AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Rebecca Corinne Dealy for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology presented on June 18, 2014. Title: Gender Disparity in American Literary Fiction: Women Writing the Female Experience of Romantic Relationships in Short Fiction and a Collection of Original Short Stories

Abstract Approved: _____________________________

Barry Lawler

Unpublished female authors of American short fiction face many prejudices in fiction publishing, submission, and reviewing. These prejudices stem from the writer’s position in a gender-unequal society. Feminist fiction provides dimensional, diverse female characters in relationships where previous fiction had offered only stereotypes whose role was to support and reflect leading male characters. Normalization of feminist fiction will increase diversity in writing and eliminate the negative effects of the remaining stereotypes, as they will no longer be normalized or internalized by readers. The short story, a form commonly agreed to be American in origin, is a feminist form because it encourages ‘othered’ individuals to share their stories, and as a result it can do political work for the propagation of feminist ideology through an accessible avenue.

Key Words: Gender, American Short Fiction, Feminism

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Gender Disparity in American Literary Fiction:
Women Writing the Female Experience of Romantic Relationships in Short Fiction

and

a Collection of Original Short Stories

by

Rebecca Corinne Dealy

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

_______________________
Rebecca Corinne Dealy, Author
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**SHORT FICTION COLLECTION**

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PREFACE

Women, both as writers and characters in fiction, face adversity. Writing as a woman and about women has social context that requires forethought. My short fiction collection was written with questions in mind that were explored during my thesis research: How are women represented in fiction? Are women free to write women’s stories without compromise to masculine privilege? What stories about women are common? What do readers learn from these representations of women?

I have researched female presence in literary romantic relationships to guide and give context to my own writing. Though much of what I found has been historically negative, thoughtful feminist critique has exposed why old form is negative, how positive change is currently in progress, and where there is still work to be done. I have taken ideas from this research to guide my writing, focusing on unique perspectives and situations and giving complexity to my leading female characters.
I have written four short fiction stories with female protagonists and researched correlations between gender and published fiction for this thesis. The research investigates the barriers women writers face to be published, the stereotypical representation of female characters in romantic relationships with men in published fiction, and how the American short story has been adopted as a feminist form to challenge the ingrained sexism associated with fiction and society at large. Throughout this thesis, diversity in writing, as well as the importance of normalizing feminist fiction, is stressed.

Feminism is broadly defined here in varying contexts; for this thesis I will use bell hooks’ concise definition: “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (1). Additionally, the term gender is defined as the social or cultural construction projected as sex. This thesis will delimit gender as the binaries male and female and focus on only heterosexual romance.

Throughout the inspection of the romantically involved female character in fiction, it is important to note that any writer is biased from personal experience and exposure to fiction in formal education and general media. Every writer is at least in part a product of her or his society and culture. Fictional representations of gender encompass much of that experience. While any one story or representation is not necessarily
harmful, the overwhelming multitude of limiting and oppressive representations is. Majority representations of female characters have the power to silence diverse representations, like feminists’, by mere volume. If representations are repeatedly and inherently sexist, they are directly harmful to women and men. Diversity of representation requires publishers and authors to challenge sexist tropes.

Women have for the entire history of American short fiction faced numerous barriers to be published. Gender disparity in publication is still common and normative. I argue that this unchecked disparity is harmful because readers and writers internalize negative stereotypes and discredit diverse feminist fiction, hindering gender parity in fiction and society from actualization.

Part I of the research addresses the current and recent presence of women as published authors. This context shows the gender disparity of women’s publishing success that stems from the writer’s position in a gender-unequal society.

Part II investigates how women are portrayed in romantic relationships, the sexist tropes that have been used, and the feminist ideologies that encourage dimensional, diverse characters.

Part III looks specifically at the form of the short story versus other literary forms, its humble American origins, and its application as a feminist form within the workshop system.

Part IV investigates women’s short fiction, why it is vital that women’s writing be as common as men’s in formal education and the literary canon, and the political work feminist writing can do to empower women to share their stories and cultivate feminism.
PART I: THE PUBLISHING CLIMATE FOR FEMALE WRITERS

It is important that the female perspective in fiction be written by a large, diverse pool of feminist authors, given that fiction is a critical avenue for social change. Women should be the first to write their own stories and the stories of their sisters, peers, mothers, and daughters; they have the position to offer ethical reevaluations within the greater progress of feminism “aimed at securing justice for women both as individuals and as members of a previously devalued and exploited group” (Fullbrook 5). The number of men and women alike who write as feminists and write with complex characters representative of real women will increase as the feminist movement shifts American culture to gender parity. For representations to continually improve, it is important that writers and non-writing readers alike read feminist fiction, as it can act as an easy avenue to feminism (Loudermilk 17). That is not to say that all authors of dimensional women must involve feminism predominantly in their writing. However, those who choose to completely dismiss gender disparity stabilize sexism and further silence feminists.

Feminism is important for gender parity on a large scale and may assist readers and publishers to approach fiction with a gender-neutral preference for authors and stories. Without sharing their stories, women writers will continue to struggle with injustices and readers will continue not to recognize the disparity.

Authors are by no means limited to the romantic subset of literary fiction. The collection following this thesis illustrates the common theme of romantic relationships, and the research naturally progressed toward this focus as a result. All fiction writing should be applicable, in a broad sense, to the conditions that literary relationship fiction
faces. Looking at the gender dynamics in submissions, readers, published fiction, and book reviewing may help clarify where inequality starts for women and the context in which it resides.

To become influential writers and have fiction accessible to do political work if they so choose, women must widely distribute their works through formal publishing. When women submit their works to publishers, it is often unclear the ratio of authors’ genders because so few are published in comparison. This complicates the assessment of where and how sexism stems, and it is difficult to explain the causes of when and where women submit. Some publishers claim fewer female submissions (Pafunda par. 6), while others show equal numbers (Spillman 1). Roxane Gay, co-editor of *Pank*, says gender dynamics of authors of published fiction are at the mercy of the publisher, regardless of the submission pool:

> Stop justifying the lack of parity in prominent publications that have the resources to address gender inequity. Stop parroting the weak notion that you’re simply publishing *the best writing, regardless*. There is ample evidence of the excellence of women writers. You aren’t compromising anything by attempting to achieve gender parity. Publish more women writers. If women aren’t submitting to your publication or press, ask yourself why, deal with the answers even if those answers make you uncomfortable, and then reach out to women writers. . . . Read more widely. Create more inclusive measures of excellence. Ensure that books by men and women are being reviewed in equal numbers. Ensure gender parity in the critics reviewing those books. Nominate more deserving women for the important awards. Deal with your resentment. Deal with your biases. Vigorously resist the urge to dismiss the gender problem. (par. 6)

Publications can alienate readers by representing women characters less or negatively, resulting in considerable preference for submission elsewhere (Gay). Gay argues that the
publisher has the position to combat disparity in publishing and that “Change requires intent and effort. It really is that simple” (par. 7). Publishers see more quality submissions than they can possibly publish from women, let alone all genders (Pafunda par. 6), so they have the ability to achieve gender parity with small changes and consideration (Gay par. 7).

Published author and editor Danielle Pafunda says to publishers, “Blaming the submissions pool isn’t likely to improve the situation in any immediate, effective way. Unchain yourself from those submissions numbers, and you might find a more vital mode of editing” (par. 12). In order to eliminate disparaging publishing trends, publishers must emphasize gender parity in their publications even when the submission pool is not split equally between the genders. The compounding effects of sexism have origins too institutionalized and normalized to reverse without specific intent, though it is vital that as much research is done as possible to continue to reveal such origins.

Regardless of the gender of an author, rejection is extremely common. Rob Spillman, editor of Tin House Magazine and editorial advisor of Tin House Books, said of received submissions that “Male authors, in the face of rejection, are much more likely to submit more work, (and sooner) than their female peers. This is true even when the female author is explicitly requested to send more work” (par. 11). Sociological studies have shown that males display overconfidence, which is rewarded from a very young age; men and women together “overrate men’s contributions, in quantity and quality, at work and at home” (Pafunda par. 9). Women may submit to publications preferentially based on the publication’s treatment of gender of subject matter and authorship within its
periodicals (Gay par. 6); publishers should evaluate the gender dynamics of their publications to ensure they are not alienating future writers.

 Though women may take more time in submitting, Pafunda has found of her own publication that “Women submit more consistently publishable work with regard to quality and appropriateness for the given venue. Men are more likely to submit unfinished work and work that doesn’t suit the publication for which I’m reading” (par. 7). If women, on average, wait longer and submit fewer but better, more publishable drafts, then gender distribution should not be so harshly disparaging. But unfortunately, “Either consciously or unconsciously, we’ve always already divided out our submissions into those by men and women” (Pafunda par. 11), and it seems preconceptions overrule a closer examination of quality.

 Because some prominent voices “see most fiction by women as one soft, undifferentiated mass that has little to do with them” (Wolitzer 1), publishers may have weaker enthusiasm for women’s submissions despite feminists urging otherwise and silent disagreement from most bystanders. Fiction writing and reading can also be given the inconsequential label of a leisure activity when gendered female because:

 Various booksellers that have no trouble calling interesting, complex novels by women ‘Women’s Fiction,’ as if men should have nothing to do with them. A writer’s own publisher can be part of a process of effective segregation and vague if unintentional put-down (Wolitzer 1).

 Even though the majority of readers and publishers likely harbor no ill will toward women’s writing, the few prominent, misogynistic voices often go unchecked while opposition fails to gain the same consideration. Ta-Nehisi Coates describes how these sexist slights continue to occur:
Women in this society, and sadly, many others, are devalued, and not only by men, often we find ourselves devaluing other women, as well. This is how invisibility works. The concerns of women writers are pushed aside, the statistics (which VIDA has been, and will continue to, compile) are ignored, the issues are not discussed, or are glossed over with simplistic strategies for which we find ourselves grateful (at least something is being done, right?) instead of galvanized to demand more, to push for more, to create a dialectic that is inclusive, instead of amending the one that isn't (par. 6).

Even book covers are gendered and quietly devalue women; books have covers of text on male or gender-neutral ‘serious fiction,’ whereas jackets on novels gendered female show “laundry hanging on a line . . . a little girl in a field of wildflowers . . . a pair of shoes on a beach . . . an empty swing on the porch of an old yellow house,” all of which alienate men and tell the reader the author is not to be taken seriously (Wolitzer 2). This highly subjective and superficial gender separation leaves readers to literally judge books by their covers. This gendered cascade drastically affects what stories are told, skewing the entire system toward male-oriented judgment of quality.

Women “make up the majority of readers for most fiction genres, with the exception of science fiction,” and tend to read fiction authored by either gender equally (S. Cohen par. 6). But it is male readership that slants overall preference from gender parity. Unfortunately, “The industry is wary of alienating men, who tend to favor male authors, according to several studies” (S. Cohen par. 6). Authors know this, so female authors may opt, sometimes through pressure from publishers, to adopt male pseudonyms (Tuch). Women are encouraged to write from the perspectives of men, and without the signs of gender like jackets or an author’s name, readers more often than not can’t tell an author’s gender in published fiction (Pafunda; Wolitzer).
Publishing opportunities for female writers depreciate when excellence is defined within a male frame; literature is often held to a standard that prefers male settings like war or adventure over motherhood or domestic themes (Prose 1). Author Diane Johnson says that male readers “have not learned to make a connection between the images, metaphors, and situations employed by women (house, garden, madness), and universal experience, although women, trained from childhood to read books by people of both sexes, know the metaphorical significance of the battlefield, the sailing ship, the voyage, and so on.” (qtd. in Prose 1). Without ensuring equal representation of women’s stories in the American literary canon and within formal education, men will not be exposed to more traditionally female themes and will be more likely to dismiss such works as inferior. Ruth Franklin noted within the Best American Short Stories anthology that “Though the balance of bylines was roughly equal, the vast majority of the stories were about male characters. If this is a conscious or unconscious adaptation on the part of female writers, it is a disturbing form of self-censorship” (Franklin par. 6). Publishers and critics alike promote male themes and protagonists, failing to consider women’s writing for quality on its own (Prose 1).

A recent study exposed a situation analogous to fiction writing—that of playwrights. It was found that plays submitted to producers, when identical aside from a change of the gender of the playwright, were accepted significantly fewer times when the playwright was a woman (P. Cohen par. 10). Additionally, female written plays made up less than one in eight shows on Broadway despite each play receiving an average of 18% more revenue than male counterparts, and when women found success, their shows ran fewer weeks as compared with equally successful shows from male playwrights (P.
Cohen par. 14, 17). It seems women must produce better work to achieve the same status as men but are not rewarded accordingly. It is no surprise that literature, with more vague measures of excellence than drama, also finds itself devaluing the female gender.

Ruth Franklin found in 2010 that of nine major fiction publishing companies, only Riverhead had over 40% of works by women—at 45%—while the rest achieved an average of 29% female authors. One publisher had less than 10% of their published authors being female (Franklin par. 5). Though feminist thought is present in plenty of men, it would be overly hopeful to think feminist representations of gender can become normative without women writing them too. What matters when women aren’t heard is, as Annette Kolodny puts it, “not so much literature or criticism as such, but the historical, social, and ethical consequences of women’s participation in, or exclusion from either enterprise” (2). Society’s gender disparity is associated with and reflected in literature. It is important that women gain an equal chance in telling stories and participating in that culture.

Gender discrimination in publication trickles down to the reviewing process too, an often vital tool to gain exposure, support, and interest to encourage publishers to continue publishing like they do. VIDA (Women in Literary Arts) studied fifteen major publications’ gender distribution in an article called “The Count 2012,” which includes publications like The Atlantic, The New Yorker, and Tin House. They found just one of fifteen had published reviews by or about books by women more than half the time, with the majority of publishers having less than a third of their articles written by or about women (“The Count 2012”). It seems at every step of the way from submitting to publishing to reviewing, women are at a disadvantage.
Reading a work of fiction should provide any and all details about gender that the author wants to convey. Gender is only one aspect of any given character or author, and even then gender is not strictly binary or explanatory. A healthy analysis of all angles of a character is vital. A word or archetype, including ‘male’ and ‘female,’ should never be the sole explanation of a character. As Doane says,

[Feminists] challenge belief in fixed sexual difference by exposing the strategies that are used to make sexual differences seem natural. More than that, they have been writing, writing, writing. And this writing not only challenges through its politics traditional ways of representing ‘the authentic’ nature of men and women, but its very volume becomes a force that challenges male authority (9-10).

Diverse characters and representations of gender can only be available if publishers acknowledge institutionalized sexism and attempt to address the gender problem actively with intent and effort.
PART II: TWO DIMENSIONAL FEMALE CHARACTERS

When looking at American literature through a feminist lens, it is obvious that the female characters have been widely written as a response to leading men instead of as their own individuals (Aguiar; Beaulieu; Kolodny; McClave; Showalter; Woolf). Feminist authors have the thoroughly important job to “refute literary misrepresentations of females as dimensionless, to subvert preconceptions of objectified characters, and, of predominant importance, to create memorable women full of complexity and character” (Aguiar 1). Feminist criticism has put much of its effort into exposing the misogyny that runs rampant in literature, namely stereotypes of women as “angels or monsters . . . the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature . . . [and] the exclusion of women from literary history” (Showalter 5). In addition to the subjugated nature of the woman’s role in fiction, she is often portrayed as the violated opposite to the archetypal male hero protagonist, which conveys to readers that women are inherently weak (Beaulieu 4). As McClave says, “According to cultural stereotypes, women give while artists take; women are images, whereas artists make them” (7). The unfortunate weak and dimensionless portrayal of women in fiction still appears today.

The stereotyped portrayal of women is exacerbated in relationships. It is difficult to define a romantic relationship when both characters may not fully be participating, but generally it is two people with the intent, desire, or obligation to be together or the projection of such choices on one (usually female) party from the other side. What Willa Cather says in her book Not Under Forty nearly eighty years ago was as true then as it is now: “Human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life. . . . They can never be
wholly satisfactory [because] every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them” (136). When written with complex characters, relationship fiction can be of great use for feminism to break away from stereotypes and explore what it means to be human. McClave says “One comes to know oneself most deeply, and most painfully, in relationships” (4). Fiction is vital to inspect the human condition and especially to expose truth from the intimate inside of a relationship.

