

Midnight Radio:  
Connected Short Stories

By Emily Nagin

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## Day for Night

On the night of her thirteenth birthday, Rosie stayed up watching her brother David's zombie movies. Her mother had gone to bed at nine. The second Rosie heard her door close, she started "Night of the Living Dead," David's favorite. Before he died in August, he drove her out to Evans City and showed her the cemetery and the house where the movie was shot. On the way home, they took a detour through the neighborhood where Kyra Schon lived, and they actually found her house. Kyra Schon plays the little girl who eats her parents. She lived in a big, black stone house surrounded by tall, shaggy trees. It was exactly the kind of place someone in a horror movie should live. Rosie's house was also surrounded by trees. Dead leaves coated the yard and draped themselves over the low wall between the house and the sidewalk. The screens were still in the windows even though it was October, and they rattled during storms as if someone were shaking them. When David was alive, their mother had paid him to take care of the yard. Now he was gone, and their house looked deserted.

Before she started the movie, Rosie opened a Pepsi and made herself microwave popcorn with sugar on top. She put one of David's old plaid shirts on over her pajamas. The shirt hung to her knees, and she had to roll up the sleeves to eat. She turned off all the lights except for the one in the upstairs bathroom because that was what David used to do. Halfway through the movie, she needed to pee, but she was too scared to leave the couch. Rosie had never watched "Night of the Living Dead" alone. She tried to pretend that David was in the room with her, sitting in the blue armchair by the couch. But there was no one to say, "*They're coming to get you Bah-brah!*" and no one to point out the actors who played both zombies and vigilantes.

The movie ended around ten thirty. Rosie scooted off the couch and knelt by David's box of movies. She ejected "Night of the Living Dead," put it back in the sleeve, and set it gently on the coffee table behind her. David had loved "Dawn of the Dead" and "Day of the Dead," too, and Rosie had seen them about a million times. One by one, she lifted the movies out of the box and stacked them on the table. Then she picked up "Virus 29" and laid it on the floor in front of her.

In "Virus 29," terrorists release a biological agent into New York City's water supply. This chemical makes people extremely aggressive. Most people are infected through drinking or showering, but once ingested, the agent can be passed through blood and saliva. Tony, the hero, wakes from a coma and finds himself in a world of zombies. He spends most of the movie combating them. Help arrives in the form of the government, but they are too late to save Tony's family and friends. Enraged, he brutally attacks the soldier sent to rescue him and joins the zombie hordes.

"Virus 29" was David's second favorite movie, and he'd never allowed her to watch it. Rosie knew what it was about because everyone knew what it was about. It was supposed to be the scariest zombie movie ever made. It came out on David's twenty-fourth birthday, like a gift from the universe. Their brother Josh took him to see it. Rosie was only twelve, too young to get into an R rated movie. She made David a Zombie-themed birthday card. On the outside she wrote, *In the event of a Zombie Apocalypse there won't be cake* and on the inside she wrote *Sorry!*

"That movie is perfect," David said when they returned from the theater. "It calls into question everything you assume about zombies! I mean, this movie makes you think maybe they have free will or something. That's so much worse than being bitten! Like

when Tony becomes a zombie: we know he didn't drink the water and nothing bit him—he just *loses it*. He knows that the world won't get any better and he says 'Fuck it.' And that feeling you get when you watch him kill those people! You don't want to identify with him, but you sort of do.”

“I didn't identify with him,” said Josh, taking two beers from the fridge.

“But what about the last scene? That empty room the soldiers put him in—that's a metaphor for his *life*. He's trapped, there's nothing there. How can you *blame* him? I'm telling you, it's genius.”

Josh shook his head. “I don't know, man. It was good, but I'm not seeing it again. I think I'm going to have nightmares.” Josh was apprenticed to a tattooist named Bill. From noon to nine, except on his days off, he tattooed scary things on scary-looking people. His girlfriend, Lu, also worked at the shop, and she spent her time piercing people anywhere there was skin to pierce. David was three years older than Josh, but he didn't have a scary job or a girlfriend who pierced people's nipples—he didn't have a job or a girlfriend at all—and he lived at home. He didn't have anything that he was supposed to have, but he was braver than Josh. He could watch zombie movies all day and never have nightmares.

Rosie picked up David's beer, took a little sip, and said, “Will you take me next weekend?”

Josh laughed. “No way. It'll scare the shit out of you, kid.”

“No it won't!”

David stood up, took a juice glass from the cabinet, and poured a little bit of beer into it. He handed it to Rosie. “I think you should wait a year, but then, yeah, I’ll watch it with you.”

Rosie handed David his birthday card. “Can we really watch it in a year?”

“Scouts’ honor,” he said.

Then, in August, Rosie came home from her friend Lacy’s and found an ambulance and a cop car parked in front of the house. It was five in the afternoon, and the light was heavy and golden. Dust motes swam between the trees. Rosie’s mom was a scrub nurse, and Rosie’s first thought was that the ambulance belonged to Ronald, her mom’s EMT friend. But Ronald wouldn’t have left his blue and red light on, and it was too early for her mom to be home.

Then Rosie crossed the street and got a good view of the driveway and the garage. They had a two-car garage, and Josh was sitting on the ground with his back against the left door. The right door was open. Rosie saw a stretcher with a body on it, covered in a white sheet. She walked further up the driveway.

When Josh saw her, he leapt to his feet and yelled, “Rosie!” as if she had frightened him. He grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the door. They stood under an oak tree Rosie used to climb when she was little. Josh had turned her so that her back was to the garage. He kept his hand on her arm, as if he were preparing to pull her out of harm’s way.

“David died,” he said. “Mom will be here soon.”

“What?” said Rosie, but she understood.

In the dark living room, she took the DVD out of its case. There were a lot of things in the world that could scare the shit out of you. Rosie twirled it around her finger and slipped it into the DVD player.

After Principal Campbell called the hospital and was informed that Rosie's mom was assisting in a four-hour surgery, she called Josh at the tattoo parlor. He picked Rosie up from school half an hour later. Luanne, the nice security guard, waited in the rain with Rosie until he arrived. She had a big umbrella, and the two of them huddled under it and didn't speak. Rosie wasn't sure if Luanne was doing this because she felt bad for her, or if it was to prevent her from running away.

Josh parked his car in the bus lane, turned the flashers on, then turned them off and honked when he spotted her. Rosie walked over to the car as slowly as she could, even though the water was soaking into the hems of her jeans.

"I left a message at the hospital," he said. He scanned the road to see if he could pull out. "You're hanging out at the shop with me until Mom gets home."

"Fine," said Rosie. Josh turned up the radio and pulled away from the school. Rosie slouched down in her seat and put her muddy sneakers on the dashboard. She bunched the sleeves of David's blue and grey plaid shirt into her fists, which pulled the rip on the left shoulder even further open. Rosie crossed her right arm over her chest and cupped her shoulder with her hand so Josh wouldn't notice.

"Rosie," he said as she drove across the Birmingham Bridge. "Did you really...did you actually *bite* someone?"

“Yes,” said Rosie. She slid her feet slowly off the dashboard and left two streaks of muddy water on the glove compartment.

The girl Rosie bit was named Nancy Delveccio, and they were in Miss Moynahan’s English class together. Miss Moynahan was one of those young, fun teachers that you always hear about but never get. She brought kids cupcakes on their birthdays. The cupcake she brought Rosie last week had black and orange frosting for Halloween. The wrapper had little green witches on it.

The class had just finished reading “Our Town,” and Miss Moynahan had announced that they were going to perform it for the school. Rosie’s class was big, and Miss Moynahan had divided up the Stage Manager’s lines among the kids who couldn’t act. While they waited to go on, they played BS backstage.

Rosie didn’t remember seeing Nancy walk backstage with Kylie Johanssen, but she did see them set down their scripts and come over. Kylie and Nancy were sharing the role of Emily, and they were full of themselves.

“Can we play?” asked Kylie.

“Sure,” said Morrie Silverman, doubtfully. Kylie and Nancy were not the kind of girls who talked to Stage Managers. They squeezed in next to Rosie even though there was a bigger gap next to Allie Lawrence. Everyone scooted over to make room, and Morrie dealt a new hand.

