

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Charity D. Shumway for the degree of
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Major Professor

A collection of short stories about the Gardner family, spanning several generations, but focusing on the children of Len and Laura Gardner, Brooke, the second oldest, in particular. Set primarily in Utah, the collection tells the story of family members' struggles with one another, with their religious faith, and with the demands of the world beyond their community.

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The Matter Between Them

by

Charity D. Shumway

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the degree

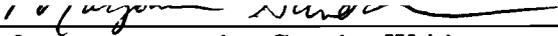
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presented on April 19, 2006

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The Downstairs

The room. Twelve by twenty. White walls with a touch of blue-green. A single large window in the front. Stairs running from the door straight up to the two bedrooms above. Although it is really only one room, the Gardners have divided the space into two parts, a “living” area and a “dining” area. The table, which they bought nearly two decades ago to be "the dining room table" in their former home, marks the division. They refer to it now only as the table. When referring to the room, they simply call it the downstairs. The downstairs always gets so messy, Laura will say to her children. They rarely respond. She hardly expects them to.

The stair rail. Painted wood, the same blue-green tint as the walls. Every December the Gardners wrap tinsel around it. For a few years epic battles took place over the tinsel. Brooke, the second oldest, insisted on putting white lights, not tinsel, on the *banister*. What she really wanted was to drape the banister in leafy, berry-festooned garlands, but these were hard to track down in Utah on a budget. She prevailed one year, so there were lights and no tinsel. The next year Jonathan, the middle child, and Anna, the next in line after him, would have none of it. You're always trying to force everyone to do things your way, Anna yelled. Bedroom and bathroom doors slammed. The night after Jonathan and Anna wrapped the railing with alternating green and red tinsel, an especially offensive move to Brooke, she stayed awake, and after she was sure everyone else was asleep, she slipped down the stairs and unwrapped the tinsel, then put up lights. You're a jerk, you know that, Jonathan said the next morning, his face suddenly in the mirror beside hers as she came up from rinsing the toothpaste from her mouth. It socked

all the triumph out of her. When she got home from school that afternoon she switched the lights back to tinsel. Mark, the oldest, smirked. Tyson, the youngest, sat on the stairs beside her while she worked.

The next year Brooke suggested they try something new, not tinsel or lights, maybe cranberry chains. Laura settled the matter. Everyone could have their way – lights, tinsel, and cranberries. Jonathan and Anna reveled in Brooke's misery. Brooke went away to college the year after that, and with a little distance everything seemed charming -- colored lights, K-Mart stockings, popcorn. ...

The plants. In front of the living room window. Nine of them. The Gardner children and even Laura herself have lately taken to calling the collection the jungle. The leaves and branches of the largest of the plants, the elephant plant, press up against the ceiling. Its pot is the largest houseplant pot Home Depot sells. Almost thirty years ago, Laura complimented Arlene, her mother-in-law to be, on the plant, its big elephant-ear leaves, pink on one side, green with white spots on the other. When Arlene gave her a clipping at the wedding, Laura thought it the best of signs.

Just after Laura filed to divorce Len she was walking into the post office as Arlene was walking out. Hello, Laura said. Arlene's face turned ashy and hard. She walked past Laura, silently. They have not spoken in the almost two decades since, though Laura knows Arlene has said plenty about her. Sometimes when Laura waters the elephant plant she thinks of Arlene and thinks, I have forgiven her for everything. She feels pious then, watering the plant, a gesture of goodwill.

Four of the plants in the collection were Mother's Day presents from when Laura's children were young. For four years in a row, all the children at church were allowed to pick out one plant for their mothers. Mark, Brooke and Jonathan all rushed to the foyer after sacrament meeting to decide on the plant. By the third year Anna was old enough to rush to the foyer with them. Tyson was born in the middle of the plant streak and had never been old enough to help. Each year Laura oohed and aahed about the plant's beauty while Len drove them home, her enthusiasm overcoming her exhaustion. When Laura divorced Len, she moved hours away. The new ward gave out single long-stem roses instead of plants, a relief. Each Mother's Day plant started out small – the kind of plant that comes twenty or thirty to a palette at the garden store – but Laura had potted and repotted them again and again. They now range in height from three to five feet.

Two of the plants date back to projects Mark undertook in high school. He wanted to see if he could grow trees from the seeds and pits of grocery store fruit. Laura took him to the store, and all of the younger kids helped eat the fruit and then sat around, fingers sticky from the juice, watching him pot the seeds: plum, orange, grapefruit, lemon, apple, nectarine, cherry. The lemon and the apple survived, and after nine years their green stalks have finally turned woody.

Mark's other projects from those days included enlisting his siblings to sell caramel apple suckers for him at school (profits split sixty him, forty them), collecting pop cans from local golf courses for their redemption values, and selling his and Laura's plasma weekly. She always wanted to be helpful, and he needed a guardian to sign off.

Once she was at the plasma center with him, she figured she might as well get him an extra twenty dollars, and he was happy to accept her offer. For weeks they enjoyed their time alone in the car together, driving to the plasma center. Despite the upsides, the visits ended when Mark heard a crackle as a technician pushed a needle through the scar tissue around a regular's veins.

During the summers after that Mark worked at a rental car company, checking cars in and out all day long, and then as a valet, parking cars for restaurant patrons until late into the night. Laura wished then that she could sell enough plasma, take in enough ironing, work enough catering jobs, something, to keep him home for some of those hours, but even though she missed him she felt justified by his drive. He was ambitious and hard-working, despite the divorce.

For years when Mark looked at the plants he felt pangs remembering all his old projects and what he had hoped for himself. He had wanted to be rich, but he had missed the easy paths – the right college, a good finance job, business school. But that was before he met and married Alice. Now those thoughts seem to him like someone else's. There once was a boy who wanted to be an entrepreneur. Mark wants now to be a husband, and he and Alice get by. He even likes managing the rental car office. That is enough, he says to himself, and believes it except in rare, tired moments when images -- marble staircases, cashmere coats -- come to him, as if from another life.

The other two plants were once in Len's office. Just before the divorce Laura stopped by to drop off a file he'd forgotten and called for. She hadn't been to his office in over a year, and when she saw the dying plants she said, Len, what have you done to

these poor babies, trying to cover the bite of her feelings with joking melodrama. I should probably water them, shouldn't I, he said, though she heard the same bite in his voice. Even though she had Tyson and Anna in tow -- Tyson years away from school, Anna in kindergarten only half days -- she carried one plant out to the car and then came back for the next so that she could nurse them at home.

Laura prides herself on her ability to keep plants alive. During her divorce she went from 112 pounds to 94 pounds and was hospitalized during her children's Christmas vacation with Len. But the plants thrived in the sunshine and greenhouse-like heat of the back room of their short-term rental, and when she returned from the hospital they were greener and bigger than they'd been when she collapsed. She could see their happiness. The elephant plant had even flowered, bunches of rubbery peach blooms so thick they bent its branches.

Months later, when her parents bought a little condominium a few miles from their apartment for her and the kids to move into, the plants weathered the move better than any of the family members, all of whom broke out in rashes from either the cleaner Laura used to disinfect the condo's old carpet or the old carpet itself. The plants, though, had been healthy since the day they'd taken their current place in front of the window fourteen years ago.

The bookshelf. In the northeast corner of the room, against the east wall. Mahogany. Three shelves. It formerly rested against the wall in Laura's grandfather's home office in Ely, Nevada and had come to the family through Laura's great-great grandfather who made it in his furniture shop in Logan, Utah just after he'd pushed his

handcart across the plains. When her grandfather died, Laura's father claimed the bookshelf and gave it to Laura and Len, who were, at the time, setting up their first home.

On the bottom shelf is a set of 1988 World Book Encyclopedias. Royal blue. The Letters A-Z on each one's binding in gold between silver stripes. By the time the Gardners moved to the condo, the encyclopedias were already out of date, but Laura has never considered getting rid of them. They are what belong on the bottom shelf.

Each of the children has turned to the encyclopedias for vital information – state birds and mottos, the food chain, countries' major exports. When he was eleven, just after the family bought the encyclopedias from the door-to-door salesman, Mark took the P volume and looked up "Prostate." The encyclopedia redirected him to "Human Reproductive Systems," in the H volume. That same year, at age nine, Brooke took the P volume to look up "Period." When she found nothing, she took the M volume and looked for "Menstrual." In the condo, after the move, Jonathan looked up "Glands." Anna looked up "Breasts." Tyson looked up "Sex," and then later, after hearing his mother on the phone with a bill collector, "Credit." After that, he, like his siblings, told the tell-tale callers that Laura wasn't home. Each time they made their secret searches, the Gardner children felt a fierce vapor of guilt, like a poisonous gas that affected all their nerves, making them morose for hours afterward. They sat on the floor with their backs to the bookcase. They only opened the books two thirds of the way, instead of resting them on their laps, fully open, as usual.

On the middle shelf, just above the encyclopedias, is a collection of forty slim, eight by ten hardcover "Value Tales," bright colored capital letters on their bindings

giving their titles: *Commitment, the Story of Jacques Cousteau; Fairness, the Story of Nellie Bly*.... Len and Laura bought these volumes and the encyclopedias from the same door-to-door salesman in the days when they tried to pump up their hope for their marriage and spending more than they could afford to seemed to show faith in their future, a future that would provide for their finances, for their feelings, for everything. A critical mass of twenty books arrived all at once. Long after the divorce, single volumes and their invoices continued arriving in the mail.

At first, Mark and Brooke, excited by the new arrivals, read all the books, which featured bright cartoon renderings of heroes or heroines and a fun magical friend, a talking notebook or a talking beaker. Jonathan read a few of them. When Anna learned to read, she read a few as well. New volumes had stopped arriving by the time Tyson could read, and he used the books only to make race car tracks. Their uniformity was pleasing to the eye, and their smooth covers made for especially good ramps. When Tyson made his ramps all the kids joined in, even Mark and Brooke who were teenagers by then.

The bookcase's top shelf is filled with the family's collection of Disney cartoons. Laura continues to buy the new release each year, even though no one watches them anymore. She watches them herself sometimes while ironing, almost able to imagine her children are still young.

On top of the bookshelf is an eleven by twenty framed photograph of the family taken at the mall the last time they were all together, for Laura's fiftieth birthday. Laura decided they would all wear blue, and everyone complied, including Brooke's husband

John and Mark's wife Alice. Brooke worried that John would despise the hokey-ness. I know what your family is like, was all he finally said, and although she bristled she was grateful that was all he'd said. Alice said she thought everyone matching was sweet. Mark had expected nothing else from her.

During the photo selection session Anna said, we're very good looking. Well, Jonathan said, maybe not Brooke, but everyone else, ha ha. To Jonathan's disappointment, Brooke said nothing. She was occupied, looking through the photos and wondering why Alice couldn't smile normally, pleased, in a way, by it. Mark was thinking of how stupid the entitled-looking shagginess of John's hair looked beside his neat, short cut. If only Brooke had married someone more like him. Laura said, oh I can't decide, then took out the photos in which one or another of her children didn't look his or her finest, Anna's forehead vein showing just a little too much, Tyson's glasses sitting on his face in a way that made his eyebrows look continuous. She didn't remove the two in which Alice's smile leered and the one in which John's was squinting. She didn't care about showing them off. I like this one best, Brooke said. It's the one you look the nicest in. Bless her heart, Laura thought, her love for her children bubbling up inside her.

The television. In the center of the living area's east wall. A 32 inch Panasonic. It floats three feet from the floor on a rectangular metal platform, held up with arcing metal legs. Each leg is doubled, like a blown-up version of a DNA double helix, little pairs of horizontal metal bars designed to hold videos where the protein lattices would be. It was, in fact, because Tyson said the stand reminded him of DNA when he and Laura

were shopping that she took her long dormant credit card from her wallet to purchase it. Tyson winced a little to see the credit card, but his mother was excited about updating the living room, and he was glad to see her happy.

The twenty slots per leg are filled with videos Laura very much enjoys but which her children consider to be of dubious quality, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Return to Me*. Beneath the platform on which the television rests is another lesser platform holding a silver combination DVD/VCR. Laura was proud to connect the DVD/VCR all by herself Christmas morning three years ago. On a final platform, at ground level, is a haphazard pile of the family's most seldom viewed videos, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Ernest Scared Stupid*, *Christmas 1990*.

On top of the television is a rectangular, pale blue doily, crocheted by a woman Jonathan knew when he was on his mission in the Philippines three years ago. A widow with four children, she joined the church three weeks after Jonathan arrived. She lived in a house with a tin roof that, when it rained, sounded to Jonathan like banging garbage cans, only the loudest yells audible above its din. Every time Jonathan spoke his broken Tagalog the woman laughed, a sweet rapid giggle. And even after he was fluent, Jonathan sometimes purposefully and humorously misspoke to make her laugh. For Jonathan, making people laugh gave him a little of the same warming he'd on his mission every time he told an investigator how much the gospel meant to him.

Just before Jonathan's two years were up, he gave the woman a hundred dollars for a suitcase full of knitted doilies, tablecloths, and pillow shams. The exchange filled him with that same sweet burning. It had come again when he'd opened the suitcase

back in the downstairs at home and listened to his mother croon over the pieces. When he yearns for that feeling now he has an almost frantic desire to be with people. When he is with them he jokes, he sings, he gives light pushes and throws his arms around shoulders. The feeling almost always comes.

On top of the doily is an eighteen inch tall Lego pagoda, complete with armed, helmeted Lego men with painted Japanese mustaches and beards. When Laura was sick with the flu three months ago Tyson, a senior in high school, kept her company in the living room, watching movies and putting together Lego packs while she recovered on the couch. The pagoda, Darth Vader, the Crusaders' Castle, and the Millennium Falcon are still scattered about the living room. Laura likes them just where they are because when she looks at them she thinks of the focused expression on Tyson's face whenever he is building something. She sees her face in his. She sees, in fact, the faces of all her children in his, concentrated and blended. Sometimes she sees Len in his face too. She identifies it in a flash of pride in Tyson's eyes or a tremor of contempt around his mouth, never, as her other children sometimes do, in the shine of his blue eyes or the wideness of his smile. She looks away from Tyson when she sees Len.

The Gardners won the television itself in a drawing five years ago. Or at least that's what Dirk Jensen of Jensen Motors said when he called. When the family's 1984 Toyota Minivan finally died, Laura took all of her children, except Mark who was living in Boston, down to Salt Lake to the used car extravaganza in the parking lot of the E Center.

“Test drive a car and earn a chance to win a television,” the Jensen Motors tent advertised in foot-tall red lettering. Laura test-drove a used 1998 Mazda MPV. Its creamy tan leather seats and its sparkling forest green exterior made her feel like she was living the life she always thought she’d live after marrying Len, and the pleasure the minivan gave her gurgled like a lovely fountain in a summer garden.

While Tyson, Anna, Jonathan, and Brooke roamed the parking lot, leaning on Mustangs and sitting in Jeeps, posing for one another’s benefit, she sat on a folding metal chair in the smothering, plastic-reeking air of the Jensen Motors tent. Mustached Dirk himself sat across from her, sweating out the details of her application for credit. With your credit history it just can’t be done, he finally told her, but maybe we could work out a deal with this 1996 Dodge Caravan. It was blue and Laura hated blue cars. Len’s now-wife drove a blue car -- Laura had seen it out the window on the rare occasions she’d come instead of Len to pick up the kids for weekends. What’s more, Laura hated Caravans. They were effeminate in the worst way, nothing tough or capable about them. Their whole aesthetic reminded her of sniveling, weak-chinned women. But she gave into the feeling that a car she hated was just desserts for her terrible finances. At least it ran. She should be grateful. She drove home that night in the Caravan.

Overnight the thought of the Caravan curdled inside her. Sure, she’d left college to get married, didn’t have any marketable skills, and relied on money from her brother and father, but she deserved better than that lousy Caravan. She woke up determined to take it back. The parking lot sale was done, so her errand took her to the Jensen Motors dealership on State Street. Sitting under buzzing lights in Dirk Jensen’s office she

breathed through her mouth until she acclimated to the wet sock smell of the little room. At breakfast her children had warned her she'd have to keep the car, had laughed at her even. Only Brooke had followed her to the door and wished her luck. But they were right. There was no returning the van. Dirk went on and on about what a great car it was, what a great deal she had actually gotten, how he understood her situation but wished she would see the bright side. She could see how pathetic she was to him, and while it angered her, she couldn't stop from seeing herself his way too. Laura cried during her drive home, past the state capitol building, and up and out of Salt Lake, whizzing by oil refineries, gravel pits, and patches of fields along the freeway before hitting her exit.

Dirk called the next day during dinner to tell Laura she'd won the television. All her feelings of foolishness and failure returned at the sound of his voice. She was glad to finally hang up, and when she rejoined the kids, all sitting around the table wolfing down tater tots, peas, and cod fillets, she shook a little as she said, I hope he doesn't think this makes up for it.

The couch. On the west wall, just beneath the diagonal climb of the stair rail. Blue and white vertical stripes, square arms, square back. A hide-a-bed. The thin pullout mattress is covered by sheets and a quilt Laura has had since her wedding day. Her mother gave her the green cotton sheets which were uncomfortably stiff at first but which, after more than twenty five years of washing, are now as soft as anyone could hope for. Her college roommates gave her the quilt. It is an artificial candy apple green with red ties and big white squares on which are painted and stitched images and words,

like a red outline of a heart with “L + L forever” stitched inside it or a blue painted toothbrush with a swirl of green toothpaste on top of its bristles and the words “Laura Brightsmile.”

Laura has always been an obsessive toothbrusher. After meals or snacks she always goes immediately to the bathroom to brush. She goes through a toothbrush every two months. When she and her children brush their teeth at the same time they often tell her to calm down, the words coming out thick through the toothpaste foam in their mouths. Anna is the only one who has ever reached to grab Laura’s hand and stop her vigorous brushing movements. When Anna’s hand sprang toward her face, Laura winced, afraid Anna would knock the toothbrush from her mouth.

The couch itself is from RC Willey. The Saturday before Father’s Day sixteen years ago Laura surprised Len with it. She knew he wouldn’t be happy – it wasn’t on sale and they hardly had the money for it. But she had already imagined, once or twice, moving her things into the den and sleeping on a cot there instead of in their bed. She knew that she had been paying close attention to any and all mentions of divorce lawyers on television. She also knew that a part of her mind she was ashamed to discover thought that this debt wouldn’t be hers to deal with and that she’d probably get to take the couch with her when she went, so now was the time.

She bought thick white ribbon at the craft store and wrapped the couch with it, tying a big bow in front. She bought an oversized card. Inside she wrote: Len, Happy Father’s Day! Love us all. Other years she had written desperate things in cards – Len, You’re the best husband and father a woman could ever imagine. Len, Words cannot say

how much I love you. If she had still been trying to convince either herself or him she would still have written those things. But she didn't. It was, in fact, in writing the card that she realized she had given up. It was when she could not even bring herself to sign Love, Laura.

The fabric along the edges of both couch arms is worn, foam padding beginning to show through. The fabric on the seats is worn, particularly on the far left, the most popular spot to sit because it puts a drink on the end table within reach. The blue of the stripes is lighter in each of the worn spots. On the left arm and the outside left edge of the couch is the slight yellow tinge of a stain, well-scrubbed and treated. It runs down the entire side of the couch, showing, upon very close inspection, the flowing of the liquid, anciently spilled.

A Saturday night ten years ago. Anna, eleven, told Jonathan, thirteen, that he had to move -- she had called the prized seat on the couch when they were coming in from the car. Jonathan said, there's no calling. Anna yelled to Laura in the kitchen. Laura yelled back to Jonathan. He didn't move. Anna then sat on top of Jonathan, but he took the remote and casually flipped channels, pretending comfort. She began to dig her elbows into him, and he finally pushed her off onto the floor. Her face grew red. She stood facing him, the vein in her forehead pulsing. He looked past her at the television. She walked around to the side of the couch, not knowing what she would do, considering punching the side of his head. When he lifted his mug of hot cocoa from the end table to take a nonchalant sip, Anna lunged, knocking the cocoa from his hand, onto the couch,

onto the side of his face and his shirt. Cocoa ran down the side of the couch as he jumped up bellowing. He grabbed Anna's hair. Anna grabbed his neck.

When Laura arrived from the kitchen to see them tearing at one another, she could not control her response. She ripped them from each other, pale with anger. Anna screamed again and again, he made me do it, he made me do it. Then Laura yelled the words no one has ever again mentioned – the police wouldn't give a fuck what he did if you killed him. It was, it remains, the only time any of her children have ever heard her swear. Anna slumped to the floor crying. Jonathan retreated to the bathroom, washing his face and hair and leaving his wet shirt in the hamper before going to his bedroom to change into a dry one. Laura walked quietly to the kitchen, her sails of anger slack and her body limp from the explosion of the words. She got rags and cleaner and went to work on the couch.

When Anna sees this spot on the couch now she thinks of the way she used to be and wonders at it. She remembers the feeling she often had in those years. It rose up like another body within hers, a sudden expansion of her blood and muscles that made her feel as if she would burst, that made her want to scream like a broken steam pipe. She would grit her teeth then and do things, shove her siblings, yell at her mother. She broke things, even her own things, her little desk chair kicked and cracked. But in high school it left, just like that. She became friends with a pack of girls, and they talked about boys and made up silly names for teachers, and spoke in chirping voices that Anna copied until one day she was not copying anymore, the voice was her voice. Her old self is so far

from her that when she sees the spot and the cracks she feels no shame or remorse, only awe.

The lamp. East of the door. West of the plants. A freestanding floor lamp. Plain gold with a cream-colored shade. No knob. A touch lamp. Laura purchased the lamp twelve years ago, during the same credit-destroying spell in which she bought new carpet for the condo and painted all the walls white with a hint of blue-green.

It is night now. November. Tyson comes down the stairs in his pajamas. He has been trying to sleep, but cannot. His hair is ruffled from his pillow. At the bottom of the stairs he touches the base of the lamp with his toe, and it turns on. The house is quiet. It has been just he and Laura for the last three years, since Anna left for school, and Laura has been asleep for hours now. Tyson knows he should be asleep too. School starts at seven thirty, and it is already past one.

He wishes Brooke were here to sit on the couch with him. She was home for a few weeks last summer, just before her wedding, and she, like Tyson, had trouble sleeping. The two of them stayed up, sitting on the couch together, leaning into one another, reading books, watching movies. Most of Tyson's favorite books, *the Catcher in the Rye*, *This Boy's Life*, *Lord of the Flies*, were gifts from Brooke. Even though Brooke has not lived at home in more than seven years now, she is the one he misses the most. When she is home he runs all her errands with her, to the bank, to pick up groceries, even to look at shoes and dresses. He knows she takes pleasure in buying him things, and though he always shrugs with feigned indifference at her suggestions of

sunglasses or shirts, he is happy to see her excitement when she buys the gifts for him.

Her smile is like his, wide and sometimes complicated.

He goes to the kitchen and pours himself a bowl of cereal, then comes back to the couch, looking at his warped reflection in the television screen as he eats. Tyson doesn't remember the other houses his siblings tell stories about – their father hitting a tennis ball over the steep roof all the way from the back yard to the front yard for them to catch, their climbing up the laundry chute, their seeing scorpions in the garage.

He has only one memory of his parents being married, and he is not sure it is real. He was so young it seems unlikely. In the memory he is sitting in the middle seat of the old Toyota van. His mother is in the passenger seat. The window is open. He cannot remember the feel of the wind, but he remembers it blowing his mother's long dark hair. His father, the driver, says something funny, and she laughs. Then she turns from the front seat to face him, and she smiles. He tries to think of where they were going or what his father might have said. But he can never really imagine his parents together. He has never heard his mother say his father made her laugh. He can take the memory no further.

This room, though, he remembers.

He is graduating from high school in May. He will leave like everyone else. But he doesn't want that. What he wants is for everyone else to come back. He finishes his cereal and lies down on the couch. His eyes fall on the *Christmas 1990* video. He has not seen it in years. He decides to put it in, the volume low. It is from the first year in this house. Laura borrowed her brother's video camera and handed it to Mark to operate.

For a few minutes Tyson sees them again sitting on the floor in their pajamas, tearing through wrapping paper. His own three-year-old face looks out at him with round eyes. Then Mark puts the camera on the arm of the couch, like a tripod, he says in the video. Tyson knows that after that the video shows only the backs of people's heads, their torsos, and the occasional faces they intentionally make into the camera. But all of their voices are there.

Still listening, he closes his eyes and thinks through every part of his body, willing it to sleep. His toes, his ankles, his calves. As a cloud of sleep finally begins settling in Tyson's mind, Jonathan's child-voice says, open this one, it's from everyone, and a moment later Laura's voice says, this is the most beautiful necklace I have ever seen.

