

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Lauren Fath for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 21, 2008.

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Abstract approved:

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Lauren Fath, in her non-fiction collection Half-Life: Essays, examines the underpinnings of her upbringing in suburban Fort Wayne, Indiana, focusing primarily on familial relationships and the importance of hindsight in understanding how our families make an imprint on our lives. By looking at our relationships through the lens offered by the present, Fath's essays show, we are able to examine our lives with a "split consciousness" that differentiates between how things seemed at the time and how they, in fact, must have been. Fath employs this split consciousness as she explores a variety of autobiographical events in her life, from her parents' tenuous relationship to her grandmother's sewing lessons to travels abroad in Slovakia. Through hindsight, Fath asserts, she is able to gain a new view of these past events and interactions, and to recognize her own culpability in situations where she had previously placed blame elsewhere. Also driving Fath's collection is a keen awareness of place and how it affects our interactions. The essays move through a series of locales—from Fort Wayne to San Francisco to Chicago, with a stop at Grandma's along the way—as the author narrates her search for a place to call home and details

the uncanny surroundings in which she grew up. These are essays about the poignance of memory, about the sharp pains of hindsight, and, ultimately, about how we make amends with our own past.

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Half-Life: Essays

by
Lauren Fath

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

Lauren Fath, Author

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This collection is dedicated to Kate Nilan. A promise is a promise.

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Half-Life

One night, I found myself marooned in Chicago's Wrigleyville neighborhood and short the fifteen-dollar cab fare to my apartment on the west side of town. So I called Cristy, the friend who'd inherited the lease on my old apartment. Sure, I could have found an ATM—for I knew the neighborhood well—and withdrawn the money for a cab. But I think I wanted to see what it was like now, the place where I'd lived for two years—my first apartment in the heart of the city, my first time living with a lover. It was only a few blocks, that walk I'd made so many times from the stretch of bars on Clark Street to 3325 North Seminary. But I'd never done it as a visitor, a stranger. I looked up at the three-story brownstones, each one like the next save for the hues of light through the windows or an interior wall painted red instead of blue. Nothing seemed to have changed since I'd moved out three months before; I had the illusion that the neighborhood was holding still, waiting for my return. The street seemed quieter than it should have been, and the streetlights dimmer. My shadow fell

long in front of me on the wet sidewalks, as if leading me in the right direction, though I would have known the way blindfolded.

I pressed the buzzer, which was no longer labeled with my last name, but Cristy's, and she let me in. She was in her pajamas and had to go to bed soon, she told me. She had work early in the morning. So did I, although leaving from here instead of my own apartment would cut a half-hour off my commute. I recalled that I could leave the apartment at 8:15 and safely be in my office by 9. Cristy offered me a pair of soft fleece pants and a T-shirt to sleep in, and soon the lights were out. But I couldn't fall asleep.

Even with its walls re-painted, curtains taken down, there was something about it that still smelled of home—the faint smell of the neighbor's wet dog in the entryway, a mix of old carpet and fall in the apartment itself. And the shape of the rooms, the angular shadows on the walls at night, were still familiar and easy to navigate. The same sounds still jarred me from sleep: the refrigerator's broken, choking hum, the stairwell that creaked whenever anyone went up or down, the rain tapping at the front windows. And the way the streetlights fell through the trees, whose branches reached fingers across the walls. I could almost hear them, too, raking the plaster.

In the morning, my hands knew the placement of light switches. And it's silly, the things that can trigger nostalgia: the small traces of me that still lived there, like a wooden corner shelf in the bathroom; like a bedroom that, no matter how many times painted over, will still be yellow underneath. And there are habits that accompany any

home, habits that become familiar only in that place. For instance, when washing my face, I looked over to see what time it was—on a clock no longer there. Or holding the toilet lever down to a count of five. Or the urge, looking out at the rain, to call in sick and return to bed, to find him there and sleep till the afternoon. But instead, just before leaving, I checked in the top right kitchen cupboard, where I'd penned my initials before moving out: LMF, in dark permanent marker.

It's a habit I've had since I was a child, marking my initials in an inconspicuous spot before leaving. In the house on Papermill Road that we moved out of when I was six, the initials are carved in the closet baseboard. At 11235 Wrentham Lane, they're written in red marker behind my bedroom door. In both of my college dorm rooms, the bottom of a dresser drawer. In the past three years' apartments, anyplace hidden enough that it wouldn't cost me my security deposit.

Because the truth is, though I've pretended to leave each of these places, with the boxes and suitcases that signify moving on, there's always some part of me that stays. The part that, on this particular day, lay on the couch at 8 a.m. and wandered fingers across familiar walls and resented unfamiliar furniture. But it's the houses that hold on for us. They aren't afraid to leave a few strings intact, to wear gouges and nailholes and penned initials proudly, to hold on to the lovers who leave them. These inked initials, like all things elemental, have a half-life. And who was it—a Greek mathematician—who noted that if you keep dividing things in half, they are never entirely gone?

Landmarks

The drive from Chicago to Fort Wayne, Indiana, starts with the heady rush of city highways, lit from above by orange-haloed lamps and punctuated by brake lights in front of us, the stop-start syncopation of city traffic. In the warm, quiet darkness of Jon Jenkins' stick-shift Mazda, I clutched the armrest to my right, pushed an invisible brake at my feet. He drove too fast for my liking, although really he was just keeping pace with traffic. I was 20, but had never learned how to drive stick, and I always got butterflies when he depressed the clutch and started out of tollbooths at 40 miles per hour, then shifted up and sped us through the rows of oblong lights. There was a sense of the infinite as we glided over Chicago's fast, slippery highways, the skyscrapers towering before us, then passing into the rear-view mirror. His speed gave me a nervous ache that felt like love. I asked him if I could put my hand over his on the gear-shift, the way my dad had let me do when I was a child. He said sure, and in this

disguised hand-holding, I knew I'd succumbed to going home for the holidays solely for the rush of this drive.

We both came from families we referred to as mended: the kind that should have broken long ago, but were still held together by fraying seams. My own parents had a tense relationship that seemed to have endured for 30 years only because staying was easier than leaving. His dad had fled to Canada when he was two, leaving his mother and a new stepfather to raise him. In both of us, there was a sense of dread in going home. It hung tense and silent in the car, under the hum of the heater and rattle of coins in the cup holders. Fort Wayne, for us, was firmly lodged in the past, and this drive akin to backward motion. Jon and I had gone to high school together, although we weren't friends then. He was too cool for me—the guitarist of a garage band called Joe's Basement, and everyone knew he was having sex with Emily Swiss, who was tall and blonde but had a big nose. I never told Jon that I found her unattractive, despite the popularity she'd wielded. Jon was three years my senior, and so we'd only overlapped at Homestead High School for a year—his senior, my freshman. Four years after he graduated, when he was 22 and I was 18, we'd met again through a mutual friend in Chicago, and I liked having someone who knew where I came from and regretted it as much as I did. There was a comfort in being known, in naming people and places we both knew, and, oddly, in corroborating each other's despair at returning home. Somehow, all the parts of Fort Wayne—those fondly and not-so-fondly remembered—gained more significance to me because Jon and I shared them.

Jon knew the landmarks of our trip home, and pointed them out to me: The Michigan City prison, flanked with warnings not to pick up hitchhikers, that meant we had two hours to go. The all-night Hardee's on the Indiana Toll Road. The hand-painted sign on Route 30 advertising CB RADIOS, ANTENAS that meant an hour and a half. And then the final turn off the highway and onto County Line road that meant 20 minutes, almost there. At the noting of each sign or turn, I lamented a little, using these landmarks as measures of our waning time together.

As the city lights dwindled to suburbs, then to unbroken farmland, we talked more. It was as if we felt a need to fill the vast physical space with sound. I remember being uncomfortably aware during these talks—aware of how I sounded, of the slightly nasal tone of my voice sinking into the Mazda's upholstery. He talked about Buddhism, about God being an internal force rather than an external one. He told funny one-night stand stories. I told him I'd never been in love, although I suspected, then, that I was. I almost—almost—talked about us, every time. I talked about our comfort with each other, about physical attraction (in a general sense, so as not to reveal anything prematurely), about independence. Once, as I was lamenting my lack of the serious relationship I so wanted (the “with you” part left unspoken), he looked at me and said, “You know, you're somebody's dreamgirl.” Oh, how I romanticized that statement. He must have meant that I was *his* dreamgirl, right? I failed to see the statement for what it really was: Jon telling me that I'd find someone—someone who wasn't him. He let me make thinly-veiled confessions for hours, played along in a game that I thought he didn't get. But he must have. And as hard as he must have tried

to avoid leading me on, I managed to twist all of his words into confessions of his love for me.

A couple of hours into the trip, our talk turned to food. It was the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, long since dark, and Jon and I figured that our families had likely eaten without us. He suggested dinner, and I agreed, giddy at the thought of adding an hour to our time together. We found an Olive Garden just off the highway, and though we both agreed it was tacky, it was the best option in Merrillville, Indiana—a city comprised of strip malls.

Seated at a corner table for two with a view of the interstate, I commented that this felt like a date. Jon smiled. I looked for a hint of sarcasm, or deception, behind that smile, but couldn't make it out. Instead, I saw that he'd slimmed down since high school, and I wondered why I hadn't noticed before that he was now handsome. I remembered him in high school as having a face that was too wide, and eyes set too close together. But now his cheeks had narrowed a bit, though he wasn't what you'd call chiseled. His forehead was high, with a receding blond hairline. He laughed, that easy laugh that I loved so much, the one that I now know was a sign of his avoidance. It was a start-stop laugh, a halting like city traffic. He played with a white cloth napkin that he hadn't yet put on his lap, rubbing the corner between his thumb and forefinger. He didn't know what to say next.

Midway through our meal, three waiters converged on our table and presented us with two (unordered) glasses of red wine and a heart-shaped chocolate cake.

“Attention, everyone,” one of them said to the small, quiet group of diners. “We’d like you to join us in wishing Laura and Bob a happy one-year anniversary.”

Before Jon or I could protest, the waiters were singing an out-of-tune ballad in Italian. Tacky, indeed. Jon and I looked at each other, half-laughing, half-astonished. I was sure he’d done it as a joke, or for the free wine. What a great story this would be, years from now. I longed for it to be our private joke. But then there was loud laughter behind us, and I looked over to see, two tables away, the apparent Laura and Bob waving their arms and laughing.

When the song subsided, along with applause from the other diners, Jon explained the mistake to our server, then asked if we could keep the wine. We did, and the cake, too. We laughed as we ate it, and I was sure this meant something, that our first anniversary had happened prematurely, maybe, but that there would be others. Jon laughed when I told him this. The evasive, easy laugh. When our check came, I reached down to grab my wallet, and Jon didn’t object or reach quickly for his credit card. I put down a ten, and then he did the same. I had hoped he would pay, to turn this into the date I saw it as, but we still had a couple hours of driving left, and I’m sure he was tired of talking about us. If he had paid, it would have meant more questions from me, more quiet laughter from him.

Back on the road, the Chicago radio frequencies faded to static. I scanned through the stations until something else came in. Usually, we found ourselves listening to those late-night shows in which people call to tell their wistful stories over the airwaves, then request songs that remind them of old lovers—Barbara or Roseanne

or Jack. That night, Jon and I sang along to Air Supply and Celine Dion. His voice was deep and his pitch was good. I mocked the songs out loud, but secretly, I liked them. I suppose it's because they helped cement the romance of these drives, the impossible love I was trying to cultivate.

As we drove along County Line Road, a dark, unlined stretch of asphalt bordered by cornfields, Jon got the words wrong.

“Step back you're dancin' kinda slow, I feel a little glow comin' through (pause pause) on you,” he belted into the dark as our headlights bounced on the uneven stretch ahead.

“No, you've got it wrong,” I said, laughing.

“What is it, then?”

“It's 'step back you're dancin' kinda close, I feel a little poke comin' through on you,’” I said quickly. Our hands on the gear-shift moved down into third as we crossed an uneven set of railroad tracks. I removed my hand from his, because I wanted him to notice that it was gone.

We were passing into the sprawling, tree-lined suburbs of Fort Wayne, and I grew quiet. Jon, too. The road was dark and tree-lined, flanked by large houses that were almost hidden, except for a porch light on here or there. I told him to take the next left, into my neighborhood, although he probably remembered from past trips home. We wound around the curves of my subdivision, to the very back, where my parents' house was nestled between a woods and a lake. As he turned up the steep

driveway, I saw that no lights were on in the house. The newspaper from that morning still lay on the concrete in an orange plastic bag.