They had gone around the circle once before Kylie put down her cards and said, “Rosie, can I ask you a question? You have to tell the truth.” Nancy glanced at Kylie,



giggled, and looked down at her cards. Kylie paused, then asked, “Are you a lesbian or something?”

Everyone froze and stared at Rosie. “What?” she said.

“You have to tell the truth,” said Nancy.

Kylie looked right at her and said, “You are, aren’t you?” There was a giddy triumph in her voice. “Rosie’s a *lesbian!*”

“I’m *not* a lesbian!” said Rosie. She clutched her cards so hard they bent in the middle. The group was completely silent. Rosie could see them leaning away from her just perceptibly, as if they were afraid of catching her lesbian-ness.

“If you’re not a lesbian, why do you always wear those lumberjack shirts?” asked Nancy. She reached out and plucked at the sleeve of David’s shirt.

“Don’t touch my shirt!” Rosie was shaking; her voice squeaked. Nancy glanced at Kylie then giggled. She grabbed a handful of the sleeve and yanked. Rosie heard the fabric rip. She looked down and saw her shoulder jutting out of the hole. The cloth hung open like a dead mouth.

Rosie held very still. Her heart was pounding. She realized she hated Nancy Delveccio more than she’d ever hated anyone. Rosie was so angry that she felt disconnected from herself, as if she were watching herself being angry. Maybe this is what being dead is like, she thought. Maybe you can *watch* yourself being dead, too.

And because she wasn’t in her body, there was nothing that wasn’t allowed. Nancy was still holding Rosie’s shirt. She looked a little surprised that she’d managed to rip it. Rosie wanted to hurt her and she wanted her to let go, so she twisted to the side and bit Nancy’s forearm as hard as she could. It was surprisingly difficult to sink her teeth in,

but when she finally got a grip she clamped them together with all her strength. At the same time that Rosie tasted blood, Nancy screamed and wrenched her arm away. Rosie jolted back into herself, stood up, and ran out of the auditorium.

Josh and Rosie arrived at the tattoo parlor during a rush period. The sofa and the armchairs were full, so Josh made Rosie wait in the back, where they kept the autoclave and the extra needles and pigments. Rosie sat on an old piercing chair and tried to do her homework, but she was too tired; she hadn't been sleeping well since she watched "Virus 29" last week. After it ended, she couldn't get herself to go upstairs. For an hour or so, she lay very still in the dark, clutching a throw pillow and listening to the house pop and creak. It was windy, and the dead leaves clattered against the window screens like boney fingers.

Every time Rosie closed her eyes that night she saw zombies advancing up the driveway and the front yard, pressing against the walls, forcing their way through the windows. She kept thinking she'd heard someone in the garage. She decided that if the zombies did come, she'd set the leaves in the front yard on fire because zombies hated heat. But how could she set the leaves on fire without going outside and being eaten? Finally she'd snapped on the reading lamp, turned on the TV, and watched Cartoon Network until it was time for school.

Josh drove her back to the house a little after five. The rain had stopped while she slept, and, except for the puddles, the streets were already dry. When they arrived at the house, their mom still wasn't home. Josh parked and sat in the car, staring at the house.

He hadn't been back since they sat Shivah for David. Rosie wondered if he felt bad about that and if the house looked different to him.

"Hasn't anyone raked the leaves?" he asked.

"Why do you care?" she muttered.

But Josh didn't answer. He got out of the car and began to walk up the driveway. Rosie followed him but stopped once she reached the house. She watched as he approached the garage. He hesitated in the doorway. Rosie didn't think he could go in. She held her breath as Josh opened the side door and stepped into the dark.

When he came out again, he was holding two rakes, one of which he handed to Rosie. "We need to make three long rows," he said. "Try to get the driest ones on top."

The front yard was big, and the leaves came up to the middle of their calves. Most of them were wet and heavy. Rosie started to sweat. She had to take off David's shirt. By the time they finished, the sun was setting. They leaned their rakes against the side of the house and while Rosie rested, Josh disappeared into the back yard and returned with the can of lighter fluid from under the grill. He sprinkled a little on each pile, then squatted down by the one closest to the street, flicked on his lighter, and held it to the leaves.

They caught with a soft *whoosh*, like an exhalation. Josh held out the lighter. "You want to do the next one?" Rosie took it from him, snapped it on, and lit the second row. When it caught, she felt as if her heart had lifted three inches in her chest. Josh lit the last row, and they went to sit on the front porch.

"I think this is illegal," he said.

At first the fire just rippled over the lighter fluid, but then the leaves caught. They smoldered and curled at the edges. They sent up tiny sparks. The veins running down to

the stems blazed at their tips, then crumbled. The webs in between turned lacy and floated into the air, balanced on waves of heat, and dissolved.

## Midnight Radio

Tia called him at the radio station during a commercial break. Rob knew it was her even before he looked at his phone. He checked that his mike was switched off before he picked up. The big green clock over the door said that it was 1:02 a.m.

“Have you thought more about Prom?” she asked, her voice falsely casual. Rob could hear the commercial he was running playing faintly in her bedroom. “Do you want to be a better lover?” asked the announcer. “Try Eroticite!”

Tia must have been lying on her bed, her homework spread out around her. Her radio, a blue and silver bubble that looked like R2D2, on the windowsill above her bed. She’d be wearing the tattered, graying Korn hoodie she’d inherited from her older sister and her black pinstriped pajama bottoms. Her short brown hair would be sticking straight out over her left ear. She was always fiddling with the hair there, rolling it between her fingers and pulling it straight out as if to measure its growth.

Rob had been in her room only a handful of times, when her parents and sister were away, but he remembered everything about it. It was blue and narrow, with a low, sloping ceiling that he always hit his head on. A Bob Marley poster hung at the foot of her bed, a blue dream catcher at the head. It smelled like lotion and socks.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea, Tia,” he said.

She was quiet for a long moment. Finally, she said, “I really think it would be fine. There’s no rule that says you can’t go. Seriously, they wouldn’t care.”

It was true, there was no rule against a twenty-two-year-old attending Prom with seventeen-year-old, but Rob doubted that the principal and the chaperones would like it. The staff hadn’t changed much since he’d gone to Woods. Mrs. Monroe and Mrs.

Kennedy, Ms. Cregan and Mr. Hileman, they'd all be there, and he knew what they'd think if they saw him with Tia.

"I've been to two proms already," he said. "I'm sick of it."

"But you haven't been with me," said Tia, softly. "Please just think about it, okay? Okay, Rob? It would mean a lot to me."

The commercial was ending. The announcer had repeated the toll free number twice. "The break's almost over, babe. I have to go," Rob said.

He heard her sigh. "Fine, whatever," she said, and hung up.

Rob put his headphones back on, closed his eyes, and listened to the dark station hum softly to itself before he started a new song. He always kept the overhead light in the sound booth off. The first night he'd been allowed to DJ—just over a year and a half ago, when he'd been slotted to host three nights a week, splitting the midnight to five spot with a slightly more senior DJ—the yellow-green strip lights, all the blinking machinery, the pressure of having to play good music for five hours straight, made him feel as if he were having a heart attack. He'd actually considered calling 911. He'd imagined the whole city dialing their radios to his show, then switching them off in disgust. Turning off the light made him feel less scrutinized. Now, it was habit. Rob liked sitting in the dark with just the red and yellow lights on the control panel and the cool white light of the computer screen. If he could have stayed in the dark sound booth forever, he would have.

For a minute or two, Rob allowed himself to imagine calling Tia back and asking her to spend prom night in the station with him. He knew exactly what the prom would be like, exactly which songs the DJ would play. He knew that there'd be three gaps in the

rap and R&B: for “Cotton Eye Joe,” “Electric Slide,” and the one by Vitamin C about graduating. All the girls would sob and sway with their arms around each other’s necks when that one played. He imagined himself in a hot room full of blinking strings of lights and folding tables, sweating in a rented suit. Tia would try to pull him into the slimy, wriggling crowd to dance. If he refused, her best friend CarolAnne Lasky would dance with her, and when they returned CarolAnne would look at him as if he were the source of all the suffering and evil in he world. He could see the teachers lurking in the shadows, full of disapproval. His old cross-country coach, Ezra Heron, would be among them. Ezra, the most disappointed of all.

