

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Sarah Kovatch for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 27, 2005. Title: Six Stories.

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Marjorie Sandor

The purpose of this document is to display a portion of the work I have completed over the last two years.

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Six Stories

by
Sarah Kovatch

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APPROVED:

Redacted for privacy [^] Major Professor,
representing Creative Writing

Redacted for privacy Chair of the
Department of English

Redacted for privacy Dean of the Graduate
School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Sarah Kovatch, Author

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Scare Mommy

I

“Read to me, read to me!” You say, and your mother sits down in a cushioned chair with *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. You are three and intrigued with all of baby bear’s accessories. You love to obsess over his things that are kind of like your things: his tiny porridge spoon (what’s porridge? you ask, night after night), his own tiny teddy-bear propped against pillow, and his wee stack of picture books beside his splintered ladder back chair.

Nestling into your mother’s lap you insist on being in charge of the page-turning, correcting her when she strays from the exact wording, for you know this story by heart. Although it is bedtime, you wear a ratty black tutu fastened over your footie pajamas. This is your link to another world and you are rarely seen without it. “Read to me, read to me!” You can’t go to sleep without a story.

Settling into the tale, you let your page-turning duty slide, sinking into your mother. You have both just taken a shower—always a tad traumatizing to be under water—and now that the steam has lifted and evaporated you feel warm and cool at the same time. Your mother is wearing a long white bathrobe and has her hair wrapped in a towel. She is your mermaid mommy and you love being in the nest of her lap when she wears her terry cloth robe. It smells good: sweet, like warm honey, but also clean and soapy. You grip a thready brown and yellow blanket and part of her robe in one hand, drowsily sucking your thumb.

You’re a little in love with Goldi and her sausage roll curls tied up with a stiff pink bow, doing all the things you would never do. “What’s porridge?” you ask again as Goldi gobbles up baby bear’s breakfast.

“Like cereal,” your mother says for the second time, petting damp hair off your forehead with a soft and cool hand. She’ll say it yet again when the bears return and discover that someone’s been eating their porridge. You have other books where porridge is featured and even more books where animals talk and keep house. One day, you think, you’ll visit one of these places. Although you don’t like most new food, you’re curious about porridge because of the way it steams from the pretty round bowls and especially because of the way the word feels sounds: as if from a distant land, but still, a land you feel you belong to.

You cannot get close enough to the pictures in the book. You press the pages flat with your hands and nose the page, certain you can catch the drawings move if you get close enough. You are lost in one of the crucial scenes: Goldi is sleeping, and the

three bears return to the cottage. Papa Bear's face is angry and he holds his paw in the air. Out of nowhere, your mother's voice changes. She bellows as if from the bottom of a rain barrel, "Someone's been eating MY porridge!" It's a thunderous gravelly voice.

It is as though a hard rubber ball is bounced on your chest. You startle, pop your thumb out of your mouth, swivel your head around and say, "Mommy?" You can feel her solid legs beneath her robe, can even smell the sweetness of her soap; you just can't help but check, to see if it really still is *her*.

When you look at her, her face oddly regular, there is no trace of the strange voice. Her expression challenges, *What, did you hear something?*

"What's wrong, Pancake?" she asks playfully, in her real voice.

You turn back to the book, alert now, feeling jumpy. Outside it is dark and windy. Wind rattles the windows of your old house. The slightest rustle, the slightest light bulb flicker can send you into a whirlwind of fear. When the heat suddenly clangs on through the radiator pipes, you imagine that the innerworkings of the house are coming to get you. Before bedtime, anything can happen.

On the next page, the bears proceed to discover their bear-world upended. You take comfort in the predictability of this routine. One step ahead of these bears, you already know what they will find and you laugh a little, to think about their surprise. Lingering on this ravished living room scene, you pick out all of your favorite details. This is the climax, the page you wait for because it is the only page without words, just one big picture spread out onto two pages. You always point to the bear family's coo-coo clock on the wall, to the spider web in the corner. You always say, "hell-oooooh in there," to the mouse hole in the wall. You always take your mother's finger and count all of the mice hidden throughout the room.

Turning the page, you feel your mother muster a deep breath. Papa Bear stands in front of a chair with a tousled cushion. She pauses a moment then roars: "Someone's been sitting in MY chair!" This time her voice is louder, deeper.

"No!" you protest, at once peeling into soggy sobs, "Do your REAL voice!" You swivel around in a snap, all messy nose and blurry eyes, to see her face: suddenly she looks scary with her hair wrapped in a towel. No hair; all face. Who knows what could come out of her mouth? She is in cahoots with the radiator pipes, the squeaky floors, the rattling windows. Whimpers cramp your throat.

"But that's how they talk," she explains in her normal motherly tone, only softer and in a higher pitch than usual. You can tell she's about to laugh.

You don't want her to sound like any bear. Papa, baby, or even mama. "No!" you say again, shrieking, now livid.

"What's the fun of reading Goldilocks if you don't do the voices?"

“I don’t like any voices!” you declare.

“But you like pretending, this is just pretending,” she says, her dark pale face in a tall towel looks naked except for raised eyebrows and shining eyes. She laughs, tilting her towel-head back. “Why don’t you try doing Papa Bear, Pancake. It’s fun. Go ahead, see if you can scare mommy.”

But you feel shy. You cork your mouth with your withered little thumb and writhe in her lap, hiding your eyes with your blanket and the sleeve of her robe.

“Oh-kay” she sighs. “No more bear voices for little Pancake.” Even though she’s sticking to the agreement, you keep your head turned away, making her turn all the pages, refusing to enjoy the pictures. Toddler spite.

She kisses you in her funny way, a stream of rapid and repeated kisses, a trick that you are still too slow to do as well as her, in a place between your cheek and neck—fast kisses tickle there—and turns out the light. Her body wrapped in terry cloth disappears in the dark and you only see her face. Then she turns away, for the door.

“I want the hall light on!” you scream.

“I know, I know,” she says.

You keep your eyes open, boycotting bedtime, and listen to her walk down the creaky staircase.

Alone in your narrow wooden bed you feel regretful now, about turning away from the book, wishing you could have seen Goldie’s curls catching wind as she escapes the cottage.

It is not the last time your mother will catch you off guard with a Papa Bear-performance. Every once in a while she’ll do it again, testing you—an agonizing tickle—you hate to be scared before bed. But you ask for The Three Bears night after night, begging to be bewitched.

II

At age six, you watch your father, an artist, a painter, on his hands and knees on the floorboards of the living room, painting a canvas of a face. The canvas is as tall as you are. Stranded with him during the summer days while your mother works at the hospital, you watch him paint, ducking in and out of your library book and dangerously airing your toes against the box fan. You catch a whiff of paint every now and then searing through the summer humidity. You like the smell; it makes your nose feel clean. Propping up in the posts of a nearby doorway—a favorite nook—you read Little House on the Prairie, thrilled that you and Laura Ingalls live in the same part of America. On the book cover she wears a bonnet. What you wouldn’t give for a bonnet! You wish you could visit other eras to try on the clothes, to use the tools, to eat the food, to play with

the toys from back then. You want to test yourself, to see if you have what it takes to be a pilgrim.

Your father uses his fingers instead of a paintbrush, and his face is red from bending over so long. He sits up, cracks his shoulders, and squints at his painting. He has a worm of a concentration-wrinkle in his forehead (his painting expression: he will not laugh at your jokes much when he looks like this) and his messy hands held in the air.

“Who’s that,” you ask, holding the place in your book.

The face, shaped like a big pointy heart, is surrounded by masses of black hair filling the canvas all the way to the edges.

“It’s mom, Pancake,” he says, hunkering down again, his thick fingers sweeping dark blusters of paint. The eyes on the pointy heart are black and enormous, as big as your father’s hands. They are unfamiliar, and you stare at them with fascination and disgust, the way you would stare the bent shape of a dead bird in the road. Still freshly wet, the eyes look like holes you could fall into and die.

Your father has speckles of paint on his jeans and tee shirt and he’s made a mess of the floorboards. He leans closer to the face and his blond hair flops over his forehead.

This is not what your mother looks like! Nothing about the painting is pretty, the way photographs look, or drawings of women in books look. In real life, your mother looks like the Sun Maid Raisin Lady on the red box with the red bonnet and basket of grapes. Her hair is soft and brown like the raisin lady’s; her expression is pretty, her eyes upturned in a smile. Your mother and the Raisin Lady tilt their head to one side in the same way, lovingly. But this painting! You are distracted by it, unable to sink back into the pilgrim world, angry at him for making her look so monstrous, so unlike a real person, especially your mother. The overwhelming cloak of hair, the sharp face, those wet midnight-eyes, the scrape of a mouth scares you but also puts you off, like a strange smell.

Months later, the big painting hangs in a black frame and looms on the far wall of their bedroom. You want to know what your mother has to say for it—you feel too bashful to question her—what if it’s true? What if that *is* how she is sometimes, when you’re not looking? A digging feeling in your gut knows that this is a possibility. You feel shy standing in front of the painting and staring at it. Something about it is like spying on someone undressing. But when you let yourself briefly glance at the face in the frame, you feel the same sensation you get standing at the edge of a pool and teetering forward: that strange inside feeling of almost falling. She seems to not even notice the painting as anything but just another piece of art, just another strange painting on the wall. *That’s you, you know!* You want to tell her this, but never do. You want to shove

her at it—you want her to explain it to you, to own up, as if it is her fault she looks that way.

III

By the time you are in your twenties, far from home away at college, when family eccentricities are badges of honor, something you brag about while rolling your eyes—the pride of the anomaly—a happy burden, you’ve learned to love the painting. It is beautiful. Maybe the most beautiful painting you have ever seen. To this older you, the painting looks mythic, timeless, wild, yet impenetrably sad—she is a nymph, a dragon, a brown-haired angel. The painting, though just of her face, reveals a long porcelain neck wrapped with gusts of black hair: this makes you think she was naked where the painting ends.

But what is it about the painting that still scares you as an adult? Though you’re old enough to appreciate those abstract eyes, the crude lines, something about the face continues to unnerve you. It is certainly your mother’s face, a recognizable likeness in the swirls and finger-strokes, but as a snapshot could never capture. And in a way you will never, could never, know her. This makes you spiteful when you concentrate on it too much—you are not sure if you like that glow of hers. You wonder: *When will I ever glow this way?* Youthful energy, passion, but also wisdom is swept up in her hair and burning through her enormous eyes, large as puddles.

Old enough to love the painting, to wonder at it and delight in the ambiguity of beauty, fear, and—gasp!—the sexiness of her repose; you have grown this longing to ask your mother a question. You’ve written down your question and tucked it in your change purse to keep it close to you, waiting for the unimaginable moment to ask.

What you want so badly to ask is this: You want to know—you must know—if she’s ever loved anyone before your father. The wise face in the picture seems to want to show you the ways of romance—so different from the nurse-face, always cautioning against meningitis and lime disease. You know she was married fairly young, early twenties, the age you are now, and you must know if she ever felt the surge of love with another man before your father. It’s not a necessary question, say, about the family tree or how do you make pie crust, it’s just a nosy little question easily classified in the, none-of-your business category.

But you must know. You think about this all the time, your popeyed soul rapt in wonder, starves for this question to be answered. During those special late-at-night chats you have with your housemates you ask if they could ever ask their mothers this question. A soft girl with freckles on her arms and legs tells you with an air of holiness; *my mom is my best friend*. Others tell you that they never speak to their mothers. How simple their lives seem with their constants and absolutes. Given the right mood you stare into the

faces of people you pass on the street and think, “they have a mother.” You are easily dizzied, easily moved by contemplation, by feeling part of something larger—yet also as alone as an acorn, dropped.

Over your long Christmas vacation the first year of college, you spend an evening at your grandmother’s house poking through all of her old photograph-albums inspecting your mother’s face at every age. You are in one of your moods, gloomy as an antique shop, poring over the pictures, wishing you could pluck her out of pose and have conversations. You do not hear your mother leave the table of Aunts drinking coffee in the kitchen. She startles you when she leans over your shoulder and says, “Oh, ha. That skirt,” nodding at a picture in which she stands beside a butter-colored VW bug. You hate being caught in reverie and flip through the rest of the snapshots as if they were all the same.

The next day, back at your parents’ house, your Christmas vacation coming to an end, you wash a bowl in the kitchen sink while your mother wipes down the counter. You have asked her to show you how to make a cheesecake to take back to your housemates. It’s your grandmother’s recipe, an unusual cheesecake recipe made in a shallow sheet-cake pan and sliced into a grid of glossy white tiles. It feeds an army. Everyone loves it.

You are eager to get back to college life with the cake. Eager to return to your housemates and especially to that inky-eyed boy you had said goodbye to on a positive note before leaving for home. What if you start seriously dating him? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to make him the cheesecake? You flash forward to your lives together (a nasty habit you’ve been trying to break since junior high) and feel a primal—or maybe just old fashioned—instinct to feed him family recipes as he drools for more. Your mother doesn’t know about this boy, you’ve felt far too shy to tell her. After all, you barely know each other. It was only that you left a party together and walked around sleepy neighborhoods marveling at the warm fog in the air. Neither of you was tired in the least, and when sunrise came, you felt confident enough to talk on and on about how beautiful it was. It is just a crush, but each time you think of him your body flushes, overwhelmed that one person in the vast world has seen you before the morning sun. You imagine him watching you move gracefully about your old spotty relatives, patiently playing with your cousins, and glowing with holiday cheer. The mere thought of him has been the magic glimmer that made every mundane acrylic sweater you unwrap on Christmas morning Perfectly Marvelous.

Your fantasy is to unfurl all of your secrets about this boy as your mother shows you how to bake the cake. You will share a womanly moment while cracking eggs and buttering the pan. Then you will ask her the question you’ve been yearning to ask. “Did

you ever love anyone before dad?" You imagine yourself saying it softly, even though your father will be out of earshot watching the news upstairs. You imagine yourself asking the question while turning a wooden spoon in the belly of your great grandmother's ancient jadeite bowl—nothing timed or scripted of course—just womanly chit-chat as you bake side by side. You have no idea what she'll say! She was a beauty when she was your age, yes, she was dark and dusky. But she was also sheltered and naive. She had only left home twice (only to visit cousins). She was so innocent! Didn't even wear makeup for her wedding—you've seen the pictures. She wore a plain white dress and was surrounded with throngs of family. Her uncles played accordions and sang polkas. Nevertheless, you crave this conversation. You crave her reaction. You crave to tell her about your own romance. The desire is as powerful as hunger, as muscle soreness, as heartache.

Before you left for Reenie Reego's, the all-night grocery market, she told you, "Don't get the low fat ricotta cheese. Make sure you check the label carefully. It never comes out right with low fat." She told you this three times, and even noted it on the grocery list. You had felt just a twinge of insult because of it. It's not as if you've never baked anything before! You and your housemates bake chocolate chip cookies all the time, though it's true, the bottoms are usually black.

At the grocery store you had felt domestic, like the baking-pro, gathering this and that in a motherly way, using a basket in lieu of a cart. You even made the executive decision of brown eggs instead of white, wanting everything to be perfect and look classic. You wanted the checker to ask you what you were going to bake—how absurd—obviously you were baking: unsalted butter, eggs, sugar. But, unstoppable, you handed over the bills and said, "My mom and I are about to make a cake," proud and moved to share.

The checker looks tired and just smiles with closed lips and nods and you wonder how many customers impulsively tell her things. But, fingering the sack of flour with her purple-painted fingernails she says, "I hope it comes out good," and you feel satisfied with the small connection you've made.

Back in the kitchen you are feeling good, if a little nervous: the kitchen is clean and the lights are low. You feel the nervousness of a performance; your ridiculous hands quiver reaching for the cold silver tablespoon. You can't wait for the house to fill with a warm buttery smell from the graham cracker crust. You examine the recipe card in your grandmother's Catholic-school cursive as your mother shakes out a yawn. It's late at night and you're catching an early bus back to school but you had insisted on baking the cake. You thought she would feel good about you insisting—she had protested, but you kept insisting, explaining how important it was for you to learn to bake this cake. And you thought your insisting acceptable, different from, say, asking for money.

She looks tired, her eyes bloodshot and dull. “Tell me you’re joking, Pancake,” she says this helplessly and weak poking through the Reenie Reego bag. When she’s frustrated, she tends to emphasize the *pan*.

You look at her, confused.

“Low fat *cottage* cheese? You did this on purpose, right? I said get ricotta! I even wrote it on your list! Ricotta Cheese, Pancake—and not low fat! Rih-cah-tah! You’re just hiding it in the car, right?”

You have to look at the carton because you don’t believe her. Your heart plunks like a pebble. Gulping dryly you frown like, *who, me?*

You apologize and “swear to God” that you didn’t do it on purpose. Your hand presses your breast in that “theatrical” way that always prompts your mother to tell you to audition for something.

“Real funny,” she says in a thin defeated voice, the voice from a wooden cross. This, you take personally.

Maybe it’s just menopause. When you first moved to college, she mailed you a snapshot of herself that your father had taken, as a joke. In the photo she was smiling a cheesy smile and holding a book beneath her chin that said, “Menopause: What every woman should know.” You had chuckled at it then, and chuckled at the way she casually mentioned *menopause* on the phone with you all the time, speaking about *menopause* as if *menopause* were a family member or neighbor you were asking about.

She looks haggard. How did you miss it before? Dry eyed and wearing her green sweatpants and a long man’s shirt buttoned unevenly she could be mistaken for a street urchin. With those wide cheekbones she looks skeletal. But you do not want her to get the last word in about this—how absurd she’s being! Childish!

“Do you think I hate you?” you burst out, on the verge of tears, upset that she’s ruined the moment you meticulously calculated. “Tell me I’m being careless or stupid but don’t accuse me—” you trail off because you don’t recognize your own voice. It is that liminal voice of yours: angry, injured, and growling. You look out separate windows, she out the window over the kitchen sink, you out at the dark front yard, the empty bird feeder. It’s nearly midnight.

It occurs to you that if you were back at school with your housemates, you would just run back to the store—what, it’s only midnight!—pick up a box of pink wine—why not!—and return to the house unfazed and ready to bake. Who cares if the oven looks crusty? Your lifestyles, it strikes you, are entirely different. You want her to know this, but you are afraid to speak. She looks at you from a new face now: no longer weak and exhausted but quite aware, gathering momentum, and amusement.

“So. What is it then?” She breaks the silence.

“What is what?”

“What is it that’s distracting you? What were you thinking of instead of this? Her tone is lawyerly and she’s smiling as if to say, *I know you’re up to something, missy.* You feel like a little girl in trouble. Resentful, you flinch-and-blink, a move you’ve perfected since junior high, along with the slack-jawed-eye-roll. Back at school you never have to deal with being cross-examined.

“Nothing,” You shrug and stare her down. “I guess I’m just careless,” you say, blank-faced.

“Oh.”

She looks small in her big clothes; you feel evil. You register the missed opportunity, your stubbornness only hurting yourself. She says, “I’ve got to get to bed,” and you think: Fine. Be tired.

You focus on your fingers until you hear her climb the first step. Then you start putting the cooking supplies back in the cabinets and drawers.

Next morning at the bus stop, gauzy headed, you wave goodbye to both of your parents and settle into your seat relieved to be taken away from them. Back at school, you never see that boy again. At this you are sad, confused, and embarrassed. You’re almost relieved you didn’t tell your mother about it. But the other question still nags. Part of you blames your failure with this boy on your ignorance of your mother’s past. You want her to give you the go-ahead. You need her to say: Onward, Girl.

When it finally happens it is nothing as romantic as over baking a family cake recipe—the two of you are having chicken salads at Pickles. You had both thought about getting burgers, fries, and chocolate malt but then didn’t.

You are one month out of college and you have all the time in the world. Too afraid to fly, your mother has taken a two thousand-mile train trip, alone, to spend a few days with you and to help you move into a new apartment—the first place you’ve ever lived alone. You have a job walking an elderly lady’s dog (a very large dog) and you think your volunteer position at the nursery school might turn into something lucrative soon. With all of this on your horizon you insist on taking your mother out. “It’s on me,” you say with your chin up.

When you haven’t seen her in some time, she always looks a little less vibrant, her thick colors slowly draining, but the train ride seems to have given her an ethereal glow: sleepy, pale, and queenly.

You have trouble saying words with large meanings. Like Love. You have to say, “The L-Word” mock-seductively or skirt around it by spelling, “Ya know, L.O.V.E.” and make faces around it—eyelash flutters. Or sometimes you say, “Luuuv,” like a

country singer. You think that this makes everyone (yourself included) a lot more comfortable. But this time, for some reason, you can't help saying the word over and over again, like tripping on a stone, then stumbling, then falling. It's like slapstick the way it keeps coming out of your mouth.

"Before you loved dad, what was your love life like? Did you love any other men?"

Your mother's face looks frightened at first and you want to wave your hands in disclaimer—oh, you don't have to tell me—but you don't. You smile and bow your head and wait, your heart mounting into your neck. You can't tell if she's glad you asked or if she feels invaded. She hates when you tease her about men looking at her—she doesn't believe you though it's true—and you want her to know this is not one of those teasing times. You want a slice of her history. You can already feel yourself speaking like her, her exact timbre and pitch emerging from your mouth in a ghostly way when you answer the phone or laugh nervously. In the same way puberty happened (sort gradually and just every once in a while) you feel yourself becoming her. You both save missing buttons in a jar. Why? You both wipe the countertops with paper towels in public rest rooms. You both repeat yourselves too much when you're arguing with someone.

She laughs. Then frowns. Then she smiles but with frown-eyes, and says, "you really want to know, huh?"

