ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: THE DARKEST POSSIBILITY AND OTHER STORIES

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The protagonists of these four short stories seem, at first glance, to have nothing in common—a reclusive college student struggling to understand a suicide; a shy, fatherless boy stumbling through piano lessons; a drug addict whose most salient relationship is with a dog; a prudish teacher coming to terms with her incarcerated brother—but some common themes bind these seemingly disparate lives together. All these characters attempt to understand the role of longing and desire in their lives—how longing and desire equally beckon and frighten them. This collection explores various manifestations of masochism, its potential to hinder and yet define people, and its potential to be, sometimes, overcome.

THE DARKEST POSSIBILITY AND OTHER STORIES

by

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THE DARKEST POSSIBILITY

By November of her first semester in college, Beth had grown bored of beauty. Every day she walked on the same neat paths to the same antique buildings with the same grandfatherish trees pointing their creaky limbs at the sky. The time she spent moving between her dorm room, the cafeteria, and her class buildings was filtered through a purposeful apathy. She didn't feel like appreciating upstate New York, so she didn't. The bag slung on her shoulder tugged at her with a great weight. Sometimes, just to make the walks end quicker, Beth would run. She would keep her head very steady so that the contents of her bag didn't get jostled, and she'd glance at her watch every time she passed another student, just so they wouldn't think her crazy. She would run until there was a pain in her gut, or until she broke a sweat, or until she was where she needed to be and out of breath and way too early.

She was early that day for Modern World History. It was in the only classroom she liked—a shabby little parlor in an old house of fading colors that some woman important to the early days of the college had occupied for an undetermined amount of time. Beth liked being the very first one of the morning to step into its dustiness. It made her feel important. Also, when she got there early, she was able to get the most comfortable chair.

Beth had decided to take history because she knew absolutely nothing about it, and although she read every word of every assignment with honest-to-God effort, the moment she closed the book she couldn't recall a single detail. History was, for her, forgettable. She consoled herself by believing she wasn't the right audience for it. Somehow they just weren't picking the interesting stories. Either way, she had no clue

how to "think like a nation," which is what their professor was always having them do. If you were France on the brink of The Great War, what would be your concerns? In every other class Beth was a talker; in this one she was terrified. She was selectively smart—she knew how to read novels but she didn't know how to read a newspaper. What would be France's concerns? Death, thought Beth. Obliteration. Often enough she was rescued from her stumbling responses by James—the only person in the entire class able to think like a nation, and more specifically a nation that wins wars.

James had recently picked up on Beth's schedule and had started arriving early, too. Each morning when he came inside the parlor his tinted glasses would still be dark from the outdoors, and as he removed his jean jacket and whisper-talked of the reading, Beth would watch the glasses slowly adjust to the new lighting. By the time the seven other students began to arrive she would be able to see his blue eyes underneath. His blue eyes were inappropriate to Beth because James had olive skin and the blackest of hair—thick, wavy, and combed into an accidental pompadour.

Beth did not particularly like James, but so far he was her only friend. One month ago she'd spotted him at the Campus Grill after class, eating a greasy breakfast sandwich at a corner table. Beth usually took her own greasy breakfast sandwiches back to her dorm room with her, since she hated eating alone in public, but because she felt a pang of guilt about how often James was forced to rescue her from their professor's queries, she walked over and sat down. She asked him what he was reading and he glanced at the encyclopedic volume in front of him and said, "Nothing. I don't really like to read when I'm eating alone, but it seems to make other people more comfortable when I pretend to." It was the most interesting thing he'd said, so far.

Today, when the professor announced that they were to choose a partner for a collaborative paper, Beth kept her eyes on her notebook for a beat longer than necessary. Amid the whispers and awkward invitations of the other students, she could feel James squirming on the couch in the corner. Finally she turned her face to him. He nodded once, slowly. James was an inherently clumsy guy; he had the kind of body that Beth could tell was once fat but was now skinny. A loping, elephantine aura clung to all his movements, even his nods. Beth imitated his slow nod back to him—not to make fun but simply to provide symmetry.

From the back of the room came a familiar clearing of the throat. A wheeze. "Is there no partner for me?"

"Ah," said the professor, biting at his mustache. "An odd number. Could there be someone missing?"

As he flipped through his folder with his slightly-too-long fingernails to find the attendance sheet, the class settled into an ashamed silence. At the back of the room, Tammy wheezed again. She was in her usual spot: a dilapidated wingback chair just a little too far removed from their haphazard semicircle to be a part of it. Tammy was from a country where French was spoken, but no one had ever bothered to ask which one. She was what the college politely called "a nontraditional student," which meant she was a middle-aged woman surrounded by a bunch of 18 to 22 year-olds and therefore shunned. On top of being old and indeterminably foreign, Tammy had these other, more damaging marks: obesity, chronic shortness of breath, and the fact that she had been the only friend of the senior who'd hanged herself at the end of September. Beth had lived right down the hall from the girl, and now she lived right down the hall from her empty room. She

walked past its closed door every day on her way to the bathroom, trying not to glance at the picture of Jesus Christ that someone had distastefully taped above the doorknob. Beth always wondered whether Tammy had done it, but she suspected no.

With what had happened to her, and with the way she seemed herself only a few minutes from total collapse, Tammy carried with her the distinct whiff of death.

"We'll take her," said Beth.

James did nothing—he kept his eyes on the front of the room, his back straight. The professor smiled.

James came up to her after class hesitantly, as he always did. There were times when Beth found it endearing but mostly she found it annoying. He glanced at her with a look that said he was fully prepared for rejection, resigned to it in fact. He held himself as if knew he might be taking for grated that their breakfast ritual was actually a ritual—that she might blow him off at any moment, and rightly so. "Breakfast?" asked Beth.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Tammy approaching, her perfectly round face punctuated by a chubby nose that reminded Beth of a cabbage patch doll. On top of her head sat a nest of brown hair twisted complicatedly into a bun.

"I recognize your face," said Tammy.

"I think we live in the same dorm," replied Beth.

"Oh, yes," said Tammy. "That's it."

Beth wasn't sure why she'd said she thought it when she actually knew it. Of course she knew it. Tammy lived one floor down, in a room reserved for seniors that had a partial roof-deck overlooking a field full of overgrown grass. Sometimes Beth would see Tammy sitting on the roof-deck in a sagging lawn chair, reading the newspaper.

“Can we get your information?” asked James. “We can figure out when to meet.”

Beth and James watched as Tammy stuck her hand into a big cloth purse hanging from her shoulder like a bloated udder. She puckered her lips and tisked her tongue as she groped for something inside it. Finally she pulled out a one thousand year-old uncapped pen and brought the tip of it to her tongue. “Paper?” she said.

Beth ripped out a blank sheet of notebook paper and listened to Tammy wheeze while she wrote down six different ways they could contact her.

On the way to the Campus Grill James didn’t mention Tammy. This was one of the reasons Beth continued to eat breakfast with him; he knew himself to be an outsider, and he never dared to whisper about other outsiders. Beth, too, was an outsider. The most mysterious thing had happened when she’d arrived at college: no one liked her. At her old high school in Indiana Beth hadn’t exactly been one of the popular girls, but she hadn’t *not* been one either. She wasn’t sure what it was about her that turned people off here. Maybe it was her clothes: too simple, too much sensible cotton. Maybe it was her haircut: too young in the way it perfectly framed her face. She didn’t have enough money—that was one thing. And she didn’t know how drink or smoke or get around in a world with rich, beautiful, witty people who knew they were all of those things. On the very first day of Orientation, a group of girls from her dormitory had made a pact to eat dinner together every night until they settled in, found better friends. But they’d never come to knock on Beth’s door that first evening, and when she went to the cafeteria alone and saw all of them there together, she realized that she hadn’t just been innocently forgotten. It wasn’t devastating to Beth but it did make her change her strategy. She brought her food back to her room and shut the door. She threw herself headlong into

school work, and she ran between buildings.

She was a Midwesterner in the Northeast, and that was also part of the problem. She couldn't say how exactly but she knew it to be true. The people here were different in the exact way people told her they would be. They were harder, shifty in the eyes. They believed they were from the best place in the world and they said so. The Midwest didn't inspire such ferocity of opinion in Beth. What was there to say about it, really? What *was* the Midwest?

James was from a small town in Arizona, and maybe that was part of his problem, too—he wasn't in the club. His other major problem was that listening to him required an exhausting amount of attention. His everyday conversation was riddled with historical, literary, and pop culture allusions, and he wasn't satisfied unless Beth gave some sign—an eyebrow raise, a chuckle—that she noticed each and every one. Although James had a significant ego when it came to his intellect, he was timid and reticent about asking her out. Beth didn't want to go out with James but she wanted him to muster the courage to ask her anyway.

They ate their greasy breakfast sandwiches and didn't talk about Tammy. Finally Beth said, "You know, Tammy is the one who found that girl. They were friends."

James sucked in air through his teeth as if he were experiencing a certain kind of pain, like rug-burn. This was his reaction whenever Beth mentioned the suicide. She didn't know how to interpret it, except that it seemed a generic gesture intended to deflect. Although she respected James for not whispering, Beth also really wished he'd just come out and whisper sometimes. Beth hadn't known the girl, she'd only shared bathroom space with her, so it was all conjecture for her—imaginings and crooked

fantasy. Was it so wrong to wonder how a person could be that *sad*? Beth was sad, but she wasn't *that* sad.

"I figured you already knew but I just kind of wanted to say it," said Beth.

James put his sandwich down. He looked scared. "Okay," he said.

"I don't think she's unhappy," said Beth, after a moment. "She sits out on that roof thingy and pulls her dress up to her knees so she can get sun on her legs."

James brought his right hand to his face, pressing his thumb and middle finger into his eyes, the way he did when he found something unbearably awkward. He shook and giggled across from her. "What an image!" he said. James found a lot of antiseptic images hard to swallow, but this time he managed to surprise Beth. She figured she wouldn't talk about Tammy anymore.

Beth had two hours to kill before her next class. Her habit was to go back to her dorm room and play Solitaire on her computer until she had to leave again. That's what she'd been going back to do on the day in late September when she saw the ambulance parked in front of the building. Inside, a tall, sweating man explained to her what had happened, and Beth ran straight up to her room where she crawled under the covers, cried a dry cry, then masturbated. Afterwards she peeked into the hallway. A few girls were standing outside the closed door, smearing tears into their faces with the tips of their fingers. They whispered consolations to each other, looked at the closed door as if they wanted in or were expecting something to emerge from it. One of the girls spotted Beth and began to walk her way. When there were only two doors separating them the girl attempted a feeble smile and opened her mouth as if to say something. Beth smiled back quickly and closed her door. She pressed her ear against the wood. She could hear the

girl's footfalls stop, and then, a few moments later, start up again in the opposite direction.

Beth remembered how she'd thought, before anything else, of her own parents back home in Indiana. She wondered how the girl had been able to extricate herself from everything and everyone—the noise and the demands and the obligations. To detach herself from the world long enough to imagine not being in it, to allow herself to consider the darkest possibility, and then, more than that, to embrace it. It either took guts or blindness and Beth wasn't sure which. Who was she, anyway? How did the girl even know who it was, exactly, she was killing?

Today Beth didn't want to play Solitaire. An itchy feeling ran round her heart, and she recognized it eventually as nervousness—nervousness about the paper. She didn't know how to write a history paper. Were they supposed to argue a point, or merely summarize? Where would they begin? She sat at her computer and looked out her window at the big pine tree in front of the dorm, the one with the lopped-off top. She wondered why anyone would ever want to lop the top off a tree. It made her feel bad for herself, that she had to look at it.

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They agreed to meet in James' room to decide on a topic for their paper. He claimed to have the fastest internet. On the way across the quad to his dormitory Beth spotted someone in the near distance waving at her frantically. Her heart fluttered. She waved back. After ten more steps, as she approached the person, he frowned, said, "I thought you were someone else," and turned away, embarrassed.

James lived in The Party Dorm. Beth had heard it referred to in this way a

number of times but she was still surprised when she took the steps to the fourth floor and found the hallway bustling with people holding beer bottles, smoking cigarettes. It was Thursday at five o'clock and she'd believed, at least, that they waited for the weekend. Everyone's doors were open, music from various rooms seeping into the hallway. Beth kept her eyes on the floor and found the one door on the hallway that was closed. She knocked.

She'd never been to James' room before. She tried to hide her disgust. Crusty plates covered his desk, wet towels were crumpled among T-shirts on the floor, and there was a funny stink coming from an aquarium in the corner next to the bed. Beth could tell that James was excited by her presence among his belongings, and a bit nervous. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and seemed on the verge of saying something.

"What are those?" asked Beth.

"Gerbils," said James.

"Oh." Beth stepped closer, careful not to place her feet on the T-shirts. The gerbils were huddled together in the corner of the aquarium, their chests heaving as if they'd just survived some sort of attack. On top of the hay that lined their cage were perfectly rounded turds of equal size, as if spit out by a machine. "What are their names?" asked Beth, not knowing what to say.

"Jessica and Elizabeth," said James. He raised his eyebrows at her, waiting.

"Ah! The Sweet Valley High twins!" Beth tapped on the glass, even though she knew it was the one thing you weren't supposed to do to animals in an aquarium. "Did you read those books?"

James shrugged slowly. "My older sister collected them. It gave us something to

talk about."

Beth straightened and looked at James. "That's actually touching," she said. "God, didn't you hate Jessica?"

"More than anything."

"So which one is Jessica?" she asked, turning back to the gerbils.

"The one who hogs the wheel."

Beth took her backpack off, then her coat. She glanced around questioningly for a place to sit. James' room had the exact same dimensions as hers: nine by fourteen feet—a hallway of sorts that had probably been used a long time ago as a janitor's closet. James extended his palm to the bed and Beth did her best to straighten the quilt so she wouldn't have to sit on his sheets. James sat on the chair in front of his computer and moved the mouse around to kill the screensaver.

"You have Bad Dog," said Beth.

"Excuse me?"

"The screensaver. That's my favorite."

"Oh, yes. Mine too."

From the hallway came a girl's shriek, then the sound of a bongo drum being struck. Beth looked around James' room again. His walls were bare except for a portrait of John F. Kennedy above his computer and, above the dresser, a giant map of the world that threatened to wrest itself from its masking tape. She noticed a dirty sock trapped among the matrix of cords underneath his desk and wondered why it hadn't occurred to him to clean up a bit.

There was a loud knock that made Beth jump. James stepped on every towel and

T-shirt on the way to the door and almost fell when his hiking boot heel caught on a pair of sweatpants.

The moment Tammy stepped inside she said, “Whew! Something smells very bad!”

Beth stared at her toes and James shoved his hands in his pockets.

Tammy said, “I am very glad not to live in this dormitory. Beth, aren’t you glad you do not live in this dormitory?”

“Well,” Beth began, but she stopped short. Tammy had raised her arms over her head to fix her bun and had exposed her armpits to them both—full of wiry hairs, some of them gray. Beth had seen plenty of girls at the college with unshaved armpits and it had never bothered her, but the combination of Tammy’s armpits and James’ presence made Beth blush as if she’d just exposed to them something of *hers*. Although it was 45 degrees out, Tammy wore a tank-top and still sweated. She coughed phlegm into a tissue and said, “What did you decide?”

James ambled back to his computer, big long strides, while Tammy surveyed the room, her large chest expanding and contracting with each breath. “May I move these clothings off the chair to sit on it?”

James made a motion to help but Tammy quickly brushed the pile aside, plopping down with a heartfelt sigh into a metal folding chair in front of the closet.

“This paper completely terrifies me,” said Beth. “I do not understand history.”

Tammy breathed. “Well,” said James, “okay, but—”

Tammy said, “It is because of the book. The book is no good. It tells you what happens next and next and next, but it doesn’t tell you how each is connected to one

another."

"But isn't that *our* job?" asked James.

"Eh," said Tammy. She shrugged. "Maybe so."

"I agree with Tammy," said Beth. "If I knew how the different parts were connected then it would become a story in my head and I could care about it more." Beth turned to James. "How come you can do it?"

James had a habit of looking off into the distance when he was answering a question that had flattered him. "I'm actually not sure. You're a better writer than me," he offered.

"Do you play chess?" asked Tammy.

"Yes," said James.

"Are you good?"

James looked off into the distance. "Yes."

"Well then it is decided that you should be the one to choose the topic."

James buried his face in his hand and snickered. "That's the most ridiculous logic I've ever heard!"

"Just do it," said Beth.

James turned to his computer screen. "Fine. I'm interested in Japanese propaganda during World War Two. The mind of the average civilian."

"Wonderful," said Tammy. "It is decided." She stood as if ready to go.

Beth couldn't help but blink in surprise. Nontraditional students were usually the most earnest, the most desperate, the most diligent. Beth said, "Well, I guess that's all we really need to do right now. Right?" Tammy wheezed as she collected her things.

