

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Vladena Aleksandra Dmitriev for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on May 28, 2008.

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Vladena Aleksandra Dmitriev, in her collection of fiction and nonfiction The Mercurial: Stories and Essays, examines the conflicts inherent in language, whether in her own experiences as a non-English speaking immigrant from the Soviet Union to the submerged anger and resentment that emerges quietly in disintegrating relationships. What unites these pieces are ideas of emotional distance and inaccessibility, from a newly American child who incites her mother's anger by unintentionally laughing at one of her linguistic mistakes, to a woman who purchases a telescope in order to look away from the instability of her own relationship. Dmitriev's fiction and nonfiction pieces are about the nuances of language, the poignancy of small events, and, fundamentally, how difficult it is to be an ordinary person.

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The Mercurial: Stories and Essays

by
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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.

Vladena Aleksandra Dmitriev, Author

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In Memory of A.G.

Every Family Has Its Troubles

When I was old enough to make large declarations, it was my grandmother who told me it was wrong to say I hated my father. Still, I hated him. His arrival had ruined my family's peace. When he first came back and I hid behind my grandmother's leg, I called him The Visitor. I didn't understand that he was my father.

Before I was born, the Soviet Army took him. He served his required time, as did all young men, from two to three years. While he was away, my grandparents, my mother, and I lived together in an apartment in midtown Minsk, the capital of Belarus, without him. My mother was in the middle of her highly accelerated Master's degree at Moscow Conservatory when she got pregnant. After the news of my father's conscription, she came home to raise me until the Soviet Union gave him back. My

grandmother and grandfather raised me just as much as she did. They washed diapers, made bottles, identified the objects I was pointing at when I was learning to talk.

I thought my grandfather was my father. When I was a little more than a year old, I would not fall asleep in my bedroom unless my grandfather sat with me. Family lore says I liked to trick him. I lay perfectly still until he was sure I was sleeping, at which point he would stand slowly and tiptoe to the door. As soon as his hand touched the knob, I popped up, saying, "I'm awake, Dada, awake!" And he would have to come back.

Before my father came home, and by the time I understood words and knew what was going on, I'd hear talk about my father. Apparently once, when I was an infant, my father was able to sneak off the army premises and run twelve miles to our house in order to see me for a few hours. Then, he ran twelve miles back, just in time to nap for forty minutes before the sergeants yelled his bunk awake for their morning run.

I didn't remember this. Earlier, when my mother talked about "my father coming back" I thought she was talking about my grandfather, who was sixty at the time, coming home from his Ministry of Transportation office after work. She must have talked about my father in the army. I must have tuned it out.

When I was three, I overheard my grandparents talking about my father just before daybreak on a Saturday in the kitchen. My mother was asleep in her bedroom. Usually, I made noise "like an elephant" whenever I woke up, according to my grandmother, but after I heard the tone of their voices, my ears knew the subject was

juicy. I snuck back in my bedroom, put on the thickest socks I could find, and successfully glided on the sleek wood floors through the main hall to the closed kitchen door. There, I curled myself into a ball to listen.

“A waste,” my grandfather was saying. “That man, a good father? Are you out of your mind?”

“What do you expect me to do?” said my grandmother. “Eat him? He’s the husband of one, the father of the other.”

“And now we’re supposed to give him the big apartment offered by the Ministry?” I heard my grandfather exhale his cigarette smoke. “That man is a snake, Katya, a *zmeya*. He’ll eat anybody.”

“Oh, Misha,” my grandmother said. “Why are you angry at me? What can I do?”

In a tone I hadn’t ever heard my grandfather use around me, he proclaimed, “It’s your fault, Katya, damn it.” His voice became broken. “You let her go to that school in Moscow. You allowed her to do whatever she wanted. You gave your daughter to him. Now look.” A long silence. I struggled to keep from moving or breathing.

“Who knows,” my grandmother, Professor of Law and First Female Head of Her Department, said in her typical level manner. I knew that now she would be staring out of the window and up at the clouds to consult her deceased parents for answers. I often saw her standing in the living room and looking at their photographs with the kind of longing I never saw otherwise in her seal-gray eyes. *Kto znaet*.

“I know,” said my grandfather. “He’ll rob us.”

My grandmother offered him more tea. I knew that it was her way of changing the conversation. My grandfather didn't prod further. Through the doors, I heard the pull and release of the cigarette between his fingers.

That dawn was maybe the first time in my life that I actively reasoned whether or not to go inside the kitchen and give myself away, possibly causing the adults to become more aware of my greedy appetite for information. I chose, possibly sealing my fate forever, to sneak back to my bedroom and keep quiet. I figured that, in time, I would hear more about this strange, vexed subject.

I never got to do that. Within the week, The Visitor arrived.

Our Visitor was nothing like my grandfather. Where he happily freewheeled around the house singing Russian anthems, my father stomped and rarely sang. While my grandfather marinated his famous spiced cabbage for the family, my father's only culinary skills involved peeling and boiling potatoes in salted water. Where my grandfather bounced me on his knees, suddenly separating them for a dip that made me squeal with laughter, my father told me to stop being so noisy. After work, my grandmother disappeared more often into the living room to look at her parents' photographs.

The first time I saw my father raise his hand to my mother was a month after he arrived and three days before our move to the bigger of the two Ministry apartments given to my grandfather. I woke up to hear my mother and the Visitor fighting in their bedroom. My mother's voice was shrill; the Visitor's voice was lower

and more threatening. I ran to my grandparents' bedroom. They were awake, my grandfather smoking, my grandmother staring forlornly at the bedroom door.

"They're yelling," I told them.

"That's your father," said my Dada. *Tvoi otets.*

"Don't learn from your father," said my grandmother. When we stopped talking, we could hear the yelling, my mother's sobbing voice crushed beneath my father's boom.

I stood up on my grandparents' bed.

"I have to help Mama," I said. Before anyone could stop me, I jumped up and ran out of the room. I bolted into my parents' bedroom to find my mother pressed against the wall and my father's hand trembling over her as if he was about to strike. I hollered as loud as I could and then started crying. My father turned to me, his eyes glowing with rage, mouth twisted into a snarl.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" he yelled, approaching me. "Get the hell out of here!"

"Leave her!" cried my mother from the wall. She didn't move towards me.

I stayed where I was, crying, and my grandparents burst in.

Immediately, my grandfather turned on my father. "Is this the thanks you give me?" he growled. "This is your daughter. Have you forgotten who your daughter is after those three years with the dogs? Are you also a dog?"

I kept crying. My grandmother walked up to my mother and wrapped her arms around her.

“This is your wife, but this is my daughter. Get out of here. Get out,” she told him.

My father looked angrily at my grandmother, at my Dada, and finally at me. He took a small step in my direction. I backed away and slammed into the armoire behind me, which made me cry harder.

“Have you no conscience?” said my Dada. “This is your child! Get the hell out! Get out before I call the police!”

Flashing one last look at me, my father left. We heard him jingle the keys in the front hall, and then the door slammed. My mother pulled away from my grandmother.

“You didn’t have to come in here,” she said.

My grandmother made a sound as if she was spitting on the floor in front of her.

“Elena, snap out of it,” she said. “That man --” and she looked out the window to her parents in the sky.

My mother was twenty-four years old at the time. Married at nineteen and pregnant at twenty, she could not imagine having waited for my father for three years just to give him up. She had faith.

“It’s a bad day,” she said. I walked over to my grandfather and wrapped my arms around his leg.

“You won’t make me live with him, will you Dada?” I said. “Please, you won’t let me live with him, right?” When my Dada had no answer for me, I crumpled into a ball. “Dada, you won’t, you won’t, right?” I kept saying.

My Dada did not respond to me. His eyes were a shell of tear-water. He looked at my mother on the wall with my grandmother. Carefully, he unclasped my arms from his leg and picked me up. He looked me in the eyes for a minute and put me down.

“Dada?”

My grandfather walked out of the room. In a moment, we heard the front door slam a second time. My mother walked on her knees to me. She took my damp face in her hands.

“Verochka,” she said. “Vera, Vera.” I knew my mother wanted, needed me to put my arms around her. Before the Visitor, if my mother was sad, I always enfolded my arms around her until she smiled at me. But it was her: *she* was the reason the Visitor had come to ruin us, *she* was the reason Dada didn’t respond to me. I pushed her hands off my face.

“It’s your fault,” I said. I knew it would make her cry. Then I ran into my bedroom and slammed the door. With my ear pressed against the door, I listened for the first sound of her sobs. Your fault. *Tvoya vina.*

The Mercurial

On a day of the week that I can't remember, before I understood that I would never figure out whether or not to love my mother, she almost kills me in our family's two-bedroom apartment in Bronxville, New York. The apartment building stands out like a dark birthmark in the center of a beautiful face, noticeably middle class in a neighborhood where the median income allows for mansions, and though we've made enough money to allow ourselves the freedoms of once-a-year family vacations and a car for each of my parents, we're not rich.

We have been in America for two years. My mother speaks English fluently, but with a Russian understanding of certain aspects of the English language. She doesn't understand articles like "the" or "a" or standard sentence structure. Whenever she says the word "walk" it sounds like "work". When my friends come over, she often tells them to "take off their botinki". It is the Russian word for shoes, and she

uses it so often that most of my friends have learned it. My mother can't fathom the thought of people wearing street shoes indoors. Maybe it's why I don't like that custom either, now that I have a house of my own.

My mother and I have just left our apartment and are driving in our recently purchased Ford Taurus, which rides somewhat like a boat out at sea. My father chose the car for its Auto Magazine Ranking on reliability and economy, but all I can think of is how nauseous I get each time my mother screeches to a sudden halt in front of one of the many stop signs in our little town. She's talking about visiting the mall after we're through with her last-minute errands in town; her excuse is a coupon for free panties at Victoria's Secret, but I know her plans involve spending hours wandering through expensive stores to marvel at the amount of clothing inside them. I also know that if I stay quiet until we get to the mall, my mother will buy me something, too, after thoroughly inspecting any garment for traces of artificial fibers and loose threads.

"That synthetic fabric is and looks cheap," she's said before. "Cotton, Lena. Wool. Silk. *Real* fibers." At the time, I was standing in front of her with a nylon/rayon black asymmetrical-necked shirt similar to something I had seen on someone in school. My mother scrunched her nose when she saw it.

"Seriously," she announced. She lifted the shirt's cheap arm. "This isn't what you want to wear."

Now I know that I'll have to pretend to take a long time examining myself in the dressing room because my mother doesn't understand how one can just try something on, like it, and buy it. Sometimes, she'll buy twelve shirts and return eleven several days later, once she's gotten used to the way the shirt moves on her body in

front of her own mirror. Still, for me, the chance to get something is better than nothing. I'm not in school and I'm more than happy to nod at regular intervals at my mother's ceaseless, career-related chatter since the day is sunny and bright, and my mother has allowed me to play the radio at low volume in the car. Plus, she's started letting me argue for the purchases of more expensive clothes since it doesn't look like I'm getting much taller. I'm eleven and already as tall as she is. People sometimes think I'm fifteen or sixteen.

When I first moved to America, I don't think I spent too much time thinking about the mall. I was still trying to make sense of the language and of this town, where some girls in school have pairs of shoes for every day out of the year. On my first day at Bronxville Middle School, my teacher, Mrs. Wiener, told me that the word 'gullible' wasn't in the dictionary, and I believed her long after everyone else understood. At the end of class, people were still laughing at me. In Russia, a teacher wouldn't say something to a student in jest.

"I don't understand," I told her at the end of the day.

"Don't you get it?" she said. "Gullible. Not in the *dictionary*?"

Another initial roadblock for me was Maya Crawford, who would later get a nose job and forget I ever existed, and who was in my gym class on the first day I was in school. As we changed - I had a shirt on underneath the shirt I was wearing so I wouldn't have to undress in front of the others - she and her friends questioned me. They all had perfect American names. Vanessa. Jessica. Annie. What about my name? Was it Lee-na, or Leh-na? Was it true I was from Russia? What was it like to be a

communist? How do you say your name again?

How could I explain that there wasn't a true way in America to pronounce my name, that the "e" in Lena was pronounced with a sound that didn't exist in the English language? Something like "ye" or "eh" but not quite.

"You can pronounce it however you want," I told the girls.

"Are you weird?" asked Maya, then, as I pulled another T-Shirt over my head. She was wearing a smirk I couldn't understand. I'm not sure I wanted to understand it.

"Probably," I said, and she and her friends burst out laughing.

Now, two years later, I am different. I'm wearing Calvin Klein Jeans, Nike sneakers, blonde highlights in my hair for which my mother paid almost two hundred dollars, and I can speak without any trace of my country's accent. I accomplished this by imitating old TV sitcoms, American-made movies, American songs. "Family" I repeated to myself as I walked around the house. "Not FAH-mee-ly" but dulled, softened, under-enunciated. Americans do not pronounce words carefully. The faster I was able to get through the word, the more American it sounded.

I can now understand some plays on words, even. In school, everyone is forgetting my Russian-ness. If I'm not around my mother, I don't have to be Russian at all, and I have learned that when my mother begins sentences with "when I was young", I can hurt her feelings by reminding her that we inherently cannot understand each other because I'm not Russian anymore. Her small victories involve blaming me for anything that is damaged or missing inside the house, since I have no siblings, and mine is being American in America.

We park on a residential street a couple of blocks from the Post Office and walk down the oak-lined sidewalk. A bunch of toddlers are in the backyard of the Bronxville Recreation Center on the way to Main Street, daycare for five hundred dollars a week. The toddlers are sitting in a circle and passing a ball around. They were probably born here. Someday, they'll be in Bronxville Middle School too, happy to be Vanessas and Annies.

Inside the Post Office, there is no waiting in line. Two older women stand behind the wooden counter, one black and loud and tiny in a bright, cheerful dress, laughing with a customer about stamp designs, and a primed, grandmotherly-type who we approach.

My mother hands the woman several thick envelopes addressed to various musical commissioners, and the woman asks my mother a question. I can't remember what happens: whether my mother misreads or miswrites or misunderstands a common English word, but when I realize that she has made a mistake, I laugh. Then the old woman laughs.