Head of the Wife

Laura picked up her daughter's backpack from the bedroom floor. It was heavier than she expected – Brooke was seven and usually carried only papers and pencils in the bag -- and as she unzipped it to take a look, she felt a little jolt of surprise at the green hair she saw. She'd bought the mermaid doll for Brooke two weeks before and had stashed it away with the other Christmas toys in the top of her closet. The doll's hair matched its painted-on shell bikini and fins. Laura loved the color, much brighter than any doll she'd ever had, but had wondered if the bikini was too immodest. When she'd read that the doll's hair changed from green to blonde with the touch of warm hands she'd decided she could explain to Brooke that only mermaids were allowed to wear bikinis.

When had Brooke found it? Excited hunting for toys seemed to Laura like a part of any normal childhood Christmas, and it was sweet to think of Brooke liking the mermaid doll. That's why Laura had bought it after all. But Brooke actually finding the toys and taking the doll – she'd even discarded the packaging somewhere – alarmed Laura. What would Brooke sneak next? Laura put the bag down and went to get her coat. Brooke was across the street playing at the neighbors, and Jonathan, four, and Anna, two, would be fine for the three minutes it would take to pick up Brooke. She would have felt easier dashing out if Mark, 9, had been home instead of at the Yearsley's for a sleepover, but still. Even before she left the bedroom, though, she stopped herself. Wasn't this exactly what she and Len had talked about with the Bishop on Sunday, her

hand in Len's, her legs neatly crossed, their padded chairs set straight across from the Bishop's lamp lit desk so he could hear all their failings? She had to let Len share parenting responsibilities. Why did she always charge in? She could blame Len for as much as she wanted, but that didn't change the fact that if she wanted things to be different she had to give him room to be a good father. What was wrong with her, that she found it so hard to let him in? She tried to imagine herself telling him about the doll, thinking through how she could say it just the right way.

Laura had an hour before Len would be home – he'd take it better if the house were clean and if dinner were on the table. She'd make clam chowder, his favorite. She looked in on the kids in the living room – Anna still asleep in her car seat and Jonathan playing with Legos. She had just enough time to mop before starting the soup.

Laura turned the faucet on and watched the hot water splash into the bucket. Then she screwed off the cap and poured a glug of ammonia into it. The moment the ammonia's smell hit her she didn't recoil as she should have. The water diluted the ammonia quickly enough that the smell became impotent after a few seconds. Still, her momentary attraction to it frightened her. She was pregnant. How could she not turn instantly away?

She took off her wedding ring and set it on the window sill, then got down on her hands and knees and plunged the rag and her hand into the steaming bucket. As Laura began to work her way from one corner of the kitchen to the other, swabbing up spills and grime, nausea surged inside her. It was nothing new. With all four of her children

she'd thrown up several times a day until month six or so – which meant she had at least four more months of this to look forward to. Just get on with it, she thought.

Why had she been surprised when she'd seen the plus sign on the stick three weeks before? Anna was two now, and her body was keeping its usual pattern. But still, she'd sat on the toilet staring at the wall, minute after minute, absently holding the stick. Finally she'd pulled herself back to mindfulness, wrapped the stick in toilet paper, and dropped it in the trash can next to the toilet. She'd shredded the box it came in and wrapped it up and thrown it away too, crumpling extra Kleenexes and throwing them on top. Three weeks since then, and she still hadn't told Len.

Laura crawled across the floor, shoving the rag and her hand into the hot water again and again. Len was going to notice her throwing up sooner or later – the fact that he hadn't yet both relieved and angered her. She should have had the guts to ask her doctor for birth control pills. It wasn't that she didn't want another child, but perhaps she could have waited until things were a little better. Len wouldn't have had to know. But now, when she finally told Len she would have to lie and say she'd just found out. The longer she waited, the less believable that would be. Then what would she say? She should tell him tonight. She should have told him three weeks ago. With a mother like her of course Brooke hid things. What other kind of child could she raise? She knew exactly how Len would see it.

When Laura finished the floor, she dumped the dirty ammonia-water into the bathroom toilet, flushed it, washed her hands, and put the bucket away. Back in the

kitchen, she slipped her ring back on and took a pot from the cupboard. She felt no better standing up than she had hunched over.

She was stirring thickening clam chowder on the stovetop when she heard Len pull into the driveway. Cold air rushed in as he opened the door from the garage. Laura's muscles tightened against the chill.

"Close the door. It's freezing," she said.

He ignored her, fishing through his pockets for his keys while the bitter wind poured into the house. The week before she had told him he'd be able to find his keys and stop getting so angry at her and the kids every time he had to look for them if he would just hang them up when he got home. She pushed down her anger at the show he made of leaving the door open now. What could she say? After he hung his keys up on the hook, he closed the door with his foot.

"Hi, Honey," she said, offering her cheek. He kissed her quickly then took one of the folding metal chairs from where it leaned against the wall.

Laura took a spoon from the drawer, dipped it in the chowder, and tasted. Good enough.

"Smells great," Len said.

She poured a bit more milk into the chowder -- it'd still be thick enough but would go a little further this way.

"So what'd you do all day?" he asked, rubbing his hands over his thick brown hair, a habit of his, before folding his arms across his lean chest. The question always

made her defensive, and she tried to brush the feeling away. Why did she assume he thought little of her days anyway?

“Well,” she sighed, “I took Mark and Brooke to school, did the laundry, went grocery shopping, read some books with Jonathan and put the kids down for naps, ran Mark over to the Yearsley's, mopped the floor, and now it's now.” She dragged the whisk around the chowder again. “Actually, Len,” she trailed off. “Actually, everything was fine.”

“What were you going to say? You started to say something.” He folded his arms tighter across his chest.

“Nothing,” she said.

“No, you started to say something else.” He exhaled loudly. “Laura, how can I be more involved at home if you don't tell me what happens?”

On Sunday the Bishop, his voice warm, his eyes soft, had read quietly from Ephesians, “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body.” After pausing to let them consider the scripture, looking at them with his warm, contemplative air, he had put his bible down and asked them, “What can each of you do to have a more Christ-like relationship and to make sure Len is more involved at home?” It was when she had instantly thought, “I don't want him to be more involved,” that Laura had realized how far things had gone, how dangerous her position had become.

She felt Len's words spinning in her head, obscuring whatever thoughts were her own. “It's not a big deal,” she finally said, “but I found out that Brooke got into the

Christmas presents in the top of our closet.” She started to laugh a little, then looked at his unsmiling face and stopped. “I only know because I found the mermaid doll in her backpack.”

“How long has she had it?” Len’s voice was harsher than she had hoped. He ran his hand over the top of his head again, smoothing his hair.

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask her.” She paused. “It’s a little thing, don’t you think?”

“Why didn’t you talk to her about it? I think it’s a big enough deal to warrant a conversation.” The metal of the seat banged as he adjusted himself, popping in and out with his shifting weight.

“She’s over at the Henderson’s. I didn’t find it until after she’d gone to play.”

Laura breathed in the smell of the chowder, her stomach turning. “Do you want to call over and have her come home for dinner?”

“I’ll let you do it,” he said and stood up.

Why was he suddenly backing away? She felt her own fatigue, stood straighter, and walked to the phone. “I’ll call, but would you mind seeing how Jonathan and Anna are doing?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks,” she smiled, feeling the strain of it.

He turned back before leaving the kitchen. “What do you want to do about Brooke? Do you want me to talk to her?” He seemed hesitant.

“I can do it,” she said. “No big deal.”

“Laura, do you want me to be involved or not?”

How tired they both were, she thought. “Of course I do. Of course.” She paused.

“Of course.”

“Should I handle this one?”

“I’d love it if you handled this one.” This was going to be fine. She’d been right to wait and let Len talk to Brooke.

A few minutes later, after she’d called for Brooke, dinner was finally ready.

Laura went to the living room to get Jonathan and Len and check on Anna. Len was sprawled on the couch watching the news, and Jonathan was playing with dinosaurs across the room. Anna was still asleep. She felt the buzz of anger rising within her, but said sweetly, “Gardner men, dinner is served.” Jonathan ran past her into the kitchen, but Len lingered with the remote in his hand until he heard the score he was waiting for. Laura tightened her grip on the dishtowel she held. Finally turning off the television, Len passed her, still standing in the doorway, and brushed his lips against her cheek. She went to the car seat to wake Anna. If she slept any more there’d be no getting her to bed that night. She cried a little as Laura lifted her out, but Laura bounced her on her hip as she walked and murmured quietly into her ear, “Shh, it’s all right.” In the kitchen, she put her in her high chair and gave her some juice in a sippy cup. She calmed down just as Laura had known she would.

Jonathan shifted back and forth on the southern Idaho regional phone book she’d added to his chair for height. Laura reached over and straightened the phone book, then

stared at the steam rising off the chowder, everything becoming fuzzy as she let her eyes lose their focus.

“Hold on just a minute longer,” she said, everything still fringed with haze.

“Brooke should be here any second.” Jonathan took his spoon and started tapping on his glass.

“Stop that,” Len said, reaching for Jonathan’s hand. Laura's view snapped back to clarity, and she watched Jonathan shrink back, dropping his hands to his lap. Just then Brooke swept in the door. Her cheeks, nose, and chin were red with cold, and the green ribbon at the bottom of one of her two blonde braids was undone, the dangling ribbon only held by the rubber band at the end of her hair. She wiped her nose on her coat sleeve as she pulled out her chair to sit down.

“We built the best snow fort,” Brooke said, taking off her coat.

“Wonderful, I want to hear all about it,” Laura said. “Blessing first, though.”

They all looked to Len. He prayed over the food, and then, with her stomach churning, Laura dished out chowder, first filling a little bowl for Anna and stirring it to cool. She tested the temperature with her finger then put it on her tray. “So let’s hear about the snow fort,” she said.

Brooke took a bite of a roll and a drink of milk. Still chewing she said, “Kelly and I got a bucket and made snow bricks and built a wall.”

Len stopped her. “Finish chewing before you talk.”

She slumped, set her fork down, and put her hands in her lap.

Laura touched Brooke’s arm. “Dad's right.”

"Brooke," Len said suddenly, "you haven't been in our bedroom, have you?"

Brooke looked surprised and confused.

"You haven't been in our closet, I mean."

Laura stared at the side of his face, watching one of his jaw muscles move just under his skin, a delicacy of muscle and flesh she had loved so much when she had first seen it years before. Why was he doing this at the dinner table? This was not how he should be doing this.

Brooke didn't answer.

"Brooke are you going to answer me or not?"

Laura stood up. "Honey, can I talk to you for a second?"

Len dropped his napkin on his chair. "Yeah."

In the living room she half-whispered, "What are you doing?"

He folded his arms. "I thought I was going to handle this one."

She dropped her voice still lower, hoping he would follow. "I'm not sure that's the best way to do it."

"Laura, I don't know what you want me to do," he said, sitting down on the couch. "If I don't do anything you aren't happy, and when I try to help you get angry." He leaned back into the cushions. "Maybe I should just butt out and let you have them all to yourself. That's what you really want. You do it your way, and I'll just get out of the way." He put his head in his hands, his palms over his eyes. With a muffled voice he whispered, "Sometimes I think this just can't work."

Laura felt a desperate clogging in her throat, a sudden charge of emotion that threatened her airway. She sat down and reached for his hands, gripping them tightly in hers. "Len, don't say things like that. I love you. I don't want you to butt out so I can do this all by myself. You're their father." Then she whispered more quietly to control the growing quaver in her voice. "I love you, but I just want you to" She paused and put her hand on his face. "Sometimes you seem like you're so angry."

"Was I angry in there?" he said softly.

"No, no, you were fine." Laura felt her desperation. How much she wanted to save them from a fight. How much she wanted everything to slip back to happiness. She could feel that she would do almost anything to smooth their lives. "I guess I was just nervous. I guess I just thought maybe you should wait until after dinner. Could you wait until after dinner?" She sighed. "I'm glad you're going to talk to her. I think that's good. Just try to be gentle." He shrugged his shoulders. "Sure I'll be gentle. I hate when you make it sound like I'm awful, though. Like I hit our children or something."

"Of course I know you're not like that," she said. A small part of her brain, though, could see it happening -- a picture, black and hazy around the edges but clear in the center, of Len raising his hand, his teeth clenched, Brooke opposite him. Laura's stomach was turning again, and she felt a telltale thickening in her throat. She breathed deeply, hoping to stop the rising nausea and push away her awful imagined scene. Of course Len would never be that angry. "It's just that I want everything to be so perfect," she said, "and I guess I'm too hard on you. I'm sorry."

"Tell me what to do," he said.

Laura reached her arm around his shoulder, the nausea still stirring. "Wait until after dinner. Then maybe you can just tell her that we know what happened." She stood up. "I'm sorry to argue. It probably would have been fine to talk to her about it at dinner. I just overreacted."

"I'll talk with her after dinner." He stood up too. "It'll be fine."

She took his arm. "You'll be great, and I'll just leave it to you." Then she let go of his arm. "I'll be back in just a minute." Behind the closed bathroom door, Laura sat on the floor by the toilet, her face poised over the bowl. Then her stomach heaved, and the vomit slid from her mouth. After a minute she stood up, swished some cold water, and headed back to the table. Why did she have so little faith in him? It would be fine. She said it over and over again -- fine, just fine.

After dinner Jonathan slid off his phonebook. Brooke stood up to leave too, but Len stopped her.

“Brooke, I need you to stay in the kitchen.”

Brooke sat back down at the table and buried her head in her arms. Laura washed dishes, keeping a peripheral eye on Anna in her high chair and listening with her back turned.

“Your mom found a doll in your backpack that was supposed to be one of your Christmas presents. Brooke, look at me.”

Brooke lifted her face, eyes barely visible over her arms.

“Brooke, you know you shouldn’t have gotten into our closet, don’t you?”

She shrugged and dropped her face again.

Len’s voice was harsher. “You shouldn’t have been sneaking around with that doll.” He paused, “I want you to go get it and get in the car.”

Laura turned around more quickly than she had meant to, and Brooke looked questioningly up at her.

Laura wiped a dish with all the nonchalance she could. “Listen to your dad, honey.”

With tears beginning to form, Brooke got up from the table and put on her coat.

“We’re going to go on a drive and talk about it,” Len said to Laura. “I think better in the car.”

“Fine, sounds great. How long are you going to be?” She gripped the dishtowel.

“I don’t know. Why? Do you think that’s a bad idea?”

“No, no. I think you could have a nice talk in the car.”

“Do you want to come?” he asked.

She paused, but hearing the silence spoke quickly again, trying not to sound hesitant. “No, you two should go and have a good talk, just the two of you.”

“You sure?”

Maybe he really did want her to come. She kept her voice even to hide her relief, “Well, actually, a drive might be nice. Sure I’ll come. Jonathan and Anna can sit in the back with me, so you and Brooke can talk in the front.”

She put the dishcloth down. “I’ll get our coats.”

Shivering in the winter cold, Laura climbed into the back of the car first, securing Anna's car seat while the others waited. She then got out and took Anna from Len to buckle her in.

Jonathan ran around to the other side of the car. Brooke stood outside the door to the backseat, holding the doll and not moving.

“Brooke, you’re in the front tonight,” Laura said. She watched Brooke's face pale, the rosiness of earlier completely gone now. Before Brooke moved, Laura reached out and tied the dangling ribbon at the bottom of her braid. The ribbon matched Brooke's sweater so perfectly. She had been happy when she'd found out Brooke would have a sister, Anna, but now, boy or girl, she didn't care, as long as she could make things fine between her and Len.

From the backseat, Laura watched Brooke's profile in the window's reflection. Shifting and pulling one of her legs up under her, Brooke took the mermaid's hair and pressed part of it between her palms -- just like Laura had imagined she would when she bought it. With the warmth of her hands the brilliant green became blonde, and she

moved her palms to another chunk of hair, transforming it in turn. Then Brooke turned to the window and pressed her forehead against her reflection, facing out at the light part of the sky where the sun had just set. She ran her own fingers over the plastic grocery bag in her pocket. Her stomach seemed to have settled, but if she had to throw up again at least she had the bag.

Car rides always put Anna to sleep, and five miles out of town the only sounds were from the car's engine and Jonathan's growls as he played with his dinosaurs. Laura hoped Brooke would turn around to show her the now-blonde mermaid, but when Brooke lifted her face again it was only to look out at the winter grey brush and hills.

Fourteen miles out of town everything began to darken, the snow-covered mountains on the horizon losing their color to become only outlines against the slightly lighter sky. They approached the part of the road that passed by the Snake River Gorge, and Brooke scooted closer to the door. Laura couldn't see Brooke's hands but was sure she was gripping the door handle. The gorge cut through the landscape like a gash. When Len had first brought Laura here, he'd told her how he used to come here with his father and look out over the edge, throwing pebbles and yelling hello to see if it echoed. He'd held her hand and the two of them had yelled hello in unison. They'd driven here often in the years since, though they never yelled now. Each time they came near the edge of the drop-off Brooke cowered, and Len told her it was silly to be afraid.

He slowed the car and pulled off the freeway into the snow by the lookout point. Laura watched Brooke's shoulders tighten and leaned forward to touch her back and smooth her hair, but she had barely lifted her hand off her lap before she stopped herself. She had to let Len be their father. She was always doing this, getting in the way. She

dropped her hand and leaned back into the upholstery, measuring her breathing. She set her hand on her stomach, and she felt as if it had grown since the afternoon, as if it were growing as she moved her palm across it now. Surely it hadn't. Still, she had to tell Len tonight.

Len turned to Brooke. "You know you shouldn't have gotten into our closet, right?"

Brooke looked at him, her profile to Laura. Without answering she dropped her eyes to the doll in her lap, sniffing.

"Brooke, you need to look at me and answer."

She turned away from him and pressed her head against the glass again, still saying nothing. Laura couldn't see her tears, but could hear them.

"Brooke, look at me."

She didn't move.

"Brooke!"

She turned back to him.

"You shouldn't have taken that doll, and you know it!"

She put her head back on the window.

"Get out of the car," Len said, opening his door.

Brooke turned her shoulders to the door, and held it, but didn't open it and didn't move to leave.

"Now!" Len said, his voice cutting into the car from outside. Brooke opened her door. "Bring the doll," he said.

Laura undid her seatbelt, but then closed her eyes and inhaled slowly. Why did she think she knew any better than Len, anyway? She stopped herself from articulating her thoughts and pushed herself back into the upholstery again. She felt the walls of her throat thicken again, as if her uneasy stomach were pushing up against it. Jonathan's dinosaurs had gone quiet in his lap.

Laura watched Brooke and Len's dark forms through the windshield. Len sitting on the bumper, his tall body lowered to Brooke's height, his broad back facing Laura. The smallness of Brooke's body was clear despite her heavy coat. Laura wished that Brooke would look through the windshield at her, but she didn't.

She couldn't make out all their words. Len's tone rose; Brooke shrugged her shoulders. Len's voice dropped again, and Brooke shook her head no. It was hard to see in the growing dark, but Laura thought Brooke was crying harder now. Len stood up and walked through the snow past her, toward the gorge. When Brooke didn't follow him, he turned back.

"Brooke, now!" Len's loud voice was clear through glass. Then Laura couldn't hear the rest of the words, but he lashed the air with his arms.

"Mom, what's going on?" Jonathan asked, his eyes welling with tears.

Len walked back to Brooke and grabbed her hand.

"Dad is just talking to Brooke, sweetheart. Nothing to worry about."

Len pulled Brooke, but she planted her feet. She was shaking her head back and forth again and again, and even through the windows Laura could hear her heaving sobs.

Laura grabbed at her door handle, but stopped herself from pushing the door open. "Jonathan, your dad is handling this one," she said, much too loudly. Len yelled,

“Now you listen to me!” and Jonathan started to cry. Laura watched Len pull Brooke forward and watched her stumble as he dragged her toward the edge. Brooke screamed “No, no, no, no,” and Laura threw open the door.

“Honey...” her voice eked out. Brooke dropped into the thin snow. It was almost fully night, and although Len didn’t seem to notice her, Laura felt Brooke’s eyes slice at her through the dark.

On the freeway, a car rounded the bend. Its headlights shone through the windows of the car. Brooke was too low to the ground, and she remained in darkness, but a glaring flash of light reflected from the metal of Len’s jacket zipper and stabbed at Laura. What would the people in the car think they were doing out there, in the dim, beside the gorge? The headlights passed, the flash was gone, and Laura stood limply by the side of the car.

Len yanked Brooke to her feet. “Now,” he said, and this time Brooke didn’t resist. She stood straight and stepped forward until she was only a foot away from the barrier. “Now,” Len said again, and Brooke threw the green mermaid doll over the edge into the gorge. Brooke and Len stood side by side for a moment, then Len turned back to the car. Brooke stayed facing the edge until Len put his hand on her shoulder. Brooke didn’t shrink from his touch, as Laura would have thought, as she would have hoped, and the two of them walked slowly back toward the car together, Brooke’s face empty.

Laura was the last to close her door. She stood staring at the chasm. Was the doll still falling? She began to twist her diamond ring into the palm of her hand.

After a mile or so, Jonathan stopped crying and fell asleep. Anna had never woken at all. She looked at their soft faces and was grateful for their easy sleep. How

often it saved them. They drove the rest of the way home in silence. Laura felt the rigidity of her body, all of her muscles seemingly unable to relax. She should have been fine, it was over, it was fine. But unease stirred in her stomach, not nausea, something else. As they passed a freeway exit, they drove under pink-orange lights, and Laura watched the color cross her daughter's limp shoulders and blonde hair. Looking at Brooke, she dug at her palm with her wedding ring until her skin was sore, until she thought she felt it tear just a little. Then she shoved her hands into her coat pockets and pushed at the fabric with her knuckles. When she finally released her hands, she moved the unharmed one to her stomach, nausea surging through her body again, and leaned her head back to listen to the slow, quiet breathing of her children in the backseat.

Peaches

One of the first signs of trouble, although I didn't see it that way at the time, was Christmas. When I was in 5th grade the big things that holiday went as usual. Even though we'd moved to a new house in a new town, Dad pulled our flocked artificial Christmas tree from the closet and as usual set it up in the front window on bricks so it looked taller, then hung the balls and the tinsel just so. None of us ever helped since my dad inevitably redid our hanging and arranging, sometimes silently, more often with a sharply worded description of just how lights, tinsel, or ornaments should and should not be hung. My mom, as usual, made fudge for all the neighbors, managing to burn herself or ruin a batch somewhere along the way -- enough to make her say "stupid idiot" furiously to herself while banging her fist into the counter or throwing a spatula at the sink.

But The Twelve Days of Christmas was another story. Every year we chose a family to deliver secret "Twelve Days of Christmas" gifts to, leaving packages on their doorstep in the nights leading up to Christmas, ringing the bell, and speeding away. Gifts in past years were little things like one book for the first day or a bottle of 7-Up for the 7th day. That year gifts were big things like big holiday-themed kitchen rugs or heavy ceramic Santa-shaped cookie jars. My mother took us with her to buy the Twelve Days gifts in the afternoon, when my dad was still at work, and when we got home she wrapped them immediately. In the past we'd delivered the gifts later in the evening, my dad staying home with the little kids, Anna a few years back, and Tyson more recently. Now, all five of us kids piled in the car, making the Twelve Days run before dinner. And somehow we knew, at dinner when Dad finally joined us, not to say anything about it.

After Christmas there was a bigger change. In the mornings we always said family prayer, the seven of us kneeling in a circle, even Tyson, just barely three. After the prayer, Dad, in his tie, would lean over and kiss Mom, in her robe, and then he'd get up and go off to work while we kids tiredly took our time getting off the floor and getting ready for school. We still said prayer, and Dad still stood up from his knees first, but now when he did, Mom looked away, no kiss. The first morning it happened Dad had moved toward her as usual, and she'd turned away, pale, shaky. I'd wondered if she were sick. The next day, Dad didn't lean in. She'd looked almost as pale.

Still, we went on almost normally. A few months passed, and state report time came around at school. I was assigned Massachusetts. The farthest east I'd ever been from our Utah home was a road trip to South Dakota, for one of my Dad's family reunions. Massachusetts was accordingly a land of glamour. Everyone did a state report in 5th grade, and my older brother Mark had done his on Louisiana two years earlier. He said the best way to start was with a letter to the Massachusetts Tourism Board, and I put mine together to his exact specifications -- "Dear Sir or Madame..." I wrote in my tidiest cursive as he dictated.

Just over a week later I came home from school to a fat packet waiting for me on the counter. The only mail I ever got was on my birthday, a card with \$10 from Grandma and Grandpa Randolph and a card with \$20 from Grandma and Grandpa Gardner. This manila envelope was on a different scale entirely. I pulled the tab carefully. Inside was not one brochure, but around 15: The Freedom Trail, The Colors of the Berkshires, the Beaches of Cape Cod and the Islands. In the coming days I traced and colored elaborate

maps of the state; I created pullout charts of natural wonders and the economy; I made a cartoon flip book of the shot heard around the world; I got an A on my state report.