He first saw Tia at the fountain below the Highland Park reservoir. It was July, and the air draped itself over his shoulders like a damp blanket. Rob, Josh Pollack, and Josh’s girlfriend Lu Martell, were all sitting on the rim of the fountain with their feet in the water. In high school, Rob and Josh had run cross-country together. His senior year, Rob could run a 5k in fifteen minutes and thirty-two seconds. He was the second fastest on his team after Danny McConnell, who could do it in fourteen minutes and forty-eight seconds. Josh (fifteen minutes forty seconds), ran beside Rob. They ran in perfect sych, even their breathing matched. One day during their sophomore year, Josh saved his life. They were running single file down Fifth when Rob tripped and stumbled into the road. A bus passed close enough to brush his shoulder. It knocked him off balance, but before he could fall, Josh grabbed his arm and yanked him back onto the sidewalk. It felt like a miracle. Rob wanted to hug him, but that would have been gay.

Around ten that evening, Maya Lamott showed up at the fountain. Rob and Josh had known Maya since sixth grade, and the older she got, the crazier she got. She'd been in *Western Psych* four times in high school. Her craziness gave her a dangerous authority. When he was twelve, a rabid raccoon got into his bedroom. Rob was there when the exterminator took it away in a trap. It was a steel trap, and he couldn't see in, but he could hear the raccoon shrieking and throwing itself against the sides. The trap shook so hard the exterminator could barely hold it. Even when she was calm, Maya reminded him of that raccoon.

She stopped at the edge of the fountain and lit a cigarette. "Hey guys," she said, the cigarette bobbing up and down as she spoke. "It's been quite some time."

"Hey Maya," said Josh, his voice careful.

Maya sat down on the lip of the fountain and swung her legs in without rolling up her jeans. "Mind if we join? This is my little sister, Tia."

Rob had not noticed that there was anyone with Maya until that moment. Tia stood behind her and slightly to the left. She wore a dark, baggy t-shirt and cut-off shorts. Her purse was cavernous and bounced against her knees when she walked. She was delicate and lanky. Her hair was chin-length then, dyed the same matte black as Maya's. She had Maya's wide, thin mouth, too. She was biting her lip and holding her left wrist in her right hand.

Rob scooted over to make room for her. She looked uncertainly at the group around the fountain, then kicked off her sandals, sat down, and began rummaging in her bag. She came up with a pack of Parliaments and popped one into her mouth like a thermometer.



Rob pulled his lighter out of his pocket. “Light?” he asked, and leaned closer than he needed to. He noticed that her eyes were green with little slivers of brown. For the rest of the night he watched her smoke out of the corner of his eye. She was amazingly self-conscious. She held the cigarette at shoulder level, her hand lulling delicately back like an old-fashioned movie star. She barely spoke until Lu asked Rob a question about the radio station.

“Wait, you’re a DJ?” she said.

Rob nodded. “At WXKD, yeah. I work Monday, Wednesday, and Friday night.”

She frowned, sucked on her cigarette, then croaked “What show are you?”

“*Radio, Radio*. It runs from midnight to five, you probably haven’t heard it.”

Tia let all the smoke out of her mouth in one burst. She swung around so that she was straddling the rim of the fountain. “Fuck off,” she said, “You do not host *Radio, Radio*.”

“I do,” said Rob. “Next month they’re moving me to full time.” He did not add that this was only because Tim, the guy he’d been splitting the late-night spot with, had been promoted to a daylight show.

Tia shook her head as if to clear her ears. “No fucking way, dude. That’s my favorite show. I’m so fucking serious. I’m not even joking. What’s it like? How do you pick the songs? Do they ever tell you what to play? Did you name it after Elvis Costello?”

He talked to her for the rest of the night. She knew more about music than some of the guys at the station. He loved the way she moved her hands when she talked, as if she were conducting her own words, pushing them toward him, drawing pictures in the

air so he could see exactly what she meant to say. Around one in the morning, she asked the question that most frayed his self-restraint: “You know when a song’s really good, and you feel like you’re sort of see-through? And it’s like something in you, like in your chest, is mixing with the song but the song is also mixing with you?”

Rob did know. This was exactly what good music, even some mediocre music, felt like to him. The moment she said it he knew they were both in trouble. It was alright to look at a sixteen-year-old, it was basically okay to talk to her. But it wasn’t alright to touch her. He chain-smoked the rest of the night.

Around two thirty he drove her home. Tia tried to ride shotgun, but Maya pushed her out of the way, saying, “In the back. And wear your seat belt. I’d die if anything bad happened to you.”

Maya slid into the front seat. The passenger-side door in the back was stuck shut. While Tia walked around the car to the other door, Maya turned to him, smiling pleasantly. “If you fucking touch my baby sister, I’ll stab you in the stomach with a kitchen knife,” she said, and tapped her cigarette ashes onto his thigh. Rob jumped slightly, even though his jeans were too thick for the ashes to burn him. Maya brushed them off then patted his leg as if it were a puppy.

Even with her psychotic sister beside him, Tia was the only thing he could concentrate on as he drove to the North Side. The air between the backseat and the front seemed denser, charged with electricity. He could feel the back of his skull prickling pleasantly.

Maya fell asleep as they drove along North Avenue. When Rob reached their house, he didn’t wake her immediately. Instead, he turned to face Tia.

“Call the station tomorrow night and I’ll play you a song.”

She grinned. “I will if you tell me my name. I bet you don’t remember it.”

“Mia?” he said. “Leah? Pia? Nokia?”

“You’re an asshole,” she said, but she was laughing.

“Tia,” he said. He shook Maya awake, then watched them climb the steep stairway to their house. He did not feel guilty at all.

“I don’t know. One prom was enough for me,” said Josh. “It sounds like hell, but you do what you have to do.”

Rob was visiting Josh at the tattoo parlor where he was apprenticed. It stunned him how much Josh had managed to change in four years. No one would have imagined that he had ever been a runner, he was so covered in ink. Carp and mermaids swam up his legs; on his arms, sparrows and spiders hovered over daggers and broken hearts; the downtown Pittsburgh skyline was tattooed on his sternum; along his left collarbone, a naked woman lay on her side. She peeked coyly over her shoulder, one hand rested lightly on her hip. A tiny set of dice lay by her feet, a bottle of wine rested against her ass. Josh’s septum was pierced too, and the gauges in his ears were so big that Rob could have reached through them and touched his neck.

Lu had been unpacking an order of steel hoops when Rob and Josh started talking about Prom. Now, she stood up and went through the beaded curtain that separated the back of the shop from the front. She managed to make the beads rustle and click against each other as loudly as possible. If there had been a door, she would have slammed it.

Rob could not stand Lu. She was a vegan in the process of brainwashing Josh into doing the same; she was always fiddling with her dreadlocks, which fell almost to her waist; she would not let Josh use the word *girlfriend* to describe her, she was his *partner*. Every time one of them used that word, Rob pictured Josh and Lu dressed as cowboys.

But those were all little things. Rob could have looked past them if Lu hadn't been so self-righteous about Tia. When she learned how old Tia was, she'd said, "Isn't that statutory rape?" Last month, she'd come to a party at Rob's place. Every time he touched Tia that night, Lu had looked more stricken. Once, after Rob kissed Tia, he looked up and saw Lu squeezing her bottle of beer with both hands, her knuckles white. It looked as if she wanted to sprint across the room and carry Tia out of the apartment, possibly to a battered women's shelter or a consciousness-raising group.

"What's up with her?" Tia had asked. "She always looks constipated."

Rob shrugged. "I don't think she likes me much."

Later that night in the kitchen, Rob and Tia ran into Lu. She was pouring herself a cup of water, and they were getting more beer.

"Your dreadlocks are so long, Lu," Tia said.

"Oh yeah, well I've had them for a while," said Lu. To Rob, it looked as if she were searching Tia's face for signs of damage. "I could do them in your hair when it grows out, if you want."

Tia fingered her hair. "That's okay," she said, still smiling. "I hear dreads get scaly on the inside, because the hair starts to rot. Is that true?"