“Do you want me to carry your suitcase in?” he asked. But I didn’t. I wanted to stay right there in that car, parked and still running in the driveway. Just a few more seconds, I thought, as I slowly picked up the purse that sat on the floormat between my legs. I set it in my lap and looked at him, but he was eyeing the garage door, as if expecting it to open and cast light onto the driveway. It didn’t, though. I put an arm around him, a clumsy attempt at a hug. The steering wheel was in the way, and he still had his seatbelt on. So I pulled back, opened the passenger door. He tripped a lever that made the trunk spring open, and I hoisted my suitcase out. I rolled it up to the front door, through the dark shadows cast by old oaks in the lawn. The plastic wheels bumping along the concrete masked the sound of his car turning around, backing down the driveway.

My Mother's Pictures

Whenever I go back to my parents' house, the pantry is filled with a different, odd selection of foods. One time, it was Slim-Fast bars, the kind that I mistook for candy bars, but which resembled candy only in their rectangular form and brown wrapper. They tasted like chocolate-coated vitamins. Or pork rinds—bag after bag of pork rinds, apparently the only snack allowed on the Atkins Diet. These are the signs of my mother's latest attempt at beauty—or, I suppose I should say, at retaining it. Though she's five-ten and slender, it's as if she wants to tease her body into looking twenty again, or into believing it never bore two children. Tacked to the refrigerator, alongside my sister's report cards and a couple of my high-school portraits, is a picture of my mom and her friend Bonnie, in their early twenties, both newly married, standing by the pool in their bikinis. She can tell me exactly how much she weighed when that picture was taken, or when she was married, or what size dress she wore to the senior prom.

When I was in high school, and fifteen or sixteen, I used to retreat to the basement, where my mother kept old photos, some of them arrayed neatly in yellowing albums, the more recent ten years' worth tossed into shoe boxes. I paged through the albums that showed my parents' wedding and their twenties, before I'd come along. I was trying, I think, to figure out what they were really like. The photos made them seem more like people, and less like my stoic, closed-off parents. They were people who skied, people who walked along beaches in Southern California, people who smoked a hookah and wore colanders on their heads at parties. Looking at these pictures, I always felt a bit guilty, as the oldest child, as if I'd personally stripped them of their carefree life, of their togetherness. I felt like an intruder, one who had turned their drawers upside down and spilled the contents on the floor, looking for something I couldn't find or didn't know. I ransacked my own house, looking for a past no one seemed to mention; maybe they didn't remember it. It had been so long since they looked happy.

One of these pictures is of my mother, sitting on the couch at her mother's house—my Grandma Rose's. It must have been during the holidays; there are Christmas lights and garland strung along the ceiling above her. She's leaning back with her long blue-jeaned legs crossed, and her hair falls effortlessly across one shoulder and the back of the sofa. She has a slight smile on her face—the tight-lipped, almost-smirking way she smiled until she got braces in her thirties. One time, my mom caught me looking at this picture in a turquoise-covered album, its cellophane

sheets stuck to each other. She told me that her mom used to have that picture pinned up at work, above her desk at the RCA plant in Marion, Indiana.

“Oh, Rosie, she should be a model,” my grandmother’s co-workers used to say of my mom.

There was a wistfulness in her voice—a wistfulness for what she’d had, and I suspect, for what people would never say of her own daughter. She wanted those compliments for me as much as she’d wanted them for herself. I tried not to care.

But I started spending time in front of the bathroom mirror before going to school, even though it was hopeless. I resemble my father in just about every way, and was always trying to stave off developing his characteristics that my mother criticized—his long, straight German nose and his red hair.

“I’ve never liked red hair,” my mother told me once. “Your dad’s used to be brown.”

I would look in the mirror at my hair, with each individual strand a different color. I used the tweezers to pull out ones that might have been red, or in danger of becoming it. I asked my friends at school whether they considered my hair red or brown. Their consensus of “auburn” didn’t satisfy me.

I used to push up the end of my nose while studying, holding my index finger to it until a red line formed where I’d creased it for fifteen or twenty minutes. I wanted it to turn up at the end, not down like my father’s. I wanted it to look like my mom’s had after her nose job—slightly concave, with small, flat nostrils.

Once, looking for something or other in the laundry room, I came upon a stack of old jeans. They were bell-bottom Calvin Kleins from the '70s, a style that had come back into vogue during my last years of high school. I took them up to my room surreptitiously, feeling like I was stealing something, feeling like I'd found something I shouldn't have. I slipped into the jeans, and the legs were too long, covering my feet and extending beyond my toes. Buttoning the waistband was useless; my mother had been at least a size smaller than I was. I took the jeans back off and changed into my own, which suddenly felt slouchy and unglamorous. I folded my mom's jeans and tucked them back in the laundry room cupboard where they'd been. Had she been holding onto them for me, or hoping she'd someday fit into them again?

Despite all these efforts, I continued to resemble my dad—in the curly hair that framed my face, the chubby cheeks and recessive jawline, soft, wide eyes and small, steady hands, the freckles that dotted our noses and cheeks after a long day in the sun. We are both meticulously neat, with an aversion to clutter, and I inherited his ability to draw well. Everything, we agree, tastes better with bacon. I know all of this about my dad because I know it about myself. And that's where my ability to understand my mother falters. Because I don't share any of her traits, she remains an enigma. Without her beauty, I can't grasp her motivations. Sometimes I tell myself that her motivations are limited to beauty. Although I know that can't be true. She told me once that she would gladly give up my dad if it meant holding on to my sister and me. I recall the moment well: we were sitting in her car, in the garage. It must have been time for me to go to tennis lessons, or piano, or dance. The car wasn't even running yet. We were

just sitting there, she in the driver's seat and I next to her on the passenger side, and she looked at me when she said it. "I'd give my life for you kids" were her words. I felt her gaze pulling at me, and looked her in the eye for just a moment. She had such light-blue eyes, with the beginnings of lines around the edges. She would have been 40, then. I quickly looked back down, embarrassed, focusing on the car keys she held in her hand. My sister was in the backseat, but at age four, she was too young to understand the gravity of the statement, or the awkwardness of the situation. My mom rarely vocalized her feelings, and her doing so made me squirm. I silently urged her to hurry up, drive. I wanted the intimacy broken, the moment over. I remember thinking, uneasily, that she shouldn't feel that way. It was a gift I wanted to give back, one I didn't think I needed.

*

For her birthday that year, I had given my mother a plastic keychain that said, "Forty: Twice as Nice as Twenty." She tells the story over and over again of going to the gas station, where the attendant at the register spotted her keys on the counter.

"Forty?" he said. "You don't look like you're forty."

She is 57 now, and these are her trophies, these accolades from strangers, and she bears them proudly, pulling them off the shelf of memory for anyone who'll listen. I wonder, still, whose acceptance she's looking for. Sometimes I worry that it's mine.

But when I was growing up, I never expressed my disapproval of these rituals, of this holding on to compliments from strangers. In fact, in some way, I think I craved my mom's undoing. With all the certainty of adolescence, I felt that something

needed to make her realize that there were virtues besides looks. And that moment happened, but I may have taken too much advantage of it—in a way that pushed her farther out of my life.

I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom. I was a senior in high school then, and probably getting ready to go out with friends or to baby-sit, although I spent countless hours in the bathroom at that age, even when I had nowhere to go. This time, I think it was evening, and my dad had just come home from work. He walked through the hallway, past my bathroom and into my parents' bedroom. I think he was looking for my mother, to tell her hello and probably ask her where they'd be going out to dinner.

I didn't hear any words over the running water, but I felt the bedroom door slam. It rattled the hallway walls and echoed as its sound fell over a balcony, bounced off the foyer floors, and traveled back upstairs. Then I saw my mother, running down the hallway. My dad opened the door and followed shortly after, holding a dress shirt in his hand. I stayed in the bathroom, but stopped brushing and held the toothbrush in my hand so I could hear.

"I don't know," my dad said, responding to some question I'd missed. "Maybe it was a patient."

I stepped out of the bathroom and walked down the hall, to where my parents were standing at the top of the stairs. I remember how white the carpet looked, and how the sun came in from our front yard—so yes, it was evening, when the sun shone through the trees in the west and fell in through the picture windows like cobwebs.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Your father has lipstick on his collar,” my mother said, then pursed her lips as if it would hold back her tears. It seems so almost theatrical to me now—like such a foolish move on my father’s part, to commit this mistake so common among cheaters. He had given himself away too easily, I thought. I was ashamed for him at having made such a mistake, if that’s what it really was. Although something in his demeanor suggested it wasn’t. He wasn’t looking at me or my mom, but at his work shoes, brown loafers with slight creases in the top where his toes bent when he walked. I, too, kept my eyes down.

And that’s when I said it. Maybe I thought it would be funny, or break the tension I was always trying to cut through.

“Way to go, Dad!” I said with my mouth still full of minty froth.

My mother slapped me across the cheek so hard the spitty toothpaste flew out of my mouth and left a series of mint splatters across the white carpet.

I’d thought my tone to be properly sarcastic. But she heard, behind it, my true allegiance. How could I applaud my dad’s philandering? And I’m still not sure whether, with that remark, I wanted to show my dad that I was on his side, or my mom that I wasn’t on hers. Although I suspect I was being spiteful. That’s how it felt when I said it.

“You’ll appreciate me when I’m dead,” my mom told me, then put a hand over her face and walked down the stairs, with the cobwebs of sunlight tangled in her hair.

My father never left her, and maybe it's the beauty she thinks he's holding on for. During my last trip home, I noted that she sleeps, now, with surgical tape over her temples, reaching out from the sides of her eyes, and three long, horizontal stripes of it across her forehead. This way, she explains, she won't get wrinkles while she's sleeping. She is trying to keep everything in position, hold it steady, in that unattainable way things used to be.

Summers in Fort Wayne

I'm not sure how she found out it was true, what she'd long suspected. Maybe she found a receipt in the garbage that had escaped the shredder. Someone had thrown something away that she had diligently labeled SAVE—one of our report cards, her work schedule, a postcard reminding her of a dentist appointment. My mom always kept a pile on the kitchen counter of items needing to be saved. But inevitably, one or two a year made it into the garbage can, then out to the larger bin in the garage. Maybe it was one of these mundane leaflets she was searching for when instead she found a bill recording the expenses of a night's stay at the Holiday Inn not 10 miles from home. Or some sort of "meet me after work" note scribbled on one of my dad's prescription pads. Or a credit card statement detailing gifts she certainly hadn't received, from stores not indicative of her husband's shopping habits.

It was nearly summer when she found out. I could have told her many summers earlier.

All summers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, tend to blend together. I remember them as having only mornings, dusks, and nights, none of the sweltering afternoons that must have happened.

Mornings, especially on weekends, meant waking up to the sun that bounced off the lake and streamed into my east-facing bedroom. Without showering or eating breakfast, I'd dress and head outside to join my dad in whatever sort of yard maintenance he was performing. We rarely spoke during these sessions, whether because we enjoyed the quiet rumination of pulling weeds, or the din of riding the lawnmower in repetitive rows. I preferred pulling weeds, tugging them up gently to expose their white roots. My dad liked trimming the hedges with a set of manual clippers that broke each branch with a loud snap. We shared an unspoken appreciation for the smell of fresh-cut grass and cold soil under our fingernails. And somehow I think the simplicity and physical strain of these tasks was a reprieve from his weekdays of patients and diagnoses and a professional obligation to cure the incurable. Nonetheless, he treated the flowerbeds as he did eyes with cataracts: by carefully extracting the bad without causing damage to the good.

On weeknights there were basketball games. His boxy gray Volvo rolled into the garage just as dinner started to make the house smell like home. I remember the sound of the door closing behind him as he entered, then waiting for him to set down his briefcase and white coat in the den. Within 10 minutes, he bounded downstairs in his "play clothes" and we headed outside, trailed by the slamming door.

The ball's worn rubber softness slid over my hands in a firm pass to his chest. "Check," he would say, and slide it back through cooling evening air. And we were off, shoving and shooting, our sneakers grinding the concrete. The ball's dull thud became a rich echo ricocheting off our brick-and-cedar house.

We couldn't land hook shots, and laughed defeatedly when they missed the backboard and thumped through the lawn. We didn't keep score, and only the rosy pinks and impending blues of dusk kept time.