The packages are sent away, and my mother and I go back outside. I'm on a babble tangent: I'm talking about school (getting better), about the sky (blue), about the trees (early in bloom), and about going to the mall. We're halfway down the next block before I realize my mother isn't talking. I look at her. In her face, I see a look I can't understand. My mother is staring straight ahead, her eyebrows sour, her stare unblinking, her small mouth tight and white.

"What's wrong, Mama?" I say. My mother doesn't say anything, so I try again. We're standing in front of the car now, and she's digging through her purse as if she

wants to gut it. She pulls out her keys and stares at me coldly.

"What's wrong?" I say, startled.

"You.... little... shit," hisses my mother in Russian, enunciating every word so that I can hear it right. Then, she walks to the other side of the car, unlocks it, and waits. I get in, and then she gets in. She puts the car angrily into gear, and screeches from the parking spot. It's early in the day and my father won't be home when we get there.

"Are we going to the mall?" I pause. I debate whether to open the car door and tuck-and-roll out onto the street.

"Why won't you tell me what's wrong?" I ask, but my mother doesn't say anything. The rest of the ride passes in silence. She doesn't head towards the mall; instead, she takes the slow route to the apartment, idling at each stop sign on the way for an especially long time.

When we get to the apartment, my mother doesn't call the elevator. She heads straight for the stairs. When we get upstairs, she unlocks the door and steps to the side so that I can come in first. She walks into the house and closes the door, doesn't take off her shoes. Instead, she leans against the entryway to the dining room and looks at me while I hover awkwardly at the front door.

"You humiliated me," she scoffs in a low voice. "How could you?"

I don't know how to answer.

"Well?" she says. I clench my fists. I just wanted to go to the mall.

"I didn't humiliate you," I say as quietly as I can.

"Right. It was my imagination that you laughed like an idiot. Obnoxious, Lena.

You're always obnoxious."

I look at the floor. Maybe it is true that I'm obnoxious. I close my eyes and wait for everything to blow over. According to my mother, I've done stupid things all my life. There have been so many, maybe she is right. There was one time that I threw to the floor a boy in school who was yelling, "communist, she's such a communist". There was one time when our neighbor on the first floor, Samantha, asked me not to tell anyone at school that we played together, and I did anyway. And now, I was laughing at my mother.

"You expect everything to work out the way you want for you," my mother says coolly. "Any reasonable daughter would apologize."

Are you weird? I hear Maya say in my head, and I get angry. "It's hard enough with a mother who doesn't understand how I feel," I say.

"How do I not understand you?" she says. "I do everything for you."

"You moved me here!" I yell. "What choice did I have?"

I'm yelling in half-Russian, half-English, everything accented.

"That's just the way it is, Lena."

"You can't expect a reasonable daughter from an unreasonable mother!" I start to yell, and my mother slaps me across the face.

"What the fuck!" I yell at the top of my lungs. If my father were home, he'd yell at me for swearing.

"You humiliated me! You embarrassed me!" shouts my mother. "How dare you!"

"I didn't do anything!" I protest. "Then again, maybe I'm weird! Maybe that's

your problem, that I'm weird! I embarrass you because you've made me weird!"

I feel heat in my face. Sometimes, rage takes over when things get crazy around the house. In school, I hear Russian voices sometimes, but I know they're not really Russian. From a distance, anything can sound like anything.

"You're a little spoiled brat!" my mother screams, something she says every time she's angry with me and then later admits that it isn't really true. I raise my hands, make fists, and shriek. My mother runs away from me and into the kitchen. I run after her into the kitchen and stop in front of her.

"You're crazy," she growls. "Leave me the hell alone!"

Be calm, I think.

"Mama! Stop freaking out!" I take another step towards her. She grabs the broom standing next to her, and holds it by the bristles, pointing the other end at me.

"Get the hell out of my face!" my mother says quietly.

"Screw you for being my mother," I say softly.

Then I run through the house shrieking the entire way and make for the bathroom. I slam the door behind me and lock it, and then I station myself in the tub by the little bathroom window on the inflated tub pillow. When I look through the window into the living room, my mother is screaming. I can't hear exactly what she's saying, so she looks like she's just throwing her head around. The living room and bathroom windows are on a corner so that one in the bathroom can see into the giant window of the living room, but the person in the living room can only see the bathroom window if someone's face is right at it. My mother raps on the bathroom window with the broom, kneeling on the giant glass table in the living room.

"Brat!" she shouts and raps, "Brat! You've lost your mind!"

In a while my mother has exhausted herself, and the rapping stops. I am now on the floor, resting my head on the toilet seat. I can see the door handle moving back and forth with my mother's exasperated effort.

"Open the door," my mother says. "Lena, open the door."

I ignore her.

This apartment has six stories. The house that I grew up in, the house in Minsk, was on the eighth floor and overlooked the heart of the city. There was a hill not too far away that was visible from my room, and all the children in the city went there with their fathers and rode sleds down the snow. My father and I even used to go.

I think about sliding down a snowed hill with my father behind me, and eventually the door handle is abandoned. My mother has gone away. I consider the likelihood of staying in the bathroom for the rest of the day. Maybe until tomorrow. Maybe until I'm old enough to leave. I have water. That's at least three weeks, and she can't stand there for three weeks straight. Plus, I'm already in a bathroom - so that's not a concern.

Soon, my mother stops shaking the doorknob. I know she hasn't left the house because one can hear the front door from the bathroom. I press my ear to the slit at the bottom of the bathroom door to see if I can hear anything, and I hear my mother's breath in her bedroom across the way. I know she's sobbing because of the hum of her voice in her breath, a note on her exhale, like an animal whining. I can't stand it.

I lift my ear from the floor and sit against the door. The sun outside looks

warm and bright. I could be outside in it, sitting in the park. I could be anywhere else. I could be on the jungle gym back home in Minsk: the elephant, its legs made for children climbing, its trunk a giant slide.

In the light of this American sun, the bathroom looks like a glossy magazine advertisement. I stretch out my feet on the fuzzy bathroom rug. My mother and I are only five or six feet apart. She is crying because she wants me to leave the bathroom. It's her way of giving up on a fight. It only works when I can see her cry. In the bathroom, it sounds like muffled music. I hate always making up after fights.

My father comes home at three, when my mother's sobs have put her to sleep in the bedroom, and I'm beginning to zone off on the bathroom floor. When he knocks on the door, I don't respond.

"Who's in there?" he says. He sounds so even, I know he's had a terrible day. I don't respond.

I know he's going to go wake up my mother to find out what's going on. Sure enough, in a couple of seconds, I hear them talking through the slit at the bottom of the bathroom door. My mother's voice rises above my father's. Then, I hear them coming towards me; their bedroom door opens with a slow, careful squeak. I've splayed myself across the floor of the bathroom, and I'm fully determined to ignore them both.

"Lena?" my mother's voice sounds through the door. "Open up."

"It's time to open up the door," says my father, always the great contributor.

"Take a nap, Dad," I say to myself. For a few seconds, my parents converse in hushed tones on the other side of the door.

"Lena?" says my mother, louder this time. "You can't keep this up all day." She's gotten fighting strength from my father. She's told him I attacked her. She didn't mention, of course, chasing me into the bathroom with a broom.

"We could call the police," says my father, a line he uses each time he wants to scare me.

"We can get the phone right now and call the police," I whisper to myself. I laugh a little, too.

"We can get the phone now and call the police!" announces my father. I laugh and I put my bare feet on the base of the toilet seat. It's delightfully cool in the midst of imprisonment.

"Shut up, Ilya," says my mother quietly. The door handle rattles again..

"People have to use the bathroom. Did you hear me? You can't stay in the bathroom."

Of course I can stay in the bathroom, I whisper to myself. I can make each of my hands into theatre characters and make up monologues for their lives. It's something I've done since I was small. My index and middle fingers become the characters' legs. The sun is pretty in the bathroom, and I have no friends in Bronxville to whom to complain about my parents.

"I'm lonely," I make one of my hands say to the other.

"Me too," says the other hand. I have them walk across the ceramic bathtub.

"Mother bought lavender body scrub," my left hand, Nina, says.

"Father doesn't understand why mother would need such things," my right hand, Bridget, says.

“The daughter isn’t the one they wanted,” Nina says.

“You’re right, Nina. Their daughter does not adjust in a healthy way.”

“That’s what Mr. DeWeese at the Guidance office says.”

My voice goes up and down with the voices. But it’s hard not to think about my parents. I climb into the bathtub, pull the shower curtain forward so that my face is hidden from them and look outside, to where I really want to be. I look down at Bridget and Nina.

“The daughter is pretty nice, though,” Bridget says.

I’m not so sure. I start to cry. I pick up a bar of organic cucumber-melon soap in one hand, pry the screen open with the other hand, and throw the soap out the window. It hits the metal tiles over the garbage area underneath. I like watching it, even though I can’t stop crying.

It seems right in the end. The bathroom is warm, a mix of new bloom and the humidity from the Atlantic.

It was the warmth of July in April. I just wanted to be at the mall. I didn’t want to make my mother so angry.

I pick up my father’s razor from the bathroom sink, and idly, without thinking, I make one clean long slice across my leg. It doesn’t hurt much, and when the blood comes up a couple of seconds later, I can hardly hear my parents talking to me through the door. I can’t believe I did it, and it looks worse than I imagined it would. The cut stretches for maybe four inches across my calf. The blood slithers thick and dark down my leg and begins to drip onto the floor. I think I laugh a little.

"Lena? Are you ill?" says my mother. I stand up so that the blood traveling one way down my leg changes direction, and I open up the door. My parents stare at me for a minute, and then look down at the blood on my leg. A bit has slithered down my foot and into my toes.

"Oh, Lena," my mother says. "What did you do?" She looks ill for a moment, and then she runs to the kitchen, I presume for hydrogen peroxide and cotton balls. My father stares at my leg. His jaw is set tight, and his under-bite is especially protruded. I think he looks like a wrathful ape each time his face contorts in this way. He's always been short with me. Now, he barely looks at me. He's tired from work. He was an artist once, but he had to give it up "for you and your mother," he always says.

"Why did you have to aggravate your mother," he says. It's a statement, not a question.

"It's not like I can argue," I say. "You're always right." I look at my leg. I'm glad it's bleeding. It feels smooth and soothing as it creeps down my leg.

"You can't leave the blood on the bathroom floor," he says. "Now your mother is going to have to clean it." He takes a deep breath. "Lena, it's so difficult like this."

"I can't now," I say.

"I work all day teaching those stupid kids, and then I come home..." He trails off. He works in a bad neighborhood in Brooklyn, at a public high school where occasionally, I've heard, fourteen-year-old guys murder their girlfriends and leave their bodies on the front steps of the school. He can't handle anything anymore.

I should have just stayed in the bathroom. "I didn't humiliate her!" I yell at

him. "She tried to kill me! She chased me into the bathroom with a broom! She's crazy! She's out of her mind!" I holler, and I see my mother walk into the living room holding the hydrogen peroxide and cotton balls.

Her mouth is in a grimace. My father looks daggers at me.

"Screw you both," I whisper.

I go into my bedroom, where I have no lock. To keep my parents from getting in, I hold the edge of the door with my foot. In a minute, the door rattles, but I hold the door tightly.

"Let me in, Lena," my mother says through the door, sounding like her old self again. I start sobbing, and I hate that each time these incidents happen, I wind up sobbing. Each time anything happens, sobbing seems to be my clearest answer. I don't know why. I don't answer her.

"Leave her alone," says my father to my mother.

"Lena, let me in," says my mother through the door. "Come on."

"She'll come out when she wants to." My father's concluding statement. I hear him walk off, and I hear the squeak of the hall closet where he reaches to get his coat. I hear him shuffling keys, huffing to himself. In a minute, I hear the front door slam. It's not the first time. He will keep making long circles around three blocks from our apartment building until he feels like he's able to tolerate us again.

With my ear to the crack between the closed door and the doorway, and my foot holding the door closed, I listen for my mother. I can hear her in the bathroom, cleaning the blood off the floor. I hear her walk to the front of the house, and for a

minute, I'm afraid she won't come back. But she does, and she knocks on my door again.

"Lena," she says. She doesn't rattle the doorknob, since I think she knows that I'm not holding it anymore, not really.

"Are you going to let me come in?" She sounds so sad.

"Come on, Len. You're going to bleed. I don't want you to bleed like that. Lenchka-dochka."

Lena-daughter. I am her daughter, and I think that I'm supposed to love her for being my mother. She loves me, after all, and I'm not a very good daughter.

The door rattles with my mother's weight. Through the crack on the floor of the bedroom door, I can see that she's sitting on the floor on the other side. Eventually, I'll let her come in, and in three years I'll leave and take her and my father to court and divorce them of their rights to my life. In five years I'll go to college three hours away and we'll talk more often than we ever did, and in ten years I'll go to graduate school three thousand miles away and silence my cell phone when she calls.

For now, I'm fine where I am, with the razor cut drying on my leg and my bedroom door between us.

The Immigrant Child's Abridged Companion

Wave Goodbye To Our House - 1993

At two in the morning, my father woke me from a deep sleep. I could hear my mother fussing in the hallway.

“We have to go,” he whispered.

“Where?” I said still asleep.

“To the airport,” he said. “Mama’s waiting.”

Outside, it was raining. The sky was slate blue and patched like mottled stone. I can't remember how it was that I got outside and into the taxi cab, or how I got from the airport in Minsk to JFK International in New York City, or how I began to understand English. I don't remember how I managed to systematically choke out every last twinge of the Russian accent that used to be part of my voice. I don't know

how I got to be a graduate English student in Oregon from being a Soviet-uniformed bow-wearing Lenin-scarf-sporting schoolchild.

This is what I do remember: when the taxi cab was driving away from our apartment in Minsk, my mother sat in the front seat barking instructions to the driver. My father and I sat in the back seat. I was eight and had never been in a real car before. I stared at the road underneath the wheels through the side window. Suddenly, my father, who is rarely sudden about anything, grabbed my arm.

“Vlada,” he said. “Look here.”