Lu flushed a little. "I don't think so."

Tia cocked her head to the side. "I think it might be," she said.

Thinking of this still made Rob smile. When Lu burst noisily out of the backroom with a new box, shaking her dreads out of her face as she went, he almost laughed out loud. Lu set the box down on the display case and flipped open the butterfly knife she kept clipped to her belt. As she stabbed the knife into the tape holding it shut she said, “Well, I think you should go to the dance.” She slit the top of the box open, then moved on to the sides. “If you fall in love with a seventeen-year-old, you have do seventeen-year-old things. I think you can afford to spend an evening being bored.” She flicked the knife shut and stuck it back in her belt.

Rob could feel Josh looking at him, but he didn’t look back. He knew that his loving Tia had never occurred to Josh. It hadn’t occurred to him either, but when Lu said it he’d turned cold and hot at the same time, as if he were about to pass out.

Rob usually picked Tia up from school. While he waited, he watched the runners circling the track. The team was doing an Indian run. The boys ran in two parallel lines, and every few seconds the pair at the back sprinted to the front. Rob had always hated Indian runs, but Coach Ezra loved them because they taught you how to pass during a race. He used to say, “The key to passing someone is demoralizing him. You want to stick the knife in and really twist it. You do that by acting casual. Take a deep breath when you’re behind him and then accelerate. When you pass him, be like ‘Hey, ain’t no big thing. Just goin’ for a jog, man.’ And then when you’re ahead and he can’t see you, *then* you fuckin’ suck wind.”

These boys were red-faced and stumbling. There was no way they could make a casual pass. In a race, Rob thought he could overtake them easily.

He spotted Tia by the side exit, walking quickly toward him. Her backpack hung off one shoulder and pulled her askew. She was smiling. When she reached him, she dropped her bag, wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest.

“Hi,” she said into his t-shirt. She looked up at him and said, “I’m *so* hungry. Can we get food?”

Rob scooped up her backpack, which was so crammed with books that the seams were splitting, and slung it over his shoulder. It always surprised him that Tia could lift it. “Where do you want to go?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Wendy’s, McDonald’s, anywhere.”

They were a block away from school when she said, “You don’t have to worry about Prom, by the way. I’m going with Jason.”

“What?” asked Rob. He remembered the way he’d felt when the bus sideswiped him. That sudden, cold force against his shoulder, spinning him toward the street. He’d been both surprised and calm. He’d thought, *Wow, I’m being hit by a bus.* “Who’s Jason?”

“You know, my friend Jason Fallin. He’s in my bio class and he’s really nice. He asked me today before we did our pig dissection, and since you said you didn’t want to go, I said yes.” Tia told him this the way she told him stories about CarolAnne. Her voice was entirely casual, her shoulders never tensed. She even stood on tiptoe and gave him a little kiss after she said Jason Fallin’s name. If they were racing, she’d have sailed by him, easy as pie. She’d be rounding the next curve while he lumbered in her wake, stunned.

Coach Ezra had devised a special eight-mile run for weekend practices. On Saturday mornings, before it was light, Rob and his teammates met in front of the school and stood in a loose circle around Ezra. They stretched their calves, thighs, and hips. They bounced up and down on the balls of their feet. Ezra stretched with them, shouting things like “How do your hamstrings feel? Are they talking to you? What are they saying? Mine are saying ‘Hello, Ezra! It’s time to *run*’!”

When their hamstrings told them it was time to run, their circle dissolved and they jogged down Fifth Avenue to Morewood. They turned from Morewood to Millvale, then on to Liberty. They held steady on Liberty until they reached 31<sup>st</sup> Street. They ran across the 31<sup>st</sup> Street Bridge, lacy with rust, onto Herr’s island, where only rich people lived and the blonde, ornamental grass rippled like a girl’s hair. When they had run once around the island, they ran back up the ramp, across the bridge, up Liberty, down Millvale and Morewood, along Fifth, all the way back to school. From Millvale on, most of the boys ran in a sloppy, tired clot. Josh and Rob stayed steady, a few feet behind Danny McConnell. When Danny ran he looked blissed-out, as if he were speaking to God.

Danny usually accelerated when they reached Fifth and Morewood. Rob watched him sprinting away, impossibly fast and assured. In the winter, the grey-white light made his skin glow. Steam rose from his arms and legs and the top of his head. Rob knew he could never catch Danny McConnell, but he accelerated anyway. During those last few meters, he fell completely into the run. All he heard was the rhythm of his breath. He knew that everything hurt, but he also felt disconnected from himself. It was as if something in the center of him had come unfastened and was rising into the air.

“I can’t believe this is *you!*” said Lu. She was lying on Rob’s sofa, holding one of his high school yearbooks over her face and if she were shielding herself from rain or bright sun. “Look at those teeny tiny shorts. God, look at your *legs!*”

From the kitchen, Josh guffawed. “But we looked good in them!” he called.

Rob pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the time. Tia had been at the prom for three hours and twenty-six minutes. Josh came back into the living room with three more beers, which he passed around before sitting on the sofa by Lu’s feet. She put her feet in his lap and squinted at the yearbook. “You look so young,” she said.

Josh took it from her and turned the pages. “You know,” he said. “I was really into running in high school, but I don’t actually miss it now. Isn’t it weird how that happens?”

Lu sat up and scooted closer to Josh. She rested her head on his shoulder and watched him turn the pages. “Wait!” she said. “Stop, go back.” She leaned closer to the yearbook and read aloud: “‘Robert Warzel: third fastest 5k in the district.’ Well shit. Who’d have guessed?”

Rob felt as if something were pressing against his breastbone from the inside, trying to get out. What did she mean, *who’d have guessed?* He stood up quickly.

“What’s up?” asked Josh.

“Just going to the bathroom,” Rob said. He left the living room, but instead of going to the bathroom, he went to his bedroom. He was nerved up and twitchy as a greyhound, like he was about to run a race.

He dug through his closet until he found an old pair of sneakers. He had only jeans and boxers, neither of which he could run in. Then he remembered that his



roommate, a line-cook at a twenty-four hour diner, had a pair of chef's pants. The pants were part of his uniform, but he never wore them. Rob went into his room and rifled through the drawers. He found them wadded up under a pile of underwear. The pants had small black and white checks and a drawstring. Rob hesitated, then dropped his jeans and stepped into them. They were extremely comfortable, and not so long that they'd snag under his heels.

Josh and Lu caught him walking out the door. "What the fuck are you doing?" asked Josh. "You look like a fool in those pants."

"I'm going for a run," said Rob. He left before Josh could say anything else.

Outside, the air was almost cool. It was Friday, and the doors of the bars were open. Loose flocks of people moved between them, chattering and smoking. The air smelled like their cigarettes and perfume, exhaust, sanitizer, and old alcohol from the slop buckets under the bars.

Rob knew he should stretch, but he didn't want to take the time. He set off down the sidewalk at a trot. He built up speed slowly, the way Ezra had taught him, but everything felt wrong. His wallet was in the front pocket of his sweatshirt, and it swung from side to side as he ran. His arms felt awkward, as if he were holding them too high and pumping them too much. He was hitting the sidewalk hard with the balls of his feet, and little shocks zipped up his shins. He felt like his ass was sticking out.

He kept going anyway. He wove around the clots of people by the bars. He took deep breaths and tried to slow his heart rate. By the end of the first block, he'd reached race pace. He held it all the way to the second block, then the third. But he was breathing too hard, and by the middle of the fourth block his thighs burned, his stomach was

beginning to cramp, and the back of his nose and throat ached. He felt as if he were running through something viscous, as if his heart were trying to climb up his throat.

Rob stopped five blocks from his apartment and leaned against a bus stop sign, gasping and coughing. This skin on his face felt tight, and sweat dripped off the hair at the back of his neck and along his forehead. He felt as if his knees had vanished, as if he'd never stand up straight again. The image of Danny McConnell rose in his mind. Danny, who'd won a cross-country scholarship to the University of Michigan their senior year. He was starting med school at Penn in the fall. Danny, who'd grown up and gone away. Danny in the last few yards of the eight-mile run: impossibly fast, almost glowing in the early morning light, accelerating while the rest of them fought for breath, disappearing down the street, forever uncatchable.