With my graded state report in hand, I walked in the door from school and headed straight down to Mark's room. Middle school got out earlier than elementary school, so he was already sitting on his bed, an old waterbed our parents had slept on until our most recent move. He didn't look up from his book when I walked in, and I sat down on the bed hard, sloshing the water. He gave me an irritated look and went back to reading.

"Hey, I think we should go to Massachusetts -- the whole family," I said.

"How are we going to get there?" he glanced up with a condescending smirk.

"We could drive this summer."

He put his book down and shrugged.

"We could stop in Louisiana on the way," I said. "Do you have a notebook? Let's write down all the places we want to go."

Within an hour we'd taken a map of the U.S. from an old National Geographic and taped it to his wall and decided that if this trip were really going to happen we'd have to plan every last detail before we told Mom and Dad. Otherwise, they'd say no before we could even get started. Before dinner, we'd written three letters to State Tourism Bureaus.

We started a routine, Mark dropping the letters in the mailbox as he walked to school each morning and bringing the mail in every afternoon before Mom could. He pulled our packages of brochures, and then, once I was home, I opened and sorted them in what had become our downstairs office. Even though we didn't close the door -- no one ever closed doors in our house except in brief moments when we were dressing -- the

other kids almost never bothered us. Partly because Mark's room was down a long hall, in an unappealing, musty corner of the basement, partly because when they did we pretended we were doing homework.

We debated every decision. Should we spend the night in North Platte, Nebraska or drive the extra 35 miles to Gothenburg? There was a Veteran's Memorial in North Platte we could stop and see after dinner (the memorial was beautifully lit by night, so the Historic Nebraska brochure told us). North Platte won. Mark stuck a yellow pushpin into the map on his wall while I recorded the information in our trip notebook: mileage from Cheyenne to North Platte, 220 miles; our expected time of arrival, 6:15 p.m. Possible hotels listed in the brochure: Best Western, Super 8... When it was time for dinner I re-filed the brochures in Mark's desk drawer, and placed the notebook in an unmarked manila folder. We didn't worry about the pushpins in the map. Sure, Mom might see them when she was putting laundry away, but she'd never guess what they were for.

While we made our plans downstairs, something else changed upstairs. Mom started sleeping on the couch in the study. With Mark's room downstairs, he might never have known if I hadn't told him, but the room I shared with Anna was right next to the study, right down the hall from Mom and Dad's. I heard Mom go into the study at night. I heard her close the door. When I got up to go to the bathroom in the night, their bedroom door, Dad's door now, was closed too. They never used to close their door.

"Did you know Mom sleeps in the study?" I said one afternoon, during a lull in our discussion about one day or two at Wild Waves, the West Virginia water park that had become one of the most anticipated highlights of our trip.

"I bet Dad snores," he said. He held my eyes, waiting for me to nod. Dad did snore; we'd all heard him. But why was it suddenly a problem? Mark had seen what I'd seen at family prayer, he knew that Mom and Dad weren't getting along, that even when they hadn't gotten along before they'd slept in the same room. I nodded anyway, not knowing what else to do, what else to think, and back we went to debating the length of our Wild Waves stay. We'd been to a water park on our trip to South Dakota. Mom, Tyson, then an infant, and Anna, then a toddler sat on a blanket with the potato salad and tuna sandwiches, and the rest of us waved to them every time we came down the slide. When he got tired, Dad went and stretched out on the blanket next to Mom, putting his head in her lap but refusing her sunscreen application so that his chest and shoulders grew redder and redder (he always said "one good sunburn means you won't have another one all summer" and was slightly irritated when my mom slathered us with sun protection).

We needed two days at Wild Waves for sure, and the trip needed at least three weeks. We'd go in July. Now that we had our official time table, we began planning every day down to the quarter hour. A week after I told Mark about Mom sleeping in the study, we were debating Colonial Williamsburg -- 30 minutes or an hour at the Folk Art Museum? Would we be hungry at 12:30 or 1:00? -- when I interrupted us again.

"I think we should plan a dinner."

"In Virginia?"

"No, here, for Mom and Dad. Maybe this weekend. A fancy dinner. We can get everyone to help. We'll be chefs and waiters, and they'll just get to sit there and eat and talk."

"I know how to make soft tacos," he said.

"No, it has to be fancy. With candles and something like steak or shrimp or lasagna."

We looked at each other quietly for a moment.

"I just want to do it because it'll be fun," I said. "Just because."

He didn't say anything else. We shifted our planning for the rest of the evening. I wrote up two invitations, one for each. "Dear Laura (or Len), You are cordially invited to dinner in the dining room on Saturday at 7:00. Please check which you would prefer and return this card to the basket you'll see placed on the piano." Below that were boxes next to shrimp, spaghetti, and Beef Wellington. I'd convinced Mark that we could find a recipe for Beef Wellington in a cookbook somewhere if that was what they checked. That night after everyone was asleep I slipped one invitation under the study door and one under Mom and Dad's bedroom door.

Mom and Dad didn't say anything about it the next morning at family prayer, but by the time I checked the basket on the piano after dinner, there were two returned cards. Mom had checked spaghetti. Dad had checked shrimp. Mark and I decided we'd make both. Plus, we'd get some sparkling cider and figure out how to make baked Alaska for dessert -- I'd never had it in real life, but mom had told me about it -- a dish they'd served at the fancy restaurant where she'd waitressed back in college.

We pulled Jonathan and Anna into Mark's bedroom -- we needed Anna to make sure Tyson stayed in bed, and we needed Jonathan to help set up. Mark and I were going to be busy enough in the kitchen. They both agreed, almost always happy just to be included in what "the big kids" were doing, and together the next afternoon all four of us

walked the three blocks to Embly's Groceries. I still had money left from my birthday eight months earlier, and Anna's had just passed, and she hadn't spent any yet. She didn't want to spend it on the dinner, though, so I promised her it was just a loan; she could have the money I'd get for turning eleven soon enough. We were back with the groceries and had stuffed them all away in drawers in the fridge or the back of cupboards before Dad got home from work.

While we were gone Mom was busy washing and ironing clothes in the big basement laundry room. Jonathan said, "I hope she didn't even know we were gone." I shrugged, but I hoped she had noticed. I wanted her to see all the work we were doing. I wanted her to quietly agree to our plan. How could she not want what we wanted?

When Saturday came, all of us kids (except Tyson who was supposed to be in bed) dressed up in our Sunday clothes, my idea. I tied the bow in the back of Anna's pink and white dress, a hand me down I'd worn when I was her age. Mark tied his own tie, then Jonathan's -- my mom didn't like clip-ons; even Tyson wore a real tie on Sundays. We looked nicer in our dress up clothes, and even if we were in the potentially-messy kitchen, that's what aprons were for. We set the table with the nice china and a lace tablecloth. Mark lit candles and poured the sparkling cider into goblets. Mom and Dad stayed out of the dining room and kitchen until 7 o'clock. Then they arrived separately, Mom first, then Dad. They looked nice. Mom had on lipstick and a sweater and slacks. She usually wore either jeans or a dress, for Sundays. The only time she wore clothes like these were for occasions with Dad after they put us to bed -- work dinners or parties. Once, when she'd been organizing her closet, I'd been sitting on the bed behind her, watching, and she'd pulled out the very sweater she was wearing, its soft white broken by

a gentle weave of blue around the chest. "When you're older," she'd said as I touched the sweater, "you can borrow this sweater to wear on a date." Dad wasn't wearing a tie, but he had on good pants and a good shirt, the sort of thing he'd wear to work. We had the chairs arranged so they were sitting next to each other, at the corner of the table. When they sat down I said, "Welcome to the Restaurant Gardner," and curtsied.

Jonathan brought out a plate of nicely-arranged cocktail shrimp, and Anna followed with a bowl of cocktail sauce. They put them down, and we all headed back to the kitchen.

"The spaghetti is ready," Mark said.

"We have to give them time with the shrimp," I snapped.

He scowled, but a minute later we were standing side by side again, listening. There was nothing to hear. No conversation in the dining room.

"Take in the spaghetti," I finally said.

Jonathan and Anna were getting ready for their wait staff duties again when Tyson, in cartoon animal print pajamas my mother had sewn, wandered in.

"Get back to bed!" Jonathan said, rushing at him. Tyson began to cry.

"Anna," I said, my voice like my mother's when she scolded us, "he's supposed to be in bed. Wasn't that your job?"

She took Tyson's hand from Jonathan and walked with him back to the boys' bedroom.

When everything was done -- the spaghetti hardly touched, the baked Alaska unserveably melted on the cookie sheet after coming out of the oven looking so golden and perfect (the creamy puddle so awful looking that we didn't even show it to Mom and

Dad and just washed it down the sink) -- we put in the movie we'd rented for them to watch while we cleaned up.

"And now I present," I said, gesturing to the TV on the cart we'd wheeled in from the front room, "Troop Beverly Hills."

"You kids are so sweet," my mother said, but didn't smile enthusiastically as she usually did when she praised us. Instead her face had something beyond the little shake of her head, the little frown within her smile that I'd seen in her face before. There was something flatter now; I didn't know this new face. Whatever it meant, her arms were folded across the bottom half of her sweater, her body hunched slightly, as if she were folding into herself, disappearing.

"The food was great," my dad said in immediate response to my mother, his voice slightly too loud, too happy. He eagerly put out his arms out, as if we were children who constantly ran to our father's embrace. Mark turned to the kitchen, and Anna hovered near my mother, but Jonathan and I awkwardly went to him, his squeeze pushing our bodies uncomfortably into his shoulder. When he let us go, he continued his smiling.

In the kitchen again I could hear the movie, even over the sounds of us rinsing dishes for the dishwasher. I'd convinced Mark that *Troop Beverly Hills* was a good choice because it had Shelly Long in it, and Mom liked her -- something she's said when I'd stayed up late to watch an episode of Cheers with her one night, the two of us curled together on the couch after the other kids were all in bed. I hadn't realized the plot of the movie centered around a mother and father about to get divorced until some hijinks with the daughter's Girl Scout troop bring them back together. Hearing the film parents fighting and the film daughter scheming, I wanted to dash in and turn it off. Everything

felt ruined, a sudden spot of embarrassment pinching my throat. I didn't want Mom and Dad to think that's what our dinner was all about. We weren't like that family. I looked over at Mark. Did he see how awful this was? He looked back blankly, and I said nothing. How could I explain?

The movie played on and on, and by the end, we'd finished the dishes and gone into the dining room to watch it too. Tyson had gotten out of bed again, and he and Anna each sat on one half of Mom's lap. Jonathan and I sat on the floor under the table. Mark, his white shirt untucked, stood in the doorway, as much in the room as out of it, as if he might walk away at any moment.

After school the next Monday, I went down to Mark's room, same as usual, ready to plan the trip.

"Hey, did we get any mail?" I said.

"I didn't check."

"What if Mom sees?"

"I don't care." He thumbed through his book.

I sat on the foot of his bed for a few minutes, waiting for him to talk to me again, for him to act like himself and walk over to the map and puzzle over where we should head to next. When he didn't, I finally stood up and pushed the bed hard with my hands, sloshing it, glaring at him, then stomped upstairs, hoping he heard me.

That night when I went to climb into bed, there was a package on my bunk. Wisconsin Tourism Bureau. Mom must have put it there. I was glad she had seen it, in a way -- it meant she knew but hadn't said no. She must have overheard us planning, seen our files. It meant she wanted to go on the trip.

I opened it up and pulled the familiar looking brochures, and something else, a bumper sticker. We'd never had a bumper sticker before, and when everyone was asleep, the door to the study and the door to Mom and Dad's bedroom both closed, I went out to the garage and peeled the backing off the "Forward Wisconsin!" sticker. Then I pushed it firmly onto the bumper of our minivan. When we drove to Wisconsin, everyone in the state would smile and honk. We'd feel right at home. We were going on the trip. I didn't know what Dad would do when he saw it, although I knew he wouldn't be happy. But perhaps Mom would tell him about the vacation. Mark might be mad too. That was fine too. I hoped so. All I knew was that I wanted Wisconsin on our car.

The next day, when I walked in the kitchen door after school, Mark was waiting, sitting on the cupboard. He'd seen the sticker by then, of course. I pretended to ignore him, opening the fridge, pouring myself a glass of milk.

"Dad's going to kill you," he finally said.

I felt a plunge in my stomach, then shrugged, a little show of toughness. "So?" I said. But in the hours waiting for Dad to come home, to walk in through the garage and see the back of the car, I thought of almost nothing but his yelling or his affected disappointment -- how could one of his children have so betrayed him, putting a sticker on the car behind his back? I milled about, sullenly watching Mom make dinner, Mom who said nothing about the sticker despite my guilty moping. Mark lingered in the kitchen too.

At last, it happened. I heard the garage door first and braced myself. Coming through the kitchen door, the first thing Dad said, his voice harsh, was: "Who put the bumper sticker on the car? Where's the GooGone? I'm going to get it off right now."

Mark, my mother, and I froze. "People who aren't clever but think they are," he went on, looking at me and Mark, his face taking on a disappointed strain, "who have one thing they want to say to everyone all the time, those are the people who have bumper stickers." When no one moved to help him he stormed over to the cupboard beneath the sink and began tipping over bottles, looking for the GooGone. Mark looked at me for a second, a flash of commiseration, then leaned into the cupboard, hanging his head. I stood completely still, trying to give away nothing, to avoid crying, to avoid any guilty quivering in my cheeks. My mother stood next to my father by the sink, looking like she too might cry, the same paleness I had seen in her so much lately. My father didn't see any of us, his head buried under the sink. "Laura, would you help me?" he snapped from his crouched position.

Twenty minutes later, he had scraped and scraped, but glue remover and all, remnants of Forward Wisconsin remained. Why was part of me so happy to see the clinging traces of adhesive? Mark didn't say anything else about it, and Mom didn't say anything either. Even Dad, after his cleaning spree, seemed to forget about it.

Mark and I didn't talk about the trip again for two weeks, even though I hoped every day he'd bring it up, and then Mom and Dad made an announcement. We were moving to a new house. It wasn't a surprise, since we'd only been renting this one, but the fun was that even though they'd looked at a few, they weren't yet sure which new house. As soon as school was out they'd send us to stay with our cousins for a week while they packed. When we got back, we'd be all moved in -- somewhere.

The trip suddenly felt much less urgent, and I let myself think of new houses instead. One warm Sunday afternoon, after our usual big Sunday dinner, Dad drove all of

us around town and showed us the two houses he and Mom were considering. There was a two-story house with red brick and white columns over across the street from the high school. I could see us there, Dad mowing the lawn, Mom tending the big flower beds in front of the columns. We could even put a tire swing in the tree in the front yard. The other house was a one-story with tan siding and only a sapling in the yard, held straight by a cut up old hose, tethering it to the ground. It was bigger, Dad said, and in more of a neighborhood. I didn't care. "I like the red one," I called eagerly from the back seat.

Finally the end of May arrived. We packed some clothes, and Dad drove all of us kids down to Ivins, a few hours south where my mother's family lived. The last thing I remember, on our way out to the car, was Mom, wearing no makeup -- something extraordinary for her -- leaning against the kitchen cupboard with a stack of papers and envelopes in her hand, staring not at the papers, but at the wall.

In Ivins, Dad dropped us off at various relatives' houses -- Aunt Jessie's for me and Anna, Uncle Jeremy's for Mark and Jonathan, Grandma and Grandpa Randolph's for Tyson. For the whole week I thought of nothing but houses: let it be the red one, let it be the red one.

But when Dad came to pick up me and Anna, all the other kids already in the van, he didn't drive us all straight to our new house; he turned away from the freeway. He was strange, red-faced, wet-eyed. I sat in the front seat, and he grabbed my hand and held it -- it had been a couple of years since we held hands, and I felt sweaty and wanted only for him to let go. Finally, we ended up at Uncle Arlen's. When we pulled up, Uncle Arlen opened the door, and as we walked in, Mom came down from upstairs, her hand gripping the stair rail tightly. I watched her, waiting for her to smile, to run to us and hug us, to

say how much she'd missed us like she always did, but instead she took Uncle Arlen's arm for a second, as if he were holding her up. At last she picked up Tyson and kissed him all over his face. Dad moved us into Uncle Arlen's living room, and we crowded onto the couch. Mom stood by the wall, as pale as she had ever been, and Dad crouched down in front of us, his face even redder, sweatier, than it had been in the car. He was crying, I could now see. He grabbed all our hands and pressed them to his chest, then said, "I want you to know that I don't want this. I want our family to stay together, but your mom doesn't want that. Your mom filed for divorce."

It should have been my mom putting her arms around us, letting us cry into the warm spot at the base of her neck where we always cried, but instead it was Dad reaching for us. I held back my tears as much as I could until he stood up too, until he let us all stand up. Mom held Tyson again. I took Anna's hand. Mark stood close behind Jonathan, his hands on Jonathan's shoulders. Mark and I looked, above the little kids' heads, at each other. His red cheeks were shaking. I was sure mine were too. It was something that didn't seem to happen to Mom or Dad when they were upset, but that happened to all of us kids.

Only a few seconds later Uncle Arlen asked if we'd like something to eat, if we wanted to play some video games. Mom and Dad stayed in the living room, and all five of us kids moved together to the family room, the Nintendo there already turned on, waiting. We huddled on the floor around it.

An hour later, the five of us still sitting in front of the television, leaning into one another, Jonathan and Mark taking their turns, Dad came in and said, "Mark and Brooke,

your mom and I decided you two are coming with me." I looked for my mother, for a confirming nod, for something, but she was nowhere.

Mark and I looked at Jonathan, Anna, and Tyson, all our faces surprised, but empty beyond that. Anna let go of my hand, Tyson got off of my lap, and Mark and I got up and followed Dad toward the door. In the entry way, Mom waited. She gave us hugs, clearly crying, and then let go. We walked to Dad's car, a two-seater. Mark got in first, then me. When Dad closed the door, my body squished into both Mark and the door, the seatbelt jabbing into my hip. I reached under and pulled the seatbelt around us. Uncomfortable as it was, I was glad to have Mark close. Jonathan, Anna, and Tyson stood behind Mom in the doorway as we pulled away. None of us waved.

The drive back home was three hours. Mark and I adjusted throughout, his hips angled, then mine. We hardly talked, listening instead to the one tape we had in the car, *Graceland* by Paul Simon, over and over again. When Paul Simon sang, "My traveling companion is nine years old. He is the child of my first marriage," I thought, that's me now. I'm from one of those families. I thought of what I'd say to kids at school in the fall. Now I'd be the troubled kid. I pictured crying in class, the attention it would get me. How people would talk about Brooke Gardner and did you hear about her parents? At least there was that. When Paul Simon sang, "There's no doubt about it. It was the myth of fingerprints. I've seen them all and man they're all the same," my dad said, "You know about fingerprints, right?" and Mark and I nodded, hardly irritated even though even Anna, in first grade, knew about fingerprints -- too distracted to be annoyed. Finally, Dad said, "I'm so sorry your Mom is doing this, but I want you to know, we're going to be okay." I didn't know who he meant when he said we. Me, Mark, and him? I

wondered what Mom and the rest of the kids were doing. More than anything, though, I wondered why everything didn't look different, why the drive felt much the same as it always did, the dry landscape whirring by.

When we pulled into town, we drove by our old house but kept going another mile, to the one apartment complex in town, down by the creek and some horse pastures. The second story apartment was empty except for a few pieces of old furniture I recognized from Grandma and Grandpa Gardner's basement, two orange arm chairs, a wicker coffee table. The place smelled like stale cigarette smoke, and the voices of a man and woman laughing loudly in the apartment downstairs came through the open windows.

"Come see the bedrooms," Dad said. "You both get to have your own rooms. I'll sleep in the living room." When both Mark and I failed to respond he prompted with a hopeful smile, "Won't it be great to have your own rooms?" I went into the bedroom that was supposed to be mine and made sure Dad saw me sit down and bounce on the bare mattress, like a person on an ad on television. The moving springs sounded hollow, echoing a little in the empty room. I wondered where Mom and the other kids were. Had they arrived at an apartment somewhere? Was Anna's and my bunk bed there?

During the next week, Dad went to work everyday. The three of us ate cereal together in the morning, then, no family prayer -- how strange it would have been with just the three of us -- Dad headed off. It was hot every day now, and there was nothing to do outside anyway, so Mark and I spent most of the day inside, watching television or reading. When lunch came around, we ate Hostess pies. They'd been on sale, 10 for a dollar, and Dad had stocked up. Mid-morning, I always imagined I'd make something

else, dreading the berry or lemon goo and the shell that turned so quickly to paste in my mouth, but then around noon when hunger hit, making Hamburger Helper or ramen, the only other things in Dad's kitchen, seemed suddenly burdensome.

"These are sick," I said to Mark.

"I kind of like them," he said. "You can squish out the insides so you don't have to eat the shell, if you want." Then he did just that, squeezing the heavy pudding from a chocolate one into his mouth. I ate the insides of a boysenberry pie with a spoon.

In the afternoons, we watched more television, and I wondered what Mom was making everyone for dinner. Lasagna and green beans was my guess on Monday. Soft tacos my guess for Tuesday. Tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches Wednesday, with peaches Mom had bottled for dessert. I told my guess to Mark every day. "I bet she made rolls too," he said, for Lasagna day. The other days he only shrugged. I kept imagining Mom standing in front of the open refrigerator in our old house, asking all of us kids what we wanted for dinner, so frustrated when we said we didn't care, insisting that someone decide! I stopped guessing out loud by Thursday.

During one of the afternoons, Mark and I unpacked the few boxes Dad had -- mostly books. "Where do you think the trip planning stuff went?" I asked Mark while we arranged paperbacks on the bookshelf in the living room. "Who cares," he said. "I never really thought we were going to go." I felt the words like a little jolt, an awful drop inside me, but I said nothing, did nothing, just continued putting books on the shelf as if he'd said nothing at all.

On our first night in the apartment, Dad had taken us outside and shown us the spot in the roof of the apartment building where a group of bats lived. Now, in the

evenings before he came home from work, Mark and I always went outside to see if we could spot some. Sometimes we did, their dark outlines against the sky like awkward birds, jerky and strange in their flight. We were always back inside before Dad got home, sure that if he knew we looked for them he would be too excited, would want us to sit out for hours with books and charts.

Toward the end of the week, just after we'd gone inside after bat watching, Dad came home with a collection of fancy Springbok puzzles, the kind with strange shaped pieces that held together even if you lifted the puzzle off the table.

"This will be so fun," he said. "We'll put these together and then put them up on the walls." For the next few days while he was at work, Mark and I worked on the puzzles, mostly in silence. When Dad came home, he joined us, the three of us squinting at the pieces under the lamplight. We finished a white Ferrari puzzle first, then Norman Rockwell's "April Fool Girl With Shopkeeper," the strange dolls with old man faces and the herons and toucans flying through the shop easy to piece together with the picture in front of us.

Finally, the weekend came and we went to visit Mom. Dad drove us to an old house right on Main Street, next to Hunger Hut, our town's little drive-in. He pulled over at the curb. "I'll see you guys on Sunday at 6:00," he said. "Be ready to go." We didn't have any bags since most of our stuff was at Mom's anyway, and Mark and I both climbed out of the passenger seat. As we were closing the door, Dad leaned over to say, "Tell the kids I love them and that I'll see them next weekend, and bring back some of your stuff." He turned his face so that he wouldn't have to look at the house, and the second Mom began to open the door, he drove away.

At the door, Mom hugged us both wildly, squeezing too hard, hurting me, and not letting go. Finally, she stepped back, and wiped her eyes. The tiny house behind her was full of boxes and the smell of moldy carpet. Jonathan, Anna, and Tyson sat on the old couch, watching the old television. They jumped up to see us.

While we were still standing at the door Mom said, a hint of the same furious voice she used when she was lashing out at herself for her cooking mistakes or her sewing machine's malfunctioning, "I don't know what your dad told you, but I didn't send you with him. I would never leave you with him. It's just I didn't know what to do. He said he was taking some of you kids, whether I liked it or not, and you guys are the strongest. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." She hugged us again, as tightly as before.

It stiffened in her arms, flushed with sudden vague anger. What did I hate? Her? The awful old house? The cigarette-stale apartment? The mess of boxes? I couldn't tell, but when she finally let go I said nothing, and went to sit on the couch with the other kids. Mark stood beside her for a moment longer, then went into some other room.

A few minutes later, I was exploring the house. Mom had taken most everything from home (even the contents of the refrigerator, something I knew because the cocktail sauce from the special dinner sat in the back of her fridge), and piles of stuff were everywhere. When I found Mark, he was lying on a bed, his legs thrown on top of a pile of Mom's clothes. "I wonder if the trip box is here," I said. "Maybe we could get Mom to go."

