ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE LITTLE DANCER AND OTHER STORIES

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Set during the 1990s on the East Coast of the United States, this collection of short stories explores identity and diaspora where grief manifests viscerally. Be it the loss of a sister, the loss of a childhood home, the loss of health, or the loss of a grandmother's memory, the alienating event pushes characters into a perceived state of paralysis yet the ensuing emotional trajectories explore how fear and grief can be empowering when borne with emotional resilience and compassion.

THE LITTLE DANCER AND OTHER STORIES

By

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The Little Dancer

"I'm here, mom," she says. "What do you need?"

I don't need anything. I like the sound of her in my foyer, though, her long arm carrying a suitcase that must be ten years old. She's wearing a fuscia sweatshirt and jeans that button right under her chest: we've always been short-wasted in my family, from granny onwards and from one daughter to the next. The suitcase doesn't have wheels so it's dragging on her arm and I lean forward for it but she shoos me away.

`The Voice' is what they call her because she says what she thinks. She was screaming when they pulled her from me after a ten hour labor and contractions that made me wince more than I'd ever winced at the world and I didn't know the pain I'd go through after her birth: I didn't know there'd be three husbands: one who'd leave, one who'd die, and a third who'd take me south. I didn't know there'd be pain much later: physical pain, from aching joints and my heart. But she never caused much pain, except for the birth, and when I saw this red baby with a face like her sister's – scrunched and raw, and later sucking like a monkey at my breast, I knew she wouldn't be trouble. I was right. She was a doll. She was a disorderly child, with thick hair that wouldn't perm. She had a thicker waist than most and she'd get into scrapes and bruises, always falling or tripping on her penny-loafers, but she was a doll.

She grew ornery much later.

"What's wrong with your computer?" she asks, moving into the den. She puts her bags on the floor. "I want to show you what Jim taught me; the browser seems to be updated frequently but you can get updates done automatically. I don't know why he doesn't just call; he could talk me through it… Jim, I said, I won't be able to unless you're talking me through it." She's wearing glasses, her blond hair flipping under fingers. She sits and looks up at me, her eyes blue over red frames, and the computer screen blinking in front of her. "Good lord, I said, we're not reformatting her machine! *Make it easy*, I said."

"What's reformatting?" I asked.

"I'm going to see if we can fix the settings on your browser," she said. "I might need the phone; can you get the phone, mom? I'm thinking that all we need to do is fix the settings on your browser…." I leave the room to look for my glasses in the kitchen: they're probably in the small decorative stand, the craft project she worked on in Japan. "Make sure you have his second number," she yelled after me. "He only answers the number for his office…."

I'm in the kitchen, standing in front of my kitchen table. The alcove behind the table is small and deep with plaid curtains lining the sides. A sham hangs loosely from the top: its three shades of purples, the color of hydrangea grown up north. I realize my glasses are hanging from my neck, the chain dangling as I look down and disperse utensils. I must have been wearing them earlier when I was doing crossword puzzles.

Outside the window, Bob is sprinkling his hibiscus. His white socks are pulled to his knees. He's wearing a pair of shorts that cinch below his waist. I look away from his

broad back and round, white shoulders. I smooth aside the Saran Wrap and move her water closer to the cheddar.

"Sit down, mom," she calls. "I'll get the food and water."

She appears in the kitchen. "Bob still watering your annuals?" she asks.

"They're gone, Jeannette," I said. "The deer ate the annuals."

She looks at me quickly.

"There are no deer here, mom," she says. I continue dispersing utensils, enjoying her momentary lapse. For a moment she watches me.

"That's not funny, mom," she says. She leans closer to peer out the window. "Are those hibiscus?" she asks.

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She's always been a hard worker. She doesn't use the mouse. She learned shortcuts so she could type faster using only the keyboard. She learned how to type on a typewriter in a boarding school north of Maine. She came home for holidays and summers and she left home at seventeen, her sister shortly thereafter. She earned an associates degree at a community college by working three jobs. For some years she taught ballroom dancing in Boston. Miss Boehm, they'd call her.

I don't know much about those years so there's little to recall but I'm recalling everything, now. Jeannette reminds me of my second husband and of her childhood home in Revere where he took her and raised her as his own: the red cedar shingles, the street between our house and the shore, the rocky beach, the bay, the smell of humidity

on a clear, fine day. The house in Revere was stout and well built. My second husband designed it and his construction company built it: David, they called him, the self-taught carpenter from Canada.

I walked through the house before leaving it for Florida. The layout to the house was odd, with steep stairs ascending to the second floor and steeper stairs descending from the children's room to the side entrance. But I loved it because he'd built it for me and the girls. I started with the kitchen, where I used to cook. I started at my old icebox near the front door. I strolled through the dining room and touched the heavy oak cabinets. The china had already been sold. I paused at the living room and stared at the black-and-white photographs on the mantel. My hair was in tight curls, just the way he liked it. The drapes were closed and I opened the heavy velvet panels. There was only one window in that room and in the meek light I looked at the couch where my granddaughters stumbled through infancy. Then toddlers laying waste to the room with wrapping paper from Christmas presents. Then children wearing slip-on elastics of toddler-sized Easter rabbits. Then Shannon sitting on David's lap as I was squeezed to the right of him. Shannon, my granddaughter: she was sprawled on his right leg in her red velvet dress though she rarely spoke and always seemed to stare right through me.

I walked by the mustard-yellow armchair where my husband had sat with Shannon, then six, in front of him. At the top of his armchair lay the white cloth protecting the fabric from his hair gel. I passed the ottoman where I'd prop up his feet. I passed the crutches and the folded wheelchair behind his chair. When I reached the brightly-lit den, I looked out.

We sold everything I thought I'd never have left.

"What are you doing in the dark?" Jeanette asks, turning on the blinding porch lights. She is standing behind me at the sliding glass doors in her nightgown. "Do you need some water?" she asked. "How's your sleep these days? Is the malic acid working? What about the glucosamine chrondroitin? Shannon said you aren't taking your supplements."

"Turn off the light," I said. She waited for me to say more and then she was bustling again, pulling the patio chairs apart. She touched my back as I brushed past to avoid her. She tried to talk and I told her, *hush*. We returned to the living room and I pressed the doors closed. The water is running in her bathroom as I'm bustling around the living room turning off lights. When I hear the shower, I return to the lanai and push the lounge chairs together. Bob's house is dark on the left. The concrete is cold and the sky is black.

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She comes twice a year. Once in September, and once in February.

"Remember the Christmas card you sent back a few months ago?" Jeannette asked, leading me into Eckerds. Cool air fanned over my blouse.

"You'd just had Shannon," I replied, buttoning my sweater as the doors swung closed.

"I'd just had Shannon," she continued. "I sent you a Christmas card right after she was born." She paused to look for the women's section before we continued. We passed the men's dress shirts and the men's dress pants. We walked by dozens of packaged

white tank shirts. We walked by the shoe department and I glanced at racks of brown shoes, the leather shiny and stiff. We walked by the perfume aisles and I glance at the colognes for Tan Oliver. She ushered me through and we stopped at Petites.

I started flipping through blouses.

"This would look sharp on you." I held up a blouse.

"You returned fifteen years of correspondence," she said.

"I was cleaning up," I said, holding up the matching linen pants.

"It was sweet." She was speaking slowly. "The children enjoyed reading the notes they mailed when they were little," she said. "They read them out loud to each other," she continued, following me. "They loved the sketches they'd drawn in crayon; Shannon was particularly impressed with the pink tutu she drew on your stationary."

I found the 75% off rack.

"I put the cards under the tree, mom; I didn't want the kids worrying about you. Shannon, mom; Shannon's worried about you. She told me to come down."

Her fingers grew quicker as she flipped through the racks.

"Linen pants," I said. "Shannon likes linen pants. Is she still a size eight or has she dropped to a size six?"

"Why did you send the stuffed dolls that speak French, though?"

"I found them in a catalogue," I said, holding up a pearl-lined V-neck sweater. It wasn't machine-washable, so I put it back. The hangers clicked as she moved through the rack. "They reminded me of you and Jeannette when you were little."

She paused, inhaling. "*That* I can understand, mom. That's why *Janice* and I didn't mind receiving them," she said. "You sent the same doll to all six of your

granddaughters, though," she continued, clicking through the rack. "You send the exact same doll and you mailed them in January. I couldn't intercept – the dolls were mailed directly to the girls so it wasn't like they were a Christmas gift. At first we had no idea who'd sent them; I called Janice to see if her girls had gotten them. Janice and I couldn't find a card. There wasn't a card or even a return address. I thought the Mail-Order Company was running some kind of promotion. When you told me you'd sent them, I broke the news casually; Shannon asked if you were okay. *Is grandma doing okay*, she asked."

I didn't say anything. She brusquely clicked through the size 14 pants.

"Shannon liked receiving the letter she wrote in 1984," she continued, pulling out a linen blouse. "She was six years old; she remembers drawing the ballerina. Do you remember when she wrote that note - it was the week that Dad died. She wrote it in your den, on your typewriter."

"Of course I do," I said. "I showed her David's body."

"Six dolls for the granddaughters," my daughter continued. "Two more for Janice and I and all the cards and letters the kids have sent…. Sending home a note that Shannon wrote when Dad died? I want you to come home, mom; I'm worried about you. Shannon's worried about you."

"Worried about what?" I asked.

"Showed her the body?" she asked.

"I showed her David's body," I said. "When he died, I showed Shannon his body. She was here when Fred has his first stroke."

"Dear God," Jeannette says.

We passed the maternity section. She passed the clothing she'd folded over her arms and her fingers smoothed out the fabric where I stood. We both stood and waited as the sales lady unlocked the door to the dressing room. I'm a foot shorter than Jeannette and shrinking. Shannon is a few inches taller than Jeannette.

"So you don't want me swimming in Bob's pool, huh?" She asked, taking back the clothing.

"No," I said.

"because he offered…," she continued, handing me the hangers. She opened the door and watched me walk into the dressing room.

"...it'll only take a few minutes," I said.

"I'll be right here," she said.

***

David wanted Jeannette and Janice to be QuebecWa when we moved into the house in Revere and that's why they became so independent. We sent them to boarding school near the border of Maine and Canada. They wore pinafores; they took classes in French. When I started working for David I was a woman struggling to get a divorce. He taught me bookkeeping. I did the office work, kept track of his business expenses. Eventually we married and he adopted the girls. This was after the war, of course.

The son of farmers, with siblings and cousins all over Canada, with a last name that wouldn't mean anything to the QuebecWa women unless they'd heard of the quintuplets borne by one of his father's cousins on the farm, with a scholarship to MIT

that he hadn't used because he couldn't afford to be a student. I've never seen QuebecWa women but I'd heard they were beautiful: they descended from the original French colonists; they had blue blood and blue-black hair. I can understand why he wanted my girls to attend boarding school. QuebecWa women are snooty, I'd heard, and David didn't raise the girls to look down on people but he wanted them well educated.

Slender, with long blond hair and her mother's blue eyes: the eyes of the ocean, the eyes of the tide rising towards her; Shannon didn't need much. She was her mother's daughter and her grandmother's granddaughter. Seven granddaughters, all heart breakers, all of them descendents of my stock and Shannon was the quietest and the most sensitive. She looked exactly like Jeannette. She moved like a dancer, dancing through Eckerd's when she came down during her sophomore year of high school. Her slim wrist had been separating the hangers, the iron clicking as she rolled her ankles. When she wasn't stretching her legs or standing in turnout she was stretching her back or rolling her neck. She barely said a word while we were shopping. She stood in first position while we waited in line at the cashier's desk and when we finally started moving she showed me the movements of a ballerina. "You always move sideways," she said. "You never directly face the audience."

When she walked away, the scent of sun block trailed her and Fred was walking towards us. Shannon stood in front of us, watching the cars go by, waiting at the curb, waiting for the right time to guide us. Shannon was walking into the street before she noticed. Then she turned to see if we were following. I didn't want her alarmed so I whispered in his ear, held his waist, and held on tightly, waiting until it passed. We were right outside of Eckerds, his forearm against the wall and his wife on the other side,

waiting. He nearly fell down, and I held his other arm. Shannon froze. Then he righted himself, holding onto me. We slowly caught up to Shannon. We crossed the street with her, with me on one side and Shannon on the other.

My daughter thinks I make a habit of things, of marrying my bosses. She never said this but she made sure that Fred's house was in my name when I married him. There were bills when David grew ill and I barely had the money to pay them though I worked full-time, as a bookkeeper, earning a decent wage until I could pay.

She's leaning back in the lounge chair on an autumn day in Sarasota and she's closing her eyes to the sun. Autumn in Sarasota is like an evergreen: always growing. It's a Friday and my daughter is planning out the weekend as she sits in the chaise lounge chair. She hasn't said much since our trip to Eckerd's and she's less intent on absorbing what I'm saying. The sun makes her weak; the sun makes everyone weak here so we sit on the patio, absorbing. It's the reason that Fred and I moved from Massachusetts. She's wearing a rainbow-colored bathing suit top with the straps pulled down so that she can bathe in the sun and I'm grateful for this: her silence. The pond before us is perfectly reflective.

"Will Shannon come down this year?" I ask. I'm sitting at the glass table in the shade with my forearms resting like I'm eating.

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Revere faced the ocean. In Sarasota our houses face a ripple-free pond. Above it, the sky is blue or gray. The storms come and go without warning. Most of our neighbors chose

to have pools installed when they ordered their houses but Fred and I preferred a lanai to the tiny pool Bob owns. The pool itself is barely the size of our guest bedroom. Fred and I didn't want the pool; we wanted a porch with a bit of covering and an open area to enjoy direct light. We wanted patio furniture: a table and chairs, with lounge chairs so we could lie out and enjoy the sight. We wanted plush chairs with thick cushions and levers. We wanted everything in our house to be peach or beige or white, with fresh air circulated by a ceiling fan, the couch in front of our TV long and comfortable. To the right of the couch was our guest chair, the chair we never used: the Lazy-boy recliner. It's sore on the eye among the pastels. That's what Fred used to say. We bought it even though it cost a small fortune. We never meant to use it; it was for our guests, for Jeanette or her husband. For Janice. For the grandkids.

We wanted to have thick screens on the porch to block out the insects. We wanted central air for the months when we couldn't walk outside. On the months when the weather was mild we'd do crossword puzzles on the porch and occasionally chat with our neighbors. Bob appeared holding a hose or hoe as he gardened. His wife had died nine years earlier.

Talk shows, the news, reading inside the house, preparing dinner.

Jeannette walked around the house for the rest of the afternoon. I reminded her to wear long socks to protect her calves from the fire ants if she went outside. I did crossword puzzles, writing to Shannon on the computer. I listened to the sound of the screen door opening and closing. At some point I heard Bob and Jeannette outside, near my kitchen table. When I stared through the alcove window, I could see them chatting in front of his hibiscus. My daughter wasn't wearing tube socks. Bob was wearing a

button-down shirt over his shorts and didn't appear to be gardening. I closed the blinds quietly.

"Bob told me the orchid show should be good tomorrow," Jeannette said later. We were resting on the patio, and she was sitting on Fred's chair. She was staring up at the stars. I used to do this with Fred every night -- analyze the clouds, predict the weather by the way they'd be forming. Presently, puffy gray clouds were hovering – I think they were called nimbostratus. "Bob said the plants would be in tents," my daughter continued, "but he doubts there'll be a rain date… He was showing me his orchid collection in the foyer; says you haven't seen it since Fred passed. He remembers showing it when Shannon came to visit."

In Florida the weather was unpredictable; thunderstorms came and left like the storms off Revere with the only difference being the drop in barometric pressure. My lower back was hurting, my entire body tense and tight.

"Do you mind if I invite Bob tomorrow?" she asked. The ice rattled in her glass. "Will you let me bring Bob tomorrow?" she asked. "They might call it off. Bob said the plants would be in tents but he doubts there'd be a rain date. The sellers move onto Long Shore on Friday. He sounded very impressed; apparently he's met the lecturer. He was showing me his orchid collection in the foyer; says you haven't seen it since Fred passed."

"I won't go if Bob comes," I said.

In Florida the weather is unpredictable; thunderstorms come and go like the storms off Revere. The only difference now is that I notice the drop in barometric pressure. My lower back is hurting, my entire body tense and tight, and the pain starting

low at the hips and gravitating like a steady burn towards my neck. Meningitis is the disease I'm reminded of when people ask about the pain. It feels like a viral infection, my spine being eaten alive by something I can't name, my back cracking every time I shift or stand.

"Do you mind if I invite Bob tomorrow?" she asks.

"Of course I do," I said, shifting in the chair. My back cracks. We ignore it, though it is audible. "I'm not marrying Bob, Jeannette. I'm also not selling the house." "What on earth?" she asks, sitting up. My hands are on my lower back, and I'm massaging a bit. She pulls the sleeves up on her bathing suit top. Her legs land on the concrete floor and her hands reached for her gin and tonic. "What on earth are you talking about, mom? Are you okay? Were we shopping for too long? Do you need Advil? Let me get the Advil." I follow her into the house and the ceiling fan whirls, dispensing air above us. It's never too hot or too cold in this house. Fred made sure of that: when we moved to Sarasota, he'd often check the thermostat. The temperature was always perfect. It was always just perfect. It was never perfect in Revere. I'm fond of telling her that: she and Janice, they married good men. Caretakers. My first husband left me and then there was David. When I met Fred, the girls were gone but I was taking care of David. She knows this, Jeannette. She's ornery; she likes to forget it.

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We are walking over St. Agnes grass at the orchid show and Jeannette's arm is linked with mine. I don't look down at her ankles: we've put bacimicine on so that she won't

itch and we're carrying folded printouts on fire ant bites from the internet. The bites were large and big, nearly hives, three or four bites to each ankle, though she refuses to complain and we've brought antihistamine. There are lofty open tents at the orchid show with blue hanging canvases and I avoid staring downwards at the band aids on her ankles. We avoid the wares in front of tents: ceramic and terra cotta pots with planters, orchids of every variety and shape on several open-air tables, orchids for sale and orchids in their prime. She stops at the orchids that are on sale. I continue walking past the table and she follows.

We head towards the main tent for the lecture and I avoided stare at the tent advertising hydroponic plants. I walk towards the lecture tent carrying pamphlets describing the different kinds of orchids. When we arrive at the lecture we sit on plastic lawn chairs within an open-air tent surrounded by five or six empty tables. Behind us is a girl in ponytails selling coffee cakes and coffee. No one else appears or enters. Jeannette opens the brochure and sets it in front of us. I glance behind at the girl's mother and she smiles at me. Jeannette circles one species of orchids and pulls two bottles of water out of her bag.

"How are your bites?" I ask. She doesn't answer, handing me water.

Shortly a man enters the tent and clears his throat, asking if we are the only folks attending. His voice is a low baritone, his body large and pudgy. I glance at this thick waist, and at the white hair above his glistening forehead. He coughs a little and glances around. His belly is twice the size of Fred's but he won't sit, instead standing near the edge of the tent near a table bearing four or five orchids. I take my water and open it.

We waited a few more minutes. Jeannette stands to buy a cup of coffee from the vending table behind us. I hear her chatting with the pony-tailed girl's mother and I place my purse on the table. When she returns, I ask if she needs Chap Stick.

The tend flaps in the humid breeze and the gentleman in front of us clears his throat.

"It looks like y'all are the only ones here for the lecture." He was wearing wide-lensed sunglasses, the sort that Fred would wear walking. "I guess I'll go ahead and get started."

"I'd like to buy my mother an orchid," my daughter says, sipping her coffee. "We read about this show in the Sarasota Times and I thought it would be neat to attend a lecture. My mother here loves plants and she's never owned an orchid."

The gentleman started nodding. His large hands reached out to cup the blooms of a potted orchid. I glanced down at Jeannette's ankles. Our printouts had indicated that hives were normal.

"My daughter's visiting from New York," I informed him. "She visits twice a year, and usually we relax at home during her September visits."

"It seems orchids grow well in Florida…." My daughter interjects. "We'd like one that's easy to take care of though my mother has a green thumb; I can't keep plants alive, personally, but my mother has a green thumb. My garden gets eaten by the deer," she says. She laughs, sipping her coffee.

"We don't have a problem with deer here," the gentleman said, tilting his head a little. Jeannette turns her head towards me and I try not to chuckle. The man is wearing a thick black belt around his waist: the kind that men wear to protect their lower back if

they are picking up heavy objects. "…Orchids are fun to grow; if you take care of them and water well, the blooms will last for months." The purple flower he cups is static against a wooden spike.

"Aren't orchids easy to grow?" Jeannette asked, picking up her pamphlet. "My mother's neighbor could help her but she needs something easy…"

"I don't want Bob's help," I informed her, leaning closer and lowering my voice. "It's been four hours. It's time to take another antihistamine…"

I watch the way my daughter's hands moved across the pamphlet. She's writing things down, jotting notes with the blue pen she's dug from her purse. "My potted plants always die," she continued. "What was it, mom? That red-leafed begonia you mailed? Started growing spots all over it and eventually I had to throw it out…"

"You never repotted your plants or took care of diseases," I said. "The plants outside your house rarely survived the deer; nothing survived except the hosta."

"Were you pruning?" the man asked. "We keep the greenhouse clean and I sterilize the utensils. With orchids you need to worry more about viruses; you can get rid of bacteria by repotting but once a virus hits it'll kill the plant…"

"Might have been a virus," she said.

"It's time to take your antihistamine…" I said.

"I'm fine, mom," she replies, sipping her coffee. "Where are you going?" she continues.

"I have to visit," I say, clutching my purse close to my body. As I'm turning a woman enters the tent and walks towards the gentleman. Jeannette's arm is on my forearm and I stay, waiting for the woman to drop her wares on the table. Short and

Asian, her hair her pinned to the top of her head in a coiffure and she doesn't speak. She gently places an orchid on the table, and Jeannette and I watch as she backs up and leaves the tent in silence. I wonder, briefly, if he found her during the war. If he was stationed in Vietnam, or maybe Korea.

"…black spots?" the gentleman said, reaching for the orchid. I reached towards my bottled water. "Sounds like scales. Orchids don't develop scales." He picked up a plant from the table. He points to the tall bloom. There are two long stalks, both of which had flowered. "This here's a Phaleonopsis. When you choose your plant it's best to buy from a greenhouse; that way it won't arrive with viruses or bacteria. My wife and I have a greenhouse so I hose it down frequently to keep the floor and shelves clean. Sanitize all of your utensils; I use a propane torch…"

My daughter was writing on her pamphlet. Both stalks had flowered, the purple blooms folded and asymmetrical and not at all like the impatiens or geraniums I had grown in Massachusetts. I fan my face with the pamphlet and looked around the tent. Beyond it, I can see a toilet bowl full of flowering annuals. Beyond the toilet bowl, the Asian woman is approaching an open-air tent.

"My mother doesn't have a propane torch," my daughter said.

"Some people just buy razor blades," he replied. "Phaleonopsis will grow wherever there's light. The trick is to keep 'em well watered and make sure they aren't in direct light …"

"She doesn't have a foyer," Jeannette said. Behind the tent, I watched the Asian woman standing behind the orchids. She's barely moving, she's also fanning her face with folded paper.

"…otherwise the roots could rot," he continued.

Purple and convoluted, the flowers waver in front of us. The man's fingers rise with the tall stem of a fuchsia-colored orchid. He pinches the plant below the blossom and we watch the bloom waver. "The flowers last for months," he said. "Orchids are well worth the investment if you want long-lived flowers. The best time to cut back the brackets is after the plant has flowered..."

"Bob has a foyer," my daughter said.

I shift in my chair. My back is starting to ache as I grow flushed and embarrassed. I excused myself.

"We should buy a plant," she said as we exited the tent. "He spent forty minutes teaching us how to grow orchids and just think, mom; we might not need a propane torch. A razor, he says. His tent is right over there." Although I'm smiling, I turned away from her. "Men and their tools," she says. "I'm sure Bob has a propane torch," she continues. As we wandered by the hydroponic orchids, she tried to pull me towards the Asian woman's orchids. I veer off and we start walking towards the car.

"We should buy a plant," she insists quietly. We are walking on the grass towards the car, the tents behind us.

"I have nowhere to put it," I tell her.

"He spent forty minutes on that lecture…"

"I'm not buying an orchid and I can't mail one to your daughters."

"One plant, mom; one plant for the house."

"I don't want one," I tell her.

"Give it to Bob…"

"Give me the keys," I said when we reached the car.

"Bob will raise it," she said.

"I'm not buying one."

At the car, my daughter presses the button for the automatic locks and the doors unlocked and then locked again. She pressed again, and the doors unlocked and then locked again. "Give me the keys," I said, but she presses the lock and the doors unlocked and then locked again. "You're impatient," I say, pressing the mechanism. The doors unlock and we both open our doors.