Women have been written as a reaction to male characters in relationships without further depth (Woolf) since before the origin of the short story. This is largely unintentional; male and female writers alike can fall into this pattern and internalize sexist ideas of what femininity should be when exposed to enough fiction with sexist overtones (Savitt 1). Literary criticism contends that “Traditional representations of women in male-authored, and often in female-authored fiction that has been influenced by the masculine tradition, have been, at best, static, mythic, lacking in substance, depth, and complexity” (Aguiar 4). Writers hold onto stereotypes presented repeatedly in literature and struggle to change or add complexity to those ideas. Works that portray women otherwise have not been successfully integrated into the literary canon or educational system. It is sexism of habit, and without intervention sexism in fiction will be unlikely to disappear.

The fiction that Americans are exposed to today is often subtly and unintentionally sexist. As Carol Pearson says, “Patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men change the world, and women help them” (qtd. in Savitt par. 10). Female stereotypes don’t persist for the intentional derision of women; they are an unfortunate consequence of common male
perspectives in fiction. Any one story may contain stereotypes and not be harmful, but it is the saturation of such representations that becomes harmful. Men are also affected by sexual stereotypes but under less degrading and pervading circumstances; overall, gender roles in fiction “polarize relations between men and women and thus deny their shared experience as human beings” (Greenburg 23).

Fiction fails to give female characters complexity when they are constrained to interacting solely with a male protagonist. Stories arise over and over in which a male experiences a whole world apart from a partner, while the woman is described only in relation to the man she is in a relationship with (Woolf). It may be difficult to spot the underlying reactionary nature of the female character, because the representation has so long been normalized in fiction.

To inspect the sexist nature of a story, the ‘Bechdel Test’ asks three questions: Are there multiple women in the story? Do the women talk to each other? Do they talk about something other than men? (Bechdel). If portrayals of women are to be healthfully diverse, they must commonly answer ‘yes’ to these questions.

Further still, it is important that women see each other more often than not as partners rather than rivals for male approval. In the United States, this competition comes from “patriarchy and capitalism, which reinforce heteronormative family structures and which specifically oppress women of ethnic and racial minority groups” (June 9-10). An important step away from sexist representation is reliance of female characters on each other instead of on men, which will foster strength within women’s stories rather than dependence and vulnerability.
One destructive portrayal of women in relation to men is the femme fatale or seductress, a common character reducing a woman to the object of the male’s sexual desire. It is a character absent of consideration of the woman’s desires, or worse, it can be the misogynistic projection of immoral motives of women used to blame women for men’s character flaws (Ballif 18). A seductress is at the heart of the tradition that “Woman is the embodiment of Eros, of sensuality, of desire (and of death). Men who succumbed to inappropriate desire were compared with women” (Ballif 18). Woman, in this case being a sexual entity without humanity or perspective, has no explored motive other than that which is projected by the male’s perspective. “The ‘matter’ of a woman’s body/sexuality has been historically/culturally delimited” for the benefit of the male authority, promoting a sexualized portrayal of women (Ballif 24).

The consequence of hyper-sexualizing the female character is not her sexuality; in a diverse fiction base there is room for all sexual female perspectives. It is instead that her sexuality is her only definition. An excess of this representation leads to misogyny and distrust in female characters with outward sexuality for fear any woman may be the immoral, man-eating character so often described.

Alternately, a female character can be categorized as the desexualized virgin who is a commodity for her future husband (Savitt par. 13). This character is valued for her physical condition because, as religious influence would have it, “A virgin’s chastity foretold its own fulfillment at the next, married, stage of life in harmonious domesticity and the production of legitimate offspring” (Cooper 1558). This imposes the unfair definition on women not of their personality, motivations, or experience, but simply of their physical state. The woman is given worth not by what she has accomplished but by
what she is not and what she hasn’t done. This is a very destructive method of characterization because it again defines the character by external means rather than internal motivations. It is also damaging to women because it restricts their “mobility, knowledge and curiosity” (Savitt par. 13). This archetype is harmful because it assumes things about a woman’s personality based on her sexuality, just as the seductress stereotype does.

Real exchange in relationships in fiction should not leave women as the objects of shallow worship or petty disdain. Characters should be “reversible, indeterminate, and unrepresentable . . . more than that which is the binary placeholder for Man” (Ballif 21). Though looking at stereotypes may leave a bleak view of underlying themes in relationship fiction, it is important to take that knowledge and try to apply methods that diversify and complicate female (and male) characters in future writing. As Savitt puts it:

> By learning about stereotypes and seeing them in very concrete form, [we] will be encouraged to understand the ludicrousness of restricting women (and ultimately men also) to narrow roles, both in literary forms and in life. By letting down the barriers to girls, the boys will also be set free. Perhaps through the use of literary forms, [we] will be less threatened or intimidated than if [our] personal styles were questioned or attacked. It is hoped that through the exposure to these sexist themes and forms in literature, [our] sensibilities will be awakened to other ways of being and viewing the world (par. 17).

Ultimately readers are responsible for their own views of women, but if it can be more obvious and more ingrained that female literary stereotypes are an unfortunate remnant of sexist ideology, then those sexist ideas may disappear from fiction and society at large. There is certainly room for sexist, hyper-sexualized, and virginal characters in fiction; it is the overabundance and normalization of these ideas that is harmful.
PART III: “UNWINKING” AMERICAN FICTION

In the last century, the short story has arrived, grown, and come to fruition as literary fiction alongside other forms well established. As William Peden says in The American Short Story, the short fiction known today is a form perhaps not born but nurtured to its adolescence in the United States and “the only one in which American writers have from the beginning tended to excel” (1). Not until the last three decades has it come to the scene as something more than a popular-but-derivative form (Peden; McClave). At first, short stories made their way into culture through popular magazines or in collections marketed as “books,” “works,” or “novels” despite being a collection (Peden 1). Quickly writers outside of popular genres began to adopt the form as their own. American professionals and novices alike approached the smaller form with passion, finding it “the most exciting, congenial, and challenging of all contemporary literary forms” (Peden 2). It has gained esteem because “Whatever its form, subject matter, and the intent of its creator, [it] challenges the powers of the most demanding craftsmen and artists” (Peden 5).

The form unapologetically exposes true craft from an author. Heather McClave brings forth the ideas of Edgar Allen Poe, a grandfather of the short story, in her introduction to Women Writers of the Short Story: A Collection of Critical Essays. Short stories, she says, “have ‘immense force’ when it comes from a concentrated experience of ‘totality,’ the experience of reading whole at one sitting a story that achieves a persuasive ‘single effect’” (1). The short story, per word, holds more weight than novels
and drama with a simpler approach than poetry is likely to have but, like the poem, can easily be read in one instance.

The short story must be distinguished from the other recognized literary forms to grasp its unique abilities. What determines what short fiction is, and what is simply short? Julie Brown suggests that women writers should refuse definition of short stories—though she encourages critical thinking about their ambiguities—since “Definitions limit, exclude, and deaden our capacity for surprise” (xxi). However, while promoting diversity in writing is truly a valuable stance to protect writers and publishers from passing over great works, a definition of form, from a bare-bones perspective, may prove helpful.

A century ago, in the short story’s humble beginnings, Brander Matthews said that “A true short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation” (52). From here, two forms emerged—one simply anecdotal and the other symbolic, ending in some realization—both of them succinct and unified (Harrington 5). Brevity is vital, so it comes naturally that “The short story requires a careful selection of material to convey meaning within strict limits on time and space. Each word must count. The attitude and approach must be clear” (McClave 5). Details included must be important to the story, a striking contrast from the sprawling, romantic novel, which has fewer constraints of setting. This need for economy and concision is equally vital to the role of unity and the totality of reading a short story in one instance. As Peden says, “Brief, elliptical, unwinking, and very much alive, the short story usually asks questions but does not suggest answers” (7). Such a form allows the short story to be “the most subtle and complex means of ethical interrogation and utterance” (Fullbrook 1).
But beyond its form, Peden says the American short story has “individuality, freedom, and variety. Flexibility and the capacity for change are its hallmarks, and no other literary genre is so close to the rapidly changing climate of the times in which it is written and which in turn it reflects with vigor, variety, and verve” (Peden 4). The fact that the short story can take a shorter time to write and edit allows for an overall faster turnover time for publishable fiction, for increased cultural relevance, and for inspection of the society which the writer comes from or investigates.

An author can also feasibly approach and work through many separate and varied short stories at any given time. This flexibility and faster pace allows for a workshop culture of editing that is unmanageable and wholly different from editing novels or dramatic works. The modern workshop system provides a solid, regimented community to support the editing process (Levy 3). Workshops cultivate the short story where the form might otherwise suffer from financial failure (Levy 3; Peden 4). As Andrew Levy says in The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story, “The workshop system, rather, is an alternate economy, enclosed and complete. . . . If there is not always enormous demand for the short story itself, there is enormous demand for this alternate economy” (3).

The institution of formal education has propagated young writers who begin their craft with short fiction, largely attributed to the accepting, nurturing workshop system that builds writers who would fail initially within classic American publishing. Students are given the power to improve among themselves successfully, which takes a great deal of power off the hierarchy of published literature and instead places it in the authors themselves.
As decades pass and education, formal or otherwise, is more easily accessible to the American public, general literary intelligence and the resultant appreciation and application of the short story likely will increase (Peden 4). The short story provides the artistry of all literature but performs as the most consumable of the forms for the general public. As we see readership grow, increased education has and will contribute to an increased awareness of historically systematic sexism in literature, which will in turn rapidly reverse that trend.

The United State’s high school and college curriculum and literary canon has proven harshly sexist, preferring male authors (Kolodny 2-3). In response, educators have brought forward previously forgotten or de-emphasized works, often written by women (Kolodny 2). The reintroduction of these works into the classroom provides students more female writing and themes and encourages them to question why women’s writing was excluded from the canon of major works at the time (Kolodny 2). It is important to note that the writers included in the canon were wealthy, educated, and generally white men (Kolodny 3).

Ellen Burton Harrington argues in the collection *Scribbling Women & the Short Story Form* that short fiction is “a feminist form, one that is particularly hospitable to women writers” because it has long been marginalized and “invites other outlaws to plumb alienation and repression in the symbolic subtext, enlightening and challenging the reader though epiphany and patterning” (8). The short story, initially rejected as formal literature, has become powerful for those marginalized, especially when quick response to cultural shifts allows an author to progress more fluidly in style and theme. A great deal of political work can be done with short fiction. The short story represents a
snapshot of the human condition—namely fundamental human alienation that we all feel sometimes (Harrington 7). It is also a tool to reclaim lost history, resist oppressive forces and empower multiethnic women (June 6).
PART IV: WOMEN WRITING THE SHORT STORY

As literacy and publication increased dramatically in the nineteenth century in both Britain and the United States, ideas about gender and literary quality became a common topic among critics and the public. In the nineteenth century many critics dismissed female writers’ works as inferior despite their short fiction’s commercial popularity at the time (Harrington; Warren). As a consequence, women’s works were often excluded from anthologies of short fiction published in the early twentieth century (Harrington; Warren). This left women writers to be “important primarily in relation to men included in the canon rather than important in themselves” (Warren 4). In life as authors and in fiction as characters, it seems women were forced to be reactions to men.

Feminist critics and formal education outwardly have discredited the idea that women’s writing is inferior or “lacks historical agency” because “Writing is an act that in itself implies agency, personal expression, and subjectivity” (Harrington 3). Despite unequal representation of women’s works in formal education and in publishing, women were and are important to the men whom they write alongside, “interacting with and influencing male writers and critics (despite the ideological barrier separating their work as women’s writing)” while participating in “a literary community of their own that wrote, revised, and published stories by women” (Harrington 3). The exclusion was aesthetic and political; American women writers were ‘othered’ from the dominant culture because of non-dominant themes and female characters with confidence and independence of male individualist protagonists (Warren 15).
In the last two decades, American anthologies of women’s works have been published, ranging widely in themes that expose the diversity in women’s writing available (Harrington 3-4). Female writers are a diverse multitude of persons “who often channel their concerns about identity, including gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, into the paradoxically compressed and elastic form of the short story” (Harrington 12). The writers are even more diverse than the stories they share, and the avenue of the short story is immensely important to share that diversity.

It is imperative that these stories come from women who resist the continued marginalization they have experienced, which will empower and connect them with each other (June 6). A female character can exhibit the shared wounds or struggle of women, a vital resource for the matrilineal connection that has been removed from history (June 133-4). The political work that can be done with short fiction is invaluable.

In the case of neo-slave narratives of African American women, their stories and female perspectives are critical to provide literary insight to show that “Enslaved persons were not wretched but instead deliberate, determined, and dignified; by focusing particularly on women who mothered under the conditions of slavery, they give imaginative voice to a previously invisible segment of the American population” (Beaulieu xv). Currently, African American women stand at a “crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America,” that of the female gender and of the African American (White 27). The feminist and artistic outlet of fiction, especially short fiction, provides the opportunity to defy stereotypes within those ideologies in a sympathetic manner. These stories, grown out of the civil rights and feminist movements, are “directly responsible for revising how we perceive black women and black family relations and for
exposing and repositioning the role that gender plays in narrativizing history” (Beaulieu 4). Female characters are being written now as strong and standing confidently by heroic males when these characters and the people they represent were “denied the privilege of having a gender identity by the institution of slavery” (Beaulieu xv). Even as feminism makes strides for women in general, ethnic women still find themselves in an ‘othered’ position (June 6). Racism ties closely with the societal constructions of sexism, heterosexism, and classism, and parallels the struggles of all of these forms of oppression.

Every story is written, whether subconsciously or overtly, in the context of the society in which the authors find themselves. Literature is a sort of “social institution, embedded not only within its own literary traditions, but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes” (Kolodny 4). An author has the advantageous position to provide thoughtful, specific inspection of the values of that institution and provide a new perspective (Bomberger 189). Feminism can use this position to resist harmful ideologies about marginalized groups because it allows writers to “bridge the gap between the world as we found it and the world as we [want] it to be” (Kolodny 1). In order to progress as a society, writers “continue to resist dominant ideologies and challenge the status quo, for these forces tend to perpetuate oppression based on gender, race, class, ethnicity, geography, and sexuality” (June 135-6).

Women as a group, “especially women of color and Third World women,” are critical voices in contemporary literary and culture criticism (Armstrong 1). Without the active work of feminism, women will continue, “as has been the case throughout the history of moral thought, to be bracketed off from men,” and be defined not by their individual humanity but by “their biological capacity for bearing children, or their
culturally assigned duties in raising them, or situated in a psychological, purportedly privileged, ghetto that locks them outside the making of meaning, culture, and history” (Fullbrook 3). The fiction of women writers today imagines new values for women, actively resisting the dominant, oppressive culture of

male-controlled institutions like the church, or, indeed, the academic philosophical establishment itself, [and] given way to a more diverse, pluralistic, egalitarian examination of values. . . . Ethical investigation has become more dispersed throughout the population. It has also become more flexible, consisting less of the drawing up of laws and emerging instead as an adjustable response to changing issues, problems and situations. . . . Fiction continues, as it always has done, to contain dimensions which speak directly to the ethical dilemmas of the times in which it is made (Fullbrook 5).

The rejection of the naturalized, dominant social values may have implications far beyond freedom from immediate oppression. Dominant groups, especially white men, may falsely claim objectivity and continue to utilize hegemonic social values to oppress and silence groups through imperialism, racism, and misogyny (Armstrong 5). These groups must instead challenge social norms and have the unique and important perspective to envision a more equitable society. Fiction is a lens to society, looking forward as it looks back. It is important to honor the perspectives of every person and experience so that the faults of normalized social values may be unearthed and replaced with feminist ideals.
CONCLUSION

Looking at the literary climate of gender today illuminates sexism and other oppressive ideologies like racism, heterosexism, and transphobia that emerge under the guise of characterization in fiction. Fiction can inadvertently exclude women’s experience, women with complexity and humanity, and overall the experiences of non-Caucasian, non-heteronormative non-males when oppressive ideologies are normalized. The lasting exposure to this fiction causes women to internalize misogynistic values. When women are repeatedly and systematically objectified, their only value comes from external characteristics like sexuality, virginity, their relation to men, and their ability to mother and kin-keep. Women are taught to hate themselves and their families and rival female peers. These values polarize men from women. People are not encouraged to share the human experience; they separately see the world from unequal gendered opposites, excluding the entire genderqueer community.

Diversity is key; women can be represented as weak or strong if these traits are portrayed as inherently human rather than specifically female. Stereotypes inhibit writing where complexity and resultant meaning could otherwise be found, limiting writers from becoming crafters of unique, literary works.

