I could see the exact place on the shoreline where I had tried to sleep soundly four nights earlier. It looked like every other place. I could hear Sara turn on the shower inside, and I thought about going in. I thought about walking inside, thin and cold from the night air, taking off the rest of my clothes silently and following her in. It would be the simplest gesture. There was no lock on the bathroom, and I thought for a moment that the door had actually been left open, that she hadn't closed it behind her when she went in.

I worried about the trip home in the morning. I knew that even if things went well that night, it would be foolish to expect anything more. We had shared a pleasant afternoon together, sitting inside a shaded marble nook, putting our feet up and enjoying the fountains and the green park. Two Americans traveling. Even if we woke up in the same bed alongside one another, still breathless and trying to recall each moment of the night before, there would still be that period of time before I ever saw her again, until we were able to return to a situation like this, sharing an intimate space and finding ourselves alone together in a foreign land.

It wouldn't be the same, and the air was too cold, and I shut the door leading out onto the balcony and listened to the water run inside the bathroom with its door left open. I wondered whether I had already missed my chance to go into that same space

with her, for us to be without clothes at the same time. I wondered what she wasn't telling me, or what she had been holding back about in the beginning, when we had first met. We'd been perfectly open about our lives in conversation, yet there was also something shared in our silences.

I sat there on the bed closest to the shower room, turning on my side and facing the wallpaper so that I'd be able to better hear the soft fall of water nearby. It allowed me to believe that I was involved somehow, if only in a glancing, second-hand way. I don't think she would've minded at all, that I sat there listening to her. It was a small intimacy.

Her bed was exactly the same as the one I had chosen, no different from mine aside from being the next bed over on the opposite side of the nightstand. Two low-watt reading lights with chains hanging down were mounted nearby. There was a hardwood bureau against the far wall, opposite the shower room, and then the television and the cube refrigerator and the door leading back out to the balcony. The walls were covered by dull blue wallpaper. The only light that we had turned on was the one nearest the front door, a floor lamp just in front of the bathroom, so that the room would be shining when she walked out. Otherwise the corners were dark, and the only thing I could hear was the pounding of water in the next room and the hush of the waves. Even with the balcony door closed, I could still hear the slow pound of the Mediterranean.

I thought, for a moment, that I could hear quiet sounds of urgency. It was similar to the way I had felt when I first heard my name being called along the esplanade, as though I were being asked to involve myself in an accident somewhere near the

shore. It sounded out of place. I looked at the light blue walls of the room and the soft slits of moonlight falling onto the carpet and thought, as I had the first time, such sounds didn't belong in a place like this. There was a sense of longing and loss in the pattering of the shower, the hum of the water heater, the soft rush of wind and moonlight between the slats of the balcony door.

I heard the water shut off in the bathroom. Then nothing. There was no longer the incessant tapping of water droplets against the shower stall, so close to my head. There was just the small squeak of the shower knob, then nothing. I waited to hear further sounds of primping or maintenance inside: the rough combing of hair or the brushing of teeth or the flush of a toilet. Anything that might fill that space beside my head with the sounds of another person in motion. But I didn't hear anything. I thought, for a moment, that the sink was running gently. I thought that I could hear hints of movement inside, the fluffing of a towel perhaps. I watched the clock on the nightstand between two beds, imagining that the minutes weren't silently ticking by.

I waited five minutes. I was about to knock when I finally heard the bathroom door swing open and Sara walked out into the living space, walking across the room wearing nothing more than a towel. Both her elbows were still dripping wet, leaving a trail across the carpet, and her long black hair swung and draped over her shoulders as she walked by. She walked without looking over at me and headed straight towards the balcony overlooking the beach. She opened the door and let back in all the sounds of the water and the mayhem and the partying down along the esplanade, and for a moment I thought that I could still hear small whispers being channeled through the night air, like ghosts being carried along. I was mistaken. I wanted her to

walk back in and shut the balcony door behind her. I walked over to see if she was alright, if there wasn't something I could do before I began to take my shower. I was about to put my hand to the door and close it halfway, making sure that she was alright, when she turned around sharply and said, "I'm fine." She smiled at me with a tired look, nodding towards the shower. "It's your turn. I just wanted to stand here a while and let my hair dry."

I left her alone, uncertain of whether or not she believed that nothing was bothering her, and I wanted to know whether she was able to hear those same soft specters that seemed to float across the wind when she opened up the balcony door, walking through and stepping out into the sounds of the esplanade and allowing her hair to slowly air-dry as I took my first private shower in months. What could I have asked of her at that moment?