I looked. My father was sitting backwards in the cab, peering through the rear window. The streetlights illuminated the corner grocery store that carried potatoes and carrots, vinegar and salt, bread on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Of course, I didn’t think about all of that. I simply stared out of the back window with my father, aware only of how late it was, how quiet the streets were, how we’d never been out so late. After a turn in the road, our apartment building came into full view. The windows were dark in it; it was if they looked at us with unfamiliar night eyes. The city was sleeping. My father picked up my hand, lifted it up, and waved it up and down.

“Wave goodbye to our house, Vlada,” he said. “Wave goodbye to our house.”

Love Your Country - 1990

When I was five, my grandfather and I were out in a boat on the river near our summer house. It was summertime in the USSR and everyone was up to nothing in honor of the nice weather. We were lying at the bottom of the boat, staring up into the bright blue sky. From the shore, my grandmother shouted at us for dinner.

“Vagabonds!” she yelled. “Alex, you’re ruining your granddaughter!” My grandfather at the bottom of the boat grinned at me wide and snickered.

“Fine!” my grandmother hollered. “Don’t eat! Starve out on the river!”

My grandfather laughed, and I laughed with him. We sprawled at the bottom of the boat. He’d cuffed his pants, and I’d done the same. He put his arms behind his head, and so I went ahead and did the same.

“Vladochka,” he said, my Russian pet name. “Listen. I’ve got something important for you to remember, since it’s such a nice day.”

“Hooligans!” shouted my grandmother from the riverbank.

“You have to remember several things for me,” he said. I looked sideways at him. He leaned onto one of his arms.

“It’s very important that you become a good person,” he said. “You have to be good to your mother and father. No matter what. You have to be respectful to your elders. Got me?”

“Yup,” I said. “I got you.” The boat bobbed with the wind. In the background, on the shore, I could hear my grandmother laughing. *Them!* I heard. *Ridiculous!*

“But most of all, you have to love your country,” my grandfather said. “You have to be proud of the Soviet Union. You must be happy that it gives you days like these.”

I thought this over for a minute.

“What about Grandma?” I said.

“You must tolerate Grandma,” my grandfather said and winked happily. He popped his head out of the boat and shouted towards the shore. “Klara! My bride! Do you love your country? Tell your grandchild that you love your country!”

My grandmother stuck out her tongue at my grandfather from the riverbank.

Nationalism – 2003-2007

My grandfather spent my sophomore year of college in Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown, Pennsylvania, on the brink of death with pneumonia, diagnosed late due to medical carelessness. In Boston, I was seething and moody – the Russian way of worrying - and I couldn’t get away to see him. My mother and uncle alternated time at the hospital translating for him; my grandmother was there all day, every day.

I came to act as translator four months after my grandfather was admitted into the hospital. When I saw him, I saw two eyes as big as eight-balls in a hollowed face. He had lost sixty pounds. His legs were as small and brittle as twigs. When I followed the gurney downstairs to translate what the doctor would say, the one in charge of scanning the blood clot in his leg, who wouldn’t look at either of us, I tried not to punch one of the walls in the narrow elevator.

Though everyone expected my grandfather to die, he decided to get well and come home to my grandmother instead. By that time, she had lost forty pounds herself, traveling back and forth to the hospital for five months. Everyone knew that the reason my grandfather had been in the hospital so long was due to an error, a misdiagnosis, a failure in modern medicine to recognize that a spiked fever may well mean something isn’t right.

I should note that my grandparents are rather unusual people in their generation. They despise racism and bigotry of all kinds. They like a good strong drink. They believe that animals should have rights. They're pro-democracy. They've voted on everything since they acquired American citizenship. So, I was taken by surprise recently when I called my grandfather and the topic drifted onto his year in the hospital.

"They call themselves doctors!" I yelled on the phone. "They missed pneumonia, Grandpa! *Pneumonia!*"

"Oh, Vlada," said my grandfather.

"They almost *killed you!*" I shrieked. I felt a pull in my body that made me want to beat my fists.

"Yes, but they *saved me,*" my grandfather said. "Think about it, Lad. I would have never made it in Belarus. Medicine wouldn't have been good enough. I would have been gone long ago."

"I can't stand this country," I blurted.

"Don't say that," my grandfather told me. "This country saved me."

On Independence Day, my grandfather wears t-shirts with American flags, and on Thanksgiving, he carves turkey.

"You have to love your country, Lad," he said, not thinking about the conversation we had had almost twenty years ago. I fell silent.

"Don't say things like that," he said. "It's not good."

We hung up the phone. I sat on my couch. I will never tell my grandfather he's wrong, but I remember that day at the riverbank when he told me *love your country,*

love your country, love your country. His voice plays in my head over and over again.

But I can no longer remember, ever, which country it is that I'm supposed to love.

What Can I Say?

I am lying in bed with my boyfriend Andy and telling him about it.

I have abnormal psychology in the morning before closing for the second night in a row at the gift shop. Friday night, no less. Andy has been out of work for three months and doesn't mind staying up late.

This is what I tell him.

I'm gift-wrapping a scented candle behind the register, and Meili is on break, when the woman in the floor length fur coat walks in. She looks like money; that coat is certainly real fur, her hair is done up in these tight short curls. And she's scowling. She doesn't look over at me or anything, just marches to the birthday cards. I look through the glass windows at the front of the store, and there's a car standing out front with its hazards on. There's a driver inside that appears to be a man.

There are about nine or ten other customers in the store. I'm watching them out of the corner of my eye, but none of them look like the type that would try and pocket anything. Three women are looking over the sample wedding invites on the big glass table in the corner, a mother and son are standing over the Chanukah decorations, a couple girls about our age are browsing through the overpriced stickers.

Remember those stickers, Andy? We got a new shipment of cows with handmade eyes and velvet spots. They're five bucks for three cows. It's crazy.

Anyway, I come up to the woman, who's taking practically every birthday card out of its place before putting it back. It's store policy, you know, to walk up and do the welcome to blah, can I help you in any way thing.

Hello, may I assist you tonight? I say in the required corporate even tone.

She doesn't even look at me, which is odd. So I decide to try again.

Hello, may I assist you tonight? I say again, in the same way.

And man – out of nowhere - she turns on me.

Get away from me! She practically screams it. If I wanted your help, I would have asked for your help!

She doesn't look me in the eye. She just screams at my face. I'm so startled, I practically leap a step backward. You'd think I stabbed her with one of the fountain pens.

I'm not saying that's the first time I've been treated like crap or anything – remember when I spent all morning organizing the crayons and glitter with Meili – except Meili was helping people with the wedding invites, since she's an actual keyholder – and then Erika walked in and yelled something about corporate

requirements and made me do the crayons over, even though she's the one that gave me the incorrect directions in the first place?

That's after the day you got yelled at for standing in Zone One, because you were supposed to be standing in Zone Two, Andy says.

Yeah, I say, and it pisses me off for some reason.

Anyway, the store goes completely silent for a moment. You know how in movies, when something really awful is happening, time slows down all the sudden? It was like that, like finding yourself naked in a classroom in a dream. I mean my heart is pounding there, because I asked a woman if she needed any help. We sell cards, for chrissake.

Wow, says Andy.

I know, I say.

We had business suits like that at Starbucks downtown, Andy says.

I want to tell him that he doesn't work there anymore, but I don't bother.

It's ridiculous, I say. After the extended horror movie moment, people start murmuring and looking at the woman in the fur coat. That doesn't bother me so much, except that they're also looking at me. I have some glitter from this morning on that stupid apron they make us wear, and I've been there for a few hours, so I really don't want them looking at me. The woman looks daggers at the birthday card case, paying no attention.

Andy, it was incredible. You know those thirty-dollar glass paperweights with the engraved initials on them? It was like my chest suddenly set itself on fire. I wanted to pick up the demo paperweight and chuck it at her head. I wanted her to fall down on the ground and bleed to death all over that ridiculous dead animal on her body. I wanted to tear out her hair. It was so sudden, and I've never been so fucking angry, Andy. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to fucking kill her.

Wow, says Andy.

The murmuring in the store continues this whole time, by the way. My face is burning, so I sit on the cash register and stare at the back of the fur-coated woman. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that the black car with its hazards on, the one that was there when the woman in the fur coat walked in, is still standing in front of the store.

Clearly, money can't even buy a soul, is what I want to tell her.

You don't, Andy says.

Of course not, I say. I just sit there and wait, and after a few minutes, she walks to the cash register and drops three birthday cards in front of me as if they were garbage. I don't say anything. I type in my code, and then I scan the first one.

And then, the strangest thing happens. For me, you know. I stop scanning and drop her card back on the counter. I try to look into her eyes.

You didn't have to yell at me, I say. I didn't ask you anything terrible, I say.

Just ring up the damn cards, she says.

I don't say anything else. What can I say?

Meanwhile, Meili walks into the front door with a take-out box from Crazy Slices. She stops for a second, surveys the woman, looks at me, regards the other startled customers, and then just heads for the back room. Not a word. You know Meili.

So, what did you do, says Andy?

Nothing, I say. The bitch gives me a credit card, and signs the receipt. Of course she doesn't hand the receipt to me, just leaves it there. Then she blows out of the store.

So, does she get into the car, Andy says?

Who cares? I say. I don't care, I say.

I'm just asking, Andy says.

There's this long pause in bed, and I can tell that Andy's gearing up for it. But I don't ask him about his post-Starbucks job search.

Instead I ask, are the dishes done?

I didn't get around to them, says Andy. But I'll get around to them tomorrow.

Anyway, I say, the second that the woman walks out of the store – and the murmurers are sure that the door is closed and that she's really gone – they all crowd around me like a pack of lions.

Are you okay, they say?

What a bitch, they say.

Are you sure you're okay, they say?

I actually can't tell who's talking, you know? It's like everyone is talking at once.

I'm fine, I say – and then I feel really dizzy.

So how did it end? Andy says.

Meili got off break and asked what happened, I say. So, I told her basically what I told you and she laughed. The same 'what a bitch' stuff as everyone else. And I love Meili, but that wasn't it, you know.

Andy reaches across me for his glass of water on the nightstand.

You know? I say.

Yeah, Andy says. But she was a bitch, after all. You got in her way of being a bitch.

It's not about that, I say.

Then what's it about? Andy says.

I'm not sure, I say, and my heart starts throbbing in this kind of way that I can't handle.

After Andy's fallen asleep with his face against the wall, I get out of bed. I close the bedroom door gently and slide down the hall to the kitchen in socks. My cat, Sloan, is sitting on the kitchen counter when I walk inside. Her yellow eyes glow in the dark. I come over to her, pet her soft head, and listen to her purr. Then, I open the refrigerator and pull out a bottle of water, but when I go to the cupboard for a glass, I find it empty. That's when I turn on the light and notice the dishes in the sink.

These dishes are something out of this world. I've seen dish stacks before, but these dishes look like architecture in hell. There are glasses that are filled with something black at the bottom that could either be coffee or tar, plates and bowls that are coated with a dried rainbow of assorted leftovers, forks bronzed with chipping teriyaki. Andy's miniature crock-pot is at the top of the mountain, overflowing with dirty water, a few Ramen noodles stuck on the outside.

And I get this feeling all the sudden, in my stomach, as if I'm sitting at the dentist's office and waiting to get that pre-filling needle jabbed into my jaw. I want to wake Andy, but it's not like the dishes will get done if I do.

So I pick up the dish gloves, and turn on the warm water in the sink, but even when the water turns hot and I can see steam coming off the dishes, I just can't bring myself to start washing them. So, I turn the sink off again, open up the window, and light a cigarette. Andy doesn't like it when I smoke indoors, so I lean on the windowsill and look out onto our street. I can hear a car revving in the distance. It revs twice, pauses, then growls three more times. It sounds like it's in a conversation with its driver, talking back. As if trying to say it's tired of standing where it is.

I Couldn't Bring Myself

I watch Tina leave my apartment for the last time, and then I sit on my couch with a beer and listen to old jazz records. Coltrane. There's a baseball game on the TV, but the sound is muted. I think I loved Tina. Something just wasn't there, that stupid something. I was still physically attracted to her most of the time. Almost three years. Two years off, then last summer with Julia, then eight months.

Julia's in California with some guy named Nick. It's no surprise. She's too beautiful to stay single. Maybe Tina and I should have never gotten back together. It's just wasted time now. But what isn't? Maybe I should just go out, knock up some girl. Maybe then I'll love something besides myself. I'm just kidding. But maybe not, maybe that's me.

I take another beer from the fridge and walk back to the couch, swinging to the music. Maybe I'll write something to Julia. We're just cross-country coworkers now,

recording musicians. We're recording this summer. I'll see Julia again, but maybe I should write to her first. *California is far away, I'll write. I just looked on a map.*

I keep thinking of that phone call Julia made to me, eight months ago. That was after the night I told her I was taking Tina back. Two months after Tina and I split the first time, we ran into each other at a bar, and then she sent me an e-mail asking if we could work things out. Julia was leaving for California in a month, and Tina wanted to try to work things out. It's good to be in a relationship, I've found.

I told Julia about Tina at a party, while she was drunk. Then, I invited her to come back to my house one more time. She did, in her own car. She sat on the floor of my living room, and played Fleetwood Mac's "Goodbye Baby." I pushed her down on the rug and kissed her. She wrapped her legs around me. I carried her to the bedroom, took off her clothes. In the morning, Julia left to go to work at ten, and I met Tina at noon, and I called Julia at seven to tell her that Tina and I were going to try to work things out.

I started this label a little while before I met Julia – Obelisk Records. I met her through Tim, a mutual friend. He started talking to Julia after she played a song at Club Passing and discovered she only lived four blocks away from him. He found out that she had recently broken up with her boyfriend, who moved back to New York City. She'd gone to college in Boston and now, after college, wanted to work on getting her music heard around town. One night, Julia invited Tim over to a party, where she sang one of her songs, and Tim decided that he would introduce her to me. I think he thought he might get a chance at sleeping with her for the favor.

I wasn't planning on sleeping by her myself. I met her on a hot weekday night in Somerville. I parked near Tim's apartment. I assumed he was already at her place. He was, but when I got there, Julia was sitting alone on the wooden stairs of the front porch in the sunset, barefoot, holding a beer and a cigarette, her green eyes searching me.