She arranges her hands in a nervous thicket of fingers—you recognize for the first time that your hands have the same personality, your nail beds the same shape—and she says to you quietly, "Yes, I guess I thought I did." She smiles and tilts her head at you, the old raisin lady, the raisin lady with a mysterious past, the seductress in the stormy painting—your mother—meets your eyes then shies her eyes toward the window.

Her answer only makes that aching gap in your soul a little wider—but also warms you with hope. You steal a private moment to envision the painting—that never ending hair and pale neck—and stare at her face for one long second before she looks away.

Heart and Soul

Your mother wants to make music. When you are ten years old, she sees an ad in the Thrifty Nickel for an upright piano and a week later it is standing endwise in your cramped octagonal living room. Since it can't stand against the heating vent or on the wall with the oval yellow, red, and indigo stained glass window, it has to go against That Wall which means your father has to move the green corduroy couch to the middle of the room. The piano is old, chipped, missing key-tops, and nicked, but still has lavish details: swirling woodwork, ornate feet, and a stool with a worn red velvet cover. At this stage of girlhood you think: this is something for rich people. You are given to banging on it quite a bit at first because of its novelty—its incongruity—in your living room. It's like having a new sibling or a good-with-kids house-guest. But your mother looks glum and left out when you touch it; she watches you from the doorframe, cocking her head. At thirty-nine she is beautiful: the posts and lintels frame her body, her wavy long hair frames her cheekbones, her long neck, and her brown eyes. When you invite her to bang the keys with you she tells you that she has vowed not to play until her piano lessons have officially begun. "How will I know what to do with the keys till then?" she says logically, and adds, "It's not a toy."

This hunk of wood could be from a saloon a hundred years ago. The wood is warped on the sides and never looks clean. In fact, the piano looks as though it has spent a few sad nights outside in the rain. And until her lessons begin, your mother spends time cleaning it with a rag and spray-bottle that she has labeled with a vis-à-vis pen, "Piano Cleaner." She's so gentle, she could be rubbing down a sleeping whale. She sprays and dusts the swirling woodwork and the heads of each key, they quietly play as she works her way down the spine, as if she is imagining she is one of the great ones, the ones she listens to on the radio.

For as long as you can remember, your mother has listened to classical music on the AM radio station. She switches it on in the car while driving you to school, she plays it in the kitchen while cooking or cleaning up, and it wakes her up in the morning on her alarm clock as she ties on her robe and fixes coffee. The subdued voiced radio announcers are so familiar they could be your friends or relatives. Oh, that one, you think. That's Eli Sage, the afternoon guy. Oh yes, Christian Cook, the one with the British accent. On the way to the supermarket one Saturday afternoon, driving in the car with your mother and all the windows rolled down, the radio announcer's velvet voice says, *This piece by Beethoven seems to begin with a question. It's a playful piece, full of life and humor just like the young Beethoven.*

Your mother, rapt, says, “Interesting,” vigorously nodding her head in agreement. You don’t see what’s so interesting, nor do you see the humor in the music. “What’s funny about it?” you ask.

“Don’t you think it’s mischievous?” she replies. “It kind of reminds me of you, Pancake. Just listen.”

Your mother and father call you Pancake because for most of your life you have been too picky to eat almost everything except pancakes and plain noodles. Since you’ve recently branched out a bit, you sometimes resent the nickname.

“Oh, hardee-har-har,” you say, mocking the whole scene.

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When you were much younger, you thought that your mother was the woman on the box of Sun-Maid Raisins. There she was, you thought, in the middle of the red backdrop standing in the yellow sunburst with her head tilted compassionately to the left. That long brown hair, those creamy arms, the strong eyebrows and delicate cheeks. Your mother! Most of all, it was her eyes, you thought. Wide-set and large, sparkling with love and care. Those eyes seemed to be holding you. Every time you looked at the box of raisins, you had a feeling it was your mother’s picture. The feeling didn’t surprise you. Your toddler’s egocentric view of the world assumed that the world knew your mother, that she was a part of everyone’s life, she could do anything, even harvest raisins. Now, standing before her piano you can imagine your mother singing and playing at the same time. Or maybe wearing a concert dress and in front of an auditorium of people. You have faith that the same fingers she uses for “tickle machine” will whip up and down those keys playing any song you request.

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After what seems like months of the awkward piano just sitting there, overgrown and silent, your mother’s lessons finally begin. She purchases a book of music from a music store downtown. You are with her admiring the colorful electric guitars as she takes her time choosing a book. She ends up with *Music For Beginners* and you are disappointed to see, thumbing through it on the drive home, no songs you recognize except *This Old Man*. The other songs have titles like, *Spanish Piazza*, *Mischievous Kittens*, and *The Ferris Wheel*. She also purchases a shiny black metronome. This, she explains to you, keeps time, keeps beat, so you don’t play too fast or too slow. The metronome, an object you haven’t yet catalogued in your ten-year-old taxonomy of things, fascinates you, seeming like a kind of clock or treasure safe. At home, you set it and release the on-button, listening to the strict ticks. Beating your eyelashes in time with the ticking metronome makes you feel like a butterfly.

“You could do this with me, Pancake,” she says, catching you examining the metronome. “We could take lessons together; wouldn’t you like to learn how to play too?”

“I don’t think so,” you say, remembering your brief stint of violin lessons last year. Such an adorable and tiny instrument, but oh-so difficult to learn. You had merely wanted your own violin to play with but when you quit the lessons after a week, the violin was returned to the elementary school music department.

“You know, Pancake, when I was your age, we didn’t have a piano—too poor—so I wasn’t allowed to take lessons. But my brother on the other hand he got...”

“Yeah, I know,” you say, cutting her off. You have memorized most of her stories and these days, are never in the spirit to listen.

ooo

One night your mother comes home from the hospital where she works as a nurse on the IV team, takes off her lab coat, puts on a faded sweatshirt, and fixes chicken pot pie. A few stubs of candles burn in the middle of the table and you joke around with your father as your mother tells you to eat at least ten more peas: ten, because you are ten years old. You stick out a rolled tongue at your plate and flutter your lashes, pretending to choke to death with each swallow. Your father chuckles but stops when your mother puts her fork down looking at the two of you.

“Eat your peas, Pancake,” he tells you gently.

After dinner, as you help your mother dry the dinner dishes, your father ducks his head in the kitchen and cupping keys in his hand says, “—Should probably get going to the studio.”

He spends every evening after dinner at his studio working with clay, making stuff. When you go to bed at night, he is still there wedging arm fulls of clay on canvas tabletops, kneading it like bread dough for giants. You kiss him goodbye on the whiskers of his cactus cheek and night after night he says cheerfully, “Back to work I go!”

You hear your mother say under her breath: Work.

She washes the inside of one of the chunky clay mugs he made and lets out the steam of a long sigh.

He says: Hey. Just because I happen to love what I do—

Her forehead looks a little wrinklier when she makes a face into the sink full of dishwater. You vow to yourself never to make that face. It is not pretty.

Your father is an artist and he loves work. He makes heavy round balls out of clay, embedded with shards of mirrors and glass weighing over four hundred pounds.

Nobody buys them. For money he makes ceramic plates, bowls, pitchers, loaf pans,

and even silverware strainers. Wedding sets mostly. Everyone wants their set to be blue, although one year (you heard him complain) coral-colored dinnerware was in high demand. But his real love, his sculptures, those globe-like monsters, overflow the rooms out to the back yard where they crouch in the grass; birds alight on the mirrored shiny crests and in winter, snow blankets the tops.

When the door closes behind your father, your mother's tired face blooms to a more cheerful expression, more like the Sun Maid Raisin Lady.

"Better start your homework," she says to you. She is looking over you and into the living room at the piano.

But you linger, poking around for something sweet in the cupboards. She hands you a Chips Deluxe! and you take it, hopping on one foot out of the kitchen and past the piano where you hammer out a nonsense noise on the keys, then scamper upstairs, skipping every other step. As you struggle with dividing fractions you hear your mother and her metronome playing slowly. She plays so slowly it distracts you. The metronome beats ponderously, like a dying butterfly, like a drunk and listless moth, and you think she must have forgotten about it because it seems to be ticking off all by itself.

But that's not true.

Her cool creamy hands hover above the keys, practicing her finger positions, so timid to make the wrong noise. At school, when you are concentrating on Mrs. Richardson in her ugly brown slacks showing you how to divide fractions on the chalkboard, you begin to hum the first few measures of, *The Ferris Wheel*, in your head. It won't leave you for years, like chronic hiccups.

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A year later, when you are eleven, you learn to play a song on your friend Veronica's piano. Veronica's family's piano is smaller, more streamlined, and shiny black. The difference is like the difference between her family's toaster and your family's toaster. You take note. Tucked into the corner of their large clutterless living room, you approach it with greedy fingers and notice your reflection in its black mirror. You find yourself rather pretty in this black reflection; it's oddly different, oddly flattering.

"Sit on the bench with me," Veronica demands. Everything she says to you is a bossy little command and predictably you give in to it. She gives a delicate toss to her long blonde hair and rights her spine. "You know *Heart and Soul*?"

"Um. No," you say, dumbly blinking.

"What?" she scolds you. "Everyone with a piano knows *Heart and Soul*! You don't need music! It's just for fun." She plays a few lilting bars as you imagine the two songs you made up after school while your mother was away at work: *Falling*

Down the Stairs, hitting every single key from highest to lowest, slowly at first, then picking up the pace scanning each key with your pointer finger, and *Fighting Birds*, two keys (any two keys) side by side going back and forth creating a twittering noise. You keep these songs to yourself.

Veronica sings as she plays, “I love the mountains! I love the rolling hills! I love the daisies! I love the daffy-dills! I love the fireside! When all the lights are low! Boom-dee-ahh-daah, Boom-dee-ahh-daah, Boom-dee-ahh-daah, Boom-dee-ahh-daah!”

Singing loud and zipping quickly along the keys she stops playing suddenly and says, “Got it? Now lemme show you the other part. It’s a two-person song.”

Veronica takes your hands and shows you what you are supposed to do with the lower keys. It doesn’t take you long to learn. Unlike the boring kid songs your mother plays, *Heart and Soul* has verve, spunk, and words you can sing along with. A rush of excitement zings your core as you play this *real* song. It is as if you are on the verge of laughter as music sallies from your fingertips. You are surprised at yourself that the sheer thrill of the noise doesn’t trip up your fingers and concentration. It feels so easy and natural! You and Veronica play all afternoon in varying octaves and speeds. You feel as though you want to try every possible combination of notes to *Heart and Soul*. You do elaborate and slow versions; you do quick and clipped versions—you cannot stop reaching for the delicious ivory. Nobody at Veronica’s house tells you to “Stop banging the keys!” or, “That’s not a toy!” or, “Hands off unless you want to take lessons!” You add little artful flourishes to your parts and quickly catch on to Veronica’s part. At the end of the afternoon, you walk away from the shiny black piano with its bright white keys, the musical tuxedo, and walk the two blocks back home.

The sun is setting and the air is warm. The tree branches and flowers have the special purple glow of pre-twilight and you feel the effects of playing music all day long in your hands. You splay your fingers to stretch them and hum *Heart and Soul*: Boom-dee-ahh-daah, Boom-dee-ahh-daah, Boom-dee-ahh-daah, Boom-dee-ahh-daah.

You fly into the house, and as usual your mother cries, “Close that screen door all the way!”

Pouncing the piano bench you say, “Mom, Mom! I learned *Heart and Soul*, lemme teach you!” Your mother thinks you are always louder, more rambunctious after spending time with Veronica, and you feel the truth of it as you commence banging out *Heart and Soul*. Your mother walks up to her piano with a dishrag over her shoulder and smiles.

“Oh, *Heart and Soul*, she says as if looking at an old photograph and remembering something. “I know this one too,” she tells you.

“You do?” Baffled, you wonder why she still only plays boring songs like, *Rain Drop-Drop-Drop*.

In a moment she is sitting beside you on the worn velvet bench gingerly playing the left hand of *Heart and Soul*. Quickening the beat to your end of the song, she keeps up. You cherish these moments of ambiguity in your relationship when you feel like friends. They are rare and wonderful. Your shoulders touch your mother’s shoulders and every once in a while your elbows knock pleasantly into one another. She smells like her homemade spaghetti sauce that’s gurgling in a pot on the stove and her wavy brown hair is tied back. You like when she wears a ponytail, it makes her look like a young girl; her bangs curl around her temples and the tips of her ears poke out like elf-ears. How impressed you are with her ability to play faster, you’ve never heard her play like this before!

“Good, Pancake!” she says, laughing as you flourish the ending, making a mock-serious face, swelling inside at the way she looks at you, so surprised at your new ability.

“Veronica taught me,” you tell her. A mistake, you realize, a moment too late. The mere mention of Veronica’s name makes her bristle: Veronica who broke the basement window with a croquet mallet, Veronica who destroyed two of her day lilies with a basketball, Veronica who invites you to go on ski vacations with her family—as if it’s that easy, Veronica who wants to have sleep-overs on school nights.

“Oh, she did, did she,” says your mother with raised brows. “Does little Veronica take lessons?”

“For like a year, then she quit,” you tell her, twiddling two flats.

“Maybe you should take lessons, then you can learn how to play more complicated songs,” she offers. “You might learn something to teach that Veronica.”

“Nah,” you say, doing a shortened version of *Falling Down the Stairs*, with the nail of your thumb. You take your hands off the keys and feel something inside hold back a certain question. Then you ask it anyway: “Why don’t you ever play faster?”

Your mother puts a finger on a key and holds it down. A gentle bell-like tone lingers in the air between the two of you. “If you go too fast, it will sound sloppy. You have to learn how to count beats and read the music. Once you know what notes to play, you have to play it at the right timing. Playing fast doesn’t mean you’re good.” She opens her music book to *The Ferris Wheel* to show you how some notes have to be held for two counts, some for a half count. “You can’t just bang-bang-bang the keys like you do.” The laughter and joking from the moment ago is gone as

she continues, “You know, *Heart and Soul* isn’t *real* music playing just because you can play it fast.” She sets the metronome to its usual poky pace, indicating the music.

Hot angry tears needle your eyes.

“This is bo-ring,” you say in a staccato voice, a little too loud.

“It’s not boring, Pancake.” She doesn’t like you to use the words ‘boring’, ‘stupid’, ‘shut-up’, or ‘hate.’ “It’s just challenging,” she says. You sense sharpness in her voice but it almost immediately softens. “When you get it right, you feel so good! You feel like you’ve made something work, or fixed something. You know? Like when you get through a fraction problem.” She has a cool hand on your ear, petting your skin and hair.

“I hate fractions,” you declare, test-driving another one of her forbidden words. You’ve always had a difficult time shifting moods. No one can pluck you out of a funk once you’re there. Once, after being scolded for something at the dinner table, you felt embarrassed and refused all food, even though you had just been dished your first slice of pizza—something good for once—and went to bed, your stomach a howling empty cave.

“Well, it’s not like fractions then.” She looks down at the keys and strokes them without playing. “It just feels good,” she whispers throatily. “You just want to keep going until you get it right.” That is when you notice a scary little glow about her. This love she feels for something else bothers you. Her hand is down from your ear and back on the keys. “And just think! If I keep going, I’ll be able to play songs I really like. Maybe you should try lessons too. Just say the word and I’ll sign you up.”

“Nah,” you say, slinking off the velvet bench and retreating back upstairs to your room. Alone, you sit at the edge of your wooden bed—the same wooden bed your mother slept in when she was a little girl—and take out your secret diary, the one with the tiny silver lock and cartoon red lips on the cover. *I learned Heart and Soul on the piano today, You write I’m better than mom!* Though instead of writing out the word, Heart, you draw one.

For the next few months you cannot pass the old dusty piano without beating out a few bars of *Heart and Soul*. Each time you enter the living room you beeline to the yellowed keys, hammering it out like an itch. Once you’ve done that, it’s usually out of your system. Your mother cries from the kitchen, “Don’t hit it like that! It’ll lose its tune!”

You touch it once more, so gentle the noise sounds like the soft sigh of a sleeping person, then bound for the couch.

After your thirteenth birthday, your mother is still taking piano lessons. She has a new music book, though the only recognizable songs in it are, *Oh My Darlin Clemantine*, and the Christmas song, *Up on the Rooftop*. All other songs have titles like, *The Nightingale Sonata*, *Jewelry Box Ballerina Minuet*, and *Moonlit Lagoon Serenade*. These are slightly more complex songs, but it only means your mother's playing becomes that much slower. Her metronome's stubborn paralyzed ticks are almost laughable, you think. The notes are so far apart from one another, and each time she makes a mistake she repeats the notes again and again till she gets it right, and you forget what she's trying to play. Incomprehensible.

Then. Who knows? A week? A month? A season? The year you turn fourteen, your mother doesn't touch the piano. The piano sits silently with the red worn velvet-topped bench tucked beneath and the lid shrouding the keys with their missing ivory. Odd, you think one day, touching a warped side, that something with so much potential noise can just sink into the living room like another one of your father's clay objects. Sometimes those balls seem so pointless, absurd and ridiculous.

At night instead of setting her metronome and working through her music book your mother sits and reads the paper in her lab coat and waits for your father to return with his red chapped hands, bits of glass in the bottoms of his shoes, and studio dust in his hair. Often, he shows her a burn, and she treats it with a little broken tip of the aloe plant on the kitchen sink as though he were one of her patients. He has lately had some success selling his new ceramic wall-tiles—as large as car tires—to a collector overseas.

Alone upstairs in your room, you miss the distraction of your mother's playing. You remember the slow motion strokes of the metronome, beating like the last licks of life, straining for rhythm. You remember the uncertainty of your mother's deliberate playing. Your memories create a cheerless little hollow in your soul—why doesn't she play piano anymore? You timidly tuck the question away after noting it, coolly aware of this new element of adolescent feeling. One thing is certain; she loves piano music. She still listens to the AM classical music station, it's always crackling through the radio in the kitchen, whenever she's home. She still pretends like she can't hear you speaking to her when she's listening. She likes to guess, and is very good at guessing, who the symphony is by. "Sounds like Bach," she'll say, and wait for the announcer to say in his mellow voice, *That was a piece by the beloved J.S. Bach, composed in his finest hour*. Until she hears who the composer is, your mother stares at the radio with one eye open and one eye closed and her lips pursed. When she's wrong, the puckered expression collapses, when she's right her face brightens

and she laughs, “Ha!” as if amazed at herself, giving a triumphant little slap to the tabletop.

But you have other things on your mind: Veronica has moved away and you have not seen her all summer. You have pimples throbbing on your face and you lean into the mirror of your bathroom to count them. Five, six, seven. You take out your diary—your *journal*—a spiral notebook and write one of your famous “kiss scenes” that you would like to happen with the boy that was nice to you in math class—or any boy, really. There are three pages of lead-up: talking and laughing, walking in a darkened park, drinking lemonade from the same glass, then you write yourself tripping on a bridge over a pond and this boy running after you to see if you’ve broken your neck. Then he kisses you! The details at this part are much more vague than the realistically construed overtures, and the painterly details given to the pond. And that fall down is pitch perfect.

You always feel helplessly low after writing one of these “kiss scenes”—it’ll never happen—so you see what your mother is up to, feeling burned to the bone at the thought of her reading a “kiss scene.” Walking down the stairs (jumping off the second to the last step) you find your her dryly turning the pages of her newspaper, cupping her mug of chamomile, and listening to a symphony on the AM station. Steam from the mug has warmed her face to a rosy blush and you look at her a moment with her eyelids down. You will never look that serene, you think, automatically fingering your blemish patch and brushing hairs out of your eyes. You call this (privately, for you’ve never told her this before) her Raisin Maid Look. She has that ungraspable essence right now—that unfathomable softness. The Raisin Maid’s eyes always look as though she is listening to a symphony. You don’t want to interrupt or move her, it will make you sad to see her pulled out of her solitude to talk to you.

You walk over to the piano and sit on the worn velvet bench. A little puff of dust erupts from the cushion as you lift the lid to look at the cold keys. The only thing you know how to do on the piano is the obnoxious but wildly satisfying *Heart and Soul*. You play your favorite part, the two-handed part, non-committedly, a bit louder than the radio, and you hear the newspaper rustle.

“We’re finally getting rid of the piano, believe it or not.”

Hopping off the bench you say, “What!” incredulous, feeling as though you’ve just learned a family member has died.

“Yep. Goodwill wants it. They said they’re always getting calls from schools and theater groups for a piano.” She turns her palms up like, *who’d a thunk!*

“But it’s always been in our house!” you say, feeling tears well up. You are given to these emotions lately. Your mother calls it a ‘flair for the theatrics,’ which angers you. You are not acting. You are feeling. These days you feel as though you can’t have an emotion without being told you should audition for commercials. Of all things, commercials.

“Pancake.” Your mother pronounces your eternal nickname in her logical tone of voice. “We’ve had the piano three years. Maybe four.”

She has a tendency to downplay.

“Four!” You exclaim. “Definitely four. Or even more. We got it when I was ten and now I’m almost fifteen. I *re-mem-ber!*”

“So it hasn’t *always* been in our house, see?” You and your mother speak to each other like this these days, in this dialect of weighted words. “And reminder: you just turned *fourteen.*”

“It *feels* like forever!”

“I haven’t been in lessons for six months,” she informs you, her voice weary.

You look at her metronome, fuzzy with dust.

