

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Elizabeth Wyckoff for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 21, 2010.

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In Can You See Me?, a collection of nine short stories, Elizabeth Wyckoff explores the conflicting desires of young women who long for connection, but struggle to find the balance between concealing and revealing themselves. The female protagonists in these stories simultaneously yearn to be seen, recognized, and acknowledged; and desire to stay hidden, concealed, and protected in their own private worlds. As they move through transitional stages of their lives—from girlhood to womanhood, or from one location to another—they attempt to inhabit the spaces between independence and isolation, connection and detachment, receptiveness and resistance, and visibility and invisibility.

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Can You See Me?

by
Elizabeth Wyckoff

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APPROVED:

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

Elizabeth Wyckoff, Author

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Everything We Know About Teenage Girls

First, there was pre-adolescence: our evolutionary flux, slow as melting glaciers, from unconsciousness to consciousness. A gradual awakening. Creatures stirring, planets orbiting, oceans deepening, the silent separations of continental drift. The dim perception of transformations occurring on the periphery of our collective awareness.

Then came the sudden stage of epiphanies. The world shifted into small, focused observations: swinging hips, glossy mouths, the smooth hairlessness of an arm on a desk. Other senses were quick to follow. New methods of perception developed. Sounds and smells. There were shrieks and trills of laughter echoing off of chalkboards, whispers sinking into asbestos-filled ceiling panels. Floral, citrusy, leathery fragrances wafting down halls in the once-dull hours after school.

We became intoxicated.

At first, the differences were fascinating. We watched as they danced. We walked while they skipped. We jogged then ran then sprinted to the point of collapse as they sat cross-legged on the edge of the field, chewing on grass and twisting stems into little rings around their fingers. We knew how to make grass whistle, how to cup it between our hands and get it to scream. But we did not teach them. We were on the turf, casting side-long glances in their direction, mentally marveling at the way their dexterous fingers bent blades into knots too small for us to see.

Soon, there was a new language to acquire. There were words in health class with barely comprehensible definitions. Words we understood completely: *breast*, *sperm*, *acne*, *sex*. And words we pretended to understand completely: *pheromones* and *ovulation*. Behind the closed doors of our bedrooms, we fingered through provocative textbooks, memorizing words we would never speak out loud, scholastic and suggestive. We had no sense of what was too scientific. We struggled to distinguish between the words worth learning by heart and those that were forgettable, and in the beginning, we attempted to retain them all: *gynecomastia*, *physiologic leukorrhea*, *pubarche*. We rolled our tongues across the sensuous assonance of *areola* and *labia* and *anorexia nervosa*: words with names like Caribbean islands, our dreamy travel destinations.

Once we were set into motion, we became quick learners. We surreptitiously raided our sisters' rooms for evidence. We found diaries explaining so much less than we'd expected. Folded papers full of notes and doodles and older boys' names. We found clues in items scattered carelessly across the carpet. Hair elastics. Bracelets. Blow dryers. Clothes on the floor in crumpled heaps. Bras hanging by straps from closet doorknobs.

We intruded. We excavated. We opened and closed. We pressed on in the name of exploration, leaving no rock unturned for the edification of our kind. We found drawers crammed with thin cotton underwear, disturbingly similar to our own. In the bathroom, we stole tampons and ripped them open and dunked them in water and watched them expand. Then, standing in front of the mirror, we dangled the cottony tubes in front of our faces like pendulums, swollen full of liquid.

Time passed quickly. Fascination evolved into yearning. Through some incredible stroke of fortune, we came to know them intimately. Me, Erica. You, Michelle. They weren't close friends. Erica wore oversized flannel shirts and knew all the lyrics to "Stairway to Heaven." Michelle played soccer and made funny faces trying to look sexy at school dances.

We wrote notes. We made mix tapes. We leaned against their lockers. We had painful dinners with their families. We led them behind our houses at dusk to see the fields light up with fireflies once the sun had gone down—oceans of bright, blinking signals. They let us touch them at night in deck chairs and hammocks and in basement rec rooms. We slid our hands up their thighs under skimpy summer shorts. We listened while they talked to us for hours and didn't notice us not talking back. We thought they looked beautiful from certain angles, but then they would turn their heads and become completely different people.

When things really started happening, we held meetings and compared notes. In faintly perfumed bedroom sanctuaries, they opened themselves to us and made no sound. They lay on their backs with their long hair flooding out onto their pillows. Their rare, sudden gasps became our Holy Grail: moments that wrenched our hearts from our chests like near-death experiences. Moments we felt willing to die for.

We worshipped them, but not as much as they worshipped us. Or so we thought. Erica sometimes talked vaguely about "our babies," how they'd have killer taste in music, or how they'd inherit all of our worst traits and turn out looking like little monsters. And, when you begged her to, Michelle snuck out of her house in the middle of

the night and drove out into the woods with you in your dad's truck. We both felt that we could ask them to do anything and they'd do it. They'd be indecisive at first, but we could tell they were always willing to be convinced. We became adept at the art of persuasion.

At a house party at the end of summer, we watched them from couches with cans of cheap beer in our hands. They were dancing on the hardwood floor of the living room where the furniture had been pushed to the walls. Erica and Michelle were there together, suddenly laughing and clinging to each other like sisters. It was the only time we ever saw them act like friends. It had gotten late. They set their bottles down on the back of the piano. They found the rhythm. They tossed their hair and sank into their hips and pulled their shoulders back, then broke out into wild, lunatic grins. They made fools of themselves and ignored us completely.

When we came back to school, I realized how much had changed. Months had passed, my hair had gotten shaggy, Erica's parents were filing for divorce, the school had instituted a new zero-tolerance drug and alcohol policy. Haley's Comet had come and gone and I'd missed it because Erica's watch alarm hadn't gone off. I was annoyed. She was upset. You and Michelle spent every minute together and I felt like I never saw you anymore.

A few weeks into the school year, Erica and I broke up. She said I never understood what she was trying to say. We had the same argument over and over. She said, "You're not even paying attention," and I said, "I am. I'm trying," and she said, "Well, try harder." I pined over the softness of her shirts and became more obsessed with

her than I'd ever been before. She became more obsessed with herself, too. I watched her walk around the halls at school, wearing low-cut jeans and acting like a total stranger. She was embarrassing herself with other boys, which destroyed me more than anything I could imagine. The last time I ever called her, her mother answered the phone and when I finally heard Erica's voice on the end of the line, I could only say, "You're not this—" before she hung up.

It was around this time, in the first deep chill of October, that you invited me over to your house and told me Michelle was pregnant. I hadn't been in your basement for a while and I'd forgotten the way your dad's leather recliners smelled like cigar smoke. They reminded me of being stuck in a car with my grandfather as a boy. We stood at opposite ends of your air hockey table and watched the plastic puck soar over the air jets. Once-familiar words took on new, heavier meanings in my head: *uterus*, *embryo*, *prenatal development*. I drove home that night and lay in bed for hours, staring into the dark cavern of my ceiling with relief and pity and dread.

Back then, we talked about how time was crawling, but really it flew. Geese went south, refrigerator contents went bad, snow piled up and crowded the sidewalks, then became dirty slush, then melted into puddles. Michelle had a little girl named Rosemary and we called her Rosie. I held her in the crook of my arm for a picture in my tux before Senior Prom. We took exams. We graduated high school. We went to college, but I went farther away. You started listening to Coltrane; I got into Sonic Youth. I moved to Boston and became a paralegal. I slept with a string of younger women and didn't stay with any of them. You started wearing glasses and moved out of Michelle's apartment and back

into your parents' house. I ran into Erica in a bar at Thanksgiving and seeing her brought that deep, harrowing pain back with more force than I would have expected. Mountains settled, the earth's crust shifted, tsunamis and earthquakes killed thousands of people, and we spun around the sun again and again.

"I mean, what the hell do we know about teenage girls?" you asked me. We were drinking beer in the backyard of your parents' house, both thirty-one and single. Earlier that evening, your parents had hosted Rosie's thirteenth birthday party, but now she was back with Michelle at their place across town.

"Not much," I confessed. The girls were gone and the yard was a mess. There were paper plates smeared with dark frosting, and bright ribbons in the grass. A few deflated balloons hung from the upper branches of the Maple tree like saggy, neon fruit.

I was visiting, home for the long Fourth of July weekend, and you had grown a beard. We hadn't seen each other in almost a year. I considered your question.

"We know what it was like to be teenage boys," I said. You shrugged your shoulders and offered me a cigarette. I shook my head. But then, after watching you light one, I grabbed the pack from the table.

"Right," you said. "As if that helps."

From our plastic lawn chairs, we watched the moon getting steadily brighter and the field steadily filling with fireflies—a dark ocean shimmering with life.

Our Lady of the Ice Storm

The next time I write to Tiffany, I'll tell her about all of this. I'll start with something like: *Dear Tiff, Get a load of this...* The freezing rain hasn't stopped in four days. Every door and window is sealed shut with ice. And I'm breaking into school with the Health teacher, Miss Hill.

"Is this okay?" I hand Miss Hill the heavy stone she told me to collect from the edge of the soccer field. She's trying to act like an authority figure, but it's clear that she has no idea what she's doing.

For one thing, she drove us here. The streets are solid ice and she doesn't even have snow tires, so it took twenty minutes to get from my house to school, which is less than a mile, as Tiffany knows. Also, we've been advised to stay indoors. My dad would have smacked himself in the forehead if he knew what we've been up to, but he's been dragging a sump pump around the neighborhood on our toboggan all afternoon, saving people's basements from flooding.

No one really knows what to do about the ice, but Miss Hill moved to our town from Canada last year and I expected her to have a little more wherewithal in this weather. I knew better, but I still got into her Saab and buckled my seatbelt this morning. This was my idea, after all. We're rescuing the freshwater fish from Mr. Vanderham's aquarium.

“This should do,” says Miss Hill, taking the stone from my hands. “But you’ll probably want to stand back.” Then she lifts the stone up to her ear, balanced on one wooly mitten, and heaves it through the window like a shot-putter.

The glass must be coated with at least an inch of ice and doesn’t make the sound I expect. The stone simply cracks through the pane, breaking it into a few large shapes, and falls thudding to the floor of the cafeteria.

“Shit!” Miss Hill shoots me a look. “You didn’t hear me say that.”

“Okay,” I tell her. But of course I did. Maybe I’ll tell Tiffany we both yelled “Shit!” That we yelled it at the same time, then looked up and laughed.

“Okay, Rachel. Now, don’t worry about the window. We’ll explain this to the school later.” She smiles, brushes some hair out of her face with her mittens, then places them on her hips to assess the damage. “And your father, too.”

This is the first time Miss Hill has mentioned my dad all afternoon, but yesterday Paul told me they’re having an affair. “Why else would she be spending the *night* here?” he asked. Everything he says to me and Jessie these days drips with disdain, making us feel like boneheads for not figuring things out ourselves. Paul’s seventeen; he says he can tell Miss Hill’s not that much older.

“It’s not an affair, idiot,” said Jessie, who does not like being treated like a bonehead. “Widowers can bang whoever they want.”

Jessie’s fifteen. She clogs up the space between Paul and me like hair in a drain. She says she hates him, but never leaves him alone. And that’s how every girl in high school acts, too, according to Dad. He always makes jokes like, “I know what Pauly

needs for Christmas this year—a stick to beat back all those girls!” Paul pays more attention to his guitar than the rest of us.

“Miss Hill doesn’t have any heat at her house,” I told them.

“Sure, isn’t that convenient,” said Jessie. “Come on down to the Bohlen’s Hot House of Love!”

But our house isn’t even that warm. On the second day of freezing rain—after we woke up to find everything, even the power lines, decorated with a fringe of icicles—the mayor declared a state of emergency. And when the radio stations predicted we’d be without power for a week or more, Dad and Paul carried the old cast-iron stove up from the basement. Dad reattached it to the chimney pipe in the living room that had been plugged up with pink insulation since as long as I can remember.

“Guess we’ll be glad for this old eyesore now!” said Dad. “Your mom and I used to call it Our Little Kitten.”

Sometimes when he mentions Mom, Dad gets these wrinkles that spread across his forehead like sand dunes. He’ll look at us with a strange expression and we all just keep talking to make sure he remembers who we are.

The next day, Miss Hill showed up with her Saab packed to the gills. She didn’t have a generator or even a fireplace. “I’d go to my mom’s in Chateaugay,” she told us, “but they say it’s even worse up there.” From where I was standing, I saw Jessie roll her eyes and Paul get red in the cheeks, but I’m pretty sure Miss Hill was staring at my dad too much to notice.

Half of his shirt collar was sticking straight up like a boat sail and the other half lay flat by his neck. He looked just like Paul does when he's listening to music and doesn't know that I'm spying—in another world and smiling like a dope.

Dad explained things to us briefly. “Miss Hill and I know each other from the Early Bird,” he said. Even I know that Dad doesn't hang out in the Early Bird, but the other half of the restaurant, the half with the bar called the Night Owl. It's been his regular spot for months. Things couldn't have been too serious before now, though. Yesterday, Miss Hill wandered all over the house, looking at our school pictures in little frames on the piano and pushing her fingers into the dirt of the kitchen plants.

Now she's using the plastic ice scraper from her car to knock jagged-edged glass out of the window. On the other side of the wall, I can hear bits clattering onto the waxy cafeteria floor.

“I think I'd better go in first,” she says, “this might be kind of dangerous.” Next thing I know, I'm on my hands and knees in the snow while Miss Hill grabs onto the window ledge and steps on me for balance. She's lighter than I imagined, only placing one boot briefly in the middle of my back while swinging the other up onto the ledge. She scoots through the window feet-first, smooth as a breeze even in her snow-pants and parka. By the time I scramble to my feet, she's smiling out at me from the window.

“Having fun yet?” she asks. When I nod, she flashes me a big grin and says, “Me too!” Still, I know enough not to get my hopes up.

Miss Hill pulls me up over the sill by my armpits. When I write to Tiffany, I could say I drove the car over to the edge of the window and stood on the hood to crawl in. But maybe that would be going too far.

I don't know much about Miss Hill, because I won't take Health until next year. But the eighth graders can't stop talking about her. She says applying coconut oil to your face every night will improve your complexion. She encourages everyone to avoid foods containing ingredients no one's ever thought to look for like xanthan gum and aspartame and gluten. When Jessie went through eighth grade Health, she had Ms. Quackenbush—a shy woman who handed out lots of informational pamphlets and left plenty of time for silent reading. If Jessie had had Miss Hill for Health, I bet she would have loved her. But Jessie will never admit that now.

They say Miss Hill doesn't hold back when it comes to puberty. She talks about tampons conversationally, reassuring girls that they can always use their fingers to fish one out if they lose the string. Apparently, Kenny Chantry said he'd find the string for any girl who ever needed it and instead of kicking him out, Miss Hill made him stay after class for the rest of the week, watching videos of women giving birth. She said he needed the education more than most.

I discovered a book called *Understanding Your Body* in a box in our attic a year ago. Dad packed most of Mom's stuff away up there, and sometimes I look through it when I have the house to myself. Her maiden name, Cynthia Newton, is written in neat cursive on the inside cover. It wasn't the material that amazed me, so much as the idea that my mother had once owned it. She had seen and learned from those very diagrams:

the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries (which looked, to me, like the skull of a long-horned sheep); the month-by-month stages of a pregnancy; the instructions for self-administered breast exams.

I read the Questions and Answers section in the back. What causes insomnia and how can it be cured? Do women age faster than men? Are there any medical reasons why a woman should, or should not, wear a bra? The answers weren't very satisfying, but I took them to heart. It felt like a replacement for the talk I did not expect to have with my father. Tiffany had one with her mom at age eleven. But the book made me feel well-educated. I knew that watching exciting television programs before bed could contribute to sleeplessness, that the signs of aging follow the same pattern in both sexes, and that it really didn't matter whether my mother had followed the breast exam directions or not. The whole process—the pressing and prodding—only helps to detect lumps. It doesn't make them go away.

Inside the cafeteria, Miss Hill and I stomp to get the snow out of our boots. Then she uses one foot to sweep the glass shards into a pile in the corner. The school, like our house, has been engulfed by an eerie silence since the storm started. Chairs sit patiently under tables, waiting to be occupied by students. I can almost hear the lunchtime voices: Danny Fredricks chewing with his mouth open on my left; loud, dramatic monologues from Shawntell Baker and Leslie Snood at the back of the room; the dull clatter of plastic trays on plastic tabletops; and silverware clinking between hundreds of little teeth. Tiffany used to sit at my table, until her family moved to Kansas last year.

Miss Hill pulls something out of her coat pocket. “Flashlight,” she says. It looks just like the one Dad keeps by the back door at our house. I follow her out of the cafeteria and into the hallway, which is windowless and dark. From the echoing sounds of our boots and snow-pants, you’d think we were ten people instead of two.

“Have you ever been in school when it’s empty like this?” She turns and shines the light at me. I shake my head. It’s impossible to see her face, staring into the light like this, but I imagine her grinning. “Creepy, huh? Those fish will be happy to see us.”

As we swish our way through the empty hallways, I start to plan out the rest of my day. When we get home, Jessie and Paul will be in the living room in front of the stove—Jessie flipping through a magazine and Paul practicing the chords to that Nirvana song. When Miss Hill leaves to go find my dad, Jessie will lower the magazine to her lap, Paul will let the neck of his guitar go slack against his shoulder and they’ll ask me about her. What do I think?

I can’t talk to them the same way I talk to Tiffany. She’s going to get the detailed version. But I know how to convince my siblings. “Well,” I’ll say, “Dad’s happy, right?”

It’s true. Dad even seems happy about the ice storm. He keeps dragging us outside and pointing to things as if we should be amazed. “Just listen to the sounds of these branches groaning!” he’ll say. Yesterday, we ran down the street as a family—even Miss Hill—to watch some transformers short out in little blue fireworks displays.

Ever since the power cut out, Dad’s become a man of action. He’s got our living room set up like a Boy Scout campground. We each have our own sleeping bag and

blow-up mat arranged in a semi-circle around the wood stove, even Miss Hill. Last night, she slept on the end next to Jessie. Dad told her it'd be warmer in the middle between him and Paul, but she said she needed the room since she kicks in her sleep. I bet Jessie loved that one.