In response to detrimental stereotypes, women writers have pulled away from the old form and instead “concentrated on presenting positive images. Faced with the challenge of creating role models for women, as well as dispelling false stereotypes, authors wrote . . . characters who were intent upon discovering their true identities distinct from patriarchal and mythical constructions of women” (Aguiar 2). The dramatic
response in recent times has been generally positive, shaking the female of her negative representation, erasing the traumatic “exclusion from authorship, and a painfully personal distress at discovering whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth where we had once hoped to discover ourselves” (Kolodny 1). Female writers have come to the sea of misrepresentation and successfully defied those representations with their own diverse stories. The task now is to increase the volume and diversity of stories and reverse the lingering effects of the ingrained sexist ideology.

It is important to note that my contention that short fiction should be feminist does not presume that the majority of authors be feminists. Rather, the themes and characters should not promote sexism disproportionately or inhibit the representation of genders based on humanity rather than stereotypes.

An interesting and not that unsurprising consequence of “feminism’s goal to eradicate the traditional stereotyping of female characters—particularly the demons and fiends that have proliferated throughout literary history—” is that the “resulting literature may seem equally as biased in its promotion of female nobility” (Aguiar 3). Representation is not easy to juggle; it is important to reiterate that a multitude of perspectives and stories is truly what feminism should strive for. Feminists should—and are humbly attempting to—use fiction as a way to portray the human experience in its entirety.

The real work to be done is to reintroduce and reconsider women’s short fiction at great length, as has been done in greater depths in the other formal literary forms. While reading women’s works, it is important to step back and consider these writers not as a single trope. Reconsidering women’s writing may establish and validate the work
feminism has done to unburden society from its crippling patriarchy, racism, sexism, heterosexism and other institutions of oppression.

When feminists attempt to “distinguish their qualities as women writers,” namely women “creating a literature of their own in the face of a male tradition that for so long has made women its foils, its mirrors, muses, and burdens,” it may happen that feminists “enter a critical limbo where no clear standards exist” (McClave 2). There is certainly room for sexist characters, angelic virgins, and hyper-sexualization in fiction; it is the overabundance and normalization of these characters that is harmful.

Publishers bottleneck the diversity of fiction available. Women struggle to share their stories, to make tangible the injustice and inequality they have experienced. When multiethnic feminist women are published, their stories become an easy avenue to feminism for readers and move the political agenda of feminism forward. Additionally, it should be encouraged and feasible for women’s writing to be seen as within a single category with men’s, marketed by theme rather than gender.

Short stories may be produced in response to the changing political climate. Feminist authors have the advantageous position to provide thoughtful, specific, unique inspection of the flawed values of our society either from firsthand experience or the experience of their sisters, peers, mothers, and daughters. The feminist community has adopted the short story for these many dissenting voices, voices that can best utilize its form. The brevity and concision demand extreme craft that result in a totality of experience, each story potent in its work. The stories raise questions back at the reader and back at the society the writer is caught within. Short stories prove to be much more politically active than any other literary form.
WORKS CITED


SHORT FICTION COLLECTION
“It’s been a while.” Emma glided down the street, an old cell phone chilling her ear. Her green eyes focused on the cracked, wet cement that slipped beneath her grey rain boots.

A man’s voice, deep and crackling, responded. “Yes it has.” He cleared his throat. “Did you want something?”

The windows of the businesses she walked past were clouded, and Emma dragged her finger along them, making a stretched, wiggling line. The air bit at her nose, the slick sludge of leaves lying in pockets under naked, slim trees.

“I know it’s only Tuesday, but I wanted to wish you a happy Thanksgiving. And give you an update, I guess. It’s rough saving up for school.”

When he didn’t say anything, she added, “What are you and Tanya up to for the holiday weekend?”
“She’s sunbathing, actually. We’re in Maui. I told your mother to pass the message along.”

“I didn’t know you could afford that.”

“I wanted to surprise Tanya.” He began speaking to her away from the phone, laughter and a woman’s muffled voice now present.

“Dad?” Emma sped up her walk, the cold crawling into her sleeves and socks.

“We wish you were here. What did you need, honey?”

“I’m on my way to the library after work. Again. I need help having my computer fixed. Maybe I could just use your old one once you fly back?”

“I got rid of my old laptop, and I’m strapped for cash. I don’t know how much I could help.”

“What about—”

“Ask your mother. I think her cup runneth over ever since the divorce.”

“I think she’s actually having a hard time.”

“Honey, I do have to go right now. I’ll call you in a bit. I love you, and have a happy Thanksgiving.”

Emma slid the silent phone into her loose coat pocket, her eyes low. Matted, oily hair slid beneath her knitted cap, the warm earflaps fur-lined. She stood taller than average, round in the stomach and breasts, and thin in the hips. She was a pear on a pedestal of long legs, moving like a spider up the sidewalk.

Just ahead of her, the library stretched above tin-roofed neighboring cottages. Emma hopped inside and brushed off the dew drop pearls collected on her coat. The nearest strip of carpet lay soaked brown with the slime of boots, slick piles of pine
needles mounded at the edges. A few leaves lay perfectly flat, central veins thick like the blue ones of Emma’s fragile, pale wrists.

The large entrance echoed with the sound of focused students—throats clearing, pages turning, computer keys clicking, and a heavy murmur of whispers. Long copper-framed windows stretched high on either side of the central rotunda where a student worker sat behind a bulky wooden desk, eyes glazed over, staring at a laptop. The marble ceiling wore hairline fractures over its slick shine, the bright, circular room connected to long, dim rows of books.

In a far corner, three rows of desks sat with decade-old, cream colored monitors, the humming boxes beneath attached by a tangle of cords. Square overhead lights and a small, fogged window provided narrow light alongside the glowing computer faces.

Emma noticed Nick sitting at one of the computers, slouching, chewing on a plastic pencil. He was clean-shaven beneath brown curls that were much longer than the last time she’d seen him. His broad shoulders were sheathed in a thick, black pea coat. He looked at a pad of paper while an assignment sat ignored on the computer.

Emma hesitated, the air settling on her like lead, her lungs laboring against its sudden weight. She was static, saturated by the scene—the musk of the forced warm air, the tender darkness, and the quiet, constant tap of Nick’s toe on the far leg of his desk.

He glanced back after a moment.

“Emma? Come sit over here.” He gestured widely with his hands, a smile splitting his tan face into the glossy whiteness of round teeth.
“Oh my goodness.” She ambled over to him, pulling off her cap and smoothing her fingers over her halo of curled, escaped hairs. “I haven’t seen you in, what, a month? I’ve been meaning to see you.”

“But we’ve both been busy.” He moved a physics textbook from the seat next to him, the front cover holding in a deep pile of crumpled papers. “What have you been up to? Are you enrolled this term?”

“No, just working. I can’t afford the credits and my parents won’t help me take out loans. I’ve been emailing the university. Just here to check up on it.” She was stiff, feet digging into the ground.

He flicked at the corner of his papers. “I’ll be honest, working sounds like a breath of fresh air. I’m here for a physics assignment due two weeks ago, and there’s an exam Monday.”

“I don’t envy you.” She unzipped her jacket, revealing a white T-shirt. “But you’re looking good. Got rid of the beard, though. I always liked your beard.”

“I miss it,” he said laughing, rubbing his neck roughly. “I had no choice. My girlfriend doesn’t like it.”

She slipped into the chair beside Nick, lowering her weight by the chair’s arms. She sank onto the slim foam pad, shoulders falling limp. Her pounding heart lagged. “What a shame.”

“What is?” Blush crept from Nick’s neck into his cheeks.

She leaned toward him. “That you have such a baby face under all that scruff.” She pulled back, turning on her computer.

“Oh.” He chuckled, ears red. “I agree, and it’s way too much upkeep for me.”
She grinned at him.

“So you’re checking your email.” He scrolled through the assignment, and rolled his head back with an exasperated sigh. “I don’t want to do my homework.”

“Do it or I’ll slap you in the face.”

He gave her a theatrical look, covering his cheeks with either hand.

Her smile widened, her thick eyelashes pointing to the paneled ceiling. “I’m keeping my eyes on you.”

“Well then I’ll have to do it, won’t I?” He opened his textbook.

Emma looked at her hands as she typed, her eyes sliding to her knuckles and the thousands of triangles that made up her skin. The computer crawled through its processing, and eventually she could see her email.

“Anything good?” Nick said, after a moment. As he took off his jacket, the faint smell of his deodorant and warm sweat tickled Emma’s nose.

“Not really.”

He stuck his head in front of her screen. “You already took physics, right? Do you know how to calculate these electric circuits?”

“Calculate what in them?”

“Good question.” His eyes were wide, twitching orbs reading the names of the authors and titles of the many emails in her inbox. “How often does your mom email you? God, that’s rough.”

“My parents got a divorce this year. She isn’t handling it too well. I try to be supportive.”
“She must always be on your case.” He sat back, leaning on his elbow now, only a few inches from her face.

She listened to the rhythm of his lungs. Her eyes focused past his head. “More than you would believe.”

“Huh.” He picked up a stack of notes, unfolding bent corners and flattening them with a sweep of his hand. “I’m exhausted. I want to go home.”

“So go home then. I’m not stopping you.”

“But I miss you.”

A wave of cool sweat hit her. “We could meet later this week.”

“In a few days. How about Friday night, when I’m done with this assignment, and done at my parents’?”

“Yes.” Her phone suddenly called out. She fumbled for it in her jacket pocket.

“Nice one.” Nick picked it up off the ground, and answered, “Hello, I’ll pass the phone to Emma.” He added quietly to Emma, “It’s your mom.”

“I have to take this.” She closed her emails and stood quickly, zipping up her coat. She whispered into the phone, “One second, I’m at the library.”

Nick waved, mouthing, “See you Friday.”

She ruffled his hair as she stood. He laughed and pulled her hand away slowly, releasing it gently.

She inhaled, walking at a quick pace and spoke into the small phone, headed to the alley behind the library from a back exit. “Hello. Mom?”
“Who was that? I haven’t heard from you all week. Did you get my emails? I must have your address incorrectly written down.” She spoke with the ardor of a protestor, her voice rapid and strong.

“I just saw them. You know my computer isn’t working and I have to go to the library to look at them, right? Dad was saying I should ask if you could help me get the repair done.” Emma tapped her boot gently on a puddle. The reflection of the grey sky and branches peeking over a fence rippled across its glossy surface, stirring up a settled layer of silt in small plumes. “And that was just Nick.”

“So I finally hear Nick’s voice. Such an attractive voice. I don’t know why you don’t date him, with how well he treats you.”

“Did you talk to Dad?”

“Your father? No. And I don’t have the kind of money to buy a laptop. I wish he would visit you, maybe buy you groceries.”

“He says there are too many speed traps on the way to my apartment. He got the one ticket and now he’s a mess about it.” Emma stepped out of the alley, to the street in front of the library. Dusk swept in, and the street lights hummed and flicked on for their nightly shift. “He did come about three weeks ago.”

“Well that’s good. At least he’s trying.”

Emma looked back at the entrance, hoping Nick might check on her. “I would date Nick, you know. But he has a girlfriend.”

“You said you got along so well. What happened? You’re too good for him, I know it. You’re too good for all those boys.”

“You don’t even know him.”
“But I know you. You’re one of a kind.”

“You have to say that.” The air was clear now, robbed of its blanketing moisture.

“I mean it. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I just wish I knew you had somebody.”

“I’m fine.”

“I couldn’t depend on your father. But young love is a strong thing, and if this boy knows anything about you, he’ll figure it out and treat you right.”

A beeping came from her phone.

“Dad is calling. I have to go. Maybe he’s come around.”

“I’ll wait on the line.”

“Don’t. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I love you.”

Emma switched the call. “Dad? I’m surprised you actually called back.”

A stifled noise came from the phone. Wind, muffled speaking, buttons being pressed with stifled beeps.

“Dad? Hello?” She held the phone at arm’s length. “Did he pocket-dial me?”

The sun was steadily falling, and angled, dramatic shadows crawled across the street. She slipped back through the entrance, heading to Nick.

She stopped at a distance again, but this time a woman was next to Nick. She was much shorter than Emma, and plain, but with symmetry and proportions that gave her an unmistakable beauty.

Emma caught herself, deciding to turn and leave. Her eyes lingered long enough to see the woman lean in and kiss Nick on the cheek.
Three days later, Emma paced, eyes darting around the room. She approached her front door. The weathered brass doorknob was stiff, turning in lurches like the arm of a clock. As it swung open, a cross-breeze barreled through. She held the heavy door open with a stack of phonebooks set aside for recycling weeks earlier. The incense and mildew thick in the air slowly filtered out. The crisp morning air coming in chilled her, and she pulled her knitted sweater close. Thin sunbeams came from the window overlooking the parking lot, and a square overhead light hung weakly, dead flies and dust collected inside.

An outdated copy of Better Homes and Gardens lay under her bed, balls of dust sticking on it as the wind found its way to the window. Inside the crumpled cover was a picture of Nick, printed in pixilated grayscale.

She meticulously cleaned her small apartment for Nick’s visit, straightening magazines, books, pictures, trinkets—any defined angles lined up in a grid around the entire room. She wiped the thick dust off with handfuls of damp toilet paper, leaving tiny rolls of white scattered on the floor. The geometric layers now floating on the wall were unrecognizable, perfect and clear.

A gust of wind shook her small window, and a drip of rain-water fell on the dark hardwood floor.

She closed the door. She sat down to watch her small box television from the rose-patterned loveseat that blocked most of the slim corridor to the fridge and stove. Her ears perked at any footsteps, listening until a door closed or the walking faded into the street noise.
At noon, Emma’s phone lit up and she tensed in anticipation, slapping it to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Emma, how are you doing?” Her mother spoke softly.

“I’m fine, Mom. What’s up?”

“Oh nothing. I thought about what you said. I think together your father and I could afford a computer. If you can find an inexpensive one—”

“I hate getting between you two like that.”

“I want to help you, but you’re going to have to make some compromises. I am struggling with keeping this household together alone, and your father needs some strong words or he’ll spend your inheritance on that, that—”

“Nice lady.”

“Yes. What a polite daughter I have.”

“Well I’ll get on that, but for now, I’m freaking out and I need some time.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Nick is coming over and I’m nervous.”

“Show that boy who’s boss. Go get ‘em, champ.”

“Thanks.”

“But don’t trust men that don’t give you exactly what you need.”

“Okay. Love you Mom.”

The call clipped short a dramatic sigh from the other end. The words “call ended” lay heavy in Emma’s hands until the glowing face of her phone dimmed and went entirely dark. She cradled it in her hands, the single connection to everyone she knew.
Footsteps and a quiet knock came from the door, and a shadow shifted under it.

“Hello?” The muffled voice was timid, but unmistakably Nick’s. “It’s me. I finished my homework. Sorry I didn’t call.”

She stared at the door, unable to process what she should do.

“Hello? I finally finished that assignment.” He paused. “Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m just caught up in this movie.” She peeled herself from the loveseat, flattened the cushion with her hands, and threw a handful of candy wrappers in the trash. She glanced at herself in a mirror, checking her teeth for debris, wiping a crust of chocolate from the corner of her lip, and adjusting her shirt. She slid her foot under the bed, pushing the old magazine from view.

She approached the door. The white paint of the doorjamb revealed scales of wood underneath. She pulled the door chain out of its slot and exhaled.

The door swung open, cold air crawling in with his warm body, just inches away from her. He rested his free hand on her shoulder, saying quietly, “How is your afternoon going?”

“Quite lazy.”

“Have a good Thanksgiving?” He threw his bag on her bed and sat on the loveseat. He added coolly, “I love this movie.”

“Just went to my aunt’s. She lives in town.” She stood beside him, arms crossed. As she watched the screen, the muscles of her back pulled her tired body backward, arched and tall.
He patted her softly on the leg. “I don’t think I’m going to do well on the exam. Who schedules midterms after Thanksgiving break? I won’t even be fully awake after all the turkey.”

“And who would study when you have all this time to relax.” Emma didn’t move. He cleared his throat, tilting his face toward hers. “My girlfriend visited yesterday on her way to her parent’s for Thanksgiving.” He looked back to the TV.

“I hope she made you do your homework,” Emma said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I’m worried about your schoolwork.” She sat down next to him, slowly.

“She didn’t help at all. But don’t judge a fish by how it can climb a tree, huh?”

“What?”

“I think Einstein said it.”

“Right.” Emma brought her feet up, curling herself in a ball. She pushed away from Nick into the arm of the loveseat. Cool pulses of sweat ran over her body, slithering like snakes.

“She wants me to change my major to psychology. She says her school has a great program.”

“Do you want to change your major?”

He paused, and said quietly, “No.”

“Well there you go.”

“It is kind of is that simple, isn’t it?” He sighed and grabbed her foot and shook it like a hand. “I needed this break today. A movie was a great idea.”