The bathroom was small, but well-decorated and soft. I could see how one could easily idle their time in there for five minutes, perhaps just sitting on the edge of the tub and enjoying the bright sparkling of the polished faucets and the scrubbed tiles and the soaps and hair products wrapped in little plastic bags. I thought I could hear Sara turn on the television set out in the main room, flipping through channels randomly and quickly, then realized that I had been mistaken and that it was only the continued, fluctuating sounds of the street traffic passing in front of the hotel and the changing acts of the esplanade. It was nothing, and I ran the water into the tub for a short while, allowing it to grow hot enough to fog over the mirrors above the sink and the full-length mirror that hung from the bathroom door. I sat at the edge of the tub with my feet in the steaming water, waiting to hear some sort of indication about

Sara's outlook towards the evening. I was hoping for some sort of sound to trickle in around the door.

I stepped into the shower once the water reached a steady temperature, keeping the heat turned up and setting the rest of my clothes down along the edge of the sink. I didn't even bother with washing at first, and just stood there with my head resting against the cool tiles at the front of the tub, feeling the contrast of temperatures and letting the warm water fall down my back and shoulders and wondering if Sara was standing outside thinking about the way that water falls down another person's body. I scrubbed down my arms and legs, washing weeks' worth of dust and dirt and mud from my calves and ankles, leaving the shower momentarily to unwrap a fresh bar of soap, not wanting to soil the one Sara had already opened for herself.

The drain wasn't running well, and I soon found myself standing in an inch of still water as I worked the tiny bar of soap into a lather, wanting to clean each and every inch of my body. I wanted to feel clean again. I turned up the heat of the water until it burned slightly, listening for any sounds outside. Nothing. I could see the floor lamp shining through the clouds of steam exiting the bathroom, and I was afraid that Sara had already drifted off to bed, that I had waited too long to finish my shower and she had already drifted off because I was simply too slow, or too hesitant. It wasn't a good feeling. I turned the shower knob as far as it would go, holding my head still against the cooling tiles, still unable to hear anything.

I counted the squares of blue and white tiles alternating near my head, one and two, one and two, trying to keep the lines of tiles ordered as the water ran down my back and shoulders, making my skin redden and filling the room with steam, clouding

out the floor lamp outside the bathroom door. There were marks of soap on the glass of the shower stall, and I could see small handprints in them and I wondered whether someone had recently made love in this shower, or whether they had fallen and tried to catch themselves in the process of soaping up. Even the foot of pooled water at the bottom of the tub was now steaming, letting off thin wisps of heated water that reminded me of the cirrus clouds high above the shores of the Mediterranean.

Sara walked in wearing only her towel.

She ran one finger across the mirror over the sink, tracing a thin line over its surface. I looked at her from where I was standing, keeping my head pressed closely against the cool white and blue tiles of the shower. I didn't smile or frown or move when she looked over.

"Couldn't you hear me?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?" I said, still looking at her through the glass.

She reached her hand in through the doors of the shower stall, then quickly pulled it out. She removed her towel, peeling it away from her body, then reached in with the towel wrapped around her arm, turning the shower knob down to a better temperature.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

She slowly opened the door to the shower, lifting up on the handle so that it wouldn't make sounds, letting her tanned feet and ankles descend slowly into the water filling the bottom of the tub. She placed her right foot in, then her left, putting her hands against the towel rack and the tiles for balance. I had never seen her like this before. She stood there motionless at the back of the tub, the lukewarm water of

the shower hitting against her calves, her hands at her sides and the rough tan lines dividing up sections of her small body. Her chin was tucked low, and her hair curled down in front of her ears, flowing downward and forming small curves around her breasts, like thin black branches. I thought for moment she was smiling, then realized it was only the upturned corners of her mouth, smiling softly at the ways that people arrive in the same place.

“I don’t think it’s going to work,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think it’s going to work. I haven’t taken any pictures since we arrived.”

“It’s alright,” I said. “You’ll think differently about it when you get home.”

“I know.”

“Why were you looking up from the beach?” I said.

“Do you mind if I come over?” she asked, as if she were standing outside.

She leaned her head up close against my back, letting it sit there softly for a moment, pressing her cool damp hair against my back and letting the water from the shower drip around her cheeks. She just kept her head there for a moment, letting it sit at that soft place at the middle of one’s back, motionless, then putting her lips softly in that same place, letting the water run across them. She slid her arms underneath mine, lifting her hands up to my shoulders and face, gently pressing her weight against my back and letting her cool hair just lay there, not moving.

“Can you feel that?” she asked, pressing herself next to me.

“Yes,” I said. “Of course I can feel that.”