For hot meals, we've been making beans and oatmeal and soup on the gas camping stove in the corner. Drinking water has to be hauled up from the well by hand, but for cooking and washing, we're using water from the creek. Paul and Jessie follow Dad down the road to the streambed, and they fill up two joint compound buckets each. We've been heating it up in pots on the camping stove at night, then dipping washcloths in to wipe our faces and armpits.

Dad had always been good at making do in a pinch until Mom died three years ago. When we were making our lunches in the morning and realized we were out of bread, Dad used to come through with good ideas, like a baggie full of raisins and dry cereal. He'd rummage around in the cupboards, looking at boxes and seeing their potential to become something else. But lately, he's been stretching to keep things together. One day he sent me to school with a whole tomato and a can of corn niblets. "Just a little salt and pepper and you'll be good to go," he said. He threw both shakers into my lunchbox before zipping it up.

At school that day, Tiffany and I shared her pack of Oreos. She always had the best lunches. And every day, inside her bag, there'd be a note with a big heart on it that said, "Happy Monday!" or "Good luck on your Math test!" or "I love you, Pumpkin!" Once, on Valentines Day, Tiffany opened her backpack to find a whole bag full of heart-

shaped lollipops. She passed them around the table to all of our friends at lunch, but I saved mine for later, when I could sit alone in attic and suck, feeling the trail of liquid sugar work its way down my throat.

On our first Halloween without Mom, when none of us planned our costumes ahead, Dad really tried. He unscrewed the shade from our floor lamp in the living room, stuffed a bike helmet inside, and strapped it to my head. I was going as a tube of toothpaste. Jessie stood like a mannequin in the middle of the room as Dad circled her, draping one of Mom's favorite light blue bed-sheets around her shoulders as the Statue of Liberty. He also made her a flaming torch out of cardboard and tinfoil. Paul got to wear Dad's old leather jacket, covered with pins, and carry his guitar around as that guy from The Clash. But when he looked at us in our costumes—three kids in a lampshade, a bed-sheet, and an old leather jacket—his eyes got all wet and worried-looking, even though he was smiling. When he sent us out onto the street, we kept turning around to look at Dad in the doorway. He stood there, smiling and rubbing his face into the crook of his elbow, until we turned the first corner.

That's why I know exactly what I'll be writing to Tiffany: Miss Hill and my dad need each other. She doesn't have snow tires; he can't make lunch. He gets sad too often and she can't break into a building without throwing a rock through the window. Maybe she doesn't know what she's getting into—showing up at our house in the middle of this storm—but I don't think she'll regret it. When she first arrived, Jessie shrugged at me and Paul and said, "Shit happens." But I wanted to say, "Shit happens *for a reason.*"

Usually, Mr. Vanderham's aquarium emits a cool, blue glow from the corner of the room. Any time you're spacing out in the middle of a lecture about the food chain or symbiosis, you can watch the fish zigzag around the tank. Mr. V loves them so much, he doesn't even get mad. I've sketched almost all of them into the back of my Life Science notebook. Each one has a name and a pair of smiling lips that I've penciled in. Of course, now the whole room is black, even the corner.

When Miss Hill shines her flashlight down into the tank, she grunts through her lips—almost a noise of pleasure—and it echoes around the room like something I shouldn't have heard. Then I see what she sees: the fish that have formed a solid layer across the top of the tank. Even lit by Miss Hill's spotlight, the fish bodies look rubbery and dull—nothing like the lively creatures in my notebook. Standing above them, I can see that their bodies have made room for each other, fitting into place across the water like puzzle pieces.

Gilbert is the first fish I recognize. He used to be the largest in the tank—a big, pearly oaf of a thing, shaped just like a slice of bread. I can also make out Zack, a smaller fish with red and black stripes, and Penelope, shimmery and metallic with long, wispy fins. And there are plenty of others surrounding them—some silver minnows here and there, and those brown-spotted fish that I could never keep straight.

I crouch down to look through the tank, the way I've done a couple times before Life Science. Normally, the bubbler on the side would be sending things into motion. Plants would be waving. Coral would be glistening. Now the water is perfectly still, like

heavy air, and thick with particles. Some of the seaweed still reaches skyward, up into the ceiling of dead fish.

“I worried it might be like this,” says Miss Hill.

“Me too,” I say, even though it’s not true.

“Sometimes there’s just nothing you can do.”

As I look up at Miss Hill’s sad face in the flashlight shadows, she suddenly looks older. The sharp angles of her jawbone, which always seemed youthful, now remind me of the evil queen from Snow White. When Tiffany and I were much younger, we memorized the words to the whole movie. She did the best impersonation of the queen, especially in that scene with the poison apple: “One bite, and all your dreams will come true!”

That’s when I notice Georgette—she’s flattened out along the bottom of the aquarium, motionless and camouflaged with the algae-covered pebbles.

“Georgette!” I say.

“What?”

“Look!” I tap on the glass. “Georgette! She’s still alive.” Miss Hill bends over and directs the flashlight to where I’m pointing.

“You’re sure that’s a fish?”

Miss Hill removes her mittens, pulls a Ziploc bag out of her pocket, and takes a long-handled net from a hook on the side of the tank. I try not to look as she collects the dead. About an hour ago, we’d stuffed the bags into our pockets cheerily, taking five each, imagining them filled with brightly-finned swirls and splashes. While she guides

the bodies carefully into her bag, I stare at Georgette. I can only see one of her pale, glassy eyes, but I swear she's staring back at me. She's the clean-up fish—the one with the mouth like a vacuum nozzle that sucks the gunk and grime off everything in the tank.

When Miss Hill pokes her with the metal edge of the net, Georgette slides forward, creating a flurry of unsettled muck.

“Fill a bag with water,” she says. So, I take a Ziploc out of my pocket and dunk it in the tank. I hold the bag open, waiting, while Miss Hill corrals Georgette into a corner.

She makes a small show of evading the net, but I can tell Georgette is ready to come with us. She even remains calm while Miss Hill lifts her in the net, her tail and flat head hanging off the ends in the shape of a frown.

“Why Georgette?” Miss Hill asks me.

“I'm not sure,” I say. “It fits her though, doesn't it?” I put my hand under Georgette's bag—she feels heavy and cool in my palm.

“It does,” she says. “Brown and spotty, just like this old girl. And I guess she's *our* old girl now, huh? Our Lady of the Ice Storm?”

I can easily picture Georgette as a saint—a glowing halo around her slimy head. Maybe I can draw a picture of her and attach it to Tiffany's letter. There's so much to include now. More than just the fallen power lines. Or the old Christmas decorations that are coated with ice all over the neighborhood. More than the edge of the picnic table in our yard, which has developed a fringe of icicles like a flapper dress. Now there's Miss Hill's hat with the pom-poms and the floor of her Saab covered with cassette tapes and

the way she slept with her sweatshirt hood pulled right up over her head last night, just like me.

“How old are you?” I ask, though I know I shouldn’t. I’ve overheard my dad tell Paul a million times: you should never ask a woman her age, let alone try to guess it. But now I’m thinking about Dad and that dopey look on his face.

“How old do you think I am?”

“Well...” I know she’s younger than my dad and older than Paul. Somewhere between seventeen and forty-six. “Thirty?” I make sure my voice sounds as high and as clueless as possible.

“That’s very close,” she says. “I’m twenty-eight.”

“You’re way older than Paul.”

“Yes.” Miss Hill tilts her head to look at me. “Twenty-eight can feel very old on some days, and very young on others.”

“Aging has a similar effect on both sexes,” I say, reciting the text from *Understanding Your Body*. “Women sometimes think that they age faster than men, but it’s not true. We just go through puberty sooner.”

Miss Hill looks impressed. “Huh. That’s a good way of looking at it. Remind me again: how old are you?”

When I hung out with Tiffany, we loved this question. Just this past summer, we would walk to the campus coffeehouse, hoping the baristas would ask us our age. We imagined them saying something like, “You girls look a little young to be drinking coffee.” To which we planned to say, “We’re fifteen.” But they never asked.

“Thirteen,” I tell her.

“That’s refreshing. Most thirteen year olds don’t know a damn thing about puberty. I don’t think parents even talk to their kids anymore.”

I got my first period two years ago, but Dad probably still doesn’t know about it. When I noticed the brownish stains in my underwear, I went straight to Jessie. She handed me some pads and said, “Well, Rachel. You’re a woman now. Welcome to Hell.”

But it won’t be Hell with Miss Hill around. Not anymore. I’ll be just what she needs—a thirteen-year-old to talk to and make plans with. Someone to make gluten-free meals for and smother with layers of coconut oil.

“I know just what these fish need,” I tell her. “A funeral.”

“Oh? But there’s so much ice.”

“We could save them in the ice. And have a funeral when the ground thaws.”

“Sure,” she says, “you can try to do that.”

My mind starts spinning. I can see the whole group of us gathered for the funeral—a festive, springtime service full of amusing anecdotes about Gilbert, Zack, Penelope and all the others—even the unnamed fish. Georgette will be there, presiding over the ceremony as Our Lady of the Ice Storm, making little sucky faces at her friends from the inside of her new bowl, saying her goodbyes and paying her respects. Miss Hill and Dad and Jessie and Paul will stand next to me, holding their hands behind their backs in little baskets. It will be something we’ll all remember later, in the summer, when we’re telling stories about this storm and the only ice in sight is just floating in our drinks.

“You’d love my friend Tiffany. She’s much easier to talk to than Jessie and Paul.” Miss Hill glances over at me from her chair. “I mean,” I continue, “I’m sure they already like you. They’ll just need time to get used to you.”

“Rachel—”

“Not *you* you. Just you at our house and all.”

“Honey—” she starts again. *Honey*. Like the beginning of the note a mom would leave in a lunchbox. “I don’t know what your brother and sister told you, but—it’s this storm. I know it might look like—well, I know what it looks like. But when the power comes on, I’m going back to my house.”

She sets her elbow on the desk and cups her hand beneath her chin, staring at me as if time has just spun backwards and I’m not even ten. Under the tabletop, I can see the bag of dead fish resting on her knee. Their bodies have slipped down onto different sides of her leg and stacked there in dark clumps against the plastic.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Miss Hill asks me, out of nowhere. I hate this question and so did Tiffany, last summer. But in her most recent letter, she said she’d French-kissed a boy under the bleachers at a rodeo. *I guess he’s my boyfriend*, she wrote, *what do you think?*

“No.” I can feel Georgette squirm against my palm.

“That’s good,” she says. “You might think you need one, but you don’t.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Well, you will.” The tone of her voice says she knows something about me that I don’t. “Someday you will and then maybe you’ll look back on this and understand.” It’s a

line I've heard before. People use it to explain what happened to Mom. But if they think I'm just biding my time, waiting for the day when I will finally understand *that*, they're crazy.

"Look," says Miss Hill. "We'd better get back to your house. It's getting dark."

But it's been dark in this room ever since we showed up.

On our way home, Miss Hill seems like a different person. For whatever reason, her car doesn't slip the way it did this morning. Her driving is more measured, steady. When we pull into the driveway, Dad's standing next to the yellow birch in our yard. The largest branch has already split away from the trunk in a jagged, mustard-colored gash and the others bend, octopus-like, toward the ground.

When Dad sees us, he doesn't seem upset. Even inspecting that ruined tree, his face looked bright. If I thought he'd be worried about us today, I was wrong. He crunches over to the car and removes his wool hat like an old southern gentleman before speaking to Miss Hill. The fluff of his balding head stands up like a fin.

"Any luck?" he asks.

"We saved one," Miss Hill tells him and tilts her head at me. But Dad doesn't even look over. He's pulled the collar of his coat up around his neck and, sheltered inside the wool, his cheeks are splotted with red. He looks like a little boy—like he found something he's just dying to show her.

So, I walk up to the house. She can do what she wants with the dead fish. I've got Georgette cradled in both hands and once I'm inside, I'll check the cabinets for her new

home. I'm not sure we have a bowl big enough, but she'll be all right once I get her near the fire. She just needs to warm up a bit. I'll get some stationery from my room upstairs, bring it down to the stove, and start my letter to Tiffany. I've got the whole thing planned out in my head. It will end the way my last letter did, like nothing's changed at all: *I miss you. Wish you were here. Love, Rachel.*

Inert

Enchanted Forest would not have been Margaret's first choice, but Trixie the plastic swan insisted upon it.

"Trixie, what do you think?" Bertie, Margaret's three-year-old niece, had asked. The swan was lying on the couch, tipped sideways, and Bertie crouched to get her ear close to his beak.

"Roberta, I won't wait around all day for that swan to start talking," Val said, assuming a motherly, hip-jutting pose from the kitchen. "Enchanted Forest or what?"

"Yes," Bertie announced quietly.

"Yes what?"

"Yes please."

Bertie had been toting Trixie around all morning, ever since Margaret had arrived, hanging him by his neck from various parts of her soft, toddler's body. In certain positions, Margaret thought, Trixie looked uncannily omniscient. But, other times, he just looked like a fat, white coat hanger.

"Trixie the Swan," Val, informed her as they clipped Bertie's car seat into the back of the Corolla. "It's the newest phase."

Last month, Margaret knew, it was a purse full of credit cards. In a moment of regrettable spontaneity, Val provided Bertie with a stack of fake credit cards she'd been

receiving in the mail; then, Val had whined about it over the phone, in that low, dramatic voice of hers, almost every time Margaret called that month.

“I just never thought she’d become so obsessive,” Val now complained.

“Mmm,” said Margaret. She stood outside the car, watching while Val located the matching ends of each buckle and tightened their straps with her sharp-but-weary maternal efficiency.

“Raisins, clean socks, admission to the bathroom. We’re talking weeks here, Margie. She took out a card and made that swiping motion for everything.”

“No one should become attached to a purse any sooner than they have to,” Margaret agreed. An image flitted briefly into her mind’s eye: the purse she’d tossed to the side of the couch in her carelessness last night. She had slept with a man for the first time in over a year—Brent, with glasses, in architecture school, the friend of a friend. She’d just invited him back to her place after dinner and let things fall. The purse had landed in her potted plant. Thinking about the mess didn’t bother her, but something else did—a disturbance in the natural order of things. Usually, Margaret said goodbye at the door and hung her purse from a peg in her bedroom. She imagined its long strap sadly draped across the soil. It was just like life, Margaret thought. You threw your purse anywhere when you had other things on your mind, and when you remembered, it was too late, and it would stay there all afternoon.

“You might have to buy my Enchanted Forest ticket,” she said.

“I might be suffering from PTSD,” Val continued.

Margaret turned away from the car. “So, you bought her a swan?” On the lawn, Bertie had bent Trixie’s neck around her wrist and was swinging him in circles, madly, like a windmill.

“Every phase becomes more traumatic than the next.” Val grabbed the car seat with two hands and shook it, like a gorilla in a cage. “You can’t even imagine.”

“No,” said Margaret, staring at Bertie across the lawn. She was rocking Trixie now, with a gentle motion of the wrist, like a baby in a bassinette. Val walked around to the other side of the car and watched Bertie with her arms folded.

“We don’t even know where he came from,” Val shrugged. “It’s like she’s already dating. The boyfriend won’t leave her side, and doesn’t say a goddamn word to us. It feels like we’ve already been replaced.”

On the drive, Bertie was tight-lipped and aloof. Margaret watched her in the rearview mirror as she draped Trixie around her neck like a scarf. Bertie had always been a quiet child—introspective, confident, serene. Margaret should have known what to expect from this visit, but somehow Bertie’s distance came as a shock every time. In the photographs Margaret had set up around her apartment, Bertie was peeking out from behind a couch, or shading her eyes from the sun, or holding a rock out towards the camera, her face an abstract blur in the background. Her moods in the photos could change—from smug to melancholy to contemplative—depending on a trick of the light.

She’d never expected to work hard at a friendship with her young niece. When Bertie was born, Margaret had hoped the childlike attributes that had followed her into

her early thirties would finally work to her advantage: a slight self-centeredness, a love of milk products. Some called her sense of humor *unsophisticated*, but in those early days, she felt baby Roberta—who could pucker her mouth to look like a chewed piece of bubblegum—would finally be the one to understand her. Margaret often sat silently through others' jokes, then laughed deliriously while her friends stirred ice in their drinks, saying, "Okay Margaret. Enough already."

Also, Margaret still sensed those subtle undercurrents—she didn't dare call them voices—that emanated from things: inert objects, like her purse, but also her houseplants and cat, Heath. Like a child, she felt that everything had a mind of its own. Some of her skirts, for example, wanted to hang next to other skirts in her closet. And if she tried to ignore them, to tell herself she was being ridiculous, the situation only got worse. She'd leave the room with a guilty feeling hovering in a corner of her mind, like a smudge on the lens of her glasses. She'd walk briskly back into the room and move the hangers together at one end of the bar. *There! Happy?* And the skirts would seem to say yes. It made Margaret feel better. She just wanted things to feel right.

To her sister Val, on the other hand, nothing ever felt right. Even when they were girls, Val carried discontentment with her like a clutch. They were their parents' only children—separated by just thirteen months—and Margaret always imagined it was this quick succession of daughters that had put a cap on their family. Her mother and father had started parenthood in an exuberant dead sprint and found themselves gasping for breath by the second lap.

“Bertie, hon,” Val said over her shoulder, “we’re almost there. Are you excited?” Bertie had covered Trixie with her unzipped sweatshirt and was fussing around, trying to tuck him into the seat next to her.

“Roberta, please answer me when I talk to you,” Val said, impatience edging into her voice. Bertie tilted her face up and met her mother’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “I said, aren’t you excited?”

“Yes,” Bertie said, almost inaudibly. Val turned to Margaret and rolled her eyes.