“Why not?” After you ask this you turn to her and realize you don’t want to know so much about her. Your eyes meet for a sharp second and it feels raw and uncomfortable, like staring into the sun. You can’t bear the thought of your mother giving up on herself or feeling ashamed about something, but all of this strikes you too late, long after you’ve blurted out the question. There is a silent moment in which you feel your own raised eyebrows and rictus mouth in full-fourteen-year-old mood swing, and at the same time see her downcast eyes. She hasn’t “touched up” her hair in a while, the auburn highlights now lusterless gray around her ears.

Pausing with your question as if turning it over and over in her mind she eventually says, “I know,” giving a smile. “I guess I’m too old. It’s too hard to learn at my age.” She swirls her tea bag between her thumb and finger and stares into her steamy mug. “If you think you’ll want to take lessons one day, we’ll keep it. I’d love for you to.”

“Nope,” you say. “Not for me.”

You feel utterly depressed.

“What I wouldn’t have given to be taking lessons at your age,” She tells you in her wistful voice. You’ve heard this all before—her brother got to take guitar lessons and swimming lessons, why? Because he was a boy—and you clomp back upstairs with a layer of guilt like a sheen on your face.

So it is that one Saturday, four men in overalls come to take the piano away. They take the front door off its hinges to make way for the beggarly piano, as ragged looking as an old shoe, out of your living room and through your front yard. You think you can hear the piano rustle a little bit with the ends of a song as it's being prodded and moved from room to room and out the door. Its tiny protest. Polite cries. Whimpers! Whimpers!

Your mother is in the front yard with a hand on her hip, watching the piano emerge into the sun. You are standing beside her, close enough to see faint lines of age, like the thinnest of rivers, mapping her eyes and lips. Her summer haircut is a bit too short, blunt and matronly; you tuck your own long hair behind your ears. The piano is so cumbersome the men have to pause with it in the middle of the doorway and wipe their foreheads. They tilt it down the porch steps—it looks surreal at this angle surrounded by outside air. The piano passes the shiny smooth glazed clay sculptures reflecting the blinding sunlight. Each of the overalls holds a corner of the piano and walks beneath the linden tree bowing over your front yard, a few of the branches scraping the piano's top. Now at the height of summer, the giant linden tree—with its heart shaped leaves—is thick with sweet odor. The fragrance comes in wafts, in an after-moment of a breeze. Wouldn't it be so lovely to have a piano under a tree, you think, suddenly remembering one of the even low voices of the announcers you just heard on the AM classical music station. After a swirling flourish of music the announcer said, *And that was Rachmoninhoff's piano concerto number 18. The performance is nature itself!* You heard this on the radio yesterday while your mother was gone and you were home alone. Your solitude, the silent house, had spooked you for some reason and so you reached for the radio and the familiar music for comforting company.

"This thing's huge," one of the overalls says.

"I tell you what!" The other one laughs.

They grunt the dilapidated piano across the yard with its lid pulled over its old teeth-like keys. You want to bid goodbye or have some other ritual of closure with the ancient piano before it disappears into the Goodwill moving van.

"That'll do 'er," an overall shouts.

Van doors slide and slam shut. You vow to make your future children learn piano. It is important to you—as you watch the van, pregnant with piano, lumber down the brick street and out of sight—that your children understand the importance of music, even if you never did until this moment, in an after-moment of a breeze.

Back inside the house with your mother, you notice the living room's unearthly emptiness. The same emptiness as when the Christmas tree is taken away at the end

of the holiday season. You start to comment on it, then stop yourself. Light streams in from the red, yellow, and indigo oval stained glass window and your mother dusts off the left-behind metronome. She walks up the steps disappearing from your eyes, first her head, then her feet, with the black thing, the little slow heart, in her hand.

Jack-in-the-Box

You are dressed in a jack-in-the-box costume, watching yourself in the full-length mirror. Your mother attends to you, turning you from side to side, fastening this and that with pins held between her lips. You are twelve and she is getting you ready for Halloween night. At twelve, you are still as giddy about the holiday as you were at six, even though the kids in Junior High are not zealously hatching costume plans or dreamily chatting about what they are going to *Be* this year the way younger children do around July: *I'm gonna be a monkey or an Indian Princess*.

But you...you love Halloween. You love dressing up, making capes, borrowing beads, wearing a mask. The transformation terrifies and thrills you all in one delightful shiver. Not as though wearing a papier-mâché mask or a pirate's patch is scary; rather, you are intoxicated by the thought of yourself altered before the world. You become altered inside as well. Your thoughts become dramatic tremors: solitary and thunderous.

It was your mother's idea to make a jack-in-the-box costume. On Halloween morning, she found a big cardboard box in the basement, perfectly square, and folding in the bottom had said, "Try this on, Pancake." The look in her eye meant she could abandon all household duties—even bills—for the rest of the day and throw herself into Halloween Costume Construction. She cocked her head to one side, squinted, and watched you step into the box. She is as pretty as the Sun Maid Raisin Lady and you feel deep gladness when she looks at you with such special care. Today she has put aside her practical nurse's-voice to play with you, to be a child with you. "We'll make straps out of twine, then your hands will be free." Listening to her, you often wonder when the transition to adult smartness occurs. Do you just have to get through school? When will you be so capable?

Your mother's Halloween costume jobs are unforgettable. One year she fashioned a wig out of an old hat and lots of curled yarn. She built a bat mask out of black felt, complete with red eyes and fangs. She sewed a pilgrim's bonnet out of green and yellow gingham (not for Halloween, just for play), a long kimono out of a bird print sateen, a denim and leather cowboy vest with chaps, and—best of all—glorious butterfly wings that moved in a silky whisper when you waved your arms. Although they are too small for you now, you love to find these pink wings packed away in the wooden trunk. You love to carefully slip your hands through the tiny armholes, getting a little damp around the ears with excitement, the way you feel peeling foil off of candy.

You are small for your age, always have been, and at twelve your architecture is more like nine. Inside the cardboard box you are even more dwarfed. You and your mother spent the afternoon in the sunny driveway painting each side of the box in bold cartoonish colors. One side boasts lavender balloons, one side is checkerboarded, the third side has a painted clown face—sad—and the last side is bedecked with hand prints. The two of you naughtily dipped the flats of your hands in paint to leave paw marks on the box. Yours are small and spindly like an outstretched spider, hers are womanly, long, and slender.

Along with the painted box you will wear a jokey clown outfit. Your mother bent over a sewing machine for hours making puffy polka-dot pants and a matching shirt with fuzzy pompom buttons. You love the feeling of her fitting clothes to your body. She has tailored everything you own from your blue jeans to your swimsuits making the fit just so. You love the feeling of her exacting hands holding your hips steady then gently folding and pinning a pant leg. The blood in your ankle fizzes: “Hold still, Pancake,” she says softly, concentrating. You love her palm on your shoulder as she pins a neckline. So lovely, when she places her hand on the small of your back while cinching a skirt waist. This is your favorite kind of affection. You barely breathe. You keep ballerina poise while she adjusts your posture and lines, feeling queenly with the attention: solid and quite conscious of the space you take up in the world.

As she frowns with focus, righting the clown collar, you catch your own eye in the mirror and quickly blink away your face. You know you are growing older. Your skin, as if newborn, tingles with every touch and breeze. It is as though you are fresh from a shell; every sensation is a warm bloom at once flooded by hot shame, an agonizing tickle.

Alone, of course, you have no problem looking into a mirror. In fact, you are quite infatuated with mirrors and your reflection. You nose the glass, never feeling close enough as you examine your skin, your freckles, your pores. Alone, you shimmy out of your clothes and peer at your front, your back, your belly, your knees—even your feet!—from all different angles. You are obsessed with wondering how you are perceived. Do people find you skinny and small? Do you look like a “teenager” yet? The tip of your chin throbs with an infant pimple, and the little hairs on your legs—once sweet faun-like down—are now whiskered and unseemly. Still, you cannot get enough of examining yourself; but with your mother by your side it is different. You feel caught. You gulp down a pebble of guilt, feeling trapped from within.

Lately, you have become your family's topic of conversation. Your parents merrily chat about your hormones, casually, as though your hormones were characters, or neighbors, or pets. If you frown over your plate of peas at dinnertime (a particularly moody time) they blame it on your "hormones gone crazy," and laugh at you, thoroughly amused. They chuckle when you feel down, and say, "Hey, Miss Mopey." You look back at them, all flared nostrils and stinging eyes: your mother makes a mad-cat-meow and your father claws the air and hisses. They look at one another and giggle. Ohhhh... the indignity of changing before everyone's eyes. And that ugly, clinical word, *Puberty*. All those vowels pressed close makes you think of dank crevices.

Downstairs, the screen door squeaks open then snaps shut, shuddering. The quiet nearness between you and your mother shatters as your friend Veronica lets herself in the house with her baby brother, Donald.

"Boo. Pancake. Boo. We're here," Veronica calls in a deadpan voice from below. "Aren't you ready yet?" You can hear she is wearing high heels as she makes her way up the steps to your room.

Veronica lives down the street. She is your only friend in Junior High. You feel lucky to have her, and comfortable in your seventh grade solitude so long as people are aware that the two of you are affiliated. Veronica is a year older than you but has a decade of sophistication on most everyone in school. Your friendship hinges on your proximity in the neighborhood; otherwise, you wouldn't even know one another. Veronica is long and blonde. Her eyes and skin are pale, cool and smooth; being near her makes you feel too dark, messy, and smelly. But you are also drawn to her allure and can't help but feel that lucky "chosen" feeling being around her.

Veronica bursts into rippling laughter—mean laughter, but you are used to it—seeing you in the jack-in-the-box costume. You look up at her: yardstick-long legs in fishnets, backless dress, and a witch's hat. All black. Your mother kneels before you, puckering the bottoms of your pants.

"Well don't you look like the biggest dork," says Veronica.

You are dazzled and aghast at her manner around parents and teachers. Once when your father was working outside in the yard in a baseball cap she said to him, "Ugly hat." Yet at other times she speaks with the ease and confidence of a grownup: you note how she refers to Donald as "Sweetie," or "Honey." When you say those words to little kids you still feel as though you are playing house.

You flinch as Veronica reaches out to touch your red-painted-nose then recoils from her own finger with disgust.

“Hey. This is a great costume,” your mother says good-naturedly. “We worked hard, didn’t we, Pancake?” She squeezes your shoulder, but the team feeling has evaporated dry.

You look down at the pompoms on your sneaker laces. “I’m a jack-in-the-box, can you tell?” You treat humiliation in the same way you treat physical pain, by squeezing your toes together and clenching your teeth.

No one comments on Veronica’s ensemble. She pulls one dress strap down over her shoulder and her eyes dart about the room. Your mother ignores her, focusing on Donald. He is in all black too. Ski hat, sweatsuit. Your mother’s voice is low and soft to him and it makes you wonder if she spoke to you that way, when you were three. You hope so.

“And what are you for Halloween, Mr. Donald?” she coos.

Donald doesn’t speak to anyone except Veronica. He looks at your mother dumbly with his flat baby face. He is unattractive, with facial creases and dimples that seem out of place. If he had a mustache, he would have the face of an adult.

Veronica speaks loudly for him in the way people speak to foreigners, translating. “Tell her what you are, Donald. Tell her. What are you? What did I say you were? You’re a punk. Say it. Say punk.” She turns to your mother. “He’s a punk.”

“Oh!” your mother says too brightly. “Ha!” She cannot hide her disapproval. She despises Halloween costumes that are easy: store-bought masks, plush pumpkin outfits, and especially no-effort costumes. The, I’m-myself-costume or the I’m-a-student-costume makes her pink with rage. “I remember when Pancake was that age,” she starts, her voice both shrill and wistful. “I made this fantastic space alien costume. She wore a silver-sprayed football helmet and we painted her face green.” Her pride makes you cower with embarrassment but you also feel protective of her passionate tone. You have noticed that most people cannot relate. One Thanksgiving, while watching a football game on television with your uncles and cousins she was suddenly overcome with shock at all the roughhousing and proclaimed to the whole room, “I would never let my child play football! That’s bad parenting!” As if you had even ever held a football. The uncles just laughed.

You feel tense and shy with Veronica in the room. Alone with her, you are silly and loud. You match her theatrics and use swearwords without blinking. Veronica can get you to do things like ask to buy pornography or beer at Hooks, the corner drugstore, just for laughs. You do this as if watching yourself in a dream. Numb, amused, and confident. But when Veronica is around your parents, you clam up. At

any moment she will expose the real you to them. Or your parents will expose the real you to her. You are not sure which would be worse.

The three of you are ready to present yourselves to the evening. You wave goodbye to your mother—who still insists on standing on the front porch till she cannot see you anymore—and head out to the streets with witch and punk. As soon as you round the corner Veronica says, “let’s go to the apartment building and flirt.”

You quick glance at Donald in hopes that he’ll suddenly cry or throw a tantrum, but he’s as calm as a loaf of bread. “You’re crazy,” you say, rolling your eyes at her. A mistake, you realize, as soon as you say it.

“I am,” she says biting the air a few times with exposed teeth.

You are never in the mood for that sort of thing. You only want to astound the men at the Hooks counter by inquiring with your big eyes and small body about the price of a forty-ounce. That is the sort of fun you are comfortable with.

Veronica calls her flirting-adventures, “Veronica’s Sexploits,” a term she borrowed from a late night television commercial. Her urge to seduce strangers is only comparable to your urge for hot cocoa after school. Her anxious fixation followed by her calm self-satisfaction is familiar to you in that way. But you follow her, servile as a doll. Even Donald the toddler could care less how the night turns out. He is a perfect punk, spiritless to the holiday. You feel your painted clown face harden into seriousness wanting to do the night the right way.

But Veronica inhabits the adult world. She is responsible for Donald, sometimes skipping school to take care of him. Your parents don’t even let you skip school when you have a cold. It amazes you that her parents never know where she is, nor do they care, and leave her alone with an unlimited allowance—or so it seems—to buy candy and magazines from Hooks. It makes your own home-life seem like nursery school, the way your mother always wants you to phone home if you and Veronica decide to leave the house and go for a walk to the park. But you adore the way she swears comfortably in the house (*Fucking, fuck!* she’ll say when she cannot open a jar of pickles), and wickedly uses her parents’ first names, Herbert and Kitty.

School is a side thing to Veronica. Your sun rises and sets upon your school clothes, your teachers (whom you also worship), your school mates’ business, your lunch, your locker, gym class, morning announcements, rules, homework and grades—especially grades. Veronica is unfazed by it all. She cannot remember the names of all of her teachers and never bothers with homework. You are drawn to her heedlessness. At her side you feel armored to the world.

And what does Veronica like about you? You know she needs your company while she baby-sits. Even though you don’t always catch the tired impatience in her

voice when she scolds Donald, or the way her eyes deaden and withdraw when he's been screaming for a long time, every once in a while you do notice this and it's scary to think of her alone. Of all people, you know that it is only you who possess the power to tickle her, to bring her cheer, and it gives you the greatest pleasure to make her laugh.

"Pancake," Veronica will say sometimes, with her air of mutiny. "Let's go to Hooks and try to buy porn."

You always throw yourself into the performance, "Um. May I please buy a Playboy Magazine?" you say, doing whatever she asks of you, ignited by your power to shock.

The counter clerk, a black man with very light skin and freckles, looks down at you. With his low tuba voice says, "No-oh, girl," his fog horn voice dropping a note. He flinches at you as if to say, "Well I never!"

"Nevermind!" you squeal, running out of the store.

"That was amazing," Veronica praises, petting your hair when the show is done. "Did you see his face?"

You always feel a little used after these words, but bask in the glory.

Veronica tugs at her fishnets and sweeps her hair out of her eyes before embarking on the apartment complex. But door after door, her sexploits strike out here. Only women answer their doors and few of them have Halloween candy to give. One young woman with a kind face, curly hair, and artistic glasses compliments your jack-in-the-box costume and gives you each a package of microwave popcorn, apologizing for not being more equipped. After each woman closes her apartment door, Veronica says, "Did you see how she looked at me? She totally hated me." You know she is simply grumpy from getting a slow start on her sexploits, and you let her spout off without comment. She is hot for attention and you notice her cool reserve beginning to peel.

You get lucky at one house where they are giving out king-sized candy bars and at another house with a giant bucket of Smarties on the porch. Veronica helps you empty half of the bucket into your bag and she takes the other half. The lawlessness of this cheers her for a while, but she is glum again by the next house in want of an audience for her fishnets.

Scolding Donald about something, she walks a few paces ahead of you, clipping off down the sidewalk in her slim heels. You watch her walk away from you, tugging Donald's arm then scooping him up to her hip. You are blocky and awkward trying to catch up but eventually surrender to your poky pace, feeling very turtle-like indeed, walled with cardboard, your arms hitched over the sides of the box.

Because of your mother's rules, you had headed out into the night early, at four o'clock, to be *on the safe side*. But it is getting darker earlier, and that has always made you feel dark inside as well. Your soul feels goosebumped, raw, sad. But something else too: a strange exhilaration for romance. The chilly air, the crunch of leaves, the golden light from houses on the dimming street makes you thirsty to fall in love—something you haven't experienced yet. This feeling comes and goes lately, and feels like homesickness. It is usually quenched and quelled by having your mother make you some hot cocoa or re-reading a scene from *The Thornbirds*, but sometimes it does not pass and you are left clouded and stuck.

Nearly tipping out of your box, you bend over to pick up a heart-shaped leaf; it is as orange as mango meat and has black veins. Pinching the leaf between your fingers you feel swarmed with melancholy, alone with the sound of wind loosening the dry leaves as Veronica struts ahead. For the first time, you are bored with her.

Suddenly, a movement catches your eye. You turn to face a small yellow house with just a strip of matted grass for a yard. The house seems placed unnaturally close to the sidewalk, as if it had been shoved from behind. Why, after walking this street on your course to school each day, had you never noticed it before? In the large front window you see a tall man, standing still, facing the world entirely naked. He holds himself with one hand, calmly but with an air of ceremony, like a fragile offering, an Easter egg. His other hand hangs at his side, limp and stupid.

It takes a moment to swallow the sight: a naked man watching you. Your clown eyes meet his eyes. He smiles, raises his eyebrows and your vision blurs. Gasping, your throat feels splintered and your eyes dry to chalk.

The man in the window does not move and neither do you.

Veronica and Donald are far enough ahead of you for you to feel as though you are completely alone with him. You have this odd feeling. This lovely vertigo. Lately, you have been getting the stinging sensation that your breasts are arriving. Though they are as quiet and small as little fried eggs, sometimes you swear they have swollen tight as a raft. Their arrival does not excite you, as it does Veronica, who palms herself vampishly in attempts to form cleavage. Your body tortures you, turns you off to food, and makes you moody: homicidal yet weepy. As much as you want to join Veronica in her sexploits, in her straps-off-the-shoulder-attitude, you know you have too many things to be ashamed of. As the naked man looks at you, that awakening threat in your bosom piques your skin and weighs you down. You want to run for safety, but you are also curious. The man is still holding himself, delicate and strange, and he points at you with his other hand. This frightens you more than his nakedness, for pointing is beyond passive display: it is an invitation.

Your knees feel icy and weird. You've heard that the heart of a bunny cannot take the shock of fear. When cornered by a cat or surprised by a zooming automobile, the bunny is stunned, has a heart attack, and dies. You've always felt capable of suffering that sort of shock. Fear is paralysis to your muscles. Panic means torpor. One last look: he's still smiling, still pointing. You feel sunburned everywhere. You execute a swift army-style turn away from the window and gulp dryly. You don't want stir the air too much for fear that the naked man will smell your terror and chase after you. You are aware that your faintest tremor could give rise to an unpredictable act.

You tiptoe past the man in the window, slowly, as if testing the ground for trap doors. As soon as you think you are out of his sight you break for it, choking on hiccups and spilling candy as you waddle with your arms high in the air above the box. For some reason, you do not want to catch up with Veronica. You want to be safely away from the naked man but also by yourself for a while to let the experience solidify. You want to re-reel it from beginning to end, like a story—yet you also want to brag about it: your own sexploits. *She was walking past the yellow cottage when suddenly something caught her eye.* You think of yourself in this manner often, as if reading your thoughts from a book. *She beheld his hairy face, his hairy chest, and in his hairy hand he held...*

You want to write it down (it is like delicious gobbling, to write) and keep it so you know it is not a dream, so you can go back again and again and again, relishing the details that are yours, yours! forever. This is your naked man. He will give you nightmares; he will *affect* you—like a car accident or a fight. He will make you feel a new rotten bit of shame—but also a bloom of excitement.

Finally, Veronica stops at the end of the sidewalk to wait as you toddle toward her. Donald is crying and she picks up his long heavy body. You feel sorry for her then. She likes costumes just as much as you and the slow night has been a disappointment. Her scarlet lipstick is just an outline around her lips. If only she would have seen the naked man. You are on the cusp of telling her the whole story. Share the wealth! you think. In your mental filmstrip, you imagine Veronica's face changing as you say, "no—and I do mean *no*—pants." You start to say something about why the two of you should always stick together on walks but she interrupts.

"I should take Donald home," she says, shifting him to her other hip. Donald yanks at her hair. "Baby, don't," she says gently, unwrapping a sucker from the trick-or-treat bag for him to take instead.

She noses his neck with her eyes closed and sighs as he drools over the candy, still holding a fist of her hair. She lets it out of his fingers and kisses his hand.

Watching her makes you feel reverent and a little jealous. She is practical now; finished with sexploits and back to reality. She looks sleepy.

“Are you going to school tomorrow?” you ask her before saying goodbye. You are bursting inside, wanting to tell her about the naked man, but something holds you back.

“I do know,” she says, wiping Donald’s nose with her pretty wrist. “I kinda don’t want to.”