She pulled her legs up to her chest. “My whole life feels like a break from school. I wish I could get a loan.”
“You’re smart. You’ll figure it out—maybe get a scholarship or something. And for now, enjoy your freedom. Freedom is an underappreciated thing.”

“What freedom? I’m stuck under the thumb of bills and loans.”

“I guess that’s true. None of us have control.” He turned his head against the arm of the loveseat. “And, God is it awful.”

Emma laid her head on the other loveseat arm, and pulled a blanket from the floor beside her, wrapping her toes and body. The heat of her breath clung against her face. She went silent.

“I’ve been debating recently about if I should focus on school,” Nick said, sitting up with the push of his feet on the wood floor, “and end things with my girlfriend. We fought this morning when she was about to leave. We fight a lot.”

“You’re fighting?” Emma wrung her hands beneath the blanket. “What’s keeping you with her?”

“I need to see this relationship through, however—or if—it ends. I love her.”

Emma watched his lips as they parted to speak again.

“And she’s throwing my birthday party. It’s only two weeks away. I’d feel bad. I don’t know. She already made invitations.”

“That’s a great reason to be with someone. A party.”

“Well we have a lot of mutual friends and history. Our families get along. It’s comfortable.”

“School is really important,” she said, looking away. “If I could afford school I’d always put it first.”
“I’m blessed that I have a functional family. To find someone that does too, and to have those two families mesh, is a whole different level of comfort.”

“So you’re in love with her family. All that other stuff should be perks, not the glue of your relationship.”

“Hence my dilemma, Emma.”

They shared a look and each let out a single, quiet laugh.

Emma breathed deeply. Only the swells of the movie’s soundtrack filled the air. She dug her fingers into her legs, arms pulsing, fighting the dramatic increase in her energy. Her heart raced. Her breath was fast.

“I can’t stay up too late tonight. I’ve been getting bad sleep recently.”

“Good thing it’s only the afternoon.”

He laid his head back, his brown bangs flopping to one side. “I needed to see a friendly face. You’re a great friend, you know that?”

She turned to him, pulling her blanket off.

“I’m not leaving now, I just want to say I have work to catch up on in the morning and I need my best chance at rest. I want a break today.”

“You could sleep here if you wanted. I know it’s closer to campus than where you are out in the boonies. If you needed to walk to the library in the morning, it’d take you ten minutes.”

“I don’t think I should.” He leaned forward, rubbing his knees. The headphones around his neck hung loose in front of him, swaying with each breath.
“It’s no inconvenience to me. The loveseat is a little short, but it’s deep enough to curl up in. Or if you wanted the bed, I could sleep in it.” She touched her neck softly. “I could sleep in the loveseat, I mean.”

“I don’t think I could sleep in a room with you.”

“What?” Her vision focused in a tunnel on the television.

“I’m too attracted to you to trust myself sleeping over alone.”

She sat up suddenly, feet shooting from her blanket onto the floor.

“Emma, I don’t know what I mean.”

“Yeah.”

“Should I go?” He stood, pointing his thumb like a hitchhiker at the door.

Emma hopped up, flight response coursing through her veins. She stared to the side, mouth agape. She couldn’t pull her eyes to look at him.

“I didn’t mean to be weird.” He snatched up his bag, and opened the stiff doorknob. With his other hand, he pulled an envelope from his bag. He turned, placed it in her hand, and kissed her on the cheek without a word.

Two weeks later, she was at Nick’s front door, clutching the birthday invitation he’d left with her, watching a cluster of limp balloons wave in the breeze, hanging from cotton string duct-taped to the gutter above. The townhouse’s white paint was peeling over warped paneling.

Emma wore a slim dress, a shimmering, elastic shell, beside her flat, cotton purse. She was clean, combed, and done-up, her skin like honey beneath the dusty wheat of her hair. The music pouring into the street from Nick’s house was thick with bass, and cans
and bottles lay strewn on the curb strip. She knocked and waited. When there was no reply, she let herself in.

The tiny, musty living room was packed with dozens of inebriated twenty-somethings. There was a game of beer pong and people dancing beneath a mixed haze, cigarette smoke curling in the open sliding glass door. The house was white-walled with only a black clock and a crooked *Dark Side of the Moon* poster. The blinds on the two windows were bent and stained grey. She recognized Nick’s girlfriend from pictures online, now sitting on a couch with her head in her hands, two girls on either side stroking her back in drunken support.

A song ended on the stereo, and Emma heard her small voice, as fragile as a porcelain doll, whimper, “I think if I just throw up, it’ll be better.”

Another song blasted. Emma slinked away, suddenly attuned to the weight of her being there, of what she had come to decide.

Each face jolted her—she searched for Nick, recognizing classmates from a previous term, all the faces uncanny in their familiarity, but no name or personality held close in her memory. She turned the corner, narrowly avoiding a running, yelling man. A small light lit the hallway. Nick was leaning on a closet, taking in the scene.

“Emma, come here. I’m so glad you made it.” He pushed himself upright from the wall and pulled her into the kitchen. Empty fifths of Burnett’s and Pabst cans littered the counters and floor. “Do you want anything? There’s plenty.” He guided her to the sink, near a couple leaned against the fridge, kissing heavily.

“No, I’m alright. Not much of a drinker.” She cleared her throat. “Happy birthday, Nick.”
“Thank you, Emma.” He stretched out his arms and pulled her into a hug.

After a long moment she pulled away. “Hello there, drunky. Are you taking a nap on me?”

“God, sorry. I’m an idiot. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“It’s okay.” She chuckled, but then shot a sideways look at the fridge couple.

“I’m so sorry. I’m drunk.” He stood up straight in a purposeful way, swaying, stumbling forward and slapping a hand on her shoulder. “You know, I miss you. Will you write me emails? Can we be pen pals?”

“What ever happened to getting coffee?”

“That’s going to be really hard.”

She stepped back and placed a hand on the kitchen counter. “Why?”

“Please? You’re such a good friend. I just want to hear more from you. I love you.” He leaned forward and hugged her again. “I’m not going to have any friends next term.”

“Next term? Well you’ll have me; I think I finally got a student loan set up.”

“But I’m transferring.”

She ducked back, her hair falling in her face. She tucked it behind her ear forcefully. “Stop hugging me.”

He stepped back and lifted his hands in the air. “Sorry. I’ll keep these to myself.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’m glad you came.” His smile was sheepish.
“You didn’t tell me.” She let out all of her breath, pushing out the stale alcohol fumes and cigarette smoke that drifted in from the window overlooking the sink. “I didn’t know you would really leave.”

His eyes, droopy with alcohol, settled in a concerned pout. He lifted his hands to pinch at his temples. “I’ll still be in the area for breaks and holidays. My parents live here. You know that.”

Emma crossed her arms and pressed her soft, balmed lips together. “I don’t think this is healthy.”

“What do you mean?” He spoke even slower now, eyes wide.

She looked over at the couple and lowered her voice. “I don’t want to give you an ultimatum, and if I did it seems… fruitless.”

“It’s a better school for my major.”

“You need to figure this out on your own.” She looked down at the floor, dirt at the edges of the lime-colored vinyl tiles. “I was waiting for something. I don’t think you’ll be able to give it to me.”

“Is this about what I said? I just want to be honest. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“It is.” She put her hand firmly on his shoulder. “Have a great time at your new school.”

“No, hey, not like that.” He held her hand on his shoulder firmly too. He scooped his head down to look into Emma’s eyes, nearing her face.

“Please, Nick. I can’t.” Emma turned, blushing. She weaved through the crowd spryly, depending on her sobriety.

“Can we just talk about this?” Nick called out from the kitchen.
She caught a glimpse of Nick’s girlfriend sitting against the wall outside of the bathroom, holding a red and white striped popcorn bucket from a local theater, the greenish pale of her face distinct beside her tan friends. As Emma stepped to the door she heard her retch.

A warm tear on Emma’s flushed face chilled as she crossed the dark, empty street and stopped beneath a crooked, dripping apple tree. She was a block away now and could see Nick standing in the doorway, nestled in a row of small houses. A veil of darkness covered her patch of grass, the nearest street light broken.

Nick called her name out, looking around wildly. It was a desperate yell, helpless like a lost child, but forceful. He took deliberate, small steps to the sidewalk and bumbled down the street, away from her.

She watched him disappear, turned down a side street. The door to his house was open and a girl appeared in the doorway, talking on a cell phone. She followed the same path, her voice booming in the street.

Emma’s bare legs ached. She crouched, rubbing her bumpy skin. Afraid her shoes might be heard and nervous that she’d be seen, Emma took small, slow steps away through the soft grass of a neighbor’s house.

The air was crisp, and the glowing, swollen moon hung alone in the sky.

Emma pulled a thick, folded paper from her purse and held it up in the darkness. She regarded it, unfolding it quietly in her hands. With the limp release of her cold, white fingers, it fell onto the wet ground. She dragged it to a puddle with the toe of her shoe, scrubbing it on the rough bumps of the cement until the faint grey blur of Nick’s face turned to pulp.
Sit in a small immaculate kitchen, frowning straight into your mother’s mint-green ceramic cookie tower. Your back is warm in the evening sun, and you’re sleepy while you watch her wipe the white counters with a sponge that fills the room with the scent of lemon bleach. You’re on your way to your best friend’s house, but your mother wants to talk.

“How was your date yesterday with Jack? Did he ask you to prom in the nick of time? Do I need to do your hair?” your mother asks. Watch her pale forehead wrinkle and her green eyes flutter gently beneath dark lashes as she speaks, scrutinizing the shiny surface. She is a widow and sometimes you are embarrassed at how old she looks.

“We’re not going to prom. I said I wasn’t going, remember?” Stare at your mother’s stiff, smoky-black hairdo, glistening with hairspray. It looks outdated and lifeless in contrast to your feathered, blonde mane. “The date was fine, but I don’t think
I’ll go out with him again. He doesn’t get me. And what’s the point of dating if he’ll be in Vietnam in a year?”

“He’s a good boy. A pen-pal could really improve your writing.” She pauses, wiping sweat from her chalky face. Sun pours through a small window over the kitchen sink past small house plants, illuminating a fuzzy halo of grey, escaped hairs above your mother’s head. “I don’t know why you don’t like him. He’s polite and was brought up in a nice family.”

“A nice, wealthy family.” Watch her squeeze water in the sink. Her nails are manicured and pristine. See her admire them, causing a rare, tiny curl of smile to flash on her thin red lips.

“You don’t care that he’s well off right now, sweetheart, I know. But just try to invest in some security for the future. I can’t provide for you forever.” She wipes a wet hand on her clean, rose-patterned apron and shuffles toward you. “It’s important to me that you find someone soon. I only see you with Amy. I was engaged at your age.”

“I know you’re worried about me. You let me know all the time that you’re worried. But I can work during school, and by the time I graduate college I can start a career. I can take care of myself, on my own if I need to.” Raise your eyebrows and smooth the cool, tight jean fabric on your thighs, watching the flared bottoms blossom around your small feet. “Whatever happens, I’ll be fine.”

She comes to you and pulls a feathered lock of hair behind your ear with her dry hand. A long finger slides around your ear like a cold snake, and you flinch. Recognize her expression: she’s made up her mind that you’re wrong.
“You know I want what’s best for you, but we can’t afford college, and you won’t have time for school when you have a family.”

“I’ve already been accepted into UCLA. Amy helped me. I’ll get scholarships.”

Stand up with fire in your eyes. “Just because you’re a housewife doesn’t mean I want to be. I want more than that.”

Push your chair against the table and ignore her thin, frowning mouth.

Her watery eyes fall to the floor as she mumbles, “In a few years you’ll want a husband and children. They’ll make you happy.”

“I’m going to college. I’ll be focusing on schoolwork, not boys.”

She picks the sponge up and swirls it on the counter again, leaving small loops of water. “I don’t want you wasting your time.”

Start to walk out of the kitchen. “I’m going to Amy’s house, and I’m late.”

Stride through the front door after slipping brown, thick-strapped sandals onto your feet, an overnight bag swinging in your hand.

The sun outside kisses your skin as you walk the few blocks to Amy’s house, the winding path carved so deeply into your brain that you could walk it blind. For years you have skipped, sprinted, done the grapevine (after finally learning how in gym class) and hopped, puddle to puddle, roaring like dinosaurs with Amy down that path.

Freedom blooms around you as you walk, and your heart is full of the youthful zeal only the anticipation of high school graduation can bring. It’s a month away, just precious weeks until you’re separated from Amy and your mother.

Arrive at the house and see Amy stretched on a red and yellow striped beach towel. Kick off your sandals and sit beside her. See thick, black eyelashes behind her
aviator sunglasses open to show small, striking brown eyes. She has an air of decadence and confidence that is sweet and thick like syrup.

“Getting tan for graduation pictures?” Twirl your hair, hugging your knees with a shy arm. The grass is cool between your toes.

“I need it. Those pictures are going to be in every one of my relative’s house for decades, do you realize that? I want to at least look better than my cousins.” Her small, blue bikini glides over her pink skin as she sits up.

“I guess you’re right. But I’m already burning from the walk.” Roll under a large oak tree on the side of the yard and stare up at the patchy sunlight that twinkles through the small lobed leaves. Their rustling is soothing.

“I’ve been out here since my parents left. I don’t even know what time it is.”

“Maybe seven?” Watch her pull her hair down from a high ponytail. “Are you excited for Stanford?”

“I can’t wait. There will be so many new, brilliant people. Hopefully I can actually make a difference while I’m there.”

“You don’t want to be a car salesman like your dad?”

“Not at all.” She gets up. “I’m going inside. We can tan tomorrow. Join me?”

Follow dutifully, picking up your bag and sandals in opposite hands. Inside the house it’s cold and you hear the whirring of an air conditioner in another room. Amy walks to the kitchen sink and fills a glass with water.

“There’s iced tea if you want some. I’m going to shower.” She gulps half the glass and sucks in air. “Since my parents are gone we can do whatever we want. They moved the TV to their room when I got a B last semester, if you want to watch it.” She
points to their door and walks away. The sound of her feet slapping on the wood floor echoes gently through the tall, empty kitchen.

In her parents’ room you see a large bed with a white, metal frame, and you sit on its thick, full blanket. Look around at the nautically themed bedroom; intricately knotted ropes and navy blue curtains frame a dimming sky. A rose patterned candy dish filled with jelly lemon slices sits on a side table, next to it a picture framed in gold with a middle school, pigtailed Amy. Notice that her dimples are less prominent now. Above her face is a golden title: *8th Grade Class of ’65.*

Amy joins you during the second episode of *The Dating Game.* She’s in pajamas now, hair freshly feathered.

“Prom night really kills, huh?” Stare at her pink, heart-shaped face that is framed by her dark mermaid mane.

“I think we’ll enjoy each other. I brought us a present.” Amy turns to you and pinches your cheek, holding a bottle of Maker’s Mark bourbon. She takes a long drink and hands it to you, turning up her lip. “It tastes awful.”

“To college,” you say, slurping up the liquid. It is your first taste of hard alcohol. Amy’s eyes are genuine and sad. “I really wish you’d been accepted into Stanford with me.”

“At least we’re both in California. I hear UCLA is a great school. We’ll still be able to visit each other. You’ll have your car.”

“It won’t be the same.” She takes another drink, and you follow. She holds your hand. “I’m afraid we’ll grow apart. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”
“We’ve been together this long. College will be nothing.” Squeeze her hand. “I’m starting to see funny. I’ve never been drunk before, is this what it feels like?” Take the remote from Amy’s hand. Wave it in the air like a maestro, miming a dramatic crescendo.

She laughs and picks a lemon candy from the tableside dish for each of you.

“College has nothing on us.”

Open your mouth. She rests the thick, sugary slice on your pink cotton tongue. Stare at the screen together, licking your lips, chewing the sweets, saliva thick with sugar. Watch flickering scenes of reporters, flamingos, intimate embraces, and salon quality shampoo.

“High school was like this, wasn’t it?” Twirl a lock of your blonde hair.

“What do you mean?”

“A bunch of flashes. You forget most of it, but when you find a good show, you stop searching and stick with it.” Scratch your head and nod to yourself. “Just like high school.”

“You must be drunk.” She pauses on a reporter:

“The number of casualties in Vietnam is beyond what anyone could have expected...”

“God, I hope this ends soon. I want to do something about it at college, you know?”

“It’s so depressing.” Flip the channel to a made-for-TV movie, a woman crying and a man holding her face gently as an orchestra swells in the background. “Let’s watch this. I think that’s Time’s Square, right? Probably about New Year’s Eve.”

“Yeah, perfect.”
Hold her hand again. Your eyes linger on one another, and she blushes. She kisses your hand lightly and grins as you watch the beautiful heroine swept into the crowd rushing to see the ball drop. Just as the hero loses sight of her, an ad appears.