The prom would be over by now. Maybe Tia was in her bedroom, drinking screwdrivers with CarolAnne in her pajamas. She'd still have her eye make-up on. Or maybe she was at a party with Jason Fallin, sitting beside him on a couch, leaning closer and giggling. Maybe they were in the back seat of his car, the windows steaming up, the window crank digging into the back of her neck. She'd ignore this and pull Jason closer. Rob knew exactly the way she'd smile before she kissed him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them wide. The world and time were so relentless. Everything was rushing away, faster and faster. Rob wanted to stay like this forever, pressing his forehead against the grainy metal, catching his breath.

## Piece of Sky

On the first really cold day of October, Alice Conrad invited Kylie to her Halloween party. Kylie was standing in the alley between the high school and the jazz club next door, where everyone came to smoke. She wished what she wished every morning—that her best friend, Nancy Delveccio, had not been forced to go to an all-girls Catholic high school, or that Kylie’s mother could afford to send her there, too.

Across the alley, Elsa Draper and Rosie Pollack giggled and drew animals on the jazz club’s wall with colored chalk. They drew speech bubbles over the animal’s heads and wrote swear words inside them. Kylie did not understand why Elsa, who could have been popular, acted the way she did. She looked as if she were made of milk and light. Her hair—pin straight without a straightener, blond without bleach—touched the small of her back. She had to sweep it aside when she sat down. Her skin was almost transparent at the wrists and temples. But she dressed like Mr. Rogers, if Mr. Rogers were a homeless punk. Today she was wearing a grimy orange cardigan over a wife beater with *Bitch!* scrawled across it in sharpie. Last week, she’d been sent home for a shirt that read *Queer?*

Rosie didn’t need to wear a *Bitch!* t-shirt: she effortlessly transcended Elsa’s freakishness. Everything about Rosie was disturbing, even her hair, which was dark brown and so curly that when you sat next to her in the auditorium, it brushed *your* shoulders. Kylie sometimes imagined that Rosie’s hair was going to strangle her. Like Elsa, Rosie was bad at being a girl: she wore faded boys’ t-shirts and never painted her nails. During class, she drew pictures on the tops of her jeans with sharpies and ballpoint

pens. When she stood up, dogs with weird smiles, cats with wings, and antelopes with horns all the way down their spines stared at you upside-down from her thighs.

Kylie had just started her second cigarette when Alice found her. Alice was the most popular girl in school, but Kylie sometimes wondered if she had learned to act like a popular girl from teen movies: she flipped her hair compulsively; her clothes were always perfect; her snootiness was almost campy. She often seemed more like an imitation of a person than an actual human being. But Kylie had also seen her act genuinely frightening. When she focused her disdain on one person, that person seemed to become smaller, slightly transparent, as if Alice were drawing something essential away from her victim and absorbing it.

Alice didn't talk to a lot of freshmen, but she'd made an exception for Kylie, because Kylie was pretty. She was aware that she was Alice's pet freshman, more like a Chihuahua in a purse than an actual friend, but she didn't complain—with Nancy gone, she had no one.

Alice leaned against the wall beside her, plucked the cigarette out of Kylie's mouth, and began to smoke it herself. "Hi Kylie Bear. What's up?" she asked.

Kylie shrugged. "Not much." She wished she had something more interesting to say. She hated that even though she didn't particularly like Alice, she still wanted to impress her.

Alice glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. "Cool," she drawled, giving Kylie her cigarette back. They stood in silence for a second, Kylie tapping her heel nervously against the wall, Alice scanning the alley for someone more interesting. Apparently she spotted someone, because she pushed off the wall and strolled away

without saying goodbye. She was a yard away when she stopped, whirled around and called, “Wait. Did I invite you to my Halloween party?”

“Oh, um...no,” said Kylie.

Alice let out a bright bubble of laughter. “Well you’re invited now! It’s next Friday at ten. Look cute.”

As Alice turned to walk away, Elsa called, “Alice, oh *Alice*! Can *I* come to your party? Can I, Alice?”

Rosie laughed. She seemed to feel Kylie watching, because she turned and looked directly at her. When their eyes met, she nudged Elsa, who grinned and raised her chin. Kylie looked quickly away.

Rosie was the reason Nancy had been banished to Oakland Catholic. She was the reason that Kylie was alone. Last year, in eighth grade, Kylie and Nancy were the queens of their class. Everyone did what they did, even the mismatched shoe thing: Kylie and Nancy used to swap left shoes. She couldn’t remember whose idea it had been. For three years, none of Kylie’s shoes matched: she had one green and blue striped Ked and one pink one; a dark brown loafer and a fawn-colored one; an orange flip-flop and a red one. One day in eighth grade, Kylie looked up from an English workbook and saw that almost every girl in her class was wearing two different shoes. She’d felt a dizzy rush of power. She’d been tempted to try and cast a spell, just to see if it would work.

Elsa had not gone to their middle school, so back then, Rosie was one of the girls who didn’t have anyone to trade shoes with. During recess, Rosie hid out in the art room with Morrie Silverman, whose asthma was triggered by leaf dust, cold, and pollen.

At the beginning of eighth grade, Rosie's oldest brother killed himself. She started wearing his huge plaid shirts to school. She'd always been quiet, but that year she stopped talking almost entirely. All the teachers treated her delicately.

Then one day, during a rehearsal of *Our Town*, Rosie bit Nancy on the arm. Nancy accidentally ripped the sleeve of one of Rosie's stupid plaid shirts, and suddenly Rosie was on her. It was the scariest thing Kylie had ever seen. After she bit Nancy, Rosie ran out of the auditorium. Nancy was taken to the hospital; a security guard went to find Rosie; Kylie had to go to the principal's office and explain what had happened.

Somehow, it became all Kylie's fault. Rosie got suspended for a week, but Kylie got detention for a month and her mom grounded her. Morrie Sliverman, who was in love with Rosie, said that Kylie and Nancy had called Rosie a lesbian. This was true, but Rosie was asking for it. What girl is stupid enough to wear a plaid shirt, a known sign of lesbianism, to middle school? What else could Kylie have done? She did not believe that being a lesbian was bad. She knew it was just another thing, like having short fingers or a weird birthmark on your cheek. But short fingers and weird birthmarks condemned you, and so did gayness. It was worse than being ugly, because it made you vanish. TJ Buckley was gay. He went around like a folded-up umbrella, everything about him closed and forgettable.

Alice Conrad was the one who accused TJ of being gay. One five-minute bullying session in middle school, and she was set for life. When it happened, Kylie and TJ were in sixth grade, Alice in eighth. They were in the lunch line. Kylie and Nancy were standing right behind TJ, Alice in front of him. TJ bumped into Alice and she turned, her

eyebrows slightly raised. She brandished her tiny, waxed container of milk at him and said, “TJ, how come you smell like cookies?”

Everyone knew what she meant. Sometimes you just knew things: girls don’t eat pepperoni or sloppy joes; boys don’t jump rope; no one should admit to reading *Harry Potter*; and TJ Buckley was gay because he smelled like cookies.

After that day, Alice seemed to be surrounded by an electrical force field, like she could zap people out of her way with a flick of her wrist and send them spinning into the sky.

Kylie sometimes caught herself daydreaming about Alice’s mole. It was the largest mole she’d ever seen. It perched on the top left side of her lip. Sometimes Kylie imagined that the mole was about to speak. Maybe it escaped from Alice’s face at night and ran around her bedroom, singing to itself and hiding Alice’s earrings. Maybe Alice sent it to spy on people after school, and in this way learned their most embarrassing secrets.

She was thinking about the mole at lunch when Alice elbowed her and said, “Kylie! Earth to Kylie!”

“What?” said Kylie. “Sorry, I’m super tired.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “I *said* do you have your belly button pierced?”

Kylie shook her head. “Needles creep me out.”

“You would look totally cute with a belly button ring, though,” Alice said. “I’ll take you to get one if you want. Have you ever been to the South Side?”

Kylie about to say she had been when Alice said, “I don’t mean to the Mills with your *mom*.”