“Then will you at least come for lunch break and meet me in the soccer field,” you say, exasperated with her again.

“Yeah, sure, Pancake.” She says. Your family nickname is the only thing about you that she admits to approving. She is endeared to it.

“Fine,” you say. “Goodbye.”

You trudge home, weary from the long walk in the awkward costume. You think of the stories you could tell at school of the naked man. You really only want to tell Veronica, but now it is too late. She would be hurt that you kept the moment all to yourself.

Still, you feel grateful for the naked man. It is as though he has given you a gift: the gift of private confidence, private sophistication, private edge. At school, all the girls your age have begun their tally: “How many boys I’ve kissed.” Girls you used to have a lot in common with have suddenly kissed up to six boys. It is now fashionable to write the list on the backside of a school notebook.

You have kissed exactly zero boys. Do you want to kiss even one? Oh, yes you do! but then you want the boy to vanish, the way deer do when you spot one in a field. You want nothing of the stuff before or after the kiss; for that you are not ready. You only want to kiss to say you have kissed. Besides, you are certain that boys do not want to kiss you. Anyone but you. Therefore, a kiss seems far off, impossible for years, maybe decades.

When you arrive back at your house, the porch light is on. Your mother raises her eyebrows at your sack of Smarties and you head up to your bedroom, claiming to want to organize your candy. You are famous for your Halloween candy organizing. It is your quirk to categorize and be the “tidy” one of the family.

But your mother suspects something is up. Peeking into your bedroom she says, “Why won’t you look at me, Pancake. Is everything okay?” She dons her *concerned* face: pitched-roof eyebrows and letter-O-lips. She is probably worried you had another spat with Veronica.

“Did Veronica have fun?” She keeps pressing, searching your face for clues.

“Mmm, kinda,” you say, forming a pile of bite sized chocolates next to the pile of caramels and nougats.

“Oooo,” she says, changing her tone, “can you spare me one of your Pixie Stix? I used to love those as a kid.”

Relieved to not have to talk about anything, you grin and playfully toast her Pixie Stix in the air with one of your own. Then you stick blue tongues out at each other, feeling a little bit of the loving spirit return from the daytime.

ooo

The jack-in-the-box sits on the floor in the corner of your bedroom with the clown suit draped over the side. You like the sight of the two empty costumes together, like good buddies after a long day. You are wrapped in your bed, relieved to have the lights out. Your window is lifted a bit so you can smell the cold air and enjoy the weight of your quilts. You like to fall asleep with the blinds rolled up so you can stare into the tangled black tree branches etching the sky.

The sky is as white as the moon this night, and your craving for romance is back. As usual, you cannot fall asleep right away. You feel hyper-alert to your heartbeat. It throbs in the center of your chest, in your throat, behind your eyes. You cannot stop the image of the naked man. He is a scar in your imagination, pointing, pointing, pointing.

You shudder, picturing yourself in his eyes from behind the window. What did he think of your painted face? Would he recognize you out of your Halloween costume? You could have told Veronica to impress her. The two of you (plus Donald) could have walked by the house again to delight in danger.

The incident makes you feel launched into the adult world, or some place beyond that—a place dangerous and perverse where even your parents have never been. Sure, you didn’t seek him out the way Veronica might have. Nor did you earn him with some brave feat of flirting. It was merely your dumb luck, pure happenstance, that you saw him at all. But it is your quiet courtship that makes all the difference. You accepted him with what you think is womanly composure. You are disturbed, curious, and spooked to your bones, but you contain yourself.

Then the sight of the jack-in-the-box in the corner floods you with guilt. Your mother spent so much time crafting the thing. The two of you were giddy for hours as she watched you pop out of the box again and again with carefree bliss (you recall this with a teaspoon of humiliation) and now you have a secret from her. A secret she would want to know about *for your safety*.

You call her into your room the way you do during a thunderstorm, to confess, to share.

“Mo-om?”

She appears at once in the doorway to your room. As soon as you see her, barefoot and wrapped in her old ankle-length terry cloth bathrobe, you decide to stay quiet. “Nothing, mom,” you tell her. It is the first time you have said that to her, but you know it will not be the last. You squeeze your eyes to sleep and the terry cloth robe disappears.

Having a secret scares you, slightly. It also gives you a glorious adult headache; you feel pallid but tough. When you wake up in the morning you know you will feel entirely new.

Old Lake

It is August and you are leaving home for Old Lake. Never have you been away from your parents, except to be with your grandmother with whom you have spent all your summers, sharing a rickety brass bed and the company of a black and white TV.

So long to that, you think guiltily, imagining your grandmother alone in her brass bed doing her pre-sleep rosary prayers and leg-exercises (twenty lifts and twenty pointed-toe air-peddles) without you to provide goofy company. The thought utterly depresses you, slaps you with the reality of lonesome old age.

You hated having to call her to say, "Not this summer, Granny, I got a job!" You kept your tone light, emphasizing the importance of earning money and being responsible. She did not hide her disappointment.

"You're just a kid, what do you need a job for?" Her voice was blue and thin.

Even as you said, "I'm fourteen, and Mom wants me to baby-sit more," you heard a little too much excitement revealed in your own voice.

"I knew it would happen one day," she wailed over the phone, "Too old for granny." How far away she sounded.

Then she offered to send you money, if you needed money so bad, but you stood your ground. An envelope addressed to you in her antique Catholic school cursive came in the mail a week later. Inside, two twenty-dollar bills. What a penance.

Now, smashed in the back of the car with Max Rudy, the feral eight-year-old whom you baby-sat all June and July, you feel adult and proud, buzzing with the thrill of going some place all together new. Max sleeps—his eyelids only half-closed and trembling—and you look out the window wondering about every hill you would climb, every darkened grove, every isolated tree, every leaning barn. You see signs for small towns you long to explore: *Mingo, Ulm, Little Hocking, Arispe, Bimble, Sully, Wiota, China, Scipio, Dundus*. These curious places seem precious. They are places you want to walk around alone and explore. You feel part of the world in a way you could not feel with your parents in the car.

Old Lake is your reward for a summer spent with Max Rudy. The Rudy parents insisted you accompany them on their two-week trip to their house at Old Lake. "You'll love it there," the tall and prim Mrs. Rudy promised. "And we could

use help with Max.” Mr. and Mrs. Rudy are intimidating figures. They are not smilers, but squinters.

Max, the only boy who has ever loved you, is as lightweight as a kitten but nearly beats you in a back-to-back height contest. You are short for your age and Max delights in the ambiguity of your smallness versus your authority. “Let’s measure hands!” he sometimes challenges, lining up a bony overgrown paw with blackened nails against your own small hand. There is a prayer-like solemnity when you come close to measure: you notice how a long vein in his neck swells as he grunts getting the fingers even, then declaring, “Same!”

“You still are not allowed to make a bonfire in the backyard,” you tell him calmly, feeling a surge of womanly power in restricting him. How strange to be in charge of someone. Funny, how easily you respond to him, not having to think much. It is within you to take care. At times it even feels like flirting, only with Max you are confident and quick on your feet. “If your mother allows you to make bonfires in the backyard, then why don’t you just wait till she comes home?”

“Aw, Pancake,” he groans. “Come on!” Everyone who knows you calls you Pancake. It began when you were a toddler as a family nickname when you refused all food but pancakes. Somehow it radiated.

Your job is to keep Max safe and occupied at Old Lake. This will be easy, you think, for you like playing with the child. It is fun to dig holes and to chase and to tell animal stories before bed. Sometimes you have more fun with him than you do with other fourteen-year-olds, throwing yourself into games you are not yet ready to give up like detective, and fort, and house, and lion family, and pirate ship, and dolls. You like the organization that makes up a child’s game: the army-man taxonomy before battle. Who cares who wins? The pleasure is in the set up: dividing the army men, delegating power, trading a grenade-belted soldier for one crouching with an automatic rifle. You and Max spend entire afternoons staging hiding places and attack zones—the battle is secondary.

Old Lake, Old Lake: The weeks before you left, the words felt like a cool spoon in your mouth. The Rudys have promised a room of your own and some time to yourself—things you already have at home but seem exotic when allotted to you in a new land. During the daytime, you will play with Max while they take care of out-of-office business. They are lawyers. They need to get away, but cannot without your help.

The offer felt like a notch above baby-sitting, such a juvenile term! This would be more like a nanny position, an au pair, a governess. And the invitation provides relief. Your best friend Veronica has moved away this summer and you are

nervous about the prospect of beginning high school without her. Furthermore, your parents have taken to pestering you to go to the pool and meet new friends. A miserable proposition. You need a diversion, an escape.

Before saying goodbye to Veronica, you made a friendship-promise together while walking the train tracks. There had been many such pacts: a promise to have babies at the same time, a promise to marry brothers in order to become sisters, a promise to travel to Paris together. This time, you each promised to write to each other if either of your much-anticipated periods came. It was your idea. Mostly because it was all your mother was talking about lately despite your deflecting indifference. Many times she invited discussion, "I'm a nurse, you can ask me anything you want." But her invitations turned into lectures about what was happening to your body. You snorted defiantly every time as if to say you were immune to such human troubles. You felt repulsed by her use of clinical terms, her uninhibited way with words like *cervix*, *ovulation* or *pubic*, words that make you roll your eyes, sigh and look away. Words that make you want to never take off your clothes.

You and Veronica decided on a code: "I'm away at camp this week" would mean *it* had finally *come*. Codes were nothing new: "My Aorta" and "The President" were code names for boys you had crushes on. "She-Wolf" was code for your math teacher and "The Esplanade" was code for the neighborhood you both lived in.

The day before Veronica left for good you said, "Don't forget to tell me about camp," winking secretively even though the two of you were alone in her bedroom. It made you feel sisterly and close to her, to have these codes.

"Pancake, I'll be honest," she sighed, pulling her long blonde hair off her neck. "It happened over two years ago. I thought it'd be weird if I told you, since you know, you're still...waiting." She looked down politely, as if embarrassed for you. "Anyway. Be glad you don't have it." She flopped back on her bed with a blank expression on her face.

You burned inside at those words. So angry and bitter when she eventually did leave. You should have assumed as much. She looked like a real teenager, the classic example of young woman: tall, elegant-shoulders, stylish blue jeans, a long smooth ponytail and the tiniest of hoop earrings on her pale pretty ears. When you look in the mirror you still feel like a child: babyish cheeks and large frightened eyes.

Old Lake is down a gravel road that wends around woods, sheep farms, cornfields, and lengths of barbed wire. The Rudys' place is an old farmhouse just a stone's throw from the lake's lip. A long narrow dock reaches out to the middle of

the lake, edged with leggy cattails and stout fruit trees. A few green canoes are piled up on a sandy embankment. On the other side of the lake there is forest.

The dim house smells splendidly like your ancient dictionary. You explore in a reverent wide-eyed trance, gingerly fingering the threadbare tablecloth, petting the plump dusty sofa, pulling the beaded chains on the flickering globe lamps. Your room, with its wooden bed and musty smelling quilts, is on the ground floor. A gingham-curtained window looks out to the lake. There is an oval braided rug beside the bed and a squat chest of drawers with round knobs. It is a simple room, just as you hoped it would be. You want to feel like a scullery maid, a live-in-girl, an orphan put to work. Inside the room by yourself you unpack your suitcase whistling happily while stashing your diary (just a notebook) and a pen in the smallest top drawer. You cannot wait to get back to that diary to record your surroundings.

Next door to your room is a tiny bathroom lined in white octagon tiles. It is a cool, bright sanctuary. There is a certain soap in this bathroom: it is a pink cake of soap, the kind of pink found only in milkshakes. It is lovely to grip the soap, all round edges and swayed belly, and when you put it back, it slips into its little dish majestically, like a naked, sleeping baby. The fragrance is chalky and old, from another era. Dusty, gloomy, but petal-perfumed as if from the depths of somewhere: from the armpit of a rose.

At the beginning of the week, you feel strong and sturdy. You are tireless with Max, who bolts about the countryside with his fingers arranged like a gun, shooting the air. You watch him do cannonball after cannonball off the dock then swim back to shore, you help him catch cherry-sized baby frogs by a marshy outlet, you gather twigs together to make a fort, you time him running from the front porch to the end of the dock. This work makes you feel saintly, pure, and patient. And you actually quite enjoy the coziness of singing a lullaby when he sneaks into your room at night, after his parents have put him to bed. This is motherhood, you imagine, forgetting your life back home. Forgetting about My Aorta and The President. Forgetting about Veronica The Woman. At Old Lake you wake, eat and sleep to this child's rhythms, reminding him to wash his hands after he exits the bathroom. You become an observer of the species Little Boy. Little Boys, you note wisely, readily resign their dignity at bedtime. If they are monsters in the yard, if they are sharks in the water, if they are baboons at the kitchen table, they are guileless about being soft ducklings before bed. Max proudly plugs his thumb into his mouth wearing only his faded dinosaur tee-shirt and underpants. "Where's bunny-nunny?" he inquires earnestly.

"Look under your pillow," you tell him.

Most days, the Rudy parents are “gone to town” to shop for antiques and do paperwork at a cafe where they can be free from distraction. You feel a little abandoned, but up for the challenge. You have an appetite for proving yourself, famous in your family for your endurance and discipline. Once you insisted on bathing in a tub of cold water to prove that you could have been a pilgrim. When your mother told you that pilgrims boiled their bath water you felt even stronger. But by the week’s end you are tired. Deliriously spent in a brand new way. And hungry too. You make two sandwiches for yourself at lunch-time and eat them outside on the dock with Max.

“You eat more than my mom,” Max says, watching you go to town on your lunch. His comment curbs your appetite for an hour but soon enough you are reaching around in the fridge till settling on an apple, a glass of milk, and some graham crackers.

At the end of these days with Max you furrow into a deep sleep till he hops on your bed the next morning, ready to eat cereal with you and play. You lie still and pretend to sleep at first because you like the feeling of his little tugs and pulls at your body to wake you up. He sits on your knees and honks your earlobes with his fingers. “Pancake. Tag. You’re it.”

So the days pass. The sun shines bright and relentless; you watch Max turn bronze. Your fantasy of writing in your diary and sipping lemonade all day long on the dock of Old Lake has shattered. Diaries are for the privileged classes. You are too busy for that sort of indulgence. Instead, you spend a great deal of time chasing Max and finding him in his hiding places—the boy loves to hide—under your bed, under the porch, in the cabinets, even in the branches of a tree. You try different strategies of trying to tire him out in the morning, so he might be sleepy in the afternoon. You chase him in the yard till he is silly with exhaustion and thirst but this just gives him more energy, the energy of a lunatic, and the sun bakes you to your bones. You wish you could hide from him.

It is on the final day at Old Lake that you stand beneath the ancient walnut tree, the tough green walnuts lousy about your feet. The smell of ripe walnuts weakens your body. It is too fresh: a mixture of wet wood, sweet fruit, and fire. The ripe walnut air gives you a headache and belly pain. Turns your bones limp. Every-so-often, a green walnut globe plummets from a high branch, lizardy skin cracking, releasing more walnut breath. Max is shirtless and barefoot. His toes are dirty and his bony shoulders are golden from the sun. He is with you beneath the walnut tree throwing walnuts in the air and repeating everything you say. It is that unmagical

time of day just after lunch when no activity amuses. The day has unraveled; dangerous boredom descends.

“Max,” you begin, patient and calm.

“Max,” he sings back in his high voice. His little mouth is turned down in a wicked smile and he eyes you, a walnut in his grimy paw, his arm reeled back and threatening. A bird feather is tucked behind his ear. The boy, when still, is a study of potential energy: his eyes always darting, his limbs always on the verge of large fast movement.

“We need to go inside and pick up toys.”

“We need to go inside and pick up toys.” He nails your inflection just so.

“Ma-ax,” you warn, dropping a note.

“MA-AX,” he mocks in a growling bear-voice. Then he hops about in a circle on one leg yipping: “Max!Max!Max!”

In a sudden hyperactive climax, he bows to the ground gathering dropped walnuts in one scoop and springs back up with an arched back, tossing the green heads high in the air. “Max!Max!Max!” The air rains violent walnuts.

“Max!Max!Max!”

A walnut hits you, square on your forehead.

“Hey!” you shout, and not in a baby-sitting voice. “Enough!” Your hands fly to your head and you look at him with angry eyes. You know Little Boys can interpret angry eyes. It takes self-will to calm down enough and not throw a walnut right back. You stare at him breathing through your nose.

Beneath the tree there is dead silence. Turning swiftly on your heel, you walk away from him toward the house. He waits a beat then tries to catch up.

“Pancake, Pancake, wait! I said I was sorry.”

You walk inside, the sound of his footsteps behind you. You continue into the bathroom and close the door without replying, wanting to shock the boy into submission. He is not used to you ignoring him or leaving him alone in a room without instructions and rules. There is a little silence—where has he gone? What if he walks right into Old Lake with his eyes closed, or puts a lit match to the rug? Guilty and worried, you are unable to enjoy the solitude in the cool echoing bathroom.

Your reflection is sweaty and red in the old smoky mirror and your insides have never felt so odd. The sea-sick feeling from the walnut smell has seeped into your ears down to way below your belly. Often, this summer of baby-sitting, you do not realize you have to pee until after the Rudys take Max for the evening. Now, you are aware that you have to pee, and quite urgently at that. Unzipping is like a

vacation and you think relieving yourself will renew your strength to get you through the rest of the afternoon with the child.

When you notice a little rust-colored spot on your pale blue panties you get dizzy and scared. It is unfamiliar, like seeing a big bug in a glass of iced tea or a snake on a front porch. You gasp out loud and crumple forward.

There is a brief moment where you have no idea what it is.

Then: "Oh." You whisper the word. You say "Oh," a second time, a surprise in your ears.

You pee, then zip up quick. You briskly scrub your hands with the dense pink soap and all hot water. The powdery smelling steam gathers in the belly of the porcelain sink and clears your eyes, nose, and head, cleansing away the green walnut smell. That deep pink soap tempers your stomachache too. When your hands are bright red and stinging raw with hot water, you switch the faucet to all cold then rinse. Holding your cheeks with your cold floral hands feels good.

Emerging from the tiny bathroom you find Max has returned building blocks to bucket. He piles a dozen scattered thumb-sized racecars onto a tray. Looking up, his eyes seem as large and wet as halved melons.

"Are you mad at me?" His voice is clear and honest.

You are not ready to make nice, knowing you will feel homesick for the edge of power if you show affection. You look around the tidied living room with one raised brow and say, "Better. Now let's go sit quietly on the porch and play library."

Play library. All that means is read quietly by one's self. Alas, this is the language you are reduced to, but it works. Max knows exactly what you mean.

He grabs a storybook and follows you to the front steps. He is still dazzled and reverent, treating you like an injured animal. You feel as though you possess magical powers.

Sitting side-by-side you lean your head against the railing and squeeze your eyes shut while Max flips through the pages of his book, tracing words and pictures with his earth-encrusted fingers.

Now you can think. You did not want this to happen to you. Not now! Now what? Should you tell Mrs. Rudy? Should you call your mom? Should you call a doctor? What if it is not *that* at all but something way worse? A disease. Deep inside though, you know it is not a disease and you know exactly what you should do. Your mother had insisted on packing "reinforcements" (her militant nickname for feminine products) just in case. She has been keeping a little stash for you in the bathroom because one day soon, you might need them. Again she is right. Those

little plastic pink packages are hidden—sitting vigil—at the bottom of your suitcase in a plastic bag doubly covered by your raincoat (which you also brought just in case).

The very thought of your “reinforcements” makes your nose flare in disgust and shame. What ugly little accessories! You do not want to give in to them; it would be a surrender. You are against puberty. You are against *all that*. You are also afraid, and a little embarrassed to do what you need to do without being told. Shy about it, even by yourself. It is as though you need to be invited into womanhood by another woman’s instructions. Painfully, you recall your last chat with Veronica.

You really want to steal away with your diary and record the event so you know it is not a dream. You want to write momentous sentences: *Today, Dear Diary, I have grown up*. Please—what trash. *Dearest Diary, I would like to record that I am now an official woman*. Otherwise, you feel as though it has not happened yet. It is not yet real.

The air outside has cooled and the sky is white and hazy—a headache sky. It is impossible to see the color of the sun. It is simply a shape, a blister, beneath clouds deep as fur. Looking up you squint and wince. Old Lake looks shiny and still but up close zillions of water bugs with eyelash legs hover above the water protectively, creating rings of the thinnest ripples, ripples, ripples. In your roaming contemplative state, you recall the first time you saw a ripple. You were three and you cast pea-sized stone into a large puddle. The ripples from the baby stone were a surprise, a discovery.

Out of nowhere, the music of mourning doves fills the air. It reminds you of afternoons walking home from school with the back-and-forth lilt of those birds rocking the air. The ghostly low coo of mourning doves wilts your muscles. You are weakened to your bones by that noise—heavy with sleep and longing. You feel made of string. A clenching cramp seizes; you remember your underpants.

The rest of the afternoon you note every new sensation: a strange pull between your thighs, a sickening headache, a sore back. You obsessively check yourself in the bathroom the rest of the afternoon but find no changes. You promise to put on “reinforcements” if there is more. It did happen, you are sure of it, but was it enough to be real?

When the Rudy parents finally return from town you are in a toxic mood. You resent them for dumping their kid on you for over a week at this place. You know you could do a better job of parenting one day. These people are frauds, you think. Your muscles ache as if you have been exercising. Your breasts: behind your breasts, beneath your breasts, within your breasts there is a fragile ache, a swollen soreness. Ducking out of the family dinner, you curl sleepily into the bed.