"Stop talking," he said.

I closed myself in the bathroom and sat on the floor, not crying, but wishing I could be somewhere else, our old house, in the car, driving. Something.

When I finally came out, Mark was gone from the bed. Even with that, the weekend felt more normal than it seemed like it should. We watched television and played *Risk* while Mom made bread and unpacked. Like usual, we went to church together on Sunday morning (no one there said anything about Dad not being with us, although I wondered if they were looking and tried to look sad but okay in case they were), came home to the usual Sunday pot roast, and then messed around for another few hours. A few minutes before 6:00, I went to the kitchen, took two plastic bags from the kitchen drawer, and hoping Mom wouldn't notice, went back to the living room and handed one to Mark. The two of us then quietly retreated the back bedroom where we'd found some boxes of our stuff, and we filled the bags with clothes.

Dad came to the door, rang the bell and then stepped back half way down the sidewalk to the street. As soon as Mark answered, he walked the rest of the way back to the car. Mark and I hugged everyone, then took our plastic bags from their discreet spot beside the door. Of course Mom noticed them, her face pulling tight, trying to soften into a sweet smile, but unable to. She said nothing, though. We walked out to our shared passenger seat, plastic bags in hand, neither of us saying a word. When we had buckled ourselves in, Mark's sharp hipbone in my leg, I was happy again to feel him beside me.

"Have either of you guys ever had Rueben sandwiches?" Dad said, as soon as we were in the car. We both shook our heads no, and he proceeded to tell us how much we were going to love them, how he'd bought the stuff for them, how we were going to have them that night. As usual, I had the position closest to the window, and I stared out at the brush along the side of the road, watching it pass in a blur. Did I want to be at Mom's still? How could when she was doing all this? I didn't want to be going back to Dad's,

though. I didn't want to be going anywhere. Mark picked up the slack. "Sounds great, Dad," he said.

Dad was still talking about Rueben sandwiches when we got back to the apartment. As we climbed the cement stairs to our door he assigned jobs, his voice a coach's, prepping his team for a play. "Brooke, you're in charge of toasting the bread. Mark, you set the table." Before the apartment, Dad had never cooked, and his pep turned all my feelings dark, settled them in the low spots and trenches inside me.

In the kitchen, both our completed puzzles now on the wall, we went to work. I pulled one of the folding metal chairs away from the card table we were using as kitchen table, then stood on it to reach the bread in the cupboard above the fridge. At home we'd always kept the bread in a breadbox, but here there wasn't a breadbox, and Dad instead put bread and cereal up in the cupboard with the phone books and the laundry detergent. When we'd finished our jobs, Mark and I sat and watched as Dad jauntily warmed pastrami, piled it onto the toasted rye, added slices of swiss cheese, forkfuls of sauerkraut, and poured on the Russian dressing. I gave Mark a doubtful look when Dad began whistling. "I can't believe I've never made these for you guys before," he said.

"Voila." He turned around and handed each of us a plate. Dad said a quick blessing on the food, and then we started eating. I was the first to push mine aside.

"Dad," I said, feeling shaky, knowing he would turn his disappointed face on me, "I don't think I like Rueben sandwiches."

Mark timidly followed, "Are you sure this is exactly how you make these, Dad?"

"I can't believe you guys don't like them," he said, taking another couple of big bites and nodding his head with satisfaction. But his chewing slowed, and finally he got

up from the table and started sniffing the ingredients. The dressing was fine, the sauerkraut fine, the meat fine. Then he sniffed the bag of bread, took a piece of the bread out, and pressed his nose into it. Mark took the top of his sandwich off and smelled the toast.

"It smells like dryer sheets," Mark said.

Dad covered his irritation over with a weak frown and pained eyes, the face I hated the most. "I think it's fine," he said, "but if you think it tastes funny we can get rid of it." One by one he brusquely grabbed our sandwiches and dumped the pastrami off the bread onto our plates. He set the toast on his plate, as if he might eat all six pieces by himself, then reached to the drawer behind him for forks and dropped them down on the table, their light metal clattering.

Mark and Dad started eating again, but I stirred my pastrami around, trying to get up the nerve to say something. Finally I did: "Dad, I don't really like sauerkraut."

"Sorry, honey," he said, trying to look earnest, "but you can't waste food. That's what we're having for dinner tonight."

There had only been one time when Mom had insisted we finish our dinners, TV dinners we'd each picked out for ourselves. Mark and I had both picked Mexican dinners, but once they were ready I'd instantly hated the mushy rice and beans. After a minute Mom went back to work, cleaning, sewing, who knew. Mark wolfed his down meal and left the table. A few minutes later, I left the table too, my meal almost untouched. When Mom came back to clean up the table, she called "Who didn't finish their dinner? Brooke?" I came running from the family room.

"That one was mine," I said, pointing to Mark's tray.

She called Mark and he came in. "Is this yours?" she said.

He looked at me, my eyes wide, urging him. "Yeah," he said, then sat down and finished my dinner.

In Dad's kitchen now, I watched both of them clean their plates. I tried another bite, still tasting the dryer sheets. Dad finished first, got up from the table and washed his dish. He went to the living room, put his feet up on the coffee table, and turned on the television. Mark whispered, "Just eat it." I looked at him and felt my eyes get teary. Things had been different when he'd eaten my TV dinner. "You have to," he said. "Just hold your breath and swallow." He got up and took his own clear plate to the sink. A half hour later I was still at the table, alone in the kitchen. As quietly as I could, I got up and took some paper towels from the cupboard, wrapped the congealing Reuben sandwich innards in a paper towel, and then wrapped a couple more around that one. Slowly, I lifted the garbage can lid and put the paper towel wad down under a chip bag and some other wet paper towels. "Okay, Dad," I called, "I finished my sandwich."

He came in from the living room and looked at my plate. "You're free to go," he said.

It had been hours since the lunchtime pot roast, and I was hungry, even after the awful bites of the Reuben sandwich. I hesitated, but finally said, "Actually, I'm still a little hungry. Can I get myself something else?"

"As long as you clean up whatever you get out." He went back to the couch.

I looked through the fridge and saw nothing, then searched cupboard after cupboard, finding nothing but ramen, Hamburger Helper, and Hostess pies. Finally, down in the cupboard with the mixing bowls, I saw something else. A bottle of peaches.

The soft half globes suspended in translucent peach liquid. My mother's peaches. The date she'd bottled them in her loopy handwriting on the lid.

I'd watched Mom bottle them two summers before, in our old house in our old town, the house my dad had built, the one we'd lived in together, my parents in their bedroom, no study for Mom to go to. We'd all gone to pick peaches, Dad included, out to one of Mom's cousins' orchards. Then, while Mom started peeling and bottling them, we'd sat around at the kitchen table eating fresh peaches until we were sticky and full, sick even. Dad had gone off to a meeting, something, and Mom had put us to bed. She'd only done a dozen or so bottles by then, but the next morning there were rows upon rows of the peaches in shiny glass bottles on the kitchen counter. We all helped carry them to shelves in the storage room. How had a bottle wound up here? Had Dad taken it or had Mom given it to him?

I opened the bottle and put half a peach and some syrup into a bowl. The peach slipped around as I pushed my spoon through it. Saliva shot through my mouth. My glands ached with anticipation. The first bite was sweet, soft, perfect. I finished the first half peach and took another one.

I ate one peach after the next. I was hungry and the peaches were good, but they were also something Mom had made, here in this kitchen where Mom had never been, where we weren't even supposed to remember her anymore. I finished the entire bottle. I could have washed the bottle and put it away -- at home we'd always reused the bottles -- but I didn't want Dad to see it, and I quietly put it in the trash under the same chip bag and wet paper towels as the sandwich.

The rest of the week, when I couldn't sleep and found myself crying quietly so Dad wouldn't hear, I wished I had saved the bottle. Finally, on a weekend visit to Mom's, I found the store of peaches and slipped one of the glass bottles into the plastic bag of stuff I was taking back to Dad's. I didn't open it and eat the peaches, though. I kept it in a stretched-out sock at the bottom of my underwear drawer, and some nights I would take it out and hold it in my hands, turning it so the glass caught the light coming in from the parking lot, tracing my fingers over the bottle's raised lettering, looking into the sweet juice holding the little strands of peach fiber. A relic. I wanted to tell Mark about it but never did.

School started again and Mark and I, in middle school together now, were still living with Dad, the divorce still unsettled, custody still in dispute. In the evenings before Dad got home, we still went out to see if we could spot bats. One afternoon, we went out earlier than usual, and standing in the shade behind the apartment building, out by the chain link fence that separated it from the road, Mark said quietly, "Do you ever think everything would be better if Mom died?"

His cheeks shook a little, and I nodded, eager for a moment with him, eager for us to finally agree again. But even though I'd nodded, I hadn't thought that exactly. What I had thought was that Mom could die or Dad could die, even both could die, that would be fine, good even. We could go back to something closer to normal, no more apartment, no more weekend visits. The only people I was sure couldn't die were Mark, Jonathan, Anna, Tyson, and me. As long as we didn't die, as long as we were there. We kept staring at the roof, but after a while, no bats spotted, Mark and I went back inside.

Sarah

When my grandma was 15 she cut off all her hair. She didn't do it so she could have a stylish twenties bob. She did it in the tool shed with a pair of pruning shears. It took me years to get the real story -- and even then I had to infer most of it -- but I finally came to understand that she'd hacked her hair off to punish herself. She'd gotten in a fight with her little brother who'd then gone wandering off in the fields near their house and been struck by lightning. When she'd picked up the pruning shears, she'd thought he was dead; she didn't know he was just unconscious, and that he'd wake up and be fine, that he'd grow up to marry, have five children, and teach math to kids (including my mom and most of my cousins) at the high school in town for 40 years.

Some stories in my family were told over and over. Family gatherings were like lotto games, the spinning machine full of stories leaping round and round, vying to be plucked out and told. Other stories, though, like Grandma's hair, were never plucked out because they were never spinning with the rest to begin with. I only discovered them because the old photo albums I looked through every time I was at my grandma's house turned up puzzles, like Grandma's beautiful hair, down to her waist, suddenly disappearing.

The summer I was 14 was the last summer we spent at Grandma Douglas's house. She would die the next winter. She was healthy right up to the day of her stroke, though, so the two weeks that summer were just like always, with my family driving down from Salt Lake, joining all my aunts and uncles and cousins, all of us descending on the house in Randolph, Utah.

On our first afternoon there the adults were napping and lounging around after a big lunch -- we'd collectively scarfed down a huge tray of Grandma's famous hot dog sandwiches (bologna was too expensive, so she bought cheap hot dogs and ground them up in her food processor to make sandwich spread) and three whole peach pies, made with peaches straight from her trees. The meal hadn't tired us kids, though, and we decided it was time for a game.

No new board games had crossed the threshold of the house since Aunt Jessie, the baby, went off to college in the late 70s, and while a few of the games were standards like *Monopoly* -- some of the others were old games none of our friends had ever heard of -- *Home on the Range*, *Authors*, *Flingo*. Even though I had begun to cringe at my Randolph cousins' awful haircuts or the way they said things like "I seen it," playing the old games still fortified us all together inside a world of Douglasness.

That afternoon the game choice was delegated to me, and I trotted down the hallway to pick a good one. Opening the closet for the first time in months, I was delighted at my new perspective. I'd gone from 5 feet to 5'6" in six months, and as awkward as it made me feel, I was excited to be looking eye-level at the upper shelves. I knew I'd played every game in there, but I began digging around on the top shelves just because I could.

I pulled out the old *Monopoly* game, *Jots and Tittles* (the Mormon version of *Trivial Pursuit* with questions about scriptures and church history), and stacks and stacks of card games, building a haphazard pile on the floor. Then from the back of the top shelf, I pulled out a pale blue box. It was about the size of the *Boggle* box, big enough to

hold a small game cube of some sort and a timer, and excited at the possibility of a game I hadn't seen or that I had at least forgotten, I pulled the lid off.

There was no game cube. There were photographs, an entire box of them, yellowed black and white pictures of different sizes. I thought I'd seen all the family pictures a hundred times by now, and I felt a stir of excitement. I wondered how it had gotten tucked away up there. I popped the lid back on and shoved the box under my arm and decided I'd look through them that night. I crammed the mess I'd made back onto the shelves, keeping *Authors* in hand, and dashed back to the family room.

Later, after the younger kids had been put to bed, I sat up downstairs, occupying the far corner of the couch under the reading lamp. It was the second year I'd been allowed to stay up with the adults and older cousins, and I wanted to feel rich with maturity, but instead felt uncomfortably aware of everything about myself: was I laughing at jokes too loudly? Should I be saying more? Did they really want me around, or was I a pain? I wondered every few minutes if I should go to bed or if that would seem stranger than me staying up. I pulled my bare feet up under me and laughed quietly when the time seemed right.

The family room's big windows were thrown wide open. Grandma's house was the only one on the block with a garden instead of weeds, and she always watered in the evening, so the thick vitality of the sprinkler on the earth, the crispness of burning citronella, and loud cricket song poured in. The sunset was long over, but the red hills around the house seemed to absorb the sky's brilliant pinks and golds before they faded to lavender and just before dark, to smoky green. Even in the dark, I felt like I could feel

the hills' glow. They seemed more like living beings than inert rocks, and in my adolescent discomfort I felt more connected to them than to my boisterous family.

Some of the aunts and uncles began trailing off to bed, and when the conversation fractured into groups here and there, I took the box of photos from the spot where I'd stashed it next to the couch. One by one, touching them as lightly as I could, I began to look through them. The pictures were all old, and most of the faces I recognized: Grandma as a little girl – her cheeks so fat you could hardly see her little eyes; her parents, always looking so serious, her mother's hair pulled back in a tight bun, her father's slicked back smooth against his head; her older brother Arlen, always athletic looking, her younger brother Clyde, a baby and then a boy with freckles and buck teeth. In all the pictures, though, there was another girl, older than both my grandma and Clyde. I didn't recognize her. She had brown hair to my grandma's blonde, and at every age her cheeks weren't round; they were smooth planes on her square face, leaving hardly anything to look at but her big eyes.

Grandma was still up, leaning back in her chair at the table, her yellow-flowered nightgown tented around her body. She was listening to Aunt Jessie and laughing while stirring a glass of warm milk, something she drank every night before bed. I went and stood beside her at the table, waiting for a pause in the conversation. It was long in coming, but finally she looked up at me, and I leaned in, delicately holding the picture. "Grandma, who's this girl?"

She took the photo in her hands, handling it far less gingerly than I did, "Where did you find this photo?"

"There was a little box in the game closet. It was full of pictures."

“Bring the box here and let me see,” she said flatly. “Just pull over a folding chair from the wall.” She scooted her chair and made room for me at the table next to her. Aunt Jessie and Uncle Arlen began their own conversation.

Grandma took the blue box and sifted through the pictures. “I didn’t even remember some of these photos existed.” She exhaled heavily.

I still held other pictures with the girl in my hand. “So Grandma,” I said again, showing her another of the photos, “this girl’s in all of the pictures.” I paused, waiting for her to say something. Finally I weakly suggested, “Was she one of your friends?”

“Oh, no. No, that’s not one of my friends.” She held her breath for a moment. “That’s my sister. Sarah.” She took the other pictures from my hand and set them on the table in a stack without looking at them. “I guess you haven’t seen pictures of her.”

I had never heard the name Sarah before. In all the other photos – Grandma’s wedding, Grandma graduating from high school, Grandma everywhere – there was no Sarah. Why hadn’t I known about Sarah? I felt like I must have sounded stupid even asking.

“Oh,” was all I said. Grandma joined Aunt Jessie and Uncle Arlen’s conversation, and I sat there beside her in embarrassed silence, trying to laugh when everyone was laughing but feeling like I was faking adulthood badly and that they all pitied me and my act.

Slowly everyone drifted off to bed, leaving, at last, only Grandma and me.

“Well, my dear. It looks like we ought to turn in for the night. We’ve lots to do tomorrow.” I wanted to ask more about Sarah, but I didn’t. I just got up along with her and walked down the hallway to our bedrooms. I was working through sentences in my

head, trying to think how to say something, anything. Finally I mumbled, "I didn't know you had a sister, Grandma."

My grandma had a habit of touching her face when she was uncertain – how many eggs in this recipe? Hand to cheek. Should I put all the girls in the laundry room or is it best if they sleep in the rooms with their parents? Finger alongside nose – and as she started to say something back to me, she moved her hand toward her mouth. But she stopped herself and lowered it back down to her side. "Well, she moved away from home when I was just a little older than you and she wasn't around much after that." We kept walking side by side down the hall. Her voice deepened, "She passed on years before you were born, so I guess we just haven't talked about her much in recent years." By then we were at the end of the hallway, her bedroom on one side, my family's bedroom just around the corner. She hugged me with her soft arms and chest, and even though my head was now above hers, the smell of ivory soap and dryer sheets, as always with Grandma, surrounded me. Then she kissed my cheek and said goodnight.

In my family's room I tried to fall asleep on my bed of blankets on the floor, but I didn't succeed before my eyes adjusted to the dark, and soon I was looking around at everything in the room, my sleeping brothers, my mother in bed next to my sister, the needlepoint on the wall (Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life). I closed my eyes and thought of Sarah and Grandma. I had imagined myself leaving Utah and my family so many times, growing up to be a National Geographic writer, a Peace Corps volunteer, something other than a person who stayed in Randolph or even Salt Lake. But I couldn't imagine not coming back. All of us, not just us in the bedroom, but the whole family always came back. Sure my parents had divorced and my dad wouldn't ever be

here at Grandma's house Randolph again, but even he was still around. No one and nothing really left, even the things on the walls had always been just where they were. Sarah had left, though. Sarah, my great grandparents, my Grandma – who had done something that made Sarah belong in the box and not the albums?

The next day instead of playing *Watson and Holmes* with the other kids, I helped Grandma make lunch – deviled eggs, carrot sticks, jell-o, and ham sandwiches. Peeling carrots while my grandma peeled boiled eggs I cleared my throat. “Grandma?” My voice quivered and I talked quickly to push through it. “Will you tell me some stories from when you were little?”

“Stories! You were always the one to ask! Well, let’s see here.” She finished peeling the eggs and began cutting them in half and separating the yolks. “I guess you’re probably wondering about me and Sarah since you’ve already heard plenty of stories about me and Arlen and Clyde.” She talked quickly, as if talking about Sarah were nothing, her hands moving precisely from one egg to the next. “Well, we used to play around the house together. Sarah was great at thinking up games. But the thing I remember most about Sarah was that she was so popular with all the other kids.” She sliced through egg after egg.

“All the boys wanted to dance with her at church dances. I remember being a few years younger than you, sitting at one of the tables -- no boys to be seen anywhere near me! -- watching her trotting around.” Her fingers dug around in the eggs, pulling out the yolks.

“Arlen used to make fun of her for spending so much time on how she looked – her hair and clothes, you know. But I begged her to do me up all the time. And the time

I'm thinking of I was just about your age and oh, you've seen the pictures, my hair was straight as can be, but I asked Sarah to curl it for me. So she heated up the curling iron on the stove and started curling my hair. I don't know where her mind was, but my hair was singed as can be when she got through with it. I think some of the boys might've danced with me if I hadn't of smelled like burnt hair!" She took her hands from the eggs and rested them on the cupboard.

I laughed and smiled the way I always did for Grandma when she was telling me something she thought was funny. I was afraid to ask more -- Grandma had a different way of seeing things, and things my parents thought were fine weren't fine by Grandma, like the time I brought in a bouquet of flowers from her garden without asking and spent the afternoon in the bedroom crying after my scolding. She could go from soft to hard in a second. It made me nervous and careful around her. But after a moment I asked anyway. "Where did she move to when she moved away?"

When Grandma didn't immediately scold me, I slowed my frenzied carrot peeling.

"Well," Grandma paused and took a fork from the drawer and began mashing all the egg yolks into a pulp before going on. "At first she just went up to Salt Lake. She got a job cleaning hotels up there at the Hotel Utah. When we got her first letter home I ran out and told all my friends that my sister had been in an elevator. Isn't that funny?"

I laughed and smiled again. "So did she always live in Salt Lake?"

"Oh, no. She was only in Salt Lake for a year before she moved to Los Angeles."

As far as I had known no one in our family, at least since they crossed the plains in covered wagons, had ever moved outside Arizona or Utah, especially not a woman

alone. Los Angeles seemed especially seedy, a vast, tawdry landscape, all movie studios and smog. Every year the high school choir went there for a choir festival. I would be going there in the spring, and even though I should have been excited because it was my first big trip anywhere, I wished it could have been somewhere else – the east coast, the south, somewhere I'd read great books about. "L.A.?" was all I finally managed to say.

"She moved there after she quit her job in Salt Lake." Grandma turned and pulled the mayonnaise from the fridge, adding a few spoonfuls to the egg yolks. Then she casually said, "We never really saw her much after that."

I waited, thinking she might go on, but she didn't look up from her mixing. Finally, in a low voice I said, "She just didn't come home?"

Grandma paused again, and when she answered all the light trilling from her voice was gone. "Well, funny thing, I say. A woman who goes off on her own in every instance I've ever seen has found herself in trouble." She held my eyes for a long moment, then said, "Well that's about enough about that. I think we've got enough carrots now. If you really want to help out you could start setting the table."

I silently set the table.

I didn't ask any more questions about Sarah, and I didn't look at the Sarah pictures again until the last day of our visit. As everyone was loading up the cars, though, with my journal in hand, I slipped into the family room where the box of photos had been sitting beside the couch, untouched since the night Grandma and I had looked at them. I could hear my heartbeat, my blood pounding in my ears like trash can lids clanging. I bent down as if I were tying my shoe and opened the box, grabbing the first

picture off the top and sliding it between the pages of my journal before quickly replacing the lid and walking back to help with luggage.

At home in my bunk that night, pen in hand so that it would look like I was writing in my journal if anyone walked in, I looked over Sarah again and again. In the photo I had taken she was close to my age, but probably a little older, and she was standing alone in front of the old house my Grandma grew up in (its crumbling structure was down the street a few blocks from the house we always visited). Her hair was pulled up loosely, a few curls falling near her cheeks. She wore a light-colored cotton dress with full sleeves, the breeze catching both the skirt and the sleeves and sending them slightly westward. She was smiling with her lips pressed together. I heard my mother in the hallway and tucked the picture away in the pages of my writing.

At the end of that next January, Grandma Douglas died. Everyone was there for the funeral. I walked around the house running my fingers over everything, the handmade doilies, the cuckoo clock on the wall, feeling like touching the things she touched pulled Grandma to me. None of us played any games that visit. After the funeral and pot luck dinner, we packed our things into Uncle Tim's car. We had to get back to school and he had to get back to work, and a friend of my mother's would check in on us while my mom stayed on with the aunts to clean out the house.

Mom was home a few days later. She arrived while I was at school, and when I got home, after a flurry of hugs, I went to our shared bedroom to drop my book bag. On my bunk was a stack of photos, tied in a thin blue ribbon, topped with a hand-written note: "Thought you might like these. Love, Mom." It was the Sarah pictures. My stomach seized at the thought that my mother knew about the picture I'd been hiding.

At the bottom of the stack was an old square envelope with Grandma's address on it. I flipped it over, and crossing the spot where the envelope had been ripped open was an address "Sarah Anderson, 131 Allen Drive, #3, Alhambra, CA 91801." The card inside had a silver dove on the front, and inside it read, "December 13, 1964. Dear Alice, Peace and Love and Happy Holidays. My thoughts are with you and your family always. Much love, Sarah." Her handwriting was beautiful, that old fashioned smooth-and-even-flowing kind I was used to seeing in old library books or on the back of the oldest family pictures. I felt a little scared running my fingers over the loops of her letters, feeling the grain of the paper she had handled. I felt like touching her things and looking into her face, the dead and wayward Sarah might seep into me.

That night after dinner everyone else went off to watch television, but I stayed in the kitchen and to help my mom do the dishes. I took a wet plate from her hands, which were cased in yellow rubber gloves to protect her self-done manicure, and said, as if it were the smallest of things to me, "Thanks for the present."

"Grandma told me last summer that you'd asked about Sarah." She handed me another wet dish.

"Yeah," was all I said, feeling flushed. I had so many more questions, and my mom would tell me anything – she always did -- but I felt childish, like a snooping character from a teen mystery. We washed and dried the rest of the dishes together talking about school and television.

That night I was in my bunk with my clip lamp on (my little sister Anna already asleep in the bunk above me), reading my scriptures. We always read them together as a family for a few minutes after dinner, but I'd also been reading ten minutes on my own,

timed on my bedside clock, every night since I started seminary in 9th grade. The hour of “released time” I spent every day in seminary class at the church building across the street from the school had felt strange at first -- singing hymns and studying scriptures during the middle of the day with a mixed bag of kids from school, as if it were just another class like biology or gym -- but I’d gotten used to it. I was eight minutes into my Book of Mormon reading when my mom came in to get ready for bed.