“I’m glad we didn’t go to prom.” Turn to Amy. “Would we have danced with me if we had gone?”

She rolls swiftly to face you, knocking the remote to the ground. “Let’s dance now.” By your clasped hands, you’re pulled off the bed.

Stumble to your feet and squeal. “I’m going to miss you.”

She draws you into her small body while commercials are blasting, and you’ve never heard anything more beautiful than Amy humming along to the Alka Seltzer jingle. Pull her into your shoulder and kiss her forehead, and stay that way until the movie comes back on.

“I love you,” she mumbles. Pull away from her, and as the crowd on the television is counting down to midnight, lean in and kiss her on the mouth right when they yell *happy new year!* You’ve never been more afraid. Linger, eyes closed, her hard breath on your face. She ducks her head into the curve of your neck and doesn’t let go until the national anthem finishes at sign-off.

Graduation is a sunny, beautiful day, filled with congratulations and tears and last words. Clustered silver and blue balloons bounce in the wind as well dressed families shuffle out of the football field, the ceremony over.

Your mother is at home, in bed.
Swim through a sea of tangled people, black robes, and caps. Smile at classmates, recognizing clusters of similar faces as families swarm around, beaming with pride. Jack, with his father standing back and shaking hands with another man, walks up and moves your tassel to the other side of your cap.

“You look so worried. You got your diploma, didn’t you?” He takes the black folder from your hands and reads it, stroking a non-existent beard.

“Yes, and I got into UCLA. But I might defer a year.” Shuffle, self-conscious as he looks at you.

“Honors diploma, and UCLA? Very nice.” He flips his shaggy bangs and extends his hand to you. “I wish I could say the same. But the old man says I should just work in the shop ‘til I have to ship out. My birthday’s in October and since I’m young for our grade I haven’t been drafted, but…” His brown eyes soften and for once he doesn’t seem like he’s trying to impress you.

“But you will be drafted.” Your hand twitches as you consider putting it on his shoulder. Look around for Amy, but return to Jack’s worried face. “But you have your diploma, so that’s good. Maybe when you’re done serving you can come back for college?”

“Maybe. But some of these shell-shock guys can’t get anything done. My dad is a little wacky even after all this time since the war. Here,” He kicks at the grass and hands you back your diploma. He looks back to his father who is still talking. “Sorry to bum you out, but I guess a lot of the guys aren’t feeling great. Some didn’t graduate since they were already drafted.”

“I’ve noticed it too. It’s kind of creepy that our parents don’t talk about it.”
He nods in agreement. “Where are your parents? Shooting the shit like my dad?”

Pull at your robe, look at the ground. “My dad died years ago, and my mother is, well she’s very sick.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I was actually looking for Amy’s family. Have you seen them?”

“I don’t think so, but there are a lot of folks around here, so I wouldn’t be surprised if I had looked right at her. She’s that little brunette friend of yours, right?”

“Yes.” Clear your throat.

“She seems real nice. You two have been friends for a long while, haven’t you?”

He is leaning to one side, stretching his leg in a lunge. Male classmates walk by, patting him on the back.

“Best friends since first grade.”

“It’s no wonder she wants to be your best friend. You’re very lovable.”

“Thank you, Jack.” Wriggle your fingers, your diploma a square weight on the pendulum of your arm.

He stands upright, approaching you. “I mean it, you’re lovable. Go ahead; tell me I don’t mean it.”

You smile politely and turn away, shielding your eyes from the sun. “I’ve got to go, if you’ll excuse me.”

He holds your arms firmly and whispers, “I heard about your mother. If you need anything, you let me know. I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, Jack. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Slip away as his father approaches. Scan the crowd for Amy, with no success.
Walking home, see balloons and flimsy card tables set up in front yards, middle-aged people in nice clothes snapping proud photographs. Consider walking to Amy’s house instead; her family is having a party, but your mother feels dreadful today and you know you should rush home. Walk through the manicured neighborhood, your cap and gown now balled up and tucked under your thin arm. In the yards you pass, mothers are crying and fathers are giving quiet, low speeches to their children, hands on their shoulders.

Wish your father was alive, that any relatives were in contact. Your mother has been undergoing treatment for a few weeks and just found out it’s terminal. “I thought I’d get better,” she had said. “I didn’t want to worry you.” Medical bills are beyond the stipend your mother receives for your father’s service in the war.

Your mother is dying, and you’re graduating into a life for her comfort.

Half a year later, Jack’s parents snap a quick photo of both of you in front of a court house. Stay silent, a small smile held in place for the camera under white pillow clouds.

Wish you were wearing a giant wedding dress filled with enough air to float away, bouncing between trees and clouds and birds, not the dark green dress you’re in that feels like a St. Patrick’s Day costume. Stand by Jack in his sharp green uniform. The camera clicks and clicks and you hope your bad skin is hidden behind his thick jacket sleeve.

Jack’s mother holds your hand and says, “Your parents would have been so happy to see you get married. When Jack comes home from Vietnam we can have a reception
and then everyone can really celebrate this beautiful marriage.” She wipes her nose with a pink embroidered handkerchief. “I’m sure your parents are watching right now, from heaven.”

Almost say, “I don’t believe in heaven,” but instead pull your scarf tight around your neck. The wind pulls heat from your nose and you’re sniffling when Jack kisses you on the cheek, his hair short and unrecognizable. Close your eyes and allow yourself one thought of Amy, hundreds of miles away.

You and Jack had agreed today would be the best day to finalize the marriage paperwork, before he was deployed. “It will still be like dating,” he had said in a letter from basic training. “But we’ll get a stipend for being married and we could use it to fix up an old house together. We can be hosts for big parties, get a dog... Now that I’m done with basic training, we can really plan for the future. Now that you’re mother is in a better place, we can focus on us. I’ll write you every week and send letters when I can.”

At some point Jack’s constant offerings couldn’t be refused and your mother grew fond of him cleaning and fixing things. She clung to the idea of you and him together as she died, believing you’d find happiness in his company, in the future of a family. You’d call Amy at night in the summer and she would try to comfort you but she didn’t have the time with her job and new friends in California. So you would hold Jack’s hand in front of your mother, let him kiss you, have dinner with his parents, and let him ask your mother’s permission for your hand. You’d told yourself the engagement would die with your mother, but his parents took you in, and you were stuck.

She died two weeks after his eighteenth birthday, and as you held her weak hand you promised her you’d marry Jack when he got back. Your mother was just a shrunken
version of herself by the end—a wrinkled, bald baby, smiling as she died, your family’s last pennies on her eyes.

A year later, stand in your new kitchen, tired from a restless night and your feet aching on the slippery linoleum. Stretch your body, expanding your arms and chest. Droopy eyes search for the coffee canister and filters as you fumble to plug in the coffee maker.

Jack is back from his first tour of duty. His face is slimmer now, eyes sunken, and he finds more pleasure playing with your golden lab than spending time with you. Jack is still sweet, but he knows that you’re not in love.

Manny, your lab, has been your company while Jack’s been away. In Los Angeles, the summer heat and sweet tea lull you into lethargic comfort as you care for the small home you’ve bought with Jack. In the heat you imagine yourself dissolving into the stiff, clay soil, leaving just a body’s outline of salt for Manny to lick, leaving no trace. Your body holds no energy. Amy hasn’t returned your letters. You are a bored housewife, the mother of a dog. Every term you defer your enrollment into the university.

Sit at the tiny kitchen table, coffee in one hand, and a small bowl of oatmeal in the other. Smile at the water-stained wall; an empty bottle of Maker’s Mark bourbon sits on the table, and you think of prom.

Remember one night, while Jack was still overseas, you were lonely and needed to talk to someone but no one picked up the phone. So you wrote Amy a letter. It was the first love letter you’d ever written, and it took five hours to get it right. It sat in your California Guide to Common Reptiles in a yellow envelope for a week until you drank
the rest of that bottle of bourbon and walked it down to the mailbox on the corner of your block.

Don’t call her, it would seem too eager.

Hear your husband slurp up the rest of the coffee in four long gulps. He scrutinizes the fridge, groaning. “You need to go shopping this afternoon.”

Stare through him. He is a ghost in the kitchen haunting you in an old movie. He no longer has your broken mother to fix, so he tries to fix you.

“Okay, Jack.”

“Amy called.” His eyes are powerful.

“Amy?” Sit up, straining against the morning light. Your hair is limp and you hide it behind your hands.

“She called last night, while you were at the bar. She was surprised to hear we my voice.” His knuckles are white around his car keys. He looks handsome in his uniform.

“Is that right?” Stir your coffee, watching the cream swirl in loops.

“Why wouldn’t she know? I thought she was your best friend?”

“We don’t really talk anymore.”

“I don’t want you pulling away from her too.” He stares at you and sighs. “I have to go to work. I think my leave is going to be cut short.”

“We can talk later.”

He nods and turns to the entryway, slamming the door as he leaves. Smile as the sound of the engine disappears down the street as he goes to the military base a few miles away.
Jump up and slide along the linoleum in your bright green socks. Halt at the other side of the counter and see a new stack of mail. A bridal magazine sits on top, sent by your mother in law. She’s been asking when the reception will be. The issue is aviation themed, like she’s been hinting at. Beneath it is a letter from Amy.

Eyes scan faster than you can comprehend words. She’d like to talk to you, in person. She is in love with you.

The notebook paper is warped in your sweating hands. Start to breathe fast and gallop up stairs. Pull luggage from under the bed, grinning. Fill it with everything: sundresses, sandals, a floppy hat, money, aspirin, a picture of your parents, deodorant, passport, and a memory box. You are shaking. Wonder if she got your other letters.

Grab your mother’s cook book as you leave. Stand in the kitchen holding two cases filled with the items chosen to define you, Manny wagging his tale at your heels.

Scrawl a note on the back of Chinese food menu:

Dear Jack,

I’m glad we tried this, and I’m so grateful for your help with my mother, but now I need to go. I will be gone for a long time, I think. You can sell my things. I took some of your pocket money to start. Don’t worry about me.

I took Manny. I thought it was best.

Love, E-------

Decide to drive away.

The ditch grass rushes past, and you watch the sinking clouds drift away in your rearview mirror above a lemon shaped air-freshener. While driving, remember how your mother always told you that love is hard and that marriage is one big compromise, but that she had you and that was all that mattered. You had thought maybe a mistake with Jack wouldn’t be the worst thing.
Turn up the crackling radio when your favorite songs come on, rolling strokes of guitar past your ears. It is the soundtrack of the life you’re driving toward, wild and free.

Hours later you’re sitting in your car, frozen. Manny is breathing heavily from the back of the car. Coins in the passenger seat look right at you with their penny eyes.

Gaze into the rainy street. The beat up station wagon smells like mildew and there’s a leak in the passenger window that’s flicking onto your luggage. Manny is whining.

Get out of the car and cross the street to a payphone. Anti-war posters are plastered on the windows of businesses outside. Manny is chewing on a clump of grass that has grown through a crack in the sidewalk.

Kick the bottom of the phone booth to loosen the door’s hinges. It smells like urine, but it’s dry and shielded from the wind. Fiddle with your wedding ring as you slip a quarter into the booth’s slot. Pull off the ring and slip it in your pocket. Press each number thoughtfully and think of your mother’s beautiful hands.

It’s late and Amy is groggy when you call, confused as your words spin past her ears.

“Hello? I can’t hear you.” Her voice is raspy with sleep.

Sigh. “I need somewhere to stay tonight.” Clench to the payphone, shivering in the small booth, bathed in a dull street lamp glow. The street around is silent except for the dog’s breathing as he stares at you; the only movement is a far strip club sign flickering and unstable in the wind.

“What? You mean with me? I don’t understand.”
“I left Jack.” Clear your throat. “I haven’t slept in two days. I need to sleep. I promise I won’t get in the way.” Rub your temples.

“Where are you?”

Look down the street at the place with her number and you think her bedroom light is on. “Well, I’m actually outside your place now. I have my dog.”

“I’ll be right down.”

As you walk to her door, your throat closes, your eyes blur, your fingers sweat, and the rain slams on you in tiny whips. Force a breath as you walk up the four steps to her front door, each a mountain, Manny pushing at the back of your legs.

Amy opens the door and you are flooded with the vision of her. She is beautiful with puffy eyes under a pale yellow sleeping cap and black hair that’s longer now. Her robe has little yellow birds on it, and she pulls it close to her body against the cold of the doorway. She says, hugging me, “I’m so happy to see you. How are you?”

“I’m okay. When I heard you’d called, I got to thinking. And then I read your letter. I don’t know what I was doing with him.” Clear your throat. “So I left.”

She guides you into the living room and slips into the kitchen. Her apartment is small and clean. There are matching golden printed throw pillows on the blue couch, bathed in a dreamlike soft light. Hear a kettle whistling.

“You read it?” she says from the kitchen. Hear her pull the kettle off the stove.

“Yes.” Sit on the couch, knees shaking, holding Manny. “I guess I’m still in shock or confused. I mean, we have more than a decade of friendship that contradicts all this.”

After a moment she brings two cups of tea and a metal bowl of water for your dog. Watch him slurp the water loudly, rhythmically, as you hold the warm cup.
After she says nothing you continue. “I’ve missed you. You’re doing alright, aren’t you? Still going to school?”

“I’ve been helping the movement against the war with journalism. There are so many people dying in Vietnam. I’m getting the truth out there.” She blows on the hot liquid.

“That’s great, Amy. It is so hard for people to lose family members, and the war is so hard on everyone. I know it’s changed Jack. I want to be there for him, but…”

Amy has a pained look on her face. “I know it must have been terrible seeing your mom pass. I’m so proud of you for doing what you did, and I’m glad he could be there to help you. I understand that it’s complicated.”

“He really did help me, and I wanted to repay him that.” Pull on your ear. “But I don’t love him, and I don’t want to be around him anymore.”

“You don’t need a man.” She smiles when Manny barks, but the smile fades as she reads your face. “You have me.”

“What are we? I mean, you read my letter.” Do not look at her.

“I love you, you know that.” She pauses, waiting. “I don’t care how long it’s been. I just wanted to be friends again. I had come to terms with your marriage a few weeks after I heard.” Hear her slippers shuffle across the wood floor as she plays with your left hand’s bare ring finger. After a long pause, she says, “I haven’t met anyone like you here.”

Swallow hard. Look at your hands as they squeeze each other, her small fingers dancing across the ridges of your knuckles. Your hands are a tense, writhing knot. “I never thought we could be together.”
“Your parents are gone, and my mother already knows how I am. Society doesn’t deserve to negotiate our feelings.” She looks right into your eyes.

Scoot closer and wrap your arm around her waist. Hold her hand.

“You were with Jack. How was I supposed to react?”

Stroke her back. “I don’t know what to say.” Hug her. Your deep breaths turn shallow.

“We can be anything you want,” she whispers. “I’m just glad you’re finally here.”

You are home.
Charlie's jade eyes glided to the clock again while we stood in line to exit customs. He was nervous, sweating in his favorite gray jacket, his fingers curling around the wide tortoise shell buttons on the front. I’d told him he wouldn’t need it in the dense heat and soaking monsoons, but as we rushed to our flight, he’d put it on out of habit.

I pinched the locks from my suitcases. “We’re going to be fine.”

Charlie’s face was pale and freckled, steadfast and sickly with jetlag. “Brinda, I love you. You know that. I have every reason to believe your family will love me. I can only say it so much until it’s meaningless to you.”

“It means a lot. It means everything.” I was waiting in the echoing hall, immersed in the thick musk of tired-bodied travelers steaming under light cotton. My sandaled feet trembled with a faint rumbling, gentle with the tides of aircrafts that flew past the
towering windows beside us. Graceful planes inched along the tarmac, turning, magnificent as elephants with jewels on their eyelids.

“We have to take our rings off.” My purple University of Washington sweatshirt hung loose over me, my dark jeans tight as green flip-flops framed my short, fat toes.

Charlie slouched, letting his head fall loosely back. “You don’t want to tell them? After out talk last night, you don’t want to?”

“When you put it like that, I sound selfish.” I buried my head in his chest, and mumbled, “But now that we’re here, I am really afraid to tell my parents.” I looked up.

His lips were parted. “They’ve known about your sister for so long.”

“She is getting married tomorrow. Our timelines are different.”

He stretched his hands into palm leaves, the joints of his fingers cracking as he pulled them into a fist.

“And she’ll take it personally if the spotlight is off her, even for a moment.”

“They’ll find out sooner or later.” He inspected the ring thoughtfully, as if it were the last time he’d see it, and dropped it into the zipper pocket of his faux-leather wallet.