Beth looked at James and shrugged.

Tammy said, "Would you like to walk with me back to the dormitory, Beth?"

"Ummm," said Beth. She was watching James, who had risen to retrieve one of the gerbils from the aquarium. He put the gerbil inside a big plastic ball that split open in the center like a fake Easter egg. "Ummm," said Beth. James snapped the ball shut and put it on the floor, at which point it began to lurch awkwardly across the room, bumping into wet towels and walls and chair legs. James was smiling. "Yes," said Beth, "I'll walk back with you."

Beth remembered something before she left and pulled from her backpack a brown paper bag full of dried apricots. "My mother sent them," Beth said. "They're quite good. A sign of appreciation." She passed them to James.

Once they were outside, Beth asked Tammy where she was from.

"Belgium. Ostend."

Beth glanced at Tammy. "Do you like it there?"

Tammy exploded suddenly into laughter—wet laughter from deep in her lungs. "Oooh!" she said, shaking her head. "Oooh!"

"I don't know why that's so funny," said Beth, beginning to feel offended. "People like places or don't like places. For example, I don't like this place."

Tammy stopped and put her hands on her knees. They were halfway through the quad, at the point where all the paths converged. A guy in dark-rimmed glasses and a leisure suit walked past them, glancing in Beth's face for a moment too long. Beth allowed herself to glare back at him. No, she thought, you do not know me. "I am sorry," said Tammy. "I must get my breath."

“Okay,” said Beth. She put her hands in her coat pockets and pretended to survey the scenery while Tammy huffed at the ground.

“Good,” said Tammy, and they started walking again. “So you do not like this place.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Beth wanted to get it right—to put her finger on the real thing—but the real thing, she knew, was unknowable even to her, closed inside the room of the girl across the hall, and she didn’t think she could say that. “Because it’s not natural, the way we’re all walled up in this beautiful place, a bunch of jerky kids who’ve had it too easy. It’s like a sick science experiment.”

“Yes, yes,” said Tammy. “This is true.” She wheezed and wiped some sweat from her upper lip. “And everyone must join the experiment.”

“Well,” said Beth. “I don’t know about that.”

They stood in the lobby of their dorm, nodding at one another for a moment before they said goodbye. Beth walked up the three flights of stairs to her room. She tried to busy herself with Solitaire, but eventually, not knowing what else to do, she climbed into bed and joylessly masturbated.

*****

On rainy days, when a looming deadline made Beth restless and ravished, she would force herself to walk across campus to the gothic, palatial library, where she would bypass the most elegant reading rooms—stained-glass windows and plush couches with students sprawled sleeping across them—to take the cold concrete steps down into the

Stacks. There, she would sequester herself in a study carol, hard wooden chair, fluorescent lights, and graffiti on the coffin-like walls. "PROF. FEINBERG SUCKED MY SCROTUM!" "WOMEN WON'T UNITE."

Beth sat in a study carol she'd never used before. She was so deep in the Stacks that she'd had to switch the light on. Books about Japan surrounded her. She sighed over them, flipped through the pages of military maneuvers, smelled their age. She thought of James—could imagine him making brilliant use of these very same volumes, nodding over particular footnotes and scribbling on his legal pad with a self-satisfied grin. Maybe she wasn't so grateful, after all, that he could think like a nation. Maybe she hated him for it.

She opened one of the newer books: a collection of oral histories of the Japanese people who'd lived through the war. She stopped randomly at an old man's account, felt a ball of phlegm rising in her throat as she read through it.

In a cave in Okinawa, at fifteen years old, this man, then a boy, had killed what was left of his entire family—mother and two younger brothers—with a stick and a rock. All so the Americans wouldn't get the chance to do it themselves. He was supposed to kill himself, too—that was part of the patriotic contract—but he'd lost courage at the last moment and lived, if only in order to remember what he'd done, and to tell it to someone who might want to write it down for him, put it in a history book that would sit, largely ignored, on a shelf in the basement of an old college library.

Beth looked up from the book when she heard a strange noise—a cry of pain. She froze, listening. It came again, this time louder and this time with a different timbre, a different tone. It wasn't pain but pleasure she was hearing, and Beth instinctively buried

her face in her hands when she realized that two students were having sex somewhere in the Stacks beyond her carol. She'd heard rumors that it happened at the college—a kind of rite of passage—but she hadn't really believed it. How did it work? Did one lie on that cold, cold floor? Did one prop oneself against the shelves? Did one *want* to be caught, overheard? She held her breath, attuned to the slightest disturbances in the air: a grunt, a sigh, and then a few breathy words that did, after all, remind Beth of a plea for mercy. She felt a stirring in her stomach. A nugget of desire.

She listened until it was over and then reread the oral account. She felt ashamed for having had to sit through those noises while such a story was open before her. This was interesting and awful. This, to Beth, was history.

*****

James showed up on Monday evening holding a brown paper bag that was so creased and beaten it had to have been used fifty times before. He handed it to Beth the moment she opened her door. She peeked inside and saw dried apricots. "You didn't like them."

"Oh, no," he said. "I liked them a lot. These ones are for you."

"The leftovers?"

"No. New ones. More dried apricots."

Beth stood there for a moment. "So you're giving me the same gift I gave you? But a different one that's the same?"

"Yes."

"I get it. Thank you."

Beth stepped aside so that James could enter. She watched him glancing around

and wondered what his impressions were. Although she spent almost all her time in it, Beth hated her dorm room. For starters it was completely overtaken by a franticly patterned comforter set her mother had bought her before she left—all optical illusions, cartoonish circles and squares. And then there were the knickknacks—lots of dogs and Disney figurines and miniature stuffed animals she'd received as birthday presents from grandparents. She remembered the way she'd thought of college a long time ago, when she'd daydreamed of it during high school study halls. Her imaginary room hadn't looked like this. It had been moodier, the lamps casting shadows that flattered people's complexions, and there were lots of pretty handmade objects to fondle, things she may have purchased elsewhere in the world. That was the problem, then. Beth was from Indiana, had been nowhere else, and had allowed her mother to give her a quilted tissue box cover. Beth couldn't be sure that any of the choices she'd made about her room were her own. She didn't know anymore what choices she would make, if she could make new ones.

She unfolded a plain blue blanket and covered the crazy comforter with it. "Sit," she told James.

"Would you mind if I took a peek at your books first?"

"No," said Beth. "Go for it."

James stood for a while in front of the bookcase, mumbling. Every now and again he'd pull a title off the shelf, hold it up to his chest, point at the cover, and nod. Beth would nod back and say, "Yeah, that's a good one for sure."

She found all of this desperately tiring. She sat at her desk, eating one of the dried apricots, and said, "Tammy's late."

"She's not coming."

"What do you mean?"

"I ran into her earlier and told her not to bother." James turned to Beth and pumped his thick black eyebrows at her. Beth froze, her heart pounding. Was it happening, then? Was now the time?

She watched James unzip the backpack he'd tossed onto the bed and whip out a stack of bright white computer sheets. "Ta-da!" he said. "I finished it!"

Beth sighed, her heart slowing, and took the sheets from him. They smelled like James' room. She glanced at them briefly then put them on her desk. "Well, what if we wanted to contribute?"

James put his hands in his pockets. "I thought you didn't want to."

"Well," said Beth, turning to her computer. Out of habit she opened Solitaire and began moving the cards around. "I went to the library yesterday and found something really wonderful. Or terrible. But applicable. And good. It should go in."

"Alright. Fine. We'll find a spot for it."

"What did Tammy have to say about all this?"

"Well, she wasn't mad."

"*I'm* not mad!"

As if the words had pierced the air out of him, James sat on the edge of Beth's bed, deflated. "I don't believe you," he said.

Beth closed her Solitaire game. "Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked.

James' hand flew to his eyes as if to gouge them out. He pressed his fingers into the sockets and laughed. It was a laugh interrupted at the back of his throat, coming out

as *khee-khee-khee*. His shoulders shook for a while. Finally he pulled his hand away from his eyes and looked at her. "Yes," he said.

"Then why don't you ever touch me?"

He stood, turned his back to her, and walked to the door. He paused there, turned around, and walked back to her, where he knelt down at the foot of her computer chair. He moved his face toward hers so that there was no distance left between them at all, so that their lips were smashed up against each other in a kiss that wasn't really a kiss but a mutual pressing. After three seconds it stopped and James stood up again.

"I'll go now."

"Okay." Beth walked him to the door—four paces. She opened it, and then—she wasn't sure why—she pointed to the closed door down the hallway. "That's it," she said.

James nodded, though he seemed not to have processed her words. "Well," he said. He stepped into the hallway and smiled politely at a girl in a nightgown passing by. "Okay," he said. He looked at his toes. "So that's her room?" he asked, looking at the door.

Beth nodded and watched, terrified, as James walked to it. He stopped in front, stared at its blank wood, and then put his hand on the knob and began to turn it.

Beth screamed and James stopped. "What?" he said.

She slammed her door and locked it. "How dare you!" she yelled. "Go away!"

*****

She knows certain things. She knows that she is sitting on the edge of her own bed in her own room with her own halogen lamp on the desktop. She knows that the lamp is illegal because it could burn down the dormitory, and that the fine for having one

is seventy-five dollars. She knows that her door is locked. She knows that the song playing from somewhere down the hall is called "Exodus." She knows that she grew up in Connecticut where the winters are cold, and she knows that Tammy brought her back here to her room—how long ago?—from Tammy's friend's apartment because she'd bled all over the friend's couch, having forgotten for a moment that she was on the heaviest day of her period.

But does she know this for certain? Does she know the couch was beige? She looks at her crotch. It is clean. She watches a scene play out in her mind: Tammy in the dark blue jumper that makes her look pregnant, on some loveseat in some woman's house, a pottery instructor who wears her hair the same as Tammy, piled on top of her head. Tammy's lips moving when she sees the stain on the couch cushion. Puckering in and out, humiliated and wondering. As if asking why. As if believing she'd done it on purpose.

And she has. Or, at least, some of it. It is happening again because she has invited it to. She will begin to do things that Tammy will call Connecticut about. She will be embarrassing to Tammy. But imagining Tammy embarrassed does not make her feel embarrassment. It is impossible for her to feel embarrassment when it's happening, and this is one of the reasons she has asked it to come back.

She watches the tips of her fingers split open. She watches calmly. First it happens to her thumbs—both thumbs in unison. Then to her pointer fingers, also in unison. Then to her middle fingers and so on, all the way to her pinkies, which hurt worst of all and take the longest. She feels it first as a bulge against the fleshy pad of the tip, something from the inside that wants out. It reminds her of childhood winters, when

she'd come in from the cold and her skin would complain, pulsating, as it grew warm against the radiator. Eventually a thin, deep line appears, as if breaking the surface of water. It is straight like a paper-cut, running from underneath her fingernail to the crease of the first joint. Blood follows.

Look, she will say to Tammy, displaying her hands. It happened on its own.

She finds it difficult to touch anything, and particularly difficult to hold a green marker to her notebook, but still she manages to scribble the following: September Something — FINGERTIPS ARE USEFUL.

She gets thirsty. All the time thirsty. She puts her mouth up to the sink faucet and opens. She does this all throughout the night because she is no longer interested in sleep. She skips class. She buys the nicest pair of scissors from the campus bookstore and uses them to cut off all her hair, holding her head over the wastebasket in her room, snipping furiously at the back. She cuts out all the necks from her shirts and sweatshirts—big scooping openings. Men use the necks of shirts to strangle women, that's why. She remembers that she has learned this, and she wants to make sure to use all of what she has learned.

She writes down what she knows. What she hears. What she learns. September Something — THE WORLD IS TOO LOUD. She draws a picture of loudness, which is orange, then uses the new scissors to cut it up into teeny bits that she carries delicately in her palms until it is time to blow on them. She watches them flutter to the floor, which is already scattered with other bits of paper. The trick is to do it the same every time.

She eats every now and again from a big jug of salted peanuts on top of her computer monitor. Everything she needs is in this room: her markers, her paper, the

peanuts. She will not leave the room this time. Out there they want to strangle her and film her. That's why she has to skip class.

Tammy comes over and knocks too loud, talks too loud. She tries to clean up the paper and the hair. She helps her into a new pair of pants because she has bled all over these ones. She has bled onto the couch of the woman Tammy loves.

But let me tell you about the last time, Tammy. Because last time was bad. Last time they sent me to a place and I got strangled by a woman who'd slit her own throat. Don't tell, she said, don't tell. Strangling isn't so bad, really. Everything goes black. Hold on a second. I have to write that down.

She tells Tammy that this time she's training it, she's keeping it. This is the right way to live, you know. Not the way we were taught.

Last time, she tells Tammy, I bled all over myself, onto a nice woman's couch.

No, says Tammy. That is this time. Two days ago.

Is it possible that it happened tomorrow? What does order matter? she asks, and she means it.

September Something — MY MOTHER ATE TOO MUCH MEAT AND FLAXSEED. One way or another, this was put inside her. So what way was it?

She laughs. She laughs easily, the laughter always right there on the surface like putting her thumb over a coke bottle ready to explode, can't stop it. Can't stop any of it. And she feels the momentum of it now. Her room is starting to bore her.

Look at me, she tells Tammy. My mother's child. Look at this stomach, how it sticks out and these flabby arms and this skin, this awful skin on my face. I need to wash it again.

Look at *me,* says Tammy. What do you think *my* mother ate too much of?

Tammy is trying to get her out of the room. Tammy is trying to keep her from figuring it all out: where the cameras are and what the causes and connections might be. Tammy comes to film her with her secret camera, to show the world how she is just a part of the larger thing they're trying to do. They're trying to get her to eat meat and flaxseed.

I like the hospital anyway, she says.

Yes? says Tammy. Well, then, shall we go?

You see, I caught you. I caught you trying to take me there.

Her toes cramp. They curl inward toward the balls of her feet and she moans, drops to the floor, grabs at them and pushes them back into place. Straight again. Do you see? she asks Tammy. Do you see what you do to me?

Go away. It's too loud where you are.

She gathers up the scraps of material, the ones she's cut from her shirts. She ties them together.

She is a pretty girl, isn't she? Yes, she is. She is one of the lucky ones, given the benefit of the doubt because looking at her pleases. She is a smart girl, isn't she? Yes, she is. She is one of the unlucky ones, able to see the way the connections don't connect, the way you can look at all the little pieces of paper on the floor and they continue to be little pieces of paper on the floor.

*****

Beth woke up on her back. Whenever she woke up on her back she thought of the girl. The ceiling pipes reminded her. Beth marveled that they'd been able to sustain the

weight of a human body. They'd always looked a little papery to her.

And now there was a vision of Tammy to go along with the pipes. How Tammy would have tried—how she would have pushed up on the body, how she would have stood on the chair and worked her cold fingers over the knots, wheezing all the while. How she would have cried out in French. Beth wondered what she would have done if she'd been there to hear the cry. Would she have run to help Tammy, or would she have crawled under her comforter and hid?

The last time Beth had seen the girl was in the bathroom they'd shared. Her hair was newly cut and this had shocked Beth. The girl had had long blonde hair that fell over her shoulders, thin and silky and straight, and she had always worn it down. She was at one of the sinks, splashing water on her face and head, getting the water absolutely everywhere and not seeming to care that the band-aids she had wrapped around every finger were getting wet, too. She grabbed a comb out of someone else's cubby and began running it over her dripping head, slicking her hair back. One of her socks was blue. The other was white. She looked over at Beth, who was brushing her teeth, and said, as if in response to an attack Beth had just made, "Who put those dark circles under your eyes? Did *I* put them there?"

Beth's heart lurched. "No," she'd said through the toothpaste. She'd watched the girl leave with the comb.

Beth brought a tuna salad sandwich back to her room and read the paper James had written for them. She read it with a red pen in hand, a jolt of satisfaction moving through her chest whenever she was able to circle a typo or write the word "awkward" over a phrase. But she had to admit that the paper was good. James had focused on the

role of the invisible in Japanese war propaganda—how Hirohito's refusal to appear in public, for example, had made the Japanese love and fear him even more. It was a smart history paper—a paper Beth could not have written. She opened the book she'd borrowed from the library and reread the account of the man from Okinawa. She wondered where the best spot for it was—or if there was a spot for it at all. For some reason she was nervous about her contribution. If it didn't fit perfectly she didn't want it in there. She waited for five o'clock, when they were supposed to meet in Tammy's room to finalize the paper.

She allowed herself to knock on Tammy's door ten minutes early, then spent those ten minutes walking slowly and carefully around Tammy's room. Every available surface of the room—and given its size Tammy had been able to bring in coffee tables and nightstands galore—was covered in Tammy's own pottery. Bowls, vases, jugs, cups. All receptacles of some sort or another, big curves and mottled colors. "You may pick them up," said Tammy, but Beth had no desire to. She wanted them to sit there as they were, undisturbed in their destiny to hold nothing, to reflect merely the potential for it.