“Alright.”

I don't know how long we stayed there, underneath the cool water of the shower. It felt like we would never leave that place, the soft feeling of falling water running down my back and shoulders and around the corners of Sara's lips, just staying there. I could feel the softness of her skin pressed against my back, feeling warm and radiant after a long day underneath the sun of the Mediterranean, with only a few small wisps of cirrus clouds between her body and the sun. She gave off a gentle heat as we stood there, as though she had just left her things behind at the beach. In the distance, there was the soft sound of the shoreline of Nice, where I had once spent an evening lying restless and turning against a pebble surface, worried that I belonged somewhere else. This never left me. There was the sound of the esplanade and the crowds and the late-night revelers against our backs as we stood there, just silent, together beneath the soft pounding of the cooling water and the warmth between two still bodies and the thought of morning, thinking that everything in our lives at that moment was over and just beginning, or that it was a small end for the both of us, and that there simply wasn't enough time left before the sun came up again. We feared moving too far. Sara kept her arms wrapped underneath mine, as I kept my head pressed close to the blue and white tiles, feeling their soft indentations at my forehead, not speaking or thinking or moving much at all, just silent, until the water became too cold for us to stay.

This morning I awoke with a start. There was a quiet stillness throughout the house, as though I had forgotten an important appointment or was waking up too late. But everything was in order. It was just after seven in the morning. There were the birds outside at the feeder and the morning sounds of my neighbors and the soft rushes of wind moving through the forests behind my house. I started a kettle of water on the stove and went upstairs to change.

I headed to the office building downtown at eight, like any other day, and had lunch with my co-workers around noon at one of the food trucks down the block. We ordered hot dogs and fries and sat on the marble benches discussing work-related concerns: where to move our public investments, which local community groups were so far demonstrating the most effective work, what specific issues we hoped to target with the next round of funding. We didn't mention our personal lives, my co-workers and I, though there wasn't any specific reason not to earlier today. I'd already been working there a few years, managing investments within the city's public works programs, and we were all quite comfortable with one another.

I wasn't unhappy with my professional life.

I left work early today, however, shutting down my computer just before three, closing the blinds in my office window and retrieving my coat from the rack in the front corridor. I said goodbye to our receptionist, a pleasant woman who I'd never thought of in an approachable way. It was never the right time. She occasionally went out for lunch with us, as there was no reason for her not to, and she'd always been welcome as we sat on the marble benches outside the office, discussing work-

related issues and the idiosyncrasies of co-workers who hadn't come for lunch that day, in good humor, sitting beneath the shade of the art museum's trees near the line of food trucks curving around the block. As I wished the receptionist a good afternoon on my way out, she asked whether everything was going alright. I told her that everything was going beautifully. Recent funding requests had been secured, and I was just heading home early, to celebrate. She smiled and said that she would see me tomorrow.

I retrieved my car from the underground garage and headed east towards the outskirts of town, managing to avoid most of the rush-hour traffic. I drove through the shopping districts and public parks, full of schoolchildren and parents who had brought them there after classes let out for the day. They were playing kickball and swarming across the jungle gym, their parents conversing close by. It was still early fall. The leaves in the city had only just started to change color. I rolled down the windows and turned on the radio and drove past the exit to my house.

I looked at the directions I had printed out on the seat next to me. Forty miles, then an exit, then another hour or two before I was close. I turned to a classical station on the radio, as this usually calmed one's nerves whenever I was driving home in the early evening. It made me feel as though I were floating through the streets instead of listening to the sounds of exhaust, waiting for the streetlights to change. I made it onto the highways east of the city in good time. After three hours of driving, I stopped at a restaurant only a few miles away from the endpoint on the directions, ordering my food at the bar and then taking it outside to their patio area, which overlooked the nearby state park. I took a seat on one of the empty barstools and

leaned out over the wooden railing, only picking at my food and thanking the waitress too graciously for bringing me out another soda without being asked. I stared out into the mountains, looking at the curves and contours of the surrounding parklands. The leaves were changing more quickly outside the city. In the distance, there were fiery collections of red and orange leaves interspersed around dark black branches, though these only appeared at the furthest edges of the park.

I was supposed to be there at sunset. I wasn't familiar with the area, however, and wanted to get there a bit early, before it was too dark for me to get my bearings, but not too early so as to seem sentimental. I drove through the park entrance and followed the hand-carved signs, which led me through the maze of picnic areas and trails and baseball fields, turning left onto an unpaved road that ran parallel to the mountain for a while and then curved sharply upwards, as the directions had assured me it would. There was a quiet stream running alongside the road, before it turned, and I clicked off the radio and left the windows down even as the temperature fell, reminded of the roads heading south from a small mountainside town in Southern France. I parked near the opening to a small footpath, taking the directions with me, walking up the stony embankment that led further up the mountain. After fifteen minutes of this, the trees opened up into a wide field of brush overlooking the valleys below, glowing in bright oranges and reds and greens, a vast field looking out from the perimeter of an old barn.