"What will I do with you," she says when we're finally sitting inside the car. She's chuckling.

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"I was throwing away the catalogues," I finally told her. "They were piling up on my doormat and I was tired of receiving them all. I've been mailing things back as I've cleaned out my filing cabinets. I've been cleaning up. There's too much paper here, and I don't want a desk. I don't even want a filing cabinet. When Shannon visited, she loved looking through the catalogues," I continued. "We both loved the catalogues. They used to arrive by the dozens: everything you could think of, all of it in my hallway. I'd trip over them as I entered. We'd look at the Petites sections in Harper's and Golden Rod and Sears. I've only got a few left; the catalogues selling fruitcake for the holidays, tulip bulbs for Mary."

The catalogues would gather in my front foyer after the mailman came around and I'd take them inside, glancing at them in the mornings. Some of the catalogues were for newer stores; some were black-and-white for the old things I knew from the forties and fifties. In the afternoons, when Fred watched the news, I'd flip through them as I listened. There were catalogues for petite clothing, and catalogues for men's clothing. There were catalogues for holiday gift baskets and catalogues for museum replicas. One catalogue advertised books. Another catalogue sold mu-mus, long-john underwear, and powder I'd used in the sixties. I found fruitcake for Jeanette in a catalogue full of gift baskets. I found cooking mitts and books for my daughters and biographies for their husbands. I bought tulip bulbs and hosta for Jeannette, and acid-loving plants for Janice's woodlands. I found fertilizers and ten-inch long markers for the plants and flowers in their gardens.

She was sitting next to me in the living room, the ceiling fan above us whirling. "You can take the magnet cover home," I continued. "You'll need to help me get it out of the closet." She glanced at the closet beside my bedroom. Her head craned over the Lazy-boy recliner. Jeannette wouldn't stop mailing me things of her own: vitamins and supplements she took, things for the bedroom she'd heard were helpful. She'd mailed a full-size foam pad, a magnetic foam pad, and a body pillow to place between my knees for better positioning. She'd mailed an ergonomic pillow for my neck and shoulders. The pillows were neatly aligned on top of each other in my closet, though I hadn't yet told her they weren't useful. On top of the pillows I'd folded a body pillow. At the top of the closet I'd shelved the foam pad placed under the lower back while sleeping. Below the shelf and above everything else was the foam cover I could barely fit into the

closet. Designed by scientists at NASA, it was supposed to *cushion the contours of the back*. The impression left on the surface was the image of a hand on wet sand. If I opened the closet, the darned things would fall on top of her.

"I wouldn't have come," she continued, "if I wasn't worried about you. Let's mail the magnet cover home. Is it the closet behind her bed?" She gestured, behind her, towards my closet.

"Shannon said that your company's been bought by a larger firm," I said, shifting in my chair to pull the leverage on the recliner. Jeannette turned and faced me. "She says they're pushing you to work full-time," I continued, distracting her.

"When did you talk to Shannon?" she asked. She stood, moving into the kitchen.

"When you were outside chatting with Bob," I called out. She returned with a full glass of Chardonnay and sat back in the Lazy-boy chair. As she placed the glass on the table, she eased back, and pressed the lever on the recliner.

I pick up the Sarasota Times and glanced over the events she's circled. As the chair tilted back, she looked for the lever operating the footrest. The footrest flew out.

"We can go to the beach tomorrow," she said, putting her legs up, smiling. "That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"How's Janice?" I asked.

"Don't get up," she said. "I've got it. How does this thing work?"

I watched her attempts to lie flat on the chair.

"Is Janice doing well with the tent I'd mailed her?" I asked.

"She loves it," Jeannette said, shifting to push the lever down.

"How are the girls?"

"Good," she said. "The girls are doing just fine."

"And Shannon?" I asked.

She didn't answer, finally pushing the right lever so that she was sitting ram-rod straight.

"The other girls?" I asked.

"Everyone's well, mom," she said. "The girls are enjoying their French dolls. Except of course for Shannon."

"Will you continue working?" I asked. "Will they keep you on, Jeanette?"

We heard the door to Bob's lanai. Jeannette remained still, opening her crossword puzzle with a crack on top of the Sarasota Times. She was holding two papers on her lap. I put my paper down, turned on the TV in the living room, pushed the lever back on my own recliner, and increased the volume on my control.

"Does Bob swim in his pool at this hour?" she asked. I didn't answer her, setting the TV control on the marble-top table beside me. The doctor had told me to start swimming but this, I don't tell her.

***

I tried to ignore Bob the next day when I went walking. It was slightly chilly, perfect for February, and Jeannette was still asleep in the bedroom when I stepped out the door and closed it carefully. I walked away from Bob's house, and I walked like we used to. I looked at things as I passed, like Fred used to. When I walked with him in the mornings I'd often forget to look unless he pointed. I passed the tangled vines of the condominium

fringes and the swamp where the little alligator ate when he wasn't finding refuge in our pond. I passed trees covered in moss so thick it overtook palms. I avoided the hanging vines and stepped carefully over yellow pollen and seedpods on the cracked black asphalt to the right of the street. Usually, Fred would steer me away from the pollen so I wouldn't slide on it. I walked right over it.

My walking sneakers were dusted in gold as I stepped over pods from trees that must have landed, in the wind, with the rotation of helicopters. My skin began growing damp from the walk and my lower back started aching. At the manmade pond, I stopped and moved a bit closer: the pond pads drifted on the surface. Though they hadn't bloomed yet, the pond resembled the myriad greens in a Monet painting. It's been warm, lately, without the storms characteristic of Florida, but the sky will grow cloudy soon, when spring hits. In the summers the sun is hot and the day's so humid that I won't walk at all. I have a trampoline at home for when the weather gets hot but I seldom use it. I like walking. It reminds me of our walks together.

I pass trimmed green topiaries and trimmed hedges. I passed the Mediterranean tile of the house around the corner. The community was still small and the majority of our neighbors were retired folk, with children and grandchildren who flew in on holidays. Fred and I, we had our favorite neighbors. The lanais behind our house circled the small pond and we could often see our neighbors eating or resting in the mornings. I've walked for two and a quarter miles when I return to the house. Bob is gardening next door and he's wearing knee-high socks with sneakers. He waved at me, his stomach protruding from a large white shirt. He started asking about Jeannette's ankles, and about my grandkids. He asks about Shannon. As he walked towards me, I quickly moved to the

front door and brusquely answered him. When I entered the foyer I stopped and locked the door. I removed my shoes and walked across the beige-carpeted floor. I stared at the mantle above the TV and at the large silver urn which is always kept dusted.

***

Bob's orchid collection was in his foyer. I haven't seen it for six months, but Fred adored it. He'd stand in the doorway, entranced with the way the doors mimicked a greenhouse: all glass, with the glass-paneled door opening to long glass panels on the right and left. The sun acted as a solarium. Bob's real foyer was in the house beyond a sturdy wooden door and we seldom moved beyond the wooden door. We stayed in the solarium, the foyer between his glass door and wooden door, where the sun would shine in the morning and afternoon. As the sun would set there'd be shadow so the plants could rest in that foyer. When we used to visit Bob, Fred would open the first door and I'd hesitate behind him, my hand curled against his back. He'd greet Bob, commenting on the orchids. Sometimes he'd sing a verse from a song we'd just seen in the theater. The last time we went, he stepped aside. He let Shannon move before him. He put his hand on her lower back, as he used to do mine, pushing her forward. She stood there shyly, peeking at all the plants in the foyer.

"She's a seamstress," she said. We were standing in the kitchen and Jeanette was awake fixing coffee. My fingers were pushing the magnets together on the fridge: there were art magnets and there were magnets of Shannon's favorite statues. There were sentimental magnets on grandmothers, and magnets of pressed flowers. The cabinets

clanked as she searched for plates. "Shannon is a seamstress in *Sleeping Beauty,"* Jeannette continued. "She dances until the Princess falls asleep but she doesn't dance on pointe. She likes the ballet because the costume is fun: the girls wear thick, wide tutus. She's more interested in modern dance, though. I keep telling her to apply for a different major."

I took prunes out of the refrigerator.

"Go for your morning walk?" she asked.

"I did," I answered. I had showered and dressed. My hair hung short in shades of white and gray, undressed. I no longer curled it.

"I wish you'd talk to her," she continued, complimenting me briefly on my matching blouse and Capri's. "Tell her to choose a different major – Accounting, maybe, or business. I'd even accept a major in English. No one's going to be home to receive a UPS delivery, mom. I don't know how I'll mail these things back; I don't know how I'll run to the post office. Jim works and I commute fifty minutes to work. Can you keep the mattress pads here? Have you tried them?"

"They don't work," I answered.

My daughter started humming. It was a false hum; it didn't quite clear her body. It remained in her throat like a shallow quick echo. I opened cabinets for the stewing pot.

"Mom, I want you to come back with me."

"This is my home," I told her, opening the kitchen cabinet for coffee cups. "Why don't you pack the mattress pads in a separate suitcase? I'll buy a suitcase for you, Jeannette; the kids will need one again eventually."

"You've told Shannon that you're not traveling anymore," she said. "Does it hurt

to travel, mom? Why won't you come for thanksgiving?"

"I'm traveling all the time," I said, pulling out the coffee saucers. "You just don't see it." I stacked the cups on top of the saucer and handed them to her.

"You told Shannon you weren't going north again. You're going to stay here and grow old, you said; you're not going north."

"I *am* old," I replied.

"I don't know what to do with her. She wants to study *dance*; how's she going to make a living? What will she do with a degree in dance? We've been to several universities in and outside of New York… She needs to major in business or accounting."

Placing the pot on the stove, I faced my daughter.

"You need to come back with me so we can take care of you," she said.

"Why can't she major in dance?" I asked.

"Mom, there aren't any jobs in dance… it's a dream, a field she can't succeed in; she'll hit thirty and what then? Why won't you return with me? Stay here and grow old? Is that something to tell the children? Shannon's worried about you."

"You're making a big mistake," I said, placing my coffee on the table. "You're making a mistake, Jeannette; she's a dancer."

I set it down hard and she jumps.

She stared at me with those crystal-blue eyes. She poured my coffee, slowly, and inhaled. Then she regarded me over the top of her red-rimmed glasses. "I don't want her relying on it, mom. Do you want her in pain later? She could be like my neighbor: goes to *Suny Purchase* and lands a career in dance; later fighting arthritis."

She inhaled again, waving her hand in front of her face. Her mouth opened and shut. She slowly carried the breakfast towards the lanai and I watched her open the sliding glass doors. I followed her out. We read the news as we sipped the coffee. She tore the crossword puzzle out, sliding it towards me. My serrated spoon clicked sharply. She pushed it towards me, "this will help you keep up," she said.

"I'm not losing my mind," I told her. "It's hard for me to focus."

She blinked at me. It's what she does when she's confused. She blinks.

"She can't major in dance," she said.

"You danced," I said. She stood, picking up her coffee cup for a refill.

***

Long before they grew older, the children swam in the ocean and Jeannette went fishing with her father. She had my blue eyes and her father's resolve. He never tried to master the ocean and that's why she loved him: I don't know if she liked waking at dawn, or if she liked the water. She might have liked fishing in the deep waters. There's nothing simple about sports fishing: its dark blue off the coast and its cold, even in the summer. There are riptides and currents that I don't understand and never asked about. My daughter would struggle with my husband until the fish tired, and hours later they'd pull in the line. She was ten years old when she started and seventeen when she was done with it. It was a struggle to remain in one place with the fish pulling their boat out beneath them and there were times when I'd wonder when the storms would hit. I'd be home, cooking dinner, watching my other daughter. On the nights that were overcast I

would listen to the radio and huddle over my typewriter. I'd write everything and nothing, then. I'd write letters.

"You were married to Grandpa when you met Fred?" Shannon had asked. She was standing on the lanai, her hands reaching to take my white slippers. I had the lights off, the light from the living room behind me. I was sitting on the edge of the lounge chair with Fred's chair beside me. "Your grandfather was sick," I explained. "When he started having dementia, I'd take him out of the home for exercise. He couldn't live at home with me; he did as long as he could but eventually I couldn't take care of him."

She was sitting on the ground in front of me. She put the slippers on, massaging the balls of her feet.

"David was sick frequently," I continued. "For years Fred sat at the edge of my desk and he was a real comedian, really sweet on me. He was a comedian, even when I got calls about David and the bills I owed the nursing home. He'd sing songs from his favorite musicals; he'd do Fred Astaire impressions, or Gene Kelly. Gene Kelly was his favorite: Gene Kelly danced like you could do it yourself. Fred loved *singing in the rain,* in particular. Once he even asked me to dance with him. Sometimes I had to visit until the phones started ringing again; we'd be sitting at our desks and he'd stand. He'd ask me to dance with him. In the lady's room I'd stand and smooth my hair down, putting on Chap Stick."

"You'd dance the waltz?" she asked.

"The waltz, the foxtrot," I answered.

She put the slippers on her feet and stood at the far screen of the lanai, her feet in first position as she bent over. Fred saw her stretching and he opened the door, walking

onto the lanai to sit next to me. He asked her if we could watch. He pulled our lounge chairs together and drew his short, stout body onto the chair. My granddaughter resumed her barre work, practicing plies and releves, with her arms drawing circles at right angles. Her feet moved from first position to second to fifth. Her last exercise was a port-de-bra. After the barre work, she practiced her modern. "This isn't a pirouette," she said after the first attempt. "It's difficult because I can't spot. I have to know my center." We watched her in the dark, her leg propelling her body, her head falling down diagonally.

"Gene Kelly would have loved to dance with her," Fred whispered. We were very still, sitting there just watching her. He picked up my hand and held it. "Look at her long legs, Flo," he said, tightening his grip. "Look at the way she glows. She's got stage presence. She loves it; she's a performer."

He held my hand loosely. My granddaughter danced well into in the dark.

***

I don't know when I grew so obstinate. When I'm driving home from the airport after dropping her off, my daughter's bottled water is in the cup holder to the right of my steering wheel. We've agreed that I'll mail her the vitamins and pillows and cushions. Or when she returns in February, her husband will package them up and mail them. We've also agreed that I'll come up for Thanksgiving. Shannon offered to fly down so that I'd have company.

When I arrive home, I rummage through my desk drawer for the remainder of the catalogues I've saved for holidays. I set aside catalogue after catalogue until I find the

one of museum replicas. The statue I've earmarked is *The Little Dancer*. Degas sculpted several of them but they weren't cast in stone: they were made of wax and later cast in bronze for posterity. Throughout Shannon's childhood I'd mailed her Degas prints when the kids were in Tokyo: note cards, stationary, and prints for her walls when she trained as a ballet dancer. The prints were nothing like the statues, though. The original Degas statues were cast in wax, with pieces of actual hair. Degas used costumes of tulle and satin for the dancers toe shoes. When the statues were found, many of them had already starting decaying. They were cast in bronze, as a result, like the tiny replica that I'm mailing her.

I'm sure Jeannette has reached her house by the time I open the sliding glass door in the living room. It's dark outside and I've moved from the kitchen where Fred would cook while we'd play the radio. When we cooked, he would sometimes ask me to dance my *clickity-clicks* I'd learned when I was a tap dancer. When I wasn't tap-dancing for him we'd glide across the room. In the years before the war, we'd play the radio for variety shows and commercials and the soaps. I'd sit with my youngest brother whom I'd caretake and we'd listen.

The last place Fred and I would be in the evenings was on the lanai, sitting in silence, as the community pond reflected the starry sky. I can't bring myself to sit on the lawn chairs anymore but I'll often end the evening staring at the sky, waiting for the memories to fade, wondering where the alligator went and whether or not he'll return through the pipes.

Retaining Ernest

It's rush hour. At the Farragut North metro exit you scale two long escalators and as the other commuters shift to the right to avoid you, you avoid stepping on the heels of the climber before you. As the runner alights you dodge past him and attempt to disengage from the crowd. If you're in a rush, as you usually are, you grip the Styrofoam cup you've discreetly sipped on the subway and you toss it into the trash can on the right. You move through the columns next to the ATM and wonder if you've got enough cash for lunch, but you don't stop; you can borrow money later from a colleague. The street is crowded with men and women wearing dress shoes or work pumps and you glide through the crowd in your airlift sneakers with work pumps pressed firmly into the hidden compartment of your bag. You pass a freestanding coffee kiosk and the smell of roasting beans. You pass the Mayflower Hotel where the pin-striped concierge stands strict and still until the doors circulate and then you're dodging the well-heeled people emerging from revolving doors, the carriage carting luggage out, the concierge who holds an arm up like he's directing traffic, and the limousine driver opening a sedan door for guests. You pass the bargain basement store which opens at 10am. A block further up you pass the high glass windows where mannequins are frozen in wool coats and plaid patterns. The traffic island appears central to your vision, beyond the streak of cars streaming past Connecticut on either side, and you almost step into the street. You remember the speeding cars, the irresponsible drivers, the parking meters with their heads broken by bats. You wait, subdued, for the light.

When the light turns, you cross the street. Walking quickly, you clutch your purse or a rolled up Economist or whatever is you've needed survive your commute. You pass the first of two high-rises where the deli on the first floor opens at 7 and closes at 2:30. You pass the flower shop as you're swinging open the large glass doors but don't stop.

We'd fought about it, the night prior. The commute, the happy hours, the commitment to the job, the reason why I can't control my hours. Sometimes it's the happy hours that get to him. Sometimes it's the evenings when I'm late. It's 8:45am when I sit at my desk and I don't know when I'll be leaving that evening. This is par for the course: I don't leave the office until I've filled the cases. The phones are ringing somewhere else; not at my desk and not at Fitzpatrick's but across the floor and throughout the other offices. The interpreters haven't called yet and I'm pulling up my chair, looking at the case log. If I flip a few pages, the caseload is mostly in pen but there's some pencil. Fitzpatrick is sitting in his cubicle beside me as I flip methodically and we're waiting and praying that our 9ams show up for their hearings. No-shows cost the company a penalty. No-shows cost my interpreters casework. No-shows cost me my credibility. I'm waiting and praying that I'll be able to leave at 5pm and Fitzpatrick is leaning back in his chair, dangling a *Ceylon Tea* bag over his cup.

"Little cranky?" he asks.

"Trouble in paradise?" he continues. He's wearing a Ben Pierson shirt which is crisp and freshly ironed. I stare ahead instead of commenting and as I'm waiting for the phones to ring, I stand and stare out over Connecticut. On the street below, the florist is

just opening and a steady line of green appears: it's December, so he isn't setting out much. At lunch, I'll go on a smoke break just to see what survives the cold.

"Polanski," Fitzpatrick commands. "Get yourself some coffee before the temps get into it. It's from Amy's Guatemalans."

Across the flower shop and on the other side of 14th Street, Fitzpatrick's favorite stylist is on a smoke break. I watch him leaning against a concrete pillar; his hair gelled, his thick coat covering a tiny thin body. He's Latin American, or maybe Central American. The hair salon behind him is just opening. We can barely see it up here, from the top floor on a high-rise.

"Your stylist is smoking," I say. Fitzpatrick crowds the window beside me, his long body leaning over. "Of course he's smoking," he says.

"I'm thinking of going home for Christmas," I continue.

"Mmmmm, mm?" he murmers, inflecting the sound on the second syllable. His head is bent down, his eyes squinting. "Pulanski's finally going home?" he asks without turning. I pull my chair back to sit down. I have ten minutes when no one needs me. I'm imagining my speech to my boss, and what I'll say, and how I'll convince him it's a family emergency.

***

"This is you," I say to Ben later. "You're responsible for a region of interpreters. You have several variations of Chinese dialects spoken by crafty competitive interpreters who lie about their hours, their travel time, and availability. The entire Fujian province is

immigrating illegally so that's the dialect *du jour* and you're it: you're the coordinator who organizes all the hearings in New York City. You share your Foochow with the FBI, the Coast Guard and the INS. When one calls from Saipan, your second-in-command is apparently running Federal Plaza. You don't want to think about how bad it is or how much you're being manipulated so you're constantly recruiting. You're being run as you attempt to outsmart your interpreters."

"I know you love what you do, Sarah," Ben says. "That wasn't why we fought last night." The casserole is in the oven and we're sitting in front of the TV. This is our time before dinner: the time when we hash things out, when we try to talk and share, when we discuss some of our work-related thoughts. Occasionally, we avoid talking about work and focus on plans for New Year's but that's been less and less, with my mother calling at night.

"There are dozens of cases at Federal Plaza, and dozens more at Elizabeth," I say. "I'm not properly staffed, Ben, so I'm constantly recruiting." I stand and walk to the kitchen, rooting in the drawer for a cigarette. He doesn't stop or chastise me. He's sitting on the couch and shakes his head when I pull out a lighter. "Someone faxed me a newspaper article today," I said. "I wasn't sure who it was, but the article was about a three hour hearing at Federal Plaza. I don't know the interpreter who worked it; I know the applicant was a poet during the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the hearing, everyone was crying: the judge, the alien, the interpreter."

Ben declines when I offer him a cigarette. I stand behind our blue IKEA couch and with the sliding glass door opened; I light my cigarette and try to exhale out. My boyfriend has curly black hair. Occasionally I'll run my hands over it, just before he gets

it cut, just to feel the texture under my fingertips, but I don't touch him now. I won't touch him until I've washed my smoky fingers.

"I'm not staying longer than another year," I continued, exhaling.

"The primary key for your database is a composite of interpreter's names," he said, reaching for the remote. "I don't understand your dedication," he said. "That was the gist of the conversation last night." He flicks the TV on and doesn't turn to look at me. "I hope you're promoted before the restructuring. I hope your work-husband is useful at covering your region." The volume is so high that I ask him to turn it down. Above the drone of CNN, he turns to face me. "I'm hoping for a lot of things, Sarah but I don't want to fight tonight."

The city blinks in the distance. I extinguish my cigarette and close the sliding-glass doors to the patio. Leaning over the couch, I wrap my arms around his neck.

"Smoky girl," he says, and I release my grip. "Why this job, Sarah?" my boyfriend asks. We've been dating each other since sophomore year of college. We've been living together since graduation. The years have flown: seven years without a break.

"I don't want to fight again," I answer him.

"Your mother called," he says. "What would she be doing?"

I don't answer him.

It was close to 10:30pm and my parents would be barely awake. They'd be getting ready for bed, and my mother would be brushing her teeth with Sensodyne. She'd be wearing her long, plaid nightgown. My father would be wearing flannel as he moved from room to room, shuffling in the slippers I mailed him last Christmas. He

would leave the Christmas lights. All night, at the front of the house, the lights on the trees would be blinking in myriad.

"Explain to me why you love this job," he said, pulling at me. I allow myself to sink onto the couch. His fingers gripped my bare toes and he started massaging the balls of my feet.

***

There's the distancing, always the distancing, for if you draw too close you'll be seared by what you see. We weren't permitted to take anyone with us on training and we'd only been to one hearing. The entire division had been forced to go: our suitemates, our directors and managers, the coordinators who sit in cubicles on the main floor, the recruiters, and the interns from Ireland. The purpose of the hearing was to give a visual; ostensibly, it was to help us understand training. In reality, it gave us a sense of purpose. Per Fitzpatrick, it was emotional blackmail.

We'd only seen one. The case was held in a small courtroom in D.C. and when I sat at the back with Fitzpatrick, he crossed his long leg and withdrew a pack of tissues from the pocket of his jacket. When I glanced at him, he opened the tissues and pro-offered me one. "I'll be dispersing them later, my dear," he said. "*Do* take while they're still available." The courtroom looked better maintained than a traffic court: blue walls, blue carpeting, square-shaped and stout. Wooden benches and a judge announced before entering. The EOIR officer sat with a stack of notes within a leather binder to the left of the judge. Our Somalian interpreter stood next to the American flag wearing a black suit,

blue tie, and furrowed brow to the right. He stood to the left of the alien and gave a quick oath before proceedings commenced efficiently.

"Not my type," Fitzpatrick whispered in my ear.

"Nice lips, though," twenty minutes into the proceedings.

"This is not about your sex life," I whispered back, furious.

The judge ruled quickly. The hearing was over in thirty minutes and then the judge was whisked through the door, our interpreter venerated by our bosses, and Fitzpatrick shaking the Somalian interpreter's hand as he invited him to the Christmas Party in our building.

"How was your hearing?" I ask David. It is four o'clock on Wednesday and I've got one hour to fill a Mandarin case. David, I knew, would be like the Somalian in court. He'd be wearing a suit, he'd be straight-backed and tall, he'd be standing next to the alien but he'd be looking forward.

Outside our office, the phones continued to ring.

"Fine," David said. He sounded tired.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "You sound tired."

"I'm sorry, Sarah," he continued. He paused as though he hadn't heard me.