“Yes they will. I want to share the news with my family, not whisper it behind Lona's back.”

The line moved toward the scanner, an accordion of people between taupe walls.

“It’s weird that my family knows and yours doesn’t.” He scratched his head, his long, slim fingers slithering through thick clumps of orange hair. “I will say it again; you’re stressing yourself more than you need. They know we’re serious enough for me to come across the world with you to your sister’s wedding. I think they’d be surprised if we told them we’re not engaged.”
“We’ll tell my aunt. She can keep a secret and be on our side, I promise.” I looked down to the slim band on my own finger. “I just want to wait until we’re more settled. After the wedding.” I leaned on his chest, a quick heartbeat tickling my ears.

“After the wedding,” he repeated, quietly. “Would it help if I ask permission for your hand?”

“We’d only risk my parents saying no.” I slipped my ring off.

A crisply dressed airport official passed, announcing in sharp Bengali, “Please put your bags on the belt.”

I grasped the fraying corner of my passport through the shimmering green cloth of my purse, a folded Seattle Times Sunday crossword laying flat beside it. I slipped the bag off into a plastic tub.

I stood beside Charlie for a long moment, silent.

“I wish I could understand Bengali,” Charlie whispered as he inspected the other end of the machine.

“You’ll absorb it fast enough. You know more than you think after living with me.” I looked at the whirring, clunking machine as it spat out bags.

“I’ll do my best to impress everyone with my extensive vocabulary.”

“You’ll be great.” I leaned over my bag, kissing his cheek. “Just don’t screw anything up.”

Charlie scoffed and headed down the aisle toward the exit.

I grunted against my largest bag, and my nerves mushroomed to a wide lump in my throat.
My aunt Lasya was short and radiant as she stood in the mouth of the terminal, striking in her deep blue sari flecked with faint gold flowers, holding a drape of marigold necklaces. A pair of matching basil green trunks sat behind her. She smiled widely and held out her arms, her short hair swaying under the halogen glow.

“Brinda, my darling niece, you look more beautiful than ever.” She brought me into a hug, laying a bright orange necklace over me and then Charlie. “This must be Charlie. Why, your hair is nearly marigold. Look.”

“You’ll have to excuse my aunt. She never ceases to embarrass everyone with her confidence.”

Charlie blushed, showing a sliver of his pearly teeth. “Thank you for the necklace.”

“You’re very welcome Charlie. When I visited Hawaii, I didn’t get a Plumeria necklace; to this day I haven’t gotten over it. I thought I’d send some good karma out into the world and maybe it’d come back to me.”

“You’ve been to Hawaii?”

“I work for a travel agency. I’ve been everywhere.”

“Mamaji hates that you get to go on so many trips,” I added, nudging her. “And she wishes you weren’t so far away in London.”

Lasya grabbed her bags, leading the way toward the main entry of the airport. “A poor boy sold me the necklaces for five hundred Rupees. I’m getting soft.”

“Now is the time to give, Lasya, and it won’t stop all week.”
“I want to give. My sister is so lucky to have a beautiful daughter in a beautiful wedding.” She stopped in the middle of the airport’s wide entrance, and turned to us intently. “I wonder when I’ll be back for another.”

I looked to Charlie, his eyes fat as lychees. My heart skipped.

“Your mother will be too busy helping your sister to notice the tan lines on your fingers. But she has to suspect something, with Charlie coming here. It’s common sense.”

All around us were a swirl of families, children on tiptoes who held parents’ hands, packs of friends that roamed, bright with rolling bags, rich dark eyes and hair gleaming above thick lengths of fabric and jangling jewelry that flowed like syrup. The soupy, familiar haze that flowed in from the entrance slipped in my bones.

Lasya cleared her throat. “Your mother will not like it.” She put her arm around me and leaned in toward Charlie. “She is never content. She won’t say it to you, but she thinks your sister’s doctor-husband too old.”

“Well, Charlie is my age.”

“Then he may be too young. And you forget, Dr. Pawar’s entire family lives close, in Howrah. Not in Seattle.”

“And you live in England. We must all fly to each other.” I watched Lasya shrug and lean back on her cases. “Where is Bapuji? I expected him to pick us up.”

“Finding your bags. I talked with him when I landed thirty or so minutes ago.”

As I approached the whining baggage circle, I saw my father watching the luggage turn. He had a small leather satchel over his red Panjabi, a tight fit around his neck and loose around his belly. His smooth, dark forehead glistened under a grey hair line—faintly further back than when I’d last seen it a year before. Hairy knuckles curled
around a cardboard welcome sign, and a gold tie shimmered below his beak nose, giving him an oddly formal, discomforted look.

“Have I missed any pieces?” My checked bag was perched under his elbow.

“No *Bapuji*, we brought most of them onboard. That one is filled with presents.”

“My generous Brinda.” He brought me into his arms for a long hug. “How I’ve missed you.”

Lasya’s voice echoed as she told Charlie a story, earning a look from my father.

“Let me look at you.” He held me at arms’ length. “You are American through and through now, I see. Happy without your family. They have gone off the wall without you. Conversation slips from lovely to loathsome so abruptly. I see your passion in your sister’s demands. She is what they call a *Bridezilla.”*

“I’m sure Mom is losing hair.”

“And the hair that stays is ever graying. I’m lucky that she has such allure in her cheekbones.” He smiled. “As does her beautiful sister. Hello, my favorite sister-in-law.”

“I’m your only sister in law.”

I stood beside Charlie. “*Bapuji*, this is Charlie. Charlie, this is my father.”

He stroked his own smooth chin. “Finally a face to match your voice. And such bright hair.” After a long moment he stuck out his hand, and they shook briefly.

I stood between them, whispering in Bengali to my father, “Be nice.”

“I’ll look out for you Charlie. This one’s a firecracker,” Lasya added.

“*Bapuji* wouldn’t hurt a fly.” I shared a look with my father and began toward the exit, ambling through the rotating doors, heat blasting, Charlie on my heels.

“How are *Mamaji* and Lona?”
My father's satchel jingled loose, his long arms pulling two large bags. “Everyone is very busy. You aunt is only with us now because her flight came in at the same time.”

“Guilty,” she cooed.

“I hope they’re getting good rest. Tomorrow is a big day.” My father wiped his forehead with a handkerchief from his breast pocket, smoothing his hair with the back of his hand. He hailed a cab, heat lines shimmering over burning stretches of distant cement.

Charlie touched the small white jasmine blossoms that lined the street, their sweet perfume thick in the air. “It's beautiful here.”

“Is it going to be this hot tomorrow?” I begged, leaning on Charlie.

“A storm is due during the ceremony tomorrow,” my father answered, resolute. “It should cool down soon.”

A cab pulled in front of us, brakes squealing to a halt over the rumbling street noise. It was pristine, a black stripe along its glossy side and round, bulb lights in front and back. My father beat his fist on the trunk, and it sprung open.

I settled against the car, an endless rush of people walking past, my stomach in swirls, pounding like a typhoon. “I need to sit down.”

Charlie followed me, holding my hand. “We’re almost home. We’ll get to lie down, have some tea. I’m sure your mom will make us something to munch on.”

“She’ll just want to tell us all about Lona’s tantrums. There’s a reason I planned to come in the day before the wedding.” I closed my eyes.

My aunt climbed into the car, the last bags tucked away. “Give them some credit. It has been a while since you’ve been home. Lona shares everything with Dr. Pawar now. I’m sure she’s matured.”
My father pinched between his eyebrows, speaking quick directions to the driver and turning to speak to me. “Brinda, you were always meant for great things. I’m sure you’ve had wonderful experiences abroad, just like my dear sister-in-law, but remember that this is Lona’s most important achievement.”

“We won’t steal Lona’s thunder,” murmured Charlie.

“Ahhhh, but even Charlie’s hair will steal just a little.” Lasya giggled.

The cab started down the uneven road, away from the airport, past countless street merchants and carts. Parallel rows of maroon spices and sapphire dyes lay just past the road, mounded on rice sacks like hills of boxed-off paddy fields. Cotton fabric swayed on stretched lines as a small, sweet whistle chirped through the poorly sealed door.

When the cab stopped some time later, it pulled in front of my childhood home, a narrow, two story white house on the edge of a neighborhood of sprawling estates. It had a small garden on its roof, the thick fringe of rhododendrons waggling in the breeze, backlit by the setting sun. The yard was lined with piles of folding chairs and tables. A maroon tent’s hanging fabric panels fluttered against stiff metal beams.

Lasya peeled herself from the small seat and ran to my mother, leaving the deflated cushion a sad, flopping bowl. Together they walked back down the path, my mother’s ten extra years unmistakable; Lasya’s ankles and neck were smooth and exposed, her eyeliner thick and dark like her hair.

I could hear through the door that Lasya lowered her voice to say, “Charlie seems to be a good man. Brinda is happy. Just enjoy the wedding and don’t make a fuss.”

I climbed out the door while Charlie sat hesitant in the backseat. I poked my head in at him. “Let’s meet my mother.”
Charlie took a deep breath. “I’m ready to start this adventure with you.”

My mother’s round body was draped in a bright orange sari, her graying black hair over one shoulder in a braid, walking shoeless up the stone pathway. “Brinda, my baby, you look so American.” She kissed my forehead, stood me up straight and said, “I’m glad you’re home. Please come in. I’m afraid your sister is having a fuss about dropped Tandoori on a sari right now.” She gestured for us all to go inside, formality guiding her, stress worn into her face, leading the parade of luggage through the open front door.

The air was thick with incense and tea, warm with spice and coconut milk. Displayed in the entry way were new photos of cousins blossoming into puberty—jaw lines on the boys’ faces and smooth cheekbones on the girls’.

“Samosas and mimosas? My kind of party. Only the best for the blushing bride.” Lasya kissed Lona's forehead. “Your skin is beautiful, nearly gold.”

“You've missed the Gaee Holud. Lona just rinsed off the turmeric paste from her skin. Stand up for your aunt, Lona,” said my mother, staring in from the kitchen. “She has the golden glow of a bride and soft skin for Dr. Pawar.”

Lona did not look up. She was short and delicately round, with glossy long hair and gauged ears that framed her glistening forehead. Her large eyes flicked back and forth, staring at bright fabric that drifted beneath a small cloth in her hand, in a sort of trance. “Let me fix this.” A bottle of soap sat near her on the table. Strewn beside it were piles of makeup bags, purses, brushes, and bottled water.

Lasya made a face and backed away slowly. “I need to use the little girl's room.”

I joined Lona at the dining table, Charlie beside me. “Can I help at all?”
“Is everyone speaking in English now?” Lona said, throwing up a hand.

“I brought Charlie with me from Seattle, and Lasya does hail from England.”

She looked up. “Oh. Hello, Charlie.” She looked down and started scrubbing again. “You’ll finally meet my fiancé tomorrow, Brinda. Though by then he’ll nearly be my husband.” She stuck out her hand, showing an engagement ring. “You’ll love him. We met in class at university. He spoils me; he got me a wedding planner and everything.”

“The ring is beautiful, Lona. I’m glad to see you so happy.”

“Thank you. It's a pleasure, Charlie.” She held out her hand, and they shook.

“I’ll make you some tea,” called my mother, shuffling into the kitchen and slamming a kettle on the stove.

“So tell me about your fiancé, Lona,” said Charlie, his voice weak.

“He’s a great man from Howrah. He’s a professor.”

“What department?”

“Psychology. Isn’t it romantic?” She slapped the cloth down and continued. “He’s teaching several classes. He’s so busy, but he’ll be done with his term in a month and we can leave to travel during his sabbatical.” She smiled, eyes back to the sari.

“That’s exciting news. Where will you go?”

“Oh, everywhere, Brinda. Places you couldn’t even imagine.”

“Oh.” I put an elbow on the table and turned to my mother. “What do you have left to do for tomorrow evening? The reception later this week will be catered, right?”

“Right. I’m just putting out a spread tomorrow after the ceremony. Caterers will do the full reception.” My mother dabbed at her temples with a yellow kitchen towel and
gestured for me to join her. Charlie had laid down his head on the table, eyes closed, jetlagged.

When I approached her, my mother whispered, “At least you won’t be engaged as young and naïve as your sister. Dr. Pawar is a nice man. I am very thankful. But does she love him? I am worried she doesn’t understand the full weight of marriage.”

“Are you going to do something about it?”

I watched her trace the edge of the blue laminate countertop with her finger. Staring at the wall, she blew the crumbs away like the head of a dandelion. “It’s not my place. I’ve already formally approved their courtship.”

“What are you whispering over there, Mataji?” Lona stood, slapping the sari on the table, startling Charlie. “Don’t call him Dr. Pawar. His name is Hasan. He’s family.”

My mother shifted the tea pot as it began to howl, steam snaking up her arms. She stared out the small window to the backyard, overlooking supplies for the next day. “Let me talk with your sister. I haven’t seen her in so long.”

Lona said in quiet Bengali, “At least Hasan is Indian.”

My mother shuffled to the kitchen table and placed a tea tray in front of Charlie. “I’ve had quite enough of your sass, Lona.” She slinked around the table, sitting across from us, pouring three cups of hot water.

Charlie scooped the curling, black tea leaves into his cup and stirred. “I am falling asleep. It must be morning in Seattle.”

“I’m too curious about what Hasan is doing at his bachelor party to be tired,” said Lona. She picked up a Samosa and ate it in one large gulp.

“Why didn’t you plan a bachelorette party?”
“She did. It took her three days to recover,” my mother said, shaking her head.

“Thamun! Stop! I don’t want to hear about it.” My father stood in the entryway. “Brinda and Charlie, let me show you where we’ve put you. You need your rest.”

I followed him, tea in hand.

He opened the door to the small study where a cot was set up for me. “Remember, in the morning, you may want to get up before dawn to comfort your sister.”

“Oh, Bapuji. Goodnight Charlie.”

Charlie waved until he was no longer visible, the clasp tight on the door. Outside the window clouds crept in, thickening in the sky, cooling the breeze that swept in.

I awoke at twilight and unpacked, placing Space Needle magnets, ceramic Starbucks mugs and university shirts on a small creaking chair next to my cot. I delicately wrapped boutique cosmetics I’d bought in New York during a layover; the gift, small in its yellow satin striped tissue, was dense in my hands. I set it beside the other gifts and gazed at it, restless. When the gray sky was bright, a faint knock came from my door.

“Yes? Come in.”

“Oh, I wasn’t sure you’d be up. I didn’t want to wake you if you weren’t.” My mother cleared her throat. Her white cotton pajamas hung loose over her short frame. “Your sister would love to see you.”

“Is that right?”

She chuckled. “Wear the sari your grandmother bought for you. Lona’s been through all the clothes in a five mile radius, and I doubt you could find any others. Unless you have some in your luggage.”
“I’ll wear the new one.” I sat up, pulling my hair into a tight braid. “This is the only day she can get away with ordering me around,”

“Don’t tell me you think she’d do anything but take advantage of that.” She cracked a large smile. “Oh, Brinda. I’ve missed you.”

I laughed. “I promise I won’t be like that when I get married.”

My mother looked down, a single greasy curl escaping her hair tie.

“Mamaji?” I sat up in my bed.

“Brinda, we don’t have a lot of time. This is Lona’s day, just remember that.”

“I know that.”

“Marriage is a very serious decision.”

“Yes it is, Mamaji. But—”

“I wish Lona would have waited a while longer before diving in. You’re both so young.” The door closed with a gentle click.

Panic rose before I looked down at my finger, remembering my ring hung hidden around my neck. Slowly, with an aching back, I found and dressed in the shrink-wrapped sari left in the room for me, sky blue with silver pinstripes, fold lines stiff.

I walked slowly down the stairs, groggy but pleased I’d slept in.

“Did my mother set you out some clothes to wear?” I found Charlie outside, helping set up. He wore a blue and yellow vest and a pair of loose white cotton pants.

“He’s not afraid to rock last decade’s fashion,” Lasya called, unfolding a brown metal chair.

Charlie gave a bow, swinging his left arm out to the side, the fabric falling in a curve like a paper fan. His cheeks were rosy, the white shirt twisted around his body
under his vest. “I’ll tell you what I know about these: they’re extremely comfortable. You may never see me in skinny jeans again.” He smiled widely, calmly.

“Fine by me.”

Family was filing out the door, chattering, drinking glasses of juice and snacking on sweets set out on a small table.

“So what’s next?” asked Charlie, chomping on a small *cham-cham*, covering his upper lip with whipped cream.

“We should visit Lona. She is just getting ready for the ceremony.” Lasya disappeared inside.