You do not wake up until the middle of the night. When you do wake up you feel fresh and new. Thin and energized. You are restless under the covers for a while then climb out of bed to look out the window at the lake. It is out of order and novel to be awake at this spectacular hour.

Suddenly, you know exactly what you want to do. Clutching your diary and slipping into your sandals, you shuffle out of your room and head for the front door. For a second you consider your “reinforcements,” but then think—*naah*. You take one last look over your shoulder at the dead of the living room.

You suck in a breath and open the front door to thousands of soft moths blurring the space. How can such mass movement be so noiseless? You step through their chaotic veil, their weightless wings kissing your ears. A scampering thrill swarms your bosom as you high-step-it over the scary dark grass and over to the dock of Old Lake. On the dock you can smell the fresh water; you can smell the earth. Filling your lungs with sweet night air, you gaze at the sky and think of your fever dreams of blackness, redness, and bright whiteness. The moon is out—your favorite kind of moon—a moon that looks shy, as if turning its cheek from the earth. It is not yet full. You stare into it until your vision speckles.

The night throbs with toad croaks. Their pulsating groan never pauses but ascends and ascends. Crickets are lazier. They call like a soft puff through a metal whistle. They start and stop. Witnessing their wait, their hope for a call back makes your soul ache.

You hop down to the embankment where the green canoe roofs are laced with wisps of cobwebs and dew. The canoe shell is chilly to your palms. Hoisting it over, you reveal weather-beaten oars and frightened night-crawler worms moving crazily. You laugh at those worms, for they seem idiotic.

Climbing into the canoe belly, fluidity blesses your muscles. Your cat-eyes have adjusted to the night and you feel effortless and dancierly. Inside the hollow of the canoe you clutch the oar. It is slimy and cold from dew. You use it to push off the sandy dirt. Entering the water, canoe meets lake and makes a small noise, a dainty swallow.

Have you ever felt this alone before? You cannot just let the day end. You feel urgency for an obstacle, a challenge, a ceremony, in order to inaugurate your new self. You allow the canoe to float to the middle of the lake. Your skin is sensitive, susceptible to every breeze and every rustle in the cattails. Animals must be everywhere. You let yourself imagine that wolves are circling Old Lake. That snakes and eels and catfish are nosing the bottom of the canoe. The ghoulish trees hunch

over the lake, their arthritic bows dipping to the water. The sky is black as a pupil. It makes you dizzy, offers no depth or distance, just startling foreverness.

Spreading the diary open on your lap is something you feel you must savor but instead you are self-conscious. Why? Because you have lost your rhythm. You must situate the oar, which keeps sliding off the seat, and you must find a comfortable position—no where to lean on a boat. So, you wiggle around then finally angle your notebook to catch the glare of moonlight, just enough light to pen the words: *Dear Diary, I am away at camp.* As soon as you write the sentence you feel silly and contrived. You look about the lake as if lights would suddenly switch on and catch you out there. Resisting the impulse to scribble through the sentence you continue, *And it's not that big of a deal.* In this instant you are humbled.

Still, it feels right to document, to tell someone, even if it is just yourself. You close the notebook and sit in the boat with your knees pulled up to your chest. Now what.

Raindrops tease your nose. At first it is simply a mist, and you think the canoe must have passed through a patch of fog. Or perhaps it is just the magical process of condensation that most of the world sleeps through. Yes! Maybe you are witnessing one of nature's secret transformations that takes place in the middle of the night turning dusk to dawn. But soon the mist turns to fat drops of rain falling harder and harder. Flat dollops of rain smack the top of your head, cheeks and eyelids. When a rickety finger of lightning tickles the dark sky, your bottom involuntarily leaps off the seat of the canoe. You try to protect your diary from the rain by stuffing it beneath your nightshirt, but it is no use. Taking a gulp through your nose, you madly oar towards the dock, but the wind picks up, and now the rain, in a solid wall. You have Vaseline vision. You oar with all your might till you realize you are on the opposite side of the lake. All that work! The canoe—the beast—turns in a slow circle on its own accord. How do you breathe? There seems to be a little hummingbird in your throat beating out breaths. You swallow hard and begin to cry, no tears, just dry hyperventilating heaves.

Lighting has always been your biggest fear. Even at fourteen you are afraid of being electrocuted. And you have studied: you know water is the most dangerous place to be. The frogs are so loud you are afraid their croaks will eat you alive. The utter blackness, the pelting rain, the eternal lake water will diminish you, till you are nothing at all, till the canoe is empty of your bones and blood.

Your cold wrists and hands quiver and you gnash your teeth, not knowing where to steer. For some reason, your thumbs have gone numb and stupid, the rest of your hands ache from gripping tight. You are terrified of the embankment on this

side of Old Lake. It is dark and unknown. The dock's side is too far to risk and with the wind, you do not know if you will be strong enough to make it. More lighting licks the sky. The storm has traveled closer, you can tell, because the thunder does not rumble—it rips. That flash is so close it seems to peel your bones. You cannot even remember what it feels like to not be miserable.

You try to yell but your call is warbled and weak. The storm, the frogs, the air seem syrupy, impenetrable. You call again, “help!” and feel tear-snot run salty to your top lip. Another bolt of lighting numbs your toes, turns your blood to jelly. Shamelessly, you start to scream for help and paddle wildly with your oar, hoping to get closer to the dock by the Rudy's house. In a lightning flash, you make out the shape of the dark house, no evidence of life.

You let out your biggest call yet, competing with the frogs, the crickets, the thunder, the wind and the rain flogging the lake. “Help me!”

Like a miracle, one window illuminates. Then: Mr. Rudy is on the dock with a flashlight. “Pancake?” he calls, “Is that you?”

You gulp dryly, feeling as small as a button.

“Yes,” you whimper. You are certain he could not hear that anemic noise, but you are too embarrassed to yell anymore.

“Wait right there, don't try to paddle!”

You watch him trot around the perimeter of the lake—suddenly it is not that large at all, just a round pond. Suddenly the cattails and willow trees are not menacing. Suddenly you feel like you are in the pages of a children's picture book, not a twisted nightmare. Even the darkness, so cavernous and apocalyptic moments ago, is less dark. Mr. Rudy wears an old tee-shirt and a pair of camping shorts and untied sockless tennis shoes. He wore the exact shirt and shorts and sockless shoes a few evenings ago while grilling chicken breast by the picnic table, and something about this ordinary attire dissolves the membrane of excitement and terror that had surrounded the canoe.

In a hasty gesture, you take your diary from beneath your nightshirt and toss it into Old Lake and wait for him to come. How shameful you will feel if he sees you with the thing. You watch as it floats, the paper curls and warps as if being burned. You will it to *please sink*. The rain beats your notebook and the paper becomes waterlogged before vanishing down, down, down.

The rain continues, dizzying the water with ripples and you notice the canoe floor beginning to slosh with rainwater. Hunching with your feet in the puddle and clutching your sides you carry the posture of being caught on a toilet. Mr. Rudy

rounds Old Lake, his limbs long and strong, elegant as a racing bike. You feel stumpy as a mushroom.

He arrives at the embankment closest to the canoe and says, "try to paddle to the edge and I'll help you out." He is all business, his face slack from sleep, his eyes serious, heroic. "Think you can make it?"

You feel horrible that he has to help you out of this mess, as if he is the one baby-sitting you. You are speechless, wondering how you will explain yourself, wondering if you could blame it on sleepwalking or even insanity. You cannot look at him. You look down instead and paddle long purposeful strokes, biting your lip in order to survive the humiliation. The canoe reaches low ground and bumps up to the sandy area where Mr. Rudy stands. You rise with the feeling you get after roller-skating, your knees too loose and wobbly. You dumbly grab the weak neck of a cattail then flail over the canoe seat and onto the mud.

The rain promptly stops. This intensifies your humiliation, makes the danger seem even more imagined.

"Max woke up when he heard the thunder and ran into your room because he was scared. He got even more scared when he saw you were gone," he says, squinting at you.

There is no way to miss the scolding tone in his voice and you bite the insides of your cheeks. Your lips tremble too much to speak. "Oh," is all you say.

"You seem to be in one piece," Mr. Rudy says, his tone changing. You look at him and he looks at you. "Are we working you too hard? Were you trying to make a getaway on your last night?" He chuckles at this and looks around at Old Lake. It seems tiny, a joke of a lake. Like a home-made pond that someone dug for goldfish in their back yard. You yelled for your life because of this?

"No, no," you say. "I'm so sorry!" You blurt the words, sputtering like a child in bath water.

Mr. Rudy softens. "Better tell Max that. He's all shook up in there hoping you'll come back." He laughs.

The two of you walk in the soggy grass around Old Lake and back to the house, all the while digging your fingernails into the fat of your palms. You see Max and Mrs. Rudy by the front door waiting. You feel dishonored; doing something wrong in someone else's family is near criminal behavior: unforgivable. Luckily you will be leaving the next morning.

Mrs. Rudy has both hands on Max's shoulders as if to protect him from you. Max, in his dinosaur tee shirt, gives you a look as if to say, boy, are you in trouble. You can feel your drenched black hair stuck to the sides of your face. Your feet and

legs are dirty with grass and mud; you feel like a monster. Mrs. Rudy wears a long clean bathrobe cinched neatly at her waist. Max nuzzles the back of his head into her robe and yawns.

“Oh good, you’re safe,” Mrs. Rudy says, squinting. “Your parents would kill us if we let something happen to you.”

Her words are agonizing; you feel trounced. How subtle the Mothers of Little Boys can be.

ooo

The car ride home is silent and long. At a rest stop, still hours from civilization, you finally gave into your “reinforcements,” which, before leaving Old Lake, you had hid deep in the pocket of your shorts. Now it is all you can think about; you have never known such paranoia. Max wants you to sing with him, the way you did every day on the dock together when the Rudy parents were gone to town. The thing is, he wants you to sing, *Miss Suzy*, a naughty little jingle that mentions a human being’s rear end in a rough mannered way. You are too humiliated to sing before the Rudy parents, especially a song that would remind them of your wickedness.

“How ’bout we play car-library,” you suggest.

“That’s all you ever want to do,” he whines.

You feel victim of travel-rot. Your skin feels slimy, there is dirt embedded in rivers that make up the lines of your wrists. You examine your hands: Are those your fingernails? They have grown long and filthy, like shovels.

Finally, the Rudys pull their car up to your house. Max, who begins to cry as soon as you unfasten your seat belt scrambles out of the car with you and gives you ten squeezes till you do the funny squeaking noise that he loves so much.

Your mother stands in the doorway. She is fresh and girlish in a bright new sun-dress with her hair pulled back from her face. You touch your grubby hair, feeling very ugly indeed, unkempt as a furry beast. But mostly, you are relieved to return to your mother and to be home, weary and bruised.

“You’re back!” she cheers, taking your suitcase and wrapping her long cool arms about you, pulling you in close.

You feel at home in her motherly smell: her hair and neck remind you of her terry cloth bathrobe and so loosened inside by comfort and familiarity, you almost blurt something about who you are now, how you are different. As she hugs you, her breasts smash against your own smaller breasts and with what is on your mind you nearly convince yourself that she is your equal.

Then, still squeezing, she rests her chin on the crown of your head. You still fit beneath her this way. She says, "Pancake, sometimes I forget how small you are." She is teary-eyed now, so easily overcome you think, slightly terrified by these volatile emotions. But her words give you relief. You are not so different after all. You are glad to be still a child, a girl.

She releases you faster than you expect. Dries her eyes in a hurry. "I know you hate when I get weepy," she says finding her sensible nurse's voice. And she is right. You do, usually. Because you do not know how to respond. Because you are uncomfortable with her sensitive threshold. Because you do not know how to mother your mother through sentimental gushiness. She folds her arms across her own bosom as if to say: There. I've had my cry, now I'm through. And in the hot afternoon sun you feel a chill on your skin where her arms had been.

Cassius

Winter: you arrive at the high school, run-walking, late for Algebra again. You rush through the front doors wearing a knee-length down parka with a hood pulled tight over your head, a scarf wrapped about your neck and mouth, and high snow boots—three pounds each. You peek out from a small pucker with eyes bright and watery from the warmth of the school building, and observe others in more stylish winter get-ups: figure-flattering coats, delicate gloves, styled hatless hair, feeling envy followed by secret superiority. Beneath, you are in skins of long johns—floral patterned—wool socks that cover your calves, a turtleneck, and a heavy sweater. Wrapped up this tight you can only move your hips, but you feel sensible and tough.

You also feel bigger, muscled, and uninhibited. Not to mention invisible. There is none of your usual shyness in staring at your locker neighbor, an older boy, a Senior. You are just a Junior and you stand still a moment, hidden like a mummy in winter armor, and watch the boy peel off his coat, feeling your wind bit cheeks tingle back to life.

His name is Cassius. Everyone at school calls him ‘Caj,’ but you prefer to address him by his true name, indulging in each sensuously soft syllable: *Caah-shuss*. Lovely to whisper. Like sinking into meringue.

You wrestle with your locker—it never simply opens—and suddenly your arms feel weak and limp, as though you have spent the morning shooting baskets. You give up. Cassius wears a black Pantera tee-shirt and skinny blue jeans. A frown tugs his brow as he takes a pair of drumsticks from the top shelf of his locker and tucks them into his back pocket. He is a tall boy, and sinewy as a panther. His veined muscles age him in comparison to other high school boys whose hands look too soft, milk fed and babyish. At seventeen Cassius has the worn roughness of a carpenter or coal-miner. He plays the drums in a garage band called Goat, and often sports a faded baseball hat with a piece of duct tape over the team name, the word GOAT scrawled on the tape with a black magic marker. He whips those drumsticks out of his pocket as he paces down the school halls and wildly drums the air.

Everyone in school is drawn to Cassius. He is the anomaly, not part of any crowd. Sometimes he joins the cluster of smokers at Horseshoe Park across the street at lunch and after school, but, unlike the Horseshoe crowd, he is in the gifted science and math classes. He is not in the popular crowd of the water bottle toting soccer team boys, who are smart as well as athletic, but they revere him anyway. Or maybe they are afraid of him. Teachers are on guard with Cassius. He slouches in his desk

chair and stares at teachers without taking notes, flicking his neon orange cigarette lighter with his thumb.

Cassius looks at you and smirks with a turned-down mouth, eyeing you from hood to boot. Your eyes, the only part of you exposed, meet his and you feel each individual pore on your skin expand hotly beneath inches of nylon, down, and wool. You wiggle your fingers buried deep in mitten and execute a triplicate of blinks.

“Cassius,” you say, bold and confident. “Will you help me? My locker’s stuck.”

Cassius shrugs. “Sure.” He jerks the locker handle a few times then looks over his shoulder. “What’s the combination?”

At this you hesitate. The principal gave multiple warnings and lectures when the built-in-locks were installed. Under no circumstances should anyone exchange locker combinations. There were even dramatically worded posters, *Remember the Three P’s!* hung on hallway bulletin boards: *Protect Yourself! Prevent Theft! Privacy! Don’t swap combinations.*

You loathe those over-wrought posters anyway. The uncool language aimed at targeting your age group is one of your biggest peeves.

Cassius shoots you another look. “Well, what is it, Pancake?” The whole school knows you by your childhood nickname, but when Cassius addresses you, it feels entirely too intimate, making your kneecaps chilly then hot.

“Four, ten, eight,” you say, swift as a band-aid rip. You exhale. It feels good to break one of the lesser school rules. It makes you feel like a true high schooler. You remove your hood and then your yarn pompom hat beneath it, and shake out your hair. It is matted and crispy with static from the icy air, but you feel as though you’ve just hopped off a motorcycle.

Solemnly, as though in prayer, Cassius bends toward the locker. His hips rock gently, neck curved as he spins the lock. *Four, ten, eight*, he whispers to himself. No luck; he tries again. An engorged vein crawls along the side of his neck and forks at his earlobe: *four, ten, eight*—it is frightening, a little, to hear the secret set of numbers come out of his mouth. You ball a fist in each mitten and watch as his shoulders shift again. In a flash, he lifts his arm up and hammers his fist into the metal door. You gasp at the catastrophic sound and cover your ears—a childish habit you’ve never lost: whenever you are caught off guard, you cover your ears. He keeps his fist pinned to the locker for a beat and you gaze at the violent look on his face. Not mischievous or impish, simply wild. His eyes go dull and far away. When he takes his fist off of the locker door, it opens slowly, squeaking silly on the hinge.

You look around nervously, worried that the locker has broken or that you and Cassius might have been spotted by a hall monitor, or worse, the Vice-Principal. But Cassius is unfazed. He looks you right in the eye—your vision blurs—and smiles like a dog with a dead bunny in its teeth.

The broad-chested gym teacher, Mr. Sommers, saunters by holding a clipboard and wearing a hoodie. Mr. Sommers takes in the two of you with his eyes. “Cool it, Caj,” he says as he walks by. “No need to be destructive.” Mr. Sommers looks at you as if to say, *you okay?* You avoid his eyes and hold your breath till he leaves the scene.

“Thank you,” you say to Cassius, clutching your bulbous mittened hands to your heart. Overwhelmed with gratitude, you want to offer him something in return.

He shrugs and says, “No biggie,” and gallantly holds your locker door open as you slip off your mittens and hang up your things. Standing this close, flustered, giddy, and stupid, you discover Cassius smells like bug repellent. As you squirm out of your coat, awkwardly arching your back and craning your neck to peel the heavy thing off, your elbow brushes the sleeve of his tee-shirt and the smell stirs vivid. You want to wash in that smell.

Breathing in deep to capture the scent in your lungs, you sustain a moment of eye contact with Cassius. His face is calm; his lips are parted and relaxed. Your eyes are open to his eyes. You cannot sustain the moment long and blurt, “bye,” waving hugely, all splayed fingers and pendulum elbow. He laughs at you, but with an intimate smile, and you swing around with your algebra books beneath your chin. You look over your shoulder as you race down the hall and see Cassius sauntering away in the opposite direction, air drumming with a drumstick in each fist.

In Algebra class—only a little late—as the quadratic equations are chalked, erased, and chalked again, you replay the moment of eye contact again and again.

Lately, you’re obsessed with accomplishing a singular goal. To kiss a boy. At sixteen you are ashamed of your un-kissed status and are lunatic with the thought of getting it done. And soon! Every year since seventh grade you wrote in your diary, *This will be the year, or, I promise myself I will kiss a boy.* Oh, how it pains you to re-read these earnestly written lines again and again. No boy is exempt from your kiss list. You would kiss almost any boy who would kiss you back. The only thing is, you rarely interact with boys and so your opportunities to complete your goal are slim. So slim, in fact, that it reminds you of the time you were a little girl, and set a goal to be an Olympic ice-skater, even though you had never ice-skated before. At times, this distant goal brings relief, and you think, oh well, I guess I’ll just have to remain kissless, and at other times it feels like a wicked test from God. You wonder,

what's wrong with me, when you observe others, less attractive, stupid—even dirty—kissing proudly in the hallways before class. Everyone at your school has probably kissed someone, you are certain, and gone on to other acts of passion. You will never catch up. But something about that sweet and head-clearing bug repellent has redirected your course and motivated your spirits. You look at your notebook paper, at the quadratic equation that trailed off miles ago and tell yourself, *kiss Cassius*.

You return from Algebra class still jarred by your morning encounter. You cross your fingers on your left hand so tightly they turn white, to have another chance with him, to be conversational and charming. He is not at his locker, but you are happy anyway, so happy in fact, that you do not realize that you are smiling broadly, as if posing for a picture all the way to your locker. Your locker opens obediently, on the first try, and you think, *what a miracle, he fixed it!* reeling inside at the joy of depending on someone—and a *boy*, at that—while trading books for your next class. Just before you close the metal door, something on the top shelf catches your eye. You waver on tiptoes, squint, and discover Cassius's drumsticks.

Did he accidentally forget them while he helped you this morning? No. You blush again, replaying the moment of sustained eye contact, followed by his air drumming as you parted ways before hustling to class. So he must have come back. You are struck dumb with the notion that he was thinking of you at all. What is this message?

You take hold of the drumsticks with trembling hands. What curious instruments! Minimal and ascetic in shape, like tapered candles, but riddled with the tiniest of nicks. You want to carry them with you everywhere, study them like artifacts, paint pictures of them, wear them like jewelry. You slip them back onto the shelf and go to your next class, every swish of your corduroys spinning your solar plexus.

High school, till this day, has proved to be a lonely affair. Ever since Veronica moved away, you've been on your own, your closest friend a Japanese exchange student, Yumi, who joins you for lunch in the cafeteria, who does not shave her legs, and who reads a Sailor Moon anime magazine while you do a history worksheet or read a book. At lunch, you teach her to say things in English and she brings you slim California rolls, wrapped neatly in foil. Before lunch is over, the two of you go to the girl's restroom and pick seaweed out of your front teeth.

Every now and then, Veronica calls you from her new town. She calls late at night and it is always a surprise, after not hearing from her in months. Rubbing your eyes, you sit up in bed and croak, "Hey, Vee," cozying up to the phone, happy to hear from your oldest friend. She begins the conversation with the same question, "Do

you have a boyfriend yet, Pancake?” You always laugh and make a self-deprecating comment. “No, I’m cursed.” But then she needles you till you’re angry. You turn the tables to shift the focus: “Do *you* have a boyfriend?”

She is quick to reply, “We just broke up, but I’m kind of seeing someone new—well, I haven’t decided if I’m *seeing* him yet, I just made out with him at a party this weekend.” She says this in a casual voice and you cannot help but think how upturned your world would be if that had just happened to you. When you hang up the phone, you imagine how much you would love to tell her, by the next call, that you’ve kissed someone. Such sweet relief. But talking to Veronica renders you impotent. You cannot even visualize an imagined kiss. You can only hear her scolding voice and see yourself as a messy haired teenager with the round eyes of a child. No hint of allure; purely, eternally, a kid.