Sweat clung to our temples, turning our auburn hair a shade darker on the edges when we lurched back inside. In the kitchen, the meatloaf waited, cold and half-eaten, with my mom and sister silent at the dinner table. Yes, we were in trouble, my father and I. With our heads lowered and our breath still heavy from the game, we'd scoop our own portions onto plates and eat quickly, quietly, as my mom got up and began loading dirty plates, pots and pans into the dishwasher. My sister, too, retreated, heading upstairs to her bedroom, where she'd close the door and not emerge for the rest of the evening. I suppose this was our punishment, to eat cold food by ourselves, but I secretly enjoyed it. The way we ate so perfectly embodied the divide in our family that I couldn't help but think it appropriate.

The rest of those nights, humid and taking their time to grow dark, were spent indoors, with windows open to funnel in a breeze from the lake. The air smelled of lakewater and sometimes dead fish. Bullfrogs hummed and our slow, plastic paddleboat clunked back and forth against the sides of the slip, as if rocking someone to sleep.

And then there were the arguments, the ones that took place after I went to bed but before I fell asleep. They happened year-round, but somehow the sound traveled better in summer: out an open downstairs window, then floating up on the nighttime breeze to enter my bedroom. The words were whispered, near impossible to make out, but punctuated by the sobs that seemed to break my mother in two, or my dad's fist coming down on the oaken kitchen table. I secretly hoped for them to get a divorce, year after year. It was a guilty fantasy, but I rationalized it by telling myself things would be easier that way. My mom and sister, who was six years younger than I, could move to Indianapolis, since they were always making the two-hour trip to better shopping. And my dad and I could stay in Fort Wayne, keeping up the lawn, playing basketball, so that on the outside, it would look as if nothing had changed. But nothing did change. So 25 years of marriage slipped into 26, and so on.

But 1998 was the year my memories of summer veer away from morning yardwork, from driveway basketball and evening air. I had graduated high school, and passed the days until I would leave for Northwestern by working for my dad and the other surgeons in his practice. In my memory of this job, there are no mornings or nights—only pre-dawn hours and long indoor days. My alarm clock sounded at 4 a.m., when the lake was glasslike and silent, and when the darkness was punctuated only by an occasional goose call. Walking outside to my car, I'd shiver and wipe condensation from the windows with the palm of my hand.

The 20-minute drive took me from the expansive suburbs of southwest Fort Wayne into the city's downtown—a humble version of a city, and at that hour, not much of one at all. But the too-bright lights of the operating room awakened me as I prepped patients for their 7 a.m. surgeries. First, there was the series of eyedrops—numbing drops that left an odd yellow coating on patients' eyes, dilating drops that they said stung, antibiotic drops that ran down their cheeks as they blinked. I administered each drop twice, with 10 minutes in between. Then I swabbed the bottles with miniature alcohol wipes and placed them back in their plastic stands. As a nursing assistant, this was the only patient work I was legally allowed to do, and to be honest, it made me a bit nervous and queasy, those plastic tips so perilously close to patients' eyes.

The operating room setup was my favorite. Scrubbed, gloved, and gowned, I gingerly unwrapped the blue plastic covering of each sterile tray and arrayed the instruments in the order they'd be used. I covered the microscope handles with sterile, sticky film. Near the room's swinging door, I laid out the surgeon's paper attire, careful to touch it only by the inside armpits. Peeling back the wrappers that gloved the gloves, I laid the left one on top or the right, per each surgeon's preference.

It was this consoling monotony that I embraced before my dad entered to embark on his delicate surgeries. I was able to put off, at least in my mind, what was to come. For in the dim light and breathy silence, my smallest mistake—an instrument placed in the wrong hand, a cotton swab dropped to the floor—was cause for humiliation, or worse, tears that ran down my cheeks and wet the upper rim of my

paper mask. In the operating room, my father had a quiet determination about him. His eyes never left the microscope he looked through, and his hands laid down each instrument gently on the paper-wrapped tray. If the next one wasn't ready, though, with me holding it just above his right hand, he had to look up. He didn't like to look up. He would blink his eyes a couple of times, as if adjusting to the unmagnified size of things. And then he'd look right at me. He didn't have to say anything. I was already reaching for whatever it was I'd forgotten—a tweezer, a scalpel—and laying it in his right hand between the thumb and forefinger. He never said a word, but instead, just let me be mad at myself for missing a cue. He could have reminded me that I needed to pay attention, to follow the steps of the cataract surgery, to think about what came next, just as he'd shown me. He could have told me that I shouldn't be doing a job so advanced, that I should have been filing charts. But I knew he liked having me in there, and I knew that my mistakes were infrequent. His silence, though, was worse than if he had yelled, than if he had said anything.

It was in the early morning, before surgery, before I'd screwed up, that I could relax at work. I listened as the nurses swapped stories of their husbands and family vacations, their kids' day camp. It was my dad's long-standing scrub nurse, Tammy, who made me at home in this white-bright environment. She smelled of strong coffee and cigarettes, and had eyes the same blue as the scrubs we wore. She had a knowledge of me that I don't recall finding peculiar. I suppose she kept her questions general—things that any scrub would know about the child of the surgeon she'd stood next to for eight, ten hours a day, for five years. Questions like Are you guys going to

the lake house this weekend? When do you leave for Northwestern? Are you still playing basketball?

So I'm not sure what tipped me off that she knew more. She may have asked too many questions about my dad. Or too many about my mother. But I think I recall a moment in which she said in the operating room, "Lauren Marie Fath!" I don't know whether I'd done something wrong or right, but I remember that use of my middle name breaking the barrier of acquaintance I thought she'd had with my family. I wondered how she knew my full name, since no one—not even my mother—called me by it.

From then on, I became a silent observer of her interactions with my dad, most of which were limited to handing over instruments in a tense, dense operating room. She anticipated his next need in a way I admired. She seemed invincible, in a way that I as a scrub wasn't. She never evoked my dad's quick temper. She called him "DF," the acronym he used to sign thick piles of charts. She called me "Baby Fath," a term I took to be more endearing than demeaning. He called her "Tamster," and seemed to have a different laugh reserved for her, one I'd never heard.

I suspected my dad and Tammy were having an affair, but aside from their work interactions, I couldn't prove anything. So I kept my ideas to myself. In fact, I suppose something in me liked this notion of knowing my father's secret life. He was a polite man with quiet green eyes and knobby doctor's hands that smelled of rubber gloves, even at home. To this day, I know little about his past. But I've always admired his reticence and ambition. He doesn't brag, so what I do know of his

achievements comes from reading the “About Our Staff” section of his practice Web site. There are fellowships listed and humanitarian work, published research and adjunct professorships. I remember finding, among the piles of photos and mementoes in our basement, a newspaper clipping with a picture of my young dad and a brief article about an award he’d won as a medical student. The walls of his home office are adorned with plaques for this-or-that award, or certifying that he’s been the president of such-and-such society. They’re credentials representing stories I’ll never hear. But *this* was a story I could hear, without him having to tell me. I reveled in knowing something of him that no one else did, and I suspect I wanted to keep it that way, to further the bond we had, the alliance against my mother. There is an intimacy in knowing something that no one else knows.

The summer I worked for my dad, I had a frequent daydream that played in my mind while I stood in the operating room, watching Tammy place instruments in my dad’s hand. With her, he never had to look up. I imagined a phone call to our house, answered by my mother: Someone had suffered severe eye trauma. The hospital had paged my dad, called his office, called the private line that rang directly to his desk. Could we help get ahold of him?

Meanwhile, my dad had told us he was going into the office to take care of some charts. My mother urged the person on the phone to, again, try the office. “He said he would be there,” she repeated over and over, the facts failing to sink in.

In another room, I kept quiet, picturing some sort of afternoon tryst at the Holiday Inn two blocks from the office, where my dad had likely parked his car. I pictured pagers and cell phones, either unheard or ignored, in the pockets of pants tossed to the floor. We could call the Holiday Inn. We could find out what room they'd checked into. But I couldn't betray my father. Couldn't have him realize what I was too acutely aware of. Guiltily, I wanted this to continue; I wanted his affair to be "our little secret," though he had no idea of my suspicions. To give him away would mean that, soon, everyone would know him as well as I did.

So I upheld my selfishness, I said nothing, and the patient with the fish hook in his eye or the narrow angle glaucoma or the retinal detachment inevitably lost his sight. It was my mind's way, I believe, of placing the burden on me—and by doing so, removing it from him. I wanted him to be able to hold on to what he had, to whatever he hadn't found at home. In some small way, as the guardian of his covert life, I also thought myself the guardian of his happiness.

It was many a night—and not in any daydream—I heard my mom on the phone: "Can you page my husband? I think he's there. Yeah, last name's Fath. F—as in Frank. Thanks." Pacing back and forth across the kitchen, phone to her ear, she waited for the man on the phone to find her husband and return him home. My dad went out frequently—dinner meetings and outings with other "docs," as he called them, required it. But perhaps my mom suspected other reasons, as well.

I was four or five the first time I heard her on the phone like that. My sister wasn't born yet, so at that point, we weren't yet a family split down the middle. I don't recall an allegiance, at that young age, to either of my parents, even in tricky moments like this one. Hanging up the phone, my mom looked at me, accusing. Accusing *me*, it always seemed. I hadn't known better.

“Your father would rather be at some bar than here. He'd rather be drinking than tucking you into bed. He doesn't love us.”

She'd sit down next to me on the couch, take the picture book out of my hands, and tell me that my daddy would be glad to see me when he got home, though, and urge me to wait for him on the front porch. I was allowed to take my book with me, and look at it under the porch light.

“That way you'll be the first thing he sees when he drives up,” I seem to remember her saying. So I'd walk away, through the foyer and out the front door and into the embrace of warm, dark humidity that even in summer smelled remotely of pine.

There was a wooden bench on our porch. I don't know where it is now, what happened to it. But I sat there, pulled my pajama-soft knees into my chest and watched for my dad to pull up the driveway. I don't think I was ever left out there too long—maybe an hour at most. But a child's sense of time is easily quickened and slowed. Reading my book seemed to hasten my dad's car home. Staring out into the suburban night slowed every motion, every sound: a moth fluttering toward the porch light, or a dog barking to be let in. I stood sentry against neighborhood raccoons or

opossums, determined that none would eat me for a late-night snack. So I was overcome by relief when I saw headlights round the corner, and my dad's car slide into the driveway.

“What are you doing out here?” he would ask, picking me up and smelling of something I didn't recognize. I wonder, now, whether that smell was Tammy's—coffee, cigarettes. All I remember is the way his cologne—it came in a green glass bottle, with a horse on it—got so much stronger when he picked me up and my nose and cheek brushed his neck. He carried me inside in one arm, and my abandoned book in the other.

I do remember distinctly the weekend when a fissure beneath the surface of our family became a palpable crack. It was my senior year of college, 2002, and I'd come home for Memorial Day weekend. I'd scarcely been in touch with Tammy during the past two years, so I was surprised that she knew I was in town, and that she called to invite me over for a couple of beers.

It was the kind of May night that wraps itself around you, that sinks into your skin and leaves a dewy film on hard surfaces. I walked out to my car and, with the palm of my hand, wiped a layer of mist from the windows.

I'm not sure, then, how my dad approached me before I got in and left. Perhaps he turned on the garage light and I saw his silhouette approach. Perhaps the door from inside to out closed loudly enough to hear. Or maybe it was his voice, calling out

“Loreen,” his special nickname for me. At any rate, we both stopped there, in the driveway. There was light from the garage splayed across the pavement.

In my whole life, there are a few words I remember exactly. They are his, spoken from a face too dark to see. “Your mom wanted me to tell you. Tammy and I have been . . . more than friends.”

And my own: “I know.”

The rest of the conversation is lost to me—I only know it was brief. I left anyway—perhaps because I still wanted to see Tammy, but mostly because I didn’t want to go back inside and see my mother. She would have expected my allegiance to shift. Would have expected my sympathy to be with her now. But it wasn’t. I think I must have resented her for learning the secret that was, for so long, mine alone.

The drive out to the adjacent town of Berne, Indiana, was likely spent thinking how I would tell Tammy that I knew. I knew what had happened, and I knew what she had lost. I am convinced that she loved my dad, that she thought he would leave us for her. And for some reason I didn’t resent her for that. I understood. In fact, I understood more the choice my dad *didn’t* make. I would have left.