“In a moment.” I pulled Charlie to a far corner of the garden. “Are you doing okay? I need to wish my sister well and let her have one last brag, but then I will come find you. Then we’ll have the rest of the day for each other.”

“Do what you have to.” He scratched his head. “I think your father and I get along well. He is laying on the interrogation a little thick, but it’s not rude. In fact, I’m glad he’s showing interest.”

“He is methodical. He means well.”

Long rows of small tables flanked the garden, covered in many small, bright tablecloths. Orange marigolds trembled beside ceramic dishes and slim wine glasses under a thick, rumpled blanket of clouds.

“You’re in a foreign country with your in-laws to be, and you’re not a nervous wreck. I’m floored.”

“I can’t believe how many barbeques you sat through with my drunken uncles. This is nowhere near as bad.” He hugged me. “Everyone is embarrassed of their family.”
“Lona is embarrassing. I’m worried that my parents hold me to a different standard.”

“Don’t be. Your family has been nothing but polite, if not friendly.” He gave me a sheepish grin. “I think I can handle more time with your dad. Go. Be with your sister.”

“I’ll see you later,” I called behind me as I left. “I love you.”

I walked across the garden and up the slim, concrete stairs to the family room. I was shocked by panels of silken fabrics on the walls and marigolds strung around the room where a dusty work space had been the last I’d seen. A set of three amber lamps lit the space, casting dramatic shadows on women drifting through the room. They were dressed in an explosive range of saffron, rose, and emerald saris and wore lavish golden jewelry and impeccable make-up.

A myriad of congratulations were thrown on Lona from family and friends, the women squeezing her hennaed hands, stroking her hair, sprinkling blessed water on her feet and shoulders. I waited back, peeking out a window to see my father and Charlie hoisting a tent in the backyard, sprawling ribbons fluttering in the breeze, the decorations drawing up beads of water from the sky’s hazy sprinkle. Men from both sides of the family were milling around.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who’ll be married now,” said a woman, slender and much taller than Lona. She wore a large, vermilion bindi and a red sari covered in small orange gingko leaves. “I know I’m not old, and neither are you, but it felt strange being the little sister to such an eligible bachelor.”

Lona was staring off, and her expression didn’t change. Conversation from the yard filled the sweet air. “I'll be glad to have a married sister-in-law, Ghanika.”
My mother clamored up the stairs. “At least half of the weddings I’ve been too have been rained out. Summer weddings are a gamble that way. But they always turn out so beautiful, no matter the weather.” She wore a red sari. “Rain brings life. I think it’s a good omen.”

More women followed, Lasya last with a large tray of tea.

“I agree. I’ve never seen a wedding that wasn’t beautiful. Plain maybe, but still beautiful in its own way. The brides make it so,” said Lasya, sipping at a glass of hot water with a lemon slice on the rim. “Your mother and the wedding planner have done such a good job together; there’s no way we won’t all be dazzled.”

“The wedding stage is absolutely stunning.” Ghanika approached my mother and kissed her on the cheeks. “Sorry I’m late. Hasan needed help with a haircut. I would have helped with some of the snacks.”

“I hope he looks alright,” cried Lona, eyes on Ghanika. “I have to hang up these pictures until I’m dead.”

Ghanika laughed, but her smile quickly faded. “Of course. We went to a professional. I had to call in a favor on such short notice.”

Lona sighed. “Thank goodness.”

“I’m surprised you’re fussy, Lona. You can’t be hungry; I saw how many roshogollas you ate before sunrise.” My mother poured cool water from a pitcher into a small cup and began sprinkling it on Lona. “At least your make-up is flawless.”

“There was a beauty expert here this morning. He did all this.” She gestured to her face. “Not too much water; I don’t want to smell like a fish.”
“River water smells sweet. You will only be blessed.” Ghanika placed a hand on Lona’s shoulder. “Though you may not need too many blessings. I’m pleased to see you marry my brother. He will be kind and dependable.”

I grabbed a small bowl of the water, and my aunts and cousins soon followed. I flicked Lona repeatedly with sprinkles of the water. Lona finally laughed, tickled.

“Truly, a beautiful bride for my brother,” Ghanika said, pinching Lona’s cheeks, narrowly avoiding the gold dangling from her ear to nose.

My mother sprinkled water on Lona’s feet. “I am so happy my daughter has found such an accomplished man. How lucky that his family is only as far as Howrah.”

“I need some time alone before the ceremony,” Lona said suddenly, drifting to the window, her steps slow and measured under her many layers. “To clear my head.”

“You’ll do great out there,” chirped Lasya, wiping a tear away, pulling Ghanika and my mother with her. The other women in the room reluctantly filtered out.

“Brinda will help you. Send her down if you need something, whatever it is. I love you.” My mother slipped past the door.

I looked over to Lona, the room finally quiet. Wind whistled sweetly through the almond-wood framed windows.

“Are you nervous?”

“Only that Hasan’s cousins might drop me from the piri when they bring me in. I am afraid of heights, and I don’t think the chair has straps.”

“I don’t think it does either.” I rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’m so happy for you. It’s too bad I don’t know Hasan well, but if you chose him, I’m sure he’s perfect.”
“I hope you get a wedding someday. I’ll want to see you struggle with the decisions and all the attention from the old folks. This week has been torture. There was a reason I had to get drunk at my bachelorette party. Pure escapism.”

I laughed, sprinkling the last of the river water on Lona’s shoulders. “You seem like you have it all together.”

“Hardly. But I love Hasan, and that’s what matters.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You think you’ll marry your ginger boy? I thought it was a phase.”

I stood up, smoothing my sari. “We’re engaged, Lona.”

She pulled a flask from a side table, the silver box hiding beneath a yellow cloth napkin. “That’s just more than I needed to think about right now.” She took a long gulp from the flask. “Give me some peace while I try to imagine what my future nieces and nephews will look like.”

“Fine, Lona. I love you anyway.”

“Cheers.” She took another long drink as I closed the door.

Downstairs in the yard, Hasan spoke with my father. He was gaunt, his graying temples and thick dark eyebrows sitting languid above a crimson silk shawl. Charlie was seated near the drinks, gray in the face, slouching. As I approached he stretched, showing his pale belly. “I’m exhausted.”

“Nap on my shoulders while we wait,” I whispered.

He sat next to me, the heat of his legs comforting through the thin cotton of his pants. “Your sister is about to get married.”

“I hope she can't balance on the piri.”
“You don't mean that.”

“Yes I do. I hope she falls off and trips just enough to know that everyone saw.”

“I thought you said can.” He grinned, devilish under his red hair.

I laughed with him, slipping my fingers between his. The slim base of his ring finger felt shriveled and weak, amiss without the gold band.

Just past Charlie, rain was dripping from the tent border and began to splatter, the thousands of fat drops thunderous overhead. “I hope our wedding doesn't get rained out.”

“I wouldn't mind.” Charlie looked up. “I did promise my brother he could officiate my wedding. It was in the third grade. I hope that isn't a problem.”

“He’ll have to fight my grandfather for the honor.”

“I think he could pull that off.” He laughed. “But we will have to tell your grandfather we’re engaged first. He needs time to prepare.”

I rolled my eyes heavily and looked around. Familiar faces shrunk beneath the tent above, unconvinced of its strength. “No one’s talking to us.” I squirmed in my seat.

“The ceremony is too soon. People are trying to find seats.”

I sat in the first row, mindful of my stooping posture, holding Charlie's hand for some time as he dozed. Cousins and friends of Lona's waved when I turned around to scan the sea of faces.

My grandfather, spindly with short, white hair, let out a booming call to signify the ceremony's start. Stragglers found seats, murmuring as Hasan stood by the small fire. The anticipation was palpable, the crowd’s eyes electric with excitement. My mother shed quiet tears as my father stroked circles on her back. Sheets of water seemed to slip across the yard, and time crept forward, measured as a crocodile's prowl.
Lona appeared at the edge of the large tent at last, floating on a small wood seat above four of Hasan’s cousins, betel leaves fanned over her face from her left hand. Small voices slipped into silence beneath the ever beating rain. I watched her, expectant as she drifted up the aisle to the stage and as she floated dreamlike around Hasan seven times. The men were graceless as they set her down, her hennaed feet slapping the wood stage and the leaves fluttering out from her hands at her sides.

Charlie and I looked at each other, holding in a giggle.

Lona collected herself, and holding Hasan’s hand, they walked around the small fire as my grandfather read the seven Sanskrit mantras. Lona’s beaming expression vanished as Hasan pulled a small box from behind the fire. He brought his finger out from the box and, smiling, tapped a perfect crimson bindi above Lona’s tearful, blooming eyes. He covered the top of her hairline with the same sindoor color, stroking her forehead delicately, staring into her eyes. With an exultant bellow from a conch shell, they exchanged drooping, plump marigold garlands and walked around the small fire seven times as new couple. Ghanika leapt to tie their dresses together as they finished their final round. The tent erupted into cheers, resounding brightly over the plummeting rainfall. They walked down the aisle, careful not to pull at one another’s attached dresses, the older relatives following them and filtering inside to congratulate my parents.

I squeezed Charlie’s hand. “They are handsome together, despite Lona.”

“Is it over?” whispered Charlie, music bursting from an indoor speaker.

“The ceremony is, but there is a party for the bride and grooms’ friends in just a few minutes,” I looked around, “which usually means young people only, but I guess Hasan isn’t really young. It’s anyone’s guess what will happen tonight.”
Uncles and fathers slipped chairs to the sides and into holders while Lona’s schoolmates found drinks. Hasan’s colleagues mingled, separate across the muddy yard.

“May our wedding be as beautiful and disaster free,” toasted Charlie.

“Amen.” I sipped down a large gulp of my mimosa. “I need a refill.” I stood, turning to discover my mother.

“Mamaji?”

“Brinda.”

I stood before my mother, her face worn with exhaustion and disappointment. “I want to be married in Kolkata, too,” I whispered, opening my mouth to say more, but I could only think of spring, when I’d nearly eloped with Charlie at an Elvis Chapel. I’d stood in that glittery room next to an Elvis impersonator who warbled “I can’t help falling in love with you.” I had been ready to exchange vows with Charlie, but the words wouldn’t escape my lips. Under the string lights and over the cold, dusty linoleum I knew I couldn’t leave my mother out of my wedding, so Charlie and I left, one hundred dollars poorer, agreeing that I would get my mother’s blessing.

I pulled my ring from the chain around my neck.

“It’s time for just a few pictures, Mamaji. You too, Brinda.” Lona looked back and forth between us. “Brinda, it’s not always about you. Show some tact.” She batted the ring away from my hand, shooting it into a puddle. Cool muddy water splashed over my mother's shoe.

“It’s not like that,” I whispered as she stomped away.

Charlie turned, eyes wide like a deer’s, lost without language.

My mother bent, scooping the ring from the water with her manicured pinky.
“Mamaji, I was going to tell you after Lona left for her honeymoon. I never wanted to make a scene.”

She spun the small golden band in a handkerchief slipped from her pocket, looking up at Charlie. “Don't mind my daughters; they are quite melodramatic.” She placed the ring back in my hand and pushed me toward Lona. “I’ve had it up to here with your sister.”

I lined up for a family photo, cramped behind the dwindling fire. My mother whispered loud enough for Lona to hear, “I better see that ring in the pictures, Brinda.”

Lona glowered at my mother, the photographer snapping a candid photo. Lona reeled to face forward and struck a pose with Hasan, and I put my hand on my hip, my ring glimmering in the firelight, my eyes locked with Charlie’s.
We were brought up in small schools, run-down time capsules of our grandparents’ hard work, fighting for the day we’d make it out alive. Our school walls wore a thin coat of white paint never fully covering the sea foam green and burnt orange of decades past. Buzzing dim bulbs scattered yellow light in the halls, the lamp necks hanging down from water-stained ceilings, frowning as we shuffled beneath. We walked divided, split in the dull glow, a somber high school of nearly six hundred. Most of us were children of the logging industry that used to boom in town. I and a few others tried to fight the conservative culture with starry-eyed, liberal ideas of big cities, art, and music that we hadn’t yet grasped. We few realized where this life would lead and tried desperately to pull ourselves out of the cycle.

I made it out alive, but not everyone was so lucky. I wondered where I might end up, if I would find love and a career, if I would be smart or strong enough. After
graduation, my best friend Punky and I moved away, free from years of quiet frustration but haunted by resonating guilt and dissatisfaction.

The lumber-kids followed in their parents’ footsteps, cutting down the trees their fathers had eagerly watched grow or dutifully bearing and raising the children of their husbands, never leaving the county borders. They would drop out, pregnant or siring children of momentary passion, outwardly content to start their adult lives at sixteen. I was stunned into celibacy at seeing them settle down in Lumbertown, USA. I’d see them at the holidays from my parents’ car, through a dusty window—girls I’d known, a baby on their hip as they pushed strollers filled with cases of beer down Main Street.

Everywhere in the air was a feeling like an imminent lightning storm, like we might not get out of the musty, separated school alive. When I heard classmates’ older brothers had been crushed by logs or hit by cars, I decided to obey my parents. I was straight-edge, sexless, and clean. It was the others that would fail, that would make me hurt and regret and wish for nothing but to forget high school.

My sophomore year I found my niche, a small group of science-minded, virginal musicians. We were socially disadvantaged, playing brass and woodwind instruments that gleamed like bronze shields in auditorium lights, not the guitars or drum sets of the radio. We’d joke to stray lumberjack-kids, “Are you an ax man?” We felt good about it.

The sparks of our emerging sexuality were ignited by the idea of befriending boys. We clung to the idea of friendship to mask the ocean of hormones that surged beneath the surface, paralyzed by the fear of rejection. Our hopes were low after years of wallflower existence. We were not bold enough to wear makeup and show skin, not brave enough to sneak into the local bar, and not charismatic enough to be invited to the kinds
of parties that might get us boys. We’d spend our nights listening to old music and watching romantic movies, observing what we thought must have been a record of true love’s past. But eventually the attention of three brothers left us star-struck and strutting our wiles.

Punky, Sarah, and I were struggling with the pressures of our flourishing womanhood: Punky wore outdated, baggy clothes to cover her large breasts; Sarah wore her brown hair back, boxy glasses, and tights that camouflaged her chicken legs; I wore tight high-water jeans and my favorite sweatshirt for warmth with my dusty, light hair constantly in a bun. We were validated by two lanky twin boys, Gabe and Jonah, and their freshman brother, Ezra. They were all light-haired, light-eyed Danish warriors hidden behind glasses and shyness. We were mesmerized by their gentle, friendly nature. We eventually moved as a protective unit, our backs turned to the harsh wind of the school’s aggression. The six of us had formed an unspoken group of innocence, waiting for a chance to battle the real world.

Punky’s parents had bought an old beach house our senior year from a Christian youth group. It was about an hour drive from our small Oregon town. The wooden cabin teetered on a rocky cliff above a craggy patch of forest, just a mile from the beach. It was private there, nestled in the trees where eyes couldn’t pierce the dense forest to our virtue.

We were visiting for a weekend in spring. It was the first time we’d been together without constant supervision; Punky’s parents wouldn’t be back from work until sundown. We drank a lemonade mix of tap water and a cheap, chalky powder, gulping it down like royalty. We were finally in control of our co-ed existence.
The six of us sat in the small living room in the fresh, grey afternoon light. Gabe and I sat on a pale pink loveseat and Jonah was lodged between Sarah and Punky on a matching couch beside us. Ezra sat on the floor, marking glossy paper with a green marker in an issue of *Christian Puzzles for Friends and Family*. Sea shells and religious children’s books in wicker baskets cluttered the worn linoleum beside us, shining beneath the wood paneled walls. A large single-paned window crusted with sea salt showed a small sliver of the churning ocean, mostly obscured by curled pines. The trees stood thick like soldiers crouching before an attack, their spiny green faces turned away from the usual pounding wind.

We played cards around a driftwood coffee table while Punky’s orange tabby, Apricot, weaved between our legs.

“Go fish,” Gabe said. He sat erect, barely touching me.

Punky drew a card. “A bra is really a doomsday device,” she said, slapping a set of sevens on the table. “A death clock of comfort. All a girl really wants is the freedom of a flowing shirt.”

“Exactly,” I said. “The moment I get home from school it’s arm yoga, a shimmy, and my bra on the ground.” I nudged Gabe and turned my gaze to Sarah. “Got any fours?”

“Go fish.” Sarah leaned down and scratched Apricot behind the ears. He meowed loudly over our shallow breaths. “I don’t even wear bras. I just wear a bunch of layers and no one can tell.”

Knowing Jonah and Sarah had started dating a month ago, I scrutinized their delicate social dance.
“Wait, really?” said Jonah, eyes wide. “You do that?”