What you do not tell Veronica, and what you can barely acknowledge to yourself, is that you have, in fact, kissed a boy. When you are not eating lunch with Yumi in the cafeteria, you volunteer at the special-ed classroom and help Sam, a boy born with a brain injury, eat his tan colored pudding and yams. You began volunteering for extra credit in health class, but became attached to the routine. And to Sam. The special-ed teachers know you and trust you to hang out with Sam while they smoke in the lounge or power walk.

Sam’s head is as big and unwieldy as a peony flower on a thin stem. He is strapped to a tall backed chair and his tiny wrists curl inward. Each day, when the teachers have left the room you kiss Sam on the forehead, letting your nose brush his skin and his hairline. Sometimes, in your diary, you count this as *experience with boys*. Sam always honks and brays when you do this, his rictus square mouth revealing big square teeth and red, red, gums. His forehead is smooth and tight and shiny, thin skin that feels as fragile as a glass Christmas tree ornament to your careful lips. Even though his head is clean, he smells like something dampish and old. But his eyes are as big as cow’s eyes, with long straight lashes that convulse with each of your kisses. His eyelids are thin and lavender. You usually feel sad after kissing Sam and sink into one of your gloomy funks: humorless, and tired, with a grown-up headache.

Sometimes you just eat lunch alone, absorbed with homework or *Lucy Gayheart*—a favorite novel—not looking up. Looking up at the crowd in the cafeteria is like looking down from a ladder: choking vertigo. If you keep your head in your book and your hands busy, lunch passes painlessly.

On the day you find Cassius’s drumsticks in your locker, you decide to eat in the cafeteria, even though Yumi is on a Washington D.C. trip. You find a small table far

away from the writhing center of the room and feel perfectly content unfolding the wax-paper around your peanut-butter and apple slice sandwich, knowing that Cassius's drumsticks are in your locker and he knows the combination. It is enough to give you the confidence to look boldly out at your peers sitting coupled off or in large groups. You eye two girls sitting across from one another in rapt conversation. They gesture with their hands and make big expressions with their faces. Suddenly, one of the girls puts her hand to her chest and looks concerned, reaching out to the other girl's shoulder. You feel contemplative and solid, letting your eyes roam around the room studying these groups of people.

All at once, hands come out from behind you, covering your eyes. Bug repellent! You play the fool. "Who is that?" you cry, indulging in a merry shriek.

"Guess who, little woman, guess who," says a mock-gruff voice.

You are smiling so hard it agonizes your glands. All you can do is giggle shyly, "Don't know."

Cassius soon pops in front of you and you blink away white balls of light.

"Why all by yourself?" he asks.

" 'Cause I like to be," you lie. You find it ugly to admit loneliness.

"Oh, well. I'll go," he says.

"Suit yourself," you say, giving an aloof arch to your brows.

But he ignores you. "You're so small!" he declares, gathering up your wrist in his large paw. He peers at the front and back of your hand as though it is not a part of you, but something he's found that captures his attention.

After he scoots a chair next to yours and gets comfortable, it seems official: you are friends. He helps himself to one of your pretzels and takes his drumsticks out of his back pocket. At the sight of the drumsticks, your heart seems to pause a beat. *He's been back in there?* you think, both uneasy and happy about the invasion. You grimace inside, thinking of your secret stash of feminine products hidden in a zippered cosmetics bag hanging on a hook, not to mention your coat pocket full of green peppermints that you keep to relish on your walk home from school. *Why am I so weird?* you think pleadingly, hoping he didn't snoop around at all. But you shrug it off realizing that this is just the price to pay of having a friend and you laugh as he tries to teach you how to do a paradiddle on the side of the table with his drumsticks.

He joins you at lunch the next day, too. And the next day, and the next day. You talk about all sorts of things. Mostly about his band. Sometimes he helps you with chemistry homework. "I have a fascination with it," he says and you think, *Good God, what a mind.* Then, one day, he tells you about where he lives.

“Three stories, fresh paint, modern kitchen—stainless steel fridge—the basement is totally redone...carpeted, the works.” He lists the qualities as if he’s selling you a cruise package. You are not sure what to make of his naively boastful manner.

“Wow, three stories?” you say, “Do you have a lot of brothers and sisters?”

Cassius nods immediately and smiles as if you asked an appropriate question. “I do!” he says brightly. “I do. I have lots of brothers and sisters. I guess you can say I come from a big family.” His sweet smile, when talking about his family endears him to you. His mischievous forehead seems suddenly boyish, baby-like. You almost touch him there; you want to sweep the back of your fingers right across his forehead. Instead you clasp your own hands.

“How many?” You think of *Little Women* and other novels about big families. The solidarity, the familiarity, even the hardships, seem like a happy life.

Cassius pauses. “How many?” he screws up his inky blue eyes. “I guess...like nine? No. Eleven.” He blinks then looks you in the eye. Terrific grin. “Thirteen. I think.”

You flinch: “But you’re not sure?”

“I should just tell you,” he says. “But you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“Of course,” you say, confused, but eager to be entrusted. His disclosure will bind you together. You can tell, with complete delight, that he cannot resist opening up to you.

“It’s not really my house,” he explains, looking down at his fingers. You notice his hands trembling a bit. “It’s called Youth House.” He rolls his eyes at the name but continues. “It’s for teens between families,” he said in a voice like a public service announcement.

You nod and keep your eyes fixed on his face, careful not to register shock or alarm. “How long have you lived between families?” You use a gentle, joking emphasis on the words just to show you understand. You squint, cock your head, lean in.

“Just two years. I’ve had lots of foster families and before that—like when I was nine—I lived with my dad, but then he moved.”

Something about the shakiness in his voice settles your nerves to an even hum. It is the same feeling you get after the first hour of baby-sitting, something shifts and you are suddenly comfortable and ready for service. He leans toward you more and you feel him relax and shed his toughness. You sense, by the expression in his roof-peak eyebrows, that he is on a bare wire taking a risk. His hands are now

relaxed in his lap, palms up and pink. His freshly shampooed blond hair stands wispy and fuzzy around his temples. He rubs his nose and eyes with his fist, like a kitten.

Your eyes feel clear and your head is generating and filtering thoughts in the clean and abundant fashion of a water wheel. You ask Cassius questions: Do you like the other teenagers that live there? Do you have a room of your own? What's the food like? Are the workers nice?

He lights up. "Everyone has two weekly household chores," he tells you. After listing the chores he tells you his favorite chore is mowing the Youth House lawn in the summertime.

You imagine him shirtless with his GOAT cap—backwards—working up a sweat, ruddy cheeks, fresh grass whirling about the air as he pushes a rickety mower, with an earnest little frown on his face. Suddenly, you feel something entirely new: total body love. A tidal wave of love in a way you have never felt for even a family member. A warm bloom unfurls within, and your clear vision pixelates and blurs. Every gland in your body throbs, dilates, contracts. As he scoots a little closer—light brush of shoulders—you feel a marvelous burn. Your ears are hot, your neck is damp and your throat turns to paste. You gulp his bug repellent smell and feel dewy beneath your eyes, the swarmed way you feel when you inhale a bouquet of flowers.

It is a lovely, creamy feeling—dizzy and warm and thick. The pinnacle is when Cassius leans into you, a tight press from his shoulder to yours and says, "Do you realize, Pancake, you're the only person who knows all this?"

Your heart begins to beat faster. You have made a true connection! You are pressed close, like napping pups. Anyone who passes a glance your way would think, look at those lovebirds, anyone would see a real young woman, engaged in heart-to-heart chat with a boy. For a moment you are annoyed with yourself for having to be so "aware" all the time. Don't most people live without a play-by-play analysis of who they are and how the world perceives them? Nevertheless, your thick syrupy giddiness is unsinkable. You are close enough to smell his breath and to count each of his blonde eyelashes. You look at his lips and bite your own. How hungrily you want to kiss him! You want his lips on your lips. You want to share the same humid air and breathe the same breath.

Cassius spreads his arms out in a stretch, flexing every muscle and yawning. "I'm gonna head out to the Horseshoe now," he says getting up. "Meeting some people."

You are disappointed to see him go to the park—he doesn't invite you along—but then realize you would not want to share him with anybody at Horseshoe

park anyway. So you are content, having shared an intimate lunch, and wave goodbye.

Every time you think of Cassius, you salivate as you do when you smell food. Even though you have never kissed a boy, you feel as though your lips have been pre-aquainted in some ancient time, and you are confident they would know what to do with Cassius's lips: you would hold those lips steady, softly in your own. Later that night, you write it all down in your diary: *pre-aquainted*, pleased with this romantic word, and dream how your faces would fit together. You write *Cassius Cassius Cassius* in sweeping grand cursive before drifting off to sleep.

Later that week at school, Yumi catches you in the hallway and says, "You going out with that weird boy?" Her face, perplexed.

"Who?" you say, wanting to hear her describe Cassius.

"That boy!" she says. "He always make drumming. He your boyfriend?"

"Oh, do you mean Cassius?" you say, slowly luxuriating each letter.

Pronouncing his name to someone else tastes like a dollop of melting cream.

"Cassius and I are good friends," you say, but with a coy little flourish to your voice.

Yumi is expressionless, then frowns. "Friends? With weird boy?" She makes the face of smelling something bad.

You feel drunk with the notion of being linked to Cassius. It gives you a rush of skin tingles from your wrist to your elbows to your ears, and you wonder who else besides Yumi has noticed.

But then, darkness falls. For the next four school days, Cassius is absent at lunch and locker. On the first day, you hang around by your locker to see if he will show up, but he does not.

Alone with your sandwich, you feel strong, reconciled—even brave—in your solitude. *I am by myself, but it is only because Cassius is not here*, you think. You like wondering about someone's absence. You like the way it affects your day. *My friend was gone today*. Riding off the high of his acquaintance, you imagine him watching you in the cafeteria, then sneaking up from behind as a surprise. This makes you careful to eat gracefully and look demure. There is a luxury of being alone, but knowing deep inside you are not. You fancy yourself the worried girlfriend—even though you aren't at that stage yet.

Days two and three without Cassius you are utterly glum. You come home from school in a grouchy mood. You had worn your favorite skirt—a skirt like a kilt—anticipating that he must be back to school that day and your reunion would be joyous.

At dinner that night, you stab your fajitas and roll your eyes at your parents' jokes. You cannot taste the food for all the hot chili pepper spice. "Oooo! This is great!" your parents coo to each other. "Love that kick, just after you swallow a bite!"

"It's too spicy," you say, dumping a handful of shredded cheddar over the sauce as an antidote. Your lips feel numb and you chew the ice in your water glass. Your head tends to itch when food is too spicy.

"That's cause you're not used to it yet, Pancake," says your father. "It takes a sophisticated palate." He chuckles and takes a big bite of the stuff, then closes his eyes and moans a full octave of food enjoyment moans.

"So. What's eating you, Pancake," your mother asks. She says "you" pointedly and does an impression of your puss-face: long, taught, upside-down letter-U-lips. At this, your toes feel as though they have been lit afire.

"I'm not being *eaten* by *anything*, actually." Each word is a shooting dart.

She clucks. "My, my, somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed." She makes a wide-eyes face and sucks in her lips. She footsies your father from beneath the table and they giggle.

Your parents' flirting at your expense makes you feel an apocalyptic sadness. How can they understand your aching heart if they are so blissfully stupid? You are bursting just to say his name to them—Cassius!—and to tell them how you feel, but you are afraid they would not understand. You are afraid that as soon as you explain this mystery in your life, it will feel minute. What if they make it into a joke? More likely, they will turn it into an example of your hormones-gone-mad or your age: they are more aware of having a teenager in the house than you are of being one.

On the third day of Cassius's absence, you feel destroyed: invertebrate and cotton mouthed, wits and reflexes dead and gone. You are the kind of animal who changes color with emotion: cranberry nose for hate; white lips for terror; red, red, crayon red, ears for shame; and when you are sad, you feel bled of all color. You feel like a sock puppet, slinking about the ground, and that night in your bed your teeth are clenched wide-awake, and you vibrate like a windup toy with worry and speeding thoughts. You write in your diary, *Does he hate me?* and *What do I have to live for?* and *I hate school!* and *I hate everything!* Then, in an exasperated climax, you write his name over and over again. If only you could draw his face, to summon his smile and eyes.

After Junior Literature,—four days and no Cassius—after you realize you have read the wrong Lord Byron poem in preparation for the in-class writing prompt, after you stare at your blank notebook paper and etch maniacal spirals in the

margins—usually you fly brilliantly through one of these prompts—and after scraping your scalp with your fingernail till you feel the slightest relief of blood, you walk through the crowded halls, and choke on the slow pang of a tear shimmying its way up your throat like a grape.

You go to your locker to trade books for your next horrible class: *Four, ten, eight*; won't open. Naturally! You roll your eyes and remember Cassius's confident punch a few weeks ago. That was a completely different season and you were a completely different girl. Now you are infected with him and you long for the days when it was new. You try the combination again and wiggle the handle, steaming inside at the miserly three minutes of "passing time" to get from class to class.

Four, ten, eight, four, ten, eight, four, ten, eight, four, ten, eight, four, ten, eight! You grunt through your nose and stomp one foot with each tug.

Then you try again: Four, ten, eight. You knee the door and thrust the handle so hard it hurts your pinky. But something engages and clicks in the mechanics and when you back away, it falls open. You shake out your hand and feel the pulse of a headache under your eye. Then gasp and feel your heart leap: Drumsticks!

Headache gone, you whisper, "He's here!" and smile like a cartoon clown. For a moment you think you might be dreaming. You pet them, you hold them, you touch their tips together in a drumstick kiss; they are real. You clutch the drumsticks, nearly kiss the drumsticks, then hurry off to chemistry class: tardy, and wiggling your toes in your clogs to release the joy.

At lunch you stand at the end of the milk line with your nose in your lunch bag, smelling the salty good smells. You look up—instinct!—and spy Cassius entering through the double doors. He doesn't scan the room; instead, he makes a path right to you, as if he knew where you would be. You quit the line and go to him. Three individual cigarettes poke out of his flannel shirt pocket.

"Hey stranger!" he says to you, picking you up by your knees. Shaynequa, a ponderous black girl in your gym class, who wears gold beads in her braids, does this to you every once in a while too, and you usually say something meek like "hey, hey, hey" with tight lips and grasp at the air hopelessly with your flailing fists. Normally, you hate the feeling of being in the air with only your pitiful knees being held, your center nowhere. But when Cassius picks you up by your knees, you feel like a phoenix. You hear trumpets, you hear a choir. When he returns you to earth, you have the embarrassing urge to scurry off somewhere and put your cheeks to your knees and kiss those knees.

"Wherehaveyoubeen? Haveyoubeensick?" you say in a gust of breath.

He peels into laughter, clutching his abdominals.

“Don’t look so worried!” He makes a silly concerned face: knotted eyebrows and fish-lips. He smiles and touches your chin, “Awww, you’re just cute.”

He sighs; your loins beat, beat, beat.

“I snuck out to my buddy Ike’s place and got plastered for like, three full days. Ike used to live at Y.H.—that’s what we call it, Y.H.—but now he’s nineteen, so he’s got his own place.” He points to a rip in his jeans, “Drunk on Ike’s roof.” He rolls his flannel shirt-sleeve and points to a crusty gash on his upper arm, “Drunk—and high, I might add—doing handsprings off Ike’s tractor. He lives out in the country.”

Your heart hiccups, then drops. But you stay entirely composed. “Wow. Did you get in trouble?” You are careful to say this in a tell-me-what-it’s-like voice, not a scolding or worried voice.

He chuckles, leaning into you. You feel his heat. “Totally!” he says triumphantly, scooping you up again.

The two of you find an empty table and sit on the same side of the bench. You place a popped open bag of pretzel twists between the two of you, and Cassius slumps over with his elbows on the table, propping his chin, thoughtfully, with his hands.

“So,” he says, sighing with exasperation. “Apparently I have two girlfriends.”

You get a zinging sensation in your scalp, like electrocution. At once you think, *does he consider me a girlfriend already?* spinning in wild confusion wondering about the other girlfriend. You somehow manage perfect calm and say, “Oh? Is that so?” nearly spiting out your tongue, despising your tendency for cutesie rhyming when you least expect it.

“Yeah,” he says as though tired. His brows crinkle in perplexed frustration. “There’s this new girl, Amelia, at YH and we kinda hooked up. But I can’t break up with DeeDee now.” He explains this in the same needy manner he told you about Youth House: “Promise not to tell anyone?”

You think of your social network: your parents, and Yumi, and Sam and nod, “I promise, Cassius.” But of course your heart falls.

He is visably relieved just to have gotten the information off his chest. He runs his strong fingers through his hair and exhales theatrically, saying “Shhhheewww,” then, “You’re the best.”

Walking home from school that afternoon, twirling a green peppermint disk on your tongue, you wonder how you could have possibly thought for a minute that

you were one of his girlfriends? You don't even kiss! Suddenly, impatient with your peppermint candy, you gnash it to smithereens with your molars.

DeeDee is in your gym class and you begin to observe her out of the corner of your eye as she undresses into shorts and a tee shirt. She is tall and chesty (boys call her 'Double D') and wears pointy boots. There is nothing in particular about DeeDee that makes you envious—in fact, you are quite pleased with yourself when you sneak a peak at her thick knees climbing in and out of shorts. It makes you feel dancery and conscious somehow of your posture, your small architecture. But she is an intimidating presence none the less: wide gold hoops dangle from her lobes while smaller and smaller hoops climb up the edges of her ears. She has learned you and Cassius are friends and she begins to shoot you hard eyes and call you Virgin.

It is the other girlfriend, Amelia, who bleeds your heart. Since you have never met or even seen the girl, you are left to imagine and imagine. Later, Cassius tells you she left her foster family from a different state and now attends a different high school in town. You picture her a doe-eyed, long-limbed waif: the Tough-but-Pretty type. In your mind she wears a tiny rucksack carrying all her worldly possessions: a notebook, a few favorite photographs of parents she has never met, a pair of good warm socks, an apple, and a twenty dollar bill sewn into a secret pocket. Sometimes in your fantasies of kissing Cassius you pretend you are an orphan too, like her.

Still, you are not altogether devastated by these women. You feel that your love for Cassius is stronger. You are also certain that his love for you is stronger—it is just that he isn't aware of it yet. After all, you have his ultimate trust and confidence. It just takes patience. Sooner or later—you have faith—he's bound to realize.

Cassius's attendance is solid for a spell, and he spends the beginning of lunch-time with you before going off across the street to Horseshoe Park to meet friends and have a cigarette. He never invites you along but instead says something like, "I've gotta jet," or "I'm outa this house" or "I'm gonna go smoke a square." You love the naughty air to these phrases and whenever he leaves, you feel pleasant in your solitude, replaying every loving glance, every new story he tells. If he palms your shoulder or pulls your ponytail, you float an inch above the ground for the rest of the day.

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Another dark spell of no Cassius passes for one week, and then another, and another. You feel abandoned by his absence, wondering sadly, if he has lost interest in you altogether. You feel a twinge of bitterness and think *I would never do that to him*. Desperate, you decide you need to know the truth. On the day you vow to call Youth House if he does not show up to lunch, you hear the news. It is, in fact,

DeeDee who tells you. She approaches you as you fumble to remove your turtleneck to put on your gym clothes. This is your least favorite part of the day, and you always try to do the shirt switch dance as fast as possible. You have a prudish system you've been honing since seventh grade: you take your school shirt half-way off, get your gym tank top ready and hope for an optical illusion. It is the ten seconds of dread and horror that tax your nerves and take years off your life each school day. Stuck in turtleneck tube, you blindly swat the locker room bench for your tank top. You give up and pull the turtleneck back on and find yourself eye-to-eye with DeeDee.

"Caj got arrested two weeks ago," she says, her small eyes drilling into you. "Since he's over seventeen they took him to jail." There is meanness in her tone as if to say, *You're way outa your league now, Virgin.*

DeeDee ticks off the offenses with her long nails and plump fingers: under-aged drinking, stolen car from Youth House volunteer, drunk driving, possession of drugs. "They had him in the County for a week but now he's in the state prison."

You scratch your head and look at her. Is she lying? Her face is pinched, but not joking.

"Is he okay? Are you okay?" You are not sure what else to say, but under shock, kindness comes naturally.

DeeDee's face relaxes and for a brief moment, her eyes seem surprisingly warm. "Everything's gonna be fine," she sighs. "Caj and I always land on our feet."

You admire her hardened look. It is almost a glow. You feel like a child. Immediately, you want to talk to an adult. But who? Your parents would probably overreact, or would not understand the gray area, the nuance of the whole situation. You are in love with a young criminal and you cannot explain that.

A month goes by where you think you spot Cassius everywhere. Any lean backed-boy with scruffy hair wearing a black tee shirt looks like Cassius and you think, *there he is!* or *that's got to be him!* Inevitably, heartbreak follows. The double turns around revealing a non-Cassius face—an image so upsetting to you that the face appears deformed.

Then one afternoon, the first mildly warm day of the year, you come home from school and find a letter in the mailbox addressed to you. Your heart, the hummingbird, zings in your chest. To Pancake From C18192.