Tammy reclined on a beanbag in a big boxy denim dress. Beth was surprised to see that her hair was out of its customary bun and that she was smoking a cigarette, coughing all the while.

"We should have picked a project topic that utilized your expertise," said Beth, pretending that the smoke didn't bother her.

"What? Pottery?"

"No. Belgium."

Tammy burst into laughter, little puffs of smoke escaping. "How am I an expert

on Belgium? Are you an expert on America?"

Beth could feel her face redden. "No. I know nothing about America. I guess that was a stupid thing to say."

Tammy took one last drag off the cigarette and stubbed it out in a pottery ashtray. "Would you like to see my little balcony?"

"I guess so."

In reality Beth had been dying to see the little balcony, had wondered what it was like to climb out onto it from inside the room. And what was Tammy's room like? Beth had wondered that, too. How did Tammy live? What kind of comforter set did she have? Tammy's comforter set, it turned out, wasn't really a set at all but a gigantic pile of blankets—all colors, all textures—layered one upon the other like onion skins.

Getting onto the roof-deck was an effort in endurance. Tammy opened the window as wide as it would go, used the radiator as a stepladder, and squeezed her body through the opening, pulling herself onto the deck with her hands. She was much better at it than Beth, actually, who needed Tammy to help with the pulling up part. Once out there and standing, Beth had trouble believing how deeply pretty she found it. The sun was setting over the grassy field and in the distance some cars were parked neatly next to an orange brick building, waiting. Everything waiting.

"How do you feel about James writing the whole thing?" asked Beth.

"Fine. Good. I'll do my pottery."

Through the window they heard James pounding on the door and together yelled for him to enter. He had far more trouble than Beth getting onto the deck; Beth and Tammy shouted directions at him simultaneously—where to put his boot, where his

hand—until finally they dragged him free, his shirt ripping on a nail none of them had noticed. He stood and dusted himself off and gave Beth a look—not scared but acknowledging. We pressed our lips together, remember? Doesn't that matter?

It was cold on the deck. Winter was around the corner, the air turning mean again, and Beth had to wrap her arms around her chest as they talked.

Beth said, "Your paper is good, James."

He shrugged and adjusted his glasses. She could tell he was flattered. "Did you bring that research you did?"

Beth glanced through the window, back into Tammy's room. The book lay in her backpack—heavy and unread except for those few paragraphs. "Yeah," she said, "but I'll have to show you later."

"What?" said Tammy, eyes wide. "What is this? Now I am the only one with no contribution?"

"Oh," said Beth, "it's just a small thing. A little story, really."

"What kind of story?" James and Tammy asked this at the same time.

Beth blinked at them. "Well," she said. She glanced around for Tammy's lawn chair and couldn't find it. She shifted her weight, then sat on the floor of the deck, comprised of some kind of black sandpaper material. "I can't say it," she said finally. "I'm sorry. I'll just have to show it to you. It's just… It can't really be spoken. Not by me, anyway."

They looked down at her. James pouted, confused.

Beth looked to Tammy and asked, "Do you know what I mean?"

"I believe yes," said Tammy. She took a deep wheezy breath and sat down, too.

“Yes,” she said, “I do.”

James zipped his windbreaker and turned his back to them, as if he’d just realized he was overhearing a highly private moment.

They were silent for a few minutes. Beth knew there was nothing else she could ask Tammy—nothing else Tammy could ever say to her. “I’m cold,” Beth announced. She made her way back through the window after Tammy’s instructions—right leg first, then right arm, and so on. James nearly broke his shin bone on the windowsill, but he managed to reenter the room with only a few more scrapes. And finally Tammy came back inside, breathing heavily but surprisingly dexterous. She immediately lit a cigarette.

“Pick one,” said Tammy, gesturing at her pottery. “Both of you. Any you like.”

They politely refused but this only made Tammy angry. She showed how serious she was by lifting a bluish-green vase and shoving it into Beth’s hands. “Fine,” said Beth. “I’ll take this one, then.” James circled the room three times before deciding on a gigantic black serving bowl. Beth wondered where he’d put it. For some reason, they each shook Tammy’s hand before they left. Her hand was dry and warm.

Beth and James took the flight of stairs to her room without speaking. They placed the pottery on her desk and sat together on her crazy comforter. James said, “I’m sorry about what I did. I only wanted to see whether the door was locked.” He looked down. “And maybe I was trying to impress you or something.”

“It’s okay,” said Beth. “We all wonder, I guess.” She thought for a second. “Was it locked?”

“Yes.”

Beth nodded. “That’s good.”

"I know," said James. "I don't know what I would have done if it opened."

Beth looked James in the eyes. "I didn't like her," she whispered. "She scared me. She made me mad and uncomfortable, before *and* after she did it. I've been afraid to say it. But there. I just did."

James opened his palm to Beth. She placed her hand in his, brushed her fingers over the deep lines that cut across his palm. She felt the nugget of desire again. She thought of the man from Okinawa—the punishment in survival. She would show the story to James soon, and they would figure out together where it belonged in their paper. But for right now she was going to sit on this bed that didn't feel like hers in this room that didn't feel like hers, and she was going to run her fingers over the lines in a living human palm that was not her own living human palm. And she would keep living.

MOUSE

When I was a young boy of nine and ten years old, I took piano lessons from a woman called Mrs. Hanolin. As all students of the piano should rightly be of their piano instructors, I was frightened out of my wits by Mrs. Hanolin. She was not a bad person, or teacher, but every Wednesday night that I entered her home through her garage door—bestowing first upon my mother in the driveway a spiritless wave meant to induce much guilt—I felt as if I were passing into a mildly haunted space, the air heavy with traces of an ordinary life, its ordinary sufferings, and all I could not know about them.

I was small and corpulent and I went to Catholic school. I wore a red polo shirt and pleated gray wool pants. Over the polo shirt in the colder months I wore a gray vest, and that's how I see myself now, thinking back on it: swaddled-up and sniffling. Always wintertime.

First the crunching of snow under my mother's car tires, then the feel of an orange songbook pinched in my armpit. Rubber boots would lead me onward, as if separate from my resistance. Mrs. Hanolin's highly-organized garage, with its shelves of cardboard boxes labeled in green: X-MAS ORNAMENTS, RUG SALVAGED FROM FLOOD. A dark laundry room cluttered with tipped shoes. A mustard-colored kitchen stuffed with years of food smells that nauseated me simply because they were not mine. Finally a thickly carpeted staircase that opened into a finished basement, where sat the grand piano, the older pimpled girl who had a lesson before me and who never played anything other than The Spinning Wheel Song, and Mrs. Hanolin herself, running her fingers through her necklace so that its glass balls clacked together, underneath the melody.

Photos and paintings and Things Within Frames hung from every available wall surface in the basement piano room, to the point where I couldn't tell what color the walls were underneath, or if there were walls there at all. I memorized the images quickly, and the odd choices that had been made in their layout. A few stand out to me still. A black and white photograph of a man with a handlebar mustache who seemed profoundly annoyed to have one growing there, right in the middle of his otherwise dignified face. A small portrait of a girl with a horse's chin. A painting of a man holding a woman's giant bottom against his groin. The man wore a top hat, the woman a shabby blue dress. She was fat with bright red cheeks, her hair was coming undone, and she puckered her lips in a way that begged me always to reach out to them, to give them an experimental push.

I never did. Mrs. Hanolin didn't have to tell me that I was not to touch anything. She didn't have to tell me that I was to wait patiently on the couch at the opposite end of the room while the pimpled girl's lesson ran its typical overtime. She didn't have to tell me that, while I waited, I was to flip through the wicker basket of falling-apart children's books next to the couch. At first these didn't interest me so much as the Things Within Frames, but I found in the wicker basket, eventually, my one and only consistent pleasure at Mrs. Hanolin's: a book called *The Lives of Dinosaurs.* Halfway through, on Page 33, was a drawing of two carnivores in battle. The T-Rex was roaring, its eyes wild. It was clearly winning the fight, claws poised for another strike, but it had suffered a gash in its neck that spilled bright red blood down its haunches. The gash surprised me. It was deep and wide, flapping open like a lazy mouth. The opposing dinosaur—one with a spiky back—was retreating through a shallow stream, its neck contorted in a last attempt at

defense. Blood dripped from its tongue. Soon, I imagined, it would fall.

I planned in my mind the next picture in the book: water from the stream, blue and white, frozen in a splash around the dead dinosaur's body. I wanted to draw it myself at home, but I had no talent for any kind of artistic expression. I merely had in my mind the image of the expression, and the capability to nurture it there.

I longed for effortlessness, genius. I longed for this in everything, including the piano. At night in the dark of my bedroom I listened to Pachabel's Canon on a hushed cassette player. I had a vision: me alone on a stage in my school gymnasium, eyes closed in a spotlight, the notes bursting forth from my fingers as if they were my only language. All around me were dilapidated set props from plays of long ago—it looked as if someone had taken a hatchet to them—and when I looked up from the keys to gauge my audience's reaction, I wasn't surprised to find them all in dresses, even the boys and the male teachers.

But I never learned how to read music. I fudged my way through two years of lessons by managing to read the music one time, then memorizing the feel of the songs in my fingers, knowing where to put them by physical routine only. I began well, I could play the first few bars of any song perfectly, but after a few moments all would fall apart. Under Mrs. Hanolin's gaze—under *anyone's* gaze—I had no sense. My fingers landed upon the right note or they did not, and most often they did not. I watched my fingers as if watching a centipede on its back, cloying for control.

I would have done nothing but wait for my lesson to begin, if I'd had the choice.

Every week, I waited in the same way. With the cheerful, unthinking melody of The Spinning Wheel Song as my disjointed soundtrack, the couch cushion comfortably

swallowing me into its buttocks-shaped bowl, I would study dutifully each page of the first half of *The Lives of Dinosaurs*. I studied the brontosauruses lazily chewing ferns. I studied the pterodactyls hang-gliding over a black lake. The whole time I passed through these pages I felt an insistent desire to skip to Number 33, but I felt an even stronger, grating satisfaction in denying myself the page—in keeping my love for the page in check. Finally, at the right time, I'd allow myself to look. I would look until the T-Rex grew blurry before me, until its gash was nothing more than a distant red fireworks burst that I saw when I closed my eyes at night. I would look until I knew with another swelling in my throat that my waiting was over. Mrs. Hanolin's long brown fingernails would click against the piano stool as she adjusted it to my height, her hand swirling it in circles as if swirling through sediment in a pond.

The old upright piano at my own home was horrifyingly out-of-tune. I never would have known this if I hadn't had the opportunity to hear the same songs on two different pianos every week. How different they sounded! Ours clunked its notes out, indistinct. Mrs. Hanolin's shimmered with sound—with *correct* sound. At my very first lesson, Mrs. Hanolin had given me a demonstration. She played a song as it was meant to be played, and she took up the whole piano while doing it, her arms outstretched to the high and low keys both, complicating a simple beginner's tune with extra chords and flourishes, her fingernails clicking below the notes she struck, her torso swaying back and forth as if hooked to the melody. My heart thumped as she played. I listened, transfixed by the rolling movement in her shoulders, by her feet depressing the mysterious pedals. I told myself that if I were Mrs. Hanolin, with such a striking ability, I would never leave the piano stool at all. I'd been tricked by her demonstration. Tricked into longing.

Although she was clearly deflated by my seeming incapability to learn one song well, my mother insisted that I display tenacity with the piano lessons and, as she called it, "follow-through." I wasn't entirely persuaded. Like most adults, my mother was filled with vague, passed-down notions of a child's mettle, and what was good for it. When I accused her of signing me up for piano lessons merely because it was what mothers did to their sons, she closed her textbook, used a fingernail to scratch at the remnants of the sticker announcing it was "USED," and said, "But you seem to *like* the piano so." I could not explain to her then that I was also terrified of it.

My mother was a thoughtful woman who loved to brush her hair on the back porch in the summertime and hold the stray ones out to be carried off by the wind. She worked in an office and was studying to become a nurse. She had her own longings then, for the ordinary. Every week, after escaping into the biting gray air past Mrs. Hanolin's laundry room, my heart would jump with relief at the sight of my mother's dim headlights waiting in the driveway. I could read hope in her shoulders—in the defiant way she held them back as she drove us to the Dairy Queen. Her eyes darted around the world, moved separate from the demands of the road. They moved as if they watched an imaginary scene before us. Whether it was a ballet or a battle, I couldn't tell.

Lessons were on Wednesday nights, so Tuesdays were for practicing and dreading—moaning and begging. My mother regularly showed up for these performances of misery. I would rest my forehead on the keys. I would roll my head from side to side, depressing them gently enough so they made no sound. "Just play me what you can," my mother would say from the kitchen, and I would set my fingers on the keys and rattle off the first few bars of a sonata. Then I would stop and look at her

solemnly, knowingly. It was a look that said, *You know we are not these people.* She would come to the stool and lean over me, squinting. "Well, what note is this here?" she would ask, and I would say that I knew perfectly well what note that was, thank you, and that even if she let me quit piano lessons this very instant, it would never erase the irreparable trauma of having played so poorly for Mrs. Hanolin, and for so long. My mother would rub her hands on the dish towel tucked into her skirt and look worriedly at the floor. Her perfume bothered me, on Tuesday nights.

"I will not thank you someday," I would add. And I didn't.

More than playing poorly for Mrs. Hanolin, I dreaded Handel, her old gray Tabby cat with the blackberry-jam-like goo in the corners of its eyes. By the time I got to Page 33 in *The Lives of Dinosaurs* and the pimpled girl was playing for the tenth and last time The Spinning Wheel Song, the cat would have begun its determined ritual of transferring copious amounts of fur onto my pant legs. My mother often complained about having to use the lint brush on them, and so, one Wednesday night in the dead of winter, the night that everything began to converge and then unravel, I batted the cat away as politely as I could.

Mrs. Hanolin caught me. She reappeared in the basement quite suddenly and silently, having made the untypical gesture of walking the pimpled girl upstairs to her waiting car.

Fear gripped my heart, and I closed the dinosaur book in my lap. Mrs. Hanolin tilted her head, as if to reassess my identity. I'd sensed long before that tolerating other people's pets was one of those unfortunate humanly duties—one of those crosses every decent person had to bear—and there I was failing at it, right out in the open.

Mrs. Hanolin smiled a little. She folded her arms across her chest and said, "My little man."

I thought for a moment she was referring to me, and I swallowed. Then she said, "He's telepathic, you know. Senses everything about the person inside."

Handel had sidled up next to me again, undeterred. I was petting him profusely. "Really?" I said.

"Well," she said. "It's a complicated gesture, isn't it?"

The cat butted its ears into my shin. "Yes," I said, "it is."

Mrs. Hanolin was standing in front of a large painting of a mermaid in a green seashell bikini, sunning herself on a boulder. The way she was standing, and the way her reddish hair was styled in a cotton candy-like poof around her head, she obscured the mermaid's scaled pelvis, tilted otherwise to face the big orange sun. It was the ugliest painting in the piano room, clearly done by someone who didn't understand that light and shadow are far more important than lines, but at the time I understood it only to be off-kilter in some way—childish, too large for its quality, and too fanciful to fit in with the rest of the Things Within Frames, all of which emitted an aura of determination, as if to declare against all better knowledge, *I am real*.

The cat had begun to purr, a little too loudly. "Some of his gestures are not complicated," said Mrs. Hanolin. "I was crying yesterday and he found me. From all the way across the house. He came right to me. Right into my lap. He knew I needed comfort."

I looked at Mrs. Hanolin's lap. It was securely contained within navy blue pants, then partly covered by a big, tent-like smock. I looked at the cat again. He opened his jaw

in a spookily mute meow.

I sat through the lesson with a distinct awareness of the fur on my pant legs.

In the car on the way to the Dairy Queen that night I experienced the typical half-hour of joy that followed each release from Mrs. Hanolin's domain, but this time it was tainted by wonder. What on earth did Mrs. Hanolin have to cry about? The thought made me uneasy in the marrow—the same way I felt when I couldn't remember what it was I'd just been anxiously remembering. Mrs. Hanolin lived alone—why, I considered for the first time, was she called Mrs.?—in the very back of an old and deep development of houses, all ranch-style, all with the same dogwood trees planted out front. I had trouble imagining her crying, or doing much else besides play the piano. I couldn't even imagine her in another part of her house, separate from her Things Within Frames. I tried to imagine her sleeping, but I couldn't conjure her horizontally.

As usual, my mother ordered a vanilla cone, I ordered a strawberry, and we took them back to the car to eat them, parked in the far corner of the lot that overlooked a go-kart track. My mother and I went to the Dairy Queen each week to apologize to each other, silently. Me for the complaints and inability. She for having misplaced my father.