She was already there, facing away from me, as though she had taken another path and had forgotten which set of directions she had given me. Her dark hair had been trimmed shorter, and she was wearing a thick, grey sweater that cinched at her

waist. She stood in fitted jeans that I wanted to imagine were intentional, but were probably just what she been wearing earlier in the day, for other, simpler reasons, just as I was still wearing my slacks and sport coat and tie.

“Congratulations,” I said softly, walking up behind her.

“Don’t,” Sara said.

There was a light blue lake to the east, surrounded a fiery perimeter of trees. Even from this distance, we make out small boats paddling along its water, perhaps fishers or couples out for an evening boat ride, just before dark. They slowly disappeared from view as the sun touched the shoreline, causing the surface to glow brightly and reflect, almost like a beacon, towards the mountainside where we were both standing. I could still see where the edges of the water rippled and pooled, reverberating against the dark shores in the early autumn air, effacing all traces of the summer crowds and the evening activities and the boating.

I wondered who had once owned the barn behind us, paint peeling and weather-torn, or whether it had always been designated as a quiet place in a state park. I imagined it had once been functional to someone, that it had once been a place where a family could set down their evening’s work and be able to look out as the sun set behind a distant lake.

“Can you hear that?” she asked.

There was the light hooting of owls in the rafters nearby, climbing and clawing gently within the walls of an old barn, rearranging their nests and food for the long night ahead. Our shadows fell thinly across the lowest panels of the barn. I imagined

that it must be full of these owls, roosting and settled, positioned here at the end of all things.

There was also the curling of wind around the edges of this wooden structure, whistling past our collars as we stood there. It was impossible to hear anyone enjoying the last moments of the day down by the lake, whether they were waving or drowning, but it was still possible to hear the babbling of the water in a nearby stream, even above the curling of the wind.

“I used to come here when I was younger,” she said, “when I wanted to get away from my parents. They would be down in one of the picnic areas, and I would be up here. Sometimes I would make them wait for me. I would stand here and imagine that I was looking out over the entire world, that the entire world looked like this.”

I just stood behind her, as she kept her arms crossed in front of her chest, looking out only at the water and saying nothing, giving me no indications of her reasons for asking me here. I couldn't tell if she wanted me to hold her, or whether this would be a source of comfort. But I did. I stood behind her with my hands linked tightly at her waist. She leaned her head back until our cheeks brushed together, and her eyes stared out at the night sky as the moon appeared. “You don't have to,” I said, tilting my head back to follow her gaze.

“It looks like a pebble.”

“Lots of things do,” I said. “You don't have to.”

“He makes me feel safe,” she said. “He makes me feel settled here.”

“That sounds nice.”

The sun had all but disappeared below the horizon, and its reflection dimmed. We stood there with our arms interlocked, staring up into the heavens and wondering if and when the stars might appear later tonight. But it was only the moon for now, just a wide, bright pebble sitting there at the top of the sky, surrounded by the dull haze left over from the setting sun. I could feel, at my feet, the smallest chill.

“Are you cold?” I asked her.

“I’ve been up here a while,” she said. “I was hoping you’d get here early.”

“I stopped on my way in. I stopped at that small restaurant.”

“Oh.” She leaned her head gently against mine. I could feel that the space between our cheeks was wet. When she moved away, that part of my skin turned cold in the wind.

“We can stop there on our way out. It will be a quiet place to talk.”

“It will be too late by then,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

We just stood there, standing alongside the protective side of an old barn, listening to the chatter of owls and watching the stars appear overhead, waiting for them to show. Why had I waited this long to join her up here, and why did it feel far too late? It was barely eight on an early fall evening, yet I could still feel a chill slowly crawl up my legs as we stood there. I wanted to say something, to tell her that this was a natural feeling, that all things would work out for the best. I wanted to tell her that she was right in believing that the whole world was like this, that one could stand on a hillside and look into fiery valleys below without any distant thoughts. This was possible. This was what she wanted to hear. She wanted to hear me say,

“We can stay like this. We can stand here and know without question that the entire world is as beautiful as this.”

“Do you feel that?” she asked, looking down at her feet for a moment.

“It’s nothing,” I told her.