What's up Pancake, the letter begins. You lean against the post of the doorway to the kitchen, book bag cast off, your shoulders cool and light, then slide down to the floor with the letter in both hands. You examine the artistry of his handwriting, marveling over the way he writes his cursive capital *P*: robust, yet still boyish and scratchy. How beautiful, the way the *k* and the *e* join in a cursive-handwriting-

marriage. This is your new favorite image to stare into. You imagine—then nearly feel—the hotness of his hands on your skin, his breath in your hair, and look shyly up at the empty room just to be sure you are really alone.

I guess you heard that I'm in the can. Can means prison, if you didn't know. You're too sweet to know that, probably. Anyhow I asked DeeDee to tell you where I was, but I kinda thought she wouldn't because she didn't like that I was your friend. I hope it's O.K. that I'm sending you a letter. I miss you a lot. Please write me back! It's lonely here! Don't forget about me, O.K?

The letter is not even a page long, and you read it a few times before you rise from the floor and head upstairs to your room to read it a few more times. Reading it perched on your bed in the dim quietude of your bedroom has an altogether different effect. You fold the letter, and place it on your desk, casually, so you can look at it as part of your life, like the furniture. Then, homesick for it again, and you unfold it, almost as much joy as the first unfolding, and read it out loud.

You hide his first letter in the old, pink, satin drawstring purse that once housed your childhood ballet slippers. More letters come and you hide them all in this purse and bury it in the top drawer of your dresser amongst your under-things. You manage to circumnavigate the mail every day. Not difficult because you are always the first one home, but the task feels like a vigil, something to busy your loneliness, a way to cope with the void.

In a matter of months, you have collected ten letters from Cassius and have written him at least the same. In his last letter, he repeats his usual, *Don't forget me, O.K.?* and, *I miss you a lot!* but something about the rest of the letter's tone lacks the usual intimacy. He writes a good deal about getting a tattoo, and even includes a drawing of it: a strange and chaotic arrangement of oozing and dripping shapes. Then, the letters stop.

At first, you worry. The only thing you know about prison is that it is dangerous. Are people hurting him? Is he being fed enough? You decide to write one more letter—just a short little note—even though he didn't respond to the last one.

Hi there, Cassius! I haven't heard from you in a while and I miss you. Are you okay? I'm sure you are. It was nice and warm out today so I mowed the lawn for my parents. You're right—it is a lot of fun. I hope you write back soon. Don't forget about me O.K? Ha ha ha. Your friend, Pancake

If the letter gets returned to you, then you will know he isn't there anymore. He could be at a different jail or even at a new foster family's home, you think. But if he

doesn't write back (knocking on the wood of your desk to guard against this) then you'll promise yourself to leave him alone and forget about him.

School ends for the year and the letter is not returned—it is gone for good. He doesn't write back, either. You never hear from him again.

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Summer: You find a summer job at roller skating rink, exchanging shoes for skates late into the night. You had no idea, when you accepted the job, that it would be a wax-floored haven for people on dates. It is bruising to see so many young boyfriends and girlfriends having fun together, but it soon becomes an infatuation. You love analyzing the way couples look together, their matched or unmatched beauty, their body language, the way they talk to one another. You watch paired off girls and boys gaze into each other's eyes as they roller skate around and around and around. You note the most vulnerable posture in the gaze of a slightly raised eyebrow. This is the look of devotion. You watch the way a boy graces his hands upon the small of a girl's back, then self-consciously stuffs his fists back into his pockets. This is desire.

After work late at night, you bicycle home feeling loose and free, thankful for fresh air after the sweaty-necked smell of the roller rink. You swerve the wheel of your bike making giant S shapes in the road then steady yourself and take your hands off your handlebars and extend them in the air, like a tightrope walker. You look at the street lamps and feel a kinship with their big soulful globe heads. How sad the world seems, sometimes. Down the road you spy a man and a woman walking along the sidewalk. Their boxy, too colorful clothing gives them a foreign or Old Country appearance. The man is carrying a birdcage, and because the birdcage is as big as a laundry basket, he balances it on his hip. The woman holds his other hand and you can see they are talking with each other. Every once in a while the woman looks away, then turns back to the man to say something. They are as comfortable together as two children are, but also possess and carry between them something more. What is it? It is a shared realization. Mutual transcendence. You can tell just by watching them from behind that they really love each other. Their index fingers, you notice, are linked loosely and as they stroll along unrushed, leaning in to one another. You peddle slowly, hanging back, toeing the cement with your sneaker, but following for a few more blocks. Watching them makes your chest cave in with heart hurt. You stop your bicycle till they become smaller and smaller then peddle hard, till your muscles feel tingly and hot and you feel the sensation of capsules of energy bursting. You

catch up with the couple, then pass them fast, watching them out of your periphery. The woman's full and rising laugh sticks with you all the way home.

Once you return to your room on this hot and humid night, you re-read detailed accounts of conversations with Cassius that you have recorded in your diary for better or for worse. Tonight it is for worse. Feeling punched and dehydrated, you put it away. You never had anything mutual with Cassius, or anyone for that matter. Sure, you flirted and he depended on your trust, but you never established that special connection you wanted and needed all along. You thought you had a chance. Oh, blindness! Nevertheless, you feel desperate to be near him again, and then shame, for feeling this way.

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When you do finally see Cassius again, it is deep into the next school year. You are a Senior and still unkissed. Cassius does not announce himself with drumsticks in your locker. Instead, he appears in the science wing of the high school, a solitary figure, as you tiptoe out of your physics class with the wooden "girls restroom pass" on a chain. You are reminded of the times when he first went to prison and you thought you saw him everywhere.

But as you get closer, you see you are not imagining. It is Cassius. His head is buzzed bare, and you see three birthmarks on his pale scalp—new to you. He looks skinnier and darker, like people in old war photographs. You are wearing pastel colored clothes, a color you are not used to wearing, and suddenly regret it, feeling palmy and bashful.

The two of you stand in the middle of the hallway alone, quiet, tender: button to button. You feel the familiar neurotic drumming in your chest at being near him. But this time, it is not a butterfly beat, more like worry, and dread. It is a cursed feeling.

"How long have you been back," you ask, looking at his strange shaved head.

"I've been layin' low for about a month," he says. Then he quickly adds, "sorry I didn't call you or find you. I didn't know if you'd want to see me."

You admit to yourself that there is something different now, an unpleasant angle of reality that did not exist in the letters. Overhead, a florescent light bulb sputters in its tube. You think of those letters in your satin pouch and shrivel with shame. Who do you think you are, some kind of war widow? You dread opening your top drawer ever again and hope that when you do, the pouch is pushed to the back, out of view.

"Of course I would want to see you," you say, reaching for his shoulder.

"Welcome home."

"I guess I'll try graduating this year. But I'm going to have to find good people to hang out with. How are you so good?" He touches your head and pets your hair.

At this you grimace inside, smoothing out your hair where his hands were. You do not want to kiss Cassius anymore. You feel tender pity toward him—the kind you feel for Sam—only you also feel a little cheated and exasperated with humanity. For so long you thought this was The One. You are caught off guard by your own realization and once it is planted in your head, you feel queasy, turned inside out at the thought of joining lips with this boy. You want to shake yourself out, as wet dogs do, at the thought of all your fantasies.

Despite yourself you tell him, “You know where to find me,” and smile.

“I’ll look for you at lunch sometime this week,” he says. “I have so much to talk to you about.”

The prospect makes you feel overbooked and suffocated even though lunch is eternally lonesome and quiet. This school year, Sam, the angel, has been transferred to a special care home and Yumi is back in Tokyo.

“All right,” you say. Then, indicating the hall pass, “I should get going, where are you going?”

“To The Horseshoe. DeeDee and everyone are meeting me there for a little welcome back session at the fountain.” He puts his fingers to his lips in a pot-smoking gesture and grins. But it is a dull grin.

He hangs a paw on your shoulder and pulls you in for a friendly hug. The bug repellent smell is there—sweet and sinus cleansing—but dustier and mostly covered by cigarette smoke. His shorn head prickles as you draw him into your pastels, but you squeeze him good, not minding the cactus scratch. He always said you gave surprisingly strong hugs, and you want him to never forget it. He crumples in your arms like a baby, fragile as Sam, and he does not let go when you loosen your arms, so you pat his shoulders—the bony stubs of wings—and rub his back. Amazing how only months ago, this would have sent you to your knees. But now, something has changed. Finally, he turns his head toward you with parted lips and half-mast eyes—you will never forget those pitiful eyelids. He aims for your cheek, but his lips land sloppily on your ear, messy and wet. The kiss makes a painfully loud smacking noise that grates at the softest part of your brain—like metal-on-metal—and for the rest of the day your ear rings with a spiraling tympanic echo.

Queen

Lilac cones droop heavy from hedges by the stone steps of your high school. Now, girls arrive to school dressed in light skirts and sandals and painted toes. Dozens of students have gotten haircuts in the same coincidental (and contagious) manner that rashes of people were feverish with flu just four months before. Now, noses are dry and skin is pearly and dewy. Lilac breath streams in wafts and waves through propped-open windows. Everyone is drunk with Prom Season.

Dances scare you. You are a senior this year, and are drawn to the idea of a dance, but cannot picture yourself at one, especially your Senior Prom, the weight of which feels weddingish. Many girls, you've heard, go somewhere professional to get their hair styled and their makeup applied just right for the occasion. You would be too embarrassed by such hoopla. Makeup feels clownish on your face, accentuates your black eyebrows too much. You imagine yourself in a fancy dress easy enough, but cannot imagine going further than snapping your fingers to a beat in a public gathering. And with a boy, good God, forget about it. But still, something about the lore and romance of Prom Night makes you want to be chosen, just once. Your grandmother often tells the story of her Prom Queen days. She's proud of the black and white photograph of herself wearing long gloves and a shin-length gown. How fascinated you are with her ancient tales of dancing the jitterbug all night long with every boy in school. Gazing at Laura Shilo (with her elegant shoulders and singsong voice), who will probably be this year's Prom Queen, you wonder how you could have been spawned from such stock.

What you wouldn't give to be chosen as someone's date. You just want the experience, so later, maybe, you can tell your own girlhood tale. Secretly, you look through last year's yearbook at the black and white square photographs of your male peers and examine each face to see if there is any possibility for a prom date. You look for your male match: someone with messy hair and baby-faced enough to be confused with the kids next door at the junior high. It feels strange to be caught up in these thoughts. Normally, you are unfazed by dances and just count yourself out altogether. Innately, it seems, you are against all high school social constructions, repulsed by school spirit in the same way you are repulsed by racism or other social wrongs. But for some reason, you want to be asked to prom, to transform into someone dazzling and alluring for one night.

Weeks before the Senior Prom, everyone in your homeroom class is given a ballot to vote for Prom Queen and King. You write down the names Fung Ng for

Queen and Rory McQuimby for King. Fung is a little Vietnamese girl with thick eyebrows and enormous lips. She wears children's sneakers and smiles hugely but rarely speaks. She's a wizard at math and often has Physics formulas inked on the palm of her hand. It is as much her signature style as the cornflower blue ribbon always tied about Laura Shilo's hair.

Rory McQuimby is famous for being the fattest boy in school and also for failing the drivers-ed test five times and for weeping openly once, when someone put a newt down his shirt in biology class. You smile to yourself imagining Fung and Rory dressed to kill wearing wreaths and dancing in a middle of a circle of onlookers. Nominating Fung and Rory feels like a quiet act of rebellion, you like rooting for the underdog.

Springtime: the season for yard parties, roller-blading in mobs, and ice-cream eating in pairs. And Proms. Warm weather has always struck you with apocalyptic loneliness. Year after year, the happy carefree nature of the season and the altered cheerful mood of humans and chirping birds send you to a low. On the first warm nights of spring you always feel the strong call for the outdoors and for adventure. You stand in your backyard nosing the air and wearing shorts, the backs of your bare legs in chilly ecstasy. The smells of leaves and soil and night nearly bring you to your knees. But what's the fun in stepping out all alone?

Luckily for you, the loneliness of spring weather and activities is soothed, slightly, this season because you are absorbed with your new job at Bingo's, the twenty-four-hour grocery store. Of all the possible jobs you could do at Bingo's: cashier, bagger, grocery cart collector, shelver, you have the most glamorous. Your official title is Floral Associate, and your post is the small but accommodating floral department, just a corner of the store adjacent to the produce section.

For this you have your parents to thank, your parents, who sat you down at the beginning of your senior year and said, "Pancake, you have two choices: join some high school clubs or get a job." They said they were tired of the way you moped about the house all the time, and wanted you to get involved in something and meet people. You balked, you sulked, you said *you can't control my life!*, but when the show was over, you happily looked for a job, eager to make money and learn something new and exciting.

Bingo's workers are required to wear sexless blue vests with bow ties. But a Floral Associate wears a long green apron. Wearing the apron you feel a girlish and fashionable glow. Something about it seems romantic, like being a scullery maid or an orphan. The green apron fits slim around your bust and waist, flattering your

figure and giving you a bit of length. You keep the apron neat by washing it every few days.

But most of all, you like the way being a Floral Associate separates you from your high school life. It gives you somewhere to go directly after school, negating your longing for company when the day is done. You rush to Bingo's on your bicycle, apron in school bag, working some nights till after dinner. Every now and then, someone you recognize from school will come in the store with their family, and you feel a little rush of pride being seen at your post. Having a job, you think, is much nobler than any high school activity. You don't really want to interact with the preppy girls who run the Key Club or the overly enthusiastic Spanish Club kids. You like the idea of having something to busy yourself with, but going at it alone.

And, it's a luxury to let your mind wander from schoolwork while completing mindless yet productive tasks like wrapping bouquets, watering dry soil, dusting the display pedestals, and filling party balloons with helium. What a rush it is to care for living things: Roses! Bonsai trees! African violets! Lilies! Ferns! There are many species of ferns.

Sometimes you work with Nedra, the only other Floral Associate. She is full of womanly wisdom about men and something about her reminds you of your old friend, Veronica. Once, as the two of you bent over a bucket of lilies removing all their dusty yellow stamens she said, "see that man by the avocados?" You nodded, squinting at him.

"Definitely a woman—originally, that is," she said.

"How do you know?" you asked, squinting again, the second time noting his slender neck.

"Sugar, I lived in New York City in the eighties, I've seen it all."

Another time she nudged you to look at a homeless woman wearing a nightgown and sneakers, wrestling with her grocery cart crazily to get it to push straight. "Look at that one, pretty tweaked out, wouldn't you say?"

"What do you mean by *tweaked*, exactly?" you asked, noticing the way the homeless woman was muttering to herself.

"I mean crack, Pancake. You're so innocent. See the way she's twitching and kinda hyper? Crack fiend. Trust me."

And trust Nedra you do. She's a decade older than you and is a certified floral technician. She is in charge of all floral-ordering and arranging for Bingo's and she says she dreams of opening her own shop someday. Nedra has shiny black skin and a strong Rubenesque body. She can lift anything from a twenty-gallon tub of ice and daisies to the waist-high terra cotta patio crocks of rubber trees. She has long

cat-like eyes and an elastic mouth that opens wide when she laughs or yawns. You are comfortable with your roles with one another. She is professor of life; you are student. She loves starting up conversations with you like this, “What’d you do last night? I gave myself a bikini wax and made onion rings.”

Your other co-worker is the Bingo’s store’s general manager—whom every one just calls, The GM—is a slight man with deep-socketed eyes who has the thin drained look of an insomniac. He patrols the store and refers to customers as “guests” and often stops by your station to do a “quality check,” disrupting the sisterly feeling of yours and Nedra’s workspace, reminding you to do things like empty garbage bags or organize the turnstile of mini neon teddy bears.

On the day you nominate Fung and Rory for Prom Queen and King, you are blessed with one of those precious rare afternoons at Bingo’s: the GM is far away in cosmetics or pharmacy, Nedra is gone for the day, and your only chore is to make a few balloon weights with decorated bags of bulk candy, and curly ribbon. You help yourself to a few of the flavored nougats and relax (stealthily) with a Seventeen Magazine nabbed from the checkout line. *Make your prom fantasy come true!* states the magazine in pink letters. The cover model has the pearly cheeks of Laura Shilo but wears an aggressive expression—curled lips, slits for eyes—and a billowy mint-green dress.

You flip through the glossy pages, raising your eyebrow at some of the absurd fashions: a-symmetrical prom dresses, winged prom dresses, and prom dresses made with material bearing a likeness to the mylar balloons for sale in the floral department. You give pause to an article titled, *How to flirt better than your enemy*, and yet another titled, *Your best wink yet*, where an eye-makeup technique is broken down in steps. You can’t help rolling your eyes. It is all very weird to you, silly, disgusting even, yet part of you, guiltily, wants a piece. Part of you wants to be invited into the womanly dialogue of taming men, applying nail enamel, curling hair. It seems exciting and dangerous. But the feeling is fleeting and brief, like a craving for sweets that passes after eating an orange instead. At once you feel turned off and uncomfortable with all the talk of romance-as-war: battalion plans to conquer the opposite sex. You can’t even fake the proper attitude. The competition turns you off.

You look out at the little world of Bingo’s. You like to gaze up at the ceiling’s high rafters and bright skylights, and pretend it is an aviary, or a museum of people. What fun it is to people-watch. It is so easy to be caught up in the humble poetry of the grocery store, the almost magical way everything continues operating at once, like complex choreography, like a living organism. Suddenly, your favorite

number on the Muzak sequence begins to play: a remix of an Edith Piaf song slightly sped up and synthesized, and you feel moved to make neat your floral corner.

You hide the fashion magazine and begin to sweep the floor around the display pedestals with the corn broom. You hold the broom in both hands, tight against your chest and sweeping slowly, as though dancing, to the Edith Piaf song. As you create a little dust pile with the broom, a woman speedily pushes her grocery cart through it, not even looking up. You startle to attention, expecting her to excuse herself or apologize, but she squints at her grocery list and walks on.

Is this what makes your mood sour? Suddenly, Bingo's floral counter is just a representation of everything you hate. Of all human ugliness. You begin to shine the glass door of the flower cooler with ammonia and water when a chubby fingered gentleman with a buzz haircut palms the glass then decides not to even open the cooler door. Then, a woman ordering four carnations demands each one be separately wrapped in tissue while avoiding eye contact. Handing her the last tissue-stem, she asks if she can just wrap them all herself. When the rush of customers subsides, you peer at the store through the leaves of a waxy pathos plant you gulp and observe your species: do only homeless people grocery shop? Where are all the normal clean people? Everyone in here is a freak, you think. Possibly inbred and dirty.

Then, three black men enter your domain. You can smell alcohol as they fill your space.

"Hey rose lay-day!" one of the men calls, "I need some ro-ses!" His friends whoop and laugh and dip their noses deep in the basket of freesia.

You show them the single-stem ivory Virginia Roses for two-forty-nine a piece and the pre-wrapped bundles of red roses, baby's breath included, for seven-ninety-nine.

He tosses a seven-ninety-nine bunch on the counter. "Would you like a complimentary cardette?" you ask, indicating the rack.

He smirks mischievously, examining the rack of mini-cards, then looks you in the eye with dead pan seriousness. "She *think* she pregnant," he says and his buddies howl with laughter, urging him on. Then, his eyes sparkle with an idea, "I know," he says. "I'll get one that says, *It's a boy!* one that says, *It's a girl!* and write *It Ain't Mine* on bof of 'em."

Money is exchanged and you smile, renewed of spirit. You live for these slice-of-life interactions with customers. You smile and nod and laugh politely.

"For real now, rose lady," he says. "I need you to write the card for me; I have five-year-old handwriting."

Often you write cards for men who are ashamed of their cursive. You poise your pen, and cock your head.

“*To Spooky*,” he says. “She don’t like it when I call her that. *From*,” his lips turn down at the corners as he recovers a bashful smile and says, “*me*.”

When he leaves he shadow-boxes his friends to make up for the tender moment. “Do you sell whisky here too?” he calls over his shoulder.

Laughter erupts at this, and you smile to yourself as they leave.

You have many such encounters with men; you like to feel a part of their lives, like a conspirator, or a friend. You think of the prissy girls at school, of Laura Shilo, already walking the halls with a straight-shouldered air of royalty, and find them all quite silly and childish. Here you are, in the real world, interacting with real people instead of petty high school politics.

Nedra, you note, working beside her the next day, likes talking about men and how they want her. In her stories she plays the innocent bystander just trying to live her life, while men seem to be rendered helpless animals reduced to acts of lunacy to have her. You note how she values her nonchalance; her air of boredom as the two of you build Easter basket bouquets: yellow yarrow stems, white anemone, pink tulips, and bachelor’s button.

“My stalker’s back again,” she says, correcting your basket bouquet by taking out your tulips and cutting them down shorter. “Your bouquets are unruly, child,” she mutters softly.

“Your ex-husband?”

“No, sugar,” she says with impatience. “A different stalker.” She finishes a perfect bouquet basket and begins another. “A man I dated before Terrance,” then she adds in a wanton voice, “and during Terrance—but just for a little while.

“He was waiting for me outside Bingo’s when my shift ended and tried to get me to come home with him,” she says, rolling her eyes. Then she says, “fool man,” and throws back her head, laughing with her wide crimson mouth.

Fool man. When you are alone later, you say the delicious words—such poetry! *Fool man*. You say it in Nedra’s incantation, emphasis on fool. Days before Senior Prom and still no date, you say the phrase under your breath while passing by boys in the hallways, *Fool man*, you mutter passing the glossy and blond Devon, swim team captain—you have a crush on his bow-legs. *Fool man*, passing Thaddeus, the genius, who plays every stringed instrument in the orchestra—you dream he composes minuets for you. *Fool man*, passing Joke (pronounced Yo-kay), the gorgeous Danish exchange student—you swoon over the lilt of his polite and formal English.