It still amazed her to think that Val was a mother. She loved Bertie—that much was clear. But Margaret wasn’t so sure that Val loved being a mother. Maybe their mother had felt the same way about them. In many families she knew, the oldest sibling could be characterized as patient, protective, responsible—a third little parent. And commonly, the second child rebelled, became temperamental, felt unloved. Yet, Margaret and Val had reversed those roles. When her parents once forgot to dole out their weekly allowance in junior high, Margaret noted the oversight wistfully in her diary, whereas Val stole several bills from their mother’s pocketbook. She was the sister who didn’t deserve the money, maybe didn’t even want it, but somehow always got it anyway.

The whimsical, wood-chipped path of Enchanted Forest was more of an obstacle course than Margaret had expected, full of fallen tree trunks and low-hanging, moss-covered vines. Ahead of them, the Gingerbread House lurked among the maples like a surly spinster, with its candied adornments like warts and moles, its sloping brown roof a dirty shawl.

“He’s growing a mustache,” said Val. “One of those awful handlebar ones. He told me this morning that he entered a bet at work—a mustache-growing bet. And he’s going to win.” She put two fingers to her temple and made a sound like a small explosion.

“Oh dear,” Margaret said, and flicked a clump of moss from her shoulder. When they were alone, Val always complained about Trevor—making it seem as if she were jealous of her sister’s independence. When Margaret was around Val and Trevor together, they showered each other with endearing insults and griped about married life for Margaret’s benefit.

“I told him,” Val continued, “‘You know how I feel about facial hair.’ And he said, ‘Yes, I do,’ and sat down with the newspaper.”

Margaret pressed her lips shut and strained to see Bertie on the path ahead. The children here fell into two categories, she thought—the ones who raced breathlessly from one attraction to another, and the ones who wrapped themselves tightly around a parent’s thigh and never let go. Not Bertie, though. She was moving unhurriedly toward the house in front of them, holding Trixie comfortably against her chest.

“Men!” Val exclaimed. “Who do they think they are?”

Margaret sighed. “They think they’re men. They are men, after all.” Part of her wanted to mention Brent, but she didn’t know how to frame it. Up ahead, she watched Bertie moving up the wooden stairs of the Gingerbread House with her measured, elderly-looking steps. “I mean, you can’t blame them for that.”

“Can’t we, though?”

“I don’t know. When you boil it down, you can’t blame them for much. You can only really blame yourself.”

“That’s exactly it!” Val nearly shouted. “We end up in these situations, where we’re thinking, *God, how did I get here with this person? He’s an absolute lunatic!* But, of course, it’s always our fault.”

“Hmm,” said Margaret, “well.”

She hadn’t felt that way at all about Brent. Over the course of the night, things had just become more and more apparent, like layers of tissue paper peeling away to reveal something at the bottom of a box. They sat on her fire escape with vodka tonics. Brent reached out with both hands and moved them up and down her bare calf. It was an advance, Margaret knew, but she couldn’t bring herself to respond. Every possible reaction struck her as ludicrously cheesy—giggles, a sigh, her fingers on his shin. Acknowledging his hands at all, it seemed, would have put her at some great disadvantage.

“You’re cold,” he said, speeding up his hands as if he might kindle a fire there, between her knees and ankles.

“Let’s just go inside,” Margaret offered. In her bedroom, she undressed while Brent sat on the edge of the bed. She pulled her shirt over her head, folded it and returned it to the drawer. She unclipped her bra and hung it from the doorknob. Then she pulled on a nightie, drew the sheets back, slipped into bed, and clicked off her lamp. As if they were old lovers, or as if he wasn’t there at all. But she waited in the dark for the touch of

his hands—on her waist, her shoulder, the side of her cheek. She imagined his face getting steadily closer to hers.

“Sometimes it really does feel impossible,” Val said, as Bertie emerged from the Gingerbread House with Trixie on her elbow.

But Margaret had always believed—hoped—it didn’t have to be. At dinner last night, she and Brent had reminisced over their slow artistic beginnings. Brent recalled the collegiate introductory painting course in which he’d sketched a nude model without any breasts.

“I kept thinking I’d come back to them, in the end,” he’d explained. They were well into their meals by then; Brent’s lips tinged an effeminate crimson from the wine. “But I just sketched around them . . . and around them and around them. And when the model finally stood up to leave, I’d gotten about as close as her collarbone. So, for the rest of the term, I was that weird guy who couldn’t handle nudity.”

If Margaret squinted, she could picture the frazzled, college-aged Brent: four-eyed, quiet, t-shirt-clad. Not so different from the man across the table, she thought. The white rim of his under-shirt, a sickle moon, peeked out at her from the neck of his sweater. She grinned at him, cradling some peas on her fork, then swiftly closed her mouth around them.

“But I loved that sketch,” Brent continued, “a woman with a head and neck and arms and legs—everything sketched in meticulous detail—and nothing but white paper where her chest should be. Somehow, it just made sense that way.”

Margaret paused, feeling a pea in her throat. She liked Brent's story, but felt as if she shouldn't. Was it a simple story about an art class, or something more complex—a tale laden with confusing sexual metaphors? Was he a bashful flirt or a quiet misogynist? She looked at Brent through one open eye, trying to size him up, as he placed his fingers on the bottom of his wine glass. He looked up, met her eyes, then moved his hand in small circles on the table. His Merlot sloshed up and down—excited little waves in a glass bubble.

“My experience was just the opposite,” Margaret offered, “In my photography class, I don't think I took one picture that didn't include one of my disembodied limbs. For the final exam, I paid homage to the travels of my left hand, but the teacher wasn't impressed. It was really just a bunch of awful pictures with titles like: Hand in Forest. Hand on Riverbank. Hand Holding Half-Eaten Chocolate Croissant.” Brent put his fork down to laugh, but held his hands below the table. He was difficult to read—but maybe, Margaret thought, she just wasn't very good at reading.

At the end of the night, Brent caught her off guard while she was dabbing at the corners of her mouth. “Hand Wearing Toga!” he announced across the table. There had been nothing for Margaret to do then but smile and extend her arm for them both to examine: her well-traveled hand draped in a clean, white napkin, the very likeness of an ancient Roman. She'd known then, in a rare moment of decision-making, that she would invite Brent up to her apartment and that she would not regret it.

Even still, Margaret had guiltily shooed him out of the house this morning like a wild animal—a stray cat or a squirrel that had snuck in through an open door. She had

lived alone for too long, past the point of one-night stands. She'd become too accustomed to her own slight uncleanliness—grime girdling her sink bowl, crusty casserole bits hardened onto potholders. Used tissues were scattered around her apartment, decorating tabletops like white flowers that had bloomed and wilted and fallen from a tree. She was reusing to an extent that others might deem unsanitary. Why throw away a paper towel when one could let it dry, fold it neatly, and keep it on the microwave, at the ready for another use? Why brush one's teeth when one drank coffee, steadily, throughout the entire day? Why wash a bra, ever? No one but Margaret would ever know the difference. And the bras didn't like to be washed anyway. They liked to hang from one strap around the doorknob to her bedroom, together.

Perhaps she had been wrong to shoo Brent away, but Margaret felt she had done so gently, even wistfully. True, she had not acknowledged his offer to cook breakfast, his shy promise of scrambled eggs "like cumulus clouds on a plate." And when he'd ducked in for a kiss goodbye, Margaret had kept it closed-mouthed and quick. These things could be interpreted badly, she knew. Still, she believed there had been things to encourage him, displays of true interest whose markings she so rarely revealed—the funny-looking birthmark of her attraction, that small scar of her heart.

"You two go on ahead," said Val as they approached the next attraction—the creepy caterpillar from Alice in Wonderland, smoking a giant hookah. "I have to find a ladies' room. Bertie? Do you have to go potty?"

Bertie raised Trixie's head and turned it sideways.

Val rolled her eyes. “I didn’t think so. Be good for your Aunt Margie.”

Bertie didn’t watch her mother walk off. Maybe it was true, Margaret thought, that Trixie had replaced her. She walked briskly to catch up with Bertie as they continued toward the rabbit hole.

“So, Miss Bertie-kins,” Margaret let the words trail off, realizing she had nothing else to say. Bertie looked up with the dark, placid eyes of an animal. “You never introduced me to your friend there,” Margaret tried, nodding to Trixie, who was stuffed under Bertie’s armpit.

“This is Trixie,” said Bertie, matter-of-factly, releasing him from her underarm grip. “Trixie,” she said, addressing the swan, “this is Aunt Margie.” With two hands on his tubby midsection, Bertie lifted him up toward Margaret. His neck bent at an unnatural angle, but Trixie’s eyes and his thin, carroty beak were aimed directly at her.

Margaret waited. It looked as if Bertie might initiate some sort of conversation through Trixie. Of course, it would be obvious ventriloquism, but Margaret was willing and ready to play along. She glanced surreptitiously at Bertie’s face behind her swan, imagining the deep-timbred (or would it be high-pitched?) voice of Trixie that was about to escape her lips. But Bertie kept her mouth shut tight. She stared right back at her aunt, eyes wide, as if Trixie had already spoken and it was Margaret’s turn to keep things going.

There was no way to escape it—this pressure to act, to initiate. Margaret pursed her lips into a smile at Trixie, but Bertie wasn’t impressed. She looked into Margaret’s eyes—part yearning, part disappointment, just like Brent—then turned with the swan

toward the rabbit hole. Margaret watched as Bertie walked to the tunnel, getting smaller and smaller, then dropped onto her knees like the children before her had done and disappeared into the darkness.

Margaret felt just the way she had this morning. She had woken before Brent, opened her eyes, and taken him in—the porous, magnified, one-sided face of him. She took in the sleepy sag of his cheek, the dark bean of his nostril, those sable hairs that formed the downward slope of his eyebrow. With his glasses off, she could tell that he had a dark, romantic face. He was right to wear glasses, she thought, to throw people off balance.

Slowly, Margaret had lifted her hand. She moved her fingers under the sheet and watched the cotton ripple. Then, carefully, she stretched her arm up and over toward Brent. Her head stayed motionless on the pillow, but her hand crept forward, a subaqueous monster, a traveling blue lump. Brent was sleeping on his back, but he had his head cocked to the side a little, inclining toward Margaret as if he'd fallen asleep in mid-sentence. In fact, they hadn't said more than a few words after she'd hit the lights.

Her hand approached him steadily, crossing over the expanse of his chest, the valley between his arm and his side. When she had stretched her fingers as far as they would reach, Margaret let her arm hover there, over this man in her bed, feeling the weight of each breath she exhaled. She thought Brent might open his eyes and see her in this position. He would be confused, or nervous; he would ask questions. And Margaret thought about how she would act and what she would say. *At any moment*, she thought, *he's bound to wake up*. But he didn't. And it was too hard to hold her arm there forever.

Now, Margaret held a flattened hand to her brow, surveying the wild sea of children like a ship's captain. Where was Bertie? She walked up to the rabbit hole and squatted down at the round entrance.

“Ro-ber-ta!” She called through cupped hands in a pleasant sing-song. It reminded her of the way she used to call for the family cats at night, when she was just a girl. She would step onto the back deck in her bare feet, unafraid, shouting into the dark galaxy of the woods behind their house. *Heeere Kitty Kitty Kitty!* She could never hear them coming, but the cats would always answer, popping up onto the deck after several minutes. She just sent her voice out into the void and imagined them running toward her, sleek bodies hurtling like comets across the forest floor, pushing swiftly through tall grasses to her, their beacon. Margaret could barely remember the last time she'd called like that; Heath was always just on the other side of the wall.

“Roberta!” she tried a little more loudly. A few children started to cluster behind her, wanting to get through, like moths on a screen.

“Could you look for a blond little girl in there?” she asked, watching them fall to their knees and crawl quickly into the shadows.

Margaret pictured the children clambering toward Bertie, who was probably in there, blocking their way, leaning up against the cement wall and swinging Trixie from her finger. But the kids emerged on the other side of the path almost immediately. They ran back over to her, ready to dive back in.

“Is there a child in there?” she asked, reaching out her hand to stop one of them for a second. Her hand met against the cottony tub of his chest. “A little blond girl with a swan?”

The child stumbled back, surprised, shaking his head, and looking over her shoulder. “Is everything okay?” asked a middle-aged man suddenly beside her, looking concerned. He held a baby girl on one hip. The boy grabbed his free hand, staring at Margaret, who was still crouching at his eye-level, with alarm.

“Oh, just fine!” she said, standing and smiling them away. “Just lost one down the rabbit hole! I’m sure that happens all the time.” The baby stared up at Margaret, her little face blank as a napkin.

She started walking further down the path, almost getting angry. Bertie must have slipped out the other side of the tunnel when Margaret wasn’t watching. She was just so damn headstrong. She was probably up ahead at the next attraction, the Crooked Man’s house, standing inside on the sloping floor, perfectly content to be on her own.

Margaret just had to locate her before Val returned. Her sister would not be able to handle this calmly. Val always jumped to the worst-case scenario. She was nothing like Margaret—she never waited. She didn’t believe things would always, somehow, work themselves out.

Suddenly, Margaret saw her. Bertie, holding the hand of an Enchanted Forest employee. They were outside of the crazy crooked house, and Bertie was red-faced and wild-eyed. Something spread through Margaret’s veins like a drug and she ducked behind

a tree. The employee, a tall teenage boy, was bending at the waist, speaking to Bertie in a slow, steady voice.

“We’re going to find your mom, okay?” he said, “You’re going to be just fine.” Trixie wasn’t hanging from her arm or neck. Margaret scanned the area. No Trixie on the ground, or with the employee. Bertie held the stranger with one hand, and wiped madly at her eyes with the other. If Trixie was lost, maybe Margaret could find him. She could present the swan to Bertie and set things right.

But Margaret stood behind the tree, not moving. She knew that she should expose herself. She should emerge from behind the tree, run to Bertie, and get down on one knee in the woodchips. She imagined bending down and opening her arms, holding Bertie close to her and feeling that wet face nestled into her neck. But, she had never seen Bertie this desperate before and she stood there, inert, staring as if into a mirror, and only stepping out from behind the tree after it had gone on for far too long.

Lawn Care

On the evening my husband left our house for good, I watched *60 Minutes*—a segment about a woman who stayed in bed for ninety days. She was paid thousands of dollars to stay completely horizontal as part of a NASA study.

“I was monitored 24/7,” the woman said, “so they could learn more about how muscles atrophy. They’re trying to figure out ways to slow that process down.” The woman only received a few minutes of airtime, but I still remember her spectacular bewilderment. She wore her hair very short in the back and longer in the front, tapering into points below her ears. And she looked confused—her eyes droopy with mascara, as if the *60 Minutes* make-up artists had had their way with her before the show. As if she couldn’t remember why she was there to begin with. She had experienced many things in her life—things for which she was not being interviewed—that Diane Sawyer couldn’t begin to imagine. “It was three months in bed,” she’d shrugged.

“But isn’t it true,” Diane had prodded, “that NASA will be using the research from this study as they plan a trip to Mars?”

“Beats me,” the woman said. She kept tucking the long strands of hair behind her ears, then flicking them forward again. “I guess I spent most of that time just, you know, thinking about my life.”

At the end of the interview, Diane asked the woman what she did after her release from the lab. “I spent hours just walking around my neighborhood,” she said. “I’ve never felt so happy to be alone.”

I watched quite a bit of television that week. In fact, I may not have turned the television off until Sebastian showed up to mow my lawn. He didn’t knock. By the time I came downstairs and opened my door, I found him standing on my porch. He’d left the mower down on the sidewalk.

“So, just the front?” he asked. This was the first time we’d ever met. He just looked at me and pulled a heavy hand through his hair. Beneath the bangs, I saw a dark mole—like a pinprick—over his eyebrow.

“Hi,” I said. “Um, no. Back, too, please.”

“Okay.” As he walked back down the stairs, I could see half of his ass, covered in gray boxer-briefs. He pulled at the ripcord once, twice, took a breath, then yanked the engine to life on the third try. Then, he shoved the mower into the tall grass, where it emitted a low growl.

I am not, and never have been, the type of woman who pays others to mow her lawn. But after that week, I could see from my upstairs windows that something needed to be done. Roddy, my son, had already left for the summer and I couldn’t get out there to do it myself. The neighbors in this part of town, though not particularly affluent, still attempt to keep up appearances. Hedges are trimmed; leaves are raked. The vulnerable, yawning mouths of the roses are clipped before they begin to wither.

I'd gotten Sebastian's name from my neighbor, Jim Geisenheimer. Sebastian was the younger brother of an employee at Jim's downtown coffee shop, Strawberry Fields. "I've never met him," Jim told me. "And I mow my own lawn. But he's young and pretty cheap, if you're interested."

Jim Geisenheimer and I are separated by ten feet of grass and a row of hydrangea bushes. His house flanks mine on the left. Our windows line up so that my kitchen provides a view into his living room and the windows on my second floor allow glimpses—when the blinds are up—into his guest room and bathroom. He's in his early thirties, I'd guess—childless, petless, unmarried, and gay.

Jim moved in about a year ago, and we've never had a real conversation. When I called him to ask about a lawn mowing service, I peeked at his living room through the blinds. I hoped to see him pick up, but he must have a phone on the other side of the house.

"It's great to hear from you," Jim said, as if we'd been best friends in another lifetime. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "Of course." It occurred to me that he may have been watching me, too. Perhaps he'd caught glimpses of me drifting in and out of my kitchen, drinks in hand, bathrobe fluttering. Or maybe he'd seen me awake in the middle of the night, my walls illuminated with bright gadgets from the Home Shopping Network. I pictured Jim holding his phone against his ear, arching his eyebrows with concern.

"I've got a jungle on my hands," I told him.

So, I called Sebastian and watched from the upstairs window.

When I finally saw him, a skinny teenager pushing a beat-up old lawnmower down the middle of the street, he looked like he'd crawled out of a ditch somewhere. He certainly wasn't dressed for yard work—wearing tight black jeans and high-top sneakers. The mussed-up hair suggested that he'd just rolled out of bed. "I can be there by 2:00," he'd mumbled to me over the phone.

"That soon?" I had asked. But he showed up at 1:45. His lawn care business didn't seem to be thriving.

Sebastian took about thirty minutes to mow my whole lawn—front and back. I sat inside the entire time, watching Jewelry Television. Sherri and Jay were modeling gemstones. Sherri was saying things like, "Look at the shape on this one!" in her sweet southern twang, above the clatter of the lawnmower.