The highways in this part of Indiana are smooth and unlit, bordered by cornfields and a hovering smell of manure, especially in summer, when the air holds everything close. When I arrived, Tammy was on the front porch with a cigarette. For some reason her cigarettes always smelled okay to me. They smelled like her. She went inside to get me a beer. And then we had a conversation I don’t remember,

except for its aftermath. She told me everything: of business trips and weeklong stays in Texas or California. Of early mornings in hotel rooms, when my dad claimed to be playing basketball at the gym. Of eight years, she figured it had been. Of coming over when my mom chaperoned our high school journalism trip to St. Louis. Of sex with my dad in rooms in our house that, suddenly, seemed hers and not ours. I'd always longed for the details, but knowing them repulsed me. It is the details we are unaware of, the ones we couldn't have controlled, that haunt us most.

She also told me that it was email, how my mom had found out. She'd tapped into his email, typing password after password until she guessed the right one. She'd intercepted notes for months. Scanned hotel parking lots for the gray Volvo. Understood why her husband's basketball clothes weren't sweaty when he brought them home for her to launder. But in the end, for reasons I still don't know, neither one of them left. So 34 years of marriage have slipped into 35, and so on.

And as I drove the hour back home, that night, from Tammy's, I pictured my dad in the living room, keeping guard over the quiet house in his broad, leather armchair. He had the windows open, letting in those first notes of early summer—the bullfrogs, the fluttering moths that dove toward lighted windows, their wings tapping against the screens. The slow paddleboat, just placed back in the lake a few days ago, rocking side-to-side. And from where he sat, my dad could see the driveway, could see my two headlights turn toward home. He didn't know what to expect, I imagined, but knew then that I had all the answers, that my secret was complete, though no longer

just mine and his. And when I walked through the door, he would recognize the familiar gift that trailed me home from Tammy to him: strong coffee and cigarettes.

Saturday Nights

At age fifteen, I wasn't sure what to buy for two kids, ages ten and six, whose mother had just killed herself. My logic, though it now seems faulty, was that flowers would die. I wanted Amanda and Andrew to have something they could keep. But I'm not sure why I thought they would want keepsakes that reminded them of their mother's funeral. Perhaps that's precisely why people buy flowers for funerals.

Outside a local bookstore, I climbed down from my mom's towering SUV and into a bitter cold. She offered to park and come into the store with me, but I declined.

"I want to do this on my own," I said. "Can you just wait in the parking lot?"

She agreed, understanding the gravity of the task, to a teenager. I roamed among the tall shelves, looking for the perfect gifts for Amanda and Andrew Irish. For Amanda, I found a satin-covered journal. It was blue and cool to the touch, the pages blank, edged with gold. For Andrew—who was always a little harder to shop for than his older sister—a book about famous baseball players in history. He was a Toronto

Blue Jays fan, but loved all of baseball. When I baby-sat for him, he could spend hours leafing through his small collection of baseball cards and telling me—in his pronounced lisp—stories and statistics about all the players. This book told longer stories, stories accompanied by full-page color pictures of batters mid-swing and pitchers stopped in motion.

At the checkout, the cashier offered to gift-wrap the items for me, and I accepted. But I forgot to mention that these were funeral gifts. So when she re-emerged at the counter and handed me one gift wrapped in elegant but too-bright flowered paper and the other in a print of sports equipment, I couldn't protest. I would just have to re-wrap the gifts myself, at home. That seemed like the right way to do it, anyhow. I had purchased these gifts with the money I'd made baby-sitting, and I wanted them to really be from me, in the way that young people take such care in giving gifts. It is a pleasure, not a chore as it becomes later in life. So I suppose I delighted in being able to offer presents I'd chosen and bought by myself, even on this occasion.

Sandy Irish's wake would be held downtown, at a quiet, side-street parlor near the convergence of Fort Wayne's three rivers. I was allowed to borrow my mother's car and drive myself there—it was her suggestion, and a small confirmation of my independence. I recall well the twenty-, maybe even thirty-minute drive from the city's expansive suburbs into the tight, compact downtown. It was winter and already dark, even at five in the evening. Fort Wayne's cluster of tall buildings, still lit from

Christmas, poked out in the clear, dark sky. I was nervous. I had never been to a wake. I played with words in my head, wondering what I would say to their father. The requisite *I'm sorry for your loss*, and maybe an offer: *If you ever need help with the kids, I'm always around*. Although would that imply that he couldn't take care of the kids himself, or worse yet, that I was trying to step into his late wife's role? I'd stick to condolences, I figured. What to say to the children was harder. I wasn't sure whether they would understand how their mom had died, or even understand that she *had* died. That she wasn't coming back.

The funeral home was dim and quiet, and everything seemed to be hushed by the thick green carpet underfoot. At the entrance was a set of shelves on which guests had placed glass vases of roses and lilies. I laid Amanda's and Andrew's gifts down between the fragrant flowers. I had re-wrapped them just before coming: Amanda's in a more subdued flower print, Andrew's in burgundy and gold stripes usually reserved for Father's Day or my grandpa's birthday. But no one else seemed to have brought presents. I flushed hot; had I been wrong to do so? I considered taking them back, sneaking out and putting them in the car. But having nothing seemed worse than having the wrong thing.

The quiet in the room belied the number of people there. They all seemed to stand in circles, whispering. I felt alone. I mostly remember people's legs: all wearing black trousers, skirts and nylons, and dark, leather shoes. Maybe I remember legs because I first saw Andrew darting among them, chasing his cousin around the room. I was tempted to revisit my role as his baby-sitter, to tell him to be quiet (although I

don't remember him making any sound at all) and stop running inside. But I figured maybe it was better this way, and let him keep ducking behind dark tables and tall chairs in pursuit of the cousin, a slightly-smaller, blond-haired boy.

Though Amanda and Andrew were well-behaved children, rarely giving me a hard time or disregarding my discipline, they had always seemed lonely. Their occasional antics—a sandwich in the VCR slot, an attempt to lure a Canadian goose inside—seemed out of a need for attention, rather than to make trouble. When I entered their house on Saturday nights, it was always silent and immaculate—everything in shades of bright white: the marble foyer floor, the spotless carpet, and glossy-painted trimwork around windows and doors. Every light in the house was turned on, sparkling off of glass tabletops and ornamental vases. The emptiness made the house echo. Despite its cold cleanliness, the Irishes' house always felt warm to me, welcoming. There, I knew my way around; I knew where to find a clean fork, a box of crayons, fabric softener sheets. Because I was also responsible for many of the Irishes' housekeeping duties, I felt as if the home was under my control—as if, in part, I was responsible for its tidy stateliness. But it also looked as if no kids lived there. I couldn't help but compare it to my own.

For never did I hate my house so much as in those quiet moments, when I first walked into the Irishes'. Where I lived, everything was shades of mauve and gray-blue—colonial, almost-country style, too matronly and soft. All the edges seemed to be rounded, dull, never shining. The kitchen table was cluttered with schoolbooks

(admittedly, my own), and the past three years' report cards were hung on the fridge with frog- and goose-shaped magnets. Though my mother kept the house immaculately neat, it felt dirty, cluttered, lived-in. The downstairs smelled of the cranberry- and cinnamon-scented candles that my mother always lit after dinner, and the upstairs like her perfume—weak and clean, like bed linens fresh from the dryer. Perhaps it was this smell—my mother's perfume—that made our house seem too cold, too sterile, not mine. It was this perfume that told of my mother's presence as she moved, unseen, through the house, always straightening up. She bemoaned the amount of “stuff” that had accumulated in the closets, and constantly reorganized in an attempt to control it. I'd come home from school sometimes to find my own closet rearranged, or my bathroom drawers emptied of their contents. This was *her* house, one in which her cleaning reduced me to a mere inhabitant, not a family member.

At the Irishes', each Saturday night, Sandy would always be upstairs, in her cavernous but bright-lit closet, applying makeup at a special tabletop designed just for this purpose. She wore perfume that smelled flowery and earthy-sweet—rose-like—and that scent trailed her through the house as she searched for a handbag or a favorite lipstick. She had a breathy, high-pitched voice, one that seemed to extend words just a shade too long. It turned her husband's name—Jeff—into two syllabus. She had hair dyed bright red, and a nose that was slightly crooked at the end. I thought these traits made her beautiful, unique, though I now see how she might have stood out as trying too hard. That red hair, especially, always did seem a bit too bright. Her chin poked out in a V-shape when she smiled.

Her husband seemed to always be hiding. Most nights, he remained in his basement office until Sandy yelled out his two-syllable name. He would quickly hug the kids, always in a hurry to make his exit. He often left town for long stretches of time, sending Amanda and Andrew postcards from India or London. I think it was this mode of communication he preferred. He was never mean, always soft-spoken and a little awkward. Perhaps he was happy to dwell in his vibrant wife's shadow. But I always wondered how such a quiet man could tolerate such a dramatic wife. Maybe that was his reason for all those trips abroad.

Even now, at the wake, Jeff seemed to disappear too easily, his black suit hidden beneath a quick procession of hugs from people I didn't recognize. There were pictures set on various surfaces, still in the frames I recognized from the Irishes' house. There was the same one that hung in my locker at school—the two kids on ice skates, having just finished a fierce hockey game on the frozen-over lake behind their house. There was one of Sandy hugging Andrew from behind, her prominent chin balanced on the crown of his blond head. He was only missing one tooth then, so it must have been at least a year ago. Curiously, I didn't see any of Sandy with Amanda, and when I thought about it, Sandy always seemed to like Andrew more. She called him "Boo-Boo," a nickname whose origin I didn't know, but which no one else used. Amanda was just Amanda, although she liked it when I called her "Manders." I liked her more. Similar to me, she had a creative streak in her, and would often spend hours kneeling at the coffee table, drawing me pictures. For Christmas, just a couple of

weeks ago, she'd made me no less than ten different cards with marker drawings of reindeer and crooked pine trees. I wondered why her drawings were never hung up anywhere in that house. Maybe, I hoped, she made them only for me.

I spotted her, then, the one I really wanted to see, standing flush against her father's leg. She was quiet, but not crying. She was wearing a black velvet dress that showed her skinny legs, poking out underneath a full skirt. She seemed taller, older, despite her narrow shoulders and little girl's figure. But she couldn't have grown in the week since I'd last baby-sat for her. She held one hand up to her mouth, biting her nails in the way she always did when she thought she wasn't being watched. But she smiled when she saw me approaching, and detached from her dad's side.

She opened her mouth as if to yell out my name, like she did when I walked through the front door of her house. (As the Irishes' Saturday-night baby-sitter for more than three years, I'd been told not to ring the doorbell. "Just walk on in," Sandy told me. I liked it. It made me feel, each time I did, like another member of the family, coming home.) But this time, Amanda stifled her squeal into a whispered version of my name. A smile opened up on her face. She grabbed me around the waist, her face nestled momentarily between my breasts. I leaned down to give her a hug at her level. She was thin, angular, bony, but soft in that velvet dress. Her hair smelled like it hadn't been washed in a couple of days—in the pleasant way that kids' hair never really smells dirty, just sort of sweet and oily.

“You hanging in there okay, kiddo?” I asked when she had pulled away from me. Amanda was an impatient hugger, always pulling away before I wanted her to.

“Yeah,” she said slowly. It was almost two syllables, the way her mother would have said it.

“You look pretty,” I said, trying to take her mind off whether she was, in fact, hanging in there.

“Ehh,” she replied, “not really. There was no one to do my hair.” Indeed, her hair—which was straight and almost white-blond, hung limply over her shoulders, clumped up in some places as if it hadn’t been brushed.

“Do you want me to braid it for you?” This was one of her favorite things—one she always asked for when I baby-sat and Andrew had already been put to bed. We would sit in the living room, she on the floor and I on the couch behind her, and I’d French braid her hair while we watched old, black-and-white sitcoms on Nickelodeon. I longed for it, maybe because it’s what my own mother used to do for me when I was younger. We’d watch movies while she braided and un-braided my hair, over and over until she fell asleep with her fingers still tangled in my curls. It sent good chills up my back, raised goosebumps on my arms and legs, and turned my neck to rubber, just like it did for Amanda.

“Sure,” she said to my offer, that smile appearing again.

I led her into the foyer of the funeral parlor, where there was a collection of benches and dark armchairs. I sat on one of the chairs, and she took her spot on the floor between my feet.

As more people entered and some left, they looked curiously at Amanda and me, likely noting our unusual choice of grooming spots. But I wasn't uncomfortable, even if the behavior was probably inappropriate. In this moment, I felt like the one person who could take care of Amanda—a feeling I'd had many times before when I took care of her and her brother.

We didn't say anything to each other as I divided her hair into three sections, then crossed one over the other, picking up more hair each time until a herringbone pattern criss-crossed down the back of her head. She didn't have a ponytail elastic, so I pulled one off my own wrist—where I always kept it, just in case—and secured the end. It felt, then, as if I should tell her to brush her teeth and put her pajamas on, so that I could tuck her in under that white down comforter specked by small, red roses.