Though a small woman, she was a voracious eater. She finished her cone nearly twice as fast as I and then shoved the ineffectual napkin into the ashtray. The heater breathed onto us, and the radio played country music songs.

I turned to her and said, "Are we happy or sad?"

She didn't answer right away. She looked in the rearview mirror at her reflection. Then she said, "Sometimes it's hard to tell."

Our car bumbled back along familiar roads, headlights cutting through snow. We

were returning to our own ranch-style house in our own development with our own dogwood tree out front. And it was perfectly obvious which one was ours because it was *that one*—right there with the greenish shutters. The one that smelled, on the inside, just like the way we smelled.

Were we happy or sad? Sometimes it was hard to tell. There was so much we could not talk about. We could not talk about school and its various miniature atrocities. How I feared and hated eraser duty, when I was made to walk alone with another student, usually female, into the dark and dank janitor's room, erasers smacking against each other and dusting my shirt with white—the nauseating smell of white. And what could she not tell me? She could not tell me what happened after she put me to bed and she remained in the living room for hours and hours more, with her glass of wine and her textbooks and her country music albums and the private, inward look on her face. What she thought about, when she was not thinking about me.

The next week, I opened the door into Mrs. Hanolin's laundry room and didn't hear a thing: no Spinning Wheel Song, no Mrs. Hanolin saying "allegro here—*here*." I glanced around for some kind of sign, then noticed a man with a bald spot like a little white saucer sitting at Mrs. Hanolin's kitchen table, staring out the window at the naked trees. He turned his head when my feet hit the linoleum. He smiled and lifted half his palm from the table in a lazy hello. I nodded, then proceeded to the basement.

I saw immediately that the pimpled girl was gone. A black-haired sloucher had taken her place on the stool, arms folded tightly against Mrs. Hanolin's diagram explaining musical chords. I saw that the sloucher was a girl, and that she wore a dark gray T-shirt way too big for her, all the way down to her knees. I saw that the songbook

open on the piano was purple—the color of the Beginner's Edition—and I decided that this must be her very first lesson, that this must be The Girl Who Would Always Be Here Now, when I entered each Wednesday. Neither she nor Mrs. Hanolin looked up as I slid myself onto the couch and noticed a scuffed-up canvas bookbag crumpled next to the wicker basket. There was a small button attached to the front pocket that said "WHO CARES?"

I pulled out *The Lives of Dinosaurs* and, with a nervous heart, opened it. I kept my eyes on the title page all throughout the lesson, glancing up at the girl only when Mrs. Hanolin clacked the glass balls of her necklace and said to her, with finality, "Follow me upstairs."

She didn't listen. She waited until Mrs. Hanolin was gone and then flipped around on the piano bench, leaned her back against the keys without hitting any of them, and began to swing her legs back and forth violently. I was surprised to be left alone with her and quite frightened, for when she turned around I saw that she was much older than I'd originally assumed.

She made eye contact with me and I immediately looked at the book in my lap. "What grade are you in?" she asked.

"Fifth," I said softly, and then again—"fifth!"—louder and desperate, in case she hadn't heard.

She nodded, her legs swinging. "I'm in eighth."

"Okay." I looked back at the book. Out of my peripheral vision I could detect her rising from the bench, walking toward me. In an instant, the couch cushion was responding to her weight, surprisingly significant. She smelled of peaches.

"Do you go to St. Stephen's?"

"Yes."

"Too bad for you."

I wasn't sure how to respond to this. I flipped a page in the book and was struck instantly by the fact that I'd never before, until that very moment, bothered to look past Number 33. In front of me was a drawing of a little crocodile-like thing escaping from its shell, pushing itself into the waiting world. I flipped the pages backwards almost instantly.

"How long've you been here?" she asked.

"One year and ten months."

"Sucks," she said. "You must be good, though."

My confidence swelled in the knowledge that her lesson was before mine, and that she would never have to bear witness to my own halting half-versions.

"Why does she make us come in through the garage?" she asked.

"I think so our shoes only dirty the laundry room."

"Why does she have so many stupid pictures up?"

The wall in front of me seemed to throb, causing a surprising sensation in my gut: defensiveness. Mrs. Hanolin's Things Within Frames were mine, too. I could have closed my eyes and given the girl almost the entire layout of the wall in front of me. I knew that right below the framed photograph of three kittens in a wheelbarrow was a wonderful and strange pencil sketch of a nun in full Habit, her body stretched to cartoonish length, pulled taut as if by a mad pack of dogs in a tug of war, which the artist hadn't bothered to include.

“My dad is making me start lessons,” the girl said. “My mom’s dead.”

I looked at her, for the first time, right in the face. It was a round face, with olive skin stretched tight and shiny over high cheek bones. Her nose was flattish, her eyes far apart and almost black. Her face was foreign to me, and I was concerned that my reaction betrayed this. I looked away.

“My dad’s dead,” I said.

This wasn’t true. My father was somewhere in California, and every now and again we would receive a package from him that contained a check and a letter that my mother snatched away before I could see it, along with a random selection of gifts packed in Styrofoam peanuts: organic jams and jellies, silk scarves, and specifically for me a pair of leather cowboy boots I didn’t have the nerve to wear outside my bedroom. I was ashamed of the way I waited for these packages. It had been months and months since the last one. Another one would never come.

The cat entered, ears agitated by the change in routine.

“Get outta here!” I said, startling myself.

“Aw,” the girl admonished, “we have a cat.” She extended her hand to it, palm up, fingertips at the ready. She tisked and smooched, but the cat wouldn’t come. It paused ten feet away and sat, watching us with a snitching tail. “Whatcha reading?” she asked.

I closed the book so that only the back cover showed. There was evidence of years of youthful abuse: chocolate smudges and poorly executed doodles. I’d never noticed them before.

“Nothing,” I said.

"You're too old for a picture book."

"Shut up," I whispered. My teeth grinded. "This one isn't for children." I used shaky fingers to find Page 33. "Look."

The girl took the book into her own lap, tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Huh!" she said. "Gross!" She handed the book back. "Can I show you my scar?"

I looked at the T-Rex—at the injury that might eventually kill it, despite its victory. "I don't know," I said. "Where is it?"

She stood in order to pull up her T-shirt. She lifted it to the very edge of her brassiere—a discolored and dingy version of white. Her stomach was paler than her face, and it spilled over her jeans a little, jiggling. Across her midriff—from one side clear to the other—was a straight line of pink scar tissue, puffy and thick as a piece of licorice.

"How'd that happen?" I asked.

"Not telling," she said. She dropped her T-shirt but it refused to lie correctly, bunching up around her bottom. She yanked at it until it covered, once more, her thighs. "It was worse than that dinosaur, though," she said.

"Let's go!" A man's voice from upstairs. I jolted on the cushion, and the cat scurried off to hide under an ottoman.

"Alright!" the girl yelled, her voice powered by the kind of annoyance reserved for the familiar. She shrugged at me and I shrugged back, realizing that a shrug was not a gesture I cooly employed.

She grabbed her bookbag and took off up the steps, decided and booming.

I ran straight to my bedroom when I returned home. I studied my face in the mirror above my dresser. How did I look? What did I look like to The black-haired

beauty with the scar on her stomach? I did not have a face with noticeable features, like hers; when I stood in front of a mirror I saw eyes and nose and mouth and nothing more. Face.

My mother knocked on the door. “Sweetheart,” she said. “What are you doing in there?”

My door had no lock—not even a doorknob. Instead there was a big hole we always mean to put a doorknob with a lock in, but somehow never get around to it. Through the hole I could see the tiny blue flowers on my mother’s dress. She pushed open the door, then had nothing to say. I realized that I had enjoyed, for just a moment, being apart from her.

In the world I fashioned for myself in the darkest dark of my bedroom, the girl was welcome. I talked to her there freely. I told her that, somewhere in California, there were sea lions on rocks like concrete slabs and beaches with piles of rotting kelp that the dogs were fond of urinating on. In my visions the girl wore braids that fell over each ear, just past her shoulder blades. I played Pachabel’s Canon for her, and it came out right. In a dream, she stood next to a giant egg. She said to me, “But the stupid thing’s heart is still beating!” and I answered her coldly, “I *know*.” In reality I wanted her to speak to me again, but I was also worried she might say something I couldn’t un-hear.

The next Tuesday evening I practiced with something resembling gusto. It was an old church hymn, and every time I finished playing what I knew—the first six bars—my mother would mumble, “Oh, I just love it,” and scurry to another dish on the stove.

Her vigor indicated exceptionality; this was a special day, and yet she hadn’t told me, and I hadn’t even realized it. There was a knock on the door. A man entered. A

man had never entered our home, as far as I could remember. I turned on my stool and looked from him to my mother, who—it quickly occurred to me—was wearing one of her special dresses. The man had a bouquet of baby's breath pressed to his chest, and he wore a bright red checkered shirt with a blue blazer over top of it. When he said hello to me and used my name for the first time, his voice caught on some phlegm and he harrumphed into a wet cough. He continued to clear his throat throughout the next hour in the living room, and then throughout the entire dinner, for which my mother pulled up to the kitchen table an extra chair that was far too low for her. She was cut off from view nearly at the bust, and she looked nervous, but she laughed at almost everything the man said and she poured for me a bit of wine in a tea cup, which made my cheeks hot. By the time we were eating Oreos off of plates, the man was sweating also.

"Play for us, sweetheart," said my mother.

I stared at her for a moment, confused.

"Play us your song," she said. "You've just been doing so great."

I shook my head, fast and sure. I glanced at the man, who had been placed, unfortunately, right next to me, making it difficult to stare as much as I might have liked. The man had big shoulders that quivered when he chuckled. He was chuckling now. "A request from Mom," he said.

I found this an odd thing to point out. I had found all the man's conversation odd, for it was comprised merely of observations of the obvious, which my mother inexplicably appreciated. I had never known my mother to be so simple. I pulled apart an Oreo and shook my head once more. "I don't know the song for tomorrow yet," I said.

“Well, how about a song you *do* know?” asked the man.

My mother laughed. “Yes,” she said. “Sure.”

I looked at her. Perhaps I could knock her over with the force of my shame.

She smiled blankly and nodded. She picked up her wine glass and took a sip, then nodded again. “Go on,” she said.

I stood up and scooted my chair away from the table as loudly as I could. I walked to the piano, vision blurred, and sat on the stool. The songbook was open in front of me, the notes of the sad church hymn. My hands squeezed into fists, and then my left hand began to pound out a familiar bass cleff: bum-bip, bum-bip, bum-bip. The start of The Spinning Wheel Song. I had learned it at the end of my first year with Mrs. Hanolin and assumed I’d since forgotten it. Bum-bip, bum-bip, bum-bip. My right hand descended to begin the optimistic melody. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my mother twisted around in the short chair, watching me with steady shoulders. My hands made it through the first ten bars of the song and then stopped, dead.

“Ha-hey!” exploded the man, clapping in the oppressive way only a big man can. I rose from the stool and ran from the room, into the hallway, into my bedroom, where I closed the knob-less door and fell upon the bed quilt, pressing my face into it, trying to imprint it there.

I waited for my mother to knock. I tried to listen to what was being whispered in the kitchen. I woke at three o’clock in the morning, the lights still bright and my school clothes still on. The house was eerily quiet around me, the air heavy with new meaning.

On the way to school the next morning, I did not speak to my mother. I ducked into the school building without turning to wave. I ran to the bathroom after lunch to

vomit up my Wednesday carrots. Then, after school, I waited in the parking lot for my mother to appear as she always did, and when she didn't I began to believe that she had left me forever. And wasn't that the right thing? I was nothing but a fatherless ingrate who couldn't even play the piano.

Finally, after the swarm of children had been claimed by various cars and buses and vans, and I stood alone and shivering with only one teacher next to me, I saw my mother's car slowly barumping into the lot. Her face was tight behind the windshield. The teacher gave my mother an admonishing salute, then headed to her own car.

I settled into the passenger's seat. I was compelled to look at her directly. Her lips were rimmed with pink, and she was not dressed appropriately for the weather. She had forgotten her coat; her shoulders look pointy under a thin sweater. She did not seem sad or happy but buzzing, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. It was as if she'd been plugged into to some kind of generator that had set her skin alight.

"You aren't a little boy," she said.

Outside, the air was frozen for the cold. The trees seemed posed for another life. The icicles in my nostrils were beginning to melt. "Okay," I said.

The man never came back to our house, and neither of us ever mentioned that there had been a Tuesday once, different from all other Tuesdays.

By the time we pulled into Mrs. Hanolin's driveway I was bursting with anxiety. I wondered if the girl had left—if I'd have to wait another six whole days to see her. I burst from the car and hopped the oil puddles in Mrs. Hanolin's garage. Just as I was about to open the door to the laundry room it opened on its own. The girl emerged, her entire upper body covered in a puffy blue jacket. Her black hair was pulled into a high

ponytail that was so tight the corners of her eyes strained. "You," she said, slamming the door shut behind her.

I tried to catch my breath. Out on the street everything was turning dark. I inhaled.

"How was your lesson?"

"I did good." She looked past me to the driveway.

"Where's your ride?" I asked.

"I dunno."

"I'm late today." When she didn't respond, I thought she may have decided she was bored. I moved to open the laundry room door but she stopped me with a hand to my chest, flat and forceful, catching me off balance and causing me to stumble a step backwards.

She laughed. "I got you something," she said. She stuck her arm out and twisted her back so that her bookbag slid down her arm. She unzipped it. My mouth went dry, anticipating and dreading.

She pulled out a book, familiar in its flash of brown and green on the back. She flipped it around, and the entire scene before me became distorted for an instant—swelled and then shrunk again, as if it had taken a breath of its own. *The Lives of Dinosaurs.*

I opened my mouth.

She said, "Here, dummy," and she held it out to me.

I put my hands in the air as if to surrender, and that's when I realized I'd forgotten my songbook in the car. "No," I said.

The girl glanced around quickly, then flapped the book at me. "I snatched it for

you," she whispered.

"Where will I put it? She'll see me walk in with it."

"You figure it out."

I watched my hands receive the book. They were red and cold and my fingernails needed clipping. I stuck the book, suddenly huge to me, under my armpit and said, "Thanks."

She put her finger to her lips. "Quiet as a mouse."

I nodded, unfeeling. "Can I go inside now?"

She snapped her ponytail around. "Yeah," she said, "whatever."

I went inside and stood in the yellow light of the laundry room, breathing. The dryer was working on a load, rumbling away, the clicking of zippers and buttons against the sides. It was a familiar sound, but it was accompanied by the smell of an unfamiliar detergent that accosted my nose, began it running. I listened intently to any sounds that might come to me above the dryer, from downstairs, where Mrs. Hanolin was, surely, beginning to wonder about me.

I pushed my body into the small space that separated the dryer from the wall. It was what I did without having to decide it. I could not walk downstairs with the book, but I also could not hide the book and retrieve it on my way out. My heart reeled at the idea, for the book would never belong in my home, would never belong to me. I had no interest in looking at it now, under the yellow light, crouching low. As if I were a criminal. The dryer hummed next to me, warm through my coat. I waited, not sure how much time was passing. My legs began to cramp and my nose continued to run. I wiped it on my coat sleeve and nearly yelped when the dryer let off a buzz and came to rest.

I held my breath. The house was now still, and the dryer shutting off had made me see, really see, the laundry room for the first time. The walls were mint green and completely bare of pictures. Exposed. In the corners of the floor, which I had a particularly good view of, there were balls of lint caught on bits of peeling-away linoleum. From downstairs, there came the faintest sound of a piano. Mrs. Hanolin was playing a song—a sad, forgettable song. I stared at the mint green walls and listened. It was not the song she'd played for me at my first lesson, and it was not as good.

Eventually, I heard my mother's car engine idling in the driveway. I stood, my legs pinching. I unzipped my coat and slipped the book inside. I would never return to Mrs. Hanolin's. I would take the book home with me, read it once all the way through, and then destroy it.

CAVE CANUM

Sarah woke to Leo striking his typical morning pose: asleep on his back between her and Danny, belly and genitalia fully exposed, gravity peeling his lips away from his teeth, seemingly ferocious. Sarah believed she understood dogs, and that they understood her in return. Ever since childhood—ever since she was thirteen years old and realized with a bitter resignation that she would never be a good-looking woman—Sarah had been drawn to dogs. Drawn to their neediness, their unconditional requests for affection, and the fact that they didn't know she was ugly, didn't know the shadowy parts of her heart that kept her removed from the world and angry at it, a conservative, borderline degenerate.

Next to her, Danny chewed the skin off the sides of his fingers. He was not a good-looking man either, though this wasn't why Sarah was determined, once again, to dump him.