“Where are you reading?” she asked.

“Alma 5,” I said, putting my finger in the page, “the part about ‘Have ye received his image in your countenances.’”

“Ah, one of my favorites,” she said, leaning into my bunk (the middle of the triple bunk, her on the bottom, Anna on the top). “Except it always made me feel a little bit like if was having an ugly day it was because I’d offended God,” she winked at me.

I smiled and put my scriptures aside. Then, trying to find the right words, I began to feel the same flushed warmth in my cheeks I’d felt earlier that evening. Right words or not, I asked in the most ordinary tone I could, “Mom, why did you think I’d want the Sarah pictures?”

“Ah. I thought you might wonder about that. Well, Grandma told me you’d found the box of pictures, and I know how you like family pictures.” She paused, her pink painted fingernails (chipped, despite the rubber gloves) fiddling with one of the ties of my quilt. “I just don’t think there’s a need to have anything silly like family secrets. So ask me anything you want to know.”

She climbed up onto the bunk. I liked to have her lie beside me; it's how she put me to bed when I was little. But it was cramped, and I still felt flushed as I asked, "Did you know Sarah?"

"I only ever met her once. She came to Thanksgiving the year Janice was born. So I was too little to really remember her now."

"Did she get married and have kids?"

"She had a daughter."

Yet another family member I'd never heard of. I imagined an angry cousin, determined never to talk to my family. I was used to the Douglas warmth, and I didn't like thinking of us as harsh and angry. "Where's her daughter now?"

"She died when she was little."

"Oh," was all I said, and my mom leaned over and began to stroke my hair.

"She drowned in a pool when she was just a toddler. It was before I was born."

"Is her husband still alive?" I asked.

"Well, actually, Sarah never married."

So that was it. She had gotten herself pregnant. I imagined Sarah's face in the picture. Even though her look was blank, I had read myself into it. I was scared by my conjured image of her eyes, terrifyingly reflective of my own. The fear of pregnancy stalked me. Every month while I waited for my period to come I was afraid it had happened to me. It was impossible, I knew how everything worked, but I imagined that sperm had gotten to me in the swimming pool or that I had touched something a boy had handled and then somehow touched myself. I told myself it was crazy, but still I always had a panicky day of crying if I wasn't bleeding on time. Every time I thought I might be

pregnant I had the hope that if it were so I would be run down by a car on my way walking to school. I imagined the car racing up onto the sidewalk, and I felt relieved.

After a second of silence, I asked, almost whispering, "How did Aunt Sarah die?" Hearing myself add aloud the Aunt to Sarah's name alarmed me. Maybe I wasn't supposed to call her Aunt. She sounded so close to us suddenly.

My mom still stroked my hair, and I leaned into her chest. Not looking at her made this all easier. "As far as I know, she drank herself to death. That's the most I ever heard. Whether that means she died from alcohol poisoning or just got sick and old faster because she drank I don't know." I had never been near alcohol. I didn't know anyone in my family had ever had even one drink. I could hear Grandma Douglas warning my mom about alcohol by telling her that Sarah had drunk herself to death. I imagined her followed it up by saying "just goes to show God catches up with you," in the way she always had when she thought someone got their just desserts.

After another minute of my mom quietly stroking my hair I said, "I have a test tomorrow. I ought to get to sleep."

My mom kissed my forehead. "Should I turn off the lamp?"

"I still have another two minutes to go."

"Alrighty, then."

She climbed down into her bunk, and I finished my reading and then turned off the lamp myself. In the dark, I closed my eyes and hoped that if I held perfectly still sleep would seize me. But it didn't. I thought of Sarah, her billowing dress and enigmatic smile blazing in my mind, and I felt afraid. I was afraid I was the different one. Why was I always thinking about getting out of Utah? Why had I been looking at

that picture of Sarah for months? Why did I trace my fingers over her script? I wished it could be last summer and we could all be playing *Authors* together. It would have made me feel like a Douglas, like my place in the photo albums was permanent.

In a few weeks I would be with the school choir in Los Angeles, where Sarah had hidden herself away and died. In the weeks between my mother's gift and the trip, I came home from school every day, and after throwing my bag and coat down on my bunk, closed the door most of the way (we never closed it all the way unless we were changing, and then only for a few seconds), then I quietly opened the wooden jewelry box where I'd stowed Sarah's pictures and letter. Each day I stood there looking at the smooth planes of her face and the dust of Randolph in photo after photo, following her handwriting with my finger, thinking of her and her life, feeling guilty for the arousal I felt at the thought of her dark life. Holding the artifacts, I felt the satisfied weight of a secret – I knew about Sarah. I never took the pictures and card and sat down to look over them. I always stood, my hands holding them just above the jewelry box, poised to drop them back in and act as if I was hunting for earrings if anyone came through the door. I moved my eyes back and forth over her old address and thought of myself in her city, on her street, which I'd found in the atlas in the school library.

By the time I was packing for the choir trip, digging out shorts and t-shirts from the back of my drawers where they'd been stored all winter, I had become so attached to the Sarah artifacts that I wrapped them in a t-shirt and shoved them in the bottom of my duffel bag. I imagined sending the girls I'd share the hotel room with off for the night and then looking at the pictures in the open. A few hours after I finished loading the rest of my stuff in the bag, my mom dropped me off at the school where the charter bus was

waiting. A few parents were coming along as chaperones, but my mom had thrown away the chaperone slip with a laugh. “Parents get so worked up about this stuff. Like I think you’re going to get on a bus and become some wild, rebellious teenager. All of you kids are so good. It’s just like Joseph Smith said, teach them correct principles and let them govern themselves.”

I waved goodbye and got on the bus. I was one of the first kids there, and I found an empty row in the middle, put my bag above me and put my pillow up against the window, settling in. The other kids trickled onto the bus, and by a few minutes to ten, most of the seats were taken. I was lucky enough to still have my two seats to myself, and I leaned against the window, my feet up, reading the chapter in *Jane Eyre* where Jane sits in the window seat, awkwardly watching Rochester and his elegant guests. I looked up from the book just in time to see Mark Daly climb on the bus, brushing his brown hair off his forehead and looking up the aisle. I suddenly felt my heart in my throat. Unlike Rochester, he *was* handsome. I looked back at my book immediately.

When I wasn’t looking at my music in choir, I was looking at Mark Daly. Every time he raised his hand to move his hair off his forehead, a habit of his I found absolutely gorgeous, I couldn’t take my eyes off the delicate movement of his fingers brushing across the brown waves. He caught me staring at him all the time. In choir that morning he had caught me staring and instead of looking away as usual, he had winked at me. He was a year older than me and popular, and I was afraid he was making fun of me. I hadn’t taken my eyes off my music for the rest of class. I’d seen him again that afternoon – he was leaving his seminary class just as I was going into mine – and even though he’d smiled, the awful embarrassment had rushed over me again.

He walked down the aisle toward me. I was reading the same sentence over and over, not processing a word of it, when he stopped at my row. "Mind if I take this seat?" He brushed his fingers past his falling hair.

I moved my feet and sat up. "Sure. I mean no. I mean I don't mind." My face tingled again. He took his backpack and jacket off, his shirt stretching across his chest as he moved. I bored my eyes into *Jane Eyre*, but I could see him lift his arms to put his bag overhead in my peripheral vision, and my stomach swirled. There were other seats still open. He was sitting by me on purpose.

"Honors English reading?" he asked, settling into his seat. My tongue felt thick, gummed to the bottom of my mouth. I took too long to answer, and he filled the pause with, "We read it last year too. I liked it."

"I'm not so far along," I finally said.

He adjusted in the seat and his shoulder touched mine. He stayed in that position. I felt a warm rush of feeling – some hormone jetting through me. I moved a little so we weren't touching and gave him a half smile.

"So have you been to Los Angeles before?" I asked, and instantly felt stupid. Of course he had, he'd been in choir last year too.

"Yeah, I went with the choir last year. It was awesome."

"Cool," I said.

The overhead lights turned off as the bus pulled out of the school parking lot.

"Is this your first time?" He moved his legs, spreading out, and his knee touched mine. I left my knee just where it was.

"I've never been to California, so yep." I wanted Mark Daly to like me. If Mark Daly liked me, it would mean I was pretty, that I was attractive, that I was everything I wanted to be and didn't think I was. I looked back at my book, ridiculously, because it was too dark to read.

"You'll ruin your eyes," he said.

I laughed a little too much and put the book down. "So tell me about the trip last year," I said.

Our knees were still touching. He began to talk and I hardly heard what he said. I watched his face move, his hair resting right above his brown eyes, then falling and being lifted with that quick flick of his hand. I could smell him, a mix of Irish Spring and Old Spice deodorant (the same kind my dad used). I wanted to nuzzle my face into his neck and breathe it in. He talked and talked, and I laughed and answered, and slowly the violent swirl of my nervousness calmed. Still, my leg burned where his touched mine. Holding my leg so still next to his, my muscles began to stiffen. It got later and later, and we both started to yawn. The bus was beginning to quiet down.

"I think I might try to fall asleep," I said and adjusted for the first time, moving so that I could prop my pillow up next to my head. My leg rejoiced at the shift, but the spot where his knee had been touching mine felt suddenly cold, bereft of the pressure of contact.

"I forgot to bring a pillow," he said.

"Do you want to use mine?" I said, pulling it from behind me and handing it to him, thinking mid-move how girly and desperate giving him my pillow must have looked.

“I’ll share it with you,” he said. “Put it in the middle here and we can both use it.” He propped it between us, and we both leaned into it. My arm, shoulder, and head felt his body through the pillow, and I tingled all up and down. The purr of the bus and the darkness of the road lulled me, and even with the tingle of Mark Daly, I fell asleep. I woke up later in the night when the pillow shifted. I let my head fall onto Mark’s shoulder, and in the atmosphere of his smell I fell asleep again.

I woke up with a line of sun burning through the window onto my face. My head was still on Mark Daly’s shoulder, and realizing it, I sat up, and wiped my mouth quickly, afraid I might have drooled. I was overjoyed to find my face and his shoulder dry. He looked like he had been awake for a while.

Through the windows the terrain was still empty desert, not city, but there were Joshua trees and types of brush I wasn’t used to seeing. We had to be getting close.

“Do you know how far we are?” I asked.

“Another few hours,” he said. Then he smiled, “Feel free to use my shoulder again if you’re still tired.” I shrugged shyly.

We talked little that morning, but his shoulder and arm and leg brushed mine again and again, hour after hour. Finally we hit the hills outside the city, and then, from above, we came down into it, the sprawl of it everywhere, the brown icing of smog hovering just as I had expected. I wondered how Sarah had gotten here. Had she driven? Had she come with a man or alone?

By the time we rolled into the hotel parking lot, I was anxious to get off the bus, even with Mark beside me, but we waited for 20 minutes while the choir director went in to get our room assignments. When he returned, we all filed off the bus and headed up to

our rooms. Mark and I rode up in the same elevator. I got off on the 5th floor. He got off on the 6th.

By noon we were back on the bus and on our way to our competition. I sat with the three girls who were sharing my room. Mark was three rows back. I held my head just so, imagining him looking at it from behind. And on and on the day went, us not talking, but me moving and acting and speaking with him in mind. I felt outside my body, like I was watching myself in a movie, and I was relieved to get back to the hotel that night and hide away in my room. The burden of acting tired me, and when everyone walked down the block for a movie, I said I was going to stay in to read *Jane Eyre*, but I was thinking of Sarah's pictures in my bag – eager for the chance to take them out and look at them.

Back in the room, I took out *Jane Eyre*, and so I wouldn't be a liar, began to read a few pages. Jane had just discovered the trick of Rochester's gypsy disguise when the phone rang. It startled me, and I nervously picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Mark. I was hoping you were in."

I felt myself smiling stupidly, hugely, uncontrollably. "Yeah, I didn't really feel like a movie."

"Me neither."

Silence.

"They were giving out cookies at the desk," Mark said. "I grabbed a couple. I thought you might want one."

"That sounds really good," I said.

"I'll come bring you one, then."

"You're sure?"

"What, you're afraid I'm going to be busted by a chaperone or something?"

I laughed a little. "Not if you're not. Besides, what are they going to do? Get mad at us for eating cookies?"

"See you in a minute," he said.

A few minutes later Mark and I were sitting on the bed together, eating our cookies and talking about the day, the festival, the other kids in the choir. I had never been alone with a boy. Every gesture I made seemed awkward to me, and my voice sounded forced and too-bubbly. Finally we both said nothing, and I looked at my book, then quickly up at him and away again. He leaned in toward me. I knew what was happening, and my limbs felt numb, my stomach viciously whirring. I closed my eyes and the warm smell of him grew close and then his lips touched mine. They were soft at first, and then they pulled away and came in again, more forcefully this time, his mouth opening against mine, warm, wet, alarming.

I could taste the cookie from his mouth. I opened my mouth slightly, afraid of doing the wrong thing. His arm moved around my shoulder and, with his body against mine, I could hear practically nothing but the metallic clanging of blood in my ears. We kissed and kissed. I pulled away and laughed after a minute, but he just smiled and leaned in again. His hands began to rub my back up and down. I was sure I wasn't supposed to be thinking mechanically through my actions, but I was. And even with my eyes closed and my face pressed up against his, I was listening for the key in the door,

horrified at the thought of my roommates walking in. And I was thinking of how I smelled, how the cookies in my mouth must taste, the strangeness of Mark Daly's tongue.

His hands moved through my hair and to my shoulders, then up and down my arms. I felt myself begin to stiffen, a panic at the thought of him touching me any more. There was a line – kissing yes, anything else, no. I'd heard the talk at church every year since I turned 12, and with seminary now I heard it even more often. But I steeled myself against the panic. I didn't want to look inexperienced and stupid. Besides, Mark knew the line as well as I did. His lips still moving against mine, his hand moved to my waist, holding it. Then it moved up my side, slowly, all the way back up to my shoulder. As it passed the side of my breast I felt my throat tighten. He moved his hand down again, then slowly up again, this time moving it in just a little so that it rubbed over my breast. I felt my face grow hot, and I felt suddenly stiff, like I had grabbed an electric fence and couldn't let go. I knew exactly when I was supposed to stop, and somehow I hadn't done it in time. I pulled my lips away from his.

"You okay?" he smiled and looked beautifully right into my eyes. I nodded back weakly. "It's not a big deal," Mark said. "I'm not going to do anything else." But I still didn't move. "It feels good, right?"

I swallowed to make sure my vocal cords would work. "Yes."

"Don't worry." He reached his hand up and touched my face. "Come here. Just let me hold you."

I leaned back into him and we kissed again. Mark Daly, kissing me – I couldn't believe it was happening. I wanted to be fine, to be good at this, to know what I was doing. I kept kissing him, trying to act as if I was all those things, minute after minute.

His hand began to move again, from rubbing my back to reaching around to caress my side and then my stomach. I began to stiffen and stopped myself. Nothing was going to happen. It was going to be fine. Then his hand moved up to my chest again. I didn't stop him this time. He moved his hand over one breast and then the other again and again. I wanted to pull away. I wanted to cry. I thought of my mother expecting me to govern myself and how disappointed she would be, how if she knew she'd never think of me the same again. No one would. As he moved against me, my ears hurt with the heavy pounding of blood, my head ached with reproaches, with fear of him moving his hand anywhere else. I wanted to stop. But I breathed slowly and kept my body loose. After a few more minutes he slowed down, then stopped and leaned back from me.

"Who knew you were so sexy," he said touching my face. I smiled, but my whole body was a cavern of recrimination. I didn't want to be sexy. It sounded horrible and dirty.

"Everyone is going to be back soon," I said. "You should probably go back to your room."

"Probably," he leaned in and gave me another kiss. "See you tomorrow then," he said, standing up. I walked him to the door and as he walked out he gave my hand a squeeze. I smiled.

I closed the door behind him, and the loathing clamoring through me broke through the surface. I went in the bathroom, closed the door, and watched myself cry, letting the tears run down my face and splatter onto my shirt. I was everything I wasn't supposed to be. And for what? So I could feel grown up? So I could think that I was pretty? So Mark Daly would like me? I was shallow and stupid. I had wanted to stop,

and I hadn't. Why had I forced myself to let him keep going? I wanted to be messed up. It was sick of me. I looked at my ugly self, my face red and puffy, my nose running. I wanted to cut my hair off. I bit the inside of my cheeks hard, till tears sprang up in my eyes again and I could feel my ears burning. Then I wiped my face and left the bathroom.

From the bottom of my bag I pulled out the t-shirt with Sarah's artifacts in it. I untied the little blue ribbon around them, and then took my favorite picture in my hand, her sleeves sweetly billowing in the wind, her eyes looking blankly out at me. I looked at my hands and I made them rip it in half, tears running down and dripping off my cheeks again. I made them rip it in half again and again and again until my lap was covered with tiny scraps and there was nothing left to ever look at again. Then I got up and carried the scraps to the bathroom and flushed them down the toilet. The rest I wrapped back up in the t-shirt, saving for other days, and shoved them back in the bottom of my bag. I turned off the light and climbed into bed, pretending to sleep when my roommates came back from the movie, talking quietly not to wake me.

Years later, after I had spent many more evenings with Mark Daly and others, had torn up Sarah's pictures one by one, and had grown up and moved across the country by myself, I was in Los Angeles for work. I was heading home to Salt Lake for a weekend with my mom the next morning, but I had another night at the hotel first. Heading back after my last meeting of the day, I drove past my exit, my mind silently following the lovely arcs of Sarah's handwritten address, traced into my memory so long before. I'd never been there, but I'd furtively looked at maps of Alhambra throughout high school, and it didn't take long to find.

I parked beneath a bluish streetlamp that circled me in a ring of light, and I took in the Mission style apartment building, 131 Allen Drive, its white stucco crumbling, mud and water stains climbing halfway up the first floor, scraggly weeds littered with beer cans and cigarette butts filling its flower beds. I took a step toward it, and a close-by dog barked. My nerves splintered, and I froze. Raising only my eyes, I looked to the third floor windows. I halfway expected to see a vision of Sarah and her mysterious smile looking down at me. I saw nothing but the dark window.

Sarah had at least been honest and left, clean and clear, while I'd torn up pictures in private and stayed a Douglas year after year, sitting in church and flying home to play board games I'd tired of. How foolish of me to envy her, though, and how indulgent of me to come here. I bit my cheeks, a habit I'd never broken, then turned and climbed back in my car.

Crush

I don't think it's silly, Brooke. You know enough about him to have a crush on him, and who knows, maybe there really is something to it. Didn't your sister come up with some term for this when she wanted to put those Johnny Depp posters up over her bed? The celebrity crush? It's not even that bad. He's not a movie star, so you're one better there. I think it's normal. Don't worry. I mean, you know about me and the whole Steve Young thing. Well, actually, I'm sure there's plenty you don't know. It's so embarrassing. But I guess it's the kind of psychotic thing you can laugh about later. Your crazy mother, ha ha. And I'm sure you'll feel a lot better about yourself when I'm through!

When it first started I didn't even really know who he was. I'd heard about him, I guess because he was playing football at BYU back then. The first time I remember really thinking anything about him, your dad and I were driving home to Arizona from Salt Lake after Christmas. It was snowing, and I remember exactly where we were, between Monticello and Moab. We were listening to the Holiday Bowl on the radio. Mark was in the back asleep, and I was holding you -- you were just a couple of months old. I was sort of asleep, sort of awake. Well, then your dad shakes me and says "Laura, Laura, listen."

There were just a few seconds left in the game, and BYU was down, and that's when he made this amazing play. I don't remember if he ran or threw or what, but that game ended up being called the Miracle Bowl because they won, just barely barely. Ask people about it, they'll still tell you. Winning that game was one of the things that brought him out as a major player. But anyway, I was half-asleep, and I hear these last

couple of minutes, and in my brain I say, "you are going to know this guy one day." And the feeling was "knowing is more than just knowing." You understand what I'm saying?

When you're asleep and awake you think all these weird things. But, I had this thought, this feeling. It sounds so bizarre, but I always remembered it. Anyway, I never really paid attention to him because why would I? I was married. But you know, ten, eleven years later, after your dad and I got divorced, he was with the 49ers, and I just sort of kept track of him. I mean he was tall, dark, with those blue eyes -- he just looked like someone who belongs in our family -- and he was single and Mormon, and I'd had that thought. So I kept track of him. The thing you have to remember about me was how young I was when your dad and I got divorced. Barely thirty-four. Steve Young was a little younger than me, but honestly and truly the way I thought of it was that he could have been the father of my last three kids, no problem. You and Mark, well, he was a little young, but the last three. And regardless of age, you all looked like him enough that we could definitely pass.

So the second year after we moved up to Centerville, you remember, when Mark came back to live with us from your dad's and I was working in the Viewmont cafeteria. Well, Viewmont was doing so bad in their football that year, and I had heard that he had this foundation, Forever Young, that did a ton of stuff, I really didn't even know what at the time, just lots of stuff. So I wrote him a letter. Something like, "this high school team is doing terrible, it'd really help if you'd come talk to them." I worked at the high school, right? I had a vested interest. Plus, if I could have guessed what his foundation did I would definitely guess something about kids and sports. I felt like an idiot writing the letter, though. I knew it was crazy, but maybe he'd come and I'd meet him, so what if

it was crazy. Obviously nothing happened, and that was that. Well, then about a year later I wrote him another letter -- "They're going to fire the coach, and you ought to come and do something." So stupid. And nothing happened again.

My next ploy, I don't even know who I heard this from, but I found out he was a contributor to the Rodger's Memorial Theater. He was listed in the program as the sponsor of the new upholstery for the seats. Not that he was from Centerville or anything, but he was in Utah a lot and he must have known people. You know the Stephen's Hot Cocoa people? You remember, they had your choir group sing at their Christmas party that one year. You must have been a junior? Anyway, I'm pretty sure he knew them. I don't know how, just rich people knowing rich people. Same with the Rodger's Memorial people. So anyway I had this idea. Anna -- she was, let me remember, nine maybe, and wanted to be in drama really bad, and I was pretty sure the lady who ran Rodger's knew Steve Young. So I went there and said my daughter really needs to be in drama classes, but I can't afford to pay, so can I clean your house as an exchange. I thought maybe he'd be around sometime, at their house, and we'd meet, nice and casually. I'd be dusting and he'd just walk in -- you know, think I was pretty, fall instantly in love with me. Ha!

But Anna really did want to be in drama and I really didn't have the money to pay for it, so that wasn't a lie, just not the whole reason. Well, I paid for the first month of classes, sixty dollars or something, but then Anna decided she didn't like it, so I had to let that one go.

All this time I was thinking that if he just met me... It's like *While You Were Sleeping*, where Sandra Bullock is in love with that guy she doesn't really know. She

says the perfect line, you know deep down if they knew you, if they really, really knew you, they'd love you. That's exactly how you feel. Isn't that how you feel?

It's just a matter of making that happen. Get to know me. I'm not a scary weird person, even though I may seem like it with these letters. Really, I don't think there are really too many ladies out there as great as me. Well, you know me. All the parenting and communication things you know I've worked on. I've studied. I've really developed that. What you see is what you get with me. No hidden agendas. I'm different.

So anyway, after that I just went along and didn't do anything for a while, but I kept thinking about his foundation, and then I came up with a new idea. There are so many single ladies, if they could stay home with their children until their children went into kindergarten, I think you could give no greater gift to the children of the world. Obviously I felt that plight a lot with you kids, even after you were in school, and at that point, anyone that I met that had any money at all, I would have talked to about that. Actually, I wanted to have someone in government get some kind of a bill, like if there were businessmen who would be willing to help support single women, they could count it as a deductible. Knowing that he already had an organization, I would have liked to have made that aware to him.

So I wrote him another letter all about that, and one weekend your Aunt Sandy and I took the address we had for his foundation in Salt Lake and drove down to try to find it. I put on a nice pair of slacks. Do you remember that sort of maroon pair? You told me to wear them to parent teacher conferences a couple of times. Oh, and this is hilarious -- Sandy showed up in a long black skirt and this very fitted red sweater -- and that was after she'd gotten her breast implants, so you can just imagine.

The whole thing I was thinking was "I'll go in there, I don't care." Even if it was embarrassing, if there was some way I might meet him or at least find something out about him... So we drove all around down by Orange Street, the industrial district. We kept thinking we'd missed it and driving around and around this warehouse area, all these loading docks and stuff, all these men who looked sort of like mechanics, you know, in those jumpsuit things, just hanging out on the docks. I'm sure they noticed these two silly ladies who kept going by again and again. And meanwhile, the sun goes down and it's getting darker and darker. Well, in the end we figured out the address was just a P.O. Box or something. After we'd spent all this time. Ridiculous. So I just ended up mailing it.