"Oh fuck," I thought. Tina and I were inches from falling apart, and the green of this girl's eyes was visible from the bottom of the stairs.

She invited me inside. I followed her up the curved wooden stairs to the kitchen. I watched her small bare feet near-hop on each of the stairs. I watched her small hands set her beer down, open the refrigerator, and pull out a beer for me. She was wearing a white tank top that had three snap buttons near the chest, and the top button was unbuttoned.

"I can get it," I said to the beer and her unbuttoned tank top.

"I've got it," she said. She popped the lid of the beer, and I saw the subtle smile in her profile. I could see the curve of one of her small breasts as it disappeared into the shirt. I wanted to open another button before she ever played a song for me.

And when she did play, sitting on her bed upstairs, the frayed cuffs of her jeans brushing her small toes, I knew I was in trouble.

I grab another beer from the fridge. It's fucked up, but If I could cry, I would. It was only eight months ago that I completely fucked things up. Julia and I were playing together at the Fair Hill Summerfest. Five hundred people camping out in

tents, listening to amateur musicians bellow their hearts out. Julia sang so beautifully, the crowd that was roasting marshmallows over the firepit put down their sticks and stopped eating. It had been raining that day, and the grass was damp, but everyone still sat and watched her. When she got off stage, I grabbed her hand and we took off for the woods. We were drunk, but we held hands as we walked past our friends.

“I’m so proud of you,” I said to her. I lay on the ground. The sky was like the sea at night, multiple shades of dark. Movement not linear, but circular. That was important to me that night. Knowing that was important to me...but I’d just left Tina. I’d just left Tina, but I didn’t want to be anywhere else except on the ground with Julia. If it was only another time. If it was another time, I would have loved her.

“It was all you,” she said. “I wouldn’t have gotten here without you.”

“I’m the middle man,” I said. “It was you.”

“People keep asking me what we are,” she said.

“Oh?” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t know what to tell them.”

I laughed. “Tell them anything,” I said. I’m a jerk.

She sat upright next to me. She wanted me.

“Let’s go back to our tent,” I said.

We went back to our tent. She stumbled, and I held her up. She leaned on my arm; I leaned back into hers. She stopped in front of me three feet before the door of the tent, grabbed my hair at the back of my head, and kissed me. We’d set up the tent for just the two of us. Our friends knew, even then. We fell to the blow-up mattress,

unbuttoning each other. We threw our clothes on the vinyl floor. I kissed her neck, and she kissed mine. Then, we noticed that the camping lantern was still on.

“Shit,” she said, and we laughed. I buried my face in her hair. “I gotta go and check,” she said. She wrapped the top blanket around herself and walked outside. I saw her through the tent, and she laughed. She came back inside and zipped up the tent.

“If anyone was looking, they would have caught a show,” she said. Then, she turned off the lamp. She climbed on top of me, but I flipped her over, pressed my body into her. Holy crap, I kept thinking, you’re fucked. I made love to her so hard that I was sweating like hell, even though it was freezing. I made love. I never made love to anyone. Maybe not even Tina. We shared our bodies with each other. Even in the dark, I could see the pale green of Julia’s eyes.

“Come for me,” I begged her as I moved on top of her. “Please,” I said. “Please, come for me.”

She did, and afterwards, I held her to sleep. I wanted to.

The night after the festival, we went to movie night at Tim’s. She looked at me in the car as I drove. As we drove, the streetlights kept hitting her hair. Her hair was glowing gold. My head was spinning.

“I love what you do during sex,” she said, almost to herself, in my passenger seat. She looked down at her hands. “That thing you said.”

“What thing?” I said. My heart was racing. She was leaving, and it was just like me to fall for some girl that was about to disappear. And that’s maybe what she

had to be at that point. She had to be some girl. You can't afford to love someone about to disappear. My heart raced. I wanted to grab the back of her gold head and mash my body into her, right then, while the car was moving.

"That one word," she said.

I was stopped at a red light and I looked at her face. She was smiling a half-smile at me. Her eyes were smiling. She was beautiful. I knew she would never be alone. She would meet some suitor in California. I'm just some guy in Cambridge, and Julia is beautiful. But maybe I'm a jerk, and that's just an excuse.

"What word?" I said.

"Please," she said. She arched her back. She arched her back often, to stretch her shoulders. Her shirt traveled up, and I saw a small slice of the skin on her belly. I saw the shadow of the muscle of her stomach as it disappeared into the waist of her jeans.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a cigarette. The light turned green, but I didn't move. She lit the cigarette, and looked at me sideways. She looked at me as if I was the only man in Cambridge. I held myself away from her.

"Please," she said again. "The word 'please'. What a great word." She leaned into the car seat.

We parked on Addison Street, across the street from Tim's. I turned off the car. I was about to open my door, but she touched my arm. She touched me so gently. She was still looking at me. When she leaned to the side, her gold bangs fell over her eyes.

"Listen, Brett," she said.

We sat in silence in for a minute. I looked ahead at the row of parked cars down Addison. I coughed.

“I - have feelings for you,” she said slowly.

We sat, looking over the low housetops of Cambridge, at the streetlights against the charcoal sky, the bumper-to-bumper cars.

“Well, me too,” I said. I continued to look straight ahead. “I have feelings too, but I’m trying to ignore them.”

I knew I should have stayed in the car a few minutes longer. I should have touched her shoulder. But I couldn’t. I got out of the car, stood outside the driver’s side door, and waited for her to get out too. I let her walk ahead of me to Tim’s. I sat next to her at Tim’s, but I didn’t touch her. I knew she wanted me to touch her. I couldn’t.

I wanted to take her to her own place that night, but her car was still parked at my apartment. She cried in my living room, and I looked at the floor.

“We can’t do this,” I said.

“You said that a hundred times already,” she said. “We’ve been doing this. We’re doing this.”

“You’re crying in my living room,” I said. “I got out of a relationship. I can’t have any more crying in my living room.”

That night, in the end, we both slept in the living room. I folded out the couch. I was going to sleep in the bedroom and let her sleep in the living room, but instead, I lay down next to her. I didn’t touch her all night. She slept on her side, her face curled

away from me. I slept on my back. I fell asleep quickly, so I wouldn't have to think about her like that.

That night that I got back together with Tina, Julia called me. She was in her car.

"I'm driving down the highway," she said. "I'm past Harvard Square on Memorial Drive."

I knew I shouldn't have picked up the phone. If I could have cried, I would have.

"How could you," she said. "How can you be like this? You were with me last night, with her tonight. How does that even make sense?"

"I told you we were meeting," I said. "I told you. We met, and that was the truth. We'll try to work things out. I told Tina not to ask questions about what we were up to in the months we weren't together, and I wouldn't ask her either."

"Must be real nice for you," she said. "Swell. Enjoy your life with Tina."

"You think it's easy for me?" I said. "You think it's easy, that I'm going to tell Tina – hey, I had feelings for someone else?"

I could hear her crying on the phone. I could hardly stand it.

"How could you have feelings for two people?" she said. "What about everything? What about me?"

"Well, you're leaving, and she's here!" I yelled. "You're leaving! Tina reached out, you know."

"All I've been doing is reaching out," she said.

“I do this,” I said. “Break up, get back together. You’ll meet someone in California.” I paused. “I love her, you know.”

“Great,” she said. “Fantastic.”

We hung up a little after 4 a.m.

We played a show a couple of weeks later with the band, the last show before Julia moved to California. I watched her tuning guitars, unpacking stands. Her gold hair fell over her eyes, and I couldn’t see them.

We found ourselves standing outside together at one point, smoking cigarettes.

“Warm night,” she said to me. That’s all she said. She threw her half-smoked cigarette into the street. “I’ll see you on stage.”

She walked inside, but popped out twenty seconds later.

“Need a beer?” she said.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I still have one inside.”

It was better to be in a relationship.

The playlist I’ve got going now is in alphabetical order, and Coltrane’s switched to Lennon. Some great songs on this album – Mind Games, I’m Losing You, Cold Turkey. He makes it sound like you can sing about these things when they actually happen. I could combine the names. I’m losing you cold turkey, playing those mind games – imagine! I’m drunk. Julia’s out somewhere with her Nick, I bet. I wonder if he’s a better lover than I am. I wonder if he satisfies her. Someone like Julia deserves a guy that’ll satisfy her.

But – I could, probably. All year, Julia and I have been exchanging music-related messages. We still work together. We'll still work together. I sign my messages *Take care*, or, *All the best*. I don't know whether that makes her sad. I've never been that good at words. I've never been that good at coming out and saying anything. I'm not that kind of guy. But I'm not a liar, and I'm not a bad guy. I think Julia knows that.

I walk into the kitchen, and grab another beer. I'm going to fall asleep before I finish it, but what the hell. It's better to have a beer.

Mirrors

I moved to Oregon to be a singer-songwriter, and then I fell in love. His name was David Schuyler. We met once, twice, three times, spent an afternoon walking hand-in-hand along the beach. The next thing I knew, he had a drawer of clothes in my apartment. I have a bad habit of falling in love, and then it's always the same: I blow into the lives of men like wildfire, treat them like kings in bed, change their opinions on love and womankind – and then they're gone. Mostly, my friends are men, and they tell me my smile is killer. So I sit and practice in front of a mirror, working with my eyes. I can make my entire face glow – I can make a man feel as if he's the greatest thing under the sun. People say that a fake smile has no inflection in the eyes. My smiling eyes are a crescent moon, the green of leaves after rain. So people have said. I think I'm beautiful. I've always been told that I'm beautiful. I hold on to that.

David, like the others, was shy but intelligent, at least in the traditional way. Good schools, high degrees. I bring them out. I can talk to them for hours, and no matter how boring I think they are, I can keep bringing them out. They open up to me. They introduce me to their parents. I'm a graduate student in music theory and composition; I'm on the road to success. I can talk politics, films, good scotch, and flower arrangement, real estate. David was a writer. He had a higher degree in it. Maybe that's what attracted me to him at first. We were parallel bullshit artists, each well versed in our tiny fields.

David was good at observing. We'd go out to bars, and he'd sit quietly in the background, nursing his beer, even when we were surrounded by my friends, by good people. Before he met me, he said, he'd hardly spent time with anyone. His best and only friend, Georgia, had three children and a paraplegic fetish. On her resume was an ex-husband who didn't pay child support, then a man her children called Four-Fingered Tim, and finally, a completely paralyzed writer living across the country with whom Georgia communicated by e-mail. David was really good at being there to listen. To analyze. To communicate a well-worded response. David, like many of the men I've known, defined himself through the misgivings of others. Unlike me, he couldn't see himself. He needed to run at least five miles a day, and if more than twenty-four hours had passed without movement, he began to jitter. We'd watch a movie and he'd constantly move from the couch, to the floor, to the couch. He was five-foot-four with arms beefed to the size of my thighs. He loved to wrap his arms around me when other men looked at me in the bars we frequented. He'd ask me to wear certain things on certain nights – a pair of jeans I thought were too tight, a black

dress that hugged my hips in a way that made them look even smaller. He loved my eyes in dark mascara.

One person David didn't love was my neighbor, Katarina. She never went to college, but she's made it on her own. Spent her childhood taking care of her little brothers while her mother was smoking crack with one of many boyfriends. Katarina's mother once said, "I better move out of Seattle, 'cause I've fucked all the men worth fucking here."

But Katarina made it through what she's been handed. She cleans houses full-time, works six days a week, and was the first person to be kind to me here in Oregon. But I could have had the worst day, and then there's a knock on my door and Katarina standing there with her arms open, as if I'm the only person she's really wanted to see all day. She brings over old Saturday cartoons on VHS when I'm stressed from work and reorganizes my dish cabinets when she thinks I've made them too sloppy.

On a peculiarly warm night last November, Katarina knocked on my door. David was over and cooking in the kitchen. Katarina has fire-red hair and the largest blue eyes I have ever seen. She's beautiful. But that night, she stood in front of my door in the rain, her eyes red and raw, her shoulders trembling. I ushered her inside and put my arms around her. She put her head into the nook of my shoulder. David didn't get out of the kitchen.

"My stepfather just called," she said. "My little brother's dad? They found pot in my little brother's locker at school, and now he's suspended, and I can't get in contact with my mother. Fuck!"

I put my arm around her. I let her speak. I gave her a cigarette. David didn't say anything.

"Max is saying that my mom has a crack pipe in the bathroom cabinet again, and I don't fucking have the time, Heather."

"I know," I said.

"I have to get up at six in the morning for work!"

"I'm so sorry, Kat," I said. "I'll do anything I can to help."

We sat there for a while afterwards, holding hands. I don't think Katarina wanted me to say anything. She knows how hard I try to understand, because she asks me about structural functions in tonal harmony for the same reason.

"She's a product of her class," David said later, after she left. "That's why she didn't go to college, Heather."

He liked saying my name as if I didn't know what it was. He'd make it into three syllables. He liked ending sentences with it, as in: It's because you haven't learned to balance your time well enough, He-a-ther, I *know* graduate school is hard, He-a-ther.

"What about Georgia?" I asked. "Is Georgia also a product of her class?"

"She had a rough time growing up," he said. "She's got three kids, and a husband who doesn't pay child support. Katarina chooses her life."

"Georgia used children as an excuse to keep her failing marriage going," I said. "Everyone's a product of their class. Everyone's a product of something."

David stared at me.

"He-a-ther," he said. "This isn't about Georgia."

“Everyone’s a product except you,” I said. “You materialized one day.”

The thing is – Katarina, Georgia, and I – we all have broken families in common. There are many ways to be a broken family. I moved out of my parents’ house at fifteen, went in to college, and accrued sixty thousand dollars of debt. Georgia waited until the birth of her first child for college, and Katarina simply chose not to go. Katarina never knew her father, Georgia’s father occasionally popped in to drop off a present and no money, and my father had so much trouble believing I existed that he spent most of his time kicking me out of his way.

I can’t say it was for me like it was for Katarina. My mother has never smoked a cigarette, much less crack, as far as I know. My parents are married and own a small two-bedroom apartment in New York City. I’m their only child. My father and I don’t talk. My mother and I talk once a month, and she has said that he was good with me when I was small. Apparently, he used to practice calisthenics with me before my morning baths, but really, that’s all I know about him. I don’t know where he went to high school, whether he liked his sister, whether he was upset when his father died.