"The cousin passed the tests," I said into the phone. My desk faced a wall and on the wall I'd tacked photographs of Ben. "He's not returning my phone calls. Wouldn't he want a better day job than visiting people in holding cells?"

"He doesn't want to work in the courts," David said.

"I call the Chinese Society for Fujians every ten minutes," I said to David, glancing down at the recruiter's sheet. "We're under a lot of stress here. I need more

people to interpret, David; the courts keep increasing the cases and I don't have coverage. The recruiters keep finding Mandarin but no one's finding Foochow; god forbid anyone gets ill and who's this other fellow?"

Fitzpatrick glanced up from his desk. He pulled hand cream out of his drawer and started applying it liberally. I looked away from his long black hands, and the long Givenchy scarf around his throat. Fitzpatrick picked up his own phone and pretended to disconnect the call. "I'm sorry," I said on the phone, watching Fitzpatrick gesturing. "I know you can't talk about your cases," I said. "I know you can't get the cousin to answer my calls. Can you talk to him, though? Ask him if he'll reconsider working for us?"

"I'm meeting the new person tomorrow," David said. "My friend's name is Earnest Wong; he might not score as high as my cousin but he speaks Foochow fluently. I'm meeting him in Chinatown for lunch. He just moved back to the area and he is a friend of my granddaughter's cousin."

"That would be wonderful," I said as Fitzpatrick walked to the window.

"What are we going to do with Polanski," Fitzpatrick said when I got off the phone. He sat at his desk and folded his legs. His black pants were ironed at the pleats and his hands were in the pockets of his blazer. "Your beeper went off at two p.m.," he said. "I heard it beep *again* about thirty minutes ago. If you aren't responsive, my dear, your family will call the toll-free number."

"Haven't you confirmed your cases for tomorrow?" I asked.

"You don't have a worksheet. You need the completed worksheet."

"I'm sure they'll understand," I replied. "They can schedule the tests without the worksheet."

"Returning to Boston?" he asked.

"Why do you care?" My hand was over the mouthpiece, my fingers dialing to confirm cases.

"Because I'll need to cover your cases, my dear."

I dialed the numbers from memory. We waited, silently, for the interpreters to respond to my pages. Outside our office, coordinators were rushing through the hallway. At the corner they turned military-style before proceeding or colliding.

***

It is the asylum officer's task to look for the first signs: the beatings, the bruises, and the torture. Physical evidence is compelling. The man who's had fingers cut off for being Christian in a Muslim country? He'd probably get political asylum. I didn't know much about the asylum process but when the asylum officer visits, the evidence must be hard and compelling. If the grounds weren't lawful, if the person can't prove a credible fear of returning, the case was denied. The denial could be appealed and under federal law, the applicant was awarded an interpreter for the court hearing.

In my fantasy Ben would be sitting beside me as I whispered and it would be a Mandarin hearing with one of my best and brightest interpreters. We'd be in New York City. I had never met any of my interpreters. I knew what the courtroom might look like from that prior hearing. I'd often heard about the more compelling cases and the ones I told Ben were cases I'd learned about through finagling. Information wasn't supposed to

be leaked on the proceedings: the asylee's family could be brutalized, even murdered in his home country.

My image of the interpreters was abstract. I hadn't met any of them; I'd created images from their voices. Steven sent me tapes of his choir practice: with that sort of projection, his ribcage had to be large. He was probably stout, with a mouth that seldom closed because he loved talking. I imagined him balding. Emmy was probably very fashionable; she'd sent a gift card for Lancôme last Christmas. From the scarves that the Professor sent, I was willing to believe his wife wore lots of red. I couldn't imagine the Professor but he was wheelchair-bound, with instable health and diabetes. We gave him cases so he could exercise his intellect.

David Yeh would have been my choice if I could observe a hearing in New York City. He'd look just as professional as the Somalian we observed in D.C. David Yeh, interpreting in fluent Mandarin, switching to Cantonese when it was realized the alien hailed from Hong Kong. He'd be a commanding presence in the court: he'd be tall and slender, with a pressed white shirt, a red tie, with a small accent. There'd be little inflection. The hearing wouldn't get messy; David was professional, and his presence kept the court orderly. If the alien spoke too rapidly, David would ask the Judge if he could ask the alien to repeat what had been spoken.

I am a girl of twenty-four, I tell Fitzpatrick. On the phone, I sounded older. If I met the interpreters in person they'd say I looked fifteen. They'd talk about their children, their houses, their spouses. They'd talk about extended families and dying relatives and how I couldn't understand; I didn't do their line of work, and they were financially responsible. Most of the interpreters were professional and kind, but the

newer ones were always looking for the upper hand. They'd send me crying to the bathroom if I didn't start them with three-hour minimums; they'd say I was young, and untalented. I didn't speak three or four languages.

Fitzpatrick leaned back in his chair.

"You're just afraid of a double-whammy," he said. "You don't want to meet the 'terps, and you want to avoid your family. You've also been fighting with your boyfriend. Want my advice, Sarah? Bring him to work, and then bring him home. All in a two-day period. He'll live."

I looked over at him; his desk was on my left and he was leaning back in his chair. His index finger lifted at me as he took a call and I shut my mouth. The top of his desk obscured him from view; if our boss stood in the door, it was my job to cough if Fitzpatrick was drifting off to sleep.

"Yes, I understand," he said, removing his hand from the mouthpiece and pressing the speaker button.

"I would just like to know," the interpreter started. "Am I on speaker phone?"

"*Yes*, you are on speaker, Carmelita," Fitzpatrick answered. "I was *just* talking about the courts at Federal Plaza with my colleague, Sarah. You know Sarah; she handles the Chinese interpreters. We are *trying* to send her to the Christmas Party in New York City because she's going to Boston for Christmas."

There's the distancing; the necessary distancing.

"You were saying?" Fitzpatrick continued. "Yes, you're still on speaker. Carry on, Carmelita, carry on…"

We didn't hang out with them. I'd never met the ones serving New Jersey. I'd never met the ones who worked in Philadelphia.

"I will *certainly* attend the party in New York City," Fitzpatrick said. "My ticket is already booked, Carmelita. But would you like to speak with Eric? We simply *can't* raise wages without the company's consent. I'll need approval of a re-negotiation."

I'd never met the ones in New York City. I certainly didn't want to meet Fitzpatrick's.

"Why not go home, Polanski," he said, gesturing in the air with long fingers when he hung up. "If the company *ever* pays for us to attend the New York City party I'll take you to Harlem. We'll *skip* the party for a small blues bar in Harlem. Talk to Boss-man; they might finance your trip."

"I'd rather spend Christmas with Ben," I replied. "I don't need to go home."

"You need to tell them soon," he continued. "Christmas is weeks away." He popped a French CD-Rom into the player and the room flooded with French until he put on earphones. I turned to the right, to the large windows, and the window sill. The entire floor had given us their dying potted plants. They lined the windowsill and were often dry from the direct sun. I was constantly watering.

***

There's the distancing, always the distancing. If there isn't distancing, there's the risk of getting too close.

"I can't go home, mom," I said over the phone. My feet were bare on the tiles. Beside me I'd placed a small carton of Ben's favorite vegetables: cherry tomatoes. "I

thought I could get the company to pay," I said, "but they won't pay for me to attend the party in New York City so the train ride would be an expensive one and we're short-staffed. I'm also applying for a position in management so it wouldn't be ideal to leave now and you know I'm spending Christmas at Ben's..."

"It's not the money, is it?" my mother asked. I could hear her in her kitchen, running the water over her vegetables. Her salad would be ready in minutes. Within thirty minutes, the dinner would be cooking. "They've spent five years on the Big Dig," she said.

"I don't understand…"

"Has it been dug yet?" my mother asked. "Will it get dug sometime this century? It's time to come home, Sarah; your father needs you. I need you. They keep writing about it in the papers; the Big Dig. When will you come home, honey? Take the train up; your father will pay for the trip; we always pay for you to come home."

My mother's accent had subsided for the most part. My father had no accent: he'd gone to school at Boston Latin.

Ben hadn't come home yet so I started slicing the tomatoes.

"I have a lot to do at work," I said. "I don't have enough vacation time for August if I take a week at Christmas."

"The Big Dig," she commented. "It's never-ending. There's always some excuse."

"How's Dad?" I asked. "How's Dad holding up?"

"We go every other weekend. He drives the Jetta."

"How's Grandma?" I continued.

"She's feeling better. The cold didn't last long. She has her moments."

"And Grandpa?" I asked.

"Shouldn't you ask your father?" she replied, slowly.

"What do I do with all the photographs?" I asked. I started pulling apart the lettuce. I put wine glasses on the counter. "Ask Grandpa to stop sending the photographs, ma..."

"She recognizes him sometimes," my mother continued.

The door opened and closed swiftly. It was Ben, carrying folders and a bottle of wine as the door closed with a thud behind him. He approached me and set the wine on the counter. As I continued talking, he slid his arms around my waist.

"I'll be home again in the summer," I said. "She's stable, mom; can't it wait until summer?" During the summers, my mother would buy me jewelry. Sometimes I'd come home and a ring or bracelet would be wrapped and waiting.

Ben moved away to start the pot roast.

"Did he get my *Get Well* card?" I asked my mother. "I wrote a little proverb… The other day I was talking about fortune cookies with my interpreters."

I stared down at my fingers.

"It's rewarding working with the interpreters," I told her. "I've been encouraged to apply for this position…"

"Sarah," my mother said.

I twisted the silver ring with its huge, bulky garnet. I took the ring off my middle finger and listened to it clink upon the table.

***

During the first week of working at Morris, I learned the reason for the hearings and the reason for my hiring. Half a million of them: half a million reasons were crossing by foot, truck, or by boat; by land, over the sea, and through various ports. The ones who were smuggled in were often given money by relatives. In some cases they crossed in ways I couldn't discuss.

I learned about the boat carrying Chinese immigrants. They called it the Golden Venture. It didn't dock at port: it never made it; it capsized in the New Jersey harbor. I laughed because Fitzpatrick told me the story to explain the increase in Foochow hearings. The way Fitzpatrick tells stories, you laugh at them; you laugh because he has a poker face and he emphasizes key words and key adjectives. When I first started working at Morris, he trained me on the region and was constantly telling me stories. You laugh at his stories, you laugh at his imitations of the interpreters. You laugh at his dry delivery and the techniques he employs to tame the interpreters. "Jerrod" Fitzpatrick, the raconteur.

You laughed at his tender until you learn the truth about reciprocity.

I learned later how many people had died on the boat and how they'd been packed in like sardines below the decks. I learned how the Chinese were charged thousands of dollars by smugglers. The ones who weren't caught, who slipped in and found their way to Chinatown, would work fifteen hour days to pay off their debts and often fell into drug-running, gang-activities, and prostitution.

I'd assumed all of the hearings were long and drawn-out, with histrionics on the part of the applicants and with poor counseling. Fitzpatrick told me there'd be quick judgments from overburdened, heard-it-all judges. "You'll need a thick skin," Fitzpatrick had said. "This is a business, Sarah. Do *not* give them the upper hand. Do *not* give in to Peter. *Remember* the reciprocity exchange; he needs you just as much as you need him. It's a real problem, these smugglers. They call them Snakeheads. How *grand*, I'm sure; what a great title."

When I talked to Ernest I developed a visual quickly: I imagined a short man with a small pot-belly, gray hair, and wrinkles. He was elderly, I knew, from his voice. As I twisted the phone chord I grilled him slowly.

"You speak Mandarin and Cantonese in addition to Foochow," I said, scanning the sheet in my hands. "You can read Chinese characters, as well. That's great, Earnest. Is Foochow your first dialect? Mandarin, second and Cantonese third?"

That morning, Fitzpatrick was drinking green tea. I watched him cuffing the sleeves on his shirt. It was a bright blue, and ironed well. I wondered vaguely who'd done the ironing.

"I speak Foochow at home, Sa-wah," Earnest said. I tried to ignore the accent. "Foochow is my first language," he continued. "I don't use Cant-o-nese often, but I can try. I'd need to practice, but I can use it at court."

"In the courtroom you'll be asked to interpret from Foochow to English," I said. "If you're assigned a Cantonese hearing, you'll be asked to interpret from Cantonese to English. The process is called bidirectional consecutive interpretation. We won't need you to do simultaneous."

"I've interpreted, before," Earnest said. "I've worked in Montana, Sarah. We moved to Connecticut because my wife, you see – my wife wanted to be with the children. We have grandchildren, you see, and my entire family lives with me now in Connecticut. I could take the Metro North train from Connecticut but it could be long; it might take a few hours."

I twisted the phone chord around my finger.

"He's interpreted before," I told Fitzpatrick when I got off the phone. "He sounds a bit nervous, but he's done state courts. He doesn't live *that* far from Federal Plaza. We'll pay him travel time; I'll start him at the usual. I'll try to explain our rates." My hand was shaking slightly. Fitzpatrick extracted the ceramic bit from his Chinese cup. He placed it on a napkin; the ceramic didn't act well as a siphon. Tea leaves were falling onto the table.

"He knows Christian vocabulary," I said. Fitzpatrick raised an eyebrow.

"He didn't mess up pronouns," I continued, watching him sip his tea.

"He converted to Christianity as a child," I said. "His entire village converted; *so* cute, Fitzpatrick. Actually, he sounds adorable."

"They are *not* cute, Sarah," Fitzpatrick said, setting the cup down. He stood and peered over my shoulder. "They are vicious, like feral grannies. Picture the Wal-Mart next to a Safeway and a dollar movie theater two stores over. Throw in a retirement community nearby and a parking lot with two handicapped spaces." He moved behind me, glancing down at my cases.

"Can I bum a cigarette?" I asked.

"Polanski, stay focused. You'll need him if you want to go home for Christmas." He reached into his drawer and pulled out a pack of smokes and matches.

"Ben doesn't want me working overtime," I said.

"Ben doesn't understand our company," he replied.

"Ben's jealous of you; he thinks you're a bad influence. He refers to you as my work-husband."

"Ben doesn't have a work-wife?" he said. "*Sa-wah*, does Ben have a right to use the term, *husband*?"

I picked up the entire pack and left without turning.

"Bring me back the stylist's number," he commanded. "I'll stay tonight when the Mandarins start arriving. I'll fill your cases."

***

"I need to stop talking so much at work," I tell my mother a few evenings later. While I wait for her reaction, I curve his name within my mouth.

They have names, but usually the names are Anglican. John, Paul, or Steve. Mary, Grace, Susan. Peter.

"This is important," Fitzpatrick had said when I first started working. "*Trust* your trainer. Speak slowly, and pronounce their names correctly."

E-r-n-e-s-t W-o-o-n-g, I'm repeating. I'm sitting on the top of the counter, half-listening to my mother. I'm thinking back, remembering. I've been repeating his name for two days now, allowing my tongue to curve in just the right way, allowing my mouth

to mimic the correct phonemes. He'd been tested for interpretation and translation. I had federal expressed the tests to Susan Lee. Susan had responded with individual tests ranging from 80% to 90% in every interpretative category.

"Language is the shared suffix of a culture's soul," I say when Ben opens the door. "Language is synonymous with culture," I said. He entered the kitchen, pausing where the carpet met tile. "If they don't speak fluent Foochow as a first language I can't use them; if we can't use them. They need to speak it at home, with each other and with their grandparents. Especially if they aren't ABC's."

Ben looked at me.

"American-born-Chinese," I explained.

Ben turned on more lights in the apartment.

"Why are you sitting on the counter?" he asked, returning to the kitchen.

"My mother called," I replied.

"So you don't move from the kitchen phone?" he asked. He was smiling.

"I've found this new interpreter and I don't appreciate that patronizing tone…"

"I thought we weren't going to talk about the interpreters," he says, taking my tone of voice. Sliding off the counter, I put on my oven gloves and opened the oven, taking out the chicken.

"I've recruited," I told him. "I lost the last fellow to the FBI; this is a huge day. Earnest passed the tests. I hope I can use him; I hope he's not as timid as he seems… We should celebrate, we should toast to longevity…"

"Okay," Ben said, opening the drawer for utensils.

"Fitzpatrick is afraid he'll be partial," I said, opening the fridge for my pre-made salad. "He's elderly and Christian so he might side with the alien. He might talk to them, or get involved; he might get himself disqualified."

"He's got a lot of advice for you now; what will he do when you're away?" Ben's eyes were as black as Fitzpatrick's. I looked away.

"I've outlasted the other coordinators. No one's betting I'll burn out. If I make it through the next few months, they'll have to promote me. They always promote from within; it sets an example for all the other coordinators…."

"They've agreed to let you go home for Christmas, then." His voice was quiet. "Fitzpatrick better handle the work well."

He started cutting the chicken and I closed my eyes to the smell of rosemary.

"I've told you this, Ben; I've told you why I moved here, and why I won't go back. It's not just that we're short-staffed and that my region is difficult. It's not just the job; Boston isn't *home*. So I wait until summer? So what? Why pretend to be what they want? Why pretend to be the nice, virginal Polish girl? The first thing they'll ask is who I'm dating."

"That's not fair, Sarah."

"Why don't you come with me, then?" I said to Ben.

He stopped cutting.

"I'm defending tomorrow for a kid who alleges *its bullshit*," he said. "That's my defense, Sarah. It's his word against the shop-owner. Have I mentioned he robbed a convenience mart run by a sixty-year old?"

"So it's okay for you to criticize my work, and not okay for me to criticize yours?" I asked. "I've got to get up early tomorrow. I'm tired."

"Come here, Sarah," he said, placing the chicken on my dinner plate.

"My mother bought these for me," I said, gesturing towards the dish. "They're from Macy's, the entire set of them. She also gave me the wineglasses from which you drink."

He served me salad. We sat and ate dinner in silence. When we finished eating, I cleared the table and slowly rinsed the dishes. Ben called to me from the bedroom.

***

When I'm at work the next morning, I'm tired again.

"*Mon deu*," Fitzpatrick says. "Did we experience the little death last night, my darling? You barely needed any blush. I hope we're still on for styling products at one o'clock."

"How's your Mexican?" I shot back.

He stood absolutely still and I paled.

"One o'clock, in front of the salon," he said, dumping the rest of the creamers on my desk. "*Promises*, Polanski. How about this: you can get out of this hair-salon business if you approach Boss-man about financing your trip. Don't even talk about *my* Mexican; he's on a tourist visa and they *don't* just hand those out."

I started rewrapping my ponytail.

"When does he return to Mexico?" I asked, slowly.

"I might be asking Carmelita," Fitzpatrick replied. "Maybe, just maybe, they'll grant asylum because occasionally he's a transvestite. Maybe that will qualify him as a social group, *maybe* I can grease some palms and get him an attorney. I'm sure Carmelita will help him with his testimony. *Comprende*, Sarah? *Quedado*."

"I'm sorry," I said. When he leaves, I sit at the desk and start calling interpreters.

"Sarah," my interpreter states over the phone. Above me is a photograph tacked to the corkboards. It's a photograph of me bending over the keyboard and Fitzpatrick is sitting beside me, his finger pointing over the case log, the two of us staring forward at the computer. The phone is free-standing, on the corner of my desk, like a prop on a stage. Halfway between my keyboard, Fitzpatrick, and myself, is the rolodex. This was the office in which I was trained. It's the closest I've come to any sort of physical torture. I stand, still on the phone, and look down at the street for Fitzpatrick. He's standing next to the florist. As I lean over the window he glances up, shading his eyes. He waves at me. I try to relax.

"Did he do okay in court?" I asked, twisting the chord around my finger. "We chatted for an hour yesterday and I was late leaving so I finally cut the call short. He sounded okay when I spoke with him; a bit nervous, but okay."

"He's a little slow, Sarah," David says. "But he'll gain confidence as he goes. His pronunciation's very good. The case was religious, so he handled the terms well. He stumbled a bit when the alien talked for too long but he raised his hand and asked the alien to repeat."

"Did he talk directly to the alien?" I asked.

"He asked permission from the judge first," David replied.

"Did he get too tired?" I ask. "How long was the hearing?"

"An hour," David replied. "He's not bad for a new interpreter. The judge liked him and the others are calling him *Zhang Lao*; "elder."

"Does he seem to like the work?" I asked.

"I've introduced him to the others," David said over the phone. "He knows where the lunch room is located. He is going to attend the calendar hearing tomorrow morning."

Fitzpatrick stepped closer to the flower shop. From where I stood, I could see his head bent towards the florist's, and then they were talking. Fitzpatrick stepped around the flat concrete pillars by our building and entered the pathway lined with plants, following the florist. Very shortly they were inside the store, and I could see no more of either of them. Across the street, the hair stylist came out to smoke a cigarette. I watched and waited for Fitzpatrick but he didn't reappear. He didn't cross the street.

"He sounded really nervous," I said. "Last night, when I prepped him for the case, he sounded frightened."

"We've all had our first case," David said. "He'll be fine, Sarah; give him Judge Hendricks and Judge Patterson for a while. With a few more cases he will be fine."

When I hung up, I sat down for a moment, flipping through my case log. My boss was sitting at his desk when I entered the office next door. I closed the door in one elegant swipe and the noise startled us both as the phones rang to a hum. "My grandmother is sick," I said, looking behind him at the sun blocked by Venetian Blinds. I wondered, briefly, if he ever stood and watched the traffic below. I wondered if he'd ever looked out and seen Fitzpatrick. I wondered if he'd seen the stylist chain smoking

or the florist below us putting out his wares. I wondered why he never came into our office: our office crammed with four desks, and mine next to Fitzpatrick's, with the office plants on the sill soaking the sunlight. I wondered why he wouldn't let me meet the interpreters: whether it was because I looked young, or whether it was because he couldn't justify the expense to the other coordinators.

"I have to take the week off at Christmas," I continued, my arms by my side.

"It's very short notice," he said, tapping his pencil on his desk.

"I'll have the cases filled before I leave."

"And the same-days?"

"Fitz and Carla can fill them; they've been trained. We've found a new Foochow interpreter; we can rotate him in. Fitzpatrick found him from one of the recruiters."

Our director nodded, pleased.

"Still applying for the regional manager position?"

"I'm applying," I said, shifting slightly in my work-pumps. Eric was wearing a starched white shirt. The picture on his desk was a Glamour Shot; his wife was wearing cobalt-blue eye shadow and wide, bright lips. The background behind her was black with shooting stars.

"Fitzgerald indicated there'd be a party for the interpreters?" I asked. "It would be good for me to meet the Foochow interpreters."

"I'm sure we can give you the time and date," he responded. "I still need to clear this vacation with the other managers and you'll miss meeting the D.C. region at our Christmas party," he said.

"This is a family emergency," I said. I withdrew before he could say anything further.

"*Wei*, indeed," Fitzpatrick was saying at my desk in the suite adjoining. He talked into my phone. "I'm putting her on." He put the extension on hold and returned to his desk. I glanced at it carefully, making sure he hadn't put the person on speaker. "Your beeper's beeping and your interpreter's waiting," he continued, reaching into his desk for another language C.D.

"What if I bring Ben home with me?" I asked, touching the base of a plant, ignoring the blinking light on my extension. We had tropical plants, and a few ferns, but nothing yet that was Christmassy. I hadn't been out to the flower shop in a while; I hadn't seen the holiday bouquets up close, or the florist, with his long blond hair held back like mine – in a ponytail.

"Bring me instead," Fitzpatrick said. "I'll dress in drag." He joined me at the window. "Your florist was *quite* enchanting."

I told him I was going for a short smoke. On the phone outside, I called my mother. Our conversation lasted well beyond ten minutes, and when I was done, the florist had returned to the inside of his store.

***

With some of the interpreters, I feel like I'm dealing with children. I can imagine their quirks and whines on the bodies of thirteen year olds. They sound like adults but really they're kids, with surly eyes and defiant hands, gesturing as they drive their point's

home. They argue for allowances, better curfews, and fewer deadlines. Higher wages; more cases; better rates for travel time. They corner the market, and from the corner you latch out onto any concession you can find. You beg and barter, you coax and coerce. You try to avoid the guilting mechanism they use, like the one your mother employs, or your significant other.

I'm talking to myself again. I'm staring forward waiting for the phone to ring and Fitzpatrick is leaning back in his chair snoozing. The interpreters aren't all tall, and slender, like David or short, and elderly, like Earnest. They aren't all sweethearts. They are downright manipulative. Some of them, like Peter, will use anything they can to ask for more money. The ones like Peter, I can't imagine in my head. "He's really something," my mother might say, or my father's brother. I don't imagine the ones who are like Peter. It would be harder to handle their voices, their complaints, for I'm *not* like Fitzpatrick: I *can't* put them on speaker.

He also doesn't imagine things.