"Beautiful," Jay would add. "It's much prettier in person than on this monitor right here."

I felt full with relief, hearing Sebastian outside, imagining the grass under that whirring blade. His presence just beyond the walls was a comfort. Although Sebastian was younger, he reminded me of my son. At the last minute, Roddy had decided to spend the summer at his fraternity house, so he didn't have to put up with me and Tom. But now it was just me. I hated to imagine Roddy there—in that dingy, pillared mansion. Another boy who drinks too much and never sleeps.

"Your gutters need cleaning," Sebastian told me at the front door when he'd finished. "I'll come back to do that too, if you want."

"Okay," I said, "like, in a few hours?"

He tossed his head sideways, whisking bangs out of his eyes and exposing the mole. “Nah, I have to do something later,” he said. We both paused. “I have to meet up with my girlfriend.” While he looked at me, he stuffed both hands into his jean pockets, then pulled them out, and tugged at the waist of his jeans. I could tell there was no girlfriend, but it was a good lie. Most people would have believed him.

“I see.”

“But I can come on Tuesday.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll be here.”

As he walked off the porch, he turned back with a rush of confidence. “Don’t call anyone else!” he shouted. “I’m good with gutters!” He smiled, then pushed the mower down the street.

The next few days went by more slowly than I’d expected. Television started to lose its appeal. I began to notice how often Sherri and Jay repeated themselves. “Here it is on the hand,” they said, over and over again. I tried not to think about the last thing my husband had said as he left: “You’re unhappy. I get it.” As if I might have brightened at that—or been relieved. He got it!

“No. You don’t,” I said. He’d closed the door quietly behind him.

When Tuesday came, I spent the morning planted at my upstairs window. The only bright period involved watching Jim Geisenheimer pluck his eyebrows in his bathroom next door. He had the whole thing done in under a minute: the tweezers seeming to move at hyper-speed, knowing exactly where to find rogue hairs and how to

uproot them most effectively. To me, his movements looked second nature: a turtle laying eggs, a cat bathing itself with its tongue. Something instinctive, rather than simply practiced.

It reminded me of a time in my twenties when I lived alone in my first apartment. I kept such good care of myself—shaving my legs and wearing perfume just to stay in for a simple dinner. I didn't need anyone then. Now, I rarely tweeze my eyebrows and when I do, it's like I've forgotten how. I lean close into my mirror, still as a statue, and rest the sliver of metal between my eyes for whole seconds at a time. Then I jerk my arm away and start all over again.

Mostly, during that time, I just stared at the street and imagined Sebastian on it. I thought about how long it would take for my muscles to atrophy. Everyone once in a while, a white van with the words "Air Conditioning/Heating" or "Plumbing" would drive by. Once, I saw an Irish setter in the passenger seat, head thrust out the window, ears flapping in the wind like little wings.

When Sebastian finally showed up, it was late afternoon. He looked cleaner than before and acted more polite. At the door, he said, "Nice day."

"Yes," I said brightly, though I hadn't really noticed. He didn't have to brush his hair out of the way to reveal the little mole today—it stood out like something freshly scrubbed.

"Got a ladder I can use?"

I pointed him around to the garage and tried to busy myself inside. I heard him clanging around with the ladder, heard it thwang up against the side of the house, then heard his voice—“Mother fuck!”—carry through the quiet afternoon.

I walked quickly to the window. He was shaking one hand in the air, but his face stayed calm as a coldcut. He leaned over the ladder, inspecting it carefully. I opened the window.

“Is there anything I can get you?” I asked, poking my head through the frame. The air outside was heavy with heat. “Maybe some water?”

He looked at me. “That’d be great,” he said. “I’m, like, dying.”

“Okay,” I said, “water coming right up.” I brought my head back into the house and lowered the window. Then, for no reason at all, everything in the kitchen looked exactly as it had when Tom and Roddy were still there. I told myself it was nonsense, but still, it wouldn’t have surprised me to walk around the corner and find them in the next room.

Instead, I went straight to the cupboard and extracted two tall drinking glasses. In the kitchen sink, I filled them with water. Then, realizing Sebastian would probably want ice, I dumped the water out of the glasses and carried them to the freezer.

When I twisted the plastic tray between my hands, the ice cubes cracked up and down in their separate plots. One popped too high, bouncing off of the tray and the stove before hitting the floor. I paused for a moment to watch as the cube slid across the linoleum toward the open basement door—a hard, little ghost. Then, it flipped over the floor casing and proceeded down the stairs.

I stood there, holding the tray in my hands, and listened to the clatter as the cube descended. There was a long pause when it must have caught a corner and leapt high into the air. Then I heard it skitter to a stop on the cement.

Sometimes, I can't help but see things as signs. I did this before Tom left, but I think I'm getting worse. Out of all the tiny occurrences in my day—rotten fruit, stubbed toes, birds shrieking down from electric lines—sometimes something will happen, and I know it *means* something. Something bad. These things will remind me that I have no luck; that even when I'm starting to feel lifted, my body is home to a million invisible weights and I will never, ever be able to leave the ground. *Drinks*, I reminded myself, trying to refocus. *Water, drinks, Sebastian*. But it felt like Tom was back in the house and my fingers were shaking as I held the tray.

I left the glasses on the stove and walked upstairs to breathe. In the bathroom, I locked the door, and sat on the cushioned toilet-seat cover, pressing the side of my head against the window. Through the slatted shades, I could see sunny trees, the sunny sidewalk, and the clear, sunny street. I could hear bluegrass music approaching. At a distance I couldn't place it, but as it came closer I could make out a crooning male voice and the frantic twang of a banjo. I stayed at the window, waiting to see the truck emerge. I imagined the male, baseball-capped driver singing along through the rolled down windows. But the truck must have turned in a different direction, because the street stayed empty until the music was gone.

When I came back downstairs, Sebastian was standing in my kitchen. He looked at me with the glass of water in his hands. The ice cubes were starting to melt in their tray on the stove.

“Did you get that water from the tap?” I asked.

“Yeah?” he said. He took small sips from his glass. He, clearly, did not find it strange that he had entered my house without permission, and helped himself to my water.

“Well,” I put a hand on the counter and smiled, trying to look calm. “How’s it going out there?”

“Fine.” His gaze roamed slowly around my kitchen, illuminating everything like the beam of a flashlight—unwashed dishes in the sink, a plastic ant trap in the corner, the stained dish towels threaded through cabinet handles. “That ladder is old,” he said. I thought of the ice cube melting on my basement floor.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“A beer sounds pretty good.” He looked at me curiously, undaunted.

“You’re not twenty-one.”

“Doesn’t a beer sound good to you? You should do what you want.”

I looked at him, then went to open the fridge. “Just don’t tell your parents,” I said. I thought about drunk driving, but remembered he had no car. Maybe he wasn’t even old enough to drive.

I took two beers out of the fridge, and flipped their caps off with an opener. In Sebastian's hand, cool vapors twisted out of the bottle's mouth. I took a sip. He drank then, too, as if he had been waiting to take his cue from me.

"So, you're in high school?" I asked.

"Sort of," said Sebastian. "I start this fall."

"My son's older than you," I said. "By four years. He's a sophomore in college."

"Where is he?"

"Not here," I said, and pulled at my beer. My lips made a suctiony pop when they pulled off of the top—something I hadn't intended—and Sebastian smiled.

"Can we sit down?" he asked.

Sebastian sat in my husband's old spot on the living room couch. I thought about bringing out some coasters, then thought better of it and watched him set his dripping bottle directly onto the wood. I'd left Jewelry Television on, but the program had changed—no more Jay and Sherri modeling gemstones. Now Scott and Dawn were discussing rings, but I'd turned the volume down too low for us to hear.

We turned our heads together when a couple of skinny teenagers—a boy and a girl—coasted past the front windows on skateboards. Both wore large reflective sunglasses. The boy swiveled back and forth with a smooth, impressive showmanship and the girl seemed to be propelled forward, magically, by her skateboard—a long one that sagged gently in the middle. She had one foot planted in front of the other and a waxy soda cup in one hand. She was holding the cup up to her mouth and sucking at the straw. They moved quickly out of view.

When I turned back to Sebastian, he said, “So, your son’s in college. And your husband’s gone.” I wasn’t sure how he’d learned that particular bit of information.

“That’s right,” I told him. “Free as a bird.”

Sebastian just looked at me. He said, “I bet your son’s the one who *really* wishes he were home alone.”

That wasn’t true, but I didn’t say anything. Roddy considers isolation a fate worse than death. He gets that attitude from his father. As a teenager, Roddy could never bear to be left home alone. No matter where we were going, he always begged to come along. Even on our trips upstate when we watched Tom’s mother wasting away. Even to that cabin in the Adirondacks where we spent our last anniversary; Tom and I each taking turns alone on the porch to throw rocks into the lake. Even in high school, Roddy implored us to bring him to our counseling sessions in the city. In the end, he never came on any of those trips. Sometimes he mustered up the courage to stay home, permanently stationed—zombie-like—in front of the TV. Mostly, though, he slept over at a friend’s. He made daylight pilgrimages to the house as we had instructed him to, double-checking the alarms and making sure we hadn’t been robbed in the night.

When a knock came from the door, it took me a moment to register the meaning of the noise. If I were alone, I could have scrambled upstairs and looked through my window to survey the scene. I could have crawled quietly onto my bed and curled up there, pretending no one was home. Instead, I swung the door open and found Jim Geisenheimer on the porch. He looked startled, as if I were intruding on his space, opening his door, coming to him with something to say.

“Hello,” I said, the near-empty beer bottle in one hand. Behind me, I heard the muffled squeak of cushions—Sebastian pushing himself up from the couch. But when I turned around, he did not appear to have moved at all.

“Hello,” said Jim, still looking as though he didn’t know how to proceed. “I noticed you finally mowed the lawn.” He turned his head to the side and registered Sebastian on the couch. “Is that—I mean, is this your son?”

“Yep,” Sebastian said, before I could even turn around. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yes, finally!” Jim raised a friendly hand. “How’s school?”

My old self might have played along. I would have winked at Sebastian and asked Jim in for a drink. But I didn’t want my house full of men again. Especially a house full of children and lovers, and none of them mine.

As I looked from Jim to Sebastian, I could see them morphing into Roddy and Tom. They were sitting in chairs around my table, moving their mouths. I had almost forgotten the way men used their mouths for talking and eating. They parted their lips, formed words to make their hunger known, then opened those lips still wider for food—one fluid motion of asking and receiving—mashing everything together with their teeth and tongues.

It was the way mouths were meant to be used—you had to give them that. They didn’t twist anything around, didn’t pucker up or purse in their hungers, their weaknesses. What else were mouths supposed to do, after all? I’d spent the last twelve days alone and completely indoors, but still, I’d kept my mouth shut.

“He was just leaving, actually,” I said. Jim’s eyebrows slanted up—a questioning look. “He doesn’t live here anymore.”

“You should probably go,” I said as soon as Jim had backed out the door. It was getting dark. Sebastian smiled and tossed his hair. The mole over his eyebrow looked bigger and darker than before.

“Oh come on, that was fun.”

“I’m serious,” I said.

“It’s pouring,” he said. “I want to stay and talk to you.”

“Well, I need to be alone right now.” I tried to keep my voice steady. I hadn’t even noticed the rain. We couldn’t see outside from the living room—the blinds had been closed for weeks—but, sure enough, rain was shushing and sighing against the windows like a frenzied crowd.

Sebastian set his mouth into a line. “You’re kicking me out.” He waited for my answer. *I get it. No, you don’t.* Then he walked hard across the floor. “You’re all the same,” he said without turning around, then he jerked the door open, and slammed it shut.

I counted seconds—one, two, three—went to the door and turned the lock. The television sat blank and quiet.

On television, people are almost never alone. They exist in pairs or clusters or groups—getting locked into houses, stranded on islands, and forced into contact with their alter egos. If people say no or decide they can’t hack it, they get cut from their

shows and cease to exist. Dead, as far as the audience is concerned. But they never leave a character alone in a room.

Television, of course, is nothing like real life.

I was upstairs in bed, under the covers, when someone knocked on the front door. Three strong raps. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the woman from the NASA study. She hadn't minded staying in bed for ninety days. And when the time came, she just stood up and started walking. She knew what mattered. I imagined her hair, flipping back and forth in front of her ears, and I saw it so clearly that I started to think no one had knocked on my door at all. Maybe I had imagined the whole thing.

Then the bang on the back of my house made me catch my breath. It was the ladder, I knew immediately. Another bang. Sebastian on the ladder. Climbing my house. Bang. Bang. Bang. He knew he could get up to the roof, but what would he do there? I listened to him scuffling onto the shingles. I knew what he could do. Watch cars drive by or talk to himself. Spy on Jim Geisenheimer. Replay the most recent fight a hundred times in his head.

The evening air was as cool as a blade when I slipped out my front door. In my slippers, I padded softly over the old wood. By the rose bushes, rectangular paths stopped abruptly in the grass where Sebastian had botched the mowing. The front gutters were still clogged with wet leaves. I walked out onto the lip of the porch. Sebastian couldn't see me from there and I wouldn't move forward any further. I just breathed in the night

air and looked up and out. A few stars, like white pinpricks, hung over the crescent of the moon—pale as an onion against the darkening sky.

Girl Parts

On Wednesday morning, like every morning, their alarms went off at the same time. Daphne's radio was set to The Moose—"Central Maine's #1 Hit Music Station"—but Olivia's just emitted loud, blaring sounds. She woke feeling disoriented and panicked until her hand found the Snooze bar. Then she lay in bed, feeling her heartbeat slow, and listening to the trashy pop songs on the other side of the wall. Daphne kept her radio on while they got dressed, as she had all summer. They both tried to answer the mind benders on the Moose Morning Show.

Roughly 25% of Americans say they just won't eat this, no matter what...

"Liver," Olivia said, looking down to buckle her belt. *Liver*. It had been her nickname in high school. A name she'd once cried about in the space behind the stairwell of her attic when she was nine. But somehow, over the course of the next ten years, she'd learned to just put up with it.

Olivia had an appointment with her gynecologist in the afternoon, and she chose her outfit with this in mind. A dress would make things easier for everyone—get things over and done with as quickly as possible. She decided on a cotton shift dress she'd owned and loved since high school—blue with a pattern of little fish that swam across the fabric in horizontal lines. You had to get close to realize the fish weren't just random oval shapes or bits of confetti. Since she'd been in college, Olivia wore the dress with a thin

white belt that hung, sultrily, off one hip, like a ring-toss at a carnival. It seemed like the outfit of a lucky woman who didn't care.

“Brussel sprouts!” Daphne called from the bathroom.

They never got the mind benders right, and Daphne shouted about this, too, as they passed each other in the carpeted upstairs hallway. “A mushroom? What the *fuck*.”

They never ate breakfast. Once they were dressed, they were out the door. Daphne drove them up to campus in her beat-to-shit Corsica, while they guessed at more mind benders on The Moose.

This year, it's estimated that some 25,000 women will do this...

“They're kidding, right?” said Daphne. “That's a question we're supposed to answer?” Mac, the radio personality, said the answer was: *Call off their wedding*.

At St. Sebastian's, Olivia and Daphne walked together to the edge of the parking lot, then separated for the rest of the day. Later, at three, when their part-time, summer work days ended, they would reconvene at the car, drive home and reenter their empty house. The other roommates, Alexis and Jen, were conspicuously absent. They would move in at the end of the summer, but for now, their rooms—side-by-side at the end of one hall—were dark and mysterious as caves. Each room was filled with a jumble of unpacked moving boxes; clothing on hangers, covered in plastic; tall floor lamps strangled in their cords.

In the evenings, Olivia didn't know what to do with herself.

This was why Daphne had invented Dining with Dudes. The idea was simple: on the first Wednesday of each summer month, they'd each invite a male friend to the apartment for dinner. Several other titles had been considered: Meals with Men, Chow with Chaps, Food with Fellows. Olivia never really thought it would happen. But now that it was June, Daphne was getting serious.

"We have to ask tomorrow," she'd pronounced on Tuesday night. "Now or never."

"What do you think about FA?" asked Olivia. They were playing Scrabble on the floor with wine and a bowl of Cheerios.

Daphne took a sip from her glass and shrugged. "It's in that *Sound of Music* song."

"Fa, a long, long way to run?" Olivia hated Scrabble and knew Daphne did, too. Still, this was their fourth game in the past week. "That doesn't sound right."

"Stop trying to change the subject," said Daphne. "I need you with me on this." Olivia knew that Daphne wanted to invite her summer boss and Biology professor, Dr. David Weiss—a slightly-graying man with attractive stubble and pale, piercing eyes. He'd always reminded Olivia of a Siberian Huskie.

"I just can't believe you're inviting a professor. Really? Are you really doing that? Won't he have to get a babysitter or something?"

"Please," said Daphne. "He does *not* have children."

Olivia placed her tiles on the board to make three two-letter words: OF, FA, LA. "Twelve points," she said. "And fine, we'll ask tomorrow. But Weiss won't come."

“He totally will.”

“Okay he probably will, but it’s going to be weird. And, now who am I going to ask, another 50-year-old? My dad?” For the last two weeks, Olivia’s parents had been living at her grandmother’s cottage in Camden, only forty-five minutes away on the coast. Her grandmother, in the advanced stages of macular degeneration, enjoyed the company. When her daughter and son-in-law weren’t visiting, she lay on her couch for days on end listening to books on tape with her eyes closed.

Daphne laughed and spun the board around. “Leave it to me,” she said. “I’ve already got someone in mind for you. His name’s AJ. He’ll be fun.”

“AJ?” Olivia didn’t have a good feeling about people who went by their initials. She shuffled her letters around on the little wooden tray.

“Did you have someone else in mind?” asked Daphne.

“Do we have to do this?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “You haven’t been with anyone since, what, Conor Watson?” She started to place some tiles on the board. “I need to get laid. You need to get laid. And tomorrow night is where it all begins: Dining with Dudes.”