There was a certain tranquility to that silent time, feeling alone in the house after the kids had gone to sleep. I enjoyed fingering the Irishes' soft linens and the occasional pair of satin underwear that came through the laundry when it was under my control. Even the foods in their pantry were exotic: flavored coffee mixes, small, thin cookies coated with chocolate, teas with lilting names like chamomile and darjeeling. I didn't dare taste them, though I longed to. I didn't even know how to make tea. Their possessions were foreign to me, elegant. I thought that by taking care of them as if they were my own, perhaps I'd inherit some of this sophistication. I think it was an attempt to make the Irishes my family, for I approved of them much more than my own. I'm sure, had I been there more than Saturday nights, the glamour of

their quotidian life would have worn off. But it never did, mostly because Sandy was so vastly different from my own mother.

She was open with me, asking about boys at school (though I never had much to report) and sharing more of her personal life than I'd ever heard of my mother's. I craved our evening drives home, after she and Jeff had returned. She drove me home in her tan Mercedes with its soft, leather seats still warm. It was a short drive—only about a mile down Liberty Mills Road, from her own subdivision to my own. But I basked in those five minutes, listening to her stories about how she, too, used to just be seen as a “smart” girl and not a pretty one. But look at me now, her stories seemed to say. Everything about her seemed to say, “Look at me.”

Perhaps I hadn't looked hard enough, I thought, tucking stray ends into Amanda's braid. I hugged her good-bye, then, and sent her back to her father. I spotted, standing next to the closed coffin, Sandy's two sisters. I knew them casually, from the couple of times they'd dropped off their own kids, Amanda's and Andrew's cousins, when their own Saturday sitters had cancelled at the last minute. I was surprised to see that they weren't crying, just talking as if out to coffee on a Tuesday afternoon. I wondered whether they were mad at Sandy for what she'd done. I was old enough to realize that suicide is selfish, though it hurt me to think of Sandy in that way. But maybe being mourned is a privilege, one not so easily granted to a woman who'd thrown herself off the twentieth-story balcony of an apartment building. At that moment, I didn't like myself for thinking that; I wanted Sandy's sisters, her husband

and kids, to seem as if they missed her a little more. But everyone seemed silent, closed off. Amanda, I felt, was the only one who had wanted to see me, and she was now being whisked into one hug after another, her frail shoulders disappearing beneath a procession of arms. I left her to this dubious comfort and stepped back outside, where the cold felt good, the air clear and easy to breathe.

As I drove home from the wake—which traced part of the path from the Irishes' home to my own—I recalled those nights that Sandy drove me home. Saturdays so different from this one. Liberty Mills Road was a winding, dark road made still darker by a canopy of thin-fingered trees overhead. Maybe it had snowed and that's why I remember a hint of white illuminating the branches and the roadway, or maybe there was a full moon. In Fort Wayne, where the landscape is flat and the sky unbroken, the winter full moon silvers the edges of everything. And beneath this glimmer, and the faint dashboard lights, I told Sandy, so many times, about my unglamorous family: my parents' fighting, my mother's disapproval of my new jeans, and the way I didn't clean the bathroom well enough. And I talked, too, of how I returned this disapproval, criticizing my mom's plain, white button-downs or how she berated my rare 'B' on a math test. Sandy agreed, calling my mother plain, too strict, old-fashioned. Immediately, when she said those things, I wanted to take back what I'd said.

But at thirteen or fourteen, it seemed worth it to stay quiet, especially when Sandy would let the car run in our driveway and prolong our conversation for an extra

few minutes. She would hug me good-bye—the smell of roses weakened from the evening—and say, “Hang in there, kiddo.”

Kiddo. It sounded familiar.

But last week, I remembered—the last time I’d seen her—Sandy hadn’t driven me home.

The week before, Sandy had been in a play—she had a small role in the civic theater’s production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Jeff had gone to watch. It must have been opening night, because midway through the evening, Sandy phoned. She had forgotten to tell me that tonight, when she returned, she’d be hosting the cast party. Forty people would, within a couple of hours, converge on the Irish household. So could I please prep the house for a party, get the kids dressed up, set out the food and drinks? A bit overwhelmed at the change of plans—we’d just settled into a game of Monopoly—but eager to please Sandy, I said “sure.” I wasn’t dressed for a party, I commented, assuming that I’d be asked to stay and mind the kids. She told me to go into her closet and find something. This, to me, was a particular honor. Not only was I being trusted with her party plans; I was also allowed to enter the cavernous closet that adjoined the master bedroom, to finger the fabrics of her expensive clothes, to wear them.

I hung up the phone and asked Andrew to put away the game, no longer concerned that the colored dollars and tiny metal pieces might not end up where they were supposed to. I enlisted Amanda’s help in picking out clothes for both herself and

Andrew. Their closets were full of dressy attire from expensive local children's shops, though, to my surprise, the clothes weren't in any order. Dresses were smashed up against T-shirts, and clothes remained in there that looked far too small. Amanda's pants weren't on hangers, but instead, tossed in a pile at the bottom of the closet. My own closet, as a child and even now, was never full of expensive clothes, except for a couple of dresses for church or choir concerts. But everything was hung in neat rows, ironed stiff, with like colors brushing against each other. My mom was responsible for this, just like the towels in my bathroom, which were also stacked by color. After sorting through the mess and correcting some shirts that were hung inside-out, I picked for Amanda a green satin dress, and for Andrew a shirt, tie, and pants ensemble, topped off with a navy blazer that would make him look like a miniature prep-schooler. I ran a bath in the master bathroom and one in the other upstairs bathroom, and told both kids to hop in and clean up. Could I leave them unattended, I thought, and get some cleaning done? I hoped I could, and did, running down the white-carpeted steps and into the kitchen. I loaded dishes in the dishwasher and tidied up the pile of fashion magazines, mail, and school papers that had collected on the kitchen island. The fridge, I discovered, was full of appetizer trays, beer, and champagne. I went ahead and set out the food, not sure when I'd have more time to do it. I filled the kitchen sink with ice and packed the beer and champagne in tightly. I'm not sure why, at my age, I determined that this would be more classy than having people reach into the fridge for their drinks. But I was pleased with the effect: The

green and brown glass bottles shone under the kitchen lights, and their multi-colored labels added a punch of color to the white decor.

My own parents never threw parties like this. In fact, I'm not even sure they had enough friends to throw parties like this. So I wasn't sure what else to do. I was desperately afraid, though, of overlooking something, of doing something wrong to garner Sandy's displeasure. I wanted her to be pleased with me, to appreciate my competence and maybe even my good taste. I loved her compliments when she returned home and I'd done the dishes or the laundry, folded and put away stacks of matching bath and hand towels in tall, white closets. I always feared she'd be mad if I hadn't tidied things up, though I realize now that she never seemed to clean, herself. One night, desperate for things to do, I'd even organized all of her fashion magazines by title—*Elle*, *Glamour*, *InStyle*, *Vogue*, and finally, *W*—and then by date. They occupied several tiers of the built-in parlor bookcase. I wondered just briefly why she kept them all, and brushed the thought away, guilty. My mother would have called them clutter, despite their shiny covers and lovely, lithe women in strange, revealing clothes.

To be sure, my mother did not approve of Sandy Irish, nor of my forging any sort of relationship with her. But she had succumbed to my dad's insistence that I should have to work for my spending money instead of getting an allowance, and so I was allowed to return to the Irishes' every Saturday night. But my mother screened Sandy's calls—taking messages and leaving them taped to the kitchen counter for me, instead of calling me to the phone to speak with her in person. She reminded me that

Sandy was selfish, inconsiderate, flighty, and not a good mother to those kids. And maybe my mom was right, I realized as I drove home from Sandy's wake. I saw, as if through my mother's eyes, how she had abandoned her kids.

But just the week before, I saw the party—this impromptu gathering of what I presumed would be a lively theater crowd—as my chance to really impress Sandy, to secure the approval that was always implied but never stated. I lit candles, perched them high enough that the running-around children wouldn't knock them over. I polished the already-clean bathroom fixtures with Windex and paper towels and made sure there were clean hand towels hanging from the white metal rings. I turned on the porch lights, and the large foyer chandelier that cast scattered, diamond-shaped lights on the marble floors.

And last, with Amanda and Andrew occupied setting out plates and glasses for the guests—which they happily did, for they'd absorbed my excitement at the impending party, or maybe just at staying up past bedtime—I retreated to Sandy's closet to pick out my clothes. We were the same size; I knew this because she kept a log of her daily weigh-ins taped to the mirror above the make-up counter. But somehow, everything I tried on felt wrong—too old, maybe, or too glamorous. But wanting to look festive, I selected a red silk camisole adorned with matching sequins. It felt tight and revealing—especially compared to my stodgy baby-sitting sweatshirt. I put on a straight, black skirt with it, a pair of pantyhose and black heels, the shortest ones I could find in the closet. As soon as I had the outfit on, I wanted it off. The tights made my legs itch. The shoes made my ankles totter and shake as I walked. I saw in

Sandy's mirror that the shirt's thin straps left my boring, cotton bra peeking out underneath. I felt the way I always had when my mother dressed me up for Christmas or Easter mass at church: itchy and confined, as if I were showing off, pretending to be prettier than I was.

And I felt the same once the party descended on the Irish household. But it didn't matter. Sandy did compliment my work—briefly noting the beer in the sink with a laugh. But Amanda and Andrew promptly fell asleep on the living room sofa. Their parents left them there, still in their dress-up clothes, as if they were another decoration.

“Why don't we have Jeff drive you home?” Sandy asked just fifteen minutes into the party, with the doorbell still ringing.

I went up to her closet and changed into my comfortable clothes, and hung hers back on their satin-covered hangers. I wanted to stay, not as the nanny or the caterer, but as someone welcome at the party. I wanted to be the third Irish child, or almost-adult, standing around the kitchen island and picking over a platter of carrots and dip, listening to the banter that gave rise to those deep, beckoning laughs. But I padded down the white-carpeted stairs and, unable to locate Sandy for a good-bye, met Jeff at the door that led to the garage.

The drive home was tense, silent. The pepper-haired, Harvard-educated businessman didn't seem to know what to say to me. For once, the trip was slow, painstaking. The road crept in front of the headlights, and finally, we were pulling into my tree-lined driveway, nestled in the back of a small woods. Jeff handed me a wad of

cash—thicker than what I usually got, my fingertips noted, and I climbed out with a quick “See you next week.” I didn’t look at him as I stepped out of the quiet car, didn’t turn around to watch him pull down the driveway, not in the wistful way I would have watched Sandy turn back towards home.

Driving home from the wake, I was eager to get home only so that I could change out of my itchy pantyhose and stiff black skirt. My dressy, heeled shoes pinched my feet as I depressed the car’s brake and accelerator. When I pulled up the driveway, I saw that someone had left the porch light on for me, the same way I always had when it was time for the Irishes to return home. Surely it had been my mom, with her frog- and goose-shaped magnets, her boring button-downs. My mom, who’d shown me how to braid hair, to do laundry, to mop floors so that they weren’t streaked. I felt guilty as I walked through the front door of my darkened house. Even though my parents were both asleep, the TV long ago turned off and only the buzzing, fluorescent light above the kitchen sink left on, I felt as if my mother had caught me sneaking in after a long night out. I closed the front door quickly, trying to keep out the cold. I took off my black leather shoes and set them with the rest of the collection just inside the door. In the kitchen, I took a deep breath—cranberries, cinnamon—and the house seemed almost warm, almost like my own.

The Singer

It is a week before Christmas, a Tuesday around noon, and I sit on my kitchen floor pinning together two pieces of flowered fabric. It's almost dark, but I'm still in pajamas—flannel pants, a bedraggled Northwestern sweatshirt, a pair of once-white slippers that now bear signs of unmopped floors. Cleaning has never been my strong point. In sorting through that closet or vacuuming around a certain shelf, I am almost certainly able to discover something I'd rather do. So with the vacuum cord still plugged in across the room, and poised to trip me for several days thereafter, I will recover a handbag half-made or a skirt without a zipper, and gladly embark on a day in front of the sewing machine. On this particular day, the project is simple: I'd found some scraps of whimsical calico in my closet stash, and decided to make a small child's purse for a friend's daughter.