Federal Plaza is a huge building. It might be as tall as the Empire State building or the World Trade Center. I know the FBI is lodged there. The CIA and federal and state law enforcements have offices. The Executive Office of Immigration Review has an office and several other federal agencies. The strongholds are the courts. There are dozens of courts for every type of crime and every type of immigration violation. The immigration lawyers are hired by the EOIR office but I don't know much about them: their data is secretive. Some of it is widely published: human rights violations documented by the United Nations. The EOIR has a government contract with our company to staff the courts.

I've already received a Christmas card from my grandfather. The card's at work, on my corkboard, next to the photograph of me and Fitzpatrick.

There's the distancing.

"Don't confuse pronouns," I tell Earnest later. "I know there are problems interpreting events that happen in time. Work your way through the hearing; remember to talk in first-person. Don't gesture, and don't repeat the alien's gestures. If the alien is talking too quickly, ask the judge for permission to talk to the alien. Ask the alien to repeat what he or she said. That's all, though. Just remember, Earnest: never talk directly to the alien. The next cases might become more difficult."

Outside the courtroom would be dozens of Chinese. Everywhere you looked there would be Chinese: old and young, husband and wife, entire families, wandering Federal Plaza, getting lost, all of them trying to talk to interpreters. David wouldn't always be by his side, or the other interpreters. Earnest would observe the mass-introductions in Foochow: the 8:30 a.m. calendar hearings held every day.

The court was too large and overwhelming that it felt impossible to conceptualize; I could only imagine, like imagining my grandpa tending to my grandma. I imagine my grandma on the nursing room bed: the clean linen, the spills on my grandma's shirt as she eats the chocolate we've brought for her. I can see my grandpa sitting next to her. He's holding her hand, and in front of him, on the wall, are the angels. For a while, she only wanted to see angels. I don't understand why he returns day after day, or why he's there until the day closes, but I'd been there in August and she didn't recognize me.

Imagining the nursing home leads to memories so you block out the memories for stories and dialects and boats, and then the imagining is in the work. It's in the stories

you hear, the words that traverse interpreter's mouths like broken communiqué, and you push for it because you're punished by it to work harder. You push to hear about the hearings: the people who interpret, the ones who are disqualified by judges, the ones who can't make it through a hearing because it's like interpreting for distant cousins.

My boyfriend never talks about his casework. He never mentions the court, but we handle the government. Of all people, I thought he'd understand the courts and our importance. The importance of due process and of equal footing.

I can imagine swarms of Polish entering Ellis Island in the early 1900s. People would be arriving by the hundreds, the boats dumping them off before re-fueling and returning, the Statue of Liberty before them and then the lines of intending immigrants. There wouldn't have been interpreters then; there'd have been government officials and wooden pews, or maybe the wooden floor, for sleeping. Piles of clothing and piles of shoes and coats donated by the upper class and somewhere, somewhere in the docking station, lines and lines of people waiting to get into the queues to complete the paperwork, the rest of these people outside the building.

"Do you *have* to take work home?" Ben is asking.

"You take files home," I said.

"I'm a public defender," he replied.

The phone rang, and I grabbed for it.

"Morris Interpretation, this is Sarah," I said, not realizing.

"I've booked you a ticket on American Airlines, sweetheart," my mother says.

"Is Grandpa okay?"

"Grandpa's fine," she says. "Grandma isn't doing well. It's time to come home."

"I didn't realize, I'm sorry," I said. "Grandpa sent me these photographs of his father's father in Poland with the Christmas card. I'm up for review next month and I've almost finished what I've been working on but couldn't it wait until August…"

"Grandpa put the tree up," she continued. "Bob says he's putting the decorations on. Grandma won't be home to see them, but Grandpa wants the tree up so we're going to help them decorate the house with all of her ornaments. He must be okay; he's taking care of himself. It's hard, Sarah; when one goes, the other usually follows shortly. He's getting' ready to sell the second cah, so he's alert. Come up, sweetheart; your father isn't sleeping…"

Eric had visited Federal Plaza. There were dozens and dozens of Chinese, he said; all of them wandering, looking lost. Most of them wearing oversized clothing like they'd made a group-trip to the Salvation Army. Perhaps that was why he didn't want me attending the Christmas party: like Fitzpatrick, he was concerned I'd grow attached. Perhaps I wasn't professional enough. Perhaps he thought I'd lose it.

"O-kay," my grandpa says when slowly getting out of the car. Every day he's at the nursing home. I can imagine it. His knees are always bad, so when he moves, he moves with difficulty. His knees are getting worse. He might need to get surgery. He's always okay, though. "O-kay," he'll say when my father helps him. "O-kay," when they slowly walk towards the nursing home. O-kay. O-kay.

"I'll come," I say.

***

The flower shop has been selling Christmas trees at the base of my building. Two weeks before Christmas and I hadn't noticed them before; I hadn't been to the flower shop, and hadn't ogled the florist in person. I stopped on my way into the building although the long-haired hippy man glanced back with a smile and as I averted my eyes, he bent over and continued unloading his wares. His hands were graceful. There were miniature trees that he was tending to; a smaller branch of a larger pine, perhaps. They were perfect Euclidean triangles with a tiny perfect bluebird perched on top. They couldn't be trees. The branches were so close and compact they resembled trees. But they couldn't be real. They'd fall apart. Gold and silver-beaded garlands were strung from bottom to top. The ornaments were hanging balls of red and green, not far from what my grandma would put up.

I paused and the pausing makes me five minutes later than usual so when I entered the office, the receptionist glanced up with a startled glance. Phones were ringing in every office, as usual; the west coast coordinator grabs me in the hallway as we collide.

"Someone called in a bomb threat to Federal Plaza," he says, rushing off as more coordinators pass. I hurried through the corridor past three other coordinators. I hurried past Eric's office into our suite and Fitzgerald was standing by the window when I entered.

"You're late," he sighs, adjusting his tie.

"I worked the telephonics last night until 9," I replied. He was wearing a pressed pinstriped shirt and his hands are on his hips as he stares down. "Peter Chang's on line 4," he says. "I wonder if our stylist uses gel, or mousse? Come here, Sarah. *Gel*, or *mousse*?"

"What's going on?" I asked before I picked up.

"Gel, I think," Fitzpatrick says. "Peter refuses to go back to court. The bomb threat was called in at 7:30 and cases resume at ten. They cleared the court at nine so that gives you thirty minutes to talk him back into court."

"Good God," I said, picking up the phone. "Peter, I'm sure they've cleared the court if they're sending everyone in again. No, I'm sure it's safe; if the FBI can return to work, so can you. No, you must return to the court for your case. If we get a no-show I'll have to report your actions to my director… Yes, I know you're the best Wenzhou interpreter but if we get a No-Show penalty I'll have to report you to Eric. He'll talk to Susan. *She*, Peter; Susan is a *woman*. She's the head of the company."

The phones were ringing, and the baby bluebirds were perched on the pine-branched Christmas trees well below our window. My grandmother put a bird like that on the top of the tree. A nest would be below it. The bird would perch like it was ready to fly off. I never understood it, when I was a kid. I doubt she'd even seen a bluebird. They were an endangered species and I don't remember seeing one, either. My parents always had a ring of angels on the tip of the tree and it was my father's duty to put it on, to reach through the scratching pine as needles were dislodged and would fall, to light the ring so that the angels circled carrying candles.

Fitzgerald resumed playing his Portuguese CD.

"If they've cleared the building," I continued, "It's safe for you to go back in. Peter I'll have to report you to Eric if you don't return." My fingers flipped the black cord around my fingers and I tapped at the sheet of cases, flipping through the new faxes, wondering if Earnest was okay. I'd scheduled him for an 8am hearing.

"That's very considerate," I said. "David's behind you? And John and Jenny? Everyone in a line? Put David on first, please. Thank you."

I heard a click, and then a dial tone. My fingers flew to the trinkets on the top of my desk as I waited for David to call. John Poon sent a trinket once: John, from Philadelphia, who claimed I was Polish-Chinese with slanted eyes and a broad, stocky frame. John had a soft voice, and a slight lisp. He wanted to make a film. He was probably tall and slender, with sheepish eyes and a hesitant grin. Eventually, the courts complained he wasn't translating, and then he stopped answering pages, and then he stopped taking work.

The plaque on the table was small and black, with a heavy base attached to the back. The lettering was gold and cursive, with characters dipping into a lateral line. When the table shakes, the plaque falls down, so I constantly right it at the topmost part of my desk. The lateral line runs down. *The Will Is The Way*, it reports.

"Good morning, Sarah," David said on the phone.

"How is Ernest?" I asked.

"He seems to be fine," he replied. "Jenny is talking to him."

"Will you look after him? Make sure he's okay?"

"He's very cordial," David replied. "The judges like him; I'm sure he'll do fine. Just make sure he doesn't talk to the aliens. I saw him in the hallway and the lawyer for the aliens tried to talk to him."

"Did he talk to the attorney?" I asked, rapping John's plaque against the table. "I can't afford to lose another Foochow. Did he talk to the alien? How about the alien's lawyer?"

"No," David replied. "I have to go, Sarah; my hearing starts at ten."

My fingers rapped the plaque.

The pager in my purse began to buzz. I hadn't bought a pager until Grandma stopped eating. Grandpa's tree was up, the bluebird on top of a faux-pine. The oak table was probably decorated with a red tablecloth and under it they'd place bits of hay as Christmas approached. An extra place-setting, the door unlocked in case a stranger comes, and the smell of Grandma's meatballs permeating carols as they played. When I was younger, I wore a red velvet dress; it was sewn for my life-size doll but my mother let me wear it to Christmas. As I grew older, Grandma stopped making dolls and sewed dresses.

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I try to teach the new interpreters to distance themselves. You have to distance yourself to do their line of work. You never know what you have to open in order to close. There is some distancing to be done at court and when the heavy oak doors open, the interpreters

don't know what they'll hear. They could leave in a half hour and be off to Chinatown for food. They could end the hearing in tears.

The bulk of the hearings are bogus, Fitzpatrick had told me:

The alien didn't know the Lord's Prayer.

He claimed to receive forced sterilization, but he couldn't provide written records.

"This man was from the cultural revolution," Ernest said over the phone, his accent heavy. "The hearing went on and on, Sarah. The defense… the defense argued with Judge Harris."

"Judge Harris is very laidback," I said. "He's so easy-going that some of the lawyers argue with him. Did you do okay, Ernest? Despite the bomb threat? That seldom happens. It must have been hard to concentrate."

"The alien, he was speaking so fast, Sarah. I asked him to slow down, and when the hearing was over, the lawyer followed me into the hallway. I tried not to talk, Sarah, but the lawyer wanted me to talk to the alien so they were following me. The alien was yelling and the lawyer wanted me to talk to him but I kept running towards the subway." He started laughing. "I didn't know what to do, Sarah, so I kept running towards the subway."

"Did they leave you alone?" I asked. "You can probably ask one of the policemen to escort you out of the building. I'm so sorry; I've never had an incident like that. Listen, I have to go home, Ernest," I continued. "It'll be hard to juggle cases when I'm gone. Do you think you're up for a few cases a week; I know you live far from the courts?"

"I'll do what I can," he said. He was short and small, I imagined; a slight, elderly gentleman with his back curved like the slanted line in the vertical radical of 'grandpa', and I happen to know the Chinese character because I sent a New Year's card to my grandfather. *Happy New Years*, the card read in Chinese. *Happy New Years, Grandpa!* I had written. *I'm still in D.C. supervising Chinese interpreters; I don't have enough vacation time to head home but I'll see you during the summer!*

"Ernest," I said, scanning my case log. "I can't find anyone to take a hearing tomorrow afternoon. I've received a morning case, and Young can switch, but I need someone for the afternoon. I don't have you on schedule for the rest of the week, but I have to go home."

"Is everything okay?" he asked. "I can come in two, maybe three days, Sarah. Maybe not all day but a morning or afternoon?"

"It's okay," I said. "You'll be fine, Ernest. The judges like you. You're doing really well."

I stopped talking for a moment before continuing.

***

That evening I put the poinsettia plant on the table in the living room. I've brought it home, not to grow it, but to make it diminish, somehow, with the lack of sun and care. We get poinsettia every winter around the holidays, but it doesn't truss up the office or venerate Christmas. The office managers get poinsettia for the Christmas party which is always held two floors down, with bottled beer pro-offered from coolers.

"Interpreter sent you flowers?" Ben asked.

"They don't send flowers," I replied. "They send Pixie perfume from CVS or tea cups from Chinatown. I've received silk handkerchiefs with the price tags still attached. Earnest is sending me a book that his friend wrote; it's a biography on Christian missionaries in China. Last year the Wenchow interpreter sent me a calculator. But to answer your question – no, no one sent me this poinsettia."

"You stole it from the office?"

"I don't know why," I said, setting it on the counter. We stood there, staring at it.

"You're too attached," Ben said.

"It's a poinsettia," I replied. "I'm going home two weeks before Christmas and I won't be here to receive the gifts…"

"Sarah, you've lost five pounds over the last two weeks," he said.

"The region's nearly fully staffed."

"Then you'll get a better position? Then you'll be home at a decent hour to sample my Chicken Dijon and Stouffers stuffing? They'll just keep you longer. Do you really think they'll give your region to someone else? You handle it too well and I'm tired of seeing what you go through; I'm sick of it, Sarah."

I placed the poinsettia in front of the patio door. We were out of wine. I opened the fridge and looked for Ben's beer. I joined him at the couch with a bottle of Wicked Winter Brew.

He stood as I tried to nestle against him and I heard the kettle in the kitchen. He returned with a cup of tea so hot that it nearly scalded my hands. He didn't look at me as he turned to head to bed.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I do *not* want a girlfriend who's obsessed over work."

"*This* is what we *do*, Ben," I said. "We obsess over work. We help people; we care take and listen to their stories..."

"*This* is what *you* do," he replied. "You use the royal 'we'. Every time you use the royal 'we' I get frustrated, Sarah; I'm going to start applying for new jobs because I know the pay won't get better. Litigation's a stepping stone, Sarah; that's all it's been. I didn't do it to help humanity at large. It's a job; it's not a vocation."

He stooped over the pot of poinsettia and pushed it to one side. I watched him take a cigarette from the open pack on the kitchen counter. Opening the door to the patio, he lit it, exhaling out.

"So is this a test?" I asked. "This living arrangement? You don't even know. You've got three siblings, Ben."

"That's not fair," he said, smoking outwards. "You agreed to live with me; not your mother, not your grandmother or grandfather, not anyone on your mother's side who thinks I should have given you a ring…"

"Maybe that's the problem," I said. I walked to the closet, brushing by him brusquely, opening up the linen closet, searching for clean linen. "You can have the bed tonight," I said. "The couch works just fine."

"I worry about you," he said, tossing the cigarette out the balcony. "Why can't I worry about you?"

"I'll have my pager on me," I said, focusing. I needed to pack. He closed the patio. I watched him bend over to move the poinsettia back. The leaves shook in flashes of green and red.

"Call me when you get to Massachusetts," he said, approaching me.

"We should probably water it," I said, staring at the poinsettia.

He took the linen out of my hands and slowly put it back into the closet.

"Don't sleep on the couch tonight," he said. "Sarah, please. Come to bed."

***

I was at the train station. I was at the train station with the phone in hand and I was dialing the 1-800 toll-free line that I usually give to interpreters. It's odd that I can dial from anywhere in the continental United States; if I dialed during the day, I'd get the person staffing my region. If I dialed during California's business hours I'd get the staff handling telephonics. Telephonics were held in the sensory deprivation tank where Fitzpatrick first trained me: it was a small office, with no incoming sound and no windows, with only two doors and no ventilation. Nobody bothered us there. It was there that I first dealt with the interpreters and I have a photograph of it above my desk.

I was at Union Station at two o'clock in the afternoon, holding my tickets, when I heard about Earnest.

"Sarah," Fitzgerald said when I was patched through.

"How are the children?" I asked, watching as people rushed before me. It wasn't like me to be sarcastic, but I felt tired. The station was decked out in Christmas

decorations with carols playing. People were rushing. In one corner, a man dressed as Santa Claus was ringing a bell and requesting donations for the Salvation Army. The line for the coffee shop was so long that people stood outside the store to wait in queue for service. There was a tree, right in the middle of the terminal, and the crowds moved around it dragging luggage and bags.

I couldn't imagine how they got it the tree in but it must have been carted with boughs fully wrapped in plastic, then lifted with a crane and slowly unraveled so that bough upon bough fell towards the ground.

"Everything's fine. We'll manage everything until you get back."

He was probably standing at the window, with his back to the office door. He was probably standing and staring out over the street with a cup of tea or coffee, watching for the stylist.

"Have you got his number?" I asked. "The stylist?"

"I'm working on getting the florist's number," he said. I laughed at him, sounding hoarse. "It's not for me, Sarah; I'm getting it for you. Is it *reasonable* to expect reciprocity?" I laughed again. The Christmas tree decorating Union Station was probably an Alaskan Spruce. I wondered if they found it by satellite, the way they did for the trees displayed at Rockefeller Center. I couldn't quite see what was on the top of the tree, from my angle; was it a bird, on top, neatly feathered? Or a ring of angels, high above the crowd, circling the topmost bough with hands clasped in prayer?

"Manage what?" I asked. "Can you repeat that? I can barely hear you." Was the bird a Polish custom, or was it my Grandma's own swan song, like the porcelain dolls she'd give when we came over?

"Nothing," Fitzpatrick said. "The region is fine. No bomb threats today; everything's just fine. We had a little problem with Earnest but go home, Polanski. We've got it covered."

"What's up?" I asked. "What's going on with Earnest?"

"Oh, Ernest called earlier. I *shouldn't* be telling you this; you should get on the bloody train. I *shouldn't* be telling you this Sarah; I know you're going home but the courts would be calling later. Earnest was caught lunching with an alien."

"… you are fucking me. Fitzpatrick if you're joking I will royally wipe your ass…"

"The fellow was from his hometown, apparently," he continued.

"I told him not to talk to the aliens; he'd been *told* that," I said. "He *knows* that. I *told* him that; didn't I tell him not to talk to the aliens? You've heard most of the prepping; I told him not to talk to the aliens… When we were training, I told him not to talk to the aliens. Some Foochow lawyer chased him out of the plaza and I told him to go to the police the next time it happened…"

"Something about a pagoda," Fitzpatrick continued, his voice low. "You did everything you could, Sarah." I stared out over the terminal, watching people move around and past the Christmas tree, watching the way people moved without smiling or greeting each other. "It's not easy, for some of the interpreters," he continued. "Eric?" he said, loudly. "Just one moment… Give me one moment." His voice grew low again. "Running into your classmate? He probably didn't even have lunch; he probably just said *hello* and some crazy, catty bitch… I'd bet dollars for beers it was Carmelita."

"Plus it's in the packet," I continued.

"Just outside the city of Fuzhou is a very small town, and that's where he lived. The alien was wandering the halls of Federal Plaza and they recognized each other immediately; that's what happened, I'm sure of it. He claims he wasn't lunching with the interpreter so some catty bitch called him out. Maybe it was Juanita? Just because they fight for cases… my god, they're *all* federally certified in Spanish…"

I twisted the phone chord around my finger, the noise of the station rising and interceding. I blocked one ear with a finger and stared across at Santa's bell. People weren't stopping to give change.

"Gotcha," he says. "I'm just kidding, *Sa-wah*. Earnest wants to meet you in New York when you're returning. You have a week, right? He said to give him a page. We've called David and he's meeting up with you as well. They want to take you out for dinner and so we've emailed you with a better train to take… It will be two trains, of course; one from Boston to Union Station where the interpreters will meet you. Later in the evening you can return on the second train. Nothing's reimbursed, of course, but the entire Foochow region wants to meet you so *please* change your schedule… They're taking you out for dim sum at one of the best restaurants in Chinatown so *don't* disappoint me… Now that I think about it, I'm sure the stylist wears gel. His hair is *definitely* peaked at the hairline… perhaps, to hide a receding hairli…."

"You *asshole*. I'm going home and I'm wearing the ring my grandmother gave me. When she started growing *ill* I didn't know what to do with all of it so I *took* it; she called it *my inheritance*. My inheritance, Fitzpatrick. She called her jewelry *my inheritance*."

"Go home, Sarah," he said. I hung up.

Under the tree, boxes were wrapped in picture-perfect wrapping paper with nothing untucked or untaped. Scattered on top of a glittery undercoat, the presents were monotonous in red and green wrapping paper with the tree towering above them. Strings of Christmas lights blinked like stars and they wound in successive circles towards the rigid topmost bough but I couldn't make out what was on the top of the tree because I wasn't wearing my glasses. I couldn't focus because my vision was blurry but I wondered if there was a ring of angels, like the angels circling the tip of the tree at home, so silvery and bright that they offset the gold garlands in ominous, omniscient white. Perhaps there was a bluebird, so small and perfect that the glittering ornaments and tinsel and lights would be taken down but at the end of Christmas the tree would still be loyal, the rest of the sidewalk littered with naked pine as my grandpa placed the tree outside near the hedge. The chickadees and cardinals would land to pick at the popcorn garland my grandma had made and strung specifically for this purpose: watching their flight up towards the sky and higher, so high above the clouds that I could see them flying no further, their view above the house round and distance and perfect, their piercing blue coats fluorescent in the sunlight.

The Elements of Design

My parents lived in a large white house forty minutes north of Baltimore so close to neighboring farms that you could hear the horses neighing at night. In front of the house an S-shaped garden path led from the driveway towards the waiting white porch and a mixed hedge of rhododendrons stood before the front of the house, with flowers flanking the front of the porch in perennial folds of pristine, sharp colors. These fell out and were planted down the S-shaped path but they only bloomed during spring, not winter. When we first moved in, my mother planted an additional row of long ornamental grasses for varied texture.

If you were gazing at the house, you'd notice the white siding, the white Colonial structure, and the long rectilinear windows on every floor including the front porch. The front porch was supported by four Greek columns. The door to the house, like the house itself, was painted white. You wouldn't notice much of the embellishments unless you had a discerning viewer: someone like my sister, Susan, pointing them out. From the walkway, for instance, the front door rose towards a half-moon elliptical window framing the top. She'd shown me this view, when we first moved in. From a certain angle on the walkway, you'd stare into the elliptical window and notice the white latticed banister slashing horizontally on the second floor. Beyond this banister was another elliptical window at the top of long windows in the vertical living room. This view, this layered view through the second floor and out into the sky, would be missed entirely unless the viewer were standing at just the right angle on the walkway. If you stood, as I had, with

Susan's hands on my shoulder, with her finger pointing upwards, you'd see it.

Light, more than structure is the key to interior design. At the new high school I learned the gloaming period of day was the Magic Hour and as the sun set, trees and flowers turned a certain hue of sharpness. Things were prettier at this time. Things rested fragile, suspended between day and night, half-golden in the absence of direct light. I began to understand why Susan had loved photography. The azaleas turned a darker shade of pink; the bushes a sharper green; everything defined by the refraction of the sun's light through the hemisphere. This hour, if you caught it, was a movement from myopia to sudden sharp sight.

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Don't go into science, my father told me. You'll need to get exclusive with your studies, you'll publish or perish when you get the degree, you'll scrutinize some field to the exclusion of everything else. You'll decide you'd rather teach scuba diving in Vermont and that's ten years gone to waste: five to get the degree and five of postdoctoral fellowships. You'll leave academia and research with pennies in your pocket and an urge for more degrees. Study something broad, something you'll cherish: study the social sciences instead. Things are arbitrary and you can bullshit your way through your career. You can transition, he said. Become a psychiatrist: you won't have the overhead of nurses, receptionists, and hefty malpractice insurance. You can continue your hobbies, he said.

"I don't have the energy for this," I'd said, sitting in his civic Honda. "I'm

leaving. I'm leaving for the west coast. I need to break up." His pager was on vibrate. It was sitting on the backseat of his car. He was one of the few who still worked at the university.

"You can't turn back time," he'd said.

"What are you, Cher?" I replied.

"A joke is an epigram on the death of emotions," he'd continued. "A joke is an epigram on the death of emotions," he said. "Let's go inside, Rebecca."

"Nietzsche," I said, my fingers flipping the door lock. "Is God *dead*, Chris?"

We sat there quietly.

"What will you do," he asked, articulating slowly. He still had a thick accent so he spoke slowly, never giving people the benefit of the doubt, but I understood him.

"Leave," I said. "I can return for visits on the salary I'll be paid."

"You're perseverating," he said. "Reviewing the past six months and figuring out what went wrong. That's what you'll do, right? Review it all and then review the cost/benefit analysis of staying. What's the tradeoff, though?"

"Time," I said. The streets in Mt. Vernon were paved with glass, so the night view was of black granite with random sparkling stones and we'd just returned from the club. My hair was matted from smoke and sweat. I was wearing a black slip over a black lace bra and my combat boots weren't shit kickers but they had thick rubber tread. My eyes were black from makeup which had started smudging from sweat. I adjusted the vent so that the heat would hit my lap between my legs, and I opened my legs.