Normally, Olivia would meet Daphne for a ride home at three, but she would be walking home on Wednesday because of the gynecology appointment. She was going to get something removed. Some things, plural. They had seemingly shown up overnight, the way more-pleasant surprises had in her childhood: presents from Santa Claus, Tooth Fairy money, a letter from Minnehaha, the lady of Lake Minnetonka near her childhood

home. Special gifts from imaginary beings. Where did they come from? Who was responsible? Grown ups knew, of course, but when it came to such things, they stayed tight-lipped. No one ever told you. Olivia was still learning, you just grew up and figured it out on your own.

She'd scheduled the appointment for 3:15 PM, after the end of her shift. It was nothing serious. Not an operation, just a procedure. If Olivia had decided to tell Daphne about it, she would have referred to it as a removal. Her grandmother went in for this type of thing all the time—to get asymmetrical moles cut out of her doughy, freckled back. Olivia had gotten a planter's wart removed from the pad of her big toe when she was in fifth grade and the experience had been so unremarkable, she almost couldn't remember it at all.

The explanation, in this case, wasn't much of a surprise: there was a man. Conor Watson. Olivia would have called him a boy, but she was making a conscious effort with her gender nouns; she did not take kindly to being called a girl, after all. She was nineteen, a college sophomore, wide-hipped, and empathetic to a fault: a woman—she felt—by every definition of the word. She didn't know Conor well, just that he'd been a Math major, and that she'd seen him on several occasions, wearing flip-flops in the snow. They'd been in school together for the past two years, and spent one night together, in Conor's single dorm room, after a party on the last day of finals. Conor had promptly graduated and left town.

Olivia was spending the summer in their small college town. She'd spent nearly every summer of her life in Maine, at her grandparents' cottage. But that was the coast of

Maine, and this was inland. Tourists did not summer here. Only locals. Not even the college students stayed. Conor, she knew, was spending his summer at home in Duxbury, then moving to Boston to start a job in August.

At least Olivia had Daphne. And, come fall, there would be two more in the house: Alexis and Jen. Alexis, who had waitressing experience, was living with her parents in Rhode Island, working at a diner called Patsy Cline's. Jen was spending the summer with her boyfriend in Manhattan, still looking for a job, though—judging from her last phone call—it didn't look likely at this point.

As a financial aid recipient, Olivia had maintained a work-study job at the campus bookstore since her freshman year. During the school year, she only worked ten or twelve hours a week, but she'd managed to pick up extra shifts this summer. She spent half of her time serving coffee to professors at a small counter at the store's entrance. The other half involved shelving books, handling shipments of gear covered with the school insignia, and selling that gear to visiting parents and prospective students. All campus tours ended, strategically, at the bookstore.

Daphne worked on campus, too. She'd landed a well-paid summer job doing biomedical research with salamanders for the head of her department. No one was surprised. Of the four roommates, Daphne was the most studious and career-driven.

She wanted to lump them all together and call them The Girls or Girlfriends, but wanted to credit each one of them with the respect they deserved. The Women. It was accurate, but lacked a certain pizzazz. Ladies sounded derogatory, and who used Gals

anymore? In any case, they were finally roommates—living together off-campus in a decrepit old house, as they always hoped they would.

Still, Olivia hadn't told any of the roommates about her procedure. Hadn't told a soul. But by the end of the day, she would have these things removed and then they would be gone. She liked the metaphor of it. This was the last step—the tail-end of a long, unpleasant ordeal and, finally, tonight, it would be over. All evidence removed.

“AJ's in,” Daphne reported at lunchtime. They always met during their breaks to eat at the same wooden bench on the edge of the campus pond.

Olivia looked down at her lunch: an old Tupperware of raw vegetables doused with vinegar. She was cutting back on food in order to justify three daily lattes—an indulgence she'd never admit to Daphne, who was constantly gulping water out of large Nalgenes.

“He said he's looking forward to it.” Daphne dug a fingernail into the skin of her grapefruit. “And I'm asking David after lunch. Did he get coffee this morning?”

“He did, indeed.”

“God, is he a flirt or what?” Olivia never really knew how to answer this question. Dr. Weiss never flirted with her, per se. His eyes just had a quality that made him constantly flirtatious. He gave the same grave, ‘Come hither’ stare to everyone, including Lynn—the bookstore's seventy-something manager—and the cardboard cut-out of Harry Potter that Olivia once caught him examining at the back of the room. “It's just those eyes. I always feel like something's about to shoot out of them.”

“God, I know.” Daphne closed her eyes and made a swivelly, swooning motion with her shoulders. “I keep thinking about the look he’s going to give me when we finally start our affair.”

“Probably the same look he gives you while you’re feeding the salamanders and wearing those awful lab goggles.”

Daphne let out a frantic giggle and popped a slice of grapefruit into her mouth. “Probably the same look he’ll give me when he says, ‘I’m a married man, Daphne’ and leaves me sobbing on our porch. Can’t you just picture it!?”

“I sure can.” Olivia sensed the vinegar fumes filling her mouth. She thought about her one night with Conor, how the after-effects were still with her although he probably hadn’t thought about her in weeks.

Daphne lifted her Nalgene and held it there for a few seconds, making loud glugging noises with her throat. Finally, she set it back on the table. “Well, I’d better get back to those unruly salamanders.”

“Good luck with the Weiss-meister.”

“Ha,” said Daphne as she left Olivia at the picnic table. “Like I need it.”

Conor wasn’t such a bad guy. He scored relatively low on the scale Olivia and Daphne used to rate guys: the Douche Bag Meter. It was a useful system, even if Olivia questioned their use of the word. (A douche, she knew, was supposed to be cleansing. Wasn’t it French for shower?) But it was a way for them to look out for one another. The bigger the jerk, the higher the rating. Every so often, with truly reprehensible men,

someone's meter might even explode. This occurred relatively regularly after Daphne's one-night-stands. "I've got to reset the dials on my meter after that one," she'd say.

Daphne's Douche Bag Meter was always exploding, but never soon enough. At least she had a sense of humor about it.

In truth, Olivia hadn't communicated with Conor since he'd left town for the summer. With the geographic distance between them, she had grown brave and written a letter. She created a first draft in pen using words like "persuasion" and "pride" and "honour," which she spelled in the old English style. She was channeling Jane Austen, whose work she'd been studying that semester. Parts of the letter laid blame—as well they should have—and she included a few minor accusations, but ultimately, Olivia ended with self-affirmation. She wanted Conor to know that she had not been fine, but now she was. So there. She typed it all up and sent it to Conor in an email at the beginning of the summer. In the subject line, she typed, "A Short Note." The body was three single-spaced pages.

That was ten days ago. Olivia had not heard back from Conor, but she hadn't expected to. It didn't matter, she had written in the letter, whether he responded or not. She'd just wanted to say her piece. She had gathered all of her anger and hurt and frustration and shame, packed them tight as a snowball, and sent them hurtling away from her. All emotional traces of the event went flying off through cyber space toward Conor. And the physical traces would soon be frozen and scraped away.

Work after lunch put Olivia on edge. She was arranging a wall display of pillows and blankets, stocking items to be sold to families that looked like caricatures of wealthy New Englanders. Mothers in madras skirts, fathers with polos tucked into pink shorts (a color, Olivia had learned, that was actually called Nantucket Red). These were the types of people who summered in Camden, who outnumbered Olivia's grandmother ten to one. Even the tour guides had the look down—mostly male students in khakis and trucker hats. They had feathery, dirty-blond hair that flipped out under the mesh in the back.

Across the room, Olivia noticed a woman in a wheelchair, staring up at the clothing items hanging against the wall.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" she asked, walking over.

"Oh," said the woman, using one arm to spin herself into Olivia's direction. "Yes, actually." She waved Olivia closer by flapping her hand next to her face. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm picking out a sweatshirt for my son and I'd love your advice."

Olivia crouched down, balancing her hands on her knees. "Sure, what were you thinking?" When the woman's smile crept up onto one side of her face, Olivia felt suddenly self-conscious and straightened her knees into a half-upright stance.

"Well," said the woman, "I was thinking something with a moose on it. That blue one, there. But, you know how it is." She sighed. Her legs, resting on the metal footrests, didn't look functional. "He'd probably rather die than wear that. Who knows!"

Olivia brought her hand to her chin and surveyed the wall of sweatshirts. Ten, twelve, fifteen different styles at least. Her own first purchase at the bookstore had been a sweatshirt—something she'd saved for. The students here walked around with the college

name all but tattooed onto their foreheads. One of those small gestures to confirm that you were in the same category as everyone else. You were playing by the rules. You were fitting right in.

“There he is, over there,” the woman gestured with her finger. Olivia noticed how thin her thighs were—the khaki material flattened out into wrinkled strips on either side of her legs. Her feet were pressed together, but her legs tilted sideways, throwing her knees off-center.

Olivia followed the woman’s finger to the coffee bar, where Lynn was chatting over the counter with a man and a boy. The woman’s son had a head of blonde curls—he was wearing a blazer that stood a little stiff on his shoulders. He kept looking up to his dad, as the man laughed and balanced himself with one hand on the counter. The son looked a little bit like Conor in fact, the same good posture.

“Is he starting in the fall?” Olivia asked.

“Oh no,” said the woman. “No, I went here, actually. We were just passing through and I wanted to stop.”

Olivia tried to imagine the woman here. Maybe Class of ’72. Her parents’ age. But this woman looked much older than Olivia’s mother. Her face had more shadows. “Have things changed since the last time you were here?”

The woman shrugged. Her chair still faced Olivia. “I keep looking at the students, expecting to recognize someone.” She glanced over at the coffee bar, where her husband was opening a sugar packet and stirring his coffee with a spoon. “Like I’m going to run into my nineteen-year-old self on the quad.”

In Olivia's mind, the woman wasn't wheeling around campus at age nineteen. She walked confidently, innocently. She was unaware of future disasters lying in wait.

"Like you," the woman said. "Seeing girls like you always makes me nostalgic." She looked at Olivia for a long moment, then curled a piece of hair behind her ear. "At the same time, I'm so glad I don't have to go back."

"Well," said Olivia, turning back to the wall. She tried to remember her freshman self, the self whose tough decisions included school sweatshirts. "I like the moose."

The woman spun her chair around to face the merchandise and smiled. "Oh, you weren't supposed to say that," she said. She clasped her hands together and let them rest in her lap. "I just wish he didn't have to go to college. Ever. Do you know what I mean?"

A few hours later, at the doctor's office, the waiting room was empty and heavily air-conditioned. Olivia's nipples stood up as if on alert—suspicious prairie dogs surveying the landscape. She wished she hadn't worn the dress, or had at least thought to bring a cardigan. The magazines on the side table were all issues from last year. Some games for toddlers lay heaped in a corner, including one Olivia remembered from waiting rooms in her childhood—a wire sculpture with wooden beads you could lift from the platform, slide up through some loop-de-loops, and over to the other side. A simple maze. One that relied on gravity to pull everything down to one side or the other.

She'd been lucky with her gynecologist back home—a youngish woman who had worn her hair in a thick, club-like braid. Dr. Hines. She was friendly enough, but not messing around—the braid said it all. Dr. Hines had politely asked about the temperature

of the speculum. On Olivia's first trip to the gynecologist, in high school, Dr. Hines had asked, "Would you like to see your cervix?" and Olivia had scooted up onto her elbows and peered into the mirror, through the speculum, and into the dark canal of her uterus. It felt like a gift—her own cervix! A long-overdue meeting between sisters separated at birth or old friends reunited after years apart. And Dr. Hines had played matchmaker. She had thought to herself, *You know, I think these two should meet*, and arranged a casual get-together at her house. Not every gynecologist played such a role in one's life.

The gender difference with Olivia's new doctor hadn't initially bothered her. Who cared? She would not be biased. But after wiggling onto the wax paper of the examination chair, then waiting silently for Dr. Krackowski to open the door, she did have to wonder, as so many women did: *Why would* a man become a gynecologist? Surely he possessed the same skills as Dr. Hines. But that wasn't really an answer to the question. As a young medical student, when all of his friends were heading off to optometry and pediatrics and dermatology, why did this man choose to make vaginas his profession? It was a very good question.

The procedure was quick. Not painless, but quick. She let her head rest sideways and focused on her things on the floor—her purse, her shoes, her bra and underwear and dress in a limp, tangled pile.

"As you know, abstinence is the best way to avoid both pregnancy and STDs," Dr. Krackowski said when it was all over. Olivia was sitting upright in the paper gown, hands in her lap. The doctor wheeled his chair backwards, opened a drawer behind him,

and wheeled forward to offer up a handful of condoms. Olivia eyed them. It seemed like a trick.

“These are for you,” he said, placing them in her hand.

She held them while the doctor turned his back to her again, finished the paperwork on his clipboard, then left the room. Once he was gone, Olivia scooted off of the chair, stepped delicately into her underwear, and pulled the blue cotton dress back on over her head.

When she got home, Daphne was vacuuming the living room in a halter-dress and an apron—the one they’d picked out from Goodwill together that had the naked bottom half of Michelangelo’s David printed on it. It was too big for Daphne, though, and David’s marble penis was near her knees.

“What?!” she yelled, when she noticed Olivia in the doorway.

Olivia shrugged; she hadn’t said anything. But Daphne turned off the vacuum and pressed the button that sucked the cord back into the machine. “Thank god you’re back,” she said, “I put on the rice. But we need to get you ready—they’re coming at five-thirty!”

“They’re really coming?”

“What’d I tell you?” Daphne grabbed Olivia’s arm and looked her in the face, smiling. “Let’s get you freshened up—you look like hell.”

Upstairs, Olivia sat, dazed, on the mussed-up bedspread while Daphne fiddled around in her make-up case on the dresser. She was bending her knees and moving her hips back and forth to some awful song blaring on The Moose.

“Okay,” she said, approaching with a small black case in her hand. “Close your eyes.”

“What color is it?”

“Oh come on,” said Daphne. “I know what I’m doing.”

Olivia shut her eyes and felt Daphne’s breath on her face. The brush started low on her eyelid, near her eyelashes, then moved slowly up over the bulge of her eyeball. She’d always had friends who knew how to do this more skillfully than she did. Maybe their mothers or sisters had taught them the tricks of the trade years ago, but, more likely, they’d just practiced until the moves became second nature. Daphne shuffled around to the other side, and pressed the side of her hand against Olivia’s cheek.

“Do I have to do this?” Olivia asked. The brush on her eyelid felt like a fingertip.

“Open,” Daphne said. She was back at her case, extracting another tool.

“Mascara. Look up.”

“What did Weiss say?” she tried again.

Daphne sighed as she moved closer to Olivia’s face, blowing a slight wind onto her forehead. “That he’ll be here,” she said, “at five-thirty.”

Olivia had had a boyfriend once, in high school, but he wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. Not good for any stories, like David Weiss would be. Nathan was shy, like Olivia, and nothing had ever really happened between them. He’d come over to her house in the evenings, and they’d watched movies together on the couch, sitting next to each other, stiff as pokers. An hour in, Nathan might have shifted so that his forearm pressed lightly against Olivia’s forearm. She was always turning the volume up, hoping the noise

would instill her with some newfound bravery. But as the film came to a raucous close, she always began to panic. Because in the silence that followed every film, Olivia never knew quite what to do. It was that space, the empty pit of time—darkness filling her living room, the credits casting a slow flicker across Nathan’s pale forehead—that frozen moment, which made her change her mind completely. Over the course of one eighty-minute motion picture, her feelings would transition from excitement to apprehension to dread. As predictable as a prayer.

A little after five-thirty, while they were downstairs in the kitchen, pulling vegetables out of the refrigerator, Daphne’s phone rang.

“There he is,” she said, grabbing her wine glass as she answered. She turned away from Olivia and walked over to the other side of the kitchen. “Well, hello,” she sang into the phone.

On the stove, the cover of the rice pot was emitting little hisses of steam. Daphne’s voice quickly became more abrupt. “What? You’re not serious,” she said. She set her glass down on the counter and brought her hand to her ear. The wine sloshed around the glass in a dark hurricane. “Hold on a second, I can’t hear you.”

This made sense. Olivia had known it would never work out. Dinner with Dudes. In some other summer, one from her eighteen-year-old fantasies, there would have been a dinner with dudes at her college apartment. She and her girlfriends would have gathered in the yard and reclined in the lawn furniture. They would have compared tans that highlighted bathing suit straps—pale lines that could be traced over shoulders or around

necks. There was no thought of future disasters. She would be confident and capable. She would do what she pleased.

But what about the dudes? Had the dream ever gotten that far? It seemed that they had existed only on the periphery of Olivia's imagined scene—the vague shapes of bodies, out-of-focus, like everything in her grandmother's world of failing sight. Not a husband or a daughter or a person at all, but a blur that just got larger and larger and larger.

“You're outside?” Daphne said. She walked briskly to the door, opened it, and disappeared down the front steps. Olivia moved to the window and peeked out through a space in the blinds. Daphne was bending at the waist, leaning into the passenger-side window of a wagon and inside, sure enough, she could see Dr. Weiss in the driver's seat, leaning toward the window. Daphne opened the door, sat sideways with one leg inside the car, and the other stretched out over a few inches of pavement. She balanced her tiny thong on the lip of the curb. Olivia closed her eyes for a moment, feeling her eyelashes brush against the edge of the blinds. She heard the slam of the door. And when she looked again, the wagon was pulling away with Daphne inside.

Olivia closed the front door, walked upstairs, and sat on Daphne's bed with the phone in her hand. She pressed the button and held the phone up to her ear. Conor would never answer anyway. His screen would light up—OLIVIA—with no last name because he probably didn't know it. She imagined him laughing when he saw it, then stuffing the phone between some couch cushions. While it rang, she looked at herself in Daphne's mirror, where bottles of perfume and lotion obscured her neck and chin. Two rings. Her

face looked different with all of this make-up—the small pouches below her eyes looked darker than usual. Maybe the mascara had smudged. Maybe she'd just gotten old. She looked like the woman in the wheelchair from the bookstore: exhausted, but trying very hard not to show it.

“Hello?” said a voice in her ear.