The Pittsburgh Mills was a fancy strip mall. It was the only part of the South Side Kylie had been to, and both times she’d been with her mom or Nancy’s. Alice must have seen this on her face, because she laughed and said, “Oh my God, Kylie. We’re going to go to the *good end* of the South Side after school, and you’re going to get your belly button pierced.”

Kylie had never gone anywhere alone with Alice before. She was aware that this was a privilege, and also a test. She nodded and said, “Yeah, let’s go.”

After school, instead of catching the 77D to Highland Park, Kylie and Alice took the 54C to the good end of Carson Street, which was all bars, coffee shops, tattoo and piercing parlors. The only things Kylie had pierced were her ears, and she’d gotten them done at the Piercing Pagoda at Monroeville Mall. She was light-headed from the effort of trying to make conversation with Alice. Sometimes she said the right thing, and Alice laughed or smiled. When she said the wrong thing, Alice just stared at her for a moment and said, “Yeah...”

“Here’s the deal,” said Alice, when they got off the bus. “You’re fourteen, so no one’s allowed to give you a piercing without your mom there. But I know this guy, Eric, who’s cool. So we’re good.”

“Great,” Kylie said. “Awesome.”

All the way down Carson, Kylie felt as if Alice were leading her along on an invisible leash. They stopped at a place called Fourth Horseman. It was the last tattoo



parlor on the street. The windows were painted black. On one, a skeleton carrying a flaming sword rode an emaciated horse. Blood trickled from wounds on the horse's ribs and the corners of its mouth.

They stepped inside and just the smell of the parlor—antiseptic and cigarettes and what was probably cheap Patchouli—made her want to run. She was suddenly very sure that she did not want a belly button ring. She saw that there was no one standing by the register and felt a surge of relief.

Then Alice said, “Hey, Eric.” Kylie turned. A guy with a shaved head lay across a worn leather sofa. He sat up and smiled. One of his eyeteeth was missing.

“What can I do for you?” he said.

“She wants her belly button pierced,” said Alice.

Eric eyed Kylie, then stood up and sidled over to the register. “It'll be thirty.”

Kylie did not have thirty dollars on her. She did have a debit card, for emergencies. She tried to pass it to him but dropped it on the counter. She looked around for the needles but couldn't see any.

“Which one do you want?” he asked, nodding at a case of body jewelry.

The belly button rings were a jumble of bright colors and shimmery charms that she couldn't make sense of. She pointed randomly and said, “That one.”

“Nice choice,” he said, smirking a little. Kylie didn't even look at the ring she'd selected. She followed him to the piercing table and stood next to it, watching him put on gloves. The smell of the latex reminded her of the pediatrician's office.

“Pull up your shirt,” he said.

Kylie did, wishing her stomach were flat. She sucked it in a little. She could feel Eric's breath on her belly button. Then something cool touched her, and she looked down. He had drawn a little black dot. "Look good?"

Kylie nodded.

"Lie on the table. Want to see the needle?"

She shook her head and stared at the ceiling. She heard plastic crinkling, then felt something metallic touch her stomach and tighten, pinching her skin harder and harder. "Did you do it?" she asked.

"No, that's the clamp. Okay, now take a deep breath. When I tell you to exhale, I'm going to put the needle in."

Kylie took a deep breath. She wanted to press her hand over her stomach. Instead, she grabbed the sides of the table.

"Exhale."

Kylie felt the needle touch her. It took all her strength not to bolt. Her heart was thrumming in her throat; she could have sworn it was going to beat right out of her mouth. She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lower lip to keep from shouting.

When the needle went in, it ached and stung at the same time. Her stomach twisted the way it did when she had gas. She felt Eric pull the needle out. It pinched and stung more when he put in the belly button ring and screwed on the jewel at the top.

"Done," he said.

Kylie opened her eyes and looked down. The belly button ring she'd chosen had two white gemstones, one at the top, one at the bottom. Dangling from it was the silhouette of a woman with huge breasts and a tiny waist. She was leaning back on her

hands, her knees bent, her long hair tumbling out behind her. Kylie had seen the same woman on the mud flaps of huge trucks on the interstate.

“Good job,” said Eric.

“Thank you,” mumbled Kylie. She slid off the table and pulled her shirt down.

Eric hadn't told her how to clean the belly button ring, so Kylie guessed. Every night she dabbed it with rubbing alcohol, then Neosporin. She moved the post up and down to keep it from growing into her skin. When scabs appeared, she picked them off immediately.

By Wednesday the piercing was swollen and red. Pus oozed out of it during school and stained her shirts. It had started to swallow itself. During fourth period she ducked into the bathroom to check on it and found the top half of the piercing buried in skin. She managed to push the top end out again, but it hurt so much she almost fainted. She was dabbing her belly button with hot water and soap when she glanced into the mirror and saw Rosie Pollack reflected behind her.

Kylie yanked her shirt down. Rosie frowned and stepped toward her. Kylie braced herself.

“Is that a belly button ring?” Rosie asked.

Kylie gave her a shrug that was closer to a twitch. “So what?”

“Can I see it?”

Rosie's tone was not unkind—it was almost concerned. Slowly, Kylie lifted her shirt. Rosie bent down and peered at her stomach.

“This is really infected,” she said. “I think you need to take it out.”

Kylie's throat ached. There was a pressure in her cheekbones, the backs of her eyes felt hot and prickly. She shut them to stop herself from crying.

"Can you..." Her voice was squeaky and shaky. She took a breath. "Can you take it out?"

There was a pause. Kylie opened her eyes. Rosie had straightened up and stepped back. It was a ridiculous thing to ask, Kylie realized. She expected Rosie to laugh and tell her to fuck off. Kylie knew she deserved it. Instead, Rosie took her hand and led her toward the handicapped stall. Rosie's hand was cool and dry, her grip gentle.

"Alright, this might hurt a little," Rosie said. Kylie nodded and looked at the ledge just below the ceiling where the tiles ended and the beige plaster wall began. Starting at the far corner, she began counting the tiles. She felt Rosie tugging at the belly button ring. It did hurt, especially when Rosie had to bend the bar up to unscrew the gem at the top. When it was over, Rosie said, "Okay, you're good."

Kylie looked down. The belly button ring sat in Rosie's open palm, the post crusted with dried blood and pus. Rosie didn't seem at all bothered by the fact that she was touching goo from someone else's infected piercing.

They stared at each other for an awkward second. Kylie wished she hadn't almost cried. When she didn't say anything, Rosie shrugged, dropped the ring into her palm, and left.

The afternoon of Alice's party, the light was rich and golden. The air smelled like crunchy leaves, like the first day of kindergarten. The windows of the houses held the setting sun and flamed. When she was little, Kylie used to stare at windows full of light

until her eyes ached. When she looked away, the green ghosts of the windows hung in the air in front of her. She used to try to touch them, knowing they were illusions but half believing that someday she'd reach out and find them solid.

She'd dressed as a piece of the sky for Alice's party. It was kind of a lame costume: a short denim skirt, blue tights from the dollar store, blue flats, a blue sweater, and a white knit hat, which was supposed to be a cloud. Because she didn't want to go around explaining what she was, she'd safety pinned a sheet of paper to her chest with "I'm the Sky" written on it in sharpie. She knew Alice would hate the costume: it was not what she'd meant by "look cute."

She was walking down Wellesley Avenue when she spotted Elsa and Rosie sitting on the steps of a house across the street. Elsa was dressed as a '50s housewife. Rosie had straightened her hair and put on a green Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt.

"Kylie Johanssen! What the fuck are you supposed to be?" called Elsa.

Kylie almost didn't answer. She was two houses away when the memory of Rosie holding her crusty, disgusting belly button ring in the palm of her hand stopped her. She turned back to them.

"The sky," she called, pointing to her chest.

Elsa burst out laughing. She shook her head. "I like that!" When Kylie started to turn away, she called, "Seriously, it's good! I'm Betty Crocker. Rosie is Alice."

Before she could stop herself, Kylie let out a snort of laughter.

Rosie stood and stepped toward her. "Come over here!"

The light was behind them. Kylie couldn't make out their faces. They seemed sincere, but they had no reason to be kind to her. She looked down at her blue flats,

which were actually Nancy's, then up again. Rosie was leaning on the porch railing, the light breeze lifting her hair. "Come on!" she called.