"Do you love me," he asked. It was more of a declarative statement than a question. He was facing the sparkling roads and we wouldn't turn to look at each other.

Love wasn't something I trafficked in. Love had left the house when Susan had killed herself and now, of course, there was my father. I slammed the door shut when I got out, not caring if it was loud or abrasive or if I'd scratched his car. By the time I got through the front door, he hadn't had time to follow.

Inside my roommate's apartment, I pulled off the knitted black scarf. I threw it into the wastepaper basket in his kitchen after threading my fingers through it. I made my way to the stairs leading downwards in the dark.

***

I first saw him at an industrial club in southeast. I was good at knowing my center of gravity; I'd been raised and trained in gymnastics, so staying on my feet wasn't hard and I loved dancing. We didn't gravitate towards each other, he and I; this was not the sort of club where you gravitated towards anyone. The dancing was driven by industrial music. If the dancers didn't have peripheral, they'd get bumped and knocked about. Inadvertently, a wayfarer could start a mosh pit. You didn't gravitate towards anyone; you moved apart.

There was an interval in the newest Genoflex song when the beats-per-measure halted, the drums reversed on the back-beat, and the rhythm staggered in a drunken walk before beating into a fluid flow. Because the song hit dead air before continuing, the crowd stopped before a tentative return to stomping. I noticed Chris when they first started playing the song because he was standing and laughing at everyone's failure, too. He'd been dancing on the circumference of a small circle of boys but unlike them he was wearing blue jeans, not vinyl or leather. He was Indian, I was sure, though he could have been from Pakistan. He had the kind of body you could climb and when I caught his eye

he didn't turn or pretend that he didn't see me. He nodded at me: head up, eyes straight. I smiled.

I drove him home two weeks later when my friend told me he needed a ride.

"Carla says you're very much into IRC," I said the first night I drove him. "I never got the gist of that – craving someone's censure." It seemed arrogant to me, to challenge with intent to crush. It was one step above unresponsive, and several below flaming. Internet Relay Chatting was a way to release rage. It was rhetoric with spin: it was the decade's wit for Gen-X.

"It isn't really about that," he replied. "It's about wanting to be bent so that you can snap back." I wondered why I hadn't met him. Serendipity had ceased to exist anymore; it was little more than the law of averages. At the parties. At the clubs.

"You aren't online," he said.

"Arrogance," I said. "There's no point trying to impress someone who's arrogant; they only impress themselves." We were approaching a merge and it was three a.m. in the morning. "I went to an international, all-girls high school," I continued. "My parents stuck me there when my sister died. We studied your standard fare plus typing and home economics. We had a British curriculum so we didn't even study grammar. We didn't take shop and we didn't have logic classes; my father tried to bridge the gap by tutoring me in science and physics."

"Where'd you go to school?" he asked.

"The first time," I said, remembering, "he didn't want me wearing green eye shadow. Only frogs have green eyelids, he said. That's when we started arguing."

"What did you say?" Chris asked.

"I couldn't reply," I said. "What do you say to that?"

We were pulling into the club in southeast D.C. and I tried to compose myself. "I was wearing green eye-makeup at the time and I'd just died my hair purple. My mother left the room because she didn't know what to do and she hadn't a clue what to say to me. My father started by picking on my aesthetics. I argued back. We've been arguing every since."

"And your mother?" he asked.

"Got three dollars towards gas?" I asked.

***

I lived in a two bedroom and one bathroom apartment below a friend I'd known since college. It was a basement apartment so I didn't get any sunlight and I knew my parents wouldn't approve, but I also knew my father would help. Walls of contra point colors enclosed me – glum gray along the back wall, red faux-brick lining the wall adjoining my bed. Glum gray against the steep stairs leading upwards; neighbors so close I could hear their music through the walls like a broadcast. The faux-brick wall was where I put my futon. Lit by track lighting that began at several circular beams and widened like an aura over the wall, it seemed comforting: it was brick without being brick. It was the color of fire; it was invigorating. In my computer room, the landlord had sponge-painted over a baby-blue wall. There were three doors in this apartment: the one at the top of the stairs, the one that opened to the bathroom, and the gated door opening to the backyard.

My father made adjustments during the winter to make the place efficient. He put

a rim of insulation along the window above my futon to block the draft. "Rebecca," he said. "Your mother would have a fit." We didn't talk about the row house where Susan was found: a row house, somewhere in Baltimore, where she'd overdosed. He gave me a sleeping bag he'd bought through a camping catalogue. *Can be used in very cold temperatures*, the catalogue claimed. The first time I used it, I woke in a sweat.

He told me to move the futon halfway down the faux-brick wall so that the window would be further away. My father enjoyed conserving space, both owning and optimizing it, so he understood why I'd moved to a basement apartment where the rent was cheap and the fixings minimal. If he feared for my safety, he never revealed it. He knew I was a good kid. He also understood why my futon was up against the window like that, with the gray wall and window above my head, and the faux-brick to the right of my bed. You could call my father's style minimalist, or you could call it Spartan. He understood why I needed the futon against the wall, even if it wasn't logical. Like him, I needed space.

"One physicist said *the presence of matter determines the structure of space,"* he told me when I was in high school. "This was a major break-through in the study of the universe," he continued. "It expanded Einstein's theories and furthered theoretical physics concerning the dimension of space."

On breaks from school, his prying eye and pervasive explanations made me believe that life, like art, could be reduced to a science.

"The same concept applies to art and design," he'd continued. "You like art for a reason, Rebecca; you've always liked playing with space."

Susan had liked art. Her paintings were still on the walls of her bedroom.

"Modern art to me is waves of lines on paper," I said in disgust; "modern art is blocks of shapes in Lego colors; disconnected things in space. Modern art plays on emotions through the dynamic of color and line; it isn't particularly beautiful and it only works if you put it above monochromatic furniture."

"Modern art is an experiment with space," he said. He didn't care for extreme opinions on anything unless they were well defended so he explained his position. Turned me on my own. Things are set in relation to each other; he said. Space was structured to resonate. Modern art was an experiment in line, form, and color. These were the elements of design: I didn't need to cast off ambiguity, or the reason Susan had obsessed over lack of design. I carried these thoughts through high school, and through Towson State, though we fought constantly.

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"Your mother wants you to move home," he said. We were sitting at the red oak table they'd bought in Malaysia. We were drinking coffee as my mother cleaned the kitchen and I could hear the water running as we talked.

"What did you tell her?" I asked. "It's in the city, dad; no neighborhood is safe."

He leaned back in his chair, pushing the glasses up on his face.

"Crime has no address," I said.

He looked at me.

"I didn't mean it that way," I said. "You know what I mean; I need to live by myself but it's a safe neighborhood, Dad." I bit my tongue. His grayish hair used to be

dirty blond. His eyes were hazel and calm; in his heyday, he probably could have broken hearts.

"The Macintosh is working well?"

"It's fine," I said. "I can't get onto Pine; I'm not telnetting right now. Something's wrong with the software."

"Is the phone jack working?" my father asked.

"Bell came last week," I told my father. "The service guy said he usually charged, but he let it go. He fixed it, then he chatted with me for a while and he left."

"What about the car? Anyone broken into it yet?"

"Someone extinguished a cigarette out on the hood," I said.

We could hear my mother running the dishwasher. My father pushed back his chair and stood. "I'm living in a gay-burg," I told my father. "I wear black all the time. I'm not a likely target for muggers. I don't drink and I don't do drugs."

"I'm not telling your mother you live in a gay-burg," he said quietly. I could hear my mother on the telephone in the kitchen. I followed him into the living room and I sat on the Persian rug.

"Traveling shortly?" I asked.

"London," he said. "Your mother wants to go for a week." I pulled out the chessboard and my father piled logs onto the fireplace. I avoided looking at photographs, which were assiduously and carefully positioned. Rebecca in ninth grade, wearing her uniform. Our childhood vacation in Greece. Susan standing in front of the Louvre. The two of us sitting on a stone wall somewhere in Toledo, the cobblestones rough beneath our feet.

My father crumpled up some paper and pushed it under the logs. He leaned on one knee, his long body half-inside the fireplace. "Aren't you thinking about doing a Master's at U of B?" he asked. The fire crackled as he lit the newspaper. I stood, pulling a blanket off the couch. He turned to face me. "Don't they have a Master's of Graphic Design? Isn't that right down the street from you?" He sat next to me.

"Your mother wants you home, Rebecca. I'm trying. She doesn't want to know you're moving to California so for now, we're not discussing it. Bring home the application," he said. "The university is close to you, right? That would justify working on your portfolio?"

He started setting up the chess board. By the time my mother entered with her book, we were back to playing chess.

***

"Space is manipulated in modern art," I told Chris. "I have this friend who was obsessed with it. Painting after painting; never understood it. She decorated her entire room with these abstract paintings." We were sitting in his Civic Honda in front of my apartment. You couldn't see my apartment; it was at the bottom of the row house and there was only one entry safe for tenants. At that point, I still hadn't yet invited Chris in. The road before and behind us was empty, but we still had our eyes on the sidewalks. The concrete stoop in front of my building was always empty so we'd park there. We were close enough that Chris felt he could jettison his way in, and we were close enough that I could jettison out. The doors were always locked, and the rear-view mirror and side-

views were always positioned correctly. Chris could watch the roads as we made out.

He played with the top button on my vinyl dress. “Wouldn’t it be warmer in your house?” he asked.

“You’re the one who wanted to talk,” I said.

“Keep going,” he said, his fingers following the line of my bra strap.

“I’m not,” I said, pushing his fingers away from my buttons. “Modern art, like music, can exact an emotional response,” I said. “I don’t respect it for that, though; art isn’t about emotion. I like the way space is manipulated, though; you can learn the elements of graphic design by studying modern art alone.” He put his arm around the top of my seat and slowly played with the ends of my hair. I turned to face him. “You’ll hear the argument that an artist is trying to draw a response but the elements of modern art are fascinating; certain colors incite or depress and certain geometric shapes are favored by nature and then the lines, the lines can be vertical to create a dynamic space…”

“So why’d you go into graphic design?” he asked.

My fingers rose and touched his clipped beard. He had soft, round lips, and my fingers touched those. The way he was looking at me, I knew I wouldn’t sleep that night.

“When are you moving to San Francisco?” he asked me. I pulled back to look at him. “Claire tell you that?” I asked.

“You can’t decide, can you?” he asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t stay here.” His hand was slowly moving up my thigh. The car was so warm despite the winter that the windows were fogging up. He was watching the streets when he wasn’t watching me. When I was feeling his hands

I was watching the streets. What was the boy's name, the stylist? He gave better hair than head. I rocked forward a little, staring at the salon.

"Certain angles and shapes are popular and even ratios… found in nature, like in flowers or trees," I said, stifling silly little sounds, as his hand remained inside my dress, moving higher. The street perpendicular had a gay bar but it was three a.m., and it was closed. Two stores down was a video store with a sizable collection of gay porn. Chris was hairy; my roommate was into hairy men.

He was rubbing his clipped beard gently against my cheek. "And other shapes, and lines and angles, like what's used in classic Greek architecture," I continued. "We learn about them so that we're conscious of what we design and I got my degree in graphic design but I haven't learned how to use the web..."

"…I can teach you the web," he interrupted.

"I'm not staying in Maryland," I said.

"I like when you talk about your family, and your past," he said. He was looking at my hips.

"Can't be as interesting as yours," I returned.

"I like that when I touch you," he said, "you talk."

"Right," I said. "You like that you turn me on, when you make me talk."

He was nibbling on my ear when I closed my eyes. The music bounced against my eyelids, up-tempo and sharp.

***

Time, my father said, was merely space; I didn't need to speed things up by sixty-hour work weeks and twelve-hour workdays. I could create my own career path at a slower pace. Opportunities, I countered, helped people to live. I wouldn't be able to do interior design or graphic design in Baltimore. The interior design industry was dominated by blue bloods and you started by doing the drudge work. You were lucky if you even got to use CAD should you choose to break into residential and residential work was dominated by gay men, friends of friends, and people who'd been raised or known people in Pikesville. I had inherited my father's pragmatism. Baltimore was blue-blooded and it was racist. Since I wasn't blue-blood, I'd have to leave to start my life. Graphic design would be an easier break-through if I worked at a start-up. The jobs were in California: the dot-coms were there and they didn't care if I had worn black, looked Goth. The brains were in California, the freaks dominated the industries, and if there weren't freaks there were geeks willing to give jobs to Gothic Barbie Dolls.

And so was the capital. The venture capital was in California.

"*'Man is the great pattern-maker and pattern-purveyor*," I said. It was an Edmund Carpenter quote I'd learned as an undergrad. "*No matter how primitive his situation, no matter how tormented, he cannot live in a world of chaos. Everywhere he imposes form*. I want to work hard, and retire early," I said, sipping water. I never drank much in my father's house. "I'm saving, Dad, but I've got a friend moving with me."

"Your mother and I worked hard so that you could start your career slowly," my father replied.

"Is that what she'll say?" My mother was in the kitchen fixing dinner. "You can tell her graphic design is a valid field," I said. "That quote I just gave, that's in the catalogue for the U of B graphic design program. Theoretically, I'm readying my portfolio. I've brought the portfolio home."

"Are you seeing anyone, Rebecca?" my mother asked, interrupting. She was carrying in the dinner plates and she set them on the table. I stared at the blue and white designs: *shinwaseri*, they called it. Chinese designs designed by non-Chinese. "My friend's son will be home from law school shortly," she said. "I've love if you would meet him."

Susan had been set up. I was young at the time, but I remembered. He was a kid in medical school: a student hailing from the U.K. He'd been doing residency in Baltimore because of the sheer volume of gun wounds. My mother never accepted the fact that Susan was gay.

She sat beside her husband, my mother, and slowly unfolded her napkin.

"I'm too busy preparing my portfolio," I said.

"So your father tells me," she said. "Are you allergic to something? What in God's name is that mark on your neck? Are you wearing that composite gold again?" My mother had long blond hair as well, but she wore it up in a bun. She mostly wore off-white in the winter: white slacks, white sweaters, and coral-colored lipsticks from Clinique. I pulled my hair back over my ears, and smoothed the bottom ends forward. My father cleared his throat and asked for the butter.

"An allergic reaction is good," he said. "She's having a healthy auto-immune response and could probably fend off larger diseases."

“This is margarine,” my mum said abruptly. "Will you please give me back the butter?" She passed the margarine to my father and left the room with the butter and a half-empty bottle of wine. I pulled my turtleneck higher.

“Your father needs to lose a bit of weight,” my mother explained, returning.

“I hardly think Rebecca needs to hear about it,” my father said.

“Your parents are getting old, Rebecca,” my mother said.

“Is that my reason to come home more often?” I countered. My father looked at me, and I grew quiet. “I don’t hear much about your life,” my mother said. “I don’t hear anything about what you’re doing, or who you’re dating. Your father likes the apartment in Mt. Vernon, at least,” she said, pushing the plate of broccoli towards my father. My father and I exchanged glances. "I suppose it’s close to the Garrett-Jacob’s Mansion?" she asked. “He mentioned cobblestone streets.”

“Not much going on,” I said, my mouth full of turkey. I piled another piece on a forkful and quickly filled my mouth.

“Well, I’m pretty busy,” my mother said. “The tax treaties just changed for non-resident aliens.” She picked up my father’s wineglass though he’d only drunk half of the cup. When I looked at him, he shrugged and we both stood to help her clear the table. The after-dinner drink that night was chamomile tea, and my father and I played a game of scrabble.

"What's wrong?" I asked my father. “What’s she stressed about?”

"Work," my father responded. “She’s getting headaches again.”

I didn't inquire further. She joined us later to watch some movie I’d brought: something on VHS, from Blockbuster. A Hollywood movie on the life and loves of

Picasso. She sat quietly, my mother, with her bag of yarn before her, needles clicking as she knitted.

***

My mother told me once that I would fall in love three times. She'd said this when I was young: before Susan died, before we were old enough to be interested in boys. The first time, she said, I'd get my heart broken. The second time I would learn what love was about. The third time, I'd be ready to marry because by then I'd be ready to settle down. "Be careful who you date," she said. She said this so frequently that I don't remember first hearing it.

In college I learned that men, like graphics, could bleed over. I would bleed out a graphic if I wanted the moment continued. Space was time. Graphic design was a visual art; it was not a time-art like literature or music. To keep the reader on the page you extended the duration of the ad, past a fleeting glimpse, past a fleeting thought. The presence of matter determined the structure of space. Bleed-outs could be used to extend the time in the ad and like modern art, they were interesting; with the right elements, they could keep the reader on the page and extend the moment of exposure.

My first fling distracted me with his insistent phone calls. He'd slur into my answering machine that I was an *automaton*, and that I only cared about my thesis. At first he'd only call once a week, but the calls started coming like a telemarketer's. I explained this to my father when I brought my portfolio home.

"Now my phone number is one digit away from the Hotline for Drug Addicts," I

said. “Last night I was woken by someone hooked on heroin.”

"When was this one done?" he asked, pulling the portfolio out before me.

"I was learning about the bleed-out technique during sophomore year," I said.

“Frank, you need to drink your green tea,” my mother said as she carried in a pot. I cringed from the scent. She stood still, looking down at us as we watched CNN, her hands holding the pot, cups, and saucers. She put the pot on the table in front of us and when she left the room my father cleared his throat and continued looking at my open portfolio.

I glanced at the ad I’d been working on, and the bleed-out technique I’d employed. I’d used a night sky behind a set of people. The ad didn’t center on one person, or one couple, but on an entire party of events. The frame encapsulated only a small part of the crowd and individuals were caught half-in and half-out of the shot.

“Why is she harping on your health?” I asked.

“Are you rushing to put the portfolio online?” my father asked. He lowered his voice. “When do you hope to move to San Francisco?”

I toyed with my portfolio, turning the page to another design. “I might stay a bit longer,” I said. We continued watching the news on BBC, and I closed the portfolio and set it aside. “Why is she acting so weird?” I asked.

"Is this fellow helping you with web work?" my father asked.

My hands rose to my neck, and I pulled the turtleneck higher.

My father got up to put more wood in the fireplace.

“Is he nice?” he asked, bending over the fireplace on one knee. “You're working too hard, Rebecca. Even with the clubbing. Is that what the kids call it?”

"I'm here now," I said. "I'm relaxing." He curled a few newspapers into a ball and pushed them under the logs. He wasn't buying logs anymore. During the weekends he'd buy faux-logs; the kind that lit easily and would burn for show.

"Have you heard from Richard?" he asked.

"Richard's back in Poland. Geetha's in India. Annie returned to France though she'll be studying opera in the U.K."

"No one left from high school?" my father asked.

"No one left," I said.

He turned away, striking up a match.

***

"Asymmetry is symmetry askew," I said to Chris. One of his hands rose and held me gently by the neck. He pressed a bit, and I felt him pinching my jugular. I was shaking, I was trembling a bit. He made me nervous and I couldn't help being jumpy.

"It's not necessarily chaos," I continued. He wasn't pinching hard, but he was holding me still as his other hand hooked the top of my tights. I tried to shift on his lap but he held me still. "Asymmetry is an order or program which isn't symmetrical but generally has a pattern and hierarchy of it's own with items or rhythm set in various places with various weights, and as I've learned from my two years of graphic design dissonance is more interesting than similarity so the second ad we'll put on my webpage is demonstrative of asymmetry…"

“Do you think we’re similar?” he asked. “Do you think I’m intense? What do you think about me?”

“I think we're both adrenaline junkies," I said. “I think you know joint locks and pressure points.”

“What else,” he said.

"I think we've both been raised by over parenting parents. I think we've lost part of our childhood.”

“How so?” he asked.

“You’re interesting. And you won’t tell me anything which makes you doubly interesting. I mean what do you want me to say, Chris? That I want to bring my Indian friend home to meet the parents? It won’t be like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, I can promise you that. My mother never took us to India; she said it wasn’t clean." He slowly drew my dress over my head, turning me so that I faced him. I was wearing my slip as I fell back onto the futon and as I fell, my arms flew out and I landed poorly. I tried to close my legs, I tried to recover my poise, but he kneeled in front of me to tug at my thigh-high nylon socks.

"What do you think we have in common?" I asked, struggling to sit up. “You think you know me? You know nothing. I’m the little white girl, Christophe Krishnamoorthy.”

"I think we both like dancing," he said. "I think we both like each other."

He kissed the side of my thigh softly. His hands were on my knees, and when I struggled to sit up, I stared at his clipped beard. When he had first kissed me, he hadn’t done it suddenly. He'd taken his time; he'd brushed his chin against my lips. He'd been

slow and deliberate until my lips had parted. I hadn't been accustomed to facial hair on a man's chin.

"I wonder what your father does," he said. "I wonder if your mother is as thin as you, if she's athletic, if she's ambitious."

"She has blond hair," I said, folding my arms. I was getting cold. "She used to do interior design work for a firm in Baltimore but when she married my father she stopped working. Now she handles nonresident and resident tax laws; she hosts workshops at my father's company; she went into the field because she barely saw him and she knew she'd be serving his employees and postdocs. He's a principle investigator."

"How are they now?" Chris asked.

"They prefer separate spheres," I said, pulling the blanket up around me. "They've been off since my sister died when I was sixteen. Ours is the proverbial broken home except its perfect. It's a white Colonial home with the backyard leading into a cornfield. During the day, you can watch the hawks circling above on thermals. If you watch long enough, you'll see them dive for mice."

I moved the blanket from my lap to my shoulders. I curled my arms around my legs and stretched them out in front of me, cocooned in red acrylic.

Untangling from the blanket, I slid under the covers and faced the wall. The red faux-brick was crumbling next to my bed with white plaster coming off in pieces. When Chris and I had sex, I would reach for the wall and claw it: I'd be guttural, I would nearly scream. We were animals.

"I think my mother's fighting depression," I said.

He yawned behind me. It was contagious.

"*Cello*," he said, "*sanjo*."

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"Your mother wants to meet him," my father said. "She's onto you, Rebecca. She thinks you're coming here less because you're seeing someone and if you aren't explicit enough on who's traveling to California…"

"I'm not bringing him home," I replied, standing. "And I wasn't taking him to California; I'm moving with my roommate. As long as she thinks I'm cleaning up my portfolio she'll think I'm cleaning up my life and applying for a Masters..."

"I never wanted you to care what she thinks," my father said, putting a pillow behind his back. It was an ergonomic pillow: small, thick. The width was shaped like an *S*.

"Why did you wait so long to have me?"

"We wanted a few years between children," he said. "That few years became five." He seemed pale. The logs were still coming from 711 and he didn't appear to be getting exercise.

"Rebecca," he said suddenly, "the start-ups aren't stable. They're financed by venture capitalists and run by computer programmers." He leaned into the pillow. "You don't want to go out there. I know you've lived in Maryland all your life; maybe we shouldn't have sent you to an international school; maybe if you'd have more friends here you wouldn't want to go so far."

His potbelly wasn't large. My mother was acting irrational about his diet; that night, we'd had steamed vegetables and tofu cooked in vegetable broth.

"Are you well, Dad?" I asked. "Why are we eating brown rice?"

"You were burnt out when you graduated," he said. He glanced with disdain at the pot of green tea on the coffee table. I looked out the windows at the cornfields, wondering if I could stay the night, remembering I'd promised Chris dinner. Temping and web work and parents and Chris were getting crammed into my work and personal space.

"Do you like this guy?" my father asked. "Is he what's keeping you here?"

I shifted on the couch, uncomfortable.

"I like my space," I said. "I like maintaining the integrity of its structure."

"What's he like?" he asked.

"Smart."

My father picked up the latest issue of The Economist.

"He's Indian," I said. My father stopped flipping. He stood up and put wood into the fireplace, then he sat and picked up The Economist.

"Northern or southern?" he asked.

"Northern. He has an aunt in Texas. The rest of the family's in India."

"I don't think your mother needs to know about this," he said.

"I thought you said I shouldn't care. I'm moving to California—maybe I should tell her I'm dating, and I'll end with California? Or maybe I should I tell her I'm not going to end up in a row house and cut right to the chase? What's going on – what's so bad about dating someone who's Indian?"

“You’re overreacting,” my father said. He put the magazine down and picked up the remote control, flipping through channels. I’d taken my shit-kickers off at the door and I wanted to leave immediately. I wanted to dance for hours at some anonymous club, someplace in D.C., not understanding and unwilling to process comprehension. I wanted to return to Balti-whore and fuck for hours, with Christophe under the bed sheets, the wall falling apart in white flakes from the gouging of my nails and fingers.