It was 12:30 in the afternoon, and even though the blinds were drawn, it felt like afternoon to Sarah. An angry full-throttle light snuck into the room, revealing the wreckage of the night before with an unimpressed clarity. Floating particles of dust and dirtiness suspended in the still air, beer bottles containing a mushy amalgam of backwash and cigarette ash, napkins and white-powdered CD cases and darts with damaged flights, which for some reason made Sarah remember that she'd lost a favorite earring down the toilet the night before, when she'd thought she might vomit. She touched her earlobe and mourned the earring for a moment. Another ugly ex-boyfriend had given it to her.

Danny turned his head to spit a skin sliver onto the carpet—pe-tew!

She could feel the words tickling the tip of her tongue, ready to be said, but when

she cleared her throat and opened her mouth, something unexpected emerged. “I was holding a pair of tweezers,” she said, “in this dream I just had.”

“Hm,” said Danny. He used his foot to nudge angrily at Leo. Sarah pulled the dog closer to her, away from Danny.

She had been sleeping with Danny and Leo on Danny’s pull-out couch in his living room ever since she started dating him three months ago. He lived in a little dump of a two-story that he couldn’t afford but refused to find other roommates to fill. The place was largely unused, full of shadows and drafts. He claimed to have a vision, particular to the house, of someone breaking in, sodomizing him in the upstairs bathroom, and shooting him point-blank in the chest. This was why they slept downstairs. “In this vision or premonition or whatever it is,” Sarah had asked, “what exactly is happening to me?” Danny hadn’t answered for a while, then he’d said, “You ain’t there.”

“I didn’t know what the tweezers were for at first,” said Sarah, “but I knew I was going to need them. So I waited for the reason. I was in a gym or something. A gym that was also a circus tent. Then Leo showed up with his tail between his legs. He was whining and desperate and when I looked down I saw that he’d pooped right there, on the ground in front of me. And people were coming. We both knew it and we were both desperate. I bent over and used the tweezers to transfer the poop, bit by bit, into my jacket pockets. I was wearing that blue one, you know.”

“You’re turning my goddamn stomach,” said Danny. He was always in a bad mood when he woke up. At night it was paranoia; in the morning it was guilt. Sarah had her own fair share of guilt but she made a point of keeping it to herself.

Danny tugged roughly on Leo’s ear and the dog righted himself, confused and

blinking and moving his jaw in a dry-mouth smack. He was an Australian Shepherd, with upright ears and straight black fur speckled with tan and gray, which covered the carpet and now all of Sarah's clothing. He was beautiful, in the way all dogs were beautiful.

"I dreamt I was eating a fried chicken sandwich with pickles," said Danny.

Sarah thought for a moment. "Was I there?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Was I in *your* dream?"

"No. But there was the feeling of you. And something even weirder: I wasn't grossed out by the poop. It wasn't a good dream, really, but it wasn't all bad either." She sat up and assessed herself for a moment, her condition. A slight headache, a pain in her hamstring as if she'd done something to pull it. She couldn't imagine what. As usual she and Danny had managed to make the living room look this way all by themselves. She was sure she hadn't had any fun, but her mind and body felt reasonably intact—better than most mornings recently—and this lifted her, made her less willing to do what she knew she had to. What was another day? she wondered. Why not go another day? She leaned over to wrap her arms around Leo's neck. "Kisses," she requested, and Leo pushed his dry nose into her cheek in a sleepy response.

Sarah was surprised and slightly dismayed to find that she cared as much as she did for Leo. She had a small, rehearsed monologue about why male dogs fell short of bitches—how they were aloof and aggressive and prone to wandering—but the simple unscientific truth was that she didn't like their genitals. Growing up, her cousin had had

an un-snipped Golden Retriever that was forever pinning the neighborhood children against garage doors and pump-pump-pumping away at them. Sarah remembered the pink head of the penis emerging, slug-like and alive. She remembered being mortified that the dog had once again chosen *her*.

"Goddamn bed hog!" said Danny, shoving Leo onto the floor.

"Easy!" said Sarah. "It's okay, Slinky-sloo," she told Leo, who had scampered underneath the coffee table, waiting with twitching ears and guilty eyes for his next orders. Sarah's heart lurched. She had to look away from the dog.

Danny grabbed her hand and put it against the opening in his boxer shorts. "Yeah?" he said.

Sarah pulled her hand back and took a deep breath. The words were coming back now—ready to tumble forth. "No," she said. "Not now. I'm breaking up with you now."

Danny had thin lips, perpetually peeling, and two chipped front teeth from a fight years ago outside a convenience store involving a crowbar. It was one of the few stories she'd heard from "back home." He smiled, but his eyes were scared. "Naw. You ain't, though."

"Yes, I am. We have to wear flip-flops in the shower, Danny. Have you thought about that? Some people aren't meant to be couples. Some people are completely disgusting together."

Danny rolled out of the bed in one swift motion. His dark hair was flattened against the back of his head from sleeping, revealing a swirl of white scalp. He looked around the room wildly, then punched the wall and fell to his knees. Leo scurried to the

stairs, slunk halfway to the top, then turned to watch with his ears pressed flat against his head. Danny put his hands over his face and began to rock back and forth. This was exactly what he'd done the last two times Sarah had tried to dump him.

"Come here," she said. "Just stop that and come here."

"Fucking *no*," Danny said. "Fucking *no.*"

"Come here."

Danny groaned, stood, and came back to the bed. He fell across it heavily, took Sarah into his arms, threw one leg over her and held her tight against him. "Don't do it," he said. "I won't let you do it." He pushed her T-shirt up to her neck, rubbed his hands over her double-D breasts and double-D stomach. His hangnails caught on the moles that dotted her skin. "You don't wanna do it, do you?"

Leo yawned, then lay on the stair, watching from his safe vantage point. He put his snout on his paws, moving his eyes away from Sarah.

She found herself putting her hand over Danny's and guiding it—pressing the tips of his fingers into her nipples to harden them, to make her feel something, even pain if that's what it had to be. She turned onto her stomach and allowed him to pull her underwear off, to get on top of her.

She closed her eyes. Hazy traces of her dream still lingered behind them—how small she'd felt, despite her weight, in the cavernous space of the gymnasium; the swollen, anxious protection she felt for Leo; the glint of the tweezers and the knowledge that she must hurry hurry hurry; the feeling of Danny, like an unreachable itch.

When Sarah opened her eyes a few minutes later it was to Leo at the foot of the bed, silently eating the crotch out of her underwear.

*****

Sarah considered herself a failed screenwriter, though she'd never even finished her first attempt at a screenplay. She'd moved to Los Angeles right after graduating from community college, half a screenplay in a manila envelope on the backseat of her Chevrolet, and she'd lasted exactly four days there before checking out of her hotel in Los Feliz and driving all the way back to Ohio, embarrassed and irate but grateful there was not a single soul in her life to witness it.

While sitting at Hollywood coffee shops and drawing circles around job postings in the newspaper, Sarah had listened, doleful, to the conversations surrounding her. They were about acting in movies, producing movies, directing movies, watching movies, or writing movies. The people engaged in these conversations knew a lot more about all this than Sarah. They had designer sunglasses perched on the tops of their heads and did little double-takes when they caught sight of her. They seemed to know instinctually that she didn't belong there. Back in her hotel room she drank a bottle of wine out of a stout glass cup and stared at herself in the mirror: long chin, wide nose, no waist. She became hyper-aware of the fact that her pants had cost fifteen dollars. She became hyper-aware of the fact that her screenplay was about a young girl, her three-legged dog, and the life lessons they learned together. She went back to Ohio, to the same town she'd spent her entire life in, and became the manager of a video store. She did not take advantage of the free rentals.

The unfinished screenplay collected dust on the top shelf of an unused kitchen cabinet. She returned to the library the stack of books she'd checked out in an attempt to do research for her movie. The books had angered and disappointed her, anyway. They

told her things about dogs that surprised her—things she didn't want to know. They told her that dogs were revolting creatures. Exploitative and deceiving. They told her that, in countries where there were many stray dogs, there was inevitably hatred and fear of dogs. When left to their own devices dogs were scavengers. They ate the worst kind of refuse: feces and corpses and everything in between. Sarah remembered reading with disgust that, in certain parts of South America, dogs were known for pillaging graveyards during floods.

Four months after she returned from L.A., she'd hired Danny. She'd hired him, in part, out of spite for her co-workers—because they found him disconcerting and sketchy, which he was. She'd hired him, in part, because of Leo, whom he'd dragged into the store with him on a rusty chain-link leash that bit at the dog's scruff. Dogs weren't allowed in the store, of course, but Sarah was so startled by Danny's clumsy air of entitlement that she didn't say a word, and she shushed her co-workers with a glance. He wore a pair of sneakers held together with duct tape. He wandered around aimlessly for a while, Leo panting and sniffing at the ground behind him. He roused discomfort in the Comedy and Family sections by tilting his face to the fluorescent lights and sneezing so loudly, so violently, that he caused himself to trip.

Eventually he yanked on Leo's chain and the two approached Sarah at the counter. "You hiring?" he asked. He was about her age, though half her weight. His eyes were black and far apart, his nose crooked as if it had been broken and then ignored. His cheeks were riddled with acne scars.

Sarah handed him an application and he took a good hour to fill it out, obstructing customers who were trying to check out, laughing quietly to himself over his answers.

Three separate times he scratched the pen angrily over something he'd written and asked for a clean sheet. Sarah watched Leo through all of this. The dog watched her in return. She blinked at the dog and he blinked back. Out of impatience the dog whimpered and walked in a tight circle. "Shhh, little one," Sarah said, and the dog stopped, noted her, sat. Sarah saw that he was male—that he still had his testicles.

"Perfecto," Danny said finally, handing her the application. Then he said, "Come here for a sec."

"What?"

"Come here for a sec." He lifted his hand and fluttered his fingers about, as if to tell her something was wrong with her hair.

Sarah touched her neck. "What? What is it?" She leaned toward him slightly, her heart pounding.

He brought his hand to the top of her head, placed it there as if blessing her, then squeezed hard. "You never been loved the right way," he told her.

Sarah swallowed. She asked the dog's name, asked if she might come out from behind the counter to pet him. And when she did—when she crouched low to put herself at Leo's eye level—she found herself exhaling slowly and deliberately, as if offering to the dog the very core of her.

Danny was a high school dropout from Wisconsin—an amorphous, blank state to Sarah. His reasons for moving to Ohio were equally amorphous, and Sarah allowed them to be. From the very start, her relationship with Danny was based on tolerance. Tolerance and silence. If she didn't ask about his past then maybe he wouldn't ask about hers. Maybe she'd never have to tell him about the unfinished screenplay in her kitchen

cabinet.

On an undercurrent of complicity they drifted towards each other, agreeing, without really saying so, that together they'd be as sloppy, shiftless, and boring as they felt like. And boring was what they were, mostly. Doing drugs, Sarah had discovered, was boring. She believed she wanted to stop doing them. She believed she wanted to stop wanting to do them. She was not the kind of person, she reminded herself, who *did drugs*. Then again, the drugs hadn't really changed her much. She was still working, still functioning, still managing to pay her bills, even if she hadn't been back to her own apartment in weeks. If anything, the drugs had only solidified what was already a part of Sarah: her reliance upon ritual, her reliance upon the indoors.

The first time Sarah went to Danny's house, Leo darted about the living room in a contradictory dance; he was excited to greet her but terrified to greet his owner. When Danny spoke Leo cowered, tail between his legs. "He obviously done something wrong," Danny said. He turned to the dog. "What you done?" He left Sarah in the living room with Leo while he wandered into the kitchen, then upstairs. "Look how guilty he is!" he shouted down to her. "He done something for sure!"

Sarah bent to Leo. She was aware that the prospect of seeing Leo again was the main reason she'd agreed to come there. He wagged his tail so hard that he knocked an empty beer bottle off the coffee table. She held his face in her hands and looked into his eyes. She leaned in to smell his head and his breath. She moved her hands over his haunches. "Were you a bad boy?" she asked him. "What did you do, huh?"

Danny bounded down the stairs, causing Leo to shake. Without even realizing it Sarah had put her arm around the dog and pulled him close to her side. "You know," said

Sarah, "dogs can't feel guilt."

Danny stopped, folded his arms over his chest. "That's bullshit."

Sarah looked at Danny's face. He didn't seem the kind of person who'd ever want a dog, and she wondered how and why he'd acquired one, let alone one this pure and sweet and good. "Can I have a beer, please?" she asked.

Danny scratched his chin, then looked at Leo, shaking his head. "Yeah, hold on."

Once Sarah had a sip in her, she was able to continue. "It's true," she said. "Dogs can't make those kinds of connections. If you don't punish a dog immediately after the crime, it will never know what it's being punished for." Sarah had read this in one of the library books. She herself hadn't believed it at the time, but now that she had a chance to speak the information aloud, she was utterly convinced by it.

Danny pulled a toolbox out of the closet and began rummaging through it on the couch, half listening. "Yeah? You a dog expert or something?" He pulled out a small swatch of legal paper that had been folded compactly upon itself. He began to unfold it carefully while Sarah watched, trying not to look too curious or too shocked. Watching Danny—this odd stranger from Wisconsin—she believed it could be anything in there: flecks of gold, part of a dried fingertip. She could feel that Leo had calmed somewhat next to her, so she took her arm off him.

"Yeah," Sarah said. "I am."

"Why does he act all guilty, then," asked Danny, "when he done something he knows he should be all guilty about?"

"Because he sees you. You make him feel guilty."

The paper was open now and Sarah could see that its center crease cradled a small

white rock. Danny lifted it, set it on a magnifying glass, and then used a straight razor to begin chopping it up.

"Nah," he said, waving her away. "He knows what he done." He offered her a line and Sarah did one. It came naturally to her. It was as if she'd been meant to sniff up the world, to gather it all up in the recesses of her head.

Despite the momentary confidence, Sarah was still plagued by bursts of doubt. Did Leo know? Was he capable of guilt? Was he capable of shame? Certainly not the kind of shame Sarah felt, knowing she could never truly feel for someone who allowed her to behave in the way Danny allowed her to behave. Not the kind of shame she felt when she lay in bed at night with Leo curled against her legs, her sinuses throbbing. Knowing full well she couldn't save him from any of it.

*****

Later on the same day she broke up with Danny for the third time, Sarah sat on his ripped-up couch, sniffing and swallowing, sniffing and swallowing. She was waiting for a turn at darts. She was waiting to have to do another line.

Danny had hip-hop blasting, so loud they could hardly speak, the bass thumping in time to Sarah's mad heartbeat. Danny was playing darts with Nick, whom Sarah didn't trust. Nick was Their Guy, though, which meant she had to tolerate him. Every time he came by with a gram he eyed Sarah strangely, as if she were someone he knew from a long time ago, someone he didn't like. He was looking at Sarah now—looking at her hair, which she hadn't washed in two days. She averted her eyes and patted Leo on the rump. Leo had positioned himself between the coffee table and the couch, right in front of Sarah, as if to trap her there. He faced the front door and the game of darts and

he panted nervously, waiting for something inevitable to happen. Just as Sarah and Danny had their nighttime behavior separate from their behavior of the day, so too did Leo switch modes with the darkening of the sky. He would begin snarling at cars that drove by outside, circling the living room, nostrils flaring at the air. It had gotten worse over the past few weeks. His eyes, at times, were wild with anxiety. Maybe he sensed something in Sarah and was merely imitating it—a coiling up of nerve springs, ready to snap free.

"Hurry up!" she yelled.

Danny didn't hear. It took him forever to play a game of darts. He shouted along to the lyrics and then left the room for the kitchen. Sarah feigned interest in her fingernails in order to avoid Nick's gaze.

When Danny returned with a fresh beer he drew an X next to the 15 on the makeshift score sheet. In time to the beat he threw his pen at the sticky coffee table top and then grabbed suddenly at Leo's tail, saying, "Grrr, good boy," smashing the dog's ears all around his head. He climbed over Leo—the dog took a few halting steps backward out of confusion—and brought his face close to Sarah's. His pupils were huge, eclipsing his irises.

"He protects you," said Danny.

For a moment Sarah thought he was talking about Nick. She blinked, and in that blink, with her teeth numb and her throat swollen, an alternate future presented itself: a future where a man named Nick who freaked her out completely was actually *her man*, the one man. It was possible, wasn't it? If she could be with Danny then she could be with anyone, even Nick who had a dirty neckline and a fake eye and who obviously lied

about his age. Sarah laughed derisively when she realized that Danny was talking about Leo.

“Are you my little protector?” she whispered in his ear. Leo touched Sarah’s chin with his nose and went right back to staring at the front door.

Although she wanted to believe it—and she certainly liked that Danny believed it—Sarah knew full well that Leo was not protecting her. He was, in fact, *seeking* protection. This was yet another startling fact that Sarah had uncovered in her research—another reason she’d found it so difficult to continue writing about the three-legged dog who mourned, rejoiced, and contemplated right along with his child playmate, a lonely girl from the suburbs. Despite the fact that dogs were capable of something that looked a lot like love, the fact was that they were unabashedly selfish when it came to their own well-being. When dogs sensed trouble, they ran to the pack leader. Sarah did not take much satisfaction in knowing that Leo considered her the pack leader. She wanted to be something else to him, she wasn’t sure what.