When I was thirteen, I came home crying from school. At the time, I wore thick glasses because my mother wasn’t willing to spend the money on thinner lenses “while I was still growing”, braces that I’d given up putting the tooth-colored bands around, because it didn’t make them any less visible, and a back brace – a thick plastic contraption for scoliosis that increased my pants size at least four sizes while my legs were matchsticks and poked up through my t-shirts, so that regardless of the weather, I was perpetually clad in sweatshirts. It must have been nearly eighty degrees the day I

went home crying. When I left school, I took off the sweatshirt, but the skin under my brace was sweating. I was having trouble breathing.

Five blocks from my house I couldn't take it anymore. I stopped at a restaurant and asked if I could use their bathroom. In the bathroom, I took off my shirt and undid the four Velcro straps of the brace. I took off the thin wool tube that separated the brace from my skin. I propped up the brace on the floor against the door. I could feel real oxygen against my skin.

I wanted to leave the brace there, but I compromised, and hauled it down side streets back to our apartment. I had to hold up my pants with one of my hands while I held on to one Velcro strap of the brace and the bottom dragged against the ground. It didn't matter. I could feel the warm air on my skin. My skin could breathe.

I left the ugly thing in our front hall, walked into the kitchen, and put my head into my hands. I couldn't help but cry.

Twenty minutes later, I was sitting motionless, staring out the sixth-floor window of our apartment. I heard my father come home. I knew it was him by the intensity of the slam. My mother always closed the front door gently. We had a drafty hall.

"What the hell," I heard him say. "Heather..."

My father walked into the kitchen. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"Who hurt you?" he said. "Did someone hurt you?"

This made me cry harder.

"No one hurt me. It's been a hard day, Dad," I said.

"Do we need to call the police?" he said.

“No one hurt me,” I said. “At school,” I said, but I couldn’t stop crying, so everything else came out as gibberish.

“Why aren’t you wearing your brace?” he said. “The doctor said twenty-three hours a day.”

I cried.

“What are you crying for?” he said. “How will that help anything?”

I tried to not look at him and stare out the window, but my body kept betraying me. My shoulders shook. I felt like my throat was making my body convulse. My father continued to stand in the doorway.

“It’s just been a hard day,” I said shakily.

“We all have hard days, Heather,” he said. He paused, a long pause. “I’m going to go lie down. You calm yourself down in here. Your mother will be coming home from her piano students. She’ll be tired.”

I looked from the window at my father in the doorway and back.

“Yeah,” I said. My father walked away. I listened for the sound of doors. The bathroom door slammed, and I watched the customary four to six minutes on the microwave pass. I heard him mumble something to himself in the hall. Then, the bedroom door closed.

David grew up in a beautiful three-story house in the nicest part of Portland. His father was a doctor, his mother an architect who eventually gave up work and spent his father’s money remodeling the house. When David’s brother knocked up his

college girlfriend with their first child and decided to marry her, David's father bought them a house. David's family wasn't broken. Therefore, he wasn't broken.

What David loved about me most was my smile. When we first met and he'd stay over, we would sit around and smoke pot, and I would smile and bury my face into his chest. He kept staying over, and I kept smiling. I was alone otherwise, far away from New York City – and he was there at night. One day, he said he was in love with me. So, I fell in love with him too. I put on padded shorts and went on twenty-mile bike rides with him and his father. I twirled his nephew in the air. I wore mascara for him.

Ten months into my relationship with David, I flew to New York City for a week to visit my friends. The day before I left, he and I drove to Portland and got a swanky hotel. We went out to dinner, and I wore a black dress and glitzy black sandals. I noticed that he seemed to look past me during dinner.

“We'll go camping in August?” I said. “You wanted to take me camping.”

“We'll go camping,” he said. He glanced at me briefly, and the shadow of a smile passed across his face. The next day, he drove me to the airport.

“I'm worried,” I told him before I left for security. “I'm worried about not seeing you for a week.”

“There's nothing to worry about, babe,” he said. “Don't worry about a thing. I'll be right here when you get back.”

On the second night of my vacation, high school friends were coming over to my parents' place – my parents were traveling, but they'd left the spare key underneath the door – and David called. We'd talked earlier in the day about nothing in particular. He'd been in a coffee shop, he said, reading.

“Heather. Something's happened,” he said.

“Is it big?” I said. “Is everything okay? Just – some friends are coming up. Is everyone okay?”

“I'll talk to you later about it, Heather,” he said. He sounded like he was going to cry.

“No, baby,” I said. “You sound terrible. Let's talk about it now.”

“Okay,” he said. “You have to tell your friends to leave.”

I arranged to meet my friends at Joe's – a local pub – and called him back.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hi,” he said. “I'm leaving you. I'm driving to your apartment. I will leave your things, I will take my things, and I will go. I am leaving the key underneath your car tire – your friend Tom will get it.”

“What?” I said.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“What?” I said. “But I love you,” I said.

“That's not enough,” he said. “I don't love you,” he said. “When you left, I realized it. I don't love you. I can't love you, and I never will.”

When I came back to my apartment in Oregon, I found his drawer empty, my things mixed together in a giant garbage bag. He'd gotten me a pair of diamond-studded earrings for my birthday, and I found the original box. The receipt was still in it. I wondered if he'd tucked it there on purpose - so that I would know how much pretending to love me cost.

It's hard to talk to someone after something like that. I didn't call him again. I didn't e-mail him. I smiled into my mirror as if nothing had happened. One night, someone sent me a beer across a local bar, and I still don't know who it was.

I told my friends I wouldn't be single long. I never have been. Katarina was the only one who didn't say, "Heather, you need some time alone."

Katarina's boyfriend hasn't had a job for a year, but he doesn't cheat on her, either. Now. I'm not saying I sleep around. No flings, not like that. One year into another - one long break, time to heal, another long break. In a relationship, I break. After David, three weeks passed, and then I met Chris. I told Katarina about it, and she said, "Of course you did." I wasn't making long-term plans with Chris. I just needed someone to help me move on.

When I'd first come back to Oregon, a week after David's transcontinental break-up, she knew what had happened. She came over one day with a six-pack and cigarettes in the middle of the afternoon.

“Heather! You’re home! Open the door!” She yelled happily behind my door.

“Heather!”

“He was a douche,” she said when I got up and opened the door. “That’s something a douche does, Heather,” she said, and she handed me a cigarette.

I sniffed. It was nice, for the first time since David’s phone call, not to be told what to do.

“How is your brother?” I said.

“He’s a douche,” she said. “But he’s thirteen, so it makes sense.”

“Did you find your mom?” I said.

“She went up to Seattle to visit an ex-boyfriend,” Katarina said. “She thought Max would be with his father.” She glanced at me. “You know, my stepdad. We’re really close. He couldn’t handle my mom’s shit either, though.”

“I know,” I said.

“But I love my mom,” Katarina said. “She’s crazy, but I love her.”

“You don’t have a choice,” I said. “You can’t pick and choose.”

I hugged her in the doorway, and she hugged me back.

Recently, in the dark of a bed and breakfast room on the coast, Chris held me close. We’ve been together three months now. He’s an embalmer for a funeral home. He spends the day reconstructing the dead for their families’ goodbyes. He’s good at being there for other people.

I buried my face in Chris’s chest. We had been drinking wine and smoking cigarettes on our private deck, lying in a Jacuzzi tub. The sun was setting over the

horizon, and if we stretched our necks into the cold air, we could watch the waves crashing against the rocks underneath our window.

When I smile at Chris, I can see that cockeyed look in his face that reminds me of what I used to know as love. The eyebrows are slightly furrowed even while the eyes crinkle with happiness. I try to feel it too, but I'm afraid, and my chest hurts.

After we climbed out of the tub, we went inside, peeled off our robes, and slid under the covers. He buried his face in my hair. He held my waist.

Each time we drive anywhere, he opens my car door, because I love it. I told him so, and he insists, even if I've had one too many and he's driving my car. He tells me that I'm beautiful because he's convinced that I don't know it. Maybe Chris and I will get married, have a couple of kids. But then, maybe I'll win ten million in the lotto. Maybe I'll be Miss America. On certain days, I'm convinced I'm good enough for someone to build a statue of me. I practice smiling in front of the mirror, in front of the camera, in front of nobody – for nobody. Chris is maybe a genuine man.

David published a piece of writing recently – and it was my life, edited into pieces,. He used great words: barbed, serrated, splintered. Maybe not those words – maybe those are just my interpretations of the situation. I'm often incorrect. Reading it once was enough to make me sick. All I remember is that I was a character you could neither love nor hate – a character inherently damaged, beyond repair. Paused in time, so to speak. I held a knife to my jugular somewhere in the text, and in the text, I'd never put it down. I paused a bit when I read that, but it didn't hurt. I just paused.

It's been nice holding Chris recently, but soon I'll start to hide, and I fear he won't understand. My mirror will wail at me. I'll smile.

One Night

Jack and I stood at the far end of my husband's backyard and mine. The moon was beginning to fade in the indigo sky. I had been here alone before, waiting for the dawn. Dave always went to bed hours before I did. Always, when I saw the first traces of the sunlight, I would go inside and crawl into the heat of Dave's body.

Jack's wife, Grace, slept in the back bedroom of our pastoral house, all wood and painted as dark a green as the trees that surrounded it. Jack and I were cloaked in a tangle of oak tree branches and leaves, our arms touching through our thick fleece sweaters. We had known each other for five years then, friends from the first year of college, now halfway done with our doctorates in English – me in pedagogy, him, in the classics. We both knew how hard it was to hold back the tremor in each of our breaths.

It wasn't the kind of love that comes as a spark, not the chest clench that suddenly throws one off balance. Not the kind of love both of us already had, sleeping inside. Still, we had been waiting all night to be the only two people awake.

Earlier, while Grace and Dave were lighting the coals for our hamburgers, Jack and I had taken a walk down the country road outside our house. Dave and I, city folk, bought this house partially for the view of the barbed treetops surrounded by commodious sky. We knew it would mean a forty minute commute to both of our finally secured jobs, but it was worth it. Sometimes as we sat on the front porch, our fingers stained with the marinade of the chicken right off the grill, we talked about the child that we hoped would soon run up and down our earthen driveway. We bonded about the names this child would have.

“What do you think about Thomas?” I said.

“Thomas would be Tom. I like Tim a little better. Maybe Timothy,” Dave said.

“How about just ‘Thor’?” I said, waving my greasy hands around, and Dave and I cracked up.

I had known Grace as long as I had known Jack. They were high school sweethearts, and when I met Jack at the University of Southern California, Grace was in college an hour's drive away. Jack's devotion to Grace was admirable to me, was maybe one of the reasons I trusted him from the beginning. Both alone in a way, we drank beer and quoted passages from the books we were reading at the time: he, Beckett, me, Fitzgerald. While I got ready for dates, Jack sat in my room. Every few

minutes, I popped out of my tiny private bathroom for Jack's approval. Most of the time, he had a suggestion or two.

"Loosen on the eye makeup," he would say. "Your eyes are too good without it."

Voodoo it may be, but I attribute my first successful date with Dave to Jack's immediate approval. I was a little tired by dating at that point, so I just threw on my favorite jeans, a black t-shirt, and a pair of flat sandals. I combed my hair quickly, threw on some lip balm, and walked out of the bathroom.

"Ta-da," I said flatly.

"It's perfect," said Jack. I changed nothing, and a year and a half later, Dave and I were married at his parents' summer house on a lake in Connecticut. Grace and Jack were married not four months later. While Dave and I stayed in New Paltz, an hour and a half drive from New York City, Grace and Jack got positions in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Every few months, one of us would drive to see the other.

On our walk, Jack and I found a little pathway off the road. It wasn't marked as anyone's property, so we decided to follow it. After a slight climb downward, the road opened to a wide stream. Jack and I stood side-by-side, skipping rocks across the water in turns. Jack's was the first to bounce to the other side of the bank. He looked at me happily, and I was surprised to find that it made me happy too. When Dave and I skipped rocks, it always felt like a competition. With Jack, I didn't care to win. Maybe even the opposite. Our eyes met and separated again.

"How's work?" I asked.

“With the amount of time I spend reading about others’ interests, I have little time for my own,” said Jack. “But I guess it isn’t much different for you.”

“No, not much,” I said. We stood hushed for a little while, listening to the sound of flowing water. Jack picked up a big round stone and threw it into the middle of the river. It made a plunk as it disappeared under the surface.

“Remember when we would do nothing but read and drink beer?” he said.

“Yeah. Now it’s Thor,” I said.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just saying – jobs, kids. Potential kids, anyway.”

Jack smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “Grace keeps going on and on about her cervical mucus. Cervical mucus.”

“From cheap ninety-proof liquor to cervical mucus,” I said. “Cheers.” Our eyes met, but neither of us moved. I plunged a heavy rock into the water, and Jack laughed. We saw the rock fall through the water and land on the bottom.

“The coals are ready by now,” I said.

We walked back to the house, our sleeves touching. Suddenly, I stopped, turned, and punched Jack in the arm.

“What was that for?” he said.

“Nothing,” I said. “At all.” I couldn’t stop smiling. I wanted to kick myself. Why smile now, after all this time. Still, my mouth kept twitching into this stupid college grin. I looked away, towards the neighbors’ farmland.

“What’s the smile all about?” Jack said.

“Just smiling,” I said. “Beautiful here, isn’t it?”

“It is,” he said.

I punched him in the arm again.

“Dork,” I said.

“Nerd.”

“Beckett whore.”

While Grace and Dave carried the orange-sesame salmon from the grill, Jack and I made a salad in the kitchen. We kept adding ingredients. Peas, tri-colored peppers, celery, and even thinly sliced pickles. It seemed crazy, but in the end, the salad came together well. Dave and Grace commented on it once we’d all sat down at our antique cherry-wood table.