“Maybe you can tell her I’m pursuing an MFA at U of B and that I’ll hardly see her, maybe even for a year, maybe until the next holiday gathering?” I said. “Maybe you can tell her that I’m saving money and working my ass off so that my father can start saving for retirement instead of paying off the mortgage on a house that costs more than my life in a laboratory where the government pays less than corporations funding his grants. Will that will work, Dad? Why aren’t you backing me up?”

“Rebecca,” he said. He put the remote down.

“I’m confused,” I said. "I don't understand why you're taking her position."

“Your mother has certain age-appropriate expectations," he said. He stood carefully and slowly sat beside me, holding his back. "She’s linear; she tells you things so that you don’t forget what she did and how she did it. She needs you to know her timelines; she needs you to know when she dated and married. She’s trying to protect you, Rebecca.” My father rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. He handed me a blanket and I set it aside, staring at the TV.

The volume was on low and he hadn't carried the remote when he crossed over so we sat there, listening to unintelligible garble. We sat, trying to form the words to say to each other. “Time is simply space,” he said. “I taught you to fight back because I

wanted you to argue; I didn't want you getting offended. I wanted you to turn everything on its heels so that the day your mother or I cared, you'd be well passed listening. You'd be past the point of arguing. I taught you rhetoric because I wanted you to be rational. I wanted you to argue without feeling it was personal."

"I'm not Susan," I said. "I don't do drugs; I'm not heading for an overdose."

"That's a non-sequitur," he said.

"Is it?" I asked. "Why hasn't she dismantled the room, Dad? Why does everything in her bedroom look so perfect?"

I stood and headed for the remote, bringing back his heating pad. He took it without a sound and I plugged it into the surge protector. I left for the bathroom, running water over my hands, splashing water over my face. Mascara had started running and the eye make-up had smeared into a thick line of kohl. When I returned, I'd taken off most of my make-up. Dad was staring at the TV, watching some commercial.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Playing tennis," he replied.

"When should I bring home my beau?"

"Next Saturday?" he asked. He turned up the volume and we switched the channel to *Friends*.

***

Three dots of the same size set on a flat horizon are not as compelling as three dots of different sizes and distances zigzagging. Three dots of the same size appear like a child's

paper cutouts but three dots of different shapes and distances make you fight to find a visual rhythm. If there isn't visual rhythm the composition approaches asymmetry. Using asymmetry is a calculated move to seduce and solicit a response; it's a move to create an interpretation of rhythm that doesn't fall in line easily. It's not chaos, though; asymmetry is symmetry askew. Nothing approaches chaos like the human heart: nothing's as confusing as emotion.

"I'll need a scanner," I informed Chris. "The website needs a few more works." We'd tried a new club; one where a smoke room imprisoned smokers like cattle and he smelled like Tide detergent and Irish Spring. "I don't understand what she wants. She wants me to stay; she wants me to get an MFA. The next thing she'll want is law school."

"Why don't I kneel?" I asked. I felt furious and when I was furious I liked fucking. I pulled down my wrinkled velvet skirt and stood in panties. The sound of a car chase escalated from my roommate's TV. He was in for the evening, suffering from a cold.

"You're kind of quiet tonight," Chris said.

"Emotion is instable," I asked. "Ask me about my designs. Ask me about my composition employing asymmetry."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Asymmetry is simply symmetry askew," I said. "Making someone *fight* to find the rhythm in chaos? Kind of cool, Christophe."

"I came to the country at eighteen," he said. "My father works for the magistrate in the Punjab. My mother's a Professor at the local Uni."

I stopped twirling my panties in the air.

“Continue,” I said. I threw the panties towards the wall where they hit a photograph, falling onto threadbare carpet.

“I have one brother, and one sister,” he said. “They’re still in India.”

I fell back, leaned against the glum-gray wall. I watched him.

“We grew up with servants,” he said. “When my parents married, they had nothing. They had books packed in boxes.”

He walked up, dropping on his knees. He kissed the tops of my thighs and buried his head between my thighs. My hands touched the top of his head; as he leaned in, I buried my fingers in his hair.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Tell me more about your parents." I unhooked my bra and pulled it off, tossing it aside like the panties. He wouldn’t answer. "Fuck me," I said. I kneeled on the floor naked. My arms were by my side but I touched him when I got to the floor – I reached out, and touched his face.

“*Cello*,” I said, sniffling. “When I was young, I had this Japanese friend and I liked watching her bow. She always bowed, whenever she talked to anyone. I like this crevice between your nostril and your cheek – right here. I like watching you bow when I kiss it.”

Behind Christophe was my faux-brick wall which was continuing to crumble, an entire piece of the lower portion of the wall – plastic falling everywhere, the wall rift with division. Crumbling. I pulled him to the bed. *Cello*. *Sanjo*.

“Talk more about your past,” I said.

“Yours is more interesting,” he said. “You’re beautiful.”

***

Energy never transfers efficiently. This law I never understood; I deemed it unfair: there's only so much energy, and energy is lost in each transfer so why bother? People were exhaustive. Emotion was an instable element. What happened when mercury exploded?

"My mother told me something once," I said. We were in my basement apartment and we were sitting on my futon. It was five o'clock in the morning and my eyes were sore from crying. Chris had just fixed my telnetting problem and the Macintosh was turned off. I was waiting for my mom to call from the hospital saying he was okay, saying he was stable. Steam drifted from the bathroom where I'd just taken a shower. I was wearing my slip-dress with the red blanket around my shoulders and Chris had turned the heat up. We were sitting on the ground in front of the vent, I was shivering.

"There isn't stability," Chris said. I'd flipped my portfolio open to an ad I'd created as a junior. "The companies will crash, Rebecca; companies run by computer geeks who don't know business strategies?"

"Why be risk-adverse?" I asked. "It's time to jump while the market's hot."

He put my portfolio on the ground.

"Diagonal lines," I said. "Lines to create movement. They make the picture mercurial; the picture's strength is its dynamic. You know my father thinks I should stop working so hard. Things will fall in line, he says, he used to say… I think a line is

bullshit; I think a line is two points on a graph. The line forms behind as the point moves forward."

"Will you father be alright?" he asked.

"My mother, she's weird," I said. "My mother thinks I should be careful who I date. Be careful who you date, she used to say. You never know when you'll fall in love. And when you fall in love, she said, it's over."

I pulled the blankets back and slid under the sheets.

"I'm glad you paged."

"I thought he'd taught me logic," I said. "Rudimentary, nothing formal. But he was teaching me to fight my mother; it was a tool. Life isn't logical."

Chris pulled the cover up and made sure it was tucked over my upper torso.

"He should be fine," I said. "I've got to return to the hospital tomorrow."

I have a picture of Susan when she was in high school. We were five years apart. She had started wearing black long before I did. One winter we went into the backyard behind my parent's house to take pictures. The ground was covered with snow and we were wearing snow pants we'd bought from Sonny's Surplus. She captured the indentation on the snow, and the shadows of our figures behind them.

"Look, Becky," she'd said. "We're white angels in a black hell."

I have no pictures of Susan on my bedroom walls. I've framed one picture of hers and it's abstract. None of the bullshit abstracts she painted and put on her bedroom walls: none of that shit, nothing that dark, nothing that frightening. It's of shadows, and shapes. The sun was tilted, the vanishing point diagonal. We were laughing.

Azaleas

The club was part of an old warehouse on the corner of Little Italy with one side facing row houses and the other side facing public housing. It's been years since they razed the low-rises but she still remembers what the houses looked like and how they'd sound. Frail and small, they were tinderboxes of light wood, voices and cars and music carrying with the children, even the children, walking the streets at night. Eventually large planks sealed the gaping mouths of windows and doors.

"The newer developments will be up to code," she told Jason as they walked. "Nothing to buy and refurbish."

"Is that what your husband would have said?" he replied.

"Fuck you," she said. He was wearing shiny vinyl pants and they reflected the light from the street lamps. They'd parked a few blocks into Little Italy and they weren't concerned: the low rises were gone, the boys on bikes hadn't returned, no one had gotten mugged in a while and no one's windows had been broken.

"He won't be here," Jason said. "Neither will the sociopath, Amy; you need to let it go. Leave the past. Try to live in the present." They passed the end of the row houses and she paused on the sidewalk. She could hear the base reverberating as they approached the club. It was up for sale: a million dollars for two dance floors, two bars, and a liquor license. The lighting system and soundboard were old; they barely rivaled the dives in Essex. She'd gone to the dives in Essex with her husband.

"The new apartment?" Jason asked.

"The ice cream truck doesn't come towards midnight," she said.

"Nice," he said, pausing with her. "That part of Wilkins isn't too bad."

She adjusted her halter top. His fiancée was walking ahead of them.

"Do you feel safe yet?" he asked.

"This doesn't feel right," she said. "My breasts will pop out before the end of the night."

"Is this the month, Amy?" he asked.

"It's our wedding anniversary, yes," she said.

"That's not the anniversary I meant," he said.

He made a move like he was going to hug her and she stepped away.

His wife stopped and stretched in front of them, her arms high over her head, her upper torso arching. She was stretching near a crab apple tree, her long arms pale in the darkness. When she turned to face them she swayed a little, her shoulders round and broad above a tight black corset. Jen's perfume drifted through the heavy humidity and Amy fixated on the tiny bow between her breasts. It was pale pink, like the flowers on cherry trees. Behind Jennifer, the ground was raw as a reaped field, with barbed wire surrounding acres of flattened land. She remembered what it looked like several years ago: the wood, the brick, the broken glass with powder and dust kicked up and then settling. The piles of garbage. The voices of children resounding, the beams beneath the rubble protruding. She was living in the row house with Marc. Then the move to a new apartment. Then the sociopath. The second, the newer, apartment. She was in the same complex, but at least the report was on record.

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She lived in a complex west of Baltimore within the city limits; her squat building was similar to the other brick complexes in the area and she shared her water line, gas line and pipes with four other apartments. She'd moved to a newer apartment within the complex because the cops couldn't stop the sociopath from harassing her.

"It's not theater of the absurd," Jason argued, dumping a pound of red turkey in the blue bowl before her. Sweat stained the fabric beneath his armpits. They were cooking in his kitchen. She probably wouldn't go home that night; she'd crash there after the evening. She wasn't so sure the sociopath wouldn't find her.

He opened a bottle of wine and handed her glasses.

"Theater of the absurd involved existentialism, actually," he said. "*Absurdity* is the irrational universe. Life is *not* theater of the absurd; not how you mean it."

"Are we putting garlic in?" she asked. Cuttings littered the kitchen table and she wiped them off with one efficient swipe.

"It's not a theater, either," he said, handing her a garlic press. "It's not like people are acting out roles; it's just personas. Think of the club; people don't know how to act so they stick to their cliques."

"It's just a theater, then," she said, trying not to jostle Jen's vase. They were back to eating on ceramic plates: they had the entire collection of 'Sea and Shore' from Pier 1 Imports. The plates were cobalt blue, like the color of Jen's eyes.

"I spilled wine on him," she said, pealing the garlic.

"You drink white."

"Could we screen him at the club?"

"The club *is* a screen," he replied, handing her the meat. It bulged between her fingers as she added onion soup mix and breadcrumbs, showering the mixture with powdery flakes. "The point is you're trying to understand the sociopolitical environment of a club where people wear black to feel like they belong. Relax, Amy; everyone there is a freak. The point is to screen out the sensitive dorks."

"Why don't you use me as a litmus test?" Jen asked, appearing in the doorway. "I'll walk up to him and we can see if he stares at my boobs."

"Everyone stares at your boobs," Jason said. "I wake up cupping them."

"Are you talking about the boy wearing a fedora?" Jen asked. "He's gay."

"No, we're talking about the guy wearing a derby," Jason said.

"He could be gay if he was wearing a derby," Jen continued, sitting at the edge of a wooden kitchen chair. "It's May; maybe he's balding and he's a little self-conscious. Does he take it off when he dances? Why don't we invite him to a dinner party?" Her short hair bobbed forward and she pulled up her skirt to cross her legs. She was wearing a broomstick skirt with a white shawl wrapped around her waist.

"All she needs to do is talk to him," Jason said, pouring wine for Jen.

"Why don't we invite him for dinner?" Jen said, swinging her legs so that her feet rested on the floor. "It's time to start the dinner parties again."

"Dogen described mindfulness as a sort of journey," Jason continued. "You won't feel as much anxiety if you try to live with the moment. Existence is the boat," he continued, "the sail splits the wind, the oars split the water, but it's your body moving that boat; every movement is new." He took the bowl from her hands. "Sit, Aim. Each

time you row you can move in a different direction… the whole of the universe is stretched out before you. You're wallowing in the past but the past, present, and future are now. Live in the moment."

"They're not the same thing," Amy said quietly. He poured her a glass of wine as she sat there. "Or maybe they are the same thing," she continued. "I need new housing."

"Maybe randomly," he continued, "but you've still met this guy. That's why I've told you to venture on your own; don't listen to Jen about whatever happens. She believes too much in fate and I'm constantly telling her to be mindful; she forgets the keys to the house when we go to the car and when she starts the car she forgets the keys to the house. The woman needs to be *mindful*."

"Mindful of what?" Jen said, rocking on her feet a little as she stood. "Mindful of the guys with *hoodies* who approach her?"

Amy walked out the backdoor before they continued arguing. She walked barefoot up the side of the lawn, away from their voices and the smell of garlic and onion, towards the bushes at the front of the house. A sea of azaleas covered the left of the yard. The first line were fuchsia; the second and third would bloom pink. The forth line of bushes were white and when the entire hedge was in bloom, the colors would vibrate.

Jen said they didn't need a lawn troll; they had the front yard.

Amy liked them, though; she liked plants that grew in the wild. She sipped her wine and cupped the entire glass with her hand. She tried not to think about the month beyond the azaleas. Jason could keep up with the speed of her thoughts but Jen's thoughts were faster and she'd latch on if she found out; she'd latch onto her fears and

push harder. There were moments like these, but Jason told her to feel them. *Moment, moment, moment*, she thought. She didn't know if she'd trust anyone again. The curtains weren't drawn yet. They'd be drawn soon to block Jen's silhouette from the neighbors. They'd caught peeping toms before, and Jen had chased 'em into neighboring houses. Pre-pubescent boys, she'd said; that's not right, she'd said. You could stay with us, she'd said.

Amy watched the cat watching her through the window.

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The neighborhood was fairly calm, unlike her current neighborhood. Most of Jason's neighbors owned dogs and they were large, with mixed heritage, though she'd seen Scottish terriers and pugs and mutts along with the larger black labs and golden retrievers. Her apartment complex didn't allow large dogs; if you wanted large dogs, you had to rent in cheaper housing. The yards in the neighborhood were big and most weren't enclosed though some sported wooden fences and a few of the smaller, older homes even had white picket fences. There were oak and maple trees but they weren't close to the house foundations and wind chimes hung from porches. Plants were scattered everywhere. Most of the neighbors had started planting annuals.

When she lived with Marc in the row house, she never had time to garden and they were seldom outside anyway so she'd lost track of the seasons. She didn't *live in the moment* with Marc; she lived to survive it. Her row house wasn't in a neighborhood as nice as this one: they lived on a street full of row houses, and were always working on the

house so they could flip it. They gutted the wall to the kitchen, they put in new drywall, they primed and painted when the wall was ready, they stripped carpets off of the floors to assess the wood and repair it. She'd heard dogs in neighboring yards but she seldom looked outside the window. Dogs ran wild in yards that bordered backyard alleys and she hated listening to them. She and Marc let Dame sleep in their bedroom.

She sipped her beer, listening to the sound of dogs barking. Jason's neighbors were grilling on a huge grill which could easily double as a drum set if it were converted while Jason was bending over a small hibachi. The cover clanked in his hands as he closed it.

He watched her watching the neighbors.

"I feel emasculated," he said. "We need a bigger grill and you need to get your dog back."

"We're getting divorced," she said, reaching into the cooler. "We've just taken our time about it."

"He's still your husband metaphorically," he said. "I worry about you, Amy."

She listened for the sound of the wind chimes. She sat on the grass and the plate nearly tipped from her hands. She stood, she sat back beside him. She put her beer down to balance the plate. She picked the beer up and set the plate on the cooler.

"I've just moved," she said. "I haven't had to file a Protection Order and god knows they protected that asshole from being forced out, not that I'm not sympathetic for his mother – she had a stroke, you know? She needed someone to take care of her and there's not kicking out his mother so of course they're going to let this guy stay after he's signed the lease; she's disabled and he's her caretaker plus they didn't know he was

living there and she didn't know he was harassing female tenants…"

"Have you seen Norman Bates since you moved?" he asked. "You know the complex did the best they could; you'd been there less than one year and you were sexually harassed? At least they let you move into another apartment. You didn't have a case in court."

"I haven't seen him," she said, watching the dog next door. "I could have bought a Rottweiler before I moved into that place; he never would've bothered me like he did the downstairs tenant. We stood there and he snarled hello at her; I should have known when she barely answered him. I had *just* moved in, and she said she didn't know him; she said *that guy's a freak and I've barely said two words to him*."

"You haven't seen him since," Jason said. "Do you feel safe now, on the other side of the complex?"

"It's too early to tell," she said, pulling her hair back over her ears. She watched the kids next door. She stood, slowly walking towards the front yard; her bare feet stained by the stubbly grass and her head a bit tipsy. "It's hard to say," she said as they moved. "In the last apartment he could've pushed me in and tried to rape me…"

"You know why Jen told you that, right?" he asked, following her to the front of the yard.

"Because it happened to her," Amy replied.

"Right," he continued. "We're not keeping you here overnight because we're concerned about your safety," he continued. "She didn't tell you that to cause some sort of hysteria."

"No, she was right," she said. She'd brought her Pilsner and she swung it back, drinking.

"She cares about you," he said. "She's not trying to manipulate you, Amy."

"She cares about the cat," she replied, drinking.

"You don't have to spend the night," Jason said, quietly.

She reached out and ran her hand along the tops of the bushes like she'd done the prior weekend, her hand getting scratched as her fingers moved from bark to flower. "She'll need to clip them after they've bloomed," she said, pulling the twigs back so that he could see the way they've flowered. "It's easiest to prune after things bloom; cut everything back. She won't need to worry about it growing. Azaleas bloom on old wood."

"How do you know that?" Jason asked. "I thought you never had a yard." She didn't answer. "She could plant thirty on the other side," he said. "That would make the yard symmetrical. She probably wouldn't take them out if the yard's symmetrical." He started walking back to the grill. "You should decide if you can live there," he said, pausing. He walked back towards her. "We'll help with anything but you need to figure out what's safest. You can't keep living this way. If you want, you can stay here until you find a new place; no sex, no intimacy." She gripped a twig on the bushes, feeling the rough bark between her fingers. At the top of the twig, the fuchsia buds resembled the flowers on her mother's rhododendrons. She looked inside a bloom, then looked up and waited for Galadriel to appear in the window.

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Jen and Jason had been living together for three years in Catonsville and they hadn't meant to live there indefinitely. They couldn't afford something better, though, and the neighborhood was safe with the main road close to the beltway. They weren't really polyamorous. It just happened. It happened, and Amy was trying not to bring the drama.

Their house was located at the end of a road near a cul de sac with two streets crossing at the border of their lawn. Their lawn sloped downwards and the backyard could be seen by anyone walking down the bordering street so Jennifer had issues with privacy. People parallel parked on either side of their yard which drove Jason nuts and particularly bothered him when it was raining. On rainy days the neighbors' tires would dig into the yard and leave tire marks when they drove off and water would pool at the bottom of the hill near the drain so the grass, in certain areas, became flooded. They were paying for the house through a rent-to-own mortgage plan, though, so they started caring about the lawn when they'd got financing. Jen's ex-husband had ruined her credit, and Jason was a schoolteacher.

Jason was cooking food on the stove when she considered asking how they did it: how they trusted each other, how they trusted her, when she was a train wreck moving from apartment to apartment. Why they bothered. She stopped herself for fear of getting an answer. The kitchen smelled of turkey and onions, the salad had been made with oil and vinegar dressing, and as she walked to the living room she carried a full glass of wine properly. The carpet was soft under her feet as she passed the wine glass to Jen and she was careful not to raise her clenched fingers. Her legs were hurting from the night before

and she had faint scratch marks on her hands. She was too old to go dancing but she needed the distraction: the cold club, the humidity invading, and the air as she walked to the car, the smell of perfume as they were driving.

"Amy's been interested in someone new," Jason said, carrying in the plate full of chicken. "That redhead at the club." He sat behind her and his voice moved over her head. "She ran into him last night, literally bumped into him."

"Unintentionally?" Jen asked.

"That's her story," he said, reaching down from the couch. His hand was slow, pedantic, the way her husband would pet the dog. *Ex*-husband, she mouthed to herself, moving away from his hand. "Stop," she said to Jason. He stopped immediately.

"We want you at the parties," Jen said. "Try not to raise your hand above the stem. See how I'm holding it?"

"I'm not ready," she said, placing the glass on the table. "I came home the other day and people were having a block party on their stoops."

"Fate's an illusion," Jason replied.

"I brought a bottle of wine home," Amy continued. "The kid next door asked if it was a forty."

"Right," Jen said, her legs brushing against Amy's as she stretched them out under the coffee table. "Everything's an illusion," she said. "Tell her another story – why not the one on monks waiting at a river? Why not quantum physics? You're straying, Jason; when you've been married it's a hard to move on."

"I'm not teaching her *carpe diem*," Jason insisted. "It's all about perception. Identity's an illusion, Amy; it exists through perception, and human perception is one of

an infinite number of awareness's. My wine glass, for instance…"

"It's empty," Jen said, reaching for it. "I'll refill it."

"It's an empty wine glass," he continued, sitting on the floor. "Now I put it on the table. It's a centerpiece. I put it on the floor, and it's a cat toy. I wet my finger, and run it around the rim. It's an instrument; it's nothing but perception. Amy's a woman. To you, a new friend. To me, she's a sound technician. She's an ex-wife and an old friend…"

"We should leave her alone," Jen called over her shoulder, her long black skirt billowing. "She never separated from Marc," she yelled as she walked to the bedroom. She emerged with a bottle of Advil. "She never lost the townhouse, and the dog." She walked into the kitchen. "Amy's an illusion," she said, reappearing with water. "She doesn't *exist* and so of course she can forget her marriage… her past… her relationships… the fact that a Restraining Order wouldn't have helped her with that psycho neighbor."

"You can only file if you've had sex with the person harassing you," Amy stated.

"Right, so *that* was an illusion," Jen said, flipping a box of matches between her fingers. "Go teach it to the psycho neighbor, Jason; tell him to stop creating imaginary relationships." She started pacing, lighting the candles on the mantles with matches. "Then she moved and dealt with that *fucking* neighbor and the complex wouldn't let her out of her lease so they moved her to another apartment. If she'd gotten that other girl to testify she could have filed a class action…"

"She just established that she *wasn't* fucking him," Jason said. "Her neighbor didn't give the evidence to the complex; she left. She left the rest of the tenants to deal with it."

"Amy can be whoever she wants to be," Jen continued, moving towards the kitchen. "I get it, philosophy-boy. Does Amy get it? Does it make her over think everything? What an *asshole*. Where's the wine? Did you drink the Shiraz? How's Buddhism going to help her? Can we shoot that fucking ice-cream truck? It's enough to shrink my ovaries."

"Boundaries," Jason said, quietly. "You're over-identifying."

Amy walked to the kitchen for water. When she returned, Jason was touching Jen's hair. Jennifer pulled her legs up to her chest as Amy had done earlier, the soles of her feet stenciled with henna, her long arms around her knees as Jason stroked her hair. When they fought like this Amy didn't want to be around. Sometimes they weren't even fighting. She didn't understand their fights, or why they weren't nice to each other.

"Come here, beautiful," Jen said. "Only *she* knows what she wants," she said. Her soft black hair was streaked with red. When her head moved, her hair was so thick and straight that it swayed with her. "What's on your mind?" she asked. "Jason's trying to help you grieve, Amy," she said. "I'm trying to help you find practical answers."

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The winter had been brutal in the new apartment. The gas heating hadn't worked well so Jason helped her put shrink-wrap over the windows but still the draft penetrated. In the living room, the shrink-draft billowed inwards as air hit the window so she bought an electric heater and hid it when she wasn't using it. Her allergies got bad from the dust so she bought a humidifier to combat the allergy meds but that caused more mold growth on

the walls of her bedroom so she'd scrub the walls down with bleach, listening to the baby in the apartment above her, listening to the feet walking above her like there was thunder. She'd hear *you feelin' me* outside her apartment; she'd give cigarettes to the neighbors. She questioned why stay in the complex, she wondered how she'd survive without a second job to help her. During the winter she looked forward to the spring; more specifically, she looked forward to May and the azaleas. Throughout it all she was sleeping with Jason and Jennifer but it was just sex.