It's funny. I think Aunt Sandy was in love with him too. Actually, I think all my friends probably were. They were all single, and he's a big catch. Only the most beautiful Mormon man ever, plus always on TV so all your girlfriends could watch and wish they were you. Seriously, though, never once did any of them tell me it was a bad idea. They all said, yeah, great, try this, do it, do it. They were all over it. I was just the only one of us brave enough to actually do anything. I know what you're thinking -- we're all crazy! Me and my pocketful of crazy friends. Well you're probably right. What can I say? I mean, It's different with you. I'm sure your friends aren't telling you to drive around and try to find him. I'm not either, really. I'm just saying it's okay to think about it. And that maybe... Just that it's not completely crazy.

Anyway, a little bit later Aunt Sandy started playing in the orchestra again, and that's where she met that weirdo tympani player she dated for a while -- what was his name? Don? Dom? Anyway. That's also where she met Arnée. Do you remember her? I

think you met her once or twice. Kind of heavy, but pretty still, kind of puffy brown hair? Well, Arnée had a friend who had played on the football team at BYU with Steve Young, and she said she'd seen him around at this friend's house in Provo in the middle of the week sometimes. So I started driving the hour down to Provo every Tuesday to walk around the neighborhood with her.

I don't know what I thought -- if he could just see me, we'd say hi, we'd get to talking. I kept picturing him standing on this one corner in particular, sort of leaning over the fence, chatting with the neighbor. Which was silly because I don't even know whose house or whose fence it was, but I could just see him being so normal. You know, wearing a windbreaker and jeans. Sort of laughing. And then I'd walk by and we'd of course all say hi.

The whole going down to Provo to walk around just seemed like a little thing I could do, to be working on it. After I'd been going down for a while, Arnée found out that this plot of land with horses was his, and all the horses too. And I remember thinking goll, Jonathan would love those horses. I thought about stuff like that, him and you kids, and how it could work.

The other thing was that I knew that he lived between Provo and San Francisco, and I thought, fine, I'm fine with being alone some of the time. In fact, I probably want to be alone some of the time. Having a bed to myself. And then for you kids too. I thought it would have been great if you didn't have a man around all the time, since you weren't used to that. When he was there, great, and the rest of the time we'd live in this nice house and do our thing. And it'd provide fun vacations for all of us, flying to California all the time. I always wanted to take you guys places. Pack, and plan and all

of that, and we couldn't ever do that when I was married to your dad -- you know, the farthest we ever went was to drive to his family reunions -- and we definitely couldn't after. I actually thought of all the matching luggage we'd have and how the way I roll up shirts would come in so handy.

Well, after three or four months going down every week to see Arnée and walk, I had to stop. It got too cold and the van started to get really unreliable. There was this one time, actually, that I was down in Provo and when I got back to the car after our walk, it wouldn't start. The battery was fine -- it'd make that initial turning over sound -- but then nothing. For a second I thought this is perfect. I'll be stuck here and Steve Young will drive by, see me, and pull over to help. Could it get any better than that? He'd get to feel manly and helpful, ha, and I'd get to show how nice and appreciative I was, and how cool I was with him being a celebrity and whatever. I know. Ridiculous. Well, he didn't come by, obviously, and I finally just ended up calling AAA. What actually happened was that I just kept trying the car and it finally turned on, even before the tow truck came. So we called and told them not to come after all. Oh, funny by the way, Arnée was like "are you sure you want to cancel the tow truck? Maybe the guy will be cute." She was a crazy lady!

Anyway, of course I never heard back from the letter about single ladies, but around then Arnée had another idea. She thought we should go visit Forever Young's main office in San Francisco. Palo Alto, actually. So this time she wrote the letter. She was sure I needed to change my tactic, so it was something to do with Native Americans and genealogy. Arnée said that was a really popular thing at the time, and he'd probably be way more excited about this as an idea. So on a week when you all were gone with

your dad, spring break or something -- oh, I remember actually, he'd just finished his new house and you guys were all moving, helping paint and lay sod and stuff. Anyway, Arnée and I flew out there. Gosh, it was so warm and perfect. The air there, wow, the smell from all the trees, it was just so aromatic. If I could bottle that smell, I'd make millions. I mean, it's beautiful here in spring too. How can you beat that pink tree outside our window? And you always appreciate it more after a cold winter.

Well anyway, we found the building, and it was this sort of really nice glass place, not all glass, but huge windows looking out on all those trees. We parked down the street, and we were just giggling and giggling. I felt kind of stupid, like what am I doing, but also kind of like, well, maybe I'll just walk into that building and there he'll be, waiting for the elevator.

Well, we walked all around the building and inside and sat in the lobby for a while. The funniest thing was there were these brochures there by the elevator with pictures of Steve Young and a bunch of kids sitting on a lawn in a circle, smiling and talking, and he was wearing the kind of wind breaker jacket thing I always pictured him in! I totally took a brochure and thought, hey at least I got a nice picture of him out of this. It was so funny, having this little mini version in my hand. The other thing, I read the brochure a little and realized the Native American genealogy thing was never going to work. Forever Young was all about technology for kids and recreational therapy, and I don't know, it was kind of confusing what it actually did. I guess if you want to do a lot of different good things in the world I'm sure you keep it vague for that reason. Anyway, as I'm sure you can guess, no elevator run-in or anything, and we finally just dropped the letter in the lobby mailbox. Kind of a let down, but really, it was a great trip anyway.

I've thought about the whole Steve Young thing a lot since. Part of it was just that I wanted to be in love with someone. And when there was no one around to be in love with that was safe...who did we even know who was single? The old guys at the pool, all saggy and hairy? Ug. Or Bert at the gas station? I mean he was nice, but no. And everyone else was married. Anyway. With Steve, my heart could be somewhere. Have all that fun of being in love. Not that I thought it was just for fun. I was serious. But he could be this perfect person. With real people, there's always something wrong, but with him, nope, perfect. Brooke, that's the thing, if you finally meet this guy and get to know him you're going to be disappointed, I mean he could be great, but well, that's just how it goes since real people are complicated. I mean, of course that's really better in the end. You're so much more aware than I was when I married your dad. It's going to be different for you. But I'm just saying. Anyway, when I started to try to get over it, I really thought about why I spent so much time thinking about him, and I decided that was mostly what it was about.

I sent Mark and Jonathan to a football camp he had one year, recreational therapy I guess. I don't think they had any idea that I'd ever been Steve Young's stalker or anything or they probably wouldn't have gone. But that was it. No more letters or anything. I'm obviously not doing anything about it anymore. I mean, he's married now. You knew that right? It was in all the papers a couple of years ago. His wife is pretty, blonde, younger than him. They met through friends or something, of course. I almost thought of clipping a picture of them, just as a reminder, and partly because he looked so nice in it, but that just seemed crazy. When he got married, you would think that I might have felt something or thought something, but I didn't. Just nothing. Fine.

The thing is, I really do think that thought I had way back when in the car meant something. When I think about it, holy cow, the secretary that got those letters. Kept on file as a stalker. But then there's a part of me that says, someday he's going to hear my name, and it'll sound a little familiar, a little interesting. He'll be sitting there in his suit at his desk in that glass building and he'll say, Laura Gardner, Laura Gardner, and he'll feel a little warm, like there's something he just can't remember but he knows it's good.

I hardly ever think about him, but if you really want to know what I think, I think my life's not over yet. You never know, twists and turns, how things happen.

Nantucket Newspaper

John Standick was taking me to Nantucket. It was the fall of my sophomore and his senior year at Harvard. We'd been dating a few months. I'd never been on a ferry before, and I had a vision of riding out to the island under the October sunshine, the wind blowing across my skin. I'd look beautiful, and he'd kiss me, and we'd arrive with rosy cheeks and the clinging smell of sea salt. But at Hyannisport he bought tickets for the fast ferry – the one with no outdoor seating. I wanted to grab his sleeve and say “Oh, let's take the slow ferry!” and have him understand and agree, but I stopped myself – how insipid, how childish. I was humiliated by the part of me that made up girlish visions. It was the same part that had memorized maudlin Tennyson poems all throughout high school and then recited them to my friends from church in their basements on Saturday nights when other teenagers were dating. “Mariana in the South.” Mortifying. I wanted to be completely done with it.

The slow ferry was \$14.00; the fast ferry, \$27.50. That alone would have justified the slow ferry in my mind. As John breezily took bills from his money clip and traded them for the tickets, I looked away -- I never watched when he bought things, pretending I hardly noticed. I leaned against the wall, stretching myself out casually, even sexily, I thought. In my skirt and tight sweater I wanted to stand the way I thought a woman would stand.

I had already checked three times, but I unzipped my handbag to check again for the little peach disk with birth control pills inside. It was where it was supposed to be, tucked in with my lipstick in the inner pocket.

At the end of my summer vacation, my mother had taken me to the dermatologist, who had given me the birth control prescription. Every time I was home she took me on rounds, to the salon to get highlights in my blonde hair, to the dentist to get my teeth cleaned and whitened, to the dermatologist for a little something. It wasn't until John pointed it out that I really considered the strangeness in my mother's spending. Since my parents' divorce we'd always been a family who took things out of our grocery cart after ringing them up because the cheese or strawberries brought the total to more than we had, but we'd all had braces, and my mom always found money for a tanning pass.

She'd been sitting in the exam room with me flipping through *Salt Lake Magazine* when the dermatologist said lots of his patients found birth control did great things for their skin. How did I feel about trying it? I glanced over, but my mother didn't look up. She licked her thumb and turned a page, as if she hadn't heard what he'd said.

Sure, I'd said, shrugging, as if to say well, if it's good for my skin . . . But even before I nodded, even before the doctor fully said it, from the first moment I began to grasp what he was going to say, I knew, instantly and completely, that I was going to sleep with John Standick. Little Mormon Me was going to throw everything away on him.

I might marry him, I said to myself every time I thought of sleeping with him, and I tried hard to believe it. I pictured us with waffles in bed in a sunny apartment, or myself alone digging in flowerbeds and looking up from under the brim of my hat to see him walk through our garden gate. Everything might be okay if I married him. The stirrings of hormones still disgusted me a little. In high school I'd hoped to be like Joan of Arc or Julian of Norwich, above it all, and even though it was a relief not to be, I cringed

just a bit when I thought about his hands, my lips. When we were together I sometimes felt a small, dull ache of disgust for myself, for both of us. At the same time, how wonderfully my stomach fluttered when his fingers touched my waist.

Despite the fact that we'd talked about what I'd been embarrassed to hear myself refer to in unexpected church-speak as "my standards," we'd been moving closer and closer to sex since I'd gotten back from summer vacation, to the point where I had panicky thoughts that I would wind up pregnant. It had happened, my mother had told me years before, not looking up from her ironing -- *Christine Hamblin kicked her husband out, but he came back and she let him into the bedroom. She didn't even take her underwear off, but she got pregnant again, so she had to stay with him.*

Maybe the pills didn't mean John and I would have sex. But they did mean I could end my irrational worrying. As the doctor wrote the prescription I looked again at my mother, still devotedly reading her magazine. I hoped she fully believed John and I were chaste companions and that I was still the daughter I'd been when I'd left Centerville, Utah for Harvard a year earlier. A big part of me wished that too, even though I couldn't seem to stop myself from hurtling away. I wanted her to look up so we could exchange a glance that acknowledged the good humor of pure and faithful me taking birth control, but she didn't. She only raised her eyebrows a little, as if she'd just read something interesting, then arranged her expression again, her eyes fixed to the page.

On the ferry dock I watched John's pretty profile as he put his money clip back in his jacket pocket, his hand disappearing, then reappearing to reach for mine. Every step I took was a little step of consent. If I hadn't wanted it, I should have stayed back in

Cambridge. I should have said no to the prescription. I should have said no the first time his hands slipped under my blouse. Walking with him toward the ferry, my fingers helplessly tingled their way to numbness, but I kept my hand in his and tried to mimic his carefree stride as I took step after step.

On the ferry John led us to a seat near the forward windows. “Your first ferry ride! Are you excited?”

“Very,” I said. The feeling began to come back into my fingers.

“Here, you’ll be able to see everything from here,” he said. He had a way of tending to me. His voice would get creamy. He would touch me softly, pettishly. He wanted to take care of me, he had even said aloud. Late after his dorm’s formal in the spring, we’d been walking up the steps to his entryway, my bare arm draped through his tuxedoed one. He’d been tipsy, but I was the one who’d stumbled, the toe of my shoe just missing one of the steps. I’d caught myself with my hands, but not before bloodying my knee. He’d wanted to carry me inside. I wouldn’t let him – *I’m not that small*, I’d protested, and then he’d pulled me close, the faint exotic smell of wine in his voice as he said seriously, *I want to take care of you, Brooke. I mean it.* I felt limp in the face of this vision of our relationship, a little thrill of power at my ability to elicit the reaction but uneasy underneath. I could never say exactly why, even though I felt like I knew somehow, like it was a word on the tip of my tongue. Perhaps it was just that I was too mean, too mannish, to play that part forever. On the ferry, I let his hand on my back lead me to our seats.

It was Thursday mid-day – we’d taken off just after class – and even though the ferry was almost empty he still leaned over to whisper when he said, “Who would have

guessed we'd be running away for weekends together?" His breath felt warm and wet. When he pulled away, my ear felt suddenly cold, and for a wild second I wanted him to whisper in my ear forever so that I'd never again feel anything but warm, wet breath.

"I love being here for all these firsts with you," he said as the ferry began to push through the water. The soothing vibration of his low voice passed through the seat into my body.

I had first seen John Standick in *The Inquirer and the Mirror: Nantucket's Newspaper since 1821*, when I was 15. From our little Utah suburb my mom had taken out subscriptions to the *Inquirer and the Mirror*, the *Vineyard Gazette*, the *Cape Cod Times*, and the *Concord Journal*, all with the idea of scouting out a job managing a bed and breakfast.

Since my parents' divorce she'd needed a job but hadn't ever found one that suited her. Part of the problem was that she didn't really want a job. All of her friends were full-time moms; did being divorced mean her children deserved any less? She was sure it did not. Taking in ironing hadn't been as lucrative as she'd hoped, and the hairnets, pink apron coats, and lazy-eyed, overweight coworkers involved in being a lunch lady had been too humiliating. These days she was cleaning houses -- her knees hurting every night after the day's scrubbing and scraping. The bed and breakfast idea seemed like the perfect escape. She managed our household of six well enough. What other experience could she need?

The Nantucket newspaper was my favorite from the start. I could see us there. We'd live in a white, three-story house with green shutters and a view of the ocean.

We'd grow daffodils. They'd come up just in time for the Daffodil Festival each April – I'd read about it in the paper, and it sounded lovely. I'd buy bread at the market and carry it home in a basket. My mom said she could imagine being the mayor of Nantucket someday. Before she'd dropped out of college to marry my dad she'd had a real thing for political science. We had some concerns, of course. We'd have to take the ferry to church, and the schools were small. But all in all, Nantucket was the place. We could just feel it – a little breathless frenzy when we thought about it that just had to mean something.

The day I first came across John's picture, I was walking home from school when our rusty station wagon pulled up to the stoplight ahead. I heard it as much as I saw it, the worn out brakes yowling as my mom slowed to a stop. She smiled and waved cheerily, her thin wrist flickering back and forth, her curly hair bouncing as she jokingly tipped her head to the side. I waved back half-heartedly. Through the car windows light glinted off our vacuum. Rags and spray bottles filled with pink and blue liquids lay all around it.

"Hey," I said, dropping my backpack onto the floor of the car with the heaviest thud I could manage.

"Hey, Beautiful." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "I'm so sorry I'm late. Your heavy bag!"

I leafed through the mail piled on the seat between us as my mom and I drove off for the round of pick-ups to come, first my brother at the junior high, then my sister and other brother at the elementary school. The black and white German-bible-looking script of *The Inquirer and the Mirror* was followed by a big newsprint headline: "Nantucket

High School Graduates 33.” A little article followed with pictures of each senior, captioned with name, activities, and future college. I began to scan the Nantucket paper like I sometimes did my mother's old yearbooks, looking for the prettiest girl, the best looking boy, the biggest jerk, the loneliest one.

My mom interrupted me partway through the first line of photos. “How much homework do you have tonight?” she said, turning the corner and pulling onto the side street to wait for my sister. I knew what she was getting at, but I was going to make her ask me outright. “Tons,” I said.

I should have cheerfully volunteered to help, but I didn't want to. I tried to talk myself into having pride about being poor -- hard knocks, humble beginnings, etc., etc. None of it helped the shame that bubbled up every time I thought of cleaning a house that might belong to someone from school. They'd see our car outside. They'd see me carrying in the vacuum or a bucket and rags. There was no getting over that.

We drove a few more blocks before she finally said entreatingly, “I have a new house I need to clean by tomorrow so the owners can move in. If we all help it'll go so fast.”

“Fine,” I said, not meeting her eyes. At least the house would be empty.

Once we'd picked up everyone up, instead of driving down the hill toward our two-bedroom box of a house tucked in next to the Quik-E-Lube on Parrish Lane (the triple bunk my brothers shared in one room; the triple bunk my sister, my mom, and I shared in the other), we turned and went up the hill toward the big houses. Our station wagon could barely chug its way up the incline. Car after car pulled around and passed us.

We finally stopped at the house, parking on the street instead of in the long driveway (we'd learned our lesson after having to scrub an oil leak off a new house's driveway). Giant windows on the ground floor looked out at the sprawling houses across the street. As we unloaded the supplies onto the mow strip, I moved stiffly under the potential gaze of eyes everywhere. I folded the picture page of the Nantucket paper and stuck it in my back pocket, then pushed the vacuum up the driveway.

Once inside, I vacuumed the vast first floor, starting with the family room and kitchen eating area where my mom and sister were working, then moving to the foyer and living room. I was careful not to knock up against the built-in bookshelves. On the second floor I began the bedrooms. And then, there it was. The room I knew would be mine if this were our house.

It was next to the master bedroom, with a big window, complete with a window seat, looking out on the Great Salt Lake to the west. It was sunset, and the flaming, rose-colored sun was plunging into the gilded surface of the water. The sky, so easily visible from the huge window, glowed with pink all the way from the lake to the mountains. I looked until my eyes hurt, and when I looked away the after effect – a blue ball the size and shape of the sun with waves around the edges that looked a little like flower petals--shone on all the pale walls of the room. I left the vacuum cleaner running so it would seem like I was still working and sat on the window seat, tucking my legs up under me. Then I took the folded-up page of the *Inquirer and the Mirror* from my back pocket. On Nantucket I would sit in a window seat every day. I would do all my homework looking out over the sun setting on the ocean. I would fall asleep at night with a book in my

hand, the moon shining in on me, and my mom would come in and cover me with a quilt. I scanned the pictures again.

Sandra Freedom, second row, left, the clear beauty contest champ. Wavy brown hair, straight, delicate features, ivory skin – Nantucket High's Winona Ryder. Sandra Freedom's activities: cross country. Of course. Pretty skinny girls always signed up for cross country. College: UMass Amherst.

Jenny Marsden third row, center, she would have been my friend. A cute brown bob and a round jaw, her nose just a little wide. Pearl earrings. Salutatorian. Activities: orchestra, ornithology club, fencing. If we lived on Nantucket I would join the ornithology club. I would join the fencing team. College: Stanford. Maybe I would go to Stanford.

And then I came to him, there with the vacuum roaring and the pink sun setting on me in my window seat. John Standick. Bottom row. My picture would have been next to his. Shepherd, then Standick. Valedictorian. Activities: choir, newspaper editor, sailing club, tennis. College: Harvard. He wasn't beaming, instead his lips just barely curved into a smile. I thought the words *a knowing smile* and imitated his face with mine. There was something old-fashioned about him, like I'd imagined Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*. His square jaw. His big blue eyes. His vaguely womanish cheekbones. His blond hair's sculptured wave.

As we drove home that night, the full moon rose over the mountains, and I thought of John Standick. I would be valedictorian. I would be editor of my high school's newspaper. If we moved to Nantucket I would pass him on the beach and we'd exchange knowing smiles.

That summer he worked for the Nantucket paper, and I read every single one of his weekly columns on the “Nantucket Life” page. He was from New York, I learned, an only child, and had only moved to Nantucket full-time at 16, after his parents’ divorce when his mom turned the vacation house into a year-round residence (information gleaned from his June 10th column, “In Season”). I learned that he loved bright painted walls (June 24th, “Covering Your Mistakes”), that he loved the Nantucket kite contest (July 7th, “Kite Tale”), that he taught sailing to kids and worried that they’d drown even though he was a certified life guard (July 30th, “Cut Your Sails”), and that he really didn’t like dogs (August 18th, “The High Road”). My parents were divorced. I liked bright colors. I liked kites. I was terrified of dogs. I gripped each of our similarities like a tether. I never mentioned John Standick to anyone. I hardly let myself think of him, really, because it was foolishness, all foolishness. But he was there, and I saw his face as I fell asleep.

By the time I started my junior year that fall we’d stopped talking about Nantucket. *The problem is that if you manage a bed and breakfast you have to be there all the time*, my mom said. *It wouldn’t have been what we’d wanted*, I agreed. We let our subscriptions to the papers lapse. For a couple of months my mom didn’t feel like doing much of anything. We started getting dinner from the grocery store deli almost every night – jalapeno poppers and pizza pockets. My mom agreed to let a friend set her up -- it would have been her first date since my parents divorced. The man never called. We started ordering cheap home-delivery pizza. I studied, I sang, I wound up as the editor for my own school paper. The next fall I applied to college. Harvard. All I said when anyone asked why I’d want to go so far from home was why not?

John draped his arm over me for most of the ferry ride. I nestled my head into his shoulder, peacefully breathing in the clean smell of him. I'd spent so much time imagining my picture next to his in the Nantucket paper and had thought it would be an unfortunate pairing, but I'd changed myself in little ways that made me prettier. I'd started wearing heels and slim, stylish skirts I bought in little Harvard Square shops, I'd done away with barrettes, and I'd begun wearing makeup. Looking at me now, I was almost sure no one would have guessed I was from Utah. I imagined people on the ferry noticing us and thinking, *ah, a lovely Nantucket couple*, and anytime I caught someone looking at us I smiled just a little.

My first months at Harvard I'd thought I might see him, that John Standick could be anywhere. I wondered if I'd recognize him. I played out sitting down at the same table with him at the library, catching his eye, smiling ever so slightly then looking away. Beyond that, who knew? I looked him up in the student directory and found out he lived in Winthrop House. Some nights I walked by and looked in the windows of the dining hall, but I never saw him through the glass and I never dared to go in to look for him. What would I say?

I'd been hesitant about almost everything in my first months at school. The upperclassmen sitting at the tables in the activities fair had seemed like zealous missionaries, and I'd hurried past them. As a result, by the time October rolled around I realized I had nothing but school work, my 15 hour-a-week filing and copying job, the Mormon kids I'd met at church and tried to otherwise avoid (I hadn't come to Harvard to recreate Centerville, after all) and my tenuous acquaintances with the partying kids in my

dorm who'd been smart but not cool in high school and who now longed for new roles, holding beers and swaying in the dark every night. I found the whole thing laughable and disappointing.

Whenever my mom called she would ask excitedly, *how is it? It must be amazing*. I'd describe things, the scenes in the stained glass windows in the dining hall, the professors who wore bow ties, and she'd say, *oh I wish I could see them!* But under the happiness and excitement I heard the little rip of longing and anger, the same voice I'd heard late at night from her bunk below mine when she'd say, *don't ever let yourself get trapped*. I told her less and less each call.

When the new semester began in February, I finally auditioned for a choir and signed up for a volunteer tutoring program. There were lots of singing groups on campus, but I chose U Choir because we got paid to sing for services in Memorial Church – a few hundred dollars a term. The Mormon student ward met in the afternoon, so I could still hop over from Mem Church to services at the Mormon chapel on Brattle Street. It occurred to me that John Standick might be in U Choir, but I couldn't find a list of choir members online and I wasn't about to ask anyone.

When I looked around the choir on the first day of rehearsal and didn't see him I felt a soft melting of relief. I hated admitting to myself that I thought about him, and since he wasn't there I didn't have to. But just after rehearsal began he came through the door and hurriedly took his place in the baritone section across the choir from me. My stomach leapt. His hair was longer, less perfectly shaped, his cheeks were a little rosier, probably a light flush from hurrying, he looked older, but he was the same. The real John Standick. How could I be in the same room with him? I felt my body turn hot and my

cheeks blush. I watched his shoulders and his long pretty fingers as he wrestled off his pea coat. When he looked up, his blue eyes shone out above his blue collared shirt.