Danny was straightening the flights on his darts. “What you need to protect her from?” he asked the dog. He went to the window and pulled aside the curtain to glance out. Satisfied that his sodomizer was nowhere in sight, he turned and threw a dart straight at the board from where he stood. It hit the wall and dropped to the dirty carpet, where it stuck like a javelin in mud.

“Fucking watch it,” said Nick. He whipped a dart right back at Danny, and it landed in the wall next to his head. Nick smiled, then looked at Sarah. The most frustrating thing, to her, was that being ugly didn’t keep her from finding other people ugly. Nick was using his one good eye to stare at her legs. She hadn’t shaved them in

weeks. Near her ankles the black hairs were nearly half an inch long. She pulled Leo closer to her, so that he obstructed Nick's view.

The music stopped, and Danny filled the sudden silence by saying, "This girl thought about leaving me today. Can you believe that shit?"

Nick raised his bushy eyebrows and sniffed. "Yep," he said.

Leo gave up his vigil over nothing, turned two-and-a-half times, and plopped to the carpet. He lifted his right leg and gave his testicles a nudge with his nose.

Sarah glanced at the score sheet on the coffee table. Neither Danny nor Nick had more than two numbers closed out, and neither had hit even one bulls-eye. "I'm taking him for a walk," Sarah said.

Leo began spinning in circles and squealing with excitement when Sarah took the leash from the front closet. She nearly tripped over him on her way to the front door, where she told him to relax. He jumped up, nipping at the leash.

"Careful," Danny said.

Sarah glanced up. "Huh?"

"Be careful," he said, sniffing. "I'm telling you to be careful."

Outside it was a sticky August night. Sarah turned the corner and headed for her apartment without even realizing she was doing it. She allowed Leo to walk ahead of her, which meant she could see his testicles perfectly—one was so much shorter than the other that they sat on top of each other instead of side by side. Sarah had read that you weren't ever supposed to let a dog walk ahead of you, that a dog who walks ahead of his owner believes himself to be in charge, even if he isn't pulling on the leash. Leo hardly ever tugged or pulled, and Sarah didn't care if he felt himself to be in charge every now

and again. She didn't care what those stupid books had told her. The dog deserved to feel important sometimes.

Leo stopped every ten yards to lift his right leg and dribble. Sarah had noticed that Leo had two kinds of peeing: the kind for when he wanted to expel urine, and the kind for when he wanted to mark territory. For the latter, only a few drops escaped at a time. She had noticed that he marked the same spots without fail—big trees, fence posts, and even a certain manhole cover—and that he rarely chose new ones. He dribbled on the telephone pole by the intersection to her apartment, as he always did.

They passed a white-haired man walking a Cocker Spaniel. Sarah tightened up on Leo's leash.

"Is it a she?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said.

Sarah relaxed the leash and allowed Leo to approach the spaniel. "He's not good around other males," Sarah explained, "but he's fine with the girls."

The man nodded. His presence suddenly reminded Sarah that she was high on cocaine—that she was not a normal person on a normal night, walking a dog normally. Her jaw was sore from grinding and her nose was now running. She was having trouble standing still.

Leo lifted his tail high in the air, allowing the spaniel to sniff freely at his anus. "He likes her," Sarah commented.

"A beautiful dog," the man said.

"Thank you," Sarah replied, as if she were responsible for the way Leo looked.

"Are you okay?" asked the man.

Sarah looked in his face. He was watching her carefully. “Pardon me?”

“You have a bloody nose, my dear,” he said, putting his finger to his own nostril.

Sarah’s hand flew to her face. “Oh!” she said. She pulled her hand away. It wasn’t much, but her heart plummeted at the sight of the blood, then skipped a beat. She sniffled and covered her face again. “It’s the altitude,” said Sarah, inexplicably. “I’m not used to the altitude. I’m not from here.”

She gave Leo’s leash a quick tug and then they were walking again, walking away from the man. Sarah felt her eyes burning, then the urge to gag. She swallowed, pushing it down again. Ahead of her Leo trotted jauntily along.

Sarah’s landlord did not allow pets and her neighbors were watchful, so she made sure no one was lurking about before she took the steps to the second floor of her building, letting herself and the dog in.

She went straight to her bathroom and washed her face, stared at herself in the mirror for a long while. Her cheeks were sallow and her eyes looked dead. She sat on her couch and smoked the butt-end of an old cigarette she found in an ashtray, watching Leo wander around her apartment. She had not taken the leash off of him, and so it trailed sadly behind as he slunk from room to room, sniffing. Sarah’s place had the forlorn feel of being unlived in; dust had settled on the end tables, and there was a dull smell of rot coming from the kitchen. She was coming down from her high, and her sinuses were once again able to feel the burn.

“Hey you,” she said. “Come here, you.”

Leo sidled over. “Don’t be nervous,” she said. “Come lay with me.”

Sarah stood, intending to lead Leo into her bedroom, but instead she found herself

walking to her kitchen, reaching to the top cabinet and groping with her fingers for the manila folder. She pulled it down and took it into her bedroom, where her quilt was tousled into a mound, as if someone were sleeping underneath. She whipped the quilt back, her heart pounding. Then she sighed at herself when she found nothing underneath but stale sheets.

She removed Leo's leash and he hopped onto the bed easily. "Lay down," Sarah told him, patting the mattress. "Lay next to me here."

Just like Sarah, Leo yawned whenever he was anxious or excited, and he yawned now, the tiniest squeal escaping. Finally he rested, and Sarah adjusted herself on the bed, the manila folder next to her, so that she could look right into his eyes. She knew she wasn't supposed to look directly into a dog's eyes, for they understood it as a sign of aggression, but Leo had never seemed to mind it. He stared right back at Sarah as she moved her hand over his chest. Out in the living room, she could hear her wall clock ticking.

The most disturbing news Sarah had come across in her research was that dogs, even when their owners weren't home, still scratched at the front door to be let outside. What this proved, according to a zoologist, was that dogs were stupid. They didn't understand expressions of intent. They scratched at the door and the door opened. They didn't get that the scratching was a signal to the human, and that the human was the actual agent of action. Sarah's heart sank, just to remember it.

"You're not stupid," she told Leo. "Huh?"

His nose was practically touching hers. She began to scratch his chest harder, which made him flip to his back, exposing his belly.

"I'm going to steal you," she said. Her voice was unfamiliar to her. She hadn't even known she'd been thinking it.

Leo blinked. His ears responded to her voice. Little twitches.

She could do it, couldn't she? She could pack a small suitcase and get in her car and drive with Leo to Los Angeles, where this time she'd do it right, make it work, live a respectable life. Sarah had never mentioned to Danny her four sad days in L.A.; it wouldn't occur to him that she'd have the guts to go so far away. He would never know how to find her.

Yes, it could happen. She could leave her larger pieces of furniture on the street corner. She could register with a temp agency once she got there. She could finish the screenplay, ignoring all those books she'd read. She would not know how to get cocaine. And Leo would grow to love her more. The long, unfamiliar trip would force him to trust her further, rely on her further.

He extended his neck so that Sarah could scratch his chin. His incisors flashed at her. "Scary boy," she said, rubbing his belly. "Will you come with me?"

Leo sneezed, spraying Sarah's face with a warm mist. She wiped it off, then noticed something out of the corner of her eye: Leo's penis had come unsheathed. A bit of pink escaping from the tip, like the head of an uncertain turtle.

She took her hand from Leo's belly. She had the sudden urge to smack his nose, to push him from the bed—to let him know, somehow, that such a thing wasn't appropriate. She sat up and looked away. A shiver overtook her. She shook her head as if to clear it, then pulled the unfinished screenplay from the manila folder. She turned to the last page, to the last lines she had written:

CHRISTINA

You never listen to me! You don't even

love me! You just order me around and expect me to obey,

like I'm a dog or something!

CHRISTINA'S MOTHER

Well, maybe it's because you act like one!

CHRISTINA

Well, Max is the only one who understands me!

Leo turned over and hopped to the floor. Sarah put the screenplay back into the manila folder. She hid it, once more, in the top cabinet of her kitchen.

She attached Leo's leash and led him outside, to the sidewalks that would take them back to Danny's house.

"Jesus," he said when they entered. "You look spooked."

"I am spooked," said Sarah.

He approached her, put his hands on her neck and pulled her face close to his. She allowed him to kiss her.

She unsnapped the leash from Leo's collar and the dog wagged his tail as Danny greeted him.

Sarah waited for Danny to finish his shot at the dart board and then she took the steps upstairs two at a time, Leo following at her heels.

She entered the bedroom, where Nick stood with his back to her, crouched over the nightstand. Sarah closed the door and Nick turned, a finger at one of his nostrils. His eyes watered as he held out to her a plastic straw. On a CD cover, two fresh lines

awaited her. She took the straw from Nick wordlessly, then snorted the lines and sat on the bed, waiting to feel them. She forced herself to look at Leo.

He stared at her as if he knew exactly what she was doing, and exactly what she never would.

THE OTHER GUY

Visiting hours were supposed to have started seventeen minutes ago. Audrey Pope counts six people ahead of her, twenty-six people behind her, and fourteen children climbing on water fountains or scooting across the filthy tile floor in sweatpants they've long since outgrown. She cannot easily tell who the children belong to, since no one in line takes a particular interest in any of them. Instead, they shift their weight and mumble, conferring with the people nearby that "this right here is bullshit." Audrey cannot fully judge whether this right here is bullshit. She has never done anything like this before, and she is not accustomed to being in places where there is an even mix of white and black. She stands straight and still, facing the empty desk at the front of the room. She wishes there were Rules or Official Procedures posted somewhere on the walls.

Audrey Pope approves, generally speaking, of rules. She is a nervous person, easily thrown off track, and she finds that good sound rules—both the picky ones society insists upon and the big ones governed by an inherent sense of dignity—help her interact in the world with the least amount of embarrassment or misunderstanding. This is just one of the many reasons Audrey stopped teaching young children twelve years ago. Children were continually crossing boundaries they weren't yet mindful of. They made ridiculous, hurtful remarks, to each other and to her, which had no base in either logic or humor. Audrey now commutes one hour each way to Cincinnati where she teaches adult foreigners to speak English: a job she finds distinctly rewarding. Foreigners desperately want to know the rules, for they are in the business of avoiding embarrassment.

By accident Audrey meets the glance of the black woman in front of her who now

carries in her arms one of the fourteen children—a baby girl with rows of tiny braids, perfectly spaced along her skull, converging at the back in a poof of a ponytail. Audrey smiles, stiff. The girl arches her back and wriggles until her mother sets her down. She is still a toddler, able to crouch low without sitting, her bottom hovering just above the floor. She wobbles a few steps and takes an inexplicable interest in Audrey's feet. She uses her pointer finger to experiment, giving the tip of Audrey's newly polished black pump a little push. She looks up at Audrey, waiting. When Audrey does nothing the little girl begins to touch her pantyhose under her pump, scratching at them, then pulling. "Well, now," says Audrey. She retracts her foot and wonders when the child's mother will intervene. "That's no way to treat a perfectly good pantyhose."

A door to the left opens and a small red-haired police officer enters. The people in line begin to call their children over, step closer toward the desk like bulls in a pen, scuffling up dust. The police officer walks to the front desk with his hand on the transistor clipped to his waist, fuzzing and sputtering. He bestows no apology, no explanation. He is straight-backed, refusing to look at any of them. It occurs to Audrey that he might believe they deserve some disrespect—associating, as they are, with criminals.

Audrey Pope's younger brother is a criminal. He has been in jail two other times before this, once for carrying a gun into a dance club and once for breaking into a woman's house to vomit on her sofa. Audrey did not go to the jail those times.

This time, Rich has pled guilty to Assault. This is a positive development, apparently, because he was charged with something much worse, something called Aggravated Assault. Audrey doesn't understand the difference that the word

“aggravated” makes. She tries to think of Rich assaulting someone in an “aggravated” way. Would his face be blank and numb, possessed? Or fierce and fiery, moving? Audrey has never in her life witnessed an act of violence firsthand. She believes she would be most disturbed by the sound. Bodies colliding must make a great deal of noise.

The line is moving forward now. The people in front of Audrey have disappeared behind the door on the left. Audrey thinks she sees a visiting room back there—metal tables?—but she cannot be sure. In preparation she opens her wallet and pulls out her driver’s license. When the desk is open she steps up, whispers, “Richard Pope,” and slides the license over the counter. The red-haired officer looks at her, looks down at the picture. “He is my brother,” Audrey hears herself add.

The officer pauses and turns to his computer. Audrey blushes. She is eighteen years older than Rich and knows what many think simply to look at her: *Mother*. Audrey does not want to be associated with Rich in that way, to be forced to imagine him coming from deep within her own body, or to imagine others imagining it. No one has ever come from deep within Audrey Pope’s body, and she is quite determined that no one ever will.

“It dudn’t matter if you’re a relation,” the officer says, finally. “Only matters if you’re on the list.” He has the almost-Kentucky twang that southern Ohioans associate with River Rats. Audrey herself has worked hard to overcome a similar accent.

“The list?” she asks.

The officer nods. “Three people. He chooses ‘em.” He clicks at something else. “Okay,” he says, “Number 26.” He hands back her license.

Audrey walks to the door on the left. She is surprised by the scene behind it. The tall thick panes of glass that separate civilians from inmates in the movies have been

replaced by mini-stations with small metal stools and television screens. Audrey passes conversations already underway, catching glimpses of inmates' torsos, their orange jumpers, the indistinct white wall behind their heads. She finds Station Number 26 and sits on the metal stool, staring at the black screen in front of her. She waits. She pulls out a book from her oversized purse—*Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, which she is teaching to her foreigners—and tries to appear as if she is not listening.

But the stations are so close that she can hear everything, including the inmates' voices through the phones. "I ain't sleeping no good, though," says the woman inmate at Number 25. "Hanley came by for the Play Station," says a blonde girl on Audrey's right who is way too pretty, in Audrey's estimation, to be visiting the young man on the screen: sinister-looking with a mustache and uneven eyes. "Don't let *no one* touch my stuff," he says. "You hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah," says the girl. She glances over at Audrey, stops, and whispers to her, "You gotta pick the phone up!"

Audrey looks at it, black and substantial on the wall. "Oh!" she says. She laughs with a snort because she is embarrassed.

The screen begins to flicker as soon as Audrey puts the phone to her ear. Rich appears, diminutive in orange. Thin. His hair, which he has kept shaved ever since he started going bald, is growing out into a buzz cut. His cheeks and neck bear a significant growth of stubble, which is most disconcerting to Audrey, for despite the fact that Rich never managed to hold a steady job, he never failed at maintaining a fastidious appearance. Every night, before he went out, he would shave in the downstairs bathroom, a white towel over his bare shoulder and his lips pursed. It was the only thing,

in Audrey's opinion, that her brother performed with grace.

They are moving their mouths, saying things to each other, but the sound is not yet working. Rich is in a bright place; the sun divides his face in two right below the nose, highlighting his big square chin. He looks nothing like Audrey, whose face carries features grudgingly, accommodating only the smallest of everything: little slits for blue eyes, a straight thin nose, a twitching dot of a mouth that often has trouble making it all the way around a deli sandwich. Rich's face, olive-skinned and full to the edges with features, seems to proclaim a different blood—not even their mother's. Immediately, Audrey recognizes an energy about him—a constant need to fidget, to adjust, to sway—that is distinctly his own. She is grateful for it; Rich has changed a great deal over the last ten years, and Audrey takes comfort in any mannerism still clinging to him from the past.

"Where's Dad at?" he asks, when the sound starts. He scratches his head, annoyed. "I thought you were him."

In the bottom right-hand corner of the screen the white seconds begin to tick by: 14:54, 14:53. "They don't tell you who it is?" Audrey asks. "They don't tell you who's visiting you?"

Rich smiles, joyless. "Fuck, no. They don't tell you shit in here." Audrey watches his mouth move as he adds something to this, but the sound in her receiver suddenly goes dead again. A cheerful mechanical woman interrupts: "THIS CALL IS BEING MONITORED." Rich's voice returns at the end of his sentence: "—been to see me?"

Audrey breathes. "Because I haven't told him."

Rich pulls the phone away from his ear as if he has been physically accosted by Audrey's words. For some reason he tips the phone upside-down to use it as a kind of microphone, his neck jerking a little with each word. "What the *fuck*?" he says. "Is that why I'm still *in* here?"

Audrey wonders if he means these gestures, these little performances. "Use the phone like a normal person, please," she demands, loudly.

Rich cracks his neck from side to side as if in preparation for a boxing match, then puts the phone back to his ear. "I'm callin' him right when you go," he tells her. "I got commissary today."