With the salmon, we drank Yengling from the bottle. All four of us toasted, and then Jack and I toasted again. We just lifted our eyebrows a little, that’s all. Then, we played Scrabble. After a while, Dave and Grace announced that they were tired. Dave whispered in my ear, “I hope you and Jack have the opportunity to talk a while.” Maybe Grace whispered something to Jack as well. Soon, it was just Jack and me, washing dishes and drying them with a towel. The crickets’ racket made its way through the windows as we washed.

When the dishes were dry, Jack offered to go outside for a smoke. We went outside and sat on the front porch. Our sleeves touched. Jack leaned into me in that way that made him seem like he wasn’t just my friend. I turned to him and looked him in the face.

“What’s going on here, Jackie-boy?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “You punched me in the arm.”

“You look like you’re about to kiss me,” I said.

“What if I was?” said Jack.

“Damn,” I said. I exhaled my cigarette sharply. I was still a little tipsy from dinner. So was Jack, I imagine.

He leaned his palm lightly against my lower back. I leaned into his palm. I stood up. He stood too.

I walked over the little bridge that separated the house and the garden without saying anything. He followed me. I thought I would stop there and we would talk, but I kept walking through the garden. I walked through some brambles and weeds, I pushed branches out of my way. I was on a mission.

A distance far enough away from my house where Dave and Grace slept, I turned to face Jack.

We kissed. I don’t know who kissed whom, but we really kissed. I grabbed at the back of Jack’s hair. We fell to the grass. I grabbed his hair. We were in the grass for a long time, pulling, clutching.

We stood on the porch afterwards for a while, smoking cigarettes in silence. It was not quite morning. The sky was a swirl of deep blue and gray. The clouds hovered heavy in the sky.

“I love my husband,” I said.

“I know. I love Grace,” Jack said.

He threw his cigarette over the porch railing, exhaled slightly, and walked into the near darkness of my husband's house and mine.

Worse Than No Love

The phone rang at 10:15. Matt and I were still asleep in his bed. I jumped out of bed, thinking it might be my mother, and it was. She and my father were going to Aruba for three weeks. They'd gotten the tickets on a last-minute special. Matt and I had just spent three weeks in the country, where cell phones didn't work. I wanted to wish my parents a good journey.

I heard Matt walk into the bathroom. The shower started running. I hated that, being alone in the shower when he had already showered. It was a weekend, and I was on the phone with my mother. He could have waited.

"You have to deal with the registrar to ensure your graduate insurance policy," my mother was saying. She was saying other things, too, but I'd stopped listening. I could only hear the shower water running.

Within ten minutes, Matt walked out of the bathroom. I watched him go into the living room as my mother talked into my ear. I watched him walk into the kitchen, open the refrigerator, close it again. Then he picked up the broom and dustpan. He started cleaning the cat's litter from the floor. I let my mother chatter as I pulled the phone away from my ear.

"Honey," I whispered to him. "You don't have to do that now. I'll take care of it."

"I thought I'd do it now," Matt said.

I told my mother I had to go. I hung up the phone, and I watched Matt sweep. He was wearing clean jeans. His dark hair was damp, and he was still shirtless. His dark skin was striped with sunlight from the window blinds.

"Matty," I said, running my hand along my pajama pants with multicolored kittens all over them. "You didn't have to get up right away."

"I didn't know how long you'd be gone," said Matt.

"It was my mother. I had to answer," I said.

"I didn't say you didn't have to answer," he said. "I just took a shower."

"I wish you could have waited for me," I said. I was trying to be sweet. He sometimes misinterpreted me when I was trying to be sweet. I pointed at the dustpan. "I could have cleaned that up later," I said.

"I just don't like seeing cat litter. You could have stayed in bed," Matt said. He walked to the kitchen area and leaned over the counter. "Do you want to go out for breakfast?" he said.

“Do you want to have sex?” I said. “I was hoping we could have sex.” I paused. “After we spent some time in bed together.”

Matt walked over to the couch. He sat down next to me. My cat was settled on a red pillow in the middle of the couch. I pulled my pack of Camels out of my purse, walked to the window of the living room, and lit a cigarette. I inhaled and blew the smoke out the window. The cloud of smoke hovered for a minute in front of the window. It dispelled in all directions.

Matt didn't smoke anymore. When we first met, he carried a pack of Organic Nat Shermans in the inner pocket of his leather jacket. Then he stopped smoking. I asked him about that once, and he said, “Before I met you, there wasn't so much smoke around.” He never told me to stand by the window, but he coughed if I sat on the couch, even if the window was open.

“I just think it was a strange time to clean the litter off the floor,” I said. “I'm still wearing pajamas, for chrissakes. How are we supposed to think about sex on a Saturday morning after three weeks in the country, if the first thing I see is you showering, and then cleaning the litter off the floor? I even whispered to you!” I said.

“I couldn't talk to you,” said Matt. “You weren't paying attention to me.”

“I was talking to my mother!” I said.

“For twenty minutes!” Matt said.

He looked great sitting shirtless on the couch. I wanted to tell him so. But you can't tell someone they look great sitting on a couch when they're scowling. I thought maybe I saw something behind the scowl: sadness, maybe. But with Matt, even after a year, it was so hard to tell. I ashed the cigarette out the window. I sighed.

“Well, what now?” I said.

“I don’t know, Meagan,” he said.

He sat on the couch and I stood by the window.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you,” he said.

I sat next to him. I waited for him to touch me. Outside, the sky was completely clear. A late-spring breeze ruffled the pages of a magazine on the glass table. I wanted to tell him it looked pretty, but he looked so unhappy, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

In the fall, when we’d first met, we took photographs of each other in pajamas in front of the same window after the first night I stayed over. When we kissed on the couch, we tipped it back and fell onto the floor. We kept laughing, kissing. That first night, I hadn’t brought my cat along. I left her at my apartment for the weekend. When I got to Matt’s apartment, he was waiting out in front for me. I rolled down the window with the car in gear and kissed him.

“Where’s Hallie?” he said.

“I decided to leave her at home,” I said.

“It’s too bad,” Matt said. He kissed the tip of my nose. “I was kind of looking forward to having both of you here.”

On the mornings that neither of us had to work, we woke up, wasted time drinking coffee and rolling around in the bedroom. We’d stumble down the street to Henry’s Place three blocks away and order something to share. Sometimes, we’d drive

to the woods afterwards and hike up some new hill to see a new view of the small city. At night, we drank beer and played pool at one of many bars Matt knew around town. Matt had grown up in the city. People knew him. When they saw us together, they smiled. *You're the one that's taken Matt*, they said. *We thought Matt may have found a girl*, they said.

On the couch now, I was willing myself to smile.

“Why can't we do this?” I said. “Why does this happen?”

Matt put his head in his hands.

“We'll work it out,” he said. “We'll get better.”

“But we're not getting better,” I said. “I want us to, but we're not.”

Matt reached out and put his hand on my knee.

I had a trip coming up, back home, thousands of miles away. Matt was staying here without me. It would give him an opportunity to catch up with his family, and I wanted to see my family and old friends without the pressure of his being there. It was hard on him the one time we did go to visit. My father was a hairdresser in the same town for twenty years; my mother was the bookkeeper of the business. When I was small, my father would come home from work, open a beer, and sing songs for us on the piano, which was always a little out of tune. My parents' house always had some kind of music playing: Pink Floyd, ancient Arabic love songs, Chopin, djembe rhythms from Ghana. My mother found them in used music stores that were always in strange neighborhoods with hundred-year-old houses.

Matt found my parents uncanny, maybe because his parents' house was modern and quiet. There were black leather couches and chandeliers. His father was a family physician who biked twenty miles a day and avoided alcohol of any kind, and his mother spent his father's money on renovating their massive house. They were nice enough to me.

"I can't help Hallie kicking litter on the floor," I said. "She does it all on her own."

"I know," he said. "But it's the same thing every day. You can't walk around in this place in bare feet anymore."

"I thought you liked Hallie," I said.

"I do like Hallie," he said. He looked at Hallie on the red pillow. She made a grunting noise and turned on her side. "I do," he repeated. The sky was practically aquamarine. I wanted us to fly in it.

"Then why with the cat litter?" I whispered. "I love you. I'm sorry about the cat litter. Just try to hear me out."

"I am," he said. "I do love you. I'm trying."

We'd had another argument a few weeks before the cat litter incident. We were sitting in my backyard, after a day of grading papers. It had been a tense day: Matt's father and brother were working at their country house, netting blueberry bushes, and he had wanted to go along. He hadn't told me earlier.

"I wish you'd told me you were going to be working all day," he'd said. "I could have gone out with my father and brother. I haven't seen them in a while."

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know anything was going on.”

“It’s just that you didn’t tell me you had other things to do. I’m happy to spend the day with you, but I don’t see my family much anymore.”

“We had dinner with them twice this week,” I said. “I like your family. You’re welcome to spend as much time with them as possible. I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know I’d have this much work to do.”

“I don’t see my friends much either, anymore,” he said.

“You can see your friends whenever you want, Matt,” I said. I started drawing in the corner of a paper. “You choose to hang with me. I thought it was what you wanted.”

“It was,” he said. It was one of the hottest days of the year, and he was standing under the sun, getting darker. He was always standing around shirtless. Everyone had to look at him.

“Hermes,” I said.

“What?”

“I’m drawing Hermes on this paper,” I said. “You could work on some of your own stuff. I’m sorry it didn’t work out the right way. Let me know ahead of time. If it’s something important to you, you should do it.”

In the early part of the evening, we went out hiking near my apartment. I’d suggested it. I thought it might appease him. He was quiet on the walk, staring into space. I liked to walk in the woods, talk to other people with me about an unusually shaped tree or rock. For Matt, it was exercise. He wanted to get his heart rate up. We’d hold hands for a little while, but when we got to the hills, Matt sprinted. Matt had been

a wrestler back in college. He was used to running every day. I liked to run, too, but not all the time. I wanted us to just walk slowly, hold hands.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out today,” I told him on the walk.

“Me too, Meagan,” he said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’ll make dinner when we get home.”

He made a phone call to his brother in the driveway while I set wine and candles in the backyard. I let the marinade sit while he was on the phone. After a while, he came back and sat down. I brought dinner to him, and we sat for a while. I waited for my heart to relax.

I don’t know how we got into a conversation about the construction of meaning. We were talking about music, plays, and novels. Matt didn’t play any instruments, and that must have been my starting point. He was saying that music was more like a play than a novel. He was saying that in a novel, all of the meaning is contained within the text, but with music and plays, one had to hear them to acquire the greatest possible meaning. I was saying that the three were incomparable, that they were different mediums. I didn’t care to argue about it. I wanted him to tell me something good. It didn’t have to be specific, but I wanted him to smile while he said it. I wanted the candles and the sound of the night insects to mean something to him.

“But we study plays,” I said. “In college. Why study plays if there’s no value in reading them to yourself? Why study any of Shakespeare?”

“All I’m saying is that you have to hear it to achieve its greatest possible meaning. You also have to hear music to achieve the greatest possible meaning. But you don’t have to hear a novel. All the meaning is contained within the text.”

“But then, what about audiobooks?” I said. “Wouldn’t you say that someone who can’t read can still get the greatest possible meaning out of a novel read out loud?” I said. “I mean, with plays, what constitutes the greatest possible meaning? You can have *Romeo & Juliet*, the traditional adaptation, you can have *Romeo & Juliet* with Tybalt as the lead shooting his victims with pistols. With music, if you’re reading Tchaikovsky’s *Funeral March* and performing it, you’re either playing it exactly as it is written, or you’re no longer playing Tchaikovsky, you’re playing something else. They’re not the same,” I said.

“All I’m saying is that both involve listening,” he said. He did the same thing he always did when we argued: he crossed his arms over his body and closed his eyes, as if he was trying to hear himself better. “They’re closer together.”

“I want to stop this,” I said. “There’s no point to this argument.”

I pushed my chair away from the table, walked inside, and sat on the couch. I felt tears coming. Once, we’d sat on my couch and laughed – about people wearing headsets while walking on the street so it looked as if they were talking to themselves, about SUV drivers in speeding lanes, about nothing at all.

Matt came in and sat on the stool opposite from the couch. I held my head in my hands.

“I don’t want to argue anymore,” I said. “I don’t even understand what’s so important to you.”

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.” He looked even, composed. He always did.

We walked back outside and sat back down at the table. We sat in silence for a moment. In the spring, as a joke, we’d put some *Miracle Grow* on the edges of the

backyard fence, and those weeds grew almost three feet tall. Even at midnight, the air was warm. I looked at Matt. His eyes were closed, his arms crossed in front of him. I waited for him to open his eyes. Once he did, they wandered slowly from my kitchen window to my face.

“But they are closer together,” he said. “Plays to music. Give me that. They are closer together.”

I sighed and didn’t answer. I knew there was nothing I could say. From the other side of the yard, we heard a sound like leaves crunching. We looked over and saw my neighbor, Greg. He was coming home from his friend’s house, a little unsteady on his feet. I waved hello.

“Greg!” yelled Matt. “Come here. I want to ask you something.”

I didn’t say anything. Greg walked over to the table where Matt and I sat on opposite sides. It was oddly appropriate, and I laughed. Matt looked at me as you’d look at a puppy that just peed on the carpet: controlled, even, disapproving. .

“What’s up, Greg?” I said. “How’s your night going, Greg?”

Greg’s eyes wandered from me to Matt. Matt’s eyes held Greg for a moment,.

“We’re just talking,” Matt said.

“We’re having a discussion, Greg,” I said.

“Meagan,” said Matt.

I laughed again. I took a sip of my drink.

“It’s funny, Matty,” I said. “Come on. Let’s get Greg’s input.”

I walked inside. I pulled a beer out of the fridge, opened it, went back outside, and handed Greg the beer. I picked up my beer from the table and handed Matt his drink.

The cigarettes were sitting on the table, next to my glass. I hadn't looked at them all night. As we held our beers, I picked up the carton, opened it, and held it out to Greg. I put a cigarette in my mouth and waited. Greg pulled a lighter out of his pocket and lit his cigarette. He leaned over and lit mine, too. Matt watched us smoking.

"Well, cheers, guys," I said. We clicked glasses. It was quiet for a moment as everyone drank.