Kylie took a breath, stepped toward them, then stopped on the curb. She balanced on the balls of her feet, heart pounding. Down the street, a child shrieked with laughter. Kylie turned her head to look, but couldn't see anyone. She turned back to Rosie and Elsa. She knew she couldn't stand on the curb forever. Slowly, feeling as if she were falling from a huge height, Kylie let herself tip forward until her toes rested in the street.

## Foreign Countries

CarolAnne got up in the early morning and met Tia at the bus stop. It was 6:30 and the air was wet and cold, still smelled clean. The fog peeled off of the river and made everything soft. Around 2 a.m. she'd packed her book bag with everything she thought they'd need: her wallet, her iPod, a box of pop tarts, *Rolling Stone*, *Cosmo*, a fleece blanket with a picture of Jack Sparrow on it, and the form on which she'd forged Tia's mother's signature. Just before she left the house, she'd added a large thermos of coffee to share with Tia. She was halfway to the bus stop before she remembered that Tia wasn't allowed to drink it.

Their stop was in front of the Garden Theater, whose marquee advertised movies like "Rough Sex 2," and "Bondage Boys." In the summer, the lobby door was propped open, and the smell of sandalwood, mold, and something musty that CarolAnne couldn't identify drifted out. Tia wanted to go see a movie there when they turned eighteen. "We'll wear fake mustaches, they'll totally think we're boys," she'd once said. Then she painted a handlebar mustache on her upper lip with her vial of liquid eyeliner. "See? Don't I look manly?"

Tia hadn't worn make-up this morning. She stood in the fog, hugging herself and looking down the street. Her headphones were on, and the tinny ghost of a song trailed in the air. Tia hadn't gone outside without mascara, two layers of liquid eyeliner, and a third, smudged layer of eyeliner pencil since seventh grade. Seeing her without it was almost like seeing her naked.

The bus came fifteen minutes late. CarolAnne found this comforting instead of annoying. It was so ordinary. The driver was the same guy who'd driven them to school

every morning since the year started. For the first time, CarolAnne thought about how he must see them: two girls in headphones, chipped black polish on their nails, dressed identically in large, dark sweatshirts, torn jeans, and shoes with rips in the sides and scribbles on the rubber caps over the toes. Aside from Tia's naked eyes, they looked the same as they always did.

They sat in the back row and CarolAnne held her backpack in her lap. The blow heaters made a steady hushing sound, like a big animal exhaling. As the bus hurtled downtown over the bridge, she watched the sun come up and turn the river into a sheet of light.

In the bright waiting room of Planned Parenthood, CarolAnne let her head fall back and clunk against the wall. The receptionist looked up at her, smiled, and looked back down. CarolAnne poured herself a capful of coffee from the thermos, stared at it instead of drinking, then rolled her head to the side and stared at the tropical fish in the tank by the door.

Planned Parenthood had three kinds of fish: the yellow and white striped kind shaped like arrow heads with weird, nozzle shaped noses, the orange kind with three white stripes, and the chemical blue kind with black faces. The fish had bright blue gravel and bright green plastic seaweed, red ceramic coral and a windmill. Their movements were both vacant and purposeful. She thought of Tia's face, washed out in the fluorescent light as she handed off the form, signed in, and disappeared into the clinic. CarolAnne shut her eyes. She wished she were a fish.



The day before, Tia had called her after the mandatory counseling session and said, “I need you to come over here.”

CarolAnne had just stepped off the bus home from school. She walked straight to Tia’s house, which was only ten minutes from hers. She knew no one would be home but Tia. Her parents were at work, and no one knew where Tia’s older sister was that week. Maya was twenty-one and crazy. She alternated between being aloofly cool and completely manic. When she was manic she had tantrums, threw things, banged her head against the wall, then left the house for days at a time. No one knew exactly what she did during these periods, though CarolAnne had once spotted her through the plate glass window of an Eat ‘n’ Park. She was sitting in a booth, eating fries and smoking. There was a puddle of ketchup on the corner of her plate with three cigarette butts in it. Her left eye was swollen shut. CarolAnne hadn’t been able to guess whether someone had done this to her, or if she’d done it to herself.

She found Tia sitting cross-legged on her bed. When CarolAnne sat beside her, Tia produced a packet of papers from her backpack with a flourish and set it on the quilt. Almost laughing, but with an angry edge in her voice, she said, “I need a *permission slip*.”

CarolAnne picked up the form: two pieces of paper stapled together and covered in numbers and tiny writing, *Planned Parenthood of Western Pennsylvania* printed in large purple letters across the top. It looked entirely ordinary, but CarolAnne felt as if she were holding one of the antique pistols her grandfather collected. He didn’t keep them loaded, but no one had ever allowed her to pick one up. As if she couldn’t be trusted to even touch something with so much potential power.

“A permission slip for an abortion?” CarolAnne asked. Tia let out a snort of laughter and snatched the paper back. Holding it at arm’s length, she said, “Mom, can you sign this please?”

They started to giggle. CarolAnne put her head down and the giggling built into laughter. She laughed until her stomach hurt. Her eyes were watering when she looked up and saw Tia, blurred into a wash of color, slumped back against the headboard. CarolAnne wiped her eyes and Tia said, her chest still shaking, “Will you please sign it, CarolAnne?”

CarolAnne felt a jolt at the bottom of her stomach, as if she’d stepped off a high curb without meaning to. “What?”

“You know I can’t ask Louraine, and I can’t forge her signature for shit. My cursive looks like a third grader’s.”

CarolAnne knew this wasn’t true. Tia’s cursive was neat and angular as the handwriting of a secretary from the ‘50s. CarolAnne’s cursive was clumsy, huge and loopy. If anyone wrote like a third grader, it was her. Besides, the people at Planned Parenthood had no idea what Louraine’s signature looked like. They wouldn’t know a forgery if it asked them for a speculum and a paper bag of condoms.

But she also knew that this wasn’t the point at all. Tia’s head was bent over the form. She picked at the staple holding it together, the delicate bone connecting her forefinger to her wrist twitching like a pulse.

When CarolAnne slid the form away from her, Tia said, “You know you’re the best friend I have, right?”

“That’s because I’m your only friend, you preggo loser,” she said.

“Go fuck yourself, virgin,” said Tia.

CarolAnne folded the abortion permission slip into her Spanish-English dictionary and put it in her backpack. Walking down Federal Street to her house, she felt the urge to run as fast as she could, to scream, spin in a circle. Anything to get this tight, buzzing feeling out of her chest. She wanted to grab strangers by the arm—the couple eating at the rib stand that Tia insisted sold human meat, a man swigging from a bottle of wine in a paper bag, two punks carrying a battered door between them like a stretcher—and say, “My best friend is pregnant and she’s only sixteen and she won’t tell her stupid boyfriend even though he’s twenty-one and has a job and could help her pay for it.”

But under this was another feeling. She felt as if there really were an antique pistol zipped into her backpack, a loaded one. The form was weapon she was not supposed to have, something dangerous and powerful to aim at the entire, idiotic world. It was a way to scare the world back.

That night, she took the form out and stared at it when she was supposed to be doing homework. It stared back indifferently, like the picture of a crush too old or important to ever want you. She caught herself wishing one of her parents would come into her room and see the form before she could hide it. Wanting to spill made her feel like a traitor.

Around seven that evening, CarolAnne’s mother actually did come in to check on her. She sat beside CarolAnne on the bed. The dictionary was right next to her left thigh, the form sticking out of it.

Her mom was wearing a light jacket. The fabric held and radiated the cool, outside air. She smelled like dust, glue, and paint. She must have just come back from the museum, where she was hanging a show with CarolAnne's father.

"What are you working on?" she asked, running her hand over CarolAnne's hair.

"Math, then Spanish," she nodded at her dictionary.

CarolAnne imagined her mother would turn her head, pick the dictionary up. She'd leaf through it idly until she came to the form, which she'd pull out. "What's this?" she'd ask as she opened it, and then, halfway through asking, she'd register what it was. She'd smooth it across her knees and say, "CarolAnne, is there something you need to tell me?"