For this, I won't need a pattern. Unlike my grandmother, whom I recall pinning and tracing broad sheets of onionskin onto fabric, I like to work from a

drawing in my head. It starts out slow, every time. There is the measuring of fabric, the cutting of pieces with pinking shears which loosen a fringe of zig-zagged threads around the edges of the piece. Pinning is an exact act, making sure everything lines up. I think of my father at his garage workbench, urging me to “measure twice, cut once,” advice he never seemed to carry out himself, so that his curses and banging-around of tools were audible even in the house. With pins in place, I sit down at my machine. It has its quirks, but it was a gift, and somehow anything—especially the imperfect—seems more valuable when it has been given to me.

As I sew, the hum of the machine—its quick, syncopated breath—sounds a bit like *hallelujah, hallelujah*, sounds like the weekends that I used to spend at my grandmother’s. Mostly these were in the winter, when my parents would head off with their friends to watch Indiana University football games. I was dropped off at Grandma Fath’s along the way, in the small town of Gas City, Indiana. The town is a collection of old, sometimes dilapidated, houses, and shelled-out school buildings. The sign above the entrance to the town’s headquarters reads “City of Gas City City Hall.” The public library, as I recall seeing it from my parents’ car, had a sign that said PVBLIC LIBRARY, and I always cringed at the Roman-style replacement of U with V. Even at age six, I knew that Gas City wasn’t Rome. It was a town of about 300 that looked as if someone had dropped it years ago in the middle of a field and forgotten to pick it up. Since then, it has made national news just once: for forgetting where its own centennial time capsule was buried. Soon, the whole lawn in front of the Pvblic

Library and City Hall was dug to pieces as the mayor and his faithfuls attempted to locate the capsule—to no avail. It never has turned up.

Nestled within this town, at the corner of 5th and A streets, a block from the Holy Family Catholic Church—where my parents were married—my grandma’s house was its own time capsule. While my grandmother and granddad lingered in the kitchen—she cooking and whistling, he eating what he called Post Toasties and plodding over a crossword—I roamed the house. The upstairs was the best to explore. There was the room still called Dale and Jerry’s room, where my dad and his brother once slept in two twin beds with matching blue-and-green plaid comforters, and where the dresser drawers and closets still held a handful of high-school relics that never made it to a new home. There was a rabbit’s foot, a felt pennant, and a deck of miniature cards, each no larger than my thumbnail. In the closet was a wool-and-leather letter jacket for Gas City High, a now-defunct school that had been merged with Marion High in the next town over. Also in the closet was a small, embroidered pillow—the kind my grandma had made for each of her children, and then her grandchildren. I had my own, at home, on the top shelf of my closet. I wondered whose this was. Who had left theirs behind?

In Lisa’s Room, my aunt’s childhood toys still sat in a small wooden rocking chair and on a window seat covered with a blue, woolen cushion. My favorite, though it now strikes me as sinister, was a doll dressed in a pink jumper and stuffed with sawdust, whose head turned side to side via a small lever on the back of her neck. Her painted-on eyes were always out of focus. But I loved that window seat, and when

afternoon struck and the sun warmed the cushion at an angle, I could pass hours sitting there, paging through old *Reader's Digest* magazines, of which my grandma always seemed to have an ample supply. Unlike at my own house, I was allowed to close the door, and no one would bother me unless there was food ready to be eaten. Here, I could be lost in my books or Grandma's magazines; I could prop up a clipboard on my bent knees and draw; or I could pretend to dust myself with the empty perfume atomizers that had once been my aunt's.

But my favorite room by far was my grandmother's sewing room. It was tucked away at the end of the upstairs hallway, lit by two triangular windows that followed the roof's angles. This room, as I remember it, was always warmer than the rest of the house, whether because it received southern exposure, or because the heating system in this 1904 house had come, over time, to favor certain places. This warm room always seemed to have dusty trails of light filtering through it, landing and swirling on the carpet. (And one ought not to walk barefoot in there, either, my grandma always warned. Sometimes she missed a pin or two on the floor.) In a dresser that sat under one triangular window, each drawer was filled with sewing implements, sorted by type but not color. One was a medley of embroidery floss, each tiny skein neatly bound by a rubber band to prevent unraveling. The thread occupied another drawer, some of the spools so old they were made of wood, not plastic like the ones my mother gave me to play with. Another drawer was yarn, wound into tight balls of different sizes. I was allowed to make anything I wanted to with these multicolored supplies.

My go-to project was called a God's Eye—something I suppose I'd learned in my one year of Brownie Girl Scouts. I scoured Grandma's back yard for two twigs of equal width and length. Sometimes, feeling guilty and making sure the neighbors weren't watching, I'd steal them from the low branches of old Mrs. Cameron's crabapple tree next door. I loved how the small shoots peeled from the branch, wet and flesh-colored beneath their bark. Fresh shoots in hand, I'd return to the sewing room and pick yarn from among the drawer of mint greens and raspberry reds, yellows so rich I could taste meringue on my tongue. Colors always evoke taste for me; perhaps it's akin to synesthesia—the trait of those who can hear orange or smell yellow, like the light that swathed me, sitting cross-legged on the floor of that corner room, as I aligned the twigs in the shape of a cross and wrapped the yarn around them in a diamond pattern, a loop around one stick, then the next, then the next, until the yarn reached the broken-off ends of the sticks. I finished it with a loop.

Grandma hung them in the windows, which rattled in the wind and were cold to the touch, and from the ornate, white-painted stairposts. And though she always thanked me for my creations, at some point, the tall, narrow house ran out of room for God's eyes. And that's when she began to join me in the sewing room. It must have been a year or so later; I was seven or eight when she decided I should learn to sew. My mother had taught me a basic over-under stitch on some scrap fabric, but her own sewing skills didn't much exceed that, and she was at a loss to teach me more. To my grandmother, an accomplished seamstress and quilter, this must have seemed unacceptable. As I grew older, I realized that many of my mother's attributes—her

unfinished pile of mending, her preference for eating out over cooking, her general aloofness—were unacceptable to my grandmother. She was never a spiteful woman, but she did have her ideas about proper mothering.

As Grandma sat in her turquoise, brocade-upholstered sewing chair, I stood behind her, looking over her soft, rounded shoulder. She threaded the machine with magenta thread I had picked from the dresser drawer, then tucked a piece of scrap fabric beneath the presser foot.

“Watch, now,” she urged, showing me how her foot pressed down on the electric pedal and the machine seemed to take off. The thread spool turned circles on top of the machine, the fabric seemed to move of its own accord beneath the presser foot, and a pink line of perfect stitches appeared beneath my grandma’s swollen, wrinkled fingers. And the machine sang its whirring hymn—*hallelujah, hallelujah*. When Grandma let up on the foot pedal—which reminded me of the brake pedal in my mother’s big, blue Oldsmobile—the machine came to a halt and quieted. Grandma tripped a lever in the back of the machine, and the fabric came free. She clipped the pink thread with a pair of nearby scissors and handed me the creation.

“That’s nothing,” Grandma said. But I examined it closely, running my fingers over the even-stitched line of pink that looked nothing like the awkward, taut stitches I’d produced by hand under my mother’s tutelage.

Grandma let me try, then, though my feet barely reached the floor pedal. With a new piece of scrap fabric firmly secured under the presser, I gave the pedal a light tap. The machine whirred, a sort of purring that indicated a motor almost in motion. I

pushed harder—a lot harder—and we were off. The old metal Singer seemed to eat the fabric right out from under my fingers. I couldn't keep hold of it, couldn't seem to feed it straight under the needle that bobbed up and down faster than I could even see. I let up and Grandma gave a good-hearted chuckle.

“It goes pretty fast, huh?” she asked. “You'll get used to it.”

Grandma smiled at me, rubbed her liver-spotted fingers over my pale, bony knuckles. She has an easygoing demeanor but a quick, biting wit. Perhaps it's the result of having raised four children and having lost one. I've only heard my Uncle Dennis, born dead a year before my dad, mentioned once. But there's a lingering sense, in Grandma's house, of holding to what's there. A needlepoint mounted in her kitchen reads, “The one thing your parents give you is roots. The other is wings.” I think it's the wings part that my grandmother doesn't relinquish so easily, even for me; I wasn't even her first child, but her first grandchild.

“You'll always be my favorite,” she said to me as she examined my work. I thought of my younger cousins—Parker and Elaine, and my younger sister. I knew it would sadden them to hear Grandma say that to me. Nonetheless, I gloated for a moment, held on to those words.

Grandma pulled the lever on the back of the machine and extracted my own sewing sample, a crooked, wrinkled hunk of cloth. I hated that piece of cloth as much as I'd loved the act of running it through the machine. This was going to be harder than I thought, harder than Grandma made it look. For a while, I didn't want to try again. I said I just wanted to watch. This is always how I've been—afraid of trying for

fear of messing something up—especially the sewing machine, although that Singer was like a tank, down to its green gunmetal shell. I wanted to watch more, from the safety of behind Grandma’s shoulder. She was making a dress—it was mauve and made of silk taffeta, though I couldn’t have named the fabric at the time. In fact, I think it was a dress for my younger sister, a flower-girl dress for Uncle Jerry’s wedding. Maybe I remember it this way only because I’ve seen pictures of my sister wearing that dress. I do remember with certainty that the garment required a pattern. Grandma laid a broad, long piece of fabric—yes, it was mauve—across one end of her sewing table, and pulling straight pins one by one from an old candy tin, she affixed the yellow, thin-paper pattern to the cloth. Then she cut around it, using special scissors she called pinking shears. I picked them up and they were heavy, with black metal handles. When I cut a scrap of fabric with them, they produced a zig-zagged line instead of the usual straight one. Grandma told me that this kept the fabric from getting “ravelins” on the ends. And for hours, I watched as she cut and pinned, then moved over to the machine, which her spotted old-lady hands kept at bay far better than my small fingers could—better than they do today, even.

Nor is my own sewing machine any match for the old metal Singer. It is white, plastic, and called Europro, a name emblazoned on the front in large, blue-painted letters that seem fleeting compared to the Singer’s deep-grained embossing. But its tendencies are the same: a little push on the pedal and it makes that strained, purring sound. A little harder and it’s suddenly in fifth gear. I’m reminded, usually, of my dad’s driving when we enter I-69 on the way to Grandma’s: slow, oh-so-slow, around

the cloverleaf of the ramp—and then he guns it into the far left lane, testing the zero-to-70 capability of his Jeep. And today, as I sew, it's as if I'm still there, not so much making a project myself, but instead, standing behind Grandma's shoulder in that small corner room. I look at the back of her gray hair, styled once weekly at the Gas City beauty salon. The stiff web of gray curls is parted a bit in the back, having been slept on. Bending intently over her table, she does as I do: careful pinning, cutting, settling the fabric just right under the presser foot. She and I sew the outside of the child's tote bag first. It's a mint-green calico with small flowers, sews up easy without bunching in the machine. Changing the spool, we switch to the thread that matches the lining, with its print of monarch butterflies, tangerine orange and licorice black—poisonous, though you'd never know it from their sumptuous colors. It's finished off with a set of satin ribbon handles. I can hear Grandma pondering their durability—ribbon will fray—but running her hands along their cool grain and attaching them anyway, a quick sweep through the machine is all it takes, just a few stitches, a few utterances of that quiet *hallelujah* as the afternoon exhales a dusty, yellow light.

The Chipp Inn

It is Thanksgiving Day—8:30 p.m. on the West Coast, 10:30 in Chicago. If I were there, in Chicago, I'd be walking to the Chipp Inn. I'd pull my red scarf tighter around my neck and stuff my hands in my coat pockets. According to the *Chicago Tribune* online, it's 32 degrees in Chicago right now, with a chance of snow. I'd pick up the pace, lengthening my steps on the sidewalks that line Ashland Avenue. Past the Green Zebra restaurant and the club Sonotheque, with its brushed-steel exterior and muffled techno-hymns leaking out the front door; past the 24-hour restaurant that serves up grilled cheese sandwiches that leak fragrant grease from their white paper wrappings. And I'd turn right onto Fry Street, a narrow lane lined with cars and single-family homes, packed shoulder to shoulder. No one seems to shovel their front sidewalks on Fry Street, and perhaps there is packed snow underfoot, worn clear and icy by the stream of shoes that trod there before me.

The Chipp is nestled in the ground floor of a house, and the only thing distinguishing it from its neighbors is a row of neon Pabst and Schlitz signs shining through the windows. These lights, like beacons, cast pink and blue hues onto the snow that's packed up against the brick sides of the building. The windows are steamy, showing how warm it is inside, or how cold it is outside—depending on your state of mind.