Jennifer wanted to get rid of the azaleas. Amy liked how they overran the yard. Two years ago, just after the separation, she came to Jason's house on weekends for dinner and martinis. Jason would cook in the kitchen while she and Jen watched TV, did their nails, or flipped through magazines. Jen never asked what had happened with Marc, or who would get the dog, or who would get the row house, and she never seemed to care that Jason drove out to help her. The two of them fed her martinis with extra olives and she crashed on the couch when she was too tired to drive home on weekends. When the winter thawed, she started grilling in the backyard with Jason. During May, more of the yard would unfold with each weekend, and as the bushes bloomed she found a reason to keep coming. They were renting the house at the time and Amy was still in her first apartment at the crummy complex.

"I told her I'm not ready," she said. "I'm not coming to any parties; I don't want a boyfriend right now and I'm still getting used to the apartment."

"You said you didn't want her fixing you up," Jason replied, handing Amy a beer. "You didn't tell her you didn't want a boyfriend."

She sat back in the plastic patio chair, looking ahead of her at the door to the

kitchen. Jen was opening a bottle of wine through the glass; from her view on the lawn, Amy could see her near the vase of peonies.

"When I got up to the bar you were already talking about computers," she said, shifting on her chair. "I knew I'd say something and end the conversation entirely. Everyone would stop talking and look at their drinks. Then somehow I'd fall on him only this time, he'd be sprawled out on the ground and the glass would be broken beneath him."

"You haven't broken a wine glass in a while," he said, handing her a beer. "I tried to jump-start something you could join, Amy."

"What about jump-starting something I can drive?" Amy asked, craning to see the tops of the peonies over the vase. Jennifer was blocking her view; she'd put a carafe on the table and was steadily pouring wine into it. "It didn't help when Jen joined us. I can't talk to anyone when she's there."

She watched Jennifer leave the kitchen and her attention turned to the cry of a child next door. In the yard next to them, a kid was struggling to inflate a plastic pool with a bicycle pump. Amy took a swig from her cold beer and reached for the cooler. The boy's sister was wobbling on tiny legs, her hair parted into ponytails.

"Have you thought about the motor mounts?" he continued. "Where's the Astro? I'll take a look at it. They're probably bad."

"Yeah, it could be that," she said slowly. "The engine's not cutting out and the RPM is fairly low when I'm idling."

"Is the tachometer broken?" he asked.

"Are your *coals* still burning?" she replied, shifting on the chair, shifting to stare

at the little boy. He must have been seven or eight years old. He tried to pick up the little girl and her ponytails flashed before she started screaming.

"You aren't overweight," Jason said, laughing. "And you could easily pass for late twenties. Have you been in front of a mirror lately? You're a hottie, Amy."

The grill was acting up. Jason put the cover on the grass, fanning the coals with newspaper, and Amy watched the yard next door. The pool was large and blue, with multicolored Telletubbies. The kid was struggling with the air pump. Jason followed Amy's gaze and they were quiet. The little girl stumbled and as she pitched forward, her head hit the grass.

"I'm not hot like Jen," she said quietly, wetting a paper towel and handing it to him. Sweat was running down the bridge of Jason's nose. It was slammed once in a mosh pit and it had been slanted for so long that Amy didn't remember it straight. It gave his face a more angular appearance, like a hound or a collie.

"She's not trying to push you out," he said. "She thinks you want a boyfriend. Do you want a boyfriend, Amy? Or do you want a girlfriend?"

The ice-cream truck was a few blocks away but as the siren started, Amy walked to the front of the house between the children and the azaleas. This time, she was walking fast so that Jason couldn't follow her. To the right of the walkway, the soil was brown and fresh and Jen had started planting annuals. Amy's hair fell into her face as she bent over to touch the tight shape of the soft, closed tulip. She felt for the moist soil beneath it, pulling the dirt to her nose, wondering if it was fertilized or if Jen had simply watered the ground. The front door opened and she released her grip as Jen walked onto the stoop, the scent of incense trailing her.

"Come inside," she said.

Her eyes were bright and blue, like a crashing, cold ocean.

"Am I in trouble?" Amy asked.

"Sarcasm's the mark of the insecure," Jen said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Jason's sarcastic."

"Exactly," Jennifer replied.

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She was living in a mixed community and she didn't trust the neighborhood in general: people had been mugged on the road outside her complex, but she was on the bus line. Helicopters hovered occasionally and her evening walks were lit by them. Even though things grew quiet the winter she'd moved she knew the Royal Farms had gotten armed robberies. She could live through it: she could tough it out, but she didn't know where to move next, or what she could afford on her salary.

The newer apartment wasn't all that bad once she got used to it. There weren't children in the courtyard, though. She didn't see and observe the children and that was one thing she didn't mind, wherever she lived: the noisy children. Living in the moment was difficult; the moment she opened her car door, she was looking for men with hoodies. Day became night and returning home at night was harder: the newer apartment was closer to the hospital and the city got bad the closer you moved to west Baltimore. A week later, and she still didn't feel safe.

Jen opened the door as soon as she rang the bell.

"Its chaos out there," she said, setting her laundry on the couch. "Come in. Did you have fun last night? You didn't talk much at the club."

Galadriel was perched on the windowsill as Jen folded the laundry.

"You were really quiet last night," Jen said.

She continued folding laundry as Amy sat, reaching towards Galadriel. Galadriel was too involved with watching the children and the car parking and the birds flocking, so she withdrew her hands. On the table was a vase of peonies although she wasn't sure; they could have been camellias. Her mother's garden never had peonies; her mother grew tulips and hosta when she was young and she had only started learning about flowers through Jennifer. Her mother's rhododendrons were pretty hardy and they'd curl in the winter, expanding in the summer. Peonies must be harder to grow. She'd never seen anything like a peony: so large, with a bloom so big it nearly drooped over the stem. Black-eyed daisies, she'd seen. They were the state flower in Maryland: they were everywhere, on lawns and town greens and in the city near buildings or row houses or the harbor. Black-eyed Susan's, forsythia, and azaleas. They grew everywhere.

"The azaleas are beautiful," she mumbled.

"Do you feel safe now?" Jen asked.

"I feel safe," Amy said. "The complex is responsible now; if he finds and pursues me, I can sue them."

"Who?" Jen asked. "Norman Bates or your husband?"

"Norman Bates," Amy responded. "My husband won't pursue me. I think he has a girlfriend."

"How old would the baby have been?" Jen asked.

Galadriel stretched beneath her hand, her long body purring. She was lying on the top of the couch now, and Amy was petting her.

“What?” she asked, staring again outside the window.

“When did you lose the child?” Jen asked.

Amy coughed a little and the cat jumped onto the couch. She folded her hands, stared at Jennifer, listened to the children shouting. "It's not his story to tell," she said.

“I’ll tell you a story,” Jen said, folding. “Better than some of that philosophy shit Jason feeds you. My sister was dating four men so my parents tried to take the children from her, claiming she was incompetent. Huge Italian Catholic family, with nothing better to do than judge each other. I kept my mouth shut because by then I’d been disowned myself but they called social services. Do you know what the social worker said, Amy?”

Amy didn’t answer, her fingers stroking Galadriel’s stomach.

“She said the children were being fed, clothed, and sent to school,” Jen continued, drawing a handful of socks out of the hamper. She dropped them onto the couch. “*The kids were okay,* she said. They threw the case out of court.” She scratched Amy’s thigh and Amy moved back. “The judge laughed in their faces,” Jen continued. “He said, *we don't legislate morality*.”

“I don’t have hang-ups,” Amy said.

“Do you want more children?” Jennifer asked. She walked to the kitchen and the scent of petrouli receded as she moved away. The top of the glass vase curved outwards, unlike the wine glasses, and the peonies were heavy and droopy like the flowers in old paintings. On the table, next to the vase, were two glasses of water. As she helped

herself, Amy strained to hear the bell chimes. If the sound were onstage Amy would know how to sweeten it; she'd know which frequencies to clip or boost; she knew the entire range and how to work a soundboard without getting feedback.

"How did you lose the child?" Jen called from the living room.

"Miscarriage," Amy answered. "Where's Jason?"

"He's out getting lime for the Corona," Jen answered. She started folding again and stood, facing Amy. Amy shrunk back against the couch. The cat bolted and ran towards the bedroom. "Why, then? Why are you mourning?" Jen asked. "In Japan there's a god for unborn newborns whether they're miscarried or aborted, he's got a red bib and his name is Jiso. There are *graveyards* for unborn babies."

Jason would say the same thing: *why not* rather than *why*; why so, how so, so what.

"Why don't you invite several guys over?" Amy asked. "Five or six of 'em? Why don't you have a nice little party? I can dress up a little bit. I can wear your clothing. I could get to know all of them at different times during the night if you let me borrow your bed. You can sing some of your Edith Piaf and I'll ask them all if they've dated someone who's been divorced; if they don't mind if I have a child, if they'll live with me and care for the kid."

"We'll have a party for you," Jen said, picking up the hamper to flatten it out. "If that's what you want, we'll invite all of them over though Jason will want to approve of every single one," she said. She stopped folding. "He'll hand-pick them himself before he invites them here. He'll grill them and we'll all interrogate because they'd better be a

10-speed and you deserve a decent guy. If you don't want someone else, though, you need to say it."

She sat next to Amy on the couch and moved the socks to one side.

"He loves you," Jen said. "He always has."

"I don't understand you," Amy said, cringing from Jennifer's hand.

"You don't have to understand," Jen replied, withdrawing. "You just need to understand enough."

"I took down the wind chimes from the screen door," Amy said. "My next-door neighbor is from west Baltimore. It could be worse but I know his name. I'm safe now; my complex is mostly black."

"Where do you want to move?" Jen asked. "Do you want more children?"

"I don't know," she said. Amy held the water and didn't look up. She didn't have olive skin like Jennifer; her own skin was patchy and fair, so pale that the fuchsia lipstick made her feel more vibrant. Her hair was long and blond but she started dying it five years ago when the gray grew in and she hadn't stopped since, not even when someone compared it to a wig. She was skinny but her upper arms were wrinkly and she'd always been self-conscious of her wings—the guys call it wings – though Marc would say she looked just fine, and *he'd do her*. She wore jean shorts and t-shirts in the summers but this summer she'd been wearing skirts with her t-shirts. She'd been wearing deeper reds from Jen's wardrobe and she'd been wearing black skirts to the club.

"We're ordering pizza tonight," Jen continued. The bathroom door closed. She looked up, at the mantle above the boarded-up fireplace, and she stared closely at Jen's collection of statues. She stood and moved closer to see the figures resting between

candles. She saw figurines from Greek and roman mythology, she saw laughing Buddha's and a female Buddha with a flat hand held up in greeting. She saw a small silver statue with a red bib and statues from Indian or Chinese mythology. When Jen emerged she was sitting again, waiting for Galadriel, and when Jason arrived forty minutes later she was sitting there silently.

He drew the curtains and handed her a Corona with lime. She got the bathroom door closed before she started crying. She didn't open it for Jason. She opened it for Jennifer. "You're a mess," Jen said, sitting next to her, patting her awkwardly. "I've had two miscarriages. One was so bad I woke in the hospital – "where's my husband?" I asked. He was at work. The fool was working."

"I didn't want it," Amy said. "Not with him, anyway."

She sat, a grown woman in her lover's bathroom, curled up on the carpet thinking about the blood. You never think the body holds that much blood. And then the cramps had started. She lost the baby.

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Jennifer had cleaned the living room. The couch, against the wall and facing the TV, had been vacuumed and spot-cleaned so that the pale cream color looked muted and monochrome. On both sides of the couch were the heavy red curtains Amy loved: another product from Pier 1, they were long and velvety with inlaid mirrors and embroidered dark threads. Usually, Jen pulled them back so that the blinds could be opened. The cat liked to stare outside the window through the bottom of the blinds and

had done so since the start of May. Jen had even cut a hole in the bottom left-hand corner of the blinds. *How white-trash*, they joked. How white trash.

When the drapes were closed, they'd stop watching whatever program they were watching – a foreign movie or anime, and they'd go to the bedroom. This had been happening for months although the azaleas had already bloomed and May was nearly over. Galadriel was never allowed to follow them into the bedroom and if the drapes were closed, the cat was usually too distracted to stay.

"Are you helping Jason paint the bathroom next Saturday?" Jen said after they've eaten dinner. "Or do you want to go shoe-shopping? You should get your own platform shoes. They aren't hard to break in. Not hard at all."

"I'll trip," Amy said.

"Are you going out with the redhead on Friday?" Jason asked.

"I thought I'd help Jen shop for plants," Amy replied.

"You said that last week at the club," Jen said. "Even after I'd introduced you to Mark and Jerry. Even after the talk on Buddhism. Remember, Jason? You got into that huge discussion on mindfulness? If *Menace* hadn't played you guys would still be arguing. There's no future in mindfulness, though; how can you live without looking forward to anything?"

"I'm not sure I follow," Jason said. Jen was walking around wearing her powder-blue robe. Her thin legs dangled under the bottom of it; the robe was a Japanese yukata and she wore it to commemorate her first divorce. Her first husband had given it to her.

"Planting is soothing," she said, moving so that she can stand in front of Amy. "All that wet dirt and mud and the smell of fertilizer… I can't wait to get my hands into

it, even if it smells like shit. I'd like to uproot some of the azaleas this weekend and eventually create a mixed hedge. We need more annuals for the border plants and we definitely need perennials. I'll drag you both to the greenhouse to look at plants."

Amy drew her knees to her chest. It was the start of April and a few of Jen's tulips were blooming. Her fingers fluttered self-consciously against her knees and she resisted the urge to get up on the couch for a view of the front yard and the azaleas. The drapes had been drawn and her fingers played with her hair. Her stomach was turning and she wished she'd brought something for Jennifer; that was polite, bringing her wine or roses, though she didn't know decent florist shops and the nearest one to her had gone bankrupt.

"I'm tired," Jen said though the plates were still on the coffee table. "Have we gotten you through the month, Amy? I can understand. Certain months resonate tragedy."

"It's only eight o'clock," Jason said, clearing the table. "You don't want to watch a movie? I've rented something by Kurosawa. We can talk about Buddhism in full."

"Great," Jen replied. Her eyes flashed powder-blue at Amy before she stood and helped Jason clear the table. Jason called that color Montana blue. There wasn't a vanishing point, he'd said, in Montana: just a clear, long sky, with no clouds and an infinite blue.

"Amy will help with the gardening," Jen continued, walking to the kitchen. "We're going to put a small hedge of rhododendrons on the right of the lawn," she said. "I'm thinking of planting forsythia in a mixed hedge on the right; if we add ornamental grasses, we can vary the depth and texture of the shrubs. We can plant flowering quince

in the backyard; apparently they have crowded branches entwined low to the ground and can you imagine if we drew mourning doves?"

"I really see it," Jason said. "Don't you want to start on the house? I thought we were going to work on converting the attic."

"We need to work on the garden," Jen said, returning. "Amy needs to get her hands into the soil. There's nothing like opening a small patch of earth, with your hands tilling until the soil is deep enough for planting. You don't even need to dig deep; just enough to put the roots of the flowers in for a shallow rooting. Then you cover the ground with soil and fertilizer, and then you water it all but wear gloves so that compost doesn't get on your fingers… We need perennials for the rest of the summer. We need annuals to attract birds and insects."

Amy moved to the arm of the sofa, dizzy from the wine. Her parents used to grow hydrangea. Each bloom would be as large as a bouquet. She'd seen one of the neighbor's backyards when she lived with Marc, and the few times she was outside she'd stare at it. The entire porch was covered with hanging pots and potted flowers. Geraniums hung from the walls of the porch in dirt-baskets, and potted plants bloomed with impatiens, daisies, and low-growing anemones. If they bought permeable sacks and roped them to the walls on the patio outside the kitchen, the flowers would spill over suspended soil in red or purple or pink. They'd add color to the stucco house and potted plants could completely cover the concrete stoop. They could buy decent lawn chairs to be sandwiched between the flowers. Amy would pass flushing colors and Jennifer could watch as they grilled.

"Amy likes honeysuckle so we'll grow it on a fence. I have a few friends at work

that just started landscaping, so they only charge thirty bucks an hour plus supplies. So, a high fence around the backyard," she said softly, tightening her robe. "The honeysuckle won't get out of control if we let it grow on the fence. It'll smell beautiful and we'll attract insects. If we plant a crape myrtle, and a few other trees, we'll get more squirrels and birds in the backyard. Crape myrtle can grow to be fourteen or fifteen feet high; it'll create shadows on the lawn where we can plant groundcover. The crape myrtle will bloom next summer and as it grows the bark peels… I'd really like a tree with peeling bark. We have to enclose the backyard, of course. It will be expensive to put up a wooden fence. We have enough friends to help, though."

The wind chimes tinkled in the distance. Amy traced the scratches on her hand.

"We also need to work in the front yard," Jen continued as she moves. The cat jumped onto Amy's lap. As she stretched out, Amy scratched behind her ears and Jen picked up the wineglasses as she continued talking. "The azaleas are only four feet high and we have to constantly clip them, but we'll keep the fuchsia. For the wall bordering our bedroom… peonies or day lilies with one-day blooms? We'll need to plant ground cover or deeper flowers where the ground slopes downwards. Double-bulbed irises, is that what I saw? I've been reading that it prevents erosion."

"When have you had all this time?" Jason asked. "When have you been planning?" He pulled Amy onto the couch from her perch and they both sank into the cushions.

"We can create a wetland at the bottom of the yard," Jen said from the kitchen. "I'm not sure what to put in the wetland," she continued, returning. "But I want

rosebushes next to the hedge. If we put them against the corner of the wall, they'll grow on archways and trellises towards the sun."

Jason's breathe stirred against Amy's cheek. The ice-cream truck was doing its last rounds. Amy could hear children at the front of the house, their voices lower than the wind chimes, the siren song drawing them like the pied piper's flute, but she didn't open the drapes or the blinds. Galadriel jumped up to the windowsill and Amy watched her meowing. Some of the children would be clinging to the back of the truck as it moved, but soon Amy wouldn't be seeing it.

She stood and moved towards the bedroom, swaying a little, feeling her hips move, and feeling klutzy. In the center of the room, Jennifer turned and her robe fell quickly. Amy could hear the cat outside meowing but the powder blue eyes held her still, and as the room fell silent she forgot the neighbors. She forgot the past, forgot the children, was awake to the slow glow of an ember striking flame and it was Jennifer, lighting a candle, lighting wick upon wick as each moment hung suspended, moved forward, was gone. She heard another peeling of chimes. Not wind chimes or the ice cream truck, but Jennifer's wrist as it moved up her arm. The bells were singing of dissonance; the bells shoot shivers down her spine; the bells dispersed the remaining chords of the outdoor, renegade song.

Lilies

She's the woman you envy at Madams Organ: the girl whose hair falls forward and the men watch as it catches in her eyelashes. She's the girl in **Red** who pours her Cosmo into a separate glass to dilute it; she's sitting at the bar and people ask her to get the bartender's attention. She's the woman who arrives on a motorcycle wearing leather pants and a tank top. You don't know who she's meeting, or whether she's meeting a man or her girl friends. She's the gal you pass eating pizza on the ground at the end of the night, her black pants repelling gravel. She's the woman eating at the **Nile**, her fingers tapping as she teases out the definition of *fusion*. At the end of the night, she's the one negotiating a ride share with the Ukrainians.

Clara doesn't know why she's there. Clara herself barely registers.

"I've dated D.C.," the woman informs Clara, her eyes the color of acorns as her long legs cross under the table. "Clubs, restaurants, and bars. Online dating sites. I've hailed the last available cap at Adams Morgan. I've been to black-tie events at Embassies." Her eye makeup is done in gradations, from sand-colors towards deep brown. It's the type of application that Clara hasn't yet learned. They are sitting on embroidered chairs and Clara is facing her, jealous of the way her elbows rest, mesmerized by the gradation of color from the inner eye towards the outer, torn between observing this woman and the lilies dangling from vases behind her.

By the front door are the men. Behind them the men are waiting with clipboards.

Unlined eyes, Clara thinks, panicking. She's forgotten to line her eyes with soft grey kohl. Makeup isn't her forte. Clothing isn't, either. She's wearing a pink sleeveless blouse with mother-of-pearl buttons. Her arms are crossed and her palms massage her shoulders. She's chilly from the air-conditioner. Hair and makeup, she'd begun learning when she moved to D.C. Styling products, she'd learned to use later. Like most of the women, she'd arrived forty minutes earlier and compacts were opened in the restroom. Powder was pressed on noses. Giggling abated groaning and tissues were collectively dispersed. Someone commented on the golden-gilded mirror. Someone touched the black-marble counter. Everyone marveled at the sink fixtures. Acorn was blowing her nose as the women sized her up.

"What?" she asked Acorn.

"They're starting," Acorn said, sighing. From the front of the bar, the men began to descend. "I feel like a matador," she said. "Where's the cape," she continued. "Toro," she called out. "In-coming," she sang as they approached.

The first fellow to sit at Clara's table was tall and broad. Acorn leaned over at her date: a balding fellow in a pale gray suit. Clara's fingers gripped her drink as the table wobbled. Her glass was tall and long like the mohito glasses at the Latin Palace.

"… I prefer private sector," Acorn was saying.

"I'm a civil servant," Clara said to her date, leaning backwards.

"I've got a cold," Acorn was saying. "You'd think they wouldn't blast the air conditioning in these bars – does it increase your need for wine? It can't be cost-effective; there's got to be some purpose for it. Do they blast the air to get women's nipples erect? Does that increase the marketing value of the venue for men? What's the

marketing gimmick behind cold air for women? Shouldn't they put it in the ad – shouldn't they warn, "fifty degree temperatures; you won't sweat, but you must wear your pasties"? At least they give you the motif. *Tangerine*. Good name for a bar; the décor proceeds itself. It's easy to plan your outfit before coming."

"So why are *you* here?" Clara's date asked.

She glanced at Acorn, hesitating.

***

She was there to eliminate The Carls. She didn't have a moniker for her last boyfriend and she didn't want to refer to him by work-identity. He wasn't known across the country and she didn't brag about his ascendancy. There was no desire for a moniker. You didn't hyphenate his name; you didn't refer to him by last name or ascribe a nickname. Despite his formidable drive, he carried a personality to match it. Clara loved the quirky men she'd met in Adams Morgan but many of them were still carrying their college years: the nicknames, the monikers, the last names. The frat shirts. She didn't even know why she kept going. She seldom met anyone she could date and she seldom returned their phone calls when they called her. She called Adams Morgan, *Adams*. Perhaps she had site fidelity; perhaps she was a lost swan, returning to the place where she found him.

The error in that logic was that she'd started going a year before she met him.

Carl, Carl, Carl. Tall and slender, with thick-rimmed glasses. Long pale hands and hair the color of her mother's stray. Idiosyncratic interests, auburn eyebrows, and a

soft voice. Ideals founded in science and a steadfast need to write Senators. She was beginning to think she'd never find someone until she'd met him: she'd browsed bars and clubs to the point of saturation. She'd done online dating, in-person dating, and phone dating but no one took.

"Have you done this before?" she asked her date. "Have you ever done speed dating?"

"No," her date replied, propping his forearms onto the table.

He seemed shy. His pin-striped shirt was buttoned and the sleeves were cuffed at the wrist. His shoulders hung lopsided, his hands were slightly shaky. The table wobbled and he hastily sat back, withdrawing his forearms. "I'm not a big talker," he said. "I'm in the middle of studying for the MCATs and…" *Ring*, the bell sang. He paused, looking startled.

Clara gripped her drink. "That's okay," she said, pushing a napkin towards him. "It's hard to talk when you keep getting interrupted."

"Sorry, I'm a little nervous," he said.

"That's okay," she said again.

"That's a really pretty blouse," he continued.

"I called ahead," she said, looking down to ensure it was buttoned. "I called to make sure I matched the bar."

"I'm an amateur," he said, admitting his shyness.

"That's okay," she said. The board was seesawing in her lap.

"I thought this was a good way I could get over my performance anxiety," he said, putting his bottled beer on the table. The board dropped from her lap. She bent to

retrieve it, flushing when she reared. The pen was still under the table and she slammed her foot on it, sliding it closer. The front of his shirt was unbuttoned and she tried not to look at his chest, at the broad expanse of vertical lines on the pin-stripes, at the wrists that were attempting to balance forearm and elbow on the table.

"It won't end up in my lap," he said, trying to steady the table. Was there a word for misogynists who were like Pygmalion? Maybe he wanted what Carl wanted: maybe he wanted a refined woman. "I'll try not to say anything that would offend you," he continued. "I've never had a drink thrown in my face unless you count the time it was poured over my head. I've been slapped once or twice, maybe." The table wobbled and he tentatively held the sides, steadying it at a courtesy.