Since John was a baritone and I was a second soprano, we faced each other on opposite sides of the choir, and for six weeks I pretended not to know his face. When I felt myself wanting to gaze I closed my eyes and counted to five. But it ended in March. I'd been looking at him, the curve of his cheekbones, the way he sat straight with such ease, and he'd caught me and smiled. He said hey on the way into choir the next rehearsal. I replayed the moment for days. The next Sunday as I was putting my music away after services he said, "Brooke, want to grab some brunch in Winthrop House?" John Standick knew my name? But the choir was small -- of course he did. Still, hearing him say Brooke gave me the same rush I remembered from high school awards ceremonies -- a flush of joy at the sound of my name followed by a slight illness -- an awareness that I cared too much and that the joy could just as easily have been devastation. "Sure," I said.

We had brunch again the next week, and the week after that. I skipped Mormon services to spend Sunday afternoons with him. How could I have done anything else? He was John Standick, and I felt the weight of destiny behind every second I spent with him. I told him more stories about home, playing up the elements he seemed to like the most. *My mom puts up decals on our windows for every holiday, little leprechauns, rabbits, eggs. Harry, the mechanic at Quick-E-Lube looks up at me in my bedroom window and salutes. When my grandma comes to church with us she tries to single-handedly speed up hymns, singing her loudest a full beat ahead of the organ.* He couldn't get enough. *You know that's why you're not bitchy,* he said. *So many girls are so bitchy.*

We started having dinner on Tuesdays and Thursdays after rehearsals, and I finally admitted to the newspaper, emphasizing all the papers we'd subscribed to, and saying that I thought I recognized his name and must have read one or two of his articles. For a quick second he was silent, almost dazed. His face fell blank, as if he were considering something. But then he laughed, "Oh my god, that's hilarious. I can't believe you read those things!" He demanded reciprocity, and we walked to my dorm after dinner so I could dig out old copies of the columns I'd written for the *Viewmont Danegeld*. I sat in my chair reading gems from "Uncommonly Good Times in the New Commons Area" and "Why School Lunch Rocks" while he sat on my bed laughing. When I put the file down, he reached for my hand, then without waiting he got up, pulled me to him, and covered my lips with his mouth. The slickness of the saliva sent a little ripple of repulsion through me, but I opened my mouth to his and kissed him back as if nothing had ever felt better.

On the ferry our breathing fell into unison as we watched the grey ocean pass outside the windows. When the ferry finally began to slow, John squeezed my waist. "Here we go," he said. I wondered if my feelings would leap at seeing the island – some visceral response seemed necessary. But as the ferry pulled into the harbor I looked placidly out the window, and nothing in me leaped. I was about to walk onto Nantucket, and here I was, still me. As we walked off the ferry, John's hand on my back, I thought, with a feeling too quiet to be a real pang, *they're just steps. They feel like any other steps.*

My mother knew I was dating a boy named John, but she didn't know he was from Nantucket. She had never known about John Standick. I stopped myself from

storing away descriptions of the scene, since I knew I didn't want to tell her I had been here. I imagined the scene. She'd smile and gasp. *I want to hear everything!* she'd say. But she would hold her smile too long, and I would see the strain. I would know her desperation. I took John's hand, and we stepped out into the afternoon breeze.

John had told me his mother was in New York so we'd have the place to ourselves. I'd said it was too bad I wouldn't get to meet her and feigned innocence toward the other implications. Since coming back to school we'd spent night after night together in his twin bed, kissing and touching. He always fell asleep before I did, and I sometimes cried quietly, feeling his body so warm and oblivious next to mine. But it would be different here. It had to be.

As we walked across the cobblestone square and over the brick sidewalks of town, the cool breeze turned John's cheeks an attractive pink. I was never so lucky; in the cold my nose, not my cheeks, turned red. How much I wanted the kind of rosiness he had. "I would have had Katie pick us up," John said as we walked up a steep hill, "but I thought we'd enjoy the walk."

"Katie?" I asked.

"Oh, I thought I'd mentioned her. She keeps our house. She does other errands for us too. She lives in town."

He had never mentioned Katie. He must have known, after all my stories of house cleaning, how it would bother me. Of course there was a woman who kept his house. How could I have ever thought there was not? I was glad she hadn't come to pick us up. She probably would have pulled up in a rusty station wagon.

"Oh," was all I said.

After another twenty minutes of walking he finally pointed and said, "There it is." The house, a modern looking two-story, overlooked the beach at the point on the end of Bathing Beauty Road. Panes of glass in front looked out at the other houses, the giant garden and, tucked in elegantly among the bushes, the swimming pool. Clouds had blown in and the air had gotten colder. I wondered if any of the neighbors saw us as we hurried to the end of the long driveway. I thought of my hair in the wind, my hand in John's, and hoped then, in fact, that someone was looking.

Inside, we put our bags down and he led me around the ground floor, three bedrooms, all guest rooms, and the laundry room, with two washers and two dryers. Then up the stairs to the main level, which held the kitchen, a huge room with big windows facing the beach, and his bedroom down a little hallway, his childhood trophies and awards lined up on shelves above his little bed. His mother's bedroom and bathroom were up another set of stairs, all by themselves on a little third floor you couldn't see from the street.

I pulled a framed photo of him from the built-in bookshelf along one wall of the living room. "Look at this. You're adorable!" I said. He must have been fourteen or so in the picture, younger than I'd ever seen him, standing on the beach with his arm thrown around the shoulder of one of his friends, kites at their feet. His face was just as it was now, only softer. A wish that I had known him then, that I could have been the other boy in the picture, or just that I could have been John instead of Brooke caught in my throat in a sudden lump of tears. I put the picture down and pulled him toward me.

The sun set out the western windows, coating the water with gold. I was hungry – we hadn't eaten since lunch – but it didn't matter. We were on the living room couch,

and we only looked up long enough to say, *lovely, yes, gorgeous sunset*, before returning to each other, our hands pressing into one another's skin, his shirt coming off first then mine. Once the pink light had turned grey and the color of everything in the room was fading into black he pulled me up so we were sitting, his hands sliding from my lower back to the band of my pants, then further down. When I took my hands from his back, where I usually safely kept them, and began to move them down below his waist, I felt like I was watching myself in a movie. He pulled his face away and looked at me, surprised and questioning. For a moment I was afraid he would stop us, but I looked eagerly back, and we tumbled on.

After another few minutes he pulled us up so we were standing. Still kissing him, I began to move us down the hall toward his bedroom. He took his lips from mine long enough to say, "Let's go upstairs. It's nicer." Had I been myself I would have said, *to your mother's room?* But I wasn't myself, and I kissed him as he pulled me up the stairs. Step after step.

The clouds outside had broken, and the moon poured through the huge skylight and the bank of beach-facing windows in his mother's room, coating both of us with a blue glow. He sat on the bed and pulled me to him. I didn't dare take my face from his to look at our bodies. I feverishly kissed him. We went on and on. I wasn't sure what, but I was proving something, and even though I could feel the dark stirrings of regret already, I put my leg over him and pulled him to me.

"Should I get a condom?" he whispered.

The word sounded so ugly. I felt a weight behind my eyes – tears would come if I didn't stop them. "I'm on birth control," I whispered back.

He looked at me for a moment, a hint of a knowing smile in his eyes, then pushed his face against mine again and moved closer still.

Then he suddenly pulled away from me. "What's that?" he said, sitting up quickly.

"What's what?" I felt cold without his body against mine, panicky even.

He pulled his boxers on. "I think it was a car in the driveway." He hurried onto the stairs to look out the front windows. "It must be Katie."

I curled up on top of the sheet as he ran down the stairs. When he turned on the light below a small glow reflected off the walls up into the room. He must have thrown my shirt somewhere and slipped quickly back into his own thrown off pants and shirt. I heard the front door open and the shuffling of shoes on the tile floor.

"Katie, hey!" he said, projecting his voice down to the foyer below.

"John honey, hello!" Her voice sounded old, gravel in her throat. Why had I thought she would be my mother's age?

"I'm just here for the weekend," he said, "with Brooke."

As I heard my name my chest rattled. Katie knew my name.

"Your mom told me you might be coming down." Katie's voice grew louder as she climbed the steps to the main floor of the house. "Is Brooke here? I'd love to meet her."

I climbed under the covers of the bed and stared at the moon through the windows. I wanted to disappear beneath the sheets.

"I think she's still napping," John said, "but let me go see."

"I don't want to stay long," she said. "I just came by to pick up my wallet. I was mopping the floors and must have left it lying around somewhere."

I heard him coming up the stairs and sat up stiffly in bed. "Hey," he said quietly.

"Do you mind meeting Katie?"

"I'm not wearing any clothes," I said.

"I grabbed your bra." He held it out for me to take from his hand. I didn't move.

"Did Katie see you grab it?"

"I threw it on the stairs before she came in. I didn't see your shirt." I finally took the bra from his hand.

"Here," he said, pulling a white tank top from one of his mother's drawers, "put this on."

"Does Katie do the laundry? Is she going to know this is your mother's shirt?"

"It's just a t-shirt. You could have one just like it."

I climbed out of the bed and took my underwear and pants from the floor, then pulled on his mother's shirt. It smelled like perfumed drawer liners.

"If you want I can tell her you're still sleeping," he said.

But I knew it was too late. I wiped the mascara from under my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. "Isn't she going to think it's weird that I was sleeping in your mom's room?"

"It's just Katie," he said. "Who cares?"

I didn't let my face show the wincing I felt. I walked down behind him as if I were automated. On the last steps, I saw her there in the kitchen, filling three glasses with

water from a bottle. She looked up, her curly brown hair, grey at the roots, moving around her heavy round face. I put on my best smile.

"You must be Brooke," she said.

"Hi," I said. I would have shaken her hand, but she didn't put it out, and I wasn't sure that was the thing to do. Instead I put my hand up in a little wave. I stood far enough away that she wouldn't be able to smell the shirt.

"Well it's very nice to meet you," she said. She handed both of us glasses of water, and I saw the age spots on her hands. I drank the water and tried not to look her up and down but noticed the way her heavy eyelids hooded her small eyes, the way her fat cheeks pulled down at her mouth, creating deep lines where she smiled. The lines around my mother's mouth were still only small traces of wrinkles. I noticed her eyes flick up and down my body once, a quick appraisal. I wondered what she'd tell John's mother.

"Did you kids pick up anything for dinner?" she asked.

"No," John said, leaning comfortably against the cupboard. I stood stiffly in the open room.

Katie opened the fridge. "I brought a few things over this afternoon, just in case you wanted them. I can cook something up if you want. I picked up some of that pizza dough you love and there's cheese and sauce and some sausage and veggies."

I drank more water, glad for the real feeling of the cool water when everything else felt unreal, like a scene from a play, me trying to act the part of the girlfriend who belongs in a beach house.

"No," John said. "We can manage. Thanks for getting all that stuff, though."

Katie closed the fridge door. "Sure, sure," she said, smiling, the lines around her mouth looking even deeper. "Is this your first time on Nantucket?" she said to me.

I nodded and said my line, "It's beautiful."

"I hope John shows you all around tomorrow." She patted his shoulder.

"More water?" she said, putting out her hand to take my glass.

"Sure, I can get it, though." As I passed her on my way to the faucet I was sure she could smell the perfume from the drawer. Both she and John watched me fill my glass. Then we all stood in the kitchen looking at one another for a moment before Katie said, "I really ought to be getting back home."

"Good to see you, Katie," John said.

I sipped more water and looked at John, not Katie, as she went down the stairs, but even in my peripheral vision, I could see that she went too slowly, favoring one knee. At the front door she turned and said, "Bye," her thick wrist flickering back and forth in a wave. I waved back. And then she was gone and it was just the two of us again.

John took the glass from my hand and set it on the counter, spilling water. Neither of us moved to wipe it up. Then he reached his arm around my waist, under his mother's shirt, and began kissing me as if nothing had interrupted us. I kissed him back, acting as if I thought nothing had interrupted us either. I pulled him to the couch.

In elementary school my friends and I had a game called Red Rose Garden. With our fingernails we'd scratch at the insides of one another's forearms -- *first you rake the soil*. Then we'd pinch -- *then you plant the seeds*. We'd poke -- *then the rain comes*. Slap -- *then the sun beats down*. And then we'd reveal the red lines of roses. In shows of bravado for the other girls I'd let them scratch my arms so hard that little pinpoint of

blood blossomed in sweet, straight rows. There was no one to see my toughness now, but in a show for myself I pushed into the raking, the planting, full of want for the pain that sprang up in familiar crimson lines. When we were finally still, John brushed his hand softly over my hair, each gentle stroke pushing me further into loneliness, into desolation. I held still -- was I even breathing? -- waiting for him to tire of it.

After he was asleep I stood up and went to the bathroom. Closing the door behind me I turned on the light and looked at my face in the vanity. I watched myself begin to cry, then turned away and opened the shower door. It was perfectly clean, not a water streak to be seen. Katie must have cleaned it that afternoon. I stepped inside the shiny marble shower and turned the spot-free silver knob. Looking up into the falling water, I was glad for its hot sting.

I wondered how soon I could tell John I wanted to leave. But what would I say? What could I even say to myself? I wanted this. A thousand moments of decision, and I had made them all. What was the point in denying it? Of course we wouldn't leave in the morning; we wouldn't leave until Sunday as we'd planned all along. Still, I'd seen the ferry schedule in the paper enough times in high school to know it by heart, and I thought of 5:50 and 7:10 with an ache now, something almost like nostalgia. I imagined myself hurrying to the ferry alone in the dark of early morning, when none of the neighbors would see me with my bag slung over my shoulder. What a silly, Tennyson-maiden picture of flight. I was staying, I knew.

The Matter Between Them

Brooke remembered her father taking her out to the electric fence on her grandparents' farm outside Boise, the year before she started kindergarten. "The thing that happens," her father said, "is that if you grab the fence, you won't be able to let go." He took her hands in his and lifted them, as if they were grabbing the wire together. He pretended to convulse, shaking both their hands. She laughed nervously as he rolled his eyes back into his head.

She thought of that now because John was coming to visit, was coming to pick up their toddling son, Cameron, for a week. She could see how it would go. He'd stand at the door and she'd look at him, and the space between them wouldn't feel like space. As always it would feel like matter, not a void to be crossed, but a thick, electrified substance that pulled at them, that they resisted for a time. When either of them reached through it, though, touched skin, took hold of the other, neither could seem to let go.

It was all about the pull and resistance, the friction of the two. Brooke had learned that early. Long before John, she'd felt something similar -- weaker, much weaker, but similar -- with her piano teacher's husband.

She was young then, fourteen, still a kid living in her little Salt Lake City suburb, and it began in fits and starts in the evenings when her piano teacher's husband came home, Brooke still waiting for her mother to pick her up. Her mother was always late, exhausted after cleaning houses and running Brooke's siblings around to friends' houses and team practices.

Later, she'd come to sympathize with her mother, but on a night before she did, she was waiting in the kitchen after her lesson, having a Coke and graham crackers and

listening to the next student slaughter an easy little Rondo. Each wrong note fueled her resentment -- her mother knew what time her lesson ended. Why couldn't she manage to be there? Brooke flipped through Mrs. Callan's catalogs, looking at the way the women's breasts filled out lingerie. When she heard Mr. Callan's car pull into the garage she buried the catalog and took out her music. She wanted it to seem like he had interrupted her doing something important.

A rush of cool air and the smell of rain on cement followed him through the kitchen door. He brushed the water off the shoulders of his suit and smiled at her, little lines around his eyes crinkling his tan skin. She said hello.

"Brooke. Nice to see you," he said.

She was sure she blushed. He sat down across from her at the little café-sized table. "Did Linda take it easy on you today?" he said.

The Callans were young but Brooke would never call Mrs. Callan "Linda." Mr. Callan's using her first name felt to Brooke like a small transgression, one that implicated her as well. She liked being implicated.

"She was tough, but fair," Brooke said. This was the way she played adults, hammed-up charm they seemed to love.

"Glad to hear it." He looked at her, and she looked back, waiting for him to look through the mail, waiting for him to get up and shuffle around the kitchen. But he didn't. He stayed at the table, his body twenty inches from hers, too close. She could see the neat cuticles of his hands, resting on the table. It was only a minute, but it felt longer. She wanted him to move away, but she also wanted him to stay -- the pull and the resistance she would later come to know so well. The air between them became more

than air. Troughs and peaks of tension coursed through it, transforming it into a thick gel that suspended her heartbeat, that suspended time around them. It was the way she felt on stage just before she played, her hands poised above the keys.

Finally, he got up to get himself a Coke. "You want anything else?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine." Her throat felt chalky, and she was surprised she could speak.

She was relieved when Mrs. Callan shouted that her mother had just pulled up. In the car she said nothing about it. What could she have said? *Mr. Callan sat at the table with me?*

Those evening moments were short, confusing, and she could almost dismiss them as her own manufacture. It wasn't until a few months later, in a hotel room in Philadelphia, the morning before her performance in the Philadelphia Symphony's Young Artists competition that she felt sure of anything. Her mother and Mrs. Callan had gone out. She had stayed in to rest. Mr. Callan, who'd come along to Philadelphia with them for a little vacation, he'd said, had stayed in too, in his room down the hall. But then he'd knocked on Brooke's door. "Just wondered what you were doing," he said, his tone friendly, casual.

She folded her arms in embarrassment across her chest and her flimsy t-shirt, no bra underneath. She looked at him nervously.

"Anything good on TV in here?" he said. There was something awkward about the tilt of his head and the too-low pitch of his voice. She knew he wanted to come in, needed her to say yes, and the moment of power made her feel suddenly tender toward him, a slight hint of, was it pity? Whatever it was, for a moment she was unafraid.

"I don't know," she answered with a coyness she'd never heard herself use before, that surprised her in its effortlessness.

"We could check." He smiled a little, his awkwardness vanished, so much so that Brooke wondered if it had ever been there at all.

She opened the door wider, and he came in. She sat on one bed, and although there were two in the room, he sat on the same bed. He held the remote on his lap, flipping channels until he came to rest on a drama neither of them usually watched. He took his shoes off; he stretched his legs out. He wore shorts, and Brooke could see the individual light brown hairs on his legs. On the edge of the bed, she crossed her arms over her chest, sweating, her moment of bravado gone. If she were back in Utah she would be in her bedroom alone, doing her homework. But here in Philadelphia she was not alone. The side of her body facing Mr. Callan felt electrified, the nerves throbbing as the matter between them touched at her skin.

Nothing else happened. He left after the program ended. And for years Brooke thought perhaps she'd imagined the feeling, the matter between them she'd felt. Later, though, when she had the same feelings again in more certain circumstances with other men, John chief among them, she could name what she'd felt on that bed with Mr. Callan for what it was.

And John would be there, when? In twenty minutes maybe? He hadn't seen her or Cameron for three months, not since leaving New York to work at his hedge fund's London office. Cameron, who was now beginning to stand -- grabbing onto furniture and wobbling for wonderful seconds before his legs collapsed -- had only been crawling when John left. Her hair was longer, blonder thanks to fresh highlights. But the wedding pictures of her and John were in the same places on the walls, and the furniture was just as they'd arranged it when they'd moved into the lovely apartment. The night John left

for London, Brooke had pushed the couch all around the living room trying to find some other wall where it could rest; but in the end nothing else had seemed right, and she had cried unsatisfying tears and pushed it right back where it started.

She told herself she didn't want to feel the matter between them this time. She wanted another vision, another scenario to latch onto, but all she could see was John at the door, looking at her the way he always did when they had been apart, soft-eyed, half-smiling. And there it would be again, the pull toward him and the resistance against it, the friction of the two thickening the air around them into a thrumming substance. She would be unable to breathe easily. She would want for him to reach through, to touch her, for the sharpness of his touch, the jolt of it, anything other than the suffocating matter.

Thinking of it, she said aloud, "There is no point. There is nothing for you there." But how many times had she said that?

For the first few years of their relationship during and after college she kept track of their break-ups and reunions, three, four, five.... But when she finally realized how vitally each hopeful reinstatement of their romance depended on her ability to forget the last hopeful yet failed reinstatement, she stopped counting.

Before their wedding, their last break-up coincided with her moving to Boston for grad school -- it would only be a year, and then, she thought, she'd have her public policy degree and they'd be in New York together again, better than ever. John helped her move into a cramped studio apartment on Beacon Hill, as planned. But rather than settling in like she was supposed to, she'd decided to go back to New York with him for the last few days of summer. The very first night in the city again, they argued about her getting

together with a girlfriend for drinks instead of meeting up with him after his late night at the office. It turned into a weekend of all-too-familiar crying and yelling, and by Saturday afternoon they had decided it was the end. Again.

Back in Boston Brooke thought *I have moved on, I have moved on*, day after day as she walked over uneven brick sidewalks. In the evenings she couldn't bear to be alone in her shabby apartment, so she stayed in the practice rooms at school and played her favorite Nocturnes and Polonaises over and over until the building closed. As always, she and John never stopped calling but took on casual pretensions, short calls made when one or the other "just wanted to say hi."

Months went by, and she felt more certain that the words were true this time. How could they not be? How could she not have moved on with her life? But then he called. He was in Boston, checking out a company for work. Would she have dinner with him? They agreed on a restaurant down the street from her apartment.

Walking out of her apartment, Brooke wrapped her gauze-white scarf around her head and most of her face to block the freezing wind. When she stepped off Charles Street into the dark-wooded restaurant, she saw him at the table, waiting. She stood by the velvet curtain near the door, removing her scarf slowly, layer after layer, looking at him and feeling her heart beat evenly. She would be fine.

Seeing her, he stood up, one hand on his chair, the other hanging uncertainly at his side, brushing his trouser leg. His awkwardness disarmed her. He always seemed to be sure about everything, his clothes, his work, the superiority of his taste and his politics, but she had always loved him most in the moments when his certainty faltered,

when it seemed she could have some sway after all. How sweet his dangling hand looked to her.

"Have you ordered anything yet?" she said as she pulled out her chair and sat.

"You look so pretty," he said, still nervous.

She smiled a wary smile -- her eyes slightly narrowed -- and suddenly she knew that she would have ached if he had not reacted this way to her, that this was what she wanted from him. "Should we split a pizza?" she said.

He didn't answer. He turned the glass holding the little burning candle around and around. As she watched his long, nimble fingers -- they'd played so facilely beside hers during their duet recital senior year -- she felt the power of months without him moving away from her, becoming suspended in the matter that had begun clotting and throbbing around them. How much she wanted to touch and be touched, how clearly he wanted it too, but how they both resisted. Surety returned to him, and he turned his hand over on the table, palm side up, waiting for hers to meet it.

She felt her hand tingle, the power of his pulling her. "Would you like to go on a walk?" she said suddenly, pushing her chair back from the table, hungry, but knowing if she sat at that table with him any longer she would be unable to stop herself from reaching out

"Anything," he said.

She wrapped her scarf around herself again, and in the cold and wind they walked next to one another past warmly lit townhouses, toward Boston Common, not touching, not brushing, while he began to say things:

"Brooke, I am full of all the best feelings every time I see you."

"Brooke, when I see you I realize how crazy I would be to let you go."

"Brooke, I've loved you for so long."

They both shook with cold, but the words still snapped and popped at her through the icy air, each one of them traveling through the matter as a tiny jolt. "John, I have to go home," she finally said. She left him at her door without a hug, no touch at all.

He sent her three emails that night.

"Brooke, I love you, I just love you."

"Brooke, I don't expect anything from you. I just want you to know that the best times in my life have been with you."

"Brooke, let me see you again."

With each one she felt more flushed, more full of shame at the thought of giving in to him again, at the thought of explaining it to her friends, again, but even with that, she also felt more hopeful that perhaps things could be different this time. She called him just after midnight. He came over to her apartment. They sat across from one another at her little round kitchen table, shyly at first, the matter tingling and pricking until he put his hand out and she placed hers inside it.

And it was perfect there, her hand in his, for the next few months. Every weekend he drove up or she took the bus down. On long weekends, they flew to Nantucket together. He made surprise mid-week flights on the shuttle, arriving at 10 p.m. and leaving to get back to work at 6 a.m. They went to the organic grocery store and bought beautiful fruits and vegetables to cook elaborate meals together. They made love four times a day. He rented a piano for her apartment, and they played for one another. They ran in hats and gloves around Central Park or the Charles River.

After a month of near-perfection she finally told her friends, who she'd been so carefully avoiding, that she and John had gotten back together. After six weeks, she finally truthfully answered her mother's questions about what she did for the weekends. To all of their concerned questions -- how could she put herself through this again, didn't she know better -- she said, "It's not like before." Brooke worked hard at forgetting everything she and John had ever said to hurt each other, all the things about her he'd said he'd never want in a wife (her weakness, her changeability) all the things about him she'd said she'd never want in a husband (his contempt, his controlling).

John planned a trip for them for her spring break. Italy. She had never been. He bought the tickets, and they fell asleep holding hands on the flight. The airline lost her bag but promised to deliver it to their hotel the next day. In the elevator on the way up to their room she told him they should buy some condoms since her birth control was in the bag. Inside their room, they pushed open the green and white striped curtains and looked down on the stone street below. Then he pulled her to him. "Do you want to run out or should I?" she said.