There aren't many people here tonight—just the regulars. I take a seat at the bar, between Paul, a jazz guitarist with silver hair and a silver beard to match, and kind but icy-blue eyes. On my other side is Beth, a girl about my age, a hipster recently transplanted into this gentrifying west-side neighborhood. She has a multicolored tattoo that stretches all the way up one arm, and hair that falls across her face with a studied nonchalance. Joe is behind the bar; he is the owner, the bartender, the maintenance man, the father, with his broad shoulders imposing a presence that's at once intimidating and inviting. He's the kind who cooks a mean barbecue for everyone on holidays or Bears game days, showing up at 7 a.m. to grill in the bar's attached garage. But he's also the one who never looks you quite in the eye, who laughs off personal questions and asks, in a booming, God-like voice, what you want to drink next. He stubs out a Marlboro Light in the ashtray.

“Stroh's?”

“Yep.”

And he slides a bottle across the bar to me. This bar—dark, shiny oak with its polish worn away by the rubbing of elbows—has been here since the bar opened as a

gentlemen's club in the 1920s. On the wall behind the bar, there are photo montages from each decade. The first of them shows a row of men in felt hats, lined up along this bar and smoking cigars. There's also the Chipp's electrical bill from the 1940s—an absurdly small sum due. A picture of someone's new Corvair, probably one of the regulars, parked out front on Fry Street. The Chipp holds on to everything: its nostalgia hangs like a musty incense in the air, and in the grain of these photos, and in the relics that rest atop the bar and clutter the walls. So many parables have sunk into these hardwood floors, scarred from sliding bar stools, and these red walls, darkened by years of cigarette smoke. The bar counter itself is a palimpsest of carved initials—the bottom layers masked by new varnish, and then a next promptly etched when Joe wasn't watching.

The place has an off-kilter bar humor about it, the humor of the down-and-out and disenfranchised. There's a photo of the 1985 Chicago Bears cheerleaders, from the miracle year the team won the Super Bowl, as if we should all remember that the Bears were once good. There's a sign above the cash register that says, "Your wife can only get *so* mad. Why not stay a little longer?" And, indeed, the Chipp's patrons, like its memories, become easily stuck in the bar. Laura, nursing a Pabst at the other end of the bar, comments to Joe that she's been here since three this afternoon. Part of that, I'm sure, is Joe's doing. It's always the same: at the slightest shift that signals leaving, he slides another Stroh's across the dark brown bar, and says, "This one's on me."

And then there's a holler from the back of the bar—"food's up." Two men, likely Joe's friends, carry Crock Pots and heavy silver trays in. They arrange them on

the pool table in the back room, and the smell of cooked meat and barbecue sauce quickly overwhelms the lingering cigarette smoke. We regulars grab paper plates and napkins, plastic forks and knives, and load our plates until they strain with the weight of chicken wings and potato salad, mac and cheese and green bean casserole. It's all free at the Chipp, and whoever says you get what you pay for is wrong. The wings fall off the bone easily, juices rising from the flesh. The potato salad is cold and crisp. As we eat, more people show up—Beth's ex-husband, who takes the stool next to hers and slips an arm around her waist. She looks at me and winks, and I figure I'll have to ask her later what's going on. She has become my bar friend; someone whom I'd never know otherwise; but here, in this haven where everything is dim and slightly blurry, she opens up easily, and I feel judgment slip away.

In this suspended reality, there is no work the next day, no cleaning to be done at home, no lover who left someone crying in a parking lot, in another city thousands of miles away. With each drink, all of these navigate further to the back of the mind. Some might wonder why we'd all be at a bar, on Thanksgiving, instead of with family. And maybe now, it's midnight—last call on holidays. I'm wondering why my own family hasn't called. But Joe slides me another Stroh's.

Falsetto

When I was 21 and interning for a semester in San Francisco, I taught myself to knit. In those days, I could only make things that were square or rectangular, and always using the same predictable garter stitch. Nights after work were passed by the clicking of bamboo needles in my sparsely-furnished, wood-floored apartment atop the hill of Alamo Square. Knitting, for me, was a way of slowing down; it was peaceful to just sit, and count, not taking my eyes from my project. The needles kept time, like a clock's almost-silent second hand. I passed hours that way, sitting in the same position until my feet fell asleep, warm in the breath of my small electric heater.

My internship was at *San Francisco Magazine* and my editor, Anne Nelson, was a skilled knitter. I thought, for a time, that this would make us life-long friends. When Anne was frustrated by a deadline or a source for a story, she'd stop working right there in the middle of our open-air office and knit a couple of rows on whatever project she had going at the time. Anne's desk was a mess—full of press kits for bed

linens, wedding dresses, designer bathroom fixtures—but her knitting was always neatly kept in a tote bag at her feet. And her stitches were perfect, loose and quick, even with the thinnest, wispiest yarn. I would stand over her shoulder and watch, admiring her nimble hands with their short, bitten-off fingernails.

Knitting became our common ground, where otherwise we were scarcely alike. Anne had a breezy, careless sense of style that allowed her to wear a vintage sweater, braless, with Chanel trousers. She had a gap between her front teeth and a shrill, piercing voice that wasn't annoying only because it was hers. She was thrifty and a scavenger, saving every paper clip from the press kits she received and storing it, along with thousands of others, in her top right desk drawer. She knew people. She drank gin gimlets. She was hip.

I saw myself as Anne's opposite. I'd already worked at one fashion magazine, in Chicago, where the style was much more formal. My turtleneck sweaters or broadcloth button-downs were stodgy and too-old compared to Anne's flair. I was introverted, determined, and slightly afraid, never bold enough to cause a scene in the office the way Anne could. She knew designer names and used terms like "haute couture"—things I'd only heard my mother talk about, and had eschewed because my mother had talked about them. But my willful ignorance put me at a disadvantage now.

My first main project for Anne was to write a feature on teapots. I was to scour local stores and call national PR people and put together a collection of "hip" teapots for the home goods issue. I had a week to get the teapots, and the following week, all

the style editors would come together and pick the ones to be featured. So I trekked around town, sometimes staying out past dark as the days grew shorter. I'd pull my coat a little tighter around me and hit one more store before they closed. In fall, San Francisco's days are warm, but the nights grow crisp and cold, with the air from the Pacific and from the Bay colliding briskly over the city's middle. But after a few days of searching and one spent requesting non-local teapots, I had quite a collection. The boxes and packing materials had overtaken my small cubicle, and a flurry of packing peanuts squished under the wheels of my rolling chair. On the day of the selection, I lined up all my pots in the conference room and came prepared with detailed printouts on each.

Anne walked in and took a look around. She had this way, when puzzled, of sliding her lower jaw to the side and clenching her teeth together, so that the gap between her front teeth showed. When she did this, I knew I hadn't done well.

"These are tea kettles, not teapots," she said at last.

I went hot with embarrassment. I was clunky and unfashionable, an awkward middle-schooler all over again, outdone by the popular girl. All I could do was apologize to Anne and promise to round up some real teapots, *pronto*. She brushed it off, in her breezy, careless Anne way. She hadn't yelled at me, the way I'd seen her do with less-fortunate interns. Somehow, from this forgiveness, I gleaned that she liked me, almost approved of me. But not enough, not in the way I wanted.

Two months later, I was wearing a designer T-shirt, meant to look cheap and tattered, a black shawl that brushed my wrists when I reached for my beer, and a pair of black leather pants. I basked in the dim quiet of G Bar, a chic lounge in San Francisco's Laurel Heights neighborhood. I'm not sure now whom I was dressed up for: Anne, who would arrive in a few minutes, or Ian Moore, my ex-boyfriend whom we'd see perform that night. But I recall feeling uncharacteristically sleek. I had spent two hours, earlier, straightening my long, curly hair with a blow dryer. And now it felt soft and cool to the touch. I couldn't keep my hands away from it, amazed, I suppose, that I could transform myself in this way. But there was a sense, too, of trying to be something I wasn't.

Anne was late. Anne was always late. G Bar was empty: The hip crowd wouldn't appear until eleven or so. But when Anne swung open the door, the place felt suddenly full. She was wearing an orange leather jacket, all black underneath, and a scarf that trailed her quick movements. Anne always looked like a strong wind had come through her apartment and wrapped a series of fabrics around her, somehow elegantly, though not quite matching. That same wind followed her as she walked to the bar and took a seat beside me. In a quick, effortless hug, she said hello right into my cheek and barely managed to wrap her arms around my shoulders before she pulled away. She ordered a gin gimlet. I ordered one, too.

Everything Anne did carried a sense of speed, a hint of indiscretion and danger. The quick gimlets done, she drove us in her white VW Cabrio to the club where Ian would play. Despite a light drizzle, just a mist hanging in the air, she drove

with the top down. Her car's dashboard had sleek, blue lights that stood out against the night, and there was always a pack of Camel Ultra Lights in the space between the driver's and passenger's seats. Her stick shift rolled backwards at stop signs on San Francisco's steep-hilled streets, and she braked and accelerated quickly, haltingly, despite the slippery black mist that glossed the pavement. I remember her laughing, always laughing, as she drove.

The club was on Geary and Fillmore, a busy intersection pocked by Muni stops and vendors selling roses and knock-off jewelry to the night's revelers. And this, this was perfect—an emblem of my time in San Francisco, a night with Anne and an ex-love. I can hardly say, even now, who thrilled me more.

When we entered, the show had already started. The bar was crowded, all the seats taken and people already flanking the small, low stage. I like to think that Ian saw me walk in, that he gave me the usual, discreet wink as he sang. But maybe that was a token of our past.

He had straight, slick hair that fell slightly over one eye and was kept in place by a head toss every now and then. His eyes, though they were really green, looked dark and shadowed onstage, too deeply set in their sockets. But that voice—that dark-chocolate drawl, whether he was singing or speaking—that was what I had craved most since I'd left him—maybe before I should have. But the way he regarded me—or rather, didn't—at that show reminded me that I had been right. He wanted to be

idolized, not loved. He wanted to be known only from a distance: the distance between stage and audience.

Anne and I drank gin gimlets and stood leaning against the bar. She had never heard Ian before, and I hoped silently for her approval. It was always this way: a quiet pining for her to share my taste in things—clothes, bars, deeply guarded musicians.

“Love the falsetto,” Anne commented into my ear, loudly over the music, as Ian kicked his voice into a whining high note.

I preferred his deep, resonating vibrato, but didn’t say anything. The way Anne said anything—so steadfast, so certain—made it impossible to disagree. Ian played with his usual ferocity, tearing his fingers across the guitar with a disregard that ripped two, sometimes three strings in a single song. When he opened his mouth wide and let loose, the result was something akin to a controlled scream. But he never let out too much. And he always stood when playing, stomping one cowboy boot on the wood stage in time to his own rhythm. There was something animal and unleashed about him onstage that he did not have as a lover. He was reticent in bed, passive, even. In the morning, I would cover up his feet, which were always hanging out at the end of the bed, and leave without saying good-bye. I knew that saying it might mean the words were real and I’d never see him again.

Eventually, that’s what happened. But I liked that I’d left things open-ended.

Still, three months later, our fling still evoked a guilty, dangerous nostalgia in me. As wrong as it was, it felt good-risky. Like something Anne Nelson would do. It was a quick, one-sided tryst that was more emulation than love itself—just as Ian had

wanted. Maybe I'd never really expected it to last; I just lived it out in the present and knew that, later, it would be great fodder for nostalgia. But watching him sing, nostalgia turned to need—I wanted the post-show reinvention of what we'd had. I wasn't sure whether Ian craved it or not.

So that night, even as he avoided my glance toward the stage, I convinced myself that something was rekindled for both of us. After the show, Anne and I found a sofa in the back of the bar and waited—I waited, anyway—for Ian to approach. Anne lit a cigarette, which was illegal in San Francisco's bars, but no one said anything. She held it down low, between the sofa and a coffee table that held our next round of gin gimlets.

She turned to me, exhaling a puff of smoke toward her right eyebrow and then flicking ash on the floor.

"You think he's playing just for you, don't you?" She leaned close, even though the bar was now quiet.

I wasn't sure whether to be flattered or insulted by her question, but I answered honestly. "Yes, I do. Or I like to think that way."

Perhaps it was just that I remembered what it was like when he did play for me. Suddenly, though, under Anne's quick, piercing scrutiny, I was embarrassed at that admission, embarrassed to be holding out for something that was supposed to be capricious and quick. But Anne looked at me again, then, and her green eyes seemed to soften. Maybe she understood. Then she looked back down, flicked her cigarette on

the floor and leaned back into the sofa, legs crossed, one heeled black boot wavering back and forth in the air. And we waited.