"Greg, what would you say?" Matt asked. "Meagan and I were having a discussion. Would you say that music is more like a play, or a novel? In writing, you know? I'm saying that a play and music both ultimately need to be heard," he said. "And in a novel, all of the meaning is already there."

Greg, a little drunk, swayed. I didn't say anything. I was suddenly extremely tired.

"Well, I think they're different," said Greg. "I just don't think it really matters."

"Huh," I said. I took a deep pull off my cigarette.

"Well, it doesn't, really," Matt said. He held his beer glass in front of him, obscuring his face.

“I’m going home,” Greg said. His girlfriend, Dawn, was asleep inside his apartment. Dawn worked housekeeping in a hotel. She had never gone to college. She didn’t come over much when Matt was around.

Greg walked across the backyard and shot a couple of glances at us as he unlocked his back door. His door slammed shut. Matt and I sipped our beer.

“Okay, you’re right,” I said. “Maybe you’re right. A novel wasn’t written to be performed.”

Matt gazed evenly at me.

“You always have to be right,” he whispered. “Why can’t you ever concede?”

“I just conceded,” I said. The insects were loud. It was late.

“You didn’t really mean it,” he said.

When I woke up in the morning, I threw the alarm clock across the room by the electric cord. Matt woke up with the sound of the crash and found me sitting up, still holding the electric cord. The rest of the clock was scattered across the bedroom floor.

We’d said everything there was to say about cat litter. Matt rose from the couch and waited. I stood up and walked to the bedroom, Matt behind me. We undressed, had sex without foreplay, hard, fast. Afterwards, we lay still for about a minute before Matt headed to the kitchen to call his mother and I headed to the bathroom to shower.

“I hate the way you come,” I wanted to tell him. I whispered it to the shower nozzle. “I hate it with you.”

On our fifth date, months before, Matt and I had gone to the coast. It was a cold and clear day. The leaves on the trees that lined the empty highway were just beginning to turn into the copper of fall. The sun fell through the leaves and onto the highway, forming patterns of light. That night, we drove back and he stayed over at my place the first time.

“It’s beautiful here,” I told him as we reached the top of another hill that revealed new miles of lush mountains. He sat in the passenger seat. “You live in a beautiful state, Matthew.”

“I always thought the tops of the trees looked like a fence of green against the sky,” he said.

“I’ve thought that too,” I said, and through the corner of my eye, I saw him smile.

We parked off the side of the highway and walked right along the surf, holding hands, our pullovers zipped to our necks. We tried to kiss, but the wind kept whipping my hair around my face. Matt brushed it out of my face and held it down.

When we got back to my apartment, we peeled off our shoes, coats, and socks, and sat next to each other on my couch. My cat settled next to us. I buried my face in Matt’s neck.

In the morning, I walked Matt to the door.

“I’ll come back tonight,” he said. “If you’d like.”

“Already?” I said. “You don’t have to come back tonight.”

“I want to,” said Matt. “I’ve got a good feeling.”

I pulled him close to me and put my arms around his waist.

“Me too,” I said. “I’ve got a good feeling too.”

Months later, when we’d finally split, I got an e-mail from Matt. *I am a person who thought that some love was enough, it said. It's not. Limited love isn't enough. It's worse than no love at all, it said. And it's all I have for you, it seems, and that's my failing.*

I printed that e-mail, but I don’t know where it is anymore. I’ll probably find it in a box someday.

The morning of the incident with the cat litter, Matt and I went out for breakfast.

“Mushroom omelet,” I suggested. “Eggs benedict. Waffles.” His face was somewhere else, eyebrows slightly down-turned.

“Yeah,” he said. His eyes wandered over the menu.

I ordered a mushroom omelet; he ordered one with peppers, onions. His omelet arrived first. He sent the toast back because it was unbuttered. The waitress, an older woman with heavy eye makeup and a kind face, apologized for our delay.

“I love you, Matty,” I said, but he didn’t hear me. He was looking in the direction of the kitchen. He was waiting for his toast.

Telescope

Even after J.D. started getting worried, I kept dreaming about living on Europa. I couldn't stop searching for pictures on the web. I wanted to get closer to everything beyond earth.

The surface of Europa looks like children have sledded over it. Scientists suspect that underneath the sixty miles of ice, a warm salty ocean flows. The ice cover is smooth compared to Jupiter's other moons. No craters, not really. The ocean underneath could have covered the entire surface of the planet when the sun was younger and hotter. I thought: life could have existed there when the sun was hotter. I may have lived there.

J.D. thought my fascination was temperamental. One day, we hiked a hill in the woods outside our house. He hightailed it up the hill like lightning. He was

looking at his feet as he was hiking. Didn't want his ankles to give out, he said. Needed to see the ground.

"Check out this sunset," I told him. I was trying to keep up and I kept tripping over my feet. The sunset looked like a red rose had been crushed into the sky. There were rose wisps in the blue.

"It's pretty," he said. He hopped a couple of stones on the hill.

"Beyond that are other planets," I said. "Imagine! Places where we could theoretically go!"

"Absolutely," he said. "Let me know how it turns out for you."

I bought the telescope when J.D. and I first got to Burlington. I found the telescope in town at a little antique store. Well, the word "Antiques" was painted on the awning, but it was mostly just used stuff. The telescope was in a pile of antique canes. It didn't have a price tag. I thought it was a sign. I'd just moved out to the middle of the woods. Why not a telescope?

I asked the shopkeeper about it, and he said he'd take fifty bucks. He was about sixty, with gray hair and a giant gray beard.

"It's worth more than fifty," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Well, how much is it worth?"

"You found it without a price tag, so I'll give it to you for fifty," he said. "But it's worth much more than that." He wrapped the telescope in torn paper bags. He pulled a box from underneath the register, and put the telescope in the box.

"Nice of you," I said. "Thanks."

“It’s no problem,” he said. “So long as you come back.”

I laughed.

“You new in town, or just visiting?” he asked.

“I teach at the university,” I said. “So, new.”

“Good for you,” he said. “It’s nice out here. You could take a look at some bright stars with this telescope. Nothing like the city.”

“I bet,” I said. He put a piece of tape on the box to keep it closed. He handed the telescope to me.

“Enjoy,” he said. “And come on back now that you live in town.”

“I will,” I said. “Good night.” I started to back towards the door.

“Wait,” said the shopkeeper. “I have a book. You might want it with your telescope.” He ducked down underneath the counter. The counter was a semi-circle. It clearly had a lot of storage space in it. The shopkeeper reappeared, holding the book. It was hardbound and old, the cover covered in a thin film of dust. *Exploring the Night Sky* was written on the cover.

“I can have this?” I said. “Seriously?”

The shopkeeper laughed. “It’s free with the telescope. Let’s leave it at that.”

I leaned in and took the book from the shopkeeper. I opened it up and looked at the pictures. There were charts describing how to locate stars, see the craters on the moon up close, and look at all the planets lined up behind the earth.

“Thank you for this,” I said. “Good night.”

“Good night,” said the shopkeeper.

I walked outside holding the telescope in my hand. It was heavy. Real weight. I kept the telescope on the passenger seat of my car as I drove home. It was turning into a clear night. The road leading to our house was graveled. The telescope shook in the front seat as the car bounced on the gravel.

J.D.'s car wasn't in the driveway. He was still at the university. He was assigned to teach late afternoon classes, and he was probably still in his office. He'd been coming home late all week. I parked on the left side of the little garage and shut off the engine. I took the telescope from the front seat and went outside. It was so dark outside that I could hardly make out the shadow of the house from the garage. I walked quickly down the hill from the garage to the house.

The house was small and cozy. It had old-style latches on the doors, and there were doors everywhere, separating every single room. There was even a door in front of the stairwell. In the front vestibule, doors on four sides surrounded you. To the left was the living room, to the right the kitchen. The stairwell behind the door led to the bedroom, the study, and the bathroom.

I went upstairs to the bedroom. The bedroom had a very low ceiling and a skylight that was so large that a person could easily climb through it to the roof. There was a little flat space at the roof right above the bedroom where someone could sit. It decided the house for us. We set up the bed so that our pillows faced the skylight.

On the bed, I took off the paper surrounding the telescope. I picked it up carefully, climbed up on the bed, and opened up the skylight. I put the telescope up on the roof first and climbed up after it.

When I first looked through the telescope, I saw a blur. I didn't know what I was doing. I suppose I could have looked up the adjustments on the web, but I wanted to learn the instrumentation myself. I turned the knobs and, gradually, the stars came into focus. There were hundreds of them I couldn't see before. Some were extremely bright. I zoomed into one of the bright stars.

As I looked through the telescope, I thought of the shopkeeper behind his desk. What was his deal? Was he a widow? Had he lived in the town from childhood? Probably, and he was probably a widow. One day, his wife saw a string hanging from the sky and she touched it and was pulled up into the stars. He has a cat named Henry. He wakes up each morning and eats two eggs with salt and lemon-pepper.

“Jamie.”

I almost dropped the telescope from the roof. J.D. was kneeling on the bed, looking up at me.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m on the roof.”

“I can see,” he said. “I said your name a couple of times.”

“I didn’t hear.”

“Zoning out?”

“How was your day?” I said. I looked at his eyes behind his thin-wired glasses. The collar of his shirt was a little matted.

“As always,” he said. “I finally had it out with that kid who was giving me trouble. The one who kept interrupting everyone, including his classmates? He’s been taken down a notch.”

“About time,” I said. “I’m glad.”

“I talked it out with him in the office. I think he understands now.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Oh, you know.” J.D. shook his head. “Why talk about this stuff?” He ran one hand through his hair. “What do you have there?”

I put my hand on the telescope.

“I got it in town,” I said. “At a strange little antique store. I’ve been looking at stars.”

“Cool,” J.D. said. He smiled. “Jamie found a new interest.”

“Yeah,” I said. “There was the strangest shopkeeper.”

“Yeah? Well, you want to bring you and your telescope inside? We can make dinner, have a beer.”

“I was looking at a really bright star a moment ago,” I said. “It’s still in the same place.” I pointed at the telescope to prove my point.

“I’m glad,” J.D. said. He disappeared from the skylight window. “Come on down to me. Come down - let’s make food. It’s been a long day.”

I stood on the roof for a minute. Then, I climbed down, put my hands around J.D.’s waist, and we walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. Through the kitchen windows, I could see our two cars sitting next to each other at the top of the hill.

That was maybe two months after we moved to Burlington and found our house. A family with two children lived at the house before us, and they were expecting a third. They were buying a house even farther out of town. They were exhilarated at the thought of owning a house, they said. They asked us some questions.

Why were we moving to Burlington? What was bringing us over to the rural side of the east? Did we have children?

“No,” I said. The woman, Linda, looked at my unadorned ring finger, and I looked at her ring. It was a simple round diamond on a gold band. It shone brightly in the sun. I looked over at J.D., but he was at the far edge of the front yard with Linda’s husband.

“Maybe someday,” I told Linda. “We like the house, though.”

My marriage discussions with J.D. took place quite regularly for a while, when we had been together for maybe a year. We even argued about it as if we were engaged. I always wanted to have a small wedding. Thirty people maximum, summer time, cupcakes for a wedding cake, and possibly even a barefoot Pagan shaman to invoke the four elements and bless our future spiritual journey in a non-denominational kind of way. J.D. had different ideas.

“There’s my brother, and my sister, and her kids. Then there’s my father’s brother, and his kids,” he had said one night over dinner.

“They don’t all have to be there, J.D. A wedding can be an intimate thing,” I said. “Why would you want relatives at your wedding who you don’t even know so well? Just to prevent offending someone?” I felt pretty strongly about the whole thing.

“Not everyone can live like you,” said J.D.

“Well, what about your fifth cousin twice removed? Should he be there?” I put down my fork. “I don’t know what ‘live like you’ even means.” I picked the fork back

up and started stabbing at the chicken. “But I’m pretty sure you’re insulting me for no reason-”

“Damn it, Jamie,” said J.D. He chewed his chicken, swallowed, and took a long swig of his beer. Then, he sighed. “It’ll work out,” he said to me.

We never did get engaged. But we did things together. We made plans. I finished my PhD and we started looking around for jobs. Somehow, UVM offered jobs to both of us, and both of us moved. Together. Wasn’t that commitment?

I started spending more time outside with the telescope when I was waiting for J.D. to come home. Often, when he came home, I was asleep on the bed with the telescope still on the roof. I went to the local used bookstores and bought more books on how to locate stars. I downloaded star charts for my geographical position in the sky. Virgo was one of the brightest constellations visible from our roof. The maiden star of the harvest. The harvest of what, I don’t know. I started keeping the charts on the bedside table. Sometimes I fell asleep with the charts in my lap, and when I woke up, they were scattered around the floor.

I got lost inside my head at the office. I walked past people greeting me on the stairway. I started talking about space while teaching literature. I wanted my students to think about how small we were compared to everything else. Luckily, literature is effective at pointing out individual insignificance.

We were reading Chekhov's *Misery* around Thanksgiving. Smallness and all the other best story elements: a man, a carriage driver, alone, his only son recently dead, his wife dead, grieving, his customers unwilling to listen to his story. After a day of feeling inconsequential, he goes to put his horse away for the night, and realizes that he can talk to the horse. So he releases his grief by telling the horse about it. That's all. We had a discussion in class about whether that ending was depressing or not.

"At least he's not alone," someone in the front row offered.

"Are you kidding? He's alone, man. He's talking to his freaking *horse*. You'd have to be twisted to think that that's a happy place to be," someone else said.

Lindsay Cleveland, my class discussion leader, raised her hand.

"It's both," she said. "It's better for him to be with the horse than with nobody. But it's not a happy place to be, either."

After class let out, I felt extremely tired. I decided to go home and sleep. J.D. wasn't going to be home until later.

At five, it was already dark outside. It smelled like winter, like glacial wind. The winter before J.D. and I moved to Burlington, we used to take a lot of walks through various city parks. One day after it snowed, we went out for a walk. We saw a little kid sitting in the middle of the park in a gray wool coat, reading on the icy bench. He looked immersed in the book, not cold or lost. His blonde curls poked out of his hat.

"Our kid would be like that," I said to J.D. "Reading out in the snow. Sounds about right."