"Brooke," he said, gripping her shoulders and looking at her so intensely that for a moment she thought he might scold her, "I want you to marry me."

She looked at him there with the bright afternoon light of Italy behind him and felt that at last everything *was* different.

"Yes," she said, and he pulled her onto the bed.

"I don't care if I get you pregnant," he said. "I'd love to fill you up with babies. It's all I ever want to do when I see you."

She wanted to laugh at his words, but he had said them with the surety she could never contradict. She wanted to say, *just let me run downstairs*, but she didn't. If she believed in the two of them why did it matter? And if she didn't believe in them why had she said yes? Why was she here at all? They made love again and again until it grew dark. Her bag didn't arrive until the end of the week.

Their fights resumed two months into her pregnancy, during her intense morning sickness, their hurried wedding planning, and her graduation from her masters program. Small things set them off. "I wish you were more thoughtful about details," he said when she told him she'd forgotten four names from the invite list. When she said comments like that hurt her feelings, he only made more of them, insisting that she needed to stop being defensive and admit she needed to change. Each time, she cried, he yelled, they both apologized.

During the drive from Boston to their new apartment together in New York, the last of her things loaded into his car, rain fell in sheets the wipers couldn't keep up with. When they reached the Saw Mill Parkway the traffic slowed, and behind barely moving streams of red brake lights, he began with the planning again. They would be late for dinner with his parents. Why hadn't she shipped more of her stuff? This was a systemic problem. "I think I'm doing pretty well considering the circumstances," she said. And soon their voices grew louder, she looked out the window, heaving tears, and she thought (the first time in her life she had ever thought anything like it) *the only way out of this is killing myself*. She didn't want to remember the moment. She wanted to forget it, like she had forgotten so many moments from their past, but it lingered, a note echoing and echoing, like the resonance in a concert hall even after she'd taken her fingers from the

keys, her foot from the pedal. She could not gather back in the reverberation of the words.

Still, the wedding in his parents' garden was beautiful. Overflowing peonies. His family and hers, whatever they felt aside, said all the right things about their happiness at the marriage, and even though Brooke couldn't overlook the stiffness in her mother's gestures, the moments when her voice trembled with effort, joy still welled up inside her. Her family's love for her was so evident in their attempts to forget alongside her. And John, flaws and all, was the man she loved.

In the months that followed, when pregnancy began to truly transform her body, she and John had been tender. *Perfect*, she said to herself. *My life is perfect*. When Cameron was born, textbook contractions and delivery, he was perfect too.

But arguments began again when she put herself on a stringent post-pregnancy diet. Brooke wanted her body back and insisted it was fine. John worried about her extremity. Hadn't she learned her lesson in college? He would call her from work to ask what she'd eaten. She usually lied. Even then he thought it wasn't enough. Why did she think she could produce nutritious milk for their son if she was barely eating? The more she tried to adjust and accommodate, the more their old fights, the ones about their fundamental incapability, the ones she'd thought they'd never have again, began to recur. "I think I am bad for you," he would begin. How exhausted she was by it all.

When they'd broken up at the start of her year in Boston, they had argued the first night, then talked and cried and fallen asleep curled up next to each other every night until she returned to school. This time they began a similar process, night after night of almost saying they couldn't go on, but then backing away. "How could we be crazy

enough to think we're not meant to be together?" they would say in the middle of the night when, fatigued and broken, they woke up to Cameron crying. "I'm sorry," he would say into the dark room, "I don't know what comes over me. I'm ashamed."

"I'm sorry too," she would say, reaching for him. "I shouldn't be so sensitive."

But then John went to London for a week for work, and in the space his absence created she thought loudly and insistently, staying with him will crush me. Without him next to her, she saw not John and Brooke, but her parents -- her passive mother, her controlling father. How well she and John were playing the parts. She thought of the shame of telling everyone -- she had fought so hard to convince them. She thought of Cameron, suffering through divorce and its after-effects, her own parents' wretched dissolution hanging in her memory. She thought of money. She couldn't hope to stay home with Cameron anymore. And she thought of John marrying another woman, the type his family, and perhaps John himself, probably thought he should have married in the first place -- wealthy, vaguely Episcopalian, from Westchester or Greenwich. She tried to think of herself with someone else, and for a moment she almost could. He would be like John, so close it was hard to tell the difference, but just different enough.

When John got back, they sat on their bed, lamplight warming both of their faces. She looked at his crisp blue shirt collar against his neck. She looked at the late evening stubble on his cheeks, only visible because they sat so close. Cameron slept curled up near their pillows, his pink eyelids fluttering. She felt a wash of love for both of them, she wanted to reach her hands out to both of their faces, but she said what she had planned to say anyway: "We need to be apart." The words came so smoothly.

"When you say apart, what do you mean?" he said.

She couldn't breathe through the sudden thickness in her throat. She turned from John, lifted Cameron, and carried him to his crib. She would say it. She had to say it. With the feel of Cameron's warm body still on her arms, she sat down on the bed again. "I mean ending our marriage." John reached for her, and she leaned her head into his chest and cried. After a few minutes he lifted her chin and kissed her. She wanted to make love to him then, but she knew it was an impulse to fix something she had again decided was unfixable. She went into the bathroom and slowly brushed her hair, waiting for the feeling of the pull and the resistance to pass.

It was another six weeks before John moved out, and by then he'd already found out he was being sent to London for three months, so it was only to a hotel. A week later he left for England. They had decided not to tell anyone yet. It would be easier to do once he was away, once they had figured out the details of the divorce themselves, once it was final.

When the closet and the bathroom were emptied of John's things, only scattered collar stays and his empty deodorant containers left behind, Brooke thought, *there is no place left to go. I can finally let this rest.* She counted every day he was gone, adding to the chunk of time she could hold on to and say *I haven't seen him in X.*

He made calls on the run to get updates on Cameron. "He's a prince!" she'd say with all her done-up charm. "You should see the way this boy struts around." She once said, "He looks exactly like you!" but it hurt too much, and she never said it again. They didn't talk about the divorce terms.

Brooke looked at her watch. John would arrive any minute. She held Cameron on her lap, smelling his sweet shampooed hair and feeling his soft curls with her chin, his

hair dark like John's, not light like hers. She grabbed his fat arms and lifted him up. "A bah bah bah," she said, making him giggle. Then she laid him down, lifted his little t-shirt, pressed her lips to his round stomach, and blew. He laughed and squirmed. She wanted to put her mouth all over his stomach. She wanted to squeeze him with a wild love she would have been scared to let John see.

And then there it is, the buzz she has been waiting for. Her stomach seizes. How can it still seize for him? She sets Cameron on the floor. "Come on up," she says, pushing the button. She looks at herself in the mirror and smooths her hair. She checks her teeth for lipstick. Then she waits behind the door, her hands poised to open it. He knocks. She waits another moment, pretending she is walking to the door, then finally turns the knob and says, "Come in!"

"Look at him!" John says, walking by her, sweeping Cameron off the floor.

"Prince? He's a King!"

"Your flight. Was it okay?" she says.

He holds Cameron on his hip, and Cameron looks at him, his fingers reaching up to the collar of his father's suit.

"You look good," John says, and when Brooke looks at him she sees it, the beginning of the appeal, the beginning of their endless recapitulation. She has seen it so many times before. She braces.

"Brooke," his voice is slow, traveling through the matter toward her. The world around her quivers. "I need to say something. I don't know quite how to say it, though."

She does not breathe. She is limp. She wants to feel the vibration overtaking her completely, the notes of it reverberating inside and outside her body until she cannot tell

the outer and the inner matter apart. She wants to feel the auger alive with current. She is sure, at last, that she does feel it.

"I hope this isn't the wrong thing to say, but I wanted to ask you if you would mind if Cameron met someone."

She is suspended. The seconds won't tick by as they should.

"She's in New York this week. We didn't come together. It's nothing like that. She just had business too. But I wanted you to know. I don't really know the protocol. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I didn't want you to be upset if you found out, though. I didn't want you to think anything."

He says the words fast, rushing them together, his eyes searching her face. Brooke hears the words *she's in New York* inside her brain again, feeling the same sick drop. How many times can she pretend to release him? But in a moment, half a moment really, she is fine, recovered. *She's in New York* means nothing. The woman means nothing. In a moment he will take his hand in hers and lift it to his face. And the woman, whoever she is, will be nothing compared to the electricity, compared to the circuit the two of them make. She knows they are not over yet. "Sure," she says to John, prettily tucking her hair behind her ear, watching him watch her, the unmistakable look. The words come so smoothly. She is surprised by this calm. "Of course."

What We Say About Mary Petersen Laws

The story we most often hear about my great grandmother, Mary Petersen Laws, is one she recorded herself more than four decades ago. Press play and her taped voice comes up, full of southern Utah regionalism, a twang, yes, but more of a cadence, beginnings and ends of sentences pushed together, as if whoever she's telling the story to is waiting for the slightest opportunity to stop listening and get back to work. There's also a characteristic overuse of proper words, take "nor" for instance: "Now mother was a great remaker of clothes, but in them days we had neither razors nor razor blades nor rippers of any sort." Each nor comes out like ner. The same ner in "ignert," which is to say, ignorant, the word my mother and grandmother have always used to describe back-talking children.

Despite the slight graininess of the tape, it's clear this voice is of my family, and it's not just the ner's. I expect Mary Laws' voice to sound sturdy and deep, but it sounds instead like my grandmother, a girlishness in the pitch. I shouldn't be surprised, but I am. Mary Laws died in 1968, well before I was born, and she feels like an ancient to me. Like someone who should not be so directly present in my life, whose voice should not speak from the mouth of the woman, my grandmother, who, every time I visit, still asks if I'd like both butter and mayonnaise on my sandwiches. It's not just that Mary Laws has been dead for so long, it's that she had a particular kind of life: a life of kerosene lamps and animals raised to be slaughtered, a girlhood in Colonial Mexico, an adulthood on a dry farm in Blanding, Utah.

I've only seen a few photos of her (we don't have many) but in all of them she looks like an ancient too, the way our family used to look but doesn't anymore: short,

heavy, worn out. I don't know how tall she actually was, but in the one full-length photo I've seen, she is inches shorter than my grandmother, standing next to her, who is only 5'4". And she is a barrel, a loose dress draping around her ample body, her square jaw leading right to her thick neck. On top of her head, her long, thin, reddish hair (it never went fully white, only grayed a little) is tied in a bun. Her mouth pushes down at its edges into a deep frown, the lines of it etched into her face, no feeling behind it, simply the shape her cheeks and lips have taken.

There is still a branch of my family who looks like her -- the ones who stayed in Blanding. The women have huge chests and bellies, thin legs, facial hair, and bad perms, and that same characteristic frown. But we, my grandma's bunch, got out. My grandma looked more like her father, and her husband (my grandfather) thinned the Petersen blood even further. When I look at my grandmother, I see little of Mary Petersen Laws. When I look at my mother I see almost none of her. But then there is the voice. The tone, the cadence, the lingering words we haven't quite left behind. I hear it in myself sometimes, "structure" turned to "strucshure." It only happens when I've been home in Utah, steeped in family. And it takes at least a week there to surface, but surface it does.

The last time I remember the tape being played was when I was in high school, a decade ago, at a family barbeque in my Uncle Mike's back yard. It must have been the Fourth of July. My grandparents, some aunts and uncles, and perhaps ten of my thirty or so cousins were there. We all ate burgers and then Uncle Mike played it, Great Grandma Laws cranked so her voice could be heard above cars on the street, above the breeze in the quaking aspens, above and the buzz of the abundant summer insects.

"Her name was Sister Larsen, she talked very broken Danish, I mean English. Mother sent me over to borrow a pocketknife to rip a dress that she was going to make over for us. Now most of our clothes were made over other people's old clothes, and mother was a great hand at making things over. And Sister Larsen had a little pearl handled knife, and she kept it real sharp, just to rip seams. Course in them days we didn't have any razors, nor any razor blades, nor any rippers of any sort. So I went over to get it. Course, we loved to go over to Sister Larsen's because she gave us coffee rolls she called them, and they were just like the cinnamon rolls we buy now. We never had any as children 'cause mother couldn't afford to make them, she said."

And so my great grandmother goes, gets the knife, and although she is too early for a batch of coffee rolls, is promised she can have one when she brings the knife back that afternoon. All goes as planned, until, on her way to return the knife, a chicken interferes.

"Now we hadn't had any sugar, nor any salt, nor any coal oil for several days because we didn't have any money to buy it with. Our chickens had been laying up eggs somewhere, we knew they were laying but we couldn't find the eggs, and this day I run up through the corral so as to get there in a hurry for the coffee roll, and just as I got up there I heard an old hen come cackling out of a corn shuck. We had our corn all shucked for the fall, and when I went to look and inside, why I saw the most eggs I thought I had ever seen in my life. There was a whole nest full of five eggs, and I knew mother would be so glad for the eggs, so I hurried and gathered them in my apron, and I forgot all about the pocket knife." She says the words "forgot about the knife," slowly, dreamily, her voice lifting, as if, almost 70 years later, she remembers the pleasant daze.

When she gets home her mother is, indeed, glad for the eggs. She sends Mary off to the store, where eggs will make a good trade for some staples, especially coal oil, which is to say kerosene. They'll have a lamp after dark again now. Coal oil, which comes out sounding like coil oil when my great grandma says it, will play a part in many a Mary Petersen Laws story. She'll be left to stir stewed tomatoes, age ten, will run off to play, and return to find that coal oil has spilled into the pot. Her mother will bottle them up anyway and force Mary to eat them all winter. She'll stay up to read one night, age eleven, and her mother will wake, see the lamp burning, take the book, throw it in the fire, and set Mary to work with an "if you're going to burn coal oil, you better be getting something done."

But for now, there is still the pocketknife, and it catches up with her.

"One day Sister Larsen come over for her pocket knife, and mother said, Mary took your pocket knife home that very day. And she said, she didn't bring it, she just didn't bring it. And then they called me, and then I remembered that I'd seen this whole nest of eggs, so we went up to the corn shuck to look and we couldn't find anything of the knife anywhere. And Sister Larsen was scolding me and scolding me and telling me that she'd never give me any coffee cake again, I didn't need to come to her place. Mother said I'll buy you another one. And she said she didn't want another one. That was the only one that was any good. It was her father's and it was a keepsake. It was the only one that was any good."

I love this part of the story because there is the slightest edge of petulance in Mary's voice when she imitates Sister Larsen. She'd never come out and criticize a neighbor, the Mormon gospel, naturally, knitting one and all together in almost perfect

harmony. But is it possible she thinks, as I do, that Sister Larsen could learn to love another pocket knife and that pulling the coffee roll card is awfully low? When the tape ends and whoever has played it discusses the lessons we should learn from the story, seeing neighbors for the flawed people they are and cutting children slack are never among them. But oh, there's that quiet edge of petulance.

Next, we come to the ostensible reason this story was even told. Mary says, "I'd been taught to pray at home and also in our church, so after Mother and Sister Larsen left I went around by the big 'dobe fence and I knelt down and prayed, and I asked the Lord to please help me to find the pocketknife for Sister Larsen because she was mad at me and she wouldn't give me anymore coffee cake and she was mad at my mother, and would He please help me find it. Then I went back to where the corn shuck, and laying right there in plain sight was the pocket knife. And I picked it up and ran to the house with it. And that taught me a good lesson in prayer, that our Heavenly Father hears us when we pray as children or as adults."

There the tape abruptly cuts away, although it's clear she goes on talking, another "and" begun. I don't know everything the original version of the tape holds, or even where it is. The tape I have is one copied and distributed long ago by some Great Aunt or Uncle, the now-yellowed label on every copy I've ever seen exactly the same: "Grandma Laws -- Pocketknife Story" in old typewriter print.

Back at the barbeque, Uncle Mike stands and says a few words. "I want to challenge each of us to remember Grandma Laws and the power of prayer." He pauses here and looks out at us, holding eye contact. At last he continues. "Our Heavenly Father

really does hear and answer our prayers. So when you're feeling lost or confused, think of your great grandma and her faith."

And then, as always, we end the family party with a big sheet cake from Costco.

But I can't leave the story at that. In Mary's prayer I see a familiar desperation -- a frantic need to restore social relations which, unlike Mary's square jaw and frown lines, blazed its way right down to my grandma, my mother, me. She cannot stand to have Sister Larsen angry with her. Displaying a similar need, my mother will pick up that sheet cake, bring the burgers, set the table, make the punch, and do it for every last family party, so long as her brothers are satisfied and her mother at ease. I will immediately accept my siblings' apologies for reading my journals, my personal emails, my notebooks. My grandma will divvy out her possessions long before she's close to dying, terrified her children will squabble after she's gone. And there Mary is, age nine, an ancient showing of that same inordinate smoothing impulse.

I can't forget the mother of the story either, my great-great grandmother. Mary's father had died only the year before, but in that time Mary, the oldest, must have learned to read her mother's every move. The slight flattening of her mother's expression in the moment before she yelled, the pinching before she cried, the eyes fixed on the task before her that meant she was not fixed on it at all, but was elsewhere, thinking about Denmark, about her husband, about life before the desert. When they were hunting for the pocket knife, Mary would have seen her mother move through expressions -- from anger at her, Mary, to apology and attempted reconciliation with Sister Larsen, to a hint of anger again, this time at Sister Larsen -- "I'll buy you another one." It is one of the rare instances of she's-only-a-child I imagine Mary's mother ever displayed, and it only came

out defensively. Between the two of them, Mary was an adult. She'd clean the house and work the garden, care for the younger children, pull her own weight. And when she didn't, she'd be punished for it. But when Sister Larsen pushed, my great-great grandma pushed back, ever so slightly.

That is the Mary Petersen Laws story everyone knows, but there are other stories, not recorded, that my mother or my grandmother will tell if you sit with them, just the two of you. There was one my mother told a lot in the years when she was cleaning houses. "Grandma Laws met Grandpa Laws because he hired her as a maid. He was ten, fifteen years older than her, and he married her so he could stop paying her." My mother always snipped the words. The facts of the story seem right. Mary was fourteen when she finished school and started working as a maid full time. Her family needed money, and that's what there was. Grandpa Laws's family had money. They'd been in Mexico for a while and had lots of land. As it turns out, shortly after their wedding when she was 18 or so, Pancho Villa showed up and chased my great grandma and grandpa and everyone else in Colonial Diaz, their then home, out of Mexico. They fled to Utah with nothing, and Grandma Laws was right back to the same hardscrabble existence she'd had as a girl.

When my mother tells the story, she means something along the lines of "women are never appreciated, their work never properly recompensed. Don't let that happen to you." But I hear something else. Wilford Laws may not have ended up being what Mary bargained for, but he started out as exactly what she wanted, her out. The women in my family have always been trying to marry themselves out of their own lives. My grandma, marrying a man from the city. My mother, marrying a man who spent his teenage years

in Afghanistan, who was dying to get back to someplace "overseas," and me, always pulled toward pinstriped east coasters.

In the pocketknife and the wedding story, there is the Mary I see in myself, but in my favorite story there is the Mary I aspire to be. Practical, strong, able to muster whenever needed. The sturdy Mary. The one whose voice I expect to hear in the tape. In my favorite story she is a watcher of the dead.

I don't remember exactly when my grandma told me this story, but it was sometime during my college years, probably in her kitchen, when the two of us were cleaning up from one of our regular lunches. "You know in those days," she said, "they didn't have funeral parlors in little towns like Blanding, and Grandma Laws was the only one who would stay up with the bodies, icing them all night to keep them from going bad and to stop rigor mortis from setting in too strong. No one else was brave enough. They'd just cry and carry on all night long, but not Grandma Laws. They'd put the body on a board in her living room, and she'd sleep a bit, wake, switch the ice, and sleep a bit again. She helped lay out the bodies in funeral clothes plenty of times too."

My mother, years later, adds her piece. In the first story she tells me it is 1926. My great-grandmother's youngest, Velda, three-years-old, takes sick. She vomits repeatedly, her little body shaking and sweating, and less than 18 hours after the illness strikes, she is dead. They never knew how she died. Poison berries perhaps? It is July. The berries make sense. Whatever the cause, even in her grief, Mary Laws does a calculation. Both Wibb, 14, and Derby, 16, are away, hired hands on some farm, and it will take a day to get word to them, a day for them to travel. It's over 100 degrees every

day, the nights in the 70s. The ice buried under saw dust in the grainery is running low. They won't make it home before the burial. The ice won't last; Velda won't keep.

She hardly thinks of Derby -- he will understand. But Wibb -- she worries about Wibb, so much so that thoughts of him almost drown out her own grief. Velda is his pet, his special sister, the one he loves the most. If only there were more ice. If only the weather were cooler. Even in the early morning, though -- the sun has yet to rise on Velda's death -- Mary sweats when she moves. Knowing there is nothing she can do about Wibb, she sets to work. She cleans Velda, brushes her hair, and puts her in her best dress, then carries her out to the grainery, the coolest place. She takes a board from among the scrap wood and sets Velda on it. Then from under the sawdust she digs out a blocks of ice and puts them around Velda's body. The funeral will be that afternoon; she will sit by Velda, changing the ice as need be until then.

In winter, when she watches bodies, Mary keeps herself busy making paper carnations. But there are plenty of flowers in July, and so she simply sits by her daughter, looking at her little body, thinking of a far away time, only the day before.

My mother doesn't know what Mary said to Wibb when he finally came home again at the end of the summer -- even with his sister's death he stayed at the farm, finishing the season's work. I imagine she said very little. I imagine she put herself to work, as she always did, and tried not to think about. But in the winter evenings, when the whole family was together in the small house, how could she not have looked at her adolescent boy and felt the ache of it?

And then my mother tells me a second story. In this one it is 1965. "You know," she says, "Grandma Laws kept taking care of bodies long after there was a funeral parlor

up in Monticello. It was still an hour away, and expensive, so they never sent the little kids up there. You remember Sandra, Wibb's daughter? Well, her first baby was stillborn..."

It's night. Though Grandma Laws should be in bed, she is up, tidying her little kitchen. In Blanding this time of night is silent expect for insects, animals, and the occasional breeze rattling through the corn stalks in the garden. Her house is especially quiet since she lives alone, Grandpa Laws dead almost 15 years. But this night there is a knock at the door. She is surprised, but she is not a woman to startle. She simply puts down her rag and goes to answer. Her youngest son, Wibb, almost an old man himself now, faces her, a bundle in his hands.

"Sandra's baby," he says. He lifts the bundle toward her. "She lost her baby."

And my great grandma, without hesitation, reaches for that bundle, a dead baby cocooned in receiving blankets.

"Don't worry," is all she says, nothing more exchanged between them, no tears, hugs, additional words of comfort. She has taken the bundle, and that is the comfort she offers.

Inside, Mary sets the bundle on the kitchen counter and unwraps it. The baby is gray, it's body tight, wrenched, twisted. It is a girl. She puts some water on the stove to heat, and when it is warm enough, she takes the pot of water to the counter and sets it next to the baby. Then she dips her hands in, pulls them out quickly, and uses the hot water to loosen the baby's limbs. The skin is soft, but cold as it is, it doesn't feel like a baby, at least not until she begins to massage in the warmth.

While she dips her hands in the water and works the heat into the body, she says things. You're a beautiful girl. Aren't you the lucky one, back in heaven already. And the more she touches the baby, my mother says, the more she feels something, a warmth in the room, outside her body, a spirit.

It's okay, Grandma Laws says. You're going to be okay, and your mother is going to be okay, and your father, and your grandma and grandpa. Everyone is going to be fine. You don't have to worry. Your body is going to look beautiful. I have a dress for you. She massages and massages and at last the body is loose, the twists gone, the skin un-grayed, not pink, not healthy, but un-grayed.

Grandma Laws then wraps the baby up again for the moment, and goes to the cedar chest in her bedroom. From the chest she takes a little white gown, stitched years and years ago for a one-month-old -- a blessing dress for my Great Aunt June, the youngest, born three years after Velda's death. Even if it's a little too large it will do. It is something else she can offer Wibb.

Next, she pulls a box, fabric, a glue gun from the closet. Back in the kitchen she dresses the baby, wraps it again, and goes to work on a casket. White cotton covering batting covering a large shoe box. She trims it with ribbon. The baby rests perfectly inside. For a moment she looks at the baby, her hands still, as if she has forgotten what she's doing. But it is only a moment, and then she takes a cookie sheet, places it over the sink, takes ice from her freezer, an appliance she has only recently acquired, and wraps the ice in cloth. She moves the baby to the cookie sheet, packs the ice around it, and then, at last my great grandmother sits at the kitchen table and falls asleep. She will wake up in half an hour to change the ice. She will do this all night long.