I've always been the kind of person who wants to see everyone's vulnerability—particularly those I look up to. Maybe it's because I want to see my own insecurities validated, mirrored in them. But Anne gave nothing away, even in this slightly tipsy moment, even as I ruminated aloud about why I couldn't wean myself from Ian.

“He just doesn't seem to remember what it was like,” I said. “I don't understand how he could just *forget*, you know?”

He came up to us then, tossing his head back in *that way*. His cowboy boots clicked on the wood floors.

Magically, all of Anne seemed to become longer, leaner, tighter. She was already tall, with legs lengthened even more by those slim-cut, black trousers. She stretched out her crossed leg, draped a nimble arm across the sofa on the side opposite me. Ian took the invitation. Anne smiled her gap-toothed smile and introduced herself. Was she trying to show me how to refuse him? Or prove to me that he was an easy win, that anyone could charm him? I saw him latch onto her, lean into her; I was afraid he might, any minute, run a hand through her tousled, half-tangled hair.

He was like that, the night I met him. When he came up to me after a show and invited me out with him and his road man. He called me Pretty Thang (that drawl, again), not yet knowing my name. He looked me straight in the eye, maybe for the only time ever. He had a flitty gaze that always seemed lodged in the caverns of his

brow bones. In the bar, he asked me to massage his fingers and I did. I enjoyed it. I am hot with shame just thinking of this. After that one time, he called me Lauren, not Pretty Thang. And this time he called me nothing. I couldn't even hear his conversation with Anne, though the bar was quiet. Occasionally, her piercing laugh broke out, and I thought I could hear Ian's laugh, too, low and slow. I looked at him, trying to pull his gaze my way, intruding on a conversation that wasn't meant to be mine, not this time.

Ian stood up. He was skilled at the early exit: the tender and cruel art of making you want him, then walking away. He did say good-bye to me, then, likely on his way out to the van to wind up cables and re-string his wounded guitars.

When Anne turned to me, then, I tried not to let my expression betray anything. And in a moment, it didn't have to. Anne V. Nelson and I were back in her small, white convertible, top down despite a slight winter-night chill. And like all moments with Anne, I wanted to hold on to this one, the fast whir of the engine as she shifted it from gear to gear on the city's steep streets.

"Don't think about him," she said, making it sound so easy. She turned to me, taking her eyes off the road. The way they caught the light—from a passing car or a streetlamp, I don't remember—but they shone as if glazed by tears. She looked away quickly. And then she was laughing, always laughing.

It was after two a.m., and a dense fog had collected. Beyond us to the East, the Bay Bridge lights and the Transamerica Pyramid were now overcome by it. The only lights were those of the small first-floor storefronts and restaurants that line the ground

levels of San Francisco's pastel Victorians. They were shuttered now, punctuated only by an occasional "OPEN" sign left on my mistake. Anne was quiet, then, her stoic profile lit by the blue glow of the dashboard. Beneath the car's headlights, the fog hung low and heavy, settled in for the night.

Blueberry Cake

In Bratislava, just two blocks separate the places tourists go from the places they do not. The Old Town is a brick-lined haven, contained within a fortress of pink and yellow plaster buildings. Within these confines, the restaurants advertise hamburgers and beer, instead of goulash and Becherovka—a spiced rum that tastes like nutmeg. Most everyone speaks English. And the town seems not like an actual place, but a happy re-enactment of one. It's all staged, I thought as I walked to the train station, expecting that if I peered behind the right one of these facades, I'd see a bare-wood scaffold and someone cueing the lights.

It was July of last year, and I was touring Eastern Europe alone for a month. My weeklong stay in Bratislava had come to an end. Exiting St. Michael's gate, a small Baroque archway where every day, the same woman sold postcards and pashminas, I felt cast into the real city, the one behind the scenes, and I wasn't sorry. I loved the aging tram cars that whirred down the streets. And storefronts that smirked

through broken glass windows, the holes made by rocks and other debris round and gaping, like black eyes. Was it me, or had the sky darkened? These were the parts of the city I embraced most: the sidewalks where passersby, in their slow walks and furrowed brows, showed the remnants of Communist life. That world was on a slow-fade, still deeply sunken in the wrinkles of everyone's skin, in the mortar that held up crumbling 1960s apartment buildings. For as much as the city had rejuvenated its inner core, made itself accessible to tourists, the outskirts seemed to cling much more adamantly to the city's past, as did, I sensed, the people who really lived in Bratislava. A fresh coat of paint and some clean, new cobblestones couldn't erase those memories.

Embarking on my walk toward the train station, I passed a pub, a small corner joint with lace curtains and dusty windows. Signs advertising Staropramen and Budvar beers threatened to divert my walk, to keep me from catching the early train. Besides, my backpack was heavy and I still had about a mile to walk. But I was always a bit fearful, as much as I loved these parts of cities, of entering local joints. By morning, the bars were populated by old, local men and hapless young drunks, sometimes still out from the night before. My backpack gave me away as someone who didn't belong, especially in these parts where the sidewalks gave off a faint odor of urine, and garbage blew along the crevices where the curbs met the streets. So I kept walking.

The sidewalks were empty, it being early on a weekend morning. I came to a juncture in the road and didn't know which way to go. Consulting my guidebook—tucked close to my hip so that I wouldn't be pegged as a lost, lone

traveler—I realized that I’d walked right off the map. I turned a full circle, looking for anything familiar, anything I’d walked past when I’d arrived here and trekked the two miles from the station to my hostel. There was a highway—I remembered that—but it was criss-crossed with bridges and spans, pedestrian walkways stretching over and under it in every direction. Surely I’d taken one of these walkways, but how was I to know which one? I looked for train tracks, for the roof of the station, which I thought might have been red. But I was closed in by the buildings—warehouses with corrugated-steel doors, green-hued, anemic-looking highrises.

Finally, an old man in a suit jacket and dress pants approached. He said something, in Slovakian, that I recognized as “Do you need help?” I nodded, then paused. I spoke Czech quite well, and as a result, could usually decipher a few words of Slovakian. The languages used to be the same, before the Velvet Divorce in 1989, before Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. And since then, the languages, too, had reasserted their own national identities.

“Dobry den,” I said. “Kde je hlavni nadrazi?” *Good morning. Where’s the main train station?* It was Czech, but I was crossing my fingers for some similarity.

The man looked at me.

“Mluvite Anglicky?” I asked, hoping he knew a bit of English.

“Ne.” He was smiling by then.

I tried German. “Der bahnhof?” I’m not sure why I said that, because I spoke only a few words of the language, and wouldn’t have understood his directions.

He shook his head, now laughing.

I smiled sheepishly, then made a fist and pulled at the air, like I was pulling a cord. “Whooo whooo,” I said, trying to imitate a train whistle, followed by “chug-a-chug-a-chug.”

The man chuckled harder, a laugh that made his small body shake. But he got it; I saw his eyes brighten. He pointed toward one of the walkways, and then toward the street it led into. I pointed the same way, to confirm.

“Dekuji,” I said, and repeated my word of gratitude again. I must have looked even more out of place on the rest of that walk, smiling to no one as I replayed the exchange in my head.

Bratislava’s train station reflects the city’s relative newness to the practice of entertaining tourists. Unlike the shopping and restaurant complexes that masquerade as train stations in other Eastern European cities—Prague, Vienna, Zagreb—this one is decidedly functional. It has a currency exchange, a Coke machine, and the requisite half-dozen men passed out on benches in the main hall. I checked the departures list and my train’s number was blinking, meaning it would leave any minute, bound for Budapest. With my backpack pulling my shoulders into a slump, I lunged up the stairs to my platform. Indeed, the train’s engine was rumbling its low frequency, and the vents on the sides of the front car breathed more heat into the summer air. Most of the second-class car looked to be full. But luckily, I found a compartment occupied by only one other person, and sat down just as the train lurched and slid slowly out of the station.

There is something about speeding out of town in a glass-walled compartment that grants us distance, a view that gives the illusion of letting us see more. The train passed through the city's outskirts, my window seat affording views of Slovakian backyards, cluttered with chicken coops and limp, hanging laundry and those inflatable plastic swimming pools. Graffiti hung fat and heavy on the sides of buildings and the corrugated metal walls that separated the train tracks from real life. Soon, the small train stations that dotted the suburbs disappeared, and we were surrounded on all sides by golden wheat fields and forlorn factories, their striped smokestacks visible for miles.

The countryside, unlike the city, hadn't cleaned up its act for the tourists. After all, we'd only be passing through on trains. We'd only get a glimpse of defunct highrise housing and crumbling warehouses, out of place amid these wheat fields—as if someone had dropped them there and forgotten to pick them up. These Communist structures were still firmly rooted in the Slovakian countryside, disintegrating slowly into the soil; and as I looked out, there was something profoundly lifeless about their starkness, their squareness, that it seemed as if no one could live in sight of these. And clearly, few people did. The houses were scattered along the flat terrain, few and small, surrounded by dirt and usually horses. I imagined these people at home, constant exhibits for trains full of tourists, and constantly looking out their windows to the factories beyond.

The sliding glass door to our compartment opened, and a conductor held his hand out for our tickets and passports. I handed mine over, as did the woman across

from me. The conductor stamped them one after another and handed them back to us. Her passport had a red cover, not blue like mine. It was Slovakian, I noted from the lettering. The conductor and the woman exchanged words, briefly, as she tucked her passport back into the satchel at her feet. I, too, quickly put mine back in my purse, keenly aware, at this point, of my role as an outsider.

I was also hungry, and hadn't brought any food with me. I pulled a day-old bottle of Coke, half gone and undoubtedly flat, from my purse. I took big, sugary swigs and watched more fields and factories pass.

The girl across from me, the Slovakian, was about my age—27—I figured. Like me, she had her hair pulled beneath a bandanna that framed her pale face. A backpack—larger than mine and packed so tightly the fabric strained at the seams—rested on the rack above her head. She looked out the window, too, but seemed to be watching her own reflection. But maybe she felt my gaze, because she bent to the satchel between her feet and pulled out a small plastic container. She set it down on her seat's tray table and opened the lid. Inside there was a cake of some sort. I looked away, hoping the man with the snack cart would roll through the train soon.

“Excuse me,” she said, in English. She held out the container. “Would you like a piece?”

I debated this momentarily, still shaking off the surprise of an English question. I weighed all my mom's warnings about taking food from strangers against the plump, moist surface of the cake, and the chance to speak to someone who actually lived here.

“Yes, I would.”

She reached out her hand with the container, and I used my fingers to break off a small corner piece. There is something about people watching you eat—especially something like this, a gift—that makes you feel like you have to enjoy it. But I didn’t have to try. A blueberry burst open on my tongue, sweet and tart.

“This is wonderful,” I said between bites.

“The blueberries,” she said, “they are from my mother’s garden. Here, take more.” She held out the container again, and I broke off more from the same corner. I cradled the tiny, crumbling pastry in my hand, catching crumbs and tossing them into my mouth.

When we’d devoured the small cake, I inquired about her English, which was nearly perfect. She explained that she worked in public relations for a Slovakian tire company, and her job required her to write press releases in English. I longed to be completely bilingual, to not just be able to get by, but to start conversations like this one, on trains. After weeks of traveling alone, the smallest conversation still seemed awkward. I’d learned to rely on my internal dialogue, to keep myself company amid a sea of clicking tongues I didn’t understand. But I was hungry for company, for the bits of conversation that made me feel like I’d learned something about a place that I wouldn’t have otherwise. These brief conversations were a window to the countries I passed through, and a reminder of how short my time here really was, how little I knew each place.

This woman who worked for the tire company, whose name I never managed to ask, was headed south to Croatia to see her boyfriend. She'd made the short journey from her hometown in northern Slovakia to Bratislava, and then from Budapest, she would continue to Zagreb. Twelve hours, she said, in all. She fidgeted with the container, then put it back in the bag at her feet.

I could see her giddiness, the light on her face when she talked about him, but maybe it was just the sun coming in from the fields, refracted and made stronger by the train's windows. And some part of me wished that I, too, could emerge from the train to find someone waiting, someone whom I knew. But it was precisely the transitory nature of these exchanges that, I knew, brought out the light in my face: I relished these strange, momentary, never-again connections born in trains. And for the rest of that trip, I felt I knew Slovakia a little bit more. I pictured this girl, bandanna warm with the sun, as she and her mother trod over the wet soil of a garden, picking each berry carefully, so as not to break its dark blue skin.