"May I ask how on earth you got money for commissary?"

"No." Rich breathes into the phone, runs his hand over his buzz. "A girl I know." He looks at Audrey, but it's not really *at* her. The mini-cameras capture their images from above, which means that they can never make direct eye contact through the screens. When Rich looks at Audrey, it appears on her end as if his eyes are cast downward.

"What took you so long? I been here a week."

"Well. Maybe I've been busy. Maybe I've been considering the appropriate way to castigate you—" Audrey wants to continue in this vein but can't. "You've done enough to him," she says. "I will handle it this time."

Rich takes the phone away from his ear, moves as if he's about to hang it up, then changes his mind. "All I got in here is this fucking *screen*. Tell him to come."

"He doesn't have ten thousand dollars," Audrey says. "Neither do I. And, frankly, we no longer have the patience for your shenanigans."

Rich laughs—a high-pitched, teasing squeal. “Shenanigans,” he imitates.

Audrey’s chest burns. She says, “What happened to your teeth?”

“Mmm. The fucker broke ‘em. In the fight.” He bares them to Audrey, as if to ask whether anything might be stuck there. His two front teeth are chipped, and one of the bottom ones is missing entirely.

“You look terrible,” she says.

Rich shrugs his shoulders. “What was I supposed to do? Let him kill me?”

“It was a him?”

“You think I’d hit a chicken?”

Audrey looks at her lap. She has been pressing her palm, without realizing it, into the crease of *Ethan Frome*, open before her. The binding has cracked. She knows she will mourn this later when she has time. It was her mother’s copy. “What did you do to him?” she asks.

“Eh,” says Rich. “I roughed him up some. S’all.”

“Who was he?”

“Some cracker.”

Audrey shakes her head. The white numbers read 12:25, 12:24. “How many years will they give you?”

“Years?” Rich swats her question away. “I’m gettin’ months.”

“Perhaps you should begin to prepare yourself for prison.”

Rich goes still for a moment. “I’d rather be in prison,” he says defiantly. “Food’s better. They let you outside.”

Audrey sits straighter and clears her throat. She says, “I was surprised you put me

on your list."

"Yeah, well."

"I didn't know there was a list. When is your sentencing?"

"Fifteen days."

"How do you pass the time?"

"I dunno. Sleep. Write songs. Who's crying?"

Audrey dips her head away from the blonde on her right. She cups her hand over the phone mouthpiece. "The young woman next to me. I don't like it here, Richard."

"No shit." His torso begins to move forward and back on the screen, bouncing in a way that lets Audrey know he's now tipping back in a chair—a chair more comfortable than her own. "Alright. Fuck you," he says. "Fuck you and fuck Dad, too. Just go."

Audrey doesn't say anything. She lets the white numbers click by on the bottom of the screen. "Can you do me one favor?" he asks, finally. Audrey waits. "Can you read over some letters I wrote?"

"What kind of letters?"

"Sorry letters."

"To his family?"

"And him." Rich stops bouncing in his chair. "My lawyer told me to do it."

"Ah. I see. Is your lawyer competent?"

"Nah. He don't like me."

Audrey tells Rich to send the letters to her work address, but he has no paper or pen to record it. "Can you memorize it?"

"Hell, yeah. Got a crazy good memory. You know that."

"I don't believe I know anything about you at all."

Rich shrugs. Audrey recites the address. He repeats it as if it were part of a rap song, then smiles, proud.

"The deer are back," says Audrey with a purposeful note of accusation.

"Shit," says Rich. "Fuckin' nuisance, huh?"

The blonde on Audrey's right has not stopped crying. "I have to go now," Audrey says, her voice cracking.

"We still got nine minutes left!"

"Dad's been home alone all day."

"Aww!" Rich throws his head back. "You know what he's doing right now? He's fucking *laughing* cuz you ain't there."

"We'll see."

"I'm callin' him. Right now."

"I can't stop you. But I don't think you will."

Audrey hangs up. The screen goes black, then transmits her own reflection to her. Just yesterday Audrey got her hair cut into a simple bob. She still hasn't become accustomed to the sudden sight of herself. She puts her hand on her head to smooth the style, to reshape it. She feels hurt, just for a moment, that Rich didn't mention it.

She sits in her car for a few minutes before she pulls out of the lot. She watches the other people returning to their cars, their fifteen minutes over. Their T-shirts advertise places (Mount McKinley, Hard Rock Cafe London) that surely they have never visited. They wear old sneakers with no laces, so that the shoe-tongues bloom from the arches of their feet, unrestrained and obscene. They stare at the concrete as they go,

whole families walking without speaking. They don't seem angry or upset. They don't seem anything at all.

Audrey Pope used to believe that her brother's laziness would forever trump his own anger, but now she sees that you don't necessarily need a lot of energy to be a criminal, or time. Audrey so often witnessed Rich not being a criminal that she long had trouble imagining him as one. Most nights he slept in the house, in the downstairs bedroom that had always been his, sparsely decorated and smelling of corn chips. He ate cereal with Audrey on Tuesday mornings. He seemed to have somewhere to go on Tuesday mornings. And as long as Audrey didn't ask too many questions, they got along as any siblings with eighteen years between them might. It wasn't anger, exactly, that swam across Rich's face when Audrey asked questions. In his drooping eyelids, which looked like they were being held up only by sheer tenacious will, Audrey saw doubt. Rich didn't believe she really wanted to know.

Finally, after Audrey has caught her breath, she bumps her car over the train tracks, back along the unfamiliar roads, back to the other side of Butler County.

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The house on Woodlawn Avenue is old and elegant, with high ceilings and wooden floors and an abundance of small, useless rooms. Audrey Pope has lived in it her whole life, and she is quite proud to say it. Woodlawn Avenue is in a respectable neighborhood, and Audrey has maintained a decent yard for public view, as her mother always did, with neatly trimmed bushes and a modestly rewarding vegetable garden out back. With Rich gone now, the little details Audrey pestered him about will surely be overlooked—water stains on the ceilings, chipping paint on the front porch. The things

that need lifting will no longer be lifted. As she climbs the steps to the front door, Audrey wonders if she'll have to hire someone to help her rake and bag the leaves next month.

She begins to call for her father as soon as she enters, opening windows and blinds along the way. It is a gorgeous, if stifling, Saturday afternoon, and Audrey is relieved to find her father enjoying it, even if it is in the passive way old age forces him to enjoy everything. He sits in a rainbow-striped lawn chair on the screened-in back porch, facing the vegetable garden. In his lap is his white miniature poodle, Taffy, who bares his gums when Audrey leans in to kiss her father on the forehead. "Shush, Taffy," says Audrey.

"It's only when he's on my lap!" her father says wonderingly. He says this, wonderingly, every time it happens. "He's only protective when he's on my lap!"

Audrey removes her red blazer and robes a plastic chair in it. She moves the chair so that it is facing the same way as her father's, sits in it and says, "Dad, try to remember to open the blinds and the windows on a day like this."

They are silent for ten minutes, Audrey's father sucking and smacking on his butterscotch candy. Audrey waits for him to mention a phone call from Rich, but he doesn't. He stares straight ahead. "It's supposed to storm tonight," he says finally.

"Good, good," says Audrey, and she means it. Her father can't get close enough to thunderstorms. The one clear freedom he has gained by Audrey's mother's death is the freedom to experience them from the front and back porches, unmitigated, minus her shrill warnings.

Audrey rises wordlessly to check the answering machine in the living room. It is

blank. She removes her pantyhose in the upstairs bathroom, then bends a spoon in the process of dishing out two generous bowlfuls of strawberry ice cream in the kitchen. Audrey is surprised to discover that this will be a standard Saturday afternoon. She and her father will let the ice cream bowls sit for a while on the coffee table once they are finished. Audrey will read painstakingly, with a foreigner's mind, the ten pages she has assigned from *Ethan Frome*. She will underline all idioms once, and all cultural references twice. Her father will turn on the six-inch black-and-white TV and sleep through an old Western. And Rich will not show up. He will not bustle through the house with his riotous, unsettling speed, knocking everything down with a look.

Audrey's father accepts the strawberry ice cream effusively. He is surprised, pleased, grateful—he goes so far as to rotate the bowl in his hands to appreciate the ice cream from every angle, as if it's not something he eats daily. This is how Audrey's father acts whenever Audrey does him a favor; it is one of the reasons she has never left his home.

He nudges the dog off his lap, then removes his dentures, puts them into a small glass cup he carries with him for this purpose. He waits for Audrey to sit again, and then they begin eating the ice cream together. Audrey puts her feet up on another plastic chair, wiggling her newly freed toes. The wind-chimes plink in the breeze, and somewhere far off a dog begins barking, which throws Taffy into a growling spell.

"Dad," says Audrey. "We are decent people."

Her father's mouth is working on the ice cream. "Hm," he says, sticking his spoon back into the dish.

"Don't you think we are decent people?"

He looks at her, his blue eyes swampy beneath the glasses. "Well, of course I do. What kind of a question is that?"

"I don't know," says Audrey. She takes another bite of her ice cream. "Rich, you know," she says, softer.

"Did something happen?" he asks.

"No, no," she says.

Audrey's father swats at some invisible thing in the air in front of him, clearly relieved—boosted up. "He's a good kid got mixed up in the wrong crowd. That's what's happening."

"You did nothing wrong."

He puts another spoonful of ice cream in his mouth, gums it. "I know damn well I didn't," he says.

Audrey's father Edward has been living in the house on Woodlawn Avenue since 1944, when he returned to Ohio from the South Pacific because of an injury to "an indiscreet bodily location," the knowledge of which Audrey discovered in a trunk full of papers in the basement when she was twelve years old. The words made her vaguely nauseous at the time, as if her own body couldn't decide where its troubles lay. Her father's injury must not have been incapacitating, however; after the War he settled down almost immediately with a Catholic girl from the neighborhood named Frances, a girl whose destiny it was to have one miscarriage per year for the next twenty years, with only two strange exceptions to make meaning of in between: Audrey and Rich, book-ending the whole ordeal.

There were four of them in the house on Woodlawn Avenue until June 13, 1980,

when Frances' car was sideswiped outside a grocery store parking lot by a teenager rummaging in his rucksack for cigarettes. For the last 25 years—ever since the accident—when Audrey promises her father that she will drive safely, he tells her, dolefully, "It's not you I'm worried about. It's the other guy."

Audrey Pope sleeps in flannel pajamas, even in the summertime. That night, as she pulls the sheets up to her chin, two moments come back to her, starting with a dip in her heart and moving quickly to her head in strangely colorful visuals: her mother moaning on the master bed about one year before Rich was born, sunlight on her face and clumpy red-stained towels beneath her body. Then her brother as an infant, long before he could walk, sucking at a bottle of Elmer's glue as if it were a bottle of milk while Audrey, who was supposed to be watching him, pressed leaves onto a giant piece of cardboard for a school project.

Audrey sits up when she hears the thumping of hooves out the cracked window over her head. Since early summer the house on Woodlawn Avenue has been plagued by three bucks that tromp through Audrey's vegetable garden, pulling up the lettuce. She hates the deer, and not just because they destroy her garden. She hates their fragility and nervousness while doing it—how, when she slips on a robe in order to walk downstairs and shoo them off, they are already on the verge of bolting, eyes shining and ears alert. She hates how their fear makes them unpredictable and unintelligent. She hates the spindly legs that they dart off on, seemingly ready to snap in half at a moment's notice.

It is a cloudy night, a night of blackness. Audrey flips on the kitchen light, opens the door to the screened-in porch, and notices that the bowls from this afternoon are still on the coffee table. She picks them up, dumps the spoons out with a clatter, and then

bangs the bowls together over her head. “Get out of here!” she yells into the black backyard, to the murky outline of animals moving. “Get out!”

She expects the bowls to shatter in her hands but they don’t. They make a disappointing clunking noise that does the job anyway. Audrey senses the deer freeze. Their outlines bound off as if weightless, as if they are nothing more than outlines.

Audrey finds the spoons and puts them back into the bowls. She brings the bowls and spoons to the kitchen sink, where she fills them with water and then washes her hands because her fingers are sticky. A few weeks ago, before Rich assaulted a man, he helped Audrey tie plastic bags to wooden stakes enclosing the garden. He claimed the noise in the wind would scare the deer off for good.

Audrey feels that she should have known, that she might have been able to stop this latest trouble. After all, the signs were there. Rich had started asking to borrow Audrey’s car. He missed their Tuesday cereal. At odd times of the day he would close his bedroom door and scream into the phone at someone Audrey could only assume was a woman. “I said I was fucking *sorry*!” he’d yell, and on his forehead a vein would swell. When this happened, instead of telling Rich to stop it, to hang up, to leave this woman’s life and to make her leave his, Audrey would move onto the screened-in back porch to wait it out beyond earshot. Sometimes her father joined her there, and, as he turned the television set as loud as it would go, Audrey would wonder about this other person on the other line—faceless, body-less, maybe not even a woman. The only proof of her existence, after the fact, was a sullen, silent, shirtless Rich, camped out on the living room couch and biting his fingernails.

*****

Audrey Pope's favorite student at the Institute for New Speakers of English, even after only two weeks of class, is Toyoko Yamaguchi, a Japanese woman of indeterminate age with prominent cheek bones and a shiny bob. In fact, it was Toyoko who provided the inspiration for Audrey's new haircut. On Monday Audrey makes sure to meet Toyoko's glance. Toyoko smiles, waves as if they are miles away from each other, points at her own head, and gives Audrey the thumbs-up.

At the beginning of each new year Audrey tells her students to write approximately ten sentences in English explaining where they come from and why they're now in the United States of America. Today, the students hand in their essays reluctantly. "Mine is not so good," they say. "Very embarrass." Audrey does not like to encourage her students to share private information with her, and yet every year she continues to assign essays that will force them to speak of themselves—essays that will force Audrey to hear of them.

After class Audrey notices that, while the others pack up and file out, Toyoko lingers at her desk, staring at her paperback copy of *Ethan Frome,* open before her. Audrey turns her back to Toyoko and begins to erase the blackboard.

"Sensei," says Toyoko, startling Audrey into flipping the blackboard eraser onto her chest—a big powdery brick in the middle of her bosom. Toyoko laughs in a tittering way, holding her hand over her mouth. She steps out from her desk and walks to Audrey, her stiff navy jumper still creased at the lap from sitting.

"It's quite alright," says Audrey, brushing off the chalk dust. "You are a quiet person, and you startled me."

"Oh, yes, yes," says Toyoko, "I am quiet." It seems to Audrey as if the sounds

are being forced out of Toyoko, as if there are other sounds inside of her that press up against the sounds she wants, resisting them, twisting them relentlessly back into Japanese. "Please, I don't understand," she says. She holds *Ethan Frome* out to Audrey. "This sentence," she says.

Audrey takes the book from Toyoko and reads the words underlined lightly in pencil: "Ethan was suffocated with the sense of well-being." Audrey looks at Toyoko. "Which words don't you understand?"

"Yes."

"No. Which words?"

"Ah! Words. No. I understand words. Only meaning I do not know."

Audrey hands the book back to Toyoko. "It's tricky indeed," she says.

Toyoko nods her head vigorously, her shiny hair brushing against her cheeks, a strand getting caught on her lip. This is what Audrey had been jealous of; she hadn't realized that her own hair would never move like that, no matter how it was cut. Audrey says, "Have you ever felt so good, Toyoko, that you couldn't breathe?"

"Not breathe?" Toyoko shakes her head. "Oh, no. No."

Audrey's heart lurches. "Me either," she says.

Toyoko looks at the book. "But Ethan feels suffocate."

"Yes."

"With Mattie."

"Yes. With love of her." Audrey pauses, then adds, "I think."

"Oh, I see," says Toyoko. She looks back down at the book.

Audrey turns to the chalkboard, but there is nothing left to erase. She turns back

to Toyoko, who says, “Thank you, Sensei,” then takes nearly four minutes putting her book, notebook, and pencil into a red briefcase at her desk. Audrey sits at her own desk and flips open her own copy of *Ethan Frome*. Because of the cracked binding, the book now insists upon exposing the very page in question, when Zeena leaves town and Mattie takes down the pickle plate.

Eventually, Toyoko walks to the door on silent soles. “It is good,” she says. “Your hair look very good.”

“Thank you,” says Audrey.

Once she hears the swinging double doors at the end of the hallway close, Audrey flips through the small pile of essays in her folder. Toyoko’s is typed on an old machine with a faded ink ribbon:

> My name is Yamaguchi Toyoko. I came to United States one year ago and lived first in beautiful home of my cousin Yamaguchi Ichiro-san in Los Angeles California. I came to United States with my husband who is dentist. We had one daughter in Japan but unfortunate event happened and she was kill by the man with knife in her school. Maybe you have heared of this in newspaper. It happened in Osaka. I and my husband moved to Cincinnati (very difficult spelling!) because he found job. We live on North Side and must try every day not feeling sad.