“Hello,” she said. “It’s me, Olivia?” Her voice sounded strange: slow and croony. Like that song from one of her parents’ old albums: *Hello, it’s me. I’ve thought about us for a long, long time.*

“I know,” Conor said. Then a short silence. “What’s up?”

“I just, you know, wanted to say hi.”

“Oh,” he said. He breathed into the phone, possibly waiting for Olivia to speak, but when she didn’t, he continued. “I got your email. I’m sorry about, you know, everything you’ve had to deal with. But it sounds like you’re ... hey!” All of a sudden, Olivia heard low voices in the background and Conor’s voice got smaller. He was pulling his face away, or covering the phone with his hand. She heard, “Dude, knock it off!” and then, “Fuck you!” and laughter.

“I can’t really talk,” Conor said when he came back, his voice bright and clear through the receiver. “But, I’m glad you’re, you know, better.”

Olivia opened her mouth and stared at herself in the mirror without making a sound.

“Have a great summer.” More laughter in the background—a high shriek from some guy on the other side of the room. The kind boys will make with each other when they know they’re being cruel. Being douche bags, really. Then, a click.

Seconds later, Olivia heard a knock at the door, but she didn’t move to the window. Downstairs, the rice was still on the burner. The vegetables were spread out on the counter. She wouldn’t know what to do in the worst-case scenario. She wouldn’t know what to do if it was AJ at the door. What to do if he let himself in.

Zoo

“What’s a pretty girl like you doing here by yourself?”

It took me a few seconds to realize it was the giraffe talking. That gigantic fairytale of a creature standing against the wall on the other side of the room. I had been outside—making my way through the mazes of cheetahs and wild dogs and white-bellied zebras—when the cloud cover had broken into a drizzle and I’d stepped indoors. The sky was a murky cloak, typical of New York in September.

“Excuse me?”

“I said, what’re you doing here all by yourself?”

I had just entered the African Savanna and my eyes were still adjusting to the fluorescent lights. I squinted to get a better look at her face.

“You don’t see many girls like you coming to a place like this all alone,” she said again. Her voice was low and husky. As she spoke, her cheeks squished out from the sides of her jaw.

I’d been at the zoo for about an hour, but the train from Brooklyn to the Bronx that morning seemed like it had taken days or weeks. On my walk toward the indoor savanna, I’d stopped first to watch the antelopes galloping in their outdoor pen—sinister-looking horns swiveled out from their heads like snakes’ tails.

The giraffe stared at me squarely with both eyes and blinked her heavy eyelashes. I couldn’t get a read on her intentions.

“I’m fine,” I said, “I like doing things by myself.”

“Mm hm.” She nodded her thin head, which was towering up near a tangle of grey pipes on the ceiling, easily nine or ten feet over mine. Her belly bulged—a furry sac at my eye level. “I know your type,” she said, knowingly. “Miss Independent.”

I pursed my lips.

“Oh lighten up,” said the giraffe, “I’m just trying to ruffle your feathers.” I could see the long, black worm of her tongue stirring inside her mouth. She decided to change tactics: “You look like an interesting person, I’d really just like to have a conversation with you.”

I readjusted the purse on my shoulder and looked around to assess my surroundings. I was the only person in the room. Through the glass exit doors, I could tell that the rain had really started to come down, and I didn’t have an umbrella. To my left, a wall of glass cages held other, smaller animals native to the savanna: duikers, dwarf mongooses, rosy-faced lovebirds. But they weren’t paying any attention to us. Behind her, the curving cement wall of the giraffe’s enclosure was decorated with a poorly painted mural of the plains: a cheerful blue sky with cotton-ball clouds and a few, scraggly Baobab trees. The floor, also cement, was covered with a thin layer of sawdust. The whole place smelled like shit.

“Why are you talking to me?” I asked. “You’re a giraffe.”

“Look at this place,” she said. “Things can get pretty lonely around here.” She shifted her heavy hooves in the sawdust and took a step closer to me. “When I saw you walk through the door, I just thought *God, she’s beautiful.*”

I looked up at her, trying to decide. It feels like I've been making this decision my whole life.

The giraffe flapped an ear back. Then forward again.

"Look, don't worry. I'm not trying to ask you out," she said. "I realize this would never work." Still, there was something threatening about the intensity of her gaze, the mysterious knobs poking out of her forehead. I felt like I should leave. I turned to check the rain through the glass doors behind me and when I turned back around, the giraffe was dropping her head down, closer and closer to mine.

"You know, you're not easy to warm up to." She stopped her head at my eye level and froze. "You're seeing someone, aren't you?" I could feel the heat of her breath on my face.

"No," I said sharply. Then regretted speaking at all. The giraffe seemed to be smiling. Her tangled black tail swished back and forth, looking like the back of a woman's uncombed head.

"Look, do you want to go somewhere?" she asked me.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

A man carrying a bucket emerged from a door painted into the mural, and smiled when he noticed me. He wore a pair of olive-colored cargo pants and was balding prematurely on the back of his head. His collared shirt read "Zoo Personnel: Philip." But the giraffe kept talking.

"Just another bar, I mean. Don't you want to get out of here?"

The man didn't seem to hear her. He had the bucket in one hand and offered a fistful of grass up to the giraffe with the other. She didn't move her head toward him, but kept her eyes on me, pleading with those dark, heavy lashes. Her feeder just stood there, smiling up at her.

“At least let me buy you another beer?” she asked. “I just want to stay with you for a little while longer.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could speak, the giraffe stopped talking to me. She was bending her neck to the man with her food. And the thin black slug of her tongue reared its head and flexed out from between her lips. Silently, we watched her chew. The bulging of each soft muscle in her throat. The small lumps of mashed grass traveling down the slope of her neck.

Philip turned to look at me.

“You here alone?” he asked. And I watched the giraffe turn her massive body, lift her hooves off the floor, and move slowly toward the savanna.

Mouth to Mouth

I swore it would be the last summer I'd wear a one-piece bathing suit two sizes too small. I had love handles, chunky thighs, and big breasts that needed special arrangement under the Lycra in order to get my nipples centered. But not for much longer. In a few weeks—after this CPR certification, then a written exam and a swim test—I would be a lifeguard. And I would look good.

“Think of the person who makes you angrier than anyone else in the world and pretend the air right above the water is their face,” said Ms. Forsythe, our Phys Ed teacher who we later referred to as Janet, and then as Jan the Man. “Now kick!”

My legs were heavy as logs. Within seconds, our collective movements were sending sheets of chlorinated water rolling over the edges of the pool.

“Come on!” Janet prompted us from the tiled floor. “Get those feet up there! Kick! Kick!” The three of us—me, Izzy, and a man named Lou—filled the shallow end with low, sweeping waves while Jan struck the air above us with her bare heel. “I'm kicking Howard Stern!” she shouted as we flailed our legs under the water. “What about you?”

Nobody said anything in response. I was breathing too hard to speak and didn't have a clue who Howard Stern was. Over the churning surface of the water between us, I could see Izzy's face aligning with my foot. At least, her face was just where my foot would have been if I could have kicked it out of the water.

“Okay, now bend. Bend. That’s right! And bend.”

We started squatting then: me, Izzy, and Lou, following Jan the Man’s lead. Izzy, in the middle, smiled and rolled her eyes at me, letting her tongue fall from her mouth like a dead dog. Behind her, I could see Lou turned towards us, smiling, with dark hair streaming down his chest. Izzy’s bare stomach vanished below the water, then reappeared: a flickering hallucination.

Our callisthenic currents swept my thighs up in a slow lift, then dragged them, suction-like, toward the pool floor. The skin under my arms fluttered like fabric in a strong wind.

“All right, all right. That’s enough for now,” said Jan, sounding somewhat disgusted. She put a hand on her hip and looked at her clipboard. By now, the three of us had realized Jan was unhappy. We were not the group she had been expecting. What she had expected from a Saturday morning CPR certification class remains a mystery to me, but, clearly, it was not two sixteen-year-old girls—one bikini-clad and the other big-boned, to be generous—and a middle-aged man with unruly body hair.

It was the first weekend of summer vacation and, already, I was at war with my body. I was attempting to starve it on a diet of celery, skim milk, and Special K Red Berries. I’d organized a blitz as soon as school had ended: sun-burning my shoulders, hydrating with cheap beer, and smoking five cigarettes in a twenty-four hour period. And now I was attempting to kick my leg up higher than my waist. In water.

My inability to even squat successfully meant only one thing: that my body had begun its retaliation. It was determined to stop me from passing the CPR course, barring

me from a lifeguarding job at the State Park that summer, and resigning me to the sloth-like coma of the previous summer that it had loved so well. My father's homemade chilidogs had been muscling themselves into my dreams. But, the previous summer, I hadn't been friends with Izzy. And that made all the difference.

The morning of CPR training, Izzy and I woke up next to each other on the carpeted floor of her step-mom's den. We'd only gotten about two hours of sleep and hadn't completely sloughed off our drunkenness from the night before. And I was still getting used to everything that came with Izzy, the new girl, as my friend.

We groaned and staggered around the still-dark basement like zombies, toothpaste foam dribbling out of our mouths. My hair smelled like cigarette butts, but Izzy said her shower was too nasty to use.

"You really don't want to go in there. My dad's going to kill me and Eric when he gets back," she said. "Anyway, Ms. Lesbo Forsythe will find your bed-head totally charming." In her early morning disarray, Izzy seemed more stunning than usual. Her lips were a raw shade of red that I'd never seen on her before. "We'll just rinse off when we get to school. Get some coffee in our bloodstream and we'll sober up in no time."

At the high school swimming pool, twenty minutes and two Dunkin' Donuts lattes later, Izzy threw up in the locker room trashcan. We were already late for the start of class.

"I'll be fine," she said. "This happens mornings after I drink." With each passing minute, as I stood by the sinks and listened to the crinkle of the plastic trash bag, I grew more and more pleased with myself. Every embarrassing moment that had occurred since

the night before, I knew, was already weaving itself into the fabric of a story. One that I imagined Izzy and I would tell together. The story of our summer; something to make it all worthwhile.

I was still thinking this when the water calmed down and we waited for Jan to give us our next set of instructions. I was immersed up to my waist. But not Izzy. The surface hovered like a chemical blue skirt around her hipbones. If we glanced sideways, Lou and I could see the low triangle of her bathing suit whenever the level dipped.

What I didn't quite realize by that point in the summer was that Izzy didn't give a damn about becoming a lifeguard.

"This blows," she said, as we toweled ourselves off during the first five-minute water break. She slipped a finger under the edge of her bikini bottom and snapped it against her cheek. "If that old guy wasn't here to keep things entertaining, I'd have been out of here as soon as I heard the word *squat-thrust*."

I didn't have a clear idea of how Izzy spent her time the summer before, but what I imagined was an even division between sunbathing and sex. Izzy's step-mom was always off on business trips, and when her dad went along, Izzy and her older brother, Eric, were left to reign over the split-level, the liquor cabinet, and the pug, Miss Muffet. Eric refused to let Izzy near his new friends, but there were plenty of other, older boys who were happy to invite her to their parties. They knew Izzy wouldn't come without a friend and I knew that I would never be invited without her. There was an understanding there. We were all willing to make sacrifices.

“He must be a total perv anyway, wanting to be a lifeguard at his age.”

I wrapped myself in Izzy’s yellow bath towel, and pulled it tight under my armpits. There didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary about Lou. He was tall and lanky with a subtly receding hairline. In fact, he reminded me of Izzy’s dad. But I knew I was probably missing something; Izzy had a way of reading people. And my judgment was usually off.

“Look, I bet he’s thinking about us right now,” she said, crossing her arms over the bright triangles of her bikini top. Then, of course, it felt like the truth.

“So, you’ve confirmed that this guy is totally unresponsive. The first thing you do,” Jan instructed us, “is tell someone else to call 911. This can’t be a vague command, or else no one will do it. People in crowds are stupid like that. You have to point at one specific person and say ‘You! Call 911!’ Then you can get down to business.” She looked at the three of us and blinked. “Would you care to give us a demonstration, Ms. Roberts?”

“Gladly,” Izzy said, clearing her throat. This was how it always happened with her. She had some quality that made people soft, even people like Ms. Forsythe, who knew better. Izzy swung her eyes down to the dummy and let out a gasp. “Oh no! This poor man with flesh-colored eyeballs seems to be in trouble!” She shouted, suddenly pointing at me, “You! Shapely girl in black! Call 911!” I grinned and started moving my arms in a jogging motion. “And give me your phone number when you get baaaack!” Izzy called behind me.

Jan the Man closed her eyes, as if in pain.

“Well. Okay. Now, it’s CPR time. Let’s get serious here.” She hovered over the plastic man. “The heel of your hand goes on the sternum, like this. On the breast bone. Right between the nipples.” She hesitated, then moved on quickly. “The other hand goes on top of the first. Lock your fingers like so, then press hard and fast on the chest.”

I listened carefully, because I wanted to pass the course. Unlike Izzy, I actually needed to learn CPR. I had a father at home who wanted me to lifeguard even more than I did; he was a father who offered to drive me to the beach for every shift I might have this summer. A father who bought all that Special K without a single comment. A father who would have been appalled if he could have seen me the night before, sitting in some stranger’s upstairs hallway with my back against the wall, waiting for Izzy to emerge from a bedroom. When my turn came, I pressed down on the dummy as hard and as fast as I could, about 100 times per minute, as Jan the Man had instructed. I kept my back straight and elbows locked.

Next, Jan asked us to practice the head-tilt, chin-lift method on each other.

“I’ll save you first,” said Izzy, pushing me down onto the rubber mat. “Let’s see your best dead face.” I laughed and cocked my neck wildly to the side. With my eyes closed, the dark screen of my mind filled with thoughts of our summer. Izzy and me, tanning on two tall lifeguard towers, whispering together on dirty apartment couches, sleeping side by side in her den.

When I opened my eyes, Izzy was looking at Lou. She clasped her hands slowly, deliberately, and locked her elbows so that they pushed her small breasts together. From

the floor, I could see Lou knitting his brows and trying to concentrate on Jan the Man beneath him.

“You’re supposed to be tilting my head back,” I said.

Izzy placed her fingertips on my chin and a cool palm on my forehead. But instead of tilting my head, she ran a finger down the side of my cheek, like the beginning of a sex scene in some B-rate movie. Lou kept glancing over.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” said Jan. She leaned up on her elbows, causing Lou to jerk back. “Isabelle, please come over here and show me that you can, indeed, perform a head-tilt, chin-lift. Lou, trade with me. You can be the victim.”

Lou and Izzy stood up and padded around the mats, while I scrambled onto my knees.

“Sorry you have to save an old dude like me,” Lou said, chuckling. He stretched out onto the mat where I’d just been lying and brought his hands to rest over his crotch.

Izzy raised her eyebrows at me, looking delighted.

Lou wasn’t in bad shape. He had square, muscular knees. But he was covered with hair. More hair than I’d ever seen on a body, all swept in the same direction down his arms and legs and chest. Like loose threads, I thought. Like he was coming undone at the seams.

“Okay.” I put my hands gently on his face. “Head, tilt. Chin, lift.”

“Very good,” he croaked, once I’d opened his airway. Then he moved his chin back down and winked at me. “Lifeguarding,” he said. “Never thought I’d be doing this at my age.”

“All right, five-minute break,” said Jan the Man, standing up and rearranging the whistle at the front of her chest. Izzy walked to the drinking fountain, but Lou folded his hands behind his head and stayed on the mat.

“I’ve got a daughter your age,” he said. “She should be here with you girls, learning to lifeguard. Not me.” I imagined Lou’s daughter—tall and thin.

“Does she go here?” I asked.

Lou looked at me for a moment. “She lives in Buffalo.” Then he sat up and turned his head toward the pool. “Probably better that way. She’s trouble. Like your friend over there.”

From where we sat, Izzy looked like a peach-colored swizzle stick at the other end of the pool. My bathing suit dug into the creases of my thighs.

After we’d passed our CPR certification, Izzy stripped her bikini off in the locker room showers and started acting out Jan the Man’s aerobics routine. I was starting to become familiar with this mood of hers: a giddiness so wild it was nearly demonic. I figured the best thing to do was to join her there, on that bright, brainless wavelength, so I became her student.

“Down! Squat! Squeeze that butt!” It was uncanny how much she sounded like Jan. I crouched in time to her beat, following the commands. “Now, think of the person you want to fuck more than anyone else,” Izzy said with a straight face, “and imagine the air is his face.”

Laughing, she ran out of the shower and into the carpeted area between the lockers, setting off the automatic paper towel dispensers by sticking her bare butt underneath them. All of a sudden, she turned to me with a sinister look: “Dare me to run into the men’s locker room?”

I looked at her, breathing heavily. She’d framed it like a question.

“Come on, it’ll be great! I’ll give old Lou the show he’s been waiting for.”

I couldn’t tell if Izzy was expecting me to talk her down or just waiting for my permission. So, I didn’t respond at all. I just kept smiling, and breathing hard, feeling the tight edges of my bathing suit pulling on my shoulders, compressing my chest.

“Well, go do it, then,” I finally said.

Izzy’s eyes got a little wider while she stood there looking at me. Then she walked evenly, placidly, toward the pool door, opened it, and was gone.

Inside the pool, there was no trace of Izzy. The colored flags fluttered in their laundry lines on the ceiling. Small triangles, like Izzy’s bikini top lying in a heap in the showers. I walked across the floor to the door that said “Men.”

The locker room was blue, instead of green like ours, which made it seem like another world. It felt empty. Not a quiet kind of empty, not an absence, but a hulking empty that existed to fill a space where something else should have been. A stomach without food; a house with no parents; darkness under the door of a bedroom that holds two people who are making no noise.

I saw Lou before I heard him. All at once, he was standing in front of me. Bare foot, in jeans and a t-shirt, with a towel draped around his neck. It was as if the tangled mess of his chest hair had never existed at all. His eyes were wide and I realized he hadn't seen Izzy at all. We stared at each other.

"Sweetheart," he said, like he was trying to let me down easy. "What are you doing in here? I could be your father." My eyes narrowed into slits, so that all I could see were the blurred colors of his shirt. I turned and ran back the way I had come.