"Kidding!" he said. "Never been slapped. You're looking at me oddly."

She wondered vaguely if his eyes were that dark or if it was destiny.

"Did the lights just dim?" Acorn asked her date. "Maybe the electrical system isn't sound; maybe they've turned the air up a notch and the circuit can't handle the power. What do you think? Poor electricity or attempt to make people look more attractive? Okay, Mark. I meant Mike. I've got a test for you; I've got a question for you: explain salt-of-the-earth. No, the term itself."

Clara glanced at Acorn, pulling her drinks closer to her.

"Two drinks?" her date asked her.

"One's full of water," she replied, pulling her seat closer.

"That's not what I'm asking," Acorn continued. "I don't know if it's a euphemism. It could be Chinese for all I care; explain what the term means."

***

The bar was indifferent and elegant: long, tall walls painted differing shades of orange. Recessed lights on the ceiling, and track lights on the floor pointing upwards. Clara turned to glance at the gray vases illuminated by the glow. The man before her was pointing them out, admiring. Lilies leaned from turgid stems, the sponged pink centers flushed out by rising light and citrus walls. Her table was placed directly beneath a murky silver vase and the vase seemed tin, like the cookie tin her parents had found at a tag sale.

Recessed lights illuminated a pale orange bar in front of Clara, and her hands were gripping drinks on a small, dark-stained table. Lighting rose from the floor behind her and spotlighted the lilies on the wall behind her. Lilies fell from thick stems, the sponged pink centers flushing the orange out. The pistons had been cut so that pollen wouldn't fall and stain.

"They're Stargazers," she said to her date. She hadn't bought Stargazers since Carl and she didn't buy them often: the scent pervaded the apartment, and the scent was so strong it subsumed everything.

"I'm not from here," Clara said.

"Excuse me?" the boy asked. "Boy, you sure are soft-spoken."

"I mean, I moved to DC from another part of the country," Clara said, clearing her throat. *Kyrie Eleison*, she hummed.

"Are you humming?" the boy asked.

"It relaxes the throat," she said, "and you're forced to concentrate on breathing."

Carl had been fond of world-beat so she wanted to see this venue when she read about it in the Washington Post. She often borrowed his CDs to grow acclimated to clubs and bars in The District. She liked hearing this music; she was sitting and staring wide-eyed as the bells rang and men stood or tried to linger.

"I'm sorry?" she said to the brown-haired fellow sitting on the wrought-iron chair.

"I said why do you like Adams Morgan?" the man asked.

"I was just saying I've been coming here for a while."

"So why do you like it?" he asked.

"There's a lot to do," she replied vaguely.

"It seems like a meat market," he said. This one was slender with spiked hair that formed an isosceles triangle. She wondered what kind of hair gel he was wearing. The song shifted into a tract off a *Carry Maine* album. She'd heard it at a foreign film theater in Bethesda.

"I haven't a clue why I like Adams Morgan," Acorn was saying. "Maybe it's the way that everyone looks at the end of the night; the lights come on and you play "*who's hot, who's not*," but at the end of the evening, does it really matter? Everyone smells the same."

"Right, I don't have the time for parties, but I'm tired of bars," her date continued. "It's hard to meet women in bars; it seems like a meat market. To me, at least," he said, picking up his bottled Jaeger. "I work in a law firm," he said. "It's in Bethesda. I've finished grad school; went to American University and I'm studying for the bar. I don't really have time to date…. I have a friend who's clerking so I'll probably head towards corporate law. Pass the bar, and do a clerkship, and then maybe I'll get into a decent law

firm. Sorry, this is probably really boring. I have a tendency to ramble and should have gone into sales; I can outtalk any buyer and easily argue the terms…"

"…standardized tests aren't hard," Acorn was saying. "I didn't need to take the GREs for my graduate program. Of course, I dropped out after the first semester. They say you need a Masters but private sector is merit-based; I'm sure it's all a conspiracy. You start a job, they offer *tuition remission* if you slave at pittance… All at the guise of getting a two or four-year degree while working full-time…"

"Can you repeat that?" Clara asked.

"I would really like to clerk to get experience in court," he continued, lifting bottled water. She'd lost the song and another was playing. "I'll end up in corporate law, I think." He waved the bottle water at her. "Sorry, your eyes are glossing over. Figured I'd talk for the first two and half minutes and then you can respond; I came prepared," he explained, "with a strategy. He didn't memorize anything but he's clearly motivated. Only drinks Miller Lites; is laid-back enough to improvise…"

"You should have gone into marketing," she said. She slid backwards a little in the embroidered chair. This guy's stylist did a round cut, with scissors snipping at an angle. It was the same way she cut flowers in water and she found that vaguely disturbing.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I've been dating D.C. for *several years* now," Acorn said loudly. "They say there's no aristocracy. You could have fooled me for all the wanna-be Barons…"

Ring, the bell sang. Clara shifted awkwardly in her chair. She declined to answer, shaking the boy's hand when he stood and pro-offered.

"…why not?" Acorn continued loudly. "Sure, I'm a bar-crawler… more into dives and live bands than swanky places but why not? What's so great about swank?"

***

When she first started bar-hopping they'd wait for a band or restaurant or club that appealed and somehow, within the first few months of moving, she'd found her fondest memories with the temps-to-perms was in Adams Morgan. After walking the crowded streets they'd dodge pedestrian traffic and then the traffic itself: the cabs and beamers and bicycles streaming in, as they crossed streets to wait at the newer establishments or older, well-known bars. Wherever they decided to go, she'd drink a shot or two when they first arrived: it hit quicker, and lasted earlier. And it was a trial, really, once they got into the venue; it was a test of wills and a battle of endurance. Or maybe a battle of wills, and a test of endurance? Clara was famous for messing up euphemisms. When they first went to Madams Organ, her friends steered her from the front of the bar towards the nether regions before she could attempt to talk to anyone. Through moving limbs they'd slide, with bodies bumping against them. She'd dodge limbs and beer bottles and cigarettes to reach the nether regions and by the time they'd reached the rear of the bar she'd relax. The light was dimmer and the air felt less smoky, and lighter. The crowds were thinner, so they'd ascend the stairs to meet more people.

Clara didn't remember the movement of those evenings so much as the conversations. They'd move from group to group over a seven or eight-hour stretch and her friends made sure she moved from one man to another because she held everyone up.

She was the stray, the black sheep. She was the oddball. She was just as apt to talk to a married man as someone who was single, so she often needed someone to pull her away when she grew too involved in a conversation. She was struck by weird beards, colored hair, acronymed shirts, and funny one-liners.

"…and when you've only got 4 minutes, you've got to optimize," he finished. "Two minutes are yours and two are mine so why are you here?" He had a four o'clock shadow and she stared at his chin as he glanced at his watch. Her date had brown eyes and his blond hair was backlit by the walls like a halo. "I moved here for better work," she said. "I'm basically just pushing pencils right now… Is that it? Pencil pushing, isn't it?"

Ring, the bell sang.

"Do you want a beer?" her date continued. She shook her head. "How much time do I have?" he asked. "That bell sounds like the bell in the Mongolian restaurant down the road. Ever been there? They toss your food onto that grill and ring that mother-f'n bell?"

"I've been there," she replied.

"People rarely tip," he continued. "They need to get fancier; light something on fire or juggle knives. I know bartenders who give a better show. There's a tenpachi restaurant down the road… wanna go?"

She looked down at the orange-lacquered table.

"Let me read your palm," he said. "It says here you're an avid sushi fan and you love the tenpachi grill. I love your eyes; they're really beautiful. It also says that you'll

be working at a GS 12 in two years for the federal government if you get a master's degree…"

"Been here two years," she said, removing her palm. "I like Adams Morgan. I'd stay in the city for Adams Morgan alone." *Ring*, the bell rang. "I'm not in law school or in a master's program," she continued. "Is that what you're interested in? Women who are in medical school?"

Hello said Acorn as Tenpachi sat before her.

"No, *you* do. No, *you* do," Acorn said. Acorn was wearing a short brown skirt and matching suit jacket: no coordinate for Acorn, this outfit was exceptional. "Is that what you tell all the pretty girls?" she asked. "Hey, another round for the beautiful eyes." She raised her arm, straightening her index finger. "This one's on you?" Acorn asked. "Everyone here has beautiful eyes, Chad. What are there, thirty of us?"

***

After a year of temping in D.C. she was hired as a temp-to-perm so the nights she spent were wild, and dizzily fatalistic. She began buying suit separates for her new job. She spent happy hours and some of her biweekly paycheck on drink rounds with colleagues. On the weekends, the clubs they went to were so expensive that people drank before leaving their houses and needed cab fare for the end of the evening. She began to understand her attraction to Adams Morgan. The momentum of conversation hooked her more than alcohol or the venue and the diversity in D.C. was nothing like what she'd known growing up so the place, to her, was a playground. The diversity alone was a

reason to stand and chat and she took phone numbers just circulating. She took the number of the bartender with blue hair; she took the phone number of the friend yelling, "what about camaraderie?" Her friends were quick to point out that she wasn't exercising discretion and that she needed to look for the gold, or the shade of a circle suggesting. In her defense, she only went out to drink with her friends, and the phone numbers she took were of the men she found fascinating. In the interstices between spoken words and gestures she'd catch glimpses of men, and glimpses of the lives they were leading. Sometimes, she'd catch the glimpse in their eyes: the loneliness she'd felt since moving.

On one all-nighter she'd loitered with friends in front of the pizza stand. The smell of dough permeated beer, perfume, and cheap cologne. As they ate pizza, a black man stopped to chat with her because her friends were busy chatting. She looked at his trench coat and at his gesturing hands and she stood on the sidewalk to talk to him. She told him she had no change. She told him she'd moved from New York one year earlier. She held the pizza in a large swath of foil and balanced it, telling him she had no cigarettes. She had no spare change; she needed it for cab fare, and she didn't have food stamps. She saw a flash of white as the man smiled. Cheese dripped onto her hands as he pulled out a cigarette. His smile grew broader and he asked for a light.

"What's a pretty girl like you doin' without a man?" he asked, lighting his cigarette. Moments later the guy with owl-shaped glasses approached her. It wasn't Carl; this was months and months before she'd even met Carl. She had met someone in **Red** that night: tall, with glasses, who'd been seated at the bar when she and her friend

were alone and sober and waiting for friends to arrive before circling. The bartender didn't see her so he called for her – "Amy," he said to the waitress. "The lady's waiting."

Clara sat beside him and learned the history of the bar, the current owner's story, the reason why there was a projector over the dance floor. She didn't know why he wouldn't dance with her. When her friends arrived they stayed at the bar and men approached them. One of Owl's friends was Russian, and one Ukrainian. When the Owl left her so that he, himself, could circulate, she spent the better part of the evening arguing with his friends. They talked about writers. They talked about biomedical research. They talked about the Ukrainian's inability to enjoy women. The Owl, despite his hunt, he kept returning.

The Owl stood in front of her. She tried to wipe the cheese from her chin.

"Why are you standing here?" he asked her, blocking her from Trenchie. "Your friends look pretty busy. You might grab a cab home."

"I'll talk to anyone," she said, vaguely. "I can't turn away anyone who approaches me."

They stood for a second and watched the trench coat retreating.

"Come home with me," the Owl said. She deterred. When he said goodbye, he kissed her on the cheek and she watched him move off with the Russian and the Ukrainian. Moments later she was whisked into a cab with the other temp-to-perms, her cheek burning, the air whipping her face at the speed of a slight hurricane.

***

"Yeah, it's hard finding people through the personals," the man before her said. His eyes were deep-set above a flat wide nose and he was sitting stiffly in a long-sleeved shirt. "I figured I'd get a good assortment here."

"You mean like chocolate?"

"More like pastry," he said.

"I like pumpkin bagels," she said.

"There you go," he replied.

Acorn laughed loudly.

"What do you do for a living?" he continued.

"I work for the government." She watched his eyes. Eyes were the only feature she cared about and they weren't a feature at all. More like the trailer before a movie, before the screen darkened and she could relax for the longer enthrall. She leaned back, she was getting buzzed from her drink and the water wasn't helping.

"So what do you look for in a guy?"

"I hate types," she said, crossing her legs. "Categories are for government mail. There's interoffice mail, interdepartmental mail, email and snail mail. I said I was a pencil-pusher earlier but I traffic in documents…"

"You're really beautiful," he said. His eyes were starting to get warmer.

"They all say that," she said, squinting. "I'm a type O, a universal donor."

His eyes grew warmer and something flashed before the curtain dropped. She felt startled. She blushed at her stray away hand; she was stroking her wineglass by length

and damn that's gauche: there's no need to tease. He leaned towards her, picking up her pen. He drew her napkin across the table.

"Do you like football?" he asked, picking up her pen. She watched his fingers scribbling. She leaned back, crossing her legs under the table. "…love a good rumble," he said. The pen was rotating at the base of his thumb. He put the pen down and spun it on the table. "I like pastries. I'm always up for a good tart though there's something about apple pie. Apple pie's just so wholesome."

"I like someone who's cool," she said.

"You mean down-to-earth?" he asked.

"No, I want them to levitate," she said, smirking. She read what was written on his shirt. The t-shirt was two sizes too large and she wondered how she'd feel wearing it.

"You're stunning," he said. She watched the pen scratching.

***

It was the district itself that started driving her reckless. Adams Morgan had a distinct smell, its own exhale. She felt disordered at first but she liked that, she liked feeling out of control. The smells were a far cry from what she controlled in her apartment and the night drew them out as humidity often does, with the moisture carrying scent so it diffused rapidly. There were dozens of other kids like her: students and professionals in their twenties or early thirties, talking or laughing as the crowd grew thick. When the bars closed the smell of everything would congeal and rise like a pungent musk and

people would spill into the streets. They'd be shoulder-to-shoulder. She'd smell cologne and perfume and body odor. She'd hear laughter and cars running and voices.

Several people would be in the streets hailing cabs but she was never in a rush; she'd talk to whoever approached her. If someone had followed her out, she'd linger even after her friends wanted to get going. She'd stand there and if she was close enough to smell beer and deodorant or cologne her head would eventually drop onto the boy's shoulder. After she'd met Owl, she never saw him again, but other men accompanied her to the townhouse.

"Why don't you like going to bars?" he said. This one was wearing a crisp white shirt and he sat very formal, with his hands clasped on the table. She smiled at his ruddy cheeks, and at his composure.

"I don't like the bar scene because it's too smoky," she said. "I feel suffocated after a while. I've been going to bars this summer and the smell of smoke irritates my nose and throat; my late boyfriend was an immunologist who studied carcinogens."

"Late boyfriend?" he asked.

"I like to pretend that he's dead," she replied.

Her date adjusted his tie slightly.

"So what brought you here?" he continued.

"I moved to D.C. for a job after college and I stayed. There weren't jobs in upstate New York unless I moved to Rochester and I hardly wanted to inherit my father's land; he'd sell it; he doesn't have a large farm and he only rents it. He's retired now and he's a big fan of stained glass…"

"Actually, I meant what brings you to the bar?" the boy questioned.

"I wanted to talk," she said. "I wanted to meet people," she continued, wiping the table. Her napkin was wet now and she'd lost the number of Vendorware. She was also leaving wet circles on the table and the front of her blouse was damp from condensation on her glass. She looked down, sensing the formality of this boy before her. He was wearing a blazer. She hadn't seen men wearing blazers since she was a child, attending church services.

"Spiritual?" Acorn asked. "Look around you – we're in D.C., the country's capital. It's an armpit, you say? Adams Morgan is the armpit of the capital? I'll have you know that bars are an industry here. The restaurants, too. The restaurants attract the tourists; without the bars and restaurants in Adams Morgan, the nation's capital wouldn't have a place for bohemia."

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In her ideal house the bedroom walls would be auburn. Auburn was bold for Clara. It reminded her of sugar maples during the fall when the leaves changed in gradations. She loved walking under the trees to find seedpods. She liked releasing them from her fingers and watching them fall and twist like choppers.

"I'm a federal worker," she was telling Carl. "I'd rather have a slush fund." It was time to for them to get out of bed and the sky outside the window was just starting to open. The sun would illuminate soon, splitting white light through colored panes. When she moved in, her parents had come down to see her. She only let her father bring one of

his stained glass designs, though. She didn't want to be reminded of her parent's house, and of her father, who had redone half the windows.

Carl sat up. He was reaching for his clothing slowly. "You'll be okay?" she asked. The pane wasn't centered; it was sliding to one side and the meadow wasn't flush with the bottom of the window. She was so glad she didn't live in Arlington anymore; she liked her own place, her own windows, with wide space and direct sun.

"You don't now who I am," she said, opening the curtains.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing.

She started putting on sweatpants.

"Why did you say you wanted to meet my parents?" she asked. He was crying, silently, his fingers wiping the corners of his eyelids. He had hurt her and he didn't like hurting women. He'd broken up with her but she wanted her goodbye fuck: she wanted one last night to remember. He was crying softly but she wouldn't stare at him head-on because it was messed up. She was his second girlfriend and he was approaching forty.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, "You're a sweetheart."

She brushed by him for a shower, resisting the urge to hug him as she passed. Later, she was angered mostly that he'd known nothing about her. She had wanted to tell Carl about the farm she grew up on. The only thing she hated about the farm was being reliant on rain. Her father was more of a businessman than a farmer so he didn't have the long hours of families renting because he didn't use the land; he loaned it out. He still loved working it, though. In the fall he'd be at the mill bagging kidney beans until two in the morning, and now that he was older and grayer, arthritis was wearing him thin. She'd never told Carl about the farm. She was engaged and content just listening to him.

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"Excuse me," Acorn said. She was leaning over the divide. Clara glanced up from the table where she'd been shredding napkins into tiny strips. Over the course of the past fifteen minutes she'd been balling each piece as she stripped.

"I'm sorry?" Clara asked.

"It's almost over," Acorn said. "There's one more date for us both because the last guy left. If you like this one, you can keep him; I'm about to leave. I have another engagement."

"Don't leave," Clara said, though she should have spoken louder. The next date was wearing a pinstriped dress shirt, with the cuffs buttoned around thin wrists. She watched him walk across the room and when he pulled the embroidered chair out, she stared at the buttons on his cuffs.

"Pedro?" she repeated.

"That's it," he said, leaning forward.

"Did I pronounce it right?" she asked, staring at his wrists. She wanted to ask where he was from, but she was afraid of offending him so she remained silent. There were Hispanic boys in Adams Morgan though her friends blew right by them.

"I'll start," he said, folding his hands.

"I was born and raised on a farm in New York…" she started. "My father owned 32 acres of land and he'd lease them out to renters."

"Animals?" he asked. "Did you raise animals?"

"Dogs," she said. She pulled her chair in, uncrossing her legs. "I'm sorry," she said. "The room is spinning a bit and I just ended a relationship…"

"What kinds of dogs?"

"There was Blanco, our old Irish sheepdog," she said. "We had eight dogs, sum total. Muffin was a mutt; Red was an Irish Settler; Clara was an Irish Settler, too…"

"Sorry?" he asked. He shrugged.

Acorn was staring off into space. Clara watched the way her hair fell into her eyes. She glanced at the Stargazer lilies behind her.

"Yeah," she said, turning back. "Clara was named after me. I don't think I resemble her at all but she was kind of goofy… Then we had Mushroom, a mix; Licorice, a black lab; Wrinkles and Charles were brother and sister… both were Irish Settler mutts. Blanco was the last. She was an old Irish sheepdog."

"So tell me one of your favorite childhood memories," he said. His voice seemed formal, and his wrists were resting on the table.

"Of growing up on a farm…" she mused. "The fields had just been Rota tilled and my sister and I were walking with Blanco from the stream. Just beyond the fields we had a small creek and we'd walk through the fields sometimes; generally not when crops were growing but just then, it had rained hard and the fields were wet."

"Rota-tilled?" he asked.

"Reaped, more or less," she said, brushing the balled pieces of napkin into a pile. She picked up a piece and continued rolling between her forefinger and thumb. "My sister and I were walking back from the stream and the fields were wet. Since the ground had been Rota tilled, the field was basically empty – eighteen acres of mud. So my sister

picked up some mud and fast-fisted it onto my chest. We began throwing it at each other. We'd done a lot in that field, man: we'd even made our own crop circles when the corn had grown. But this was just funny. We'd been walking from the stream and we were kind of damp anyway but when she flung the mud at me with a full fist we started a mud fight right in the middle of the field. When we got tired of throwing mud my sister tackled me and slathered it all over my neck. So we started slathering it over each other until it wasn't a fight, but more of a competition. We slathered until we were covered from head to toe. I don't know if you know anything about soil…. It can be a muddy mixture of soil with fertilizer in it… Just enough for that farm-fresh scent, nothing you'd ask for in a spa. And when we were done with each other, we covered the dog. We were with Blanco, and we covered her with mud."

Ring, the bell rang.

"Continue," he said.

Clara shrugged. Acorn was emptying out the contents of her purse on the table.

"That's it," she said. "That's my favorite memory. We washed off outside my parent's house; we hosed the dog down, too. Blanco was an awesome dog: she'd tap-dance in the winter. I remember what she looked like when she did it; if I close my eyes, I can still hear it. She'd walk into the house from the cold and snow would be frozen between her paws. As she walked she'd make tap-dancing sounds, so we'd all sit near and applaud her. As the ice thawed, she'd lick it. That dog ate everything… ice and flowers and plants. She even ate her own poop. And she loved the sun; she was like a cat, she'd lie there and bask in it…"

"Why are you here?" Pedro asked. His eyes were so black that she couldn't distinguish pupil from iris. She was tired of being asked point-blank so she hesitated. She wanted to be hidden from the high-rises and square facades. She wanted to disappear from the city and reappear in a slip-of-a-house. She wanted to be folded between four forests as her job disappeared and the city waited for her to wake. She wanted to nest like a morning dove, plump with someone's baby, as the politicians mused on where they should bomb and how or why she should foot the bill.

Ring, the bell sang.

"I'm here because I want to bring someone to the bars," Clara said. "I love Adams Morgan. If I could, I would live here."

"Really?" he said. "Sounds interesting."

"I'm sure it does," she said, twisting to pull her purse off the chair.

Acorn was standing, and the sound jarred Clara. When Acorn stood, Clara stood as well. The chair flew out behind her, and hit the wall. She picked up her purse and faced Pedro.

"I'm here because I need friends," she said. Flushed with embarrassment, she stood there facing him. "I miss having friends," she said.

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Pedro stood. Men began mulling towards the traffic-controller with their clipboards and Clara yanked her list from the clipboard, ignoring Pedro as he fumbled with the iron clasp. He was standing in front of her, very still and very silent, with broad shoulders.

When the paper tore from her clasp, she pulled it out and dropped the board onto the table.

"I'll take it up," Pedro said quietly. He picked up her board and stood in front of her. "I'd like to see you again," he said, blocking her.

She smiled, still blushing. He stepped aside to let her pass, and she brushed against him as her heels went *click-click* against the hard wood. Acorn was crossing the room in front of her, barraging through the crowd in two-inch heels with a creased paper in her hands and Clara found her way in Acorn's wake; the woman was so tall that the crowds parted like she was Moses.

When the door opened, Clara inhaled and slowed her gait.

The escalator leading to the metro was long and steep and fluorescent lights reflected off of metal stairs. She felt claustrophobic. She felt nauseous. Each boy seemed like a new light and she was warmed anew by another walled within, but she was lonely in her walls. They'd been grim as inclement weather and D.C. was not a place where you wandered in all-weather.

"Bullshit," she could hear Acorn saying. She tried to catch up, descending the stairs gingerly. Acorn was long-gone, she'd bolted in her heels; she'd mastered the art of walking in them. The blue-white lights were disorienting and the stairs reflected steel-white lighting as Clara flew over the platform for the train. On the train she grabbed the pole as the subway lurched, and her fingers entwined momentarily with the woman opposite her. When the doors closed the subway rocked gently, and as they adjusted their footing she stared down at the woman's brown loafers.

She moved across the car and grabbed the pole by the opposite door; Acorn was standing at the next door, her large black bag on her arm, her elbow hanging as she gripped the bar to stay still. When the doors closed at the next stop, the subway rocked again gently. Clara smiled, a half-smile directed at strangers and the like, but Acorn didn't look at her as the subway lurched and they both struggled again to find their footing.

Iris, she remembered. The woman's name was Iris. As the lights flickered she stared across the car at Clara and then turned, quickly, looking at her own reflection. At the next stop Iris exited the subway and Clara found a seat. From the seat, she watched Iris receding. What could she remember of the Greek Gods? There was an Iris. She was the messenger goddess; the goddess of sea and sky, of rainbows and messages. The brown pants were billowing out at her ankles and her heels clicked as she took the platform in a few strident steps before disappearing.