“Are you sure?”

I wanted to say, no. No, I haven’t been sure of anything for the longest time. I haven’t been certain since we shared a room together near the Mediterranean, and I felt the hottest water on my back and you turned it down, naked with a towel wrapped around your arm, and stepped slowly into the tub with me. I felt certain at that moment, as you put your arms around mine and pressed your cool hair to my back, and we stood there with our entire lives ahead of us. I knew, at that moment, that there was nothing else. I felt safe, and settled. I knew that there was nothing else in the world, that we could stand there forever and not be bothered by anything ever again. Then the hot water ran out, and I had to leave the next morning. I don’t know whether things were still the same after that. I don’t know where things go when they are lost.

“I’ve been seeing someone,” I said.

“Who?” Sara asked, curious and amused.

“The receptionist at the office.”

“That’s nice. Is that true?”

“Not at all.” I looked straightforward, out into the dimming periphery of the moon.

“I never loved you,” she said.

“Is that true?”

“Not at all.”

“You should never have come back for me,” I said, “when you found me in Nice.”

“Is that true?”

I thought that I could still feel that constant warmth present in her, as though she had spent the afternoon in the sun and the lingering heat was radiating outwards, through her clothes. She felt so warm, as we stood there, looking up at the stars. I didn't know whether there could be anything after that day, standing out on top of a hill with our heads turned upwards, staring into the night sky and waiting for the stars to appear. I moved my feet slightly, still holding onto her, and realized that we were standing in a wet section of brush, that we had chosen a poor place for ourselves and that it would be appropriate to move. But I didn't say anything. I could feel a chill rise slowly upwards, covering my feet, my ankles.

Sara didn't move, or say much of anything, and I wondered whether or not she was still waiting for an answer. Could I have said, yes? Yes, everything from that moment forward, from the moment I heard a soft pleading quality in your voice, I knew that things would never be the same, that we should have left it as it was? I could have said, no. No, I could have stated that the trajectory of our lives was unmistakable, that it wasn't possible to go back and change things and start over. That was how things ended. That was how things were filed away. I could have said “Eight”, and perhaps she would have laughed and asked me to explain further. Perhaps we would have stood there, and the way that I told her a story from my

childhood would've changed things. It would have solidified some connection that we had thought was absent the entire time, but was really only buried deeply, that it was only hidden. I wanted to say something that would validate the time that we had spent together, passing some judgment, making some decision, explaining to her that, when I was with her, it felt as though I had between my fingers a thread-like emptiness that I had been searching out for the longest time, and that I was never sure what side of that emptiness I was on. Perhaps that might have made sense to her, and she might have made the decision to go the restaurant with me afterwards, until we'd idled too long to go back.

“Do feel that?” she asked, pleading softly into my ear.

“It's nothing.”

Somewhere, there are two lost souls staring up into the heavens beside an old barn. I could never say how long we stood there, or whether we're still there. I rubbed my hand against the soft fabric of her sweater, not letting go, as the both of us listened for an answer we hoped would arrive on the wind. The chill rose from our ankles, to our knees, to just above our waists. The owls inside the barn settled in for the evening, saving their warmth for the long night ahead. The remaining haze of the sunlight slowly dwindled, bringing out a soft glow of the moon, letting a wide panorama of stars slowly appear. I couldn't count them all. Perhaps we could each take half of them, dividing up the sky into portions and holding tight to one, two, three stars, which we would catalogue in our heads, keeping tracking of the sparks of light above us, ignoring the coldness that never seemed to fade, following us both. It's impossible to say where some people go, whether the ground swallows them up

or whether they simply move to another place where they don't wish to be found. I like to believe that it's the second one. I'd like to think that the two of us simply disappeared that night, together, standing under a darkening sky with our arms linked around one another, and that we realized, in that moment, that we were feeling the same emptiness, the same shape and size. I wondered whether she had seen it, those voices following people, and whether anyone else ever talked about those sorts of things. I didn't imagine this to be the case. I figured there was little difference between certain silences, that perhaps we were simply making things up, that there was nothing there at all. Sara and I stood there as the stars came out, every last one of them, standing there quiet as the wind curled around the edges of an old barn. We waited for the feeling of rising coldness to stop, for that sinking feeling to die down and forget about us entirely, to allow us to simply stand there quietly and wait for the chill to subside. We wanted a brief pause. It rose up our arms, to our chests, pressing into the cracks and small folds between the two of us, who were never completely touching, easing in-between two people on a mountainside, staring up into the sky and looking for warmth from one another. It rose past our bodies and held us closely, two small islands in the middle of nowhere.