You have left the night of Senior Prom unscheduled on the availability calendar at Bingo's, in the off-chance you get asked. Maybe if you'd joined some school clubs like your parents initially suggested—The Reduce Reuse Recycle club, the Pottery club, Madrigals, anything, maybe then you would have gotten a date.

On the Friday afternoon before Prom Weekend, you slump into Trigonometry class—your last class before rushing off to Bingo's—and Otis, a boy equally stumped by numbers as you, who always stays after to talk to the teacher, and tries to hide the large red Ds on his exams by folding them in half, passes you his graphing-calculator. Otis passes you his graphing-calculator at least once or twice each day with a licentious limerick typed out with the letter keys. He has a gap tooth and although you find gap-teeth attractive, you've read somewhere that gap-toothed boys are over-sexed, licentious, actually—and you fear what lurks within him.

"Getting an early start?" you say, eyebrow arched, expecting another *There once was a woman from The Ritz* piece.

"Just read it," he says, laughing, a twinkle in his small eyes. His freckles look freshly scrubbed and his red hair forms a ferocious bristle at his forehead.

As usual, a message is written on the large screen. It simply says, *Want to go to Prom Y or N.*

You press the CLEAR button, then the yellow ALPHA button, to turn the number keys to letter keys, and write *HA HA HA*, returning it to him. You want to seem carefree in his eyes, the way he is. You do not want to seem as though something like the Senior Prom would matter too much to you, or be too sacred to joke around about.

But inside you crumple. *Fool man.* Is this all you get? A joke invite? When you look back at Otis, he is serious, dutifully copying the triangle that the teacher has chalked onto the board. You stare at him and wiggle your nostrils to quietly catch his attention, but it doesn't work. He won't look at you. Suddenly, you wonder if he was—could it be?—not joking.

All through Trig class you think *what if he was serious?* and twist restlessly in your seat. Otis avoids your eyes and doesn't pass you any more calculator messages. Unusual, for him, you think. You both race to the door at the end of class and he says, "I can't go to the Prom, in case you thought I was serious, I have a job at a restaurant and I have to work."

"Funny, that. Me too," you say, gathering your books to your chest.

You pedal your bicycle fast to Bingo's, whizzing past the neighborhoods, bountiful now with fragrant buds, blurring by yards of verdant grass in a fast and

purposeful stripe. Once there, you secure your apron. You put your name on the schedule twice for a double shift on May first, Saturday, the night of the Senior Prom.

Pruning the ferns that afternoon you think, *Otis chose me*. You are certain now, that he was not joking. You could have gone to Prom with Otis. You could have worn a dress for Otis. You could have danced with Otis. You could have worn a garland of flowers for Otis. You could have applied lipstick for Otis. You could have sneaked a spritz of your mother's Bonne Belle Skin Musk for Otis. Otis who types the word Pussy into his graphing-calculator every day, to show you, to offer to you, like a boy who has just proudly built a tall tower of blocks or made a pie of mud. Here, look, see?

ooo

Prom Night, Bingo's: every rose must be dethorned. Those are the orders from Nedra, who left you a note and twenty-five dozen roses, bound and gagged with rubber-bands, standing in bunches in square tubs of ice like dead fish. All of the buds are closed tight, like the eyelids of a newborn animal. You feel as though you are doing something cosmically wrong the first time you pull a thorn stripper down the stem of a rose. It feels cruel, like poking the eye of a cat. It also feels unlucky—like the shudder in your chest on neglecting to knock on wood. You knock on wood before you begin, a little motivation builder, and throw yourself into the task. First, you try to set up a production-line strategy. You arrange the wastebasket near the tub of roses and sit on a stool hunched over, wearing cloth gardeners' gloves that give you big cartoon hands. You unbind a dozen roses and keep them on ice, removing one at a time. You pinch the stem beneath the bud, scrape the thorns off with the dethorner, then slip each stripped rose into another tub of ice water, unclogging the dethorner by banging it against the wastebasket. You roll up of your sleeves and reach for another rose.

Bend. Pinch. Strip. Bang. Bend. Pinch. Strip. Bang. You try to work up a mindless rhythm, but dethorning is slow work. You often have to go back over the stem two or three times to get rid of all the thorns, sometimes tweaking off each thorn by hand, removing your glove and using the nail of your thumb. After fifteen or so roses, your protective gloves are damp and cumbersome, so you pare down to your skin to work faster. Soon your fingers are bloody and numb.

You crack your knuckles and roll your neck. You can feel your face completely flushed run your hand through your hair, forgetting about the rose stem membrane all over your hands and feel a bit of perspiration pooling at the small of your back.

"Yoo-hoo," a middle-aged mom type says, knocking on your counter to get your attention. "I've been waiting here."

You startle looking up, and brush fingers, grimy with stem fibers on your apron, and ask what she needs. You are aware that you must look as though you've risen from the sea, for all of the green slime about you.

"I'm one of the Prom Moms," she says. "I'm the one who ordered six corsages and four boutonnieres for my son and all of his friends who are going to the high school Prom tonight," she rummages through her purse avoiding eye contact, "and I'm kind of in a hurry."

Without speaking, you go to the cooler where two-hundred clear plastic boxes hold corsage wrist bands and pin-on boutonnieres made of Chinese jasmine, foxglove, and virgins' bower. They look like tiny coffins all stacked up. "Will that be all?" you say.

"And I want a bouquet of jonquils," she says admiring her nails and pushing back a cuticle. She won't look you in the eye.

You have no idea what jonquils are, you have heard of them, yes, and are positive they are available, but you have to poke through the crowded shelf of single-stem buckets reading every label. "I'm really in a hurry here, Miss, do you know what you're looking for?"

You insist that you do, and at last spy a bucket labeled *jonquilla*, yellow flowers with slim stems. More Prom Mom types are lining up behind her to pick up corsages and boutonnieres. A few high school boys you don't recognize—thank stars—are wearing tuxedos and tapping their feet.

You glance at your messy pile of roses that need to eventually be arranged in the rose display cooler before the end of the night and give in to the fact that they will just have to wait. Frantically, you ring up customers with their Prom flowers. Two customers leave with incorrect change, you realize later, and a few others leave snarling that you were not moving fast enough.

In the middle of the line of impatient Prom Moms and tuxedo boys stands a tiny old lady in a blue polyester dress. Her head bobbles a little as she slowly steps up in line to your counter. Her voice is watery and slow and she takes her time telling you she would like a bouquet of ten hydrangeas. Those ponderous blue globes are always comedic to you, like poodles, even more so now that you realize they are the exact same blue as her dress. She takes her time unfolding her bills and counting pennies, breathing vaporous heavy breaths and making pleasantries about the roast beef sale in the deli. She cannot seem to break away, saying "goodbye, darling," and "thank you, sweetheart" and "see you again soon," before wobbling off with her beehive of hydrangeas.

You breathe a sigh of relief when she disappears and regain your rhythm, helping the last of the Prom-goers with their orders.

Hours pass, back on your rose-stripping stool, as you continue the dethorning till your hands are so cold and raw you have to run them under warm water. You stare at your hands as they tremble, red as pizza, and realize that you could not pick them out of a line as your own. You feel so cold you are certain you have goose bumps on your scalp, and you feel skinny with arm-muscle exhaustion. The warm water stings the frayed skin on the edge of your index finger so you put the gloves back on. They are wet and cold and they slow your rhythm, but at least they are padded. You put a few of the heavy buckets in the cooler, wishing Nedra was around with her funny stories and her astounding upper-body strength, to get you through the last hours of the night. Midnight: You finish the roses two hours after you were supposed to clock out and the third-shifters are beginning to arrive. You have never been at Bingo's so late. The floor behind the counter is layered ankle deep with green slime and rose leaves. A few red petals have also dropped into the mash. It smells of fish tank or decomposing spinach, and you nearly slip and fall into the heap as you make the effort to clean it all up. Rising up from the rose algae smell is the sweet sharp smell of your own sweat, the odor tickles your nose, and you decorously dab at your temples with a paper towel. Bending over your bicycle handles on your ride home, you are convinced you have arthritis.

The morning after Prom Night, eight hours later, you are back at the floral counter. This schedule had all been part of your plan to forget about the Senior Prom and immerse yourself in another world. Now that the dance is finally in the past, you breathe a sigh of relief. Your fingers are pink and swollen, all pointing in different directions of their own accord. Your thumb boasts a gloriously large blister the size of a water beetle. You poke it fondly with the nail of your pinky and think, *that is me, that is me, that is me.*

You regard the floral department with the pride of a mayor on a clean and sunny Sunday. Everything is in fair order and the galvanized-steel urn of pampas grass looks regal. You make your rounds to each display pedestal, carefully fluffing the airy moon wort, so brittle in its glass vase, then petting the tiny pad of perfect moss in the Bonsai tree pot. You visit the bouquet buckets next, indulging yourself in a nosefull of heady hyacinth. Though you are tired to your very fiber and feel as weak as a paper snowflake, you are at peace in your little kingdom that feels all your own.

Suddenly the phone rings. It's the GM. "I need you in my office," he says. "Can you come up now?"

You feel nervous, you wish he would just tell you why. Everything has to be so hush-hush with middle management, you've noticed. Anytime he has the littlest question about your time card, or your weekly schedule he calls you to his office and makes you knock, then wait. Inevitably, he's on the phone but calls you in anyway and makes you wait at the chair by his desk as he finishes up his conversation then shuffles through paperwork before he asks you something like, "Did you forget to clock in Tuesday? Just initial here and I'll make sure it shows up on your timecard." Or, "count how many rolls of tissue paper we have left and when you're done, come back up here and tell me."

This time, you hear a stern note in his voice, and consider asking him if everything is okay before you meet him in his office. You get a tremor remembering the few people who left the night before with incorrect change. "I'm on my way," you say dutifully. You hang up the phone and make sure the "Be Right Back" sign with the movable clock-hands is on the counter.

You walk to his office and knock on the door. He tells you to come in and you do, taking in his gray office furniture and gray carpet and gray wallpaper and the stale card-board box smell of his windowless quarters. There is a framed blurry watercolor of a mallard on the wall.

"Is everything okay?" you ask.

"Of course, dear," he says. He's holding a gold medallion on a ribbon, his right and left hand each pinching an end of satin ribbon and holding it in mid-air. He gets up from his desk and walks toward you with the gold medallion, still holding it in the theatrical manner. It looks almost cultish as he walks towards you with his serious face. His lips are pressed in a serene smile and he places the ribbon around your neck, the hair in your ponytail turning electric at his touch. He gives a finishing tap to your shoulders and steps away to regard you from top to bottom. Neither of you speaks.

Finally, he breaks the odd silence. "Guess who's employee of the month?" he cries.

A nauseous pause, then: "Me?" you say, in a pitiful voice.

"You betcha," he says, "here's a mirror. Smooth out your hair and I'll get a Polaroid shot."

You take the round mirror from him and see that he watches each of your movements eagerly, as if you are the princess who has just woken after years of sleep. How embarrassed you feel preening in front of him and on command. Out of politeness you awkwardly glance into the mirror just long enough to be horrified by your deep blush beneath a layer of sheen and your big eyes, black as splayed spiders. You brush a few wisps of hair off your face, disappointed that your hair looks the slightest bit

stringy around your temples. The mirror disappears from your hand and the GM waves it at you saying, "You look fine."

All of his gestures are too big, too grand and dramatic for the occasion as though he saved up all of his gross-motor movement throughout the week and was using it all now. He tells you to stand against the wall and he stands in front of you a few feet, crouching with his camera up to his face. You try to sustain a normal expression. You've always despised the long torturous seconds before the flash of a camera. *What shall I do with my hands*, you wonder, weaving your fingers together in a nervy lattice. *How shall I arrange my lips*, you wonder, chewing them slightly with your front teeth and frowning. Your body always feels like an unfamiliar puppet at these moments.

The Polaroid camera winces then flashes, filling the room with dreamlike white light. You feel robbed of vision. *Do I still have pupils*, you wonder, furiously blinking pained eyelids till the speckles of silver light vanish, and the room is gray again.

"Why do I get this award?" you ask, timid for some reason.

"Dependable, trustworthy, clean, need I say more? Mostly though, for working all sorts of crazy hours this month." He takes the black Polaroid snapshot from the mouth of the camera and waves it in the air, blowing on it.

You feel the urgency to be polite even though you are embarrassed and horrified at being recognized as a grocery store celebrity. "Oh. Thanks."

His expression changes back to being strictly business and you feel like your usual self, the anonymous worker, in his office. "Wear this medal all month. It's good for business. Customers love it. The photo will be framed by your cash register counter."

You are quiet by nature and respectful of all adults, but something in you fights.

"I don't really want my picture up," you say. Then, startled by your own bluntness you look down and wave your hands in the air in a disclaimer. "I'm just really weird, I guess, but do I have to have it up?"

The GM shoots you hard-eyes. "This is a team environment. Everyone who *earns* Employee of the Month gets their picture put up by their station. Being Employee of the Month is an honor. It is like Queen for a Month. You get a store gift certificate, the gold medal, a parking space close to the front, and the recognition." His expression softens. "The whole town will know you; Queen of Bingo's." He leans towards you, and adds, "the produce girl will be totally jealous. She was a close second."

You despise him for being patronizing. This is just a crummy little job, you think, and feel the same sort of exasperation you felt at your eighth grade graduation. *Shouldn't everyone pass eighth grade?* you had thought, begging your parents to spare you the ceremony.

Nevertheless, he takes your snapshot in between the tips of his fingers as if piping hot from the oven, and places it on his desk, guarding it with his matching steel stapler and tape dispenser set. You eye it with a cold spot in your chest and leave worried.

Back at the floral counter, a boy in a dirty baseball cap is waiting to be helped and when he sees you return he says, "I need as many fucking roses as I can find." You chuckle—irreverence always refreshes your spirits at work—indicating the flower cooler, and watch as he roots around. He emerges with two handfuls of roses and you have a muscle memory around your lower back upon seeing them smooth and dethorned. "I think I got twenty here," he says.

Something about his boyishness makes you want to be friendly and interact. "Are you apologizing or what," you tease, gently.

"Naw, that was last week. This is for our six month," he laughs then, a full and loud laugh with a pleasant squeakiness.

Our six month. What a wonderful turn of phrase, you think, stashing it in your lexicon with *fool man*.

You remind him about the free cardette and he fingers every one, examining each with a snort, before settling on a heart design cardette. He hunkers down and fidgets with the pen, ball-chained to the counter, and begins to scrawl something. Then he stops and looks at you. Your eyes lock, and you feel a connection. You feel an intoxicating swarm in your lungs, the way you feel when you bury your face in hyacinth. His eyes are deep and sad, though he smiles, and his hair is shaggy about his ears. You fantasize that after he pays for the roses, he gives them all to you. You smile at him hugely. He smiles back, those deep blue eyes twinkling.

He says, "My handwriting is for shit, would you mind writing this for me?"

Your heart falls a little.

"Fine," you say, and think *again*.

He squints and looks up at the ceiling and says, "Dear Ducky—I call her that. She's Ducky; I'm Booger. Don't ask." You laugh despite yourself, and he begins again, "Dear Ducky, you are the most beautiful girl I know." He looks at you, "How bout that? Is that all right? Does that sound good? Would you want that?"

You nod a little too vigorously and say, "absolutely."

But he frowns, a single finger to his chin, and says, "bump that. Lemme start a new card," he slaps a fresh card on the counter. "How 'bout, Dear Ducky, you are

my beautiful woman and I love you so much.” He pauses. “*So much* blows. Put, *till the end of time*,” he says, wiggling his fingers in the air in the manner of a magician. You steal a glance at him as you write, and see that he is watching every word that comes from your, his downcast lids dewy with earnest sweat. After you make the final dot of the period, he jams a fist in the air and says, “Yeah,” as if he just won a boxing match. “Awesome,” he adds, nodding cheerfully.

You giggle with him, sharing the moment of his self-approval, feeling satisfied along with him. After paying, the boy swaggers off. He whistles merrily, bunching in his arms the twenty roses wrapped in pale tissue paper and gross-grain ribbon. *I wrapped those roses*, you think as turns, his back and shoulders square and proud, *I gave him that hop in his step*, as he disappears through the double doors. You imagine his “woman,” a girl probably your age, and imagine the look on her face as she accepts the roses. Most likely she will scold him in the pretty way that girls do (perhaps by pulling him by his ears then kissing him) for his rueful cardette inked in your handwriting. Then, a plunging melancholy sinks to your toes, surprising you with its fierce velocity, as you think about that tiny part of yourself—your careful cursive, so gallant and formal—that is now all alone in the world like a released bird.

Hand goes to breast on instinct as you ruminate about boys and love and lights upon something cold: the ridiculous gold medal, gleaming from your chest like a headlight. What a penance! You tuck it under the apron and feel better but then remember the photograph and plaque that will be displayed at your cash register.

You feel you have to flee. The mere fantasy of fleeing gives you a hint of the sensation you will feel after fleeing. It will feel like taking a shower after a prolonged and lovely lapse into grubbiness. It will feel like gulping water after being parched. You will quit this job to save yourself. Your parents will be disappointed—oh, sin!—but you will promise to find other work.

You dial the extension to the GM’s office—two zeros—and listen to the blurry ring. You imagine him at his desk industriously sharpening pencil after pencil. “*Yelloh*,” he clucks.

You blurt, “do you have a second?” You don’t want to give too much away over the phone but you want to be sure it sounds urgent enough.

“The Queen is already making demands,” he jokes.

“Yeah, um, are you busy?”

“I’m always busy, dear, but what do you need?”

“Can I just come to your office for a second?”

“I suppose so, I’m just mounting your picture into our special Employee of the Month frame.”

This gives you the resolve to really go through with it. You hang up and place the "Be right Back" sign on the desk, chuckling as you spin the hands around the clock allowing them to land wherever.

The office door is closed but he lets you in and shows you your photograph. It is within a spare tire-sized wooden plaque with a window for a picture and a smaller window for a name tag. Gold calligraphy spells out, Employee of the Month.

"Your picture looks great!" the GM says. "See?"

Your eyes are half-closed and your eyebrows are raised high, as if in mid hiccup. You are smiling a closed-mouth-smile, not your natural smile, and the effect is an unfamiliar chubbiness to your cheeks. The gold medal gleams around your neck. Look at you! The Olympic Ski Champion in a grocery store apron. While the plaque is in your hands you feel the edge of power. You gaze at your photo, at the GM's idea of Queen, and try to find a polite tone to your voice. You breathe in deep and release a breath, steadying your hands on the plaque, digging your nails into the wooden underside till you feel numbness in your fingers.

"This is actually my last day of work," you say, your saliva turning to grain. You realize you are still looking down, afraid to make eye contact, so you bite the insides of your cheeks and look up at him. He is frowning.

You brace yourself for whatever he has to say by stiffening your shoulders. You feel as though quitting is against the rules. You squeeze your toes together in your shoes.

"Today?" he deepens his frown and waits a beat. "I guess I'll have to find another employee of the month. Nedra will have to cover a bunch of shifts." He looks surprisingly unfazed.

You'd prepared a few excuses, schoolwork, parents, but the GM does not ask for any excuse. It doesn't seem to matter to him. You slip the picture out of its window and hide it in your apron pocket, safe against your hip.

You realize that at this big establishment, workers are probably coming and going all the time and that Employee of the Month is the reward for the enduring few who do good work and stay. For a brief moment, you appreciate the GM and all he does. He is probably always saddled with the stress of hiring and training new workers, or Associates, as he says, all the time.

"Thanks anyway," you say, feeling the need for politeness and small talk.

"Just turn in your apron when you clock out today," he says, hunching over his desk with his narrow shoulders.

And so the Senior Prom is over, and now, you're unemployed to boot. You get a derring-do satisfaction out of both failures. One or the other would be pathetic, but coupling of the two feels heroic. Then you swallow a lump of guilt. Nedra. You have no second thoughts about quitting the floral department without a two-week notice for the GM, but you hate yourself for leaving Nedra with empty shifts. On the back of a bouquet delivery form you write, *Nedra, You probably found out I quit. I'm sorry. I'll really miss working with you!*, and leave the note behind the counter where she'll find it, beneath her slender tube of cocoa-butter hand lotion. The little unexpected waft of Nedra's smell (like the depths of sweet pastry) makes you feel ashamed of the slightly cheerful sounding ring to the last line of your note, and you bite your lips in hopes that she won't despise you forever.

In your last hour at the floral department, you stick an orange *Half Price* tag on the three leftover prom boutonnieres, forgotten in the back of the cooler. They have already turned limp and seem to have shrunk in their plastic boxes. Then you thoroughly sweep the floor and pour a little drink of water in each stem bucket and flowerpot, sneaking a kiss to the purple velvet-like tongues of the bearded iris. Irises, a summer flower, are new this week.

Before leaving you remember the employee of the month photograph in your apron pocket. Looking at it again—what a face!—makes you laugh out loud. Scissors: they are still dripping wet from slicing gladiola stems, so you run your fingers down the blades and flick a splash in the air. You take a last look at the photograph and whisper warmly, *so long to you* and cut long strokes, burying the slices in the wastebasket beneath stems and petals and dead flower buds. When the time comes to turn in your apron you get melancholy, aware you are about to lose a proud identity. You feel cold untying the thing from your waist and lifting it off your neck. And so you tie it back on, familiar and safe. You pluck a Spanish bluebelle sprig—*Endymion hispanicus*—and tuck it behind your ear. When you venture out the double doors, you feel anointed and sensitively aware of your lightly tickling flower and pretty apron. Each step feels sun-blessed, and you welcome whatever comes next.