Izzy was at her locker when I returned, pulling a sweatshirt over her wet head.

"Back so soon?" she asked. Then shrugged. "I thought he had the hots for you."

"I followed you in there," I said.

"Oh right, like you didn't want to chase after the old perv yourself."

"He's just an old guy. He doesn't have a job or something."

"Right, that's why he wants to become a *lifeguard*. Of all things." She was smiling, but something about it didn't seem right.

I went to my locker, next to hers, and pulled my dry clothes on one by one. I left my bathing suit on.

"Whatever," she said out of the silence. "Who wants to lifeguard with that guy all summer anyway? If we quit, we'll never see him again."

But I did. Izzy forgot her swimsuit in a pile on the shower floor, and as I waited for her outside in the late-morning humidity, Lou passed me alone on the sidewalk. He

came out through the double doors, squinting, with a plastic bag on his arm. I thought about how smart that was: bringing a bag for his wet suit, thinking ahead. He held his hand up to his forehead, something my dad would have done, to block out the sun. He met my eyes, then walked into the parking lot without acknowledging me at all.

With my back against the cool bricks, I watched as he disappeared into his car and backed out of the spot. His windows were dark and the sun was bright, but when he drove by, I sensed his eyes connect with mine. Soon, though, it was impossible to tell whether the pale spot was his face or just the window reflecting the sun.

I thought about all of us and what we were in for. How we had only passed the first test, and how the real challenges were still to come: yards of sustained breaststroke, the timed crawl, and rhythmic breathing. We would be asked to dive to the pool bottom to retrieve weighted rubber rings, then heavier objects of ten or fifteen pounds. They would be objects we'd have to grab with two hands, grapple with, push off the bottom to salvage. Things to hold our breath for.

Memory Speak

I can hear my mother up there, spraying things down for the band. I'm in the basement, picturing her with the Pledge in one hand, a rag in the other, as she stalks up and down the kitchen's freshly-mopped floors. It's almost a performance in itself: her moccasins carrying the beat for the whispery, spray-bottle vocals. I picture her eyeing the already-gleaming countertops for some persistent smudge. She's crouching. Squinting. Pulling the plastic trigger. She's wearing her awful apron and the yellow rubber gloves that reach up to her elbows—I know this because I found her scouring the tub in that outfit when I woke up this morning.

“Mom?” I shout up the carpeted stairs. “What are you doing up there?”

I can hear quick steps on the ceiling. “I know,” she calls down as soon as she's in my view. She grips the bottle of Pledge between both hands and the rag—an old pair of cotton underwear, maybe hers, maybe mine—peeks rodent-like from her apron pocket. “I'm almost done. I just want it to look nice for those boys.”

A few months ago, my mother never would have fretted this much over the state of the house, even for guests. But things have changed.

I'm back, for one thing, living in the converted basement that used to belong to Tim. The sour smell of his weed still lingers in the mattress and pillows, even after Mom changed the sheets. He'd lived at home for so long—forever, really—that Mom and Dad finally had to draw a line in the sand. For the last six months, he's been down in Buffalo,

we think, doing god knows what. Someone probably knows, but not me or my parents. He hasn't called once since he left. So, Tim's out of the house and I'm back in it.

I got a message from James about a week ago—his band had landed a gig at Hale, the small college in our town. Hadn't I moved home a few months ago, he asked in the message. He'd missed me at the last show in Brooklyn. It didn't feel right to play at Southpaw knowing I wasn't in the crowd. If I happened to be in town, he said, he'd love to see me.

I turned off the basement lights, crept under the covers of Tim's bed, and played the message again. I listened to the low, nasal voice and tried to imagine his face. It had been months since we'd seen each other. Upstairs, my parents sat in their separate recliners, watching television with the volume blaring.

When I returned the call, I told James it'd be fine for him to crash at my parents' house. Sure, all the guys. A new guitarist? That still only made four. Someone would have to sleep on the floor, but it'd definitely beat the van.

James didn't mention where he might sleep, but I know what's implied. We've had sex a total of four times—the same number of times he's crashed at my place after a Southpaw show. The same number of times we've ever hung out. I can't hold onto a job as a goddamn secretary, but even I can do the math.

I know the band has arrived when someone knocks a cheesy little tune on our aluminum siding, as if they've already succumbed to the horrible taste of these

surroundings. I exhale before turning the deadbolt and opening the door. It's James— with a knit beanie stretched over his head and that beard still covering half his face.

“Your orb fell,” he says, smiling in the doorway.

“Hi! My what?” I sound completely unlike myself—bright and chirpy.

“Orb,” he says, turning sideways and pointing out into the yard. My mother's lawn ornament stands at the edge of the flowerbed: a gray, faux-marble pedestal holding a metallic purple globe, as if we're a family of wizards.

“Oh, that orb.”

“It does that sometimes,” my father chimes in, joining me in the doorway. “Just falls right off and rolls into the milkweed. I'm Mark,” he says, reaching out a hand, “Beverly's father.”

The other three band members stand in our driveway—a huddle of dirty denim and hair. It's hard to believe they actually came. That they're actually planning on spending the night at my parents' house. They're brushing cigarette ashes off their pants onto our blacktop—the very blacktop where I used to roller-skate to dimpled, frizzy-haired pop-stars and annoy Tim by getting songs like *Baby, Baby* and *Dreamlover* stuck in his head.

“James,” says James, in that throaty voice of his. He shakes hands with my dad as if they're in on some secret, which of course, they are not. “Well, I put it back on the podium,” James says, then he calls over his shoulder. “Hey guys! Come on!”

“Oh, there they are,” I say, pretending to notice the band for the first time. This is an old habit of my mother's that I've recently picked up. Stating the obvious. Whenever I

come across anything, I announce my discovery. “There you are!” I say to Chad, our cat, when I find him hidden somewhere around the house. “Here we are!” I say when my mother walks into the living room to find me talking to Dad on the couch. She will smile weakly at this, her eyes darting between us—husband and daughter—as we both try to arrange our faces into the look of the innocent. No matter what we happen to be talking about, my mother now assumes that it’s about her. And that it’s nothing good.

“We parked behind the Camry,” James tells me, as the others stride toward the house. “Is that okay?”

“Oh sure, fine, fine,” says my dad.

The three band members cut across the lawn in their leather boots and clump up at the base of our steps. Derek’s in a Western-style flannel with the sleeves rolled up; Ed, a dirty white t-shirt; and the new guy, Gabe, has a thin scarf looped around his neck like a lasso. He looks younger than the rest of them—clean-shaven with wavy auburn hair that hangs all the way down to his shoulders.

“Hello boys,” my dad says merrily, leaving me in the doorway and making his introductions. James and I look at each other and smile as if we’re old friends. Like we’re not just two people who hook up when it’s convenient. For a moment, I can almost believe it. Here he is—at my front door. Meeting my dad. Getting his pillows plumped by my mother. The other members of the band nod in my direction.

I expect my mother to be waiting in the kitchen when the boys come in, greasy duffle bags slung over their shoulders, but the house feels empty. “Pam?” my dad calls from the foot of the stairs. There’s no answer.

“She’ll be right down, I’m sure,” he says, putting his hands on the back of a kitchen chair. “Why don’t you give them a tour, Bee-Bee? Show them to their rooms?” A few weeks ago, it felt like a relief to hear my old nickname again. But now, in front of James and the others, it reminds me of all the old childish associations—insects, babies, pellet guns.

“Sure, okay,” I say, starting down the hall. “We’ve got two rooms for you guys—a sort of guest room over here, and then the basement.” I try to ignore the embarrassing family photos on the wall. One features me in a turtleneck, posing with my arms spread along a fake, white picket fence. There’s a glamour shot of me and my mother wearing matching sequined jean jackets with our hair teased up like Dolly Parton. Then there’s a picture of the family before I was born. It’s always made me uneasy. Dad smiles in his ugly sweater-vest; Tim snuggles against Mom in a clean, white onesie; and no one seems to be mourning my absence at all.

“So, I guess two of you in here?” I say, stopping at the entrance to the guest room.

“Holy shit,” says Derek, walking in first.

“My mom collects sheep,” I explain as we file in.

Entering my mother’s room full of collectible sheep feels like walking into an avalanche. It used to be my room, and the sheep paraphernalia used to reside on my mother’s side of her room, until I left for college. Now, the room radiates whiteness—porcelain sheep lamps, display racks full of sheep figurines, sheep leaping over fences on the wallpaper borders and standing, in blank-faced clusters on the walls. And as a birthday present several years ago, my dad installed a nubby, off-white carpet that looks

just like lamb's wool. She never used to spend much time in here, just kept things tidy in case of visitors. But since I've been home, she's spent hours inside with the door shut. Dad and I tiptoe around the house, pausing in the hallway to stare at the closed door and wonder what she's doing in there.

"I claim this room right now," Derek says, throwing his dirty bag onto the white couch. "I must sleep here."

"All right, I'm with you," says Ed. "This is some creepy ass shit."

"I guess that means James and Gabe in the basement? It's fine down there, I promise—it used to be my brother's room."

"Where are you going to sleep?" asks James. I know what he's thinking, but I'm not sure it's going to work. The only place left for me is the living room sofa.

"Oh, Beverly will be fine." We turn to find my mother standing behind us. She's taken off the apron and gloves and changed out of the robe she's had on for days. Now, she's wearing a rosy cable-knit sweater. There's a button-down shirt underneath and the white tips of the collar emerge from her neck, crisp as envelopes. There seems to be blush on the high bones under her eyes. "I'm so sorry about the space. That couch in the guest room can't pull out. It's as old as death."

"I'll be fine," I echo, but Mom's already shaking hands with the boys and not listening to me at all. She's smiling more than I've seen in days.

"Hello," she repeats, one hand member after another, "we're so glad you're here! Hello, hello." When James introduces himself, she closes both of her little hands around

his big, calloused one and looks at him sentimentally. “Can I get you boys anything? Tea? Coffee?”

When my dad appears in the doorway, I give him a look that says, *Are you seeing this?*

“I think,” James says, looking over at Derek, “that we were supposed to be at sound check, like, ten minutes ago.”

“Oh! Well you’d better go, then!” says my mother. She’s still holding James’s hand. “But you’ll come back for dinner, won’t you? You’ve got to eat before you play.”

“That we must,” says Ed, flexing his toes in and out of the wooly carpet.

“Well good!” Finally, my mother lets go of James. Then her voice adopts a sudden edge. “Beverly, you better get them to the Hale House,” she says, not even looking in my direction. “It’ll be your fault if they’re late.”

I met James last year after one of his shows. He plays bass guitar for the band, which is called Memory Speak!—a scrambled, exclamatory riff on Nabokov’s memoir. I’ve never read it, but James explained it to me over a drink one time. I try not to find it too pretentious. My dad thinks the name is clever, but I’m pretty sure he hasn’t read Nabokov either.

They refer to their sound as “grungy folk rock.” Downward scales of bass repeat themselves in every song, like drunk men running down endless flights of stairs. Like Tim used to sound late at night, escaping into his basement lair.

I predicted everything the first moment I saw James play. A string of small, white lights hung from the ceiling over the stage, endowing the band with a magical glimmer. As a teenager, I had strung the very same lights from the ceiling of my bedroom. They could become any number of romantic clichés if I stared at them long enough—fireflies, diamonds, constellations.

As Memory Speak! played, I was aware of James's eyes. I stood in the basement of Southpaw with a plastic cup in my hand and thought about what it'd be like to bring him home. I watched his hands on the bass, and—like dozens of other girls in the room—imagined those hands on me.

Later, after we had talked at the bar and moved to another bar and his band mates called to say they'd ended up in Hell's Kitchen, I could see right through James. He wasn't all that special. He was a bald, bearded guy who'd learned to play the bass guitar. But it still felt good to be wanted. To be chosen. And to predict the future like that. I had seen a stranger on stage, pictured him in my bed that night and gone the next morning, and that's exactly what happened—as if I'd seen the whole thing unfold in my mother's ugly orb.

Just because I'm directing the band to their performance space does not mean I get to sit in the front seat of the van. I'm sitting next to James in the middle as we peel out of my driveway. My back presses hard into the seat.

Out the window, I look to see if my parents are watching from the house, but I can't quite tell. They've weatherized the windows, as they always do in the winter, with

the plastic wrap you glue to the sills then tighten with a hair dryer. Sealing themselves in. When I turn the other way, James is facing me. He waggles his eyebrows suggestively. We still haven't said more than two words to each other.

“So, we'll do sound check at ye old Hale House first,” says Derek. “Then we'll kill some time until the show. Get a few drinks and jet home for dinner?”

“We really don't have to go back,” I say. I'm imagining the seven of us crammed around the square breakfast table my parents almost never use. Me and the guys breathing beer across the table. My mother pushing broccoli around with her fork, adopting her vacant stare. Even though she invited them for dinner, my dad would probably end up preparing the meal; Mom stays calmer if she avoids the kitchen altogether and focuses on small, low-pressure tasks like folding laundry.

Before Tim left, our mother had a glass of wine at every meal. She sometimes let dishes sit in the sink and build up a crust of food so solid, they'd have to soak in hot water for at least an hour before anyone could touch them. She was a good mother—the type we didn't normally think much about.

On the night Tim left home, I hadn't answered her call. Now, it's hard to even remember what I was doing. But I got home late and listened to the message she'd left on my voicemail.

“Beverly, this is your mom calling with some news. It's about your brother.” I stood in the middle of my dark apartment, alert to the possibility of small creatures moving around me—cockroaches scuttling up the wall or a mouse that I had seen twice now, retreating into the space below the dishwasher. “He left,” she said. “Now you're

both gone. I'm sorry, honey, I'm acting a little strange right now. But what if he never comes back?"

"Is she kidding?" Derek is turning to look at Ed, averting his eyes from the road, which is lined with snowy birches. "Does she think we'd pass up a home-cooked meal? Cooked in an actual home? By an actual mother?"

"She must have no idea what we've been eating for the past two weeks," says Gabe from the back.

For a moment, I wonder if I've actually disappeared. Like I've slipped into that photograph in our hall—a world in which no one recognizes my existence but me.

Finally, James looks over with a knowing smile. *Here we are*, his eyes seem to say, as rows of trees zip by in the window.

It's Hockey Night in Canada, so by the time we get to the Tavern for post-sound-check drinks, the place is full of locals—mostly middle-aged men, faces tilted up at the TV rigged to a corner shelf above the bar. We could have stayed at the Hale House with the college students, but I thought the Tinker Tavern would impress the guys more. It's the kind of bar that joints in Brooklyn try to imitate for the serious hipsters: bad lighting; grubby, vinyl barstools; deer antlers mounted to the walls. I thought Memory Speak! would appreciate the grunge. But when the bartender pulls himself away from the game long enough to take our orders, he doesn't un-furrow his brow once. Maybe he recognizes me as Tim's little sister, but if so, he's not impressed. His eyes keep darting between me and Gabe's hair.

Derek orders a bucket of Bud and Ed gets the first round of shots.

“To hockey!” Derek yells across the bar, raising his glass in the air. I almost forgot it would be like this. Guys in bands have to be the center of attention wherever they go. A few men at the bar spin their stools to look at us, then spin them back around. James looks like a stranger, but one that I’ve known for a very long time—like someone I used to see every day on the subway.

“Tell me about Brooklyn,” I say. “I miss it.” But before he can get a word out, someone walks up to our table.

“Bee-Bee St. Claire?”

I look up into the face of a woman my age. She’s got dirty blonde hair piled up into a curly arrangement, like a bouquet, on the top of her head. I half-smile.

“Wow, it is you!” She bends her knees and stumbles backwards in her heels, pretending to be blown away. A small wave of pink liquid sloshes over the rim of her glass. “I’m Torey Phelps. An old friend of Tim’s.” A smile sneaks onto her face when she says his name. Then she mashes her lips together, spreading sticky gloss. “Since when are you back in town?”

James and the guys are watching me now. “Oh, not long. It’s temporary,” I say. “A few weeks maybe.” I’m still trying to place her: Torey Phelps. Could she have dated my brother? I’ve never seen her at our house, that’s for sure. Still, she looks like Tim’s type: outgoing and skinny, with smoker’s circles under her eyes. She probably still lives with her parents, too.

I know that when our parents think of Tim in Buffalo, they imagine him sleeping on the floor of some shabby apartment, drunk or drugged out of his mind. But I like to imagine him doing something better. Not in a city, but a little town downstate. Painting houses and cleaning up his act. Or living in the woods for a while—collecting his thoughts before making a call that will let us all know he's perfectly fine.

“Weren't you living in New York City?” Torey asks.

“Uh huh.”

“God, why'd you come back here?” She gestures around the bar with a flop of her free hand.

“Well, my mother's kind of sick.” I say it before I realize what I'm doing. James shoots me a questioning look. “I mean, not seriously.”

“Oh my god,” says Torey, dramatically. “I had no idea.”

“No no, it's really minor,” I fumble. “Not a big deal at all. I—”

“It must be pretty serious if you left the city because of it,” James says. He takes a long swig from his bottle and brings it down kind of hard on the booth. Torey raises her eyebrows.

“Well, she does need me,” I say. Although I'm not sure it's really true.

“I thought you lost your job,” he says. Torey smiles with her lips—looking like she's really enjoying this. “You said you *had* to leave.”

“My brother's gone. I had to come home.”

Torey squinches her pink lips to the side in another sly smile. “Oh Tim's not gone,” she says. “I saw him in town just a few days ago.”

“A few days ago?” I repeat. “He’s been in Buffalo for months.”

She lifts her eyebrows again, into thin little wishbones, and shakes her head—clearly pleased with herself. “Not on Saturday he wasn’t.”

I look at James, but he has no idea. Ed and Gabe and Derek have left the table and started a round of darts on the other side of the bar. Torey’s sipping her drink through a little straw with green stripes. I want to throttle her. I want to spill her drink on the floor and demand that she tell me: what does he look like? Has he lost weight? Has he let his hair get shaggy in the back? Is he healthy? Happy? Alive? Instead, I stare at the way Torey’s straw turns pink when she sucks in, then white again when she stops.