At the time of the accident that killed her mother, Audrey was 27 years old. She was teaching English at a grammar school in Fairfield, and she was very much in love with the principal there, a man named Marty Shaw: wine-guzzling, pot-bellied, charming, literate, and also very much in love with Audrey Pope. He was thirty years older than

Audrey and had been a journalist, a dentist, and a school teacher before becoming a principal. Dentists always make Audrey think of Marty Shaw—that and the way she still deliberates over the comments she writes on her students' papers and tests. "Too much," Marty would tell her. "Too much feedback. They're in the fourth grade for blast's sake!"

Audrey reads Toyoko's essay three more times, then decides to point out only one of her grammar mistakes: her tendency not to include articles like "the" and "a," which is fairly commonplace, Audrey has noticed, with the Japanese. She writes the following on the bottom of Toyoko's sheet:

> I enjoyed reading this essay very much, Toyoko. You write in clear, unadorned English, which is what everyone, whether a native or non-native speaker, should aspire to. I am terribly sorry to hear about the tragedy that befell your family. I did read about the events in Osaka, and my heart went out to everyone affected on that dark day of dark days. I truly hope that you and your husband will find peace here in the greatest country of all, the U.S.A.

Audrey signs her name and then stares at it. She hates her own signature.

*****

On Wednesday Audrey returns to the county jail to see her brother. Twenty minutes into waiting for the policeman to appear, while busy avoiding the glances of young children, an old woman in a long raincoat brushes against Audrey and explains, as if Audrey has asked, that she is here to see her nephew. "It's his birthday this weekend," she says. "I have to leave town soon. Oh, dear." She looks at the empty front desk, then

at her watch.

Audrey sneaks a look at the people behind her. “Step in front of me,” she whispers.

“God bless you,” the woman whispers back.

“I feel,” Audrey says to Rich, “decidedly frowned upon here.”

“Oh yeah?” he says. “Me, too.”

“You should have heard the people in line when I let an old woman in front of me. They might have shot me if the red-haired police officer hadn’t entered.”

There is less to say after this. Rich seems tired, and he seems to have gained weight in the last few days, in his cheeks. “What are you eating?” she asks. “What have you eaten today?”

“Shitty chicken patty with shitty beans.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

Rich chuckles into his fist. “What do you think?”

“You can call Dad if you like. It’s your responsibility. That’s all I’m saying.”

Rich shakes his head. “Got nothin’ to do with Dad. What the fuck, man—what’s it matter?”

“It matters.”

“Nah. I’m alone here.”

“I’m so damn mad at you.”

“Too bad.”

“Too bad!” Audrey repeats. Audrey knew what to expect this time—she knew, for example, to pick the phone up first—and this knowledge has made her braver. “What

am I supposed to do now?"

Rich cocks his head to the side. "Wha?"

"Who's going to be there?"

Rich shrugs his shoulders dramatically, looks right up into the camera lens in order to stare Audrey in the eyes. "Go on a fucking date! Try that!"

Audrey blinks, her chest contracting. "What's that on your head?" she asks.

Rich's hand moves to a reddish scrape near the start of his receding hairline. He touches it, rubs at it. "Had a little scuffle," he says.

"Oh, Richard."

"Different rules in here. Gotta defend myself right quick."

Audrey is struck by a flash of the immediate future: Rich putting the phone down in six minutes and thirty four seconds, walking back to his cell in handcuffs, glaring at other men along the way. Audrey wonders whether other people are frightened of Rich. She wonders whether *she* is frightened of him. She believes she is—has been—for a long time. Ever since he was born, really, and she began to worry that he would disappear.

"In my bedroom," Rich says, "there's a gun."

Audrey closes her eyes and shakes her head. "No—" she begins.

"Listen up! It's for the fuckin' deer, alright? Christ. Shoot 'em. Or shoot the sky. Whatever you want."

Audrey is still shaking her head. She looks right and left. "I don't want it there! What if someone comes? To search your room?"

Rich laughs. "Shit," he says. "You're more paranoid than me."

*****

Audrey Pope owns only three books: Strunk and White's *Elements of Style,* The Holy Bible (King James Version), and her mother's copy of *Ethan Frome*. Whenever Audrey is impelled to buy another book she tells herself that she has a library membership for a reason, then she borrows the book in question and records in her series of alphabetized notebooks the title, author, and summary, along with a quick assessment of its quality. The next evening Audrey makes an entry about a book called *Home Gardening Solutions*. "Quite handy!" she writes. "Would recommend to a friend!"

"Dad," says Audrey, closing her notebook, "listen to this."

Her father stirs on the couch, smacking his lips. "Eh?" he says. "Whaddaya need?"

"No, listen." Audrey mutes the television game show, clears her throat, and brings the book closer to her failing eyes. "For ridding your garden of deer, those beautiful but sometimes pesky creatures, try this clever, time-tested remedy: Place a lock of human hair inside a porous satchel and tie it to a low-hanging tree branch within twenty yards of the garden. The scent will intimidate the deer, and your veggies will be safe." Audrey looks up. "What do you think of that?"

"I heard of it," says her father. He pushes himself up off the couch with a groan. "But I don't buy it."

"It would have been easy to do," says Audrey, "last week."

"What?"

"Last week!" Audrey says, louder. "Before I cut my hair!"

"Oh," he says. "You want coffee? I'm making coffee."

"Dad," says Audrey, "don't you wonder where Rich is?"

Her father turns his back to her, then limps into the kitchen. "No!" he calls over his shoulder.

Audrey sits still for a moment, then follows him. Their kitchen is helpless—no matter how Audrey cleans it the floor still looks dirty, and the countertops are stained with now unknowable substances. "You've given up on him, haven't you?" she asks.

Her father unplugs the toaster in order to plug in the coffee maker. He turns it on then turns it off, spins around as if wondering what steps he has omitted. "He is a man now," he says. "A man needs left alone." He opens the cabinets, squinting into them.

"The coffee's in the refrigerator, Dad. Where it always is."

Audrey goes upstairs to her bedroom, taking the steps slowly because her legs and arms are inexplicably sore—the way they would feel ages ago after hours of chasing Rich through the backyard in the rain. She turns on the bedroom light and opens the top drawer of her dresser, where she keeps her pantyhose. She grabs one pair, tosses them to the bed, then opens one of the tiny drawers of her jewelry box, meant to store rings Audrey doesn't own. She pulls out a blue silk satchel and reaches inside it. Bound by a thin rubber-band is a four-inch lock of Audrey's mother's hair: dark like Rich's, wiry and stiff like Audrey's. Audrey cut it off of her mother's head at the viewing, after everyone had left, when Marty Shaw stood right next to Audrey with his arm wrapped tightly around her as if to hold her up or smash her into a part of him. Frances' neck was broken—that was all.

Audrey snipped the hair off, held it up, and said, "They should have set it in rollers."

"Ah, yes," said Marty Shaw. "Rollers would have been lovely."

At the exact time of the accident that killed Frances, Marty Shaw had been convincing Audrey to move in with him. He had a beautiful apartment in Cincinnati, full of quirky, exotic trinkets from his travels abroad, all of which Marty would describe to Audrey while they sat in his large-windowed living room, he drinking Cabernet, she drinking ginger ale. His favorite place in all of the world, oddly, was Cincinnati. Audrey liked Cincinnati just fine—she liked walking the River Front with Marty quite a bit—but she didn't think she could ever settle down there. How would she learn to parallel park? Marty told her she wouldn't have to worry about a thing. "I'll take care of you," he said. "We'll be partners."

Audrey sipped at her ginger ale. "Does that mean we're getting married?"

"Well, yes. Yes. Maybe we are." Marty Shaw had never been married. Audrey looked at him skeptically, but underneath her placid exterior she could feel her whole body swell, fly toward him headlong, as if Marty were a supernova and she were herself: Audrey Pope with her little shoulders scrunched up around her ears, politely asking for directions. She couldn't stop herself. She wanted it—the dress, the flowers, even the years upon years of moaning in a big poster bed with bloody towels underneath her, if that was her destiny. And although she hadn't even mentioned Marty to her parents (she'd told them she was a member of five poetry writing groups in Cincinnati), she called home right then, from Marty's telephone in the master bedroom, to tell them the news. No one answered. They were at the hospital, where Frances already lay dead.

After the funeral, when Marty asked politely whether Audrey's father would mind him returning to the house on Woodlawn Avenue, Edward simply nodded and placed his sallow hand on Marty's shoulder. Audrey went straight to the upstairs bathroom to vomit

once they got there, and when she returned she found Marty in the kitchen with her father and nine-year-old Rich, explaining to them how to make a pot of coffee. "It's sometimes tricky," he said, "getting the ratios right." Rich stood with his back against the wall, staring up at Marty with a combination of awe and fear. Marty chucked him under the chin. "Right, little man?"

Audrey went to one of the porch chairs and looked in her lap at the dress she was wearing—a pretty black dress with buttons down the front that she'd bought at J.C. Penney weeks before, never knowing what she'd wind up wearing it to. She thought of the times and the places that she'd bought her shoes, her headband, and her bracelet. That was all *THEN* in her head. Another time entirely, when she was another person entirely. She could hear Marty's voice in the kitchen, her father mumbling in response. Whatever had allowed Audrey to love Marty yesterday was gone. She knew that pleasure was going to be very hard to do well, from now on.

She stopped receiving Marty's calls. She found excuses not to make the drive to Cincinnati. Eventually, Marty scheduled a month-long vacation to Lake Tahoe and Audrey did not go along. This was the unspoken end of their relationship.

Audrey shoves the lock of hair into one toe-end of her pantyhose. She slips on a coat and sneaks outside to tie the pantyhose around one of the wooden stakes.

"It won't work," says her father, when she settles back into her reading chair.

"We'll see."

*****

Audrey hands back her students' corrected essays at the end of the next day. They lean toward each other's desks, exchange papers with nervous titters, whispering of

how humiliated they are. All this makes Audrey uncomfortable. “Okay!” she says, clapping her hands. “Time to go!”

While erasing the board, Audrey can once again feel Toyoko’s lingering presence behind her. When Audrey turns Toyoko is standing next to Audrey’s desk, holding the essay in front of her chest in the same way Audrey has seen people at airports holding signs announcing other people’s names. Audrey sees the red marks on it and feels ashamed for having had the audacity to make them. “Thank you for helping me,” says Toyoko.

“Oh,” says Audrey. “Of course. Your essay was touching.”

“Yes?” By the way Toyoko says it, Audrey can tell that she hasn’t understood.

Audrey says, “I simply mean that I was sorry to hear about your daughter.”

Toyoko’s hand moves to her mouth. “Oh, no, no. I don’t want to make you sad.”

“It’s quite alright. There’s nothing wrong with a little sadness every now and then. If it’s controllable.”

“Yes,” says Toyoko. She smiles.

By the way Toyoko stands, her back straight and her feet firmly planted, Audrey suspects that the conversation might take a while. “Do you have a particular question for me, Toyoko?”

“Yes.”

“You do? You have a question?”

“Question? Oh, no. No.”

Audrey nods. She begins to put her books into her satchel. “You seem like a very cheerful person, Toyoko. You don’t look as if something so awful happened to

you." There is Toyoko's smiling face, and her blissful incomprehension. "My mother died a long time ago," Audrey continues, "and I haven't been cheerful since. For a while, every single person I met was the kid who killed her."

Toyoko seems to want to keep smiling, but something in Audrey's tone is stopping her. She looks at her essay and folds it in half, using her fingernail to intensify the crease. She keeps her eyes on the floor.

Audrey says, "I want to feel that you and I have a bond of some kind because we have lost people. But—"

Audrey turns her back to Toyoko and puts her hands over her face. She cannot say Rich's name, but it is everywhere, churning through her body right along with her blood. *Rich, Rich, Rich.* Audrey is on the other side from Toyoko, more different from her than alike. It is not so hard, after all, to imagine Rich as the killer of Toyoko's child. It is not so hard to imagine him putting a chef's knife into a duffel bag, walking through the open doors of an elementary school, pulling the chef's knife out. She can imagine him as anything now. She can imagine what his eyes might look like in the act: more vibrant, more *seeing*, than otherwise.

"Sensei?"

Audrey turns to find that Toyoko has stepped closer to her—that her hand is extended, ready to find a place, perhaps, on Audrey's shoulder. Audrey stops the hand before it can get there. She clasps it, dry and thin, and then gives it a quick squeeze of finality. "I'm terribly sorry to have made you feel uncomfortable. You have done nothing wrong."

"It is good," says Toyoko. "It is very fine. Okay."

Audrey checks her mailbox in the teacher's lounge and finds a letter from Rich at the very bottom. Instead of a name in the return address there is a number: #1000896. Audrey sits down right there, opens the envelope, and finds two white sheets of loose-leaf paper—the same kind she encourages her students to buy. The sample letters are written in pencil, in surprisingly neat and stout letters that remind Audrey of a young girl's handwriting.

September 18

Brian Duchamp,

I am writing this letter to you from jail which is where I belong for the very bad thing I did to you. I know that me saying I'm sorry doesn't change anything or make you better but I had a lot of time to think about it since I been hear and I now know I got carryed (?) away and flipped out and never should of. If you hate me I know why.

From,

Richard Pope

Audrey doesn't read the second letter, the letter to Brian Duchamp's family. She removes her red grading pen from her bag, takes the cap off, and inserts the word "Dear" before Brian Duchamp's name. She stares at the rest of the letter until her eyes begin to blur, then she puts the cap back on the pen.

*****

"Well," says Rich, "did you get the letters?"

"I did."

"And?"

"And I made only one correction. You'll see."

"What correction?"

"You must always begin letters with 'Dear,' even when you don't know or like the person."

"Man!"

"But everything else," says Audrey, "was perfect."

Rich nods. He scratches at the scab on his head.

"And now you must do me a favor in return," she says.

Rich laughs. "You want me to mow the fuckin' lawn?"

"I want you to tell me exactly what you did to this man. This Brian Duchamp."

"Aww!" Rich throws his head back. "Come on! You already know!"

"No," says Audrey. "In fact, I don't."

*****

When Audrey comes home that evening she calls for her father, listens for a moment to the silence, then creeps upstairs where she finds him taking a nap on his perfectly-made bed. He lay on his side, facing Audrey with his shirt off. His breasts and stomach sag toward the quilt. He snores softly.

Audrey goes back downstairs and opens the door to Rich's bedroom. Rich never allowed Audrey to enter it when he lived in the house, and it now reflects the neglect; the rug under the bed hasn't been vacuumed in years and there are tiny black ants crawling over the surface of his otherwise barren desk, surrounding a sticky patch of dried liquid that is most probably beer. Audrey makes the bed and fluffs the pillow, then looks

around carefully. Nothing about this place carries Rich's mark. There are no photos, no gadgets or knick-knacks or even clothes strewn about. Instead of a curtain, Rich has thumb-tacked a blanket over the window. Audrey peers underneath his bed but there is nothing. She pulls the desk chair to the closet and steps onto it, reaching to the top shelf, feeling blindly with her hands. She retrieves a folder filled with papers documenting Rich's last incarceration. A Polaroid picture falls out: Rich lying next to a shirtless woman with a shaved head. They stare the camera down, unsmiling. Rich cups one of her breasts in his hand.

Finally, Audrey finds it, wrapped in an old beach towel: a small black case with metal flip tabs that holds a gun pressed into plush red velvet. She might call the gun beautiful, if guns could be such things. It is black and sleek and pleasantly weighty in her hand.

Outside, the screeching of the crickets is oppressive, and the air is thick with humidity. Although it has been threatening to storm for a few nights now, it still hasn't. Audrey sits on the screened-in back porch, the gun lying on the table in front of her.

"What's that?" asks Edward, startling Audrey into a gasp.

"It's a gun," she says.

"Well, what the hell for?"

"For the deer, Dad. If they come."

Her father harrumphs and steps closer, peering, adjusting his glasses. He shakes his head and sits in the chair next to Audrey. "You gonna shoot 'em?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"You'll take your foot off."

Audrey glances at him. He cocks his head to one side, as if he can hear the storm coming from far off.

"Dad?" says Audrey.

"Mm," he says.

"Rich is back in jail."

Her father doesn't look at her. He looks down, then back to the night. "How bad is it?" he asks.

"Fairly bad," says Audrey. "On September Ninth in Over-the-Rhine he assaulted a man named Brian Duchamp. He broke his right arm, three of his ribs, and ruptured his spleen. He broke his cheek bone and his jaw, and gave him internal bleeding in his stomach. He—"

"Enough," says her father, his hand raised. "Enough."

"You have to hear it, Dad. You have to. You're in this, too."

He takes his glasses off, tosses them with a clatter next to the gun. He rubs at his eyes. "I'll wait with you," he says. He sits in the chair next to her. "I'll shoot, if you want."