And CarolAnne would tell her. It would be a long story; she'd have to go all the way back to the day she told her mother that Rob was eighteen, not twenty-one. She wanted to unravel the whole lie, not just the relevant parts. She could imagine her mother's shock when she got to the part about Tia being pregnant, how it would become sadness. Her mother would also ask a lot of questions, some of which CarolAnne also wanted to know the answers to: "*Why* didn't she tell Rob?" But some would be irritating: "Is Tia on birth control?" Others would make CarolAnne cringe: "Does she know how to put on condoms?" And of course the worst of all: "Are *you* having sex with someone, CarolAnne?"

But she also knew her mother would sign for Louraine. She'd call CarolAnne's father at the museum first, and they'd talk. Her father would drive home and she'd have to tell the story again. There might even be an argument, because her father would be less inclined to break the law for Tia than her mother. But in the end, they'd sign the form.

They'd drive Tia to the clinic. Tia would be angry, but CarolAnne guessed that she'd be relieved, too.

But her mother did not pick up the dictionary. Instead she said, "That sounds like a lot. When do you want to eat? Daddy's staying late at the museum to get everything together, so it's just us."

CarolAnne could not sleep that night. At 1:37, she left her room and went down to the kitchen to make a cup of hot milk. The milk never helped her sleep, despite what her mother said, but it tasted good and it reminded her of being little. She switched on the radio and set it to Rob's show. She caught the tail end of a song, a screech of feedback, before Sublime began to play.

Rob should be involved in this somehow, she thought. Not because he deserved a say, but because they wouldn't be in this situation if not for him. He deserved to feel the way they were feeling: as if the world, which had seemed so huge, big enough to do and be whatever you wanted, was actually very small, and not very friendly.

While she waited for the milk to heat up, CarolAnne spread the form out on the counter and looked at it again. At the end of the first paragraph it said, "If you are a under 18 and are unable to obtain parental consent, a Planned Parenthood representative will help you obtain Judicial Bypass."

This sounded like another kind of surgery, like *coronary bypass*, but she'd looked it up online: it meant getting a judge to say you could go ahead without your parents knowing. The judge would wear a black robe and half-moon glasses. He'd have a ring of white hair around the sides of his head. There would be a guard in a khaki uniform in one

corner, and a stenographer in a maroon sweater in the other. The judge would look down at Tia, hunched like a wet dog in her hoodie, and make her explain why she could not ask Louraine and Peter to sign. Tia would bunch her sleeves into her hands and mumble, “They’ll be mad. And anyway, they aren’t paying for it. It’s my work money—and CarolAnne’s from her birthday.”

The judge would look at CarolAnne over his glasses, then turn back to Tia. “We deal with serious complaints in this court, miss. You are not being abused. ‘Angry’ is not a real issue.” He’d bang his gavel and say, “Case dismissed!” And CarolAnne and Tia would have to walk down the aisle, past the other people in the gallery. Tia would be able to feel their eyes on her back, maybe she’d hear them murmuring about her. These people would believe that Tia was selfish and wrong, maybe even evil. Hearing it enough, Tia would begin to believe it, too.

The station switched to a commercial and CarolAnne took her milk off the stove. She poured it into a mug and then leaned against the counter and stared at the radio. It played two ads, one for hair plugs and one for the strip club near her school. Then Rob’s show came back on.

“Alright, coming up at the top of the hour we have Social D, Pearl Jam, and Nirva-naaaa,” said his voice.

CarolAnne set down her mug. She walked to the knick-knack drawer and pulled out a black pen with “Curator’s Conference—2006” written on it. There was the form, waiting on the counter. She bent down and signed it.

*The Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act requires you to be informed of facts regarding abortion at least 24 hours before your appointment. Some people find this difficult, but others feel better when they understand the procedure. If you have any questions not addressed by this information sheet, please call your local Planned Parenthood.*

CarolAnne felt jittery and strange from the coffee, as if her head were full of water. Thirty-five minutes had gone by since Tia signed in, and CarolAnne had already gotten up to pee three times. Each time she'd been fixated by the stack of sterile, plastic wrapped cups by the toilet. Over the cups, a laminated sign read "After You Have Deposited Your Urine Sample, Please Bring it to the Front Desk." CarolAnne wondered what would happen if she did it. "I just wanted you to have this," she'd say.

She was headed to the bathroom again when someone called her name. A girl in brown corduroys and a powder blue sweater was propping the door between the clinic and the waiting room open with her hip and smiling blandly, as if she were calling roll.

"CarolAnne?" she said again, checking her clipboard.

"Hi," said CarolAnne.

The girl looked up and smiled again. "Hi," she said. "You're here with Tia?"

CarolAnne nodded.

"You can come on back."

CarolAnne scooped up her backpack and followed the girl's bouncy ponytail through the door, past the receptionist behind her bulletproof glass window, and down a narrow hall with a blue carpet and cream colored walls. There were doors on each side, most of them opening on to offices. In one room was an exam table with metal stirrups

for your feet. The room was empty, but CarolAnne paused to look into it and the girl noticed. She stopped and looked in, too.

“That’s one of our exam rooms,” she said. “And that,” she pointed to a closed door a few feet away, “is our Safe Room. It’s where the counselor meets with patients. Our counselor today is Betty. She’s great. Everyone loves her.”

CarolAnne tried to make an interested-sounding noise.

*After your pelvic exam and blood and urine tests, you will be escorted to the surgical wing.*

Tia was sitting on a table like the one in the exam room, her feet in stirrups. She wore a white and blue polka-dot hospital gown. An overweight black woman with press-on nails was standing next to her. She patted Tia’s hand when CarolAnne walked in and said, “Well look who’s here!”

Tia twitched a smile at CarolAnne. The black lady left and CarolAnne took her place. She didn’t hold Tia’s hand. Some girls hugged and held hands and shared gum and said, “I love you” all the time. Tia and CarolAnne hated girls who did that.

The doctor was a woman, and this struck CarolAnne as simultaneously odd and logical. The doctor smiled too, and introduced herself and the nurse who was with her.

“You’re going to feel a little pinch. That’s just me injecting some pain medicine, okay Tia?”

Tia nodded. The nurse handed the doctor a syringe, which the doctor held up to show them. CarolAnne wished she put would it down. Tia was afraid of needles, showing one to her was the absolute worst idea in the world. Before it was anywhere near her, she grimaced and turned her head towards CarolAnne, her eyes screwed shut.



*1. In the operating room, you will be given pain medication and a numbing agent will be injected into or near the cervix. We offer twilight sedation for an additional \$75. Twilight sedation allows you to be awake but relaxed. Under twilight sedation, everything takes on the aspect of a dream.*

When they'd first Googled Planned Parenthood, Tia had said, "Seventy five dollars? What am I, made of money?"

"I'll just club you over the head. It'll do the same thing," CarolAnne had said.

Now, she wished they'd sprung for it. When the doctor started working, Tia winced and wrinkled her forehead. After that her face was tense and still. CarolAnne fixed her eyes on Tia's hairline. In July, Tia had inherited Maya's old ID, and CarolAnne had helped dye her hair black so she'd look more like the picture. The dye was growing out now, and CarolAnne could see the soft, brown roots under the hard, dark line.

"These roots equal four months of our lives," Tia had said earlier that week. "Isn't it weird when you can see time passing like that?"

*2. After the numbing agent is injected, the opening of the cervix is stretched with a dilator.*

The room smelled like her dentist's office, like disinfectant, rubber, and metal. All the noises were muted, as if they were coming through a thick layer of batting. CarolAnne had noticed this in every doctor's office she'd ever been in.

*3. A tube is inserted through the cervix, into the uterus.*

Sometimes the doctor would murmur instructions to the nurse. Sometimes she'd look up, crinkle her eyes over her mask, and say, "How are we doing?" Tia always answered, "Okay," in a high, quiet voice that sounded nothing like her own.

4. *A hand-held suction device gently empties the uterus.*

a. *As the uterus is emptied and begins to contract, some discomfort may be experienced. Most patients report a feeling similar to menstrual cramping.*

About five minutes in, the cramping must have been pretty bad, because Tia actually whimpered