At first, things are quiet at dinner. We sip water from our glasses and Gabe uses his finger to scrape peas onto his fork. We’re eating without my mother because she’s inside her sheep room and refuses to come out. She’s already acting like this, although I haven’t told her a thing.

“We’re going to need some stuff from in there,” says Ed, after sawing a bite out of his chicken breast. I can’t tell if he’s addressing anyone in particular. The breasts on our plates are as tough as wood and nearly white—it’s hard to believe they ever belonged to something living. “Like, my bandana.”

“Yeah,” adds Gabe, “he has to play in that.”

“I just don’t understand what’s going on,” says Derek. “What is she doing in there?” He’s looking at my father, who keeps drinking water—his face as blank as my mother’s stuffed sheep.

“Wasn’t she cleaning for them?” I whisper to my father across the table. “Isn’t all of this for them?” He just looks at me and I get the feeling they’re both hating me now, Mom and Dad, for bringing home a band instead of Tim.

“Maybe she’ll talk to me,” says James. “Let me try.” He scrapes his chair back from the table and walks down the hall. We stop eating and swivel around to watch.

James places an ear against the door. He bends his knees a little. “It’s me, James,” he whispers into the door. “Mom? Can I come in?”

I place my napkin on the table. It only takes a few seconds for the door to sweep in, and for him to disappear without looking back.

James spends longer in the sheep room than I imagined he would. By the time he comes out, with the duffle bags over his shoulders, the rest of Speak Memory! is outside smoking cigarettes and warming up the van.

I should thank him, but I don’t. “Maybe we’ll talk about it later,” he says, knowingly. “See you at the show?”

“Mmm,” I say. “Have fun.”

Inside, my father’s standing at the sink. He turns to look at me when I come in. “Still in there,” he says.

When I knock at the door, there’s no answer. “Mom,” I whisper into the crack. “Mom, let me in?” Then I press my cheek up to the wood and listen. I can’t hear a sound. Seconds go by. Maybe she’s not in there at all. Maybe the window’s open on the other side and my mother has decided to hit the road. Just like Speak Memory! Maybe she’s

taken off for Buffalo with Ed's duffle bag slung over her shoulder. It seems like something we've all considered at some point, though only some of us have actually followed through.

The doorknob clicks. She must have gotten up to turn the lock, but I didn't hear her move at all. When I push the door open against the thick carpet, my mother is huddled up on the edge of her sheepy couch like she hasn't moved in hours. I close the door behind me and step towards her.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

She snorts and lets her head fall back onto the couch cushion. "Fine," she says. "I had a good talk with James." She's wearing her robe again and her short hair looks wet, as if she just got out of the bath. I take a seat on the other end of the couch, where her feet are tucked into a little triangle.

"I don't have to go to the show tonight," I sigh. "Do you want me to stay with you?"

She closes her eyes "No," she says. "You want to go. You should go."

"I saw Torey Phelps tonight," I say. My mother's eyes flash open, worried, and she freezes like an animal on the side of the road. She looks so vulnerable, so unlike herself, that I almost wish I didn't have to tell her. "She said Tim was here in town. A few days ago." There's a pause. A long one. The sheep on the wallpaper border near the ceiling are frozen mid-jump, legs splayed out, stretching in both directions.

"Don't talk to me about Tim," she says. "He'll come home when he actually wants to. Unlike some people."

It takes me a while to get up from the couch because I can't decide whether to stay or go. I don't want to go to the show, or watch James up on stage. I don't want to consider how he thinks he knows things about my mother. About how he's still trying to figure out how we'll sleep together later.

If I stay he'll just come back, and that's what will happen. I'll help make it happen, even though things are different this time—it won't be as convenient as stumbling back to my apartment. But there are dozens of ways it could still work out. We could creep out to the van in the middle of the night. Or make the guys sleep in the van and keep the basement to ourselves, toss our clothes onto the carpet full of Tim's stains—those vague shapes that remain in his absence—and fuck quietly enough that my mother can't hear. Or we can hope that she's finally left the sheep room by then. I could lead us here hours from now, let James lower me to the nubby floor, and stare past his shoulder as we pretend not to be strangers, imagining the lights that used to be in my room—the jewels, the constellations that used to hang from this ceiling like magic.

Underwater

Vince had magazine pin-ups from the forties taped to the wall beside his retirement home bed. Doris Day above the alarm clock, reclining in a beach chair. Betty Grable peeking out from behind the lampshade, blonde curls piled up on her head like a pineapple. Vince and I were dressed for the evening's event: a dance with an underwater theme. I had a pair of goggles around my neck. Vince had taped a cardboard fin to a headband and was going as a shark.

When Vince shut the door, he seemed to forget about me completely. He sat down at his desk and started pulling things out of a drawer: matchbook, green jar, cardboard cigar box. We'd only met ten minutes earlier, but already, I could feel myself becoming invisible.

The visit had been my mother's idea. She had been working in our town's new retirement home since it had opened six months ago. Tonight, she was off supporting one of her friends at an AA meeting downtown and I was chaperoning the dance as her replacement. Of course, it was too convenient to be a real coincidence. She had been trying to get me to volunteer at the home ever since we'd attended the opening ceremony over the summer. That was the longest amount of time I'd spent at the home: an entire afternoon under a tent with a hundred muggy, senior citizens. We had watched in silence while a hunch-backed old woman tottered across the sidewalk in puckery shoes and sliced through the "Opening Day" ribbon with a big pair of gardening shears.

My mother told me the old people were lonely. That they'd love to spend time with someone young, like me. Someone who might inspire fond memories of their youths. But, I wasn't convinced. No sane person could ever find my sad teenage existence very inspiring. And now I was in a room with Doris and Betty and Rita, watching an eighty-year-old roll me a joint. I knew this was not what my mother had in mind.

Years before the South Woods home existed, the massive building had been St. Bernadette's Boarding School for the Deaf and the Blind. On a handful of occasions when she'd had a few glasses of wine and was feeling reminiscent, my mother had recounted stories about the old school and the children who had lived there when she was young. I'd heard that my mother and her friends had gone streaking across the grounds of St. Bernadette's as teenagers, but Mom wasn't pleased that Donna, our neighbor, had told me about it. Apparently, they ran the full length of the arboretum, up through the tennis courts, then back into the woods, completely naked and in the middle of the day. They'd figured they wouldn't get caught because the deaf kids would never hear them coming and the blind ones wouldn't be able to see them. It was hard for me to imagine my mother having that much fun.

I never heard any specific details about the deaf and blind children, or where they had gone when the school had closed. But, when I was a child, I sometimes thought about them. I knew they wouldn't be children anymore, and I liked to picture them as deaf and blind adults, well adjusted to the realities of their lives as I assumed we all would be in

adulthood. In my imagination, they were my mother's age. They were living far away, in distant cities, and sitting cross-legged in front of fireplaces. They were sipping cider on shaggy rugs with their families. They had created bright lives for themselves in places that were dark and silent, like the bottom of the sea.

While Vince assembled the various objects on his desk, I stared into his closet-full of earth-toned sweaters. I tried to remember what I knew about marijuana from Biology class with Mrs. Henderson. I thought about adrenaline and neurotransmitters and the sympathetic nervous system, and my mother, who had no patience for drugs or scientific explanations.

"Listen to me, Bess," she had said to me once, closing my Anatomy textbook with a thump, "I'll tell you all you need to know about adrenaline. Your heart has instincts" she patted her chest, "it's much more perceptive than your brain. When it beats fast, that's your heart telling your brain to make a decision: to stay, or get the hell out of there. But, your brain will turn on you if you let it make all the decisions. Trust me."

Vince looked up from his desk and squinted his eyes, as if trying to distinguish me from the bedspread. He seemed to be wondering if I were really human. I had often wondered this, myself.

"So ... have you done this before?"

"Sure," I said.

Vince raised one eyebrow. He knew I had not and I felt immediately relieved. A pot-smoking teenager—someone who surely had more friends, more experience, and more confidence than I would ever have—that was something I could never pull off.

“Betcha didn’t see your night with the old folks panning out like this!” Vince said, pushing up on the square glasses that covered half of his face with lens. Twenty minutes ago, I wouldn’t have guessed he even knew what pot was.

“Nurses let us get away with it now and then. Medicinal purposes, of course.”

I nodded and tried to blend back into the bedspread.

“Well,” he said, “you’re quite a chatterbox, eh?”

I was trying my best not to look at anything: Vince, the drugs, the half-naked pin-ups. It was overwhelming, the number of things in the world that weren’t what you expected them to be. In my imagination, things had always seemed rosier decades ago: families stayed together, men were more attentive, women wore bathing caps and full-body wet suits into the ocean. I now knew that young girls had been posing on beach towels, exposing their cleavage for all of time. It almost made me feel like crying. Up above Betty Grable’s hair, a spider hovered on the wall. A piece of punctuation, waiting for me to speak.

“I like your sweaters,” I finally said.

“Well, now we’re talking,” said Vince. “Yep, quite a collection! Some of those date back to the Truman administration.”

I didn’t respond because I had nothing to say. I barely even knew who Truman was. The ceiling fan hung over my spot on the bed and I realized that everything around me was in motion. The edges of Vince’s un-tucked sheets were lapping at my calves.

“Sometimes I wonder what’s going to happen to them,” he said, “all those old sweaters.”

A narrow canyon formed briefly between his eyes. I walked over to the closet and took a brown sleeve between my fingers. "I could take them to a thrift shop," I suggested. "A nice trendy one."

"A trendy one?"

"Sure."

"Who would buy them?"

"I don't know," I said. "A girl who shops at thrift stores." I imagined the girl fingering through the racks. She would be lonely and shy, and this sweater with embroidered geese would appear before her, as if from a dream.

"It's a men's large," said Vince.

"Well, it'd be roomy. But, in a good way." Maybe, I thought, roomy was about to make a comeback. Maybe the lonely girl in Vince's geese sweater would spearhead the movement.

"I like your thinking," Vince said. He turned back to his desk, but I thought more about the lucky girl in his sweater. I ran my fingers over the geese: the dense threads of their beaks, and the dark fabric used to show where wings overlapped.

"Perfecto," said Vince, kissing the finished joint and dropping it into his breast pocket. He looked in the mirror and readjusted his shark fin. Then, he came over and sat next to me on the bed. A few strands of his hair were picked up by the wind and waved at the back of his head like broken cobwebs.

"You should get ready to go under water," he said.

I pulled the snorkel out of my backpack and situated the diving goggles on my forehead like sunglasses.

Vince smiled and placed his hand on my knee. I tried to remember the last time someone had touched me for that long. I couldn't think of anyone besides my mother.

"Let's go," he said. So we went.

The door to the outside world was propped open with a coffee-can full of cigarette butts. Vince and I were the first ones to sneak out, but soon, other old men began to gather in the darkness. They emerged slowly, one by one, out of the white light of the back hallway, allowing the triangular beam on the pavement to widen. When they let go of the door, the light disappeared and they pulled chairs out of the shadows, scraping them over the cement. Our eyes adjusted to the dark and I felt us all, the whole group, settling into our nocturnal selves.

Before I knew it, Vince was holding the joint to his mouth. We had formed a rough circle with our chairs and the men watched him silently. Their square glasses reflected a swarm of flies in the lamp-light by the building's edge. Vince inhaled in silence.

When he removed the paper from his mouth, he stretched his arm over without meeting my eyes. I could see nothing but the red pearl of its tip.

"It's all yours," he said.

I tried to imagine what my mother would say if she came to pick me up and noticed I was high. If she noticed, her reaction wouldn't be dramatic, but she'd heave one

of those sighs that seemed to embody all of her life's exhaustions in one breath. A sigh to say: "I knew one day it would come to this. I could see it coming with my eyes closed." I didn't want to be the cause of one of those sighs. I was supposed to be sighing with my mother, or her with me, because we were all each other had. But, then again, maybe she wouldn't notice at all. And maybe that would be even worse.

I took the joint and breathed in.

The circle erupted as soon as I removed it from my mouth. Vince released a cloud of smoke from his throat with a howl, and the others broke into wide, whiskery grins. Across the circle, an old man slapped his knee.

Vince was putting his hand on the back of my neck. He had leaned towards me and his hair was suddenly touching my head, downy against the curve of my ear. I coughed and our heads separated, then knocked back together.

I waited for something to happen. For something to become clear, or for a secret to reveal itself in small details that only I could see. There was a broken branch on the ground that looked like a severed chicken's foot. A caterpillar dangled, dark and noodly, off the brim of an old man's newsboy cap. I considered the fact that I should not have made this decision; and on my neck, Vince's hand was cold and soft.

"Atta girl," he whispered into my ear.

By the time Vince and I showed up, arm in arm, the Underwater Ball was in full swing. The overhead lights had been wrapped in blue cellophane, casting the room in a ghoulissh sapphire hue. We weren't just under water, we were so far below sea level that

the residents had evolved into glowing creatures as a matter of survival. An overweight man bounced by us, swept up in the twirling current of the dance floor, with a headlamp dangling from a wire over his forehead. A deep sea anglerfish.

Vince was smiling and nodding his head. Slicing the darkness with his shimmering shark fin.

“Looking good, Gertrude!” he bellowed at a jellyfish over by the refreshments. She held a pink umbrella above her head, and beneath it, she was a vision of dangling tentacles: iridescent saran wrap, dental floss, and gift-wrapping ribbons.

Gertrude smiled back at Vince, then let her tongue loll out of her mouth, to show us that parts of her body were becoming tentacle-like as well. I was impressed. She was morphing into a jellyfish from the inside out. To hell with costumes, Gertrude had said to herself. She had channeled the spirits of ancient squid-kingdoms and allowed their pulsing forms to take possession of her soul.

The nurses were staked out around the edges of the room with blank, wide-eyed looks on their faces. Some of them looked familiar to me; they had probably come to our house for drinks over the summer. My mother was always doing that, always welcoming other women into our world. More single women, as if that’s what we needed. Women who’d drop by unannounced and stay late into the evening, talking about life over cigarettes in our backyard. Without me.

Eavesdropping had always been easy enough, but my mother and the nurses never talked about anything I wanted to hear. They talked about all of the troubled people in their lives: out-of-work husbands, sons in after-school detention, thirty-year-old children

from previous marriages who struggled through dead-end day jobs in order to live as artists or musicians. Sometimes, they talked about their own parents, who lived upstate or downstate in nursing homes or alone in the emptied carcasses of their old houses. My mother and her friends all regretted not knowing their parents better, murmuring in assent whenever anyone made a comment about the difficulties of parenting. They hadn't made it easy for their parents, they agreed. But now, taking long drags on their cigarettes and exhaling softly into the night, they realized that parenting was a nearly impossible task.

Taking my hand in one of his, Vince led me out into the thick of the crowd. I hadn't been expecting it, but there were others as wild as Gertrude. Others who had not just acquiesced to the nurses' consensus on an underwater theme, but had surrendered to the powers of Triton himself. As I trailed behind Vince, I saw them all as if through glass. A tall starfish smiling from the edge of the DJ booth. She inched toward us in a bowlegged mosey, arms and legs splayed out from her body like a pinwheel. There was a blowfish-man with grey hair fashioned into spikes. Behind the blowfish, I saw what must have been a sea monster: scale-covered and shadowy, lurking around the tinsel curtain at the edge of the room. I barely caught a glimpse of him, dark algae dripping from his beard, before he disappeared from my view altogether.

The most stunning creature was a woman dressed as sunken treasure. She had pasted hundreds of foil-wrapped chocolate coins onto her turtleneck and pinned a little map with a red X onto her breast.

The DJ announced that this would be a slow song. Someone in the corner started blowing bubbles through a giant plastic wand.

“Are you okay?” Vince asked me. I really wasn’t sure. He pressed my hands onto his shoulders and placed his own hands, gently, on my hips.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said.

I was glad that he said it, then immediately wished he hadn’t. I tried to concentrate on tactile senses: my hand on the soft lumps of his shoulders; my feet, slow and clumsy on the carpet; and the strap of my goggles cutting into my ear. Focusing on these sensations was all I could do to keep from spinning off into space.

In physics with Mr. Baldino, we had learned that no one knew for sure whether time or space was real. The realists believed in it all, believed in everything. But, the idealists weren’t convinced. They didn’t think it was possible for time or space to exist outside of the human mind. You could see it from both sides, I thought then, in Baldino’s class. But, now I felt it was all in my head. I felt my power over them both: time slowing into a series of photographic freeze-frames, and space, first shrinking into the X on the woman’s breast, then expanding into the tiny world of her imaginary map.

“Bess?” Vince said.

I swallowed. Bubbles came drifting down around our heads.

“Remember that girl? The girl you said might buy my sweaters?”

We were getting closer turn by turn and I felt like we were circling towards the bottom of a drain.

“Do you think she’d ever wonder who owned the sweater before her?”

Vince looked at me then, his eyebrows slanting up in the centers, like mating caterpillars. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I knew that the imaginary girl would never wonder such a thing. After all, she was a teenager. She would be thinking about the nail she'd slammed in a car door, and ways to avoid eating alone in the cafeteria, and about the condoms she found in the drawer in the bathroom, even though her mother hadn't been on a date in over two years. She wouldn't have room for Vince, too.

"I think she would," I said.

Even though only seconds had passed, I felt like I had turned with Vince for an eternity, making slow orbits around the room. I found myself looking down and thinking about the carpet. About the dirt that was buried there, invisible, beneath our feet.

All of us were responsible, I thought. Even me. Over the past six months, hundreds of shoes had taken part: loafers secretly making their deposits, old slippers dropping their loam like jewels. Perhaps several faces, even, had touched a cheek to the yarn and left behind bits of themselves. I realized there were pieces of my mother there, too. Things that she had carried in and left with these strangers, things that I had never heard or seen.

Food particles, human matter, dust, earth. I couldn't see them, but I knew they existed: molecules somewhere beneath the surface, sinking along slow, separate paths to the bottom.

Vince had been staring up at the ceiling, but now his eyes shifted back to mine. He narrowed them into the darkness, and I closed my eyes.

"Can you see me?" I asked.

Everything was black, and I held my breath, wondering if I would sense the lights when they flickered back on.