Ezra scoffed.

“Sarah doesn’t need bras,” said Punky, twisting a thick strand of black hair between her fingers. “But look at Darla and me. We live a constant battle against gravity and momentum.” She pointed at me.

“Momentum?” asked Gabe. Apricot rubbed his lean body against Gabe’s shins. Gabe wrapped his long fingers around Apricot’s tail in response. He had the fingers of an old man, withered and pointed.

“It’s called *jiggle.*” Punky leaned forward and grabbed my chest. I threw my cards at her, grabbing Gabe’s leg for leverage.

Ezra threw his magazine at the table and Punky threw her hand in the air.

“I think it’s time we walked down to the beach,” said Gabe as Apricot jumped on the table and spilled the rest of the deck.

Gabe held out his hand and pulled me out of the soft couch. I was thrilled by the attention. It was the first moment—and least risky—of many that day that would send my heart racing. I was pulled out of my body, watching my heart well with validation, the exact moment and all its subtleties burned in my mind.

“Yeah, let’s go to the beach,” I said, punching his arm. I smiled, my eyes on Apricot. “I bet it’s beautiful right now.”

We gathered our sweatshirts, jackets, and boots and set out to hike down to the beach.

There was no wind. Cool rain slipped down thick strands of my hair as we walked. The air was markedly warmer than expected, filled with a sticky humidity that
wrapped around us like ghosts. We paired off down the gravel driveway that connected nearby houses to the highway up the hill. As we entered the forest, Gabe shielded me from the wind and warned me of roots, rocks, and holes abandoned by small animals. I could see Sarah and Jonah holding hands and Punky shaking rain-soaked pine sticks at Ezra, threatening to splash him.

By the time we made it to the beach we were drenched. We all looked out silently and clung to our partners against the chilly forest. The ocean was nearly flat without its usual wind, lapping little waves at the shore, the tiny dances of sand fleas the only movement on the sand. The sky was grey and the trees, disfigured and bright in the misty haze, lined the packed sand. Down the beach was a rocky cave, jutting out from the trees.

As we stood there, Punky slapped Ezra with a pine stick and ran away, heading north and laughing. He scrambled to find another stick and followed.

The four of us smiled at them and watched as they shrank into the thick, salty sea air.

Sarah said, “They’re so cute. I bet they’ll be dating soon.” She smiled and left Jonah’s side, taking my arm in hers as she passed me. She pulled me quickly down the beach, flicking sand onto the backs of her tights until we were out of ear shot. We turned, standing with our backs to the sun.

“I really like dating Jonah,” Sarah said. “He’s a really sweet guy. I know the twins can be dumb sometimes, but they really mean well.”

“I guess so. They’re great friends.”
“I really wish you could have a guy, you know? It’s hard to find anyone at our school, but there has to be someone for you, right?” She smiled, her neck poking out, expecting a reply.

“I think I’ll meet someone better in college. Someone from a bigger city who isn’t so sheltered.”

“But that’s so far off. What about—“

We heard a scream from the cave down the beach. It was a wild scream, warped and torn in the mist and sand.

Jonah and Gabe ran, taking longer strides with their slim runner’s legs. Sarah and I followed. Fear saturated us with sickening anticipation. I scanned the broad slices in my vision: the ocean’s giant expanse, the still forest, and the dark cave, more intimidating as we neared it.

We made it to the cave where the loud trickling and tidal rushing of water was cut with squeals and laughter. We climbed through a small opening toward the back of the cave.

“He said he wanted to streak. I tried to run away and I fell in the water.” Punky’s mouth was stuck in a wide smile, framed with red, chapped lips, her black hair dripping.

“I was joking, I swear. I swear it,” said Ezra, his eyes flying between Jonah and Gabe. He was trying not to laugh.

“Why not?” I said, panting.

They turned to me. Their faces were unclear, cautious.

I cleared my throat. “It’s just clothes. If we don’t have to wear bras, why wear anything else? And it’s kind of warm in here.” I looked around the cave. It was dripping
and moist, but entirely sheltered from the rain and any breezes that might pick up. There was a large opening looking out to the ocean and a door carved from the sandy stone in the back, looking into the forest. “It’s safe. No one’s going to come in here.”

“She’s right. No one really comes to this beach,” said Punky.

The three brothers looked at each other.

Ezra mumbled, “I don’t want to see Jonah and Gabe naked.”

“They wouldn’t be the only ones naked,” I said, breathing quickly. I looked to Punky, who gave me a nod of support. She was in.

The breeze that rushed past the cave’s dripping mouth was haunting, like a siren.

The ocean hit the cave softly, the tide retreating.

“I’m going to head back to the house,” said Sarah, pulling Jonah to the opening we’d come in.

“Yeah it’s too cold to, well, to do that.” Jonah ran his fingers through his wet hair, leaving.

Punky squeezed her soaking shirt. “Well maybe we could dry our clothes a little. I’m soaked.” She unzipped her rain coat as the couple left, and she laid it on a projecting barnacle crusted form on the side of the cave. She pointed at it, exclaiming, “Look ma, no kelp!”

Ezra chuckled.

“Yeah I’d at least like some of this water to steam out. It’s gross.” I peeled off my jacket and laid it beside Punky’s.

The boys mumbled and peeled off their jackets.
And then it began. It was a delicate operation of removing layers, squeezing the water from them, waiting for each other to continue, senses piqued. Every drop of water in the tide pools at our feet echoed like trumpets, and every glance of unknown white and patchy red skin was burnt into our eyes.

“Are we really going to do it?” asked Gabe.

We were all in our underwear, standing by our shoes. We stood perfectly still, afraid of sharp barnacles, of deathly slick piles of seaweed, and of showing cold, shrunken genitals or uneven breasts in the musty cave air.

Punky ripped off her large, grey sports bra and threw it on a flat patch of rocky ground. It slapped loudly. We watched in excited horror as a stream of water drained from it, the echo swirling around us, *slap slap slap*. Ezra and Gabe stared at her nervously, their eyes frozen on her face. I unhooked my stiff, black underwire bra and tossed beside Punky’s.

“Darla! What would your mother think?” Punky laughed and pulled off her underwear. She placed her soggy, socked feet back into her boots and walked toward the surf, whistling. I did the same, and together we looked into the tide pools at the green anemones and tiny swimming fish and crabs. I smiled as we leaned over the small bowls of life, the foamy water a few feet from our boots.

“I’m cold.” I was giggling, shivering. “I don’t even care. This place is beautiful.”

“Just look at the surf,” Punky said. We stood facing away from the boys.

“It’s a great view,” chimed Ezra. He appeared beside us, naked, pale, and thin as a snake.
Gabe joined in looking at the small tide pool. I didn’t stare at his shiveringly gangly body, and I knew he was glad.

“Tag. You’re it.” Punky jabbed Ezra’s shoulder and sped carefully away, finding stepping stones stable enough to propel from. He followed as she headed forward into the ocean. She let out a scream as she jumped in and cried over her white shoulder from the swirling water, “It’s very, very cold.” She stuffed her socks into her boots and threw them at us, swimming away.

“You don’t just skinny dip in the Pacific ocean,” said Gabe, mouth agape.

“Watch me.” I threw off my boots and dived in. Gabe hesitated, but we all soon swam around the cave’s mouth to the sandy beach, fighting steady currents.

I swam close to Gabe, our feet occasionally grazing each other while I looked constantly at the shore. I found a spot of water calm enough to float back on, laying my head back in the cold water as my toes peeked above the water. The sky was shining pink on grey clouds, and time felt frozen.

“This is really dangerous. Someone could get sucked out to sea,” called Gabe above the pulsing surface.

We all swam back into shore, and as soon as we stood we began to run. We ran in circles to stay warm, to see every inch of the steadily darkening, painted sky.

“The sunset is beautiful. God.” Punky plopped down in a divot in the sand, shielded from the strengthening breeze. “Fuck I’m cold.”

I joined her, and soon the four of us sat tightly together, naked, shivering and watching the sunset, our pale sides suctioned together.
“This was fun,” I said, cradling my knees, covering my breasts. The calm breeze passed around us.

Gabe put his arm around me. “I think I’ll remember it.” For a long moment we looked at each other—really deeply looked into each other’s eyes. He leaned closer in, and my body hardened. He rested a cold hand on my knee and I looked down. I was caught there, between Punky and Gabe, on the brink of achieving validation.

He kissed me on the mouth with the force and concentration of the inexperienced teenager that he was. His tongue played at my shut lips and I thought only of the uncomfortable sand and breeze steadily cooling my skin and how wet and determined his mouth felt. I waited, passive, until he peeled himself from me.

I fumbled to grab his hand, blushing, smiling nervously. He pulled away and patted me on the back, ending with a short half hug.

Gabe sighed. “What did you get us into, Ezra?”

I gazed forward, wishing my body could be warmer in the crisp air. I pulsed with silent adrenaline, giddy at experiencing what seemed a vitally important adolescent landmark.

The four of us shook and rubbed our legs, digging our feet into the sand. The sunset formed bursts of orange and pink in the clouds like stains.

From behind us we heard a rustling, and we all stiffened.

It was Jonah. “Get back to the house now. Punky’s parents are worried and I think they might come down here. Hurry up!”

“Shit.” Punky strained to stand with frozen muscles, but then ran to the ocean.
I ignored her yelps between chattering teeth as she stammered, “It’s still very, very cold.”

We all rinsed the sand off our legs and thighs with the icy, salty water. Thin streaks of sand stuck to our shins, our feet caked in it. Jonah held beach towels as he stood timid at the forest’s edge, keeping his eyes on the ground. Gabe ran up and took them. “You beautiful bastard,” Gabe said, grabbing his twin’s face with his free hand. Jonah turned and disappeared into the dim forest.

We dressed quickly, wet, gritty cloth stuck to our white skin, painful and cold.

Punky huffed. “I prefer naked to this. These clothes are the coldest thing I’ve ever touched.”

We gathered the wet jackets in our arms and headed up through the forest. The trees were a pale orange, slipping quickly into dim nightfall. The forest began to howl as the evening wind picked up, cutting through our wet feet and legs, and we thanked God for the towels.

Our eyes strained for the road. The twinkle of headlights came from a nearby road, illuminating the way. We heard a thump and crumbling of gravel and rubber. The headlights had stopped moving, one pointing directly at us, the other obscured, some twenty yards ahead.

“Did that car just crash?” I asked.

We were a silent pack sprinting up the slick hill to reach the road, sand on our hair and towels. The truck was bent around a tree.

“Where is Jonah?” said Gabe, gasping.
The truck door opened to a logger from our high school. Two crumpled beer cans tumbled out onto the road. He opened his mouth part-way and vomited. He leaned forward into the steering wheel and whimpered, “Did I hit someone?”

Gabe whispered again, “Where is Jonah?”

Before we could understand, Gabe and Ezra stood further up the gravel drive. Punky and I looked up the road at them as they crouched around a dark figure across the road.

We approached, and Punky fell on the ground next to them, kneeling, shivering in her icy clothes, pulling her towel close to her.

I ran up the hill. My feet were numb but they flew over the ground, finding each flat spot to pull my body closer to the cabin. My breasts ached as my whole body bounced to the rhythm of my long strides, gravel trickling down the slope behind me.

I burst in the front door where Punky’s parents stood with Sarah. I choked out, “Jonah got hit by a car.”

Punky’s mother picked up the phone and I ran back down the gravel hill, Sarah on my heels asking questions, stunned.

As we approached, Punky and Ezra stood still, looking at Gabe who had the drunken boy against the truck door, holding him by his neck. Punky was screaming for Gabe to stop, but he punched the boy in the face, breaking his own hand. Gabe backed up, watching the boy crumple into a ball on the rocky ground.

He turned toward us, crying, holding his fist. He picked up his towel from the ground and sat, resting his broken fist on Jonah’s still chest. The wind howled as the truck’s smoking front exhaled, shifting slightly against the tree.
Punky’s father approached, a first aid kit in hand. “Is he breathing?” He kneeled beside us. “Is everyone else okay?”

Sarah began breathing deep breaths into him, her tiny frame shaking with effort. Punky’s father thrust his hands, compressing Jonah’s chest in steady beats. We circled around Jonah. Gabe looked the worst of all of us, the angle of his jaw shaking beneath sunken eyes. In the dim driveway he looked older, bitter and sad.

Ezra and Punky held their hands on Gabe’s back. We were all frozen, monks with shawls wrapped around our heads, moaning together, shivering, empty.

I looked to the boy by the truck, if only to look away from everyone’s tears and from Sarah and Punky’s father scrambling to revive Jonah. The drunk boy had shallow breath, and seemed weak and small leaning against his car compared to how I’d seen the lumberjack-kids at school. His arm swung from his shoulder loosely.

He looked up at me and whispered, “I thought I was driving really slow.”

I kneeled by him, looking at his face. The truck lights were dimming, though I could see a confederate flag in the back window of the truck.

“I don’t know what happened.” He started to mumble and cry, holding his limp arm with his good one. As I sat by him, Jonah let out a loud cough and rolled to his side, conscious. I could hear Sarah gasping for breath, a strange laugh echoing against the tall trees. Punky held Sarah’s shoulders to steady her. I could hear Jonah whispering to Sarah as Punky’s mother appeared with blankets.

The ambulance was on its way. The brothers’ parents were driving in and we waited, the wind whistling sweetly and the sun dim through the pines.
I was glad that Punky’s parents didn’t ask us questions as we sat, still barely dripping, but safe in the towels and blankets. When the ambulance finally got to the scene, we felt at ease, and it bounced away quickly with the two injured boys and Punky’s dad. The rest of us walked up to the house, Punky’s mom leading. We had hot tea in the kitchen, but were quickly sent to our separate rooms.

Punky, Sarah, and I lay in a room together, waiting for word about Jonah.

“I have no idea what we were thinking.” Punky was on her side, facing away from me, enveloped by a tattered quilt.

“Their parents are never going to let us see them again.” I sighed. “They barely let us come for this weekend trip, even with your parents here.”

“It wasn’t our fault. We were just walking from the beach. For once we were doing what we wanted, and it should have been fine. No one should have been hurt. It was a freak accident. Some drunk idiot.”

“Your mom won’t even look at us.”

“She probably feels responsible.”

“It’s not fair. I mean, I really think we weren’t doing anything wrong.”

Punky sighed, adjusting the small pillow under her head. “We’re fine.”

For hours we lay there, worrying, waiting, Sarah silent.

Punky and I saw them at school two days later. The bruises on Jonah’s face and arms and Gabe’s swollen, bandaged hand were jarring. Though the whole ordeal slipped down to the ranks of rumor quickly, the brothers’ parents strictly forbid us to spend time together. Our interactions were permanently dampened, the dismay tangible between us.
The brothers’ lips would quiver as they counted down the seconds to escape Punky and my presence.

Gabe kept his distance, but his eyes lingered eerily. I wasn’t prepared to approach him, and he made sure never to be alone with me. Sarah slowly became a messenger. We would all smile in the halls at each other, but sit at other sides of classrooms, eat lunch on opposite sides of campus. Our friendship became a convoluted, formal nightmare, like Punky and I had already moved away. And once we graduated, the wall we’d built between us was too great to ever climb.

At holidays I would see Gabe in town from the dusty car window. He would be walking the family dog or pushing carts in the grocery store parking lot with a bright green *Thrifty Savings* vest on. He had faded from my familiarity, once a glowing dream but now a tattered, graying memory.

I was glad that my heart was not stuck here with him in the town I’d so long cultivated my mind to forget, but I missed his friendship. I missed what had been.
AFTERWORD

I don’t speak for all women as I write this reflection; I speak from my personal writing experience, using my research as a lens.

During any read-through or edit of my fiction, I consider how a publisher might read it. However, this consideration is not a priority, as I personally write to experiment with the short story form and learn about myself. And as I write long passages, I am not at all concerned with how an audience may read it. I instead concentrate on some aspect of my own life and write to better understand it, with the hope I’ll discover something about myself or the world I’m in.

I consider my fiction’s representation of gender an inspection into how and why gender roles seem the way they do to me. I hope that I represent all genders with a feminist’s eye, but I know I am still learning about feminism. I will hopefully achieve diverse feminist writing as I continually read feminist works and write, workshop, and edit. I choose short fiction because each word is important, every scene is monumental, and the stories can be read in one sitting. Workshops are also more approachable with short fiction, which has helped me gather invaluable edits and insight with my fiction.

I think that men and women alike will read my fiction with the same understanding and closeness to character. The women I write about have universal qualities for all people and shouldn’t polarize the sexes. Any literary fiction, including my own, should be a diverse, new inspection of the human condition.