J.D. laughed and ruffled my hair.

When I fell asleep at home, I dreamt about Europa. It wasn't out of nowhere: I'd been looking over the pictures. I dreamt about walking across Europa's icy surface, the giant face of Jupiter looming in front of me. The ground felt real underneath my feet, and I was just walking straight ahead on top of ice, the wind chafing my face. As I walked, I could see Jupiter's earth-sized storm moving across the planet's surface. Jupiter looked so close. With every step I took, it seemed a little bigger and closer. It looked like a new sun.

When I woke up, I could hear J.D. moving around downstairs. It was just past nine. I covered my face with the pillow on the bed, and imagined Europa as an ocean with rock beaches. We could go, establish some kind of technology to maintain the atmosphere. There would be other people there. It would be a cold planet where people could just live in peace. It would be gelid and wonderful.

I got up quietly and walked downstairs. J.D. was in the kitchen, making something on the stove.

"Good morning," he said.

"I was tired," I said.

"It's okay," he said.

I stepped up next to him. "Remember that moon, Europa, I told you about?"

He nodded.

"I was dreaming about walking on it. I could see Jupiter. And then the strangest thing – I was thinking about living there."

J.D. turned to me. "In your dream?"

"In life," I said. I laughed. "We discussed *Misery* in class today. Whether it was depressing or uplifting. Someone mentioned that it was an in-between. Better than being alone, but it still *sucks*." I smiled at him. "Don't you think?"

He stared at me. I must have looked ridiculous: my hair matted on one side, talking about living on other planets and Chekhov.

"What's gotten into you, Jamie?" he said.

"I'm tired," I said. "I'm being mean. I'm sorry." I shuffled my feet, looked him in the face. I felt a draw in my throat.

"I'm going to go to the roof," I said. "To clear my head."

"I'll call you for dinner," he said. I could see it bothered him that I was leaving.

I leaned over and kissed him.

"You're a pal," I said, as cheery as I could be. I walked to the stairs. Before I headed upstairs, I turned to J.D. He stood in front of the stove, holding his spatula, watching me intently.

"Jamie," he said.

"Yes." He opened his mouth and closed it again. I looked at him without saying anything. I waited.

"Nothing," he said. "I'll find you when dinner is ready." He smiled without any depth in his eyes. I looked up the stairs. I took a breath.

"We've been together for six years," I said. "Next month. Six years."

J.D. stood silently for a minute. Then, he put the spatula down and walked over to me. He put his arms around my waist. He put his chin on my shoulder.

He could never verbalize what he was thinking. He didn't understand that his arms around me just weren't enough. Still, I couldn't make him speak.

"I love you," he said. I contemplated shoving him into the fire on the stove and running barefoot into the woods. Then again, I'd just have been looking for him the entire time.

"I love you too," I said. "Thanks for making dinner." I pulled away from him and went up the stairs.

The next morning, J.D. had to teach and I didn't. I decided to drive to the antique store instead of lesson planning. Once I got there, though, I hovered outside for a minute before going in. I walked around the building and looked into some of the store windows. There didn't seem to be anybody else in there. The shopkeeper sat in his chair in the middle of the register, reading something hardbound. I considered leaving. I thought he wouldn't remember me. Instead, I walked around to the back, sat down on the back porch, and lit a cigarette.

I sat there long enough to smoke one full cigarette, wait, and light another. I was halfway through the second one when the back door opened. I looked up and saw the shopkeeper. He seemed smaller than he did sitting behind the semicircular counter. He stood at the threshold of the back door, looking down at me. I wanted to run. Instead, I casually flicked my cigarette.

"Hello," I said.

“Hello. The woman who bought the telescope,” he said. “On the back porch.”

“You remember me,” I said. It sounded stupid. “I was going to go in.”

The shopkeeper lit a cigarette. He looked at it, and back at me. Then he laughed.

“So you came to the back porch,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. I looked ahead. I felt like something magical was going to happen.

“So, why is the woman who bought the telescope on the back porch?”

The smoke coming off the end of my cigarette blew into my face. I took a sharp drag of it and slowly let it out. I thought of Linda with her shiny ring looking at me when J.D. and I got the house. Judging me.

“My boyfriend won’t ask me to marry him,” I said. “We’ve been together for six years.” I looked up at the shopkeeper, my cat-owning widow. He was taking shallow pulls from his cigarette. For a long time, he looked to be in thought. The mountains were nothing compared to the sky. The sky was tremendous behind him.

Five Stages, Out of Order

Acceptance

On April 26, 1999, my best friend from childhood and first lover Alec Greene woke up at 8:30 a.m. with the sharpest hunger he'd ever experienced. He walked into the kitchen and took out a carton of eggs and a stick of butter. He opened the egg carton and discovered that there were two eggs left. On the stove, he melted the butter, and cracked one of the eggs into the pan. He smashed the second egg on the floor.

Alec cooked the first egg. He added parsley, basil, white pepper, and a splash of cayenne. He would have poached the egg and put it on an English muffin. He would have added a splash of garlic salt on top. Later that day, his mother, Anna, would find these spices still sitting on her counter, English muffin crumbs on the white porcelain plate.

To the table in front of the living room window overlooking Manhattan, Alec brought his egg and muffin and his journal. While he ate, he finished reading the last ten pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I had given him a couple of months before.

After he finished his journal entry, Alec showered. I imagine he took a while in the shower, because when I saw him later, his skin still smelled of organic spiced soap – just a hint. Out of the shower, Alec walked to his bedroom and took out his paints. The most recent painting he'd been working on was of a blue sun. The rays of the sun extended like tentacles to the edge of the canvas. Razor wire held the sun to the orange sky. That's the way it looked when I'd last seen it, anyway.

The next time I saw it, the sun was still be blue, but the rays no longer extended to the edges of the canvas. There weren't any rays at all. The sun, however, looked brighter, almost ultramarine. For all that, the razor wire was still be there, holding the sun to the sky as if it would otherwise float off the canvas.

Alec did not clean up the paint after he was done. Instead, he walked into the bathroom and vomited blood.

On his hands and knees, and with his mouth full of the taste of iron, Alec crawled to the liquor cabinet in the living room. He pulled out a bottle of Jack's, and he took a swig. Lightheaded, he walked back into his bedroom, where he lit a cigarette. After his cigarette, he felt nauseous, so he walked back into the bathroom and vomited again. He stood up, walked back to the bedroom, lit another cigarette, and picked up his journal. It was 1:30 p.m. While blood trickled out of his mouth, he wrote a journal entry to me so I would know what had happened that day.

At 2:30 p.m., Alec called the Mount Sinai Hospital and asked to be re-admitted. When the medics arrived, Alec sat on the living room couch with a glass of Jack Daniels and a burning cigarette, his shirt covered in his blood and his teeth stained red.

Bargaining

On April 26, 1999, 4:00 p.m., someone ran into my high school theatre to tell me that I had a phone call in the main office. On the phone were my friends Nicholas and Beverley.

“You have to come right now,” they said.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Come, damn it!”

From the office, I ran to the train station only to find that I had missed the most recent train and that the next one wouldn't come for twenty minutes. I waited. I rapped my hands against the rail. *He fainted*, I thought. *He passed out. They found a marrow donor. If I rap my feet three times against the floor, I will have good luck for seven years. If he can only wait until I get there, we will both live forever.*

Anger

The chance of remission in intermediate-level myeloid leukemia is 48 percent. The day we discovered that Alec's chemo failed for the second time, he and I were

playing a Russian game called “Witch” in his hospital room. The concept behind “Witch” is that one splits up all the cards among the players, who then throw out all paired cards, but do not throw out the Queen of Spades. Then one person pulls from the other person’s card deck. If he pulls out one of his missing pairs, he throws out both of the cards. The person left with the Queen of Spades loses.

The doctor who came in with Alec’s chart looked like someone had smashed him on the side of the head with a brick. He also looked about nineteen.

“Uhm,” he said. He cleared his throat. We looked at him.

“Um,” he said. Alec threw a card from the discard pile at him. He’d been at the hospital for a while already. He’d gotten to know the people there. They’d even allowed him to have his paints in his room.

“Spit it out,” Alec said. “Are we fighting the good fight?”

“Unfortunately,” the doctor said. “The cytogenetic abnormalities associated with your level of progression were too strong for the chemo. We didn’t see any normal cells. I’m sorry.”

Alec looked at his hands for a minute.

“Vlada, do you want to go for a walk?” he whispered.

“Sure,” I said. The doctor looked at us apologetically. Alec looked at the doctor. The doctor hovered uncomfortably. Alec looked at the IV plugged into his hand.

“Do you mind unhooking me so that I could take a walk with my best friend?” he said.

“I don’t know if it’s such a good idea,” he said. Alec took a long breath and exhaled.

In my life, I only saw Alec lose his temper once. When I was five and Alec was six, we were visiting my grandparents’ summer house. One day, we went swimming in the pond a few streets away. On the shore, we left our towels, and I left my watch. We dove in and swam to the middle of the lake. We held a contest to see how long we could stay up by only paddling with our hands. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Alec shouted.

“Move it!” he yelled. *Otoidi!*

Alec started swimming towards the shore at high speed. I looked to the shore. Two boys no older than us stood on the shore holding our towels and my watch. When they saw us, they went running.

Alec got to the shore, jumped out of the water, and started running after them. A couple of strokes behind him, I caught up to the shore. I ran out in Alec’s direction.

When I found him, he had repossessed the towels and the watch, and the two boys were standing and facing him, their hands and faces covered in sand. Alec had a bloody lip, but there was no blood on the boys. When they saw me, they backed away farther. I was taller than they were at the time and clearly bigger.

“Girl!” they yelled at Alec “Coward!” *Devochka! Troos!* But then, they ran.

“What did they do to you, Alec?” I yelled. “What did they do!”

“I just tried to rip the stuff out of their hands, and the taller one threw me down and punched me in the face. But I didn’t let go,” he said.

“Why, Alesha? They could have hurt you,” I said.

“But they took your things,” he insisted. “Nobody can take your things. Not if I’m around.”

After Alec exhaled, he looked at the doctor one more time.

“Unhook me,” he said.

“I shouldn’t,” the doctor said.

“Unhook me now, damn it!” Alec yelled. “I’m fucking dying! Just fucking unhook me so that I can fucking take a walk!”

“It would really be better for you to think reasonably,” said the doctor.

“Okay,” said Alec. He threw his feet over the edge of the bed, jumped out of it, and ran out of the room. I heard the tape holding the IVs in place rip off his skin. The IV bag fell to the ground as Alec ran out of the room.

I was the one who had the “witch” card.

Denial

On April 26, 1999, 6:00 p.m., I walked into Alec’s room at Mount Sinai hospital. Nicholas and Beverley were sitting in the cafeteria downstairs, waiting for news over wilted lettuce. Alec’s mother was crying to herself in the hall.

Alec’s eyes were barely open. He was dying, and he was in pain. Outside the hospital window, the sun was as red as the blood that I’d gotten used to seeing drain out his body in tiny tubes. When he saw me, his eyes welled up.

I can't explain how beautiful the sunset was that day, but I can tell you what it felt like when I climbed into bed next to him. He was as warm as a furnace. His skin smelled of soap and him, like blood and sex.

That last part probably seems disgusting. But three months before, after I'd already known that he might not get a remission, we did have sex, after a night out at a show. We came back to his apartment, undressed each other, and climbed under the covers. I'd known his body since I was five years old.

Afterwards, his mother knocked on the door and asked whether the two of us rascals would like some tea. We did. We laughed as we dressed, and then the three of us, together for twelve years, sat in the living room and drank his mother's Russian tea.

"So," she said a couple of days later. "Have you two—"

"Yeah, Mom," said Alec.

"About time," she said. "Everyone was wondering."

In the hospital bed, I kissed Alec's ear. I kissed his neck, his cheeks, the side of his mouth.

"Look," I said. "Alec, look what a beautiful sunset in New York."

Alec's eyes were closed. He didn't look.

"Alec," I said. "You can hear me, right? I love you," I said.

Alec's hand clenched against my arm. I held his thin body with my eyes closed. I kissed the tip of his nose.

I didn't think I would ever live a cliché, but at the moment that I opened my eyes, I saw tears on his cheeks. He didn't want to die. But no bone marrow donor ever came to give him a hope for healthy cells back.

Once, when the first round of chemo failed, he punched a hole in his bedroom's wall. *I'll never go to college*, he had said. *I'll never hang in a gallery. I'll never get to marry you. I'll never raise a child. I'll never...*

I kissed his tears and his face and his mouth and closed my eyes. I fell asleep with him on the hospital bed.

Alec was declared dead at 8:12 p.m. When the doctors got upstairs, they found me curled up in bed next to him.

Depression

On December 4, 2002, I am sitting in a hospital bed, waiting for a bunch of surgeons to extract the extra marrow in my body through needles that look like swords. The recipient is a seven-year-old girl with the same form of leukemia that Alec had. She has a better prognosis, being younger and diagnosed earlier.

The marrow transplant will work. Tomorrow morning, her family will cheer in my hospital room. Her parents, barely middle class folk, will give me a thousand dollars right before I go to college and a turquoise bracelet for my high school graduation. Not only that, but this child, the child that will be walking with parts of my body inside of her, will go into remission, and in five years, she will be cured. She will be cured because of me. She will live for the same reason Alec died.

Of course, I don't know this yet. I've been coming into Mass General Hospital once a week for months building my marrow for this very procedure. Now, it's here. The doctors come in and give me Valium to calm me down, though I'm already calm. They tell me I'm doing a good thing. One of them tells me I'm a hero. I don't want to, but I feel my chest swell when they do.

But when I go under, I do not think of the seven-year-old child I've promised to save through months of my life and injections for my body. I do not think of her parents' happiness, and I do not think of money.

Here is what I think: Sunset. Rain on a field of corn. Alec and me, five and six, floating down the pond in an inflatable cushion, holding hands. Alec and me, eleven and twelve, running into each other's arms at JFK International Airport. Thirteen and fourteen, working on one of my school projects, molding clay turtles, our shoulders touching. Alec and Vlada, sitting in a tree... Alec and me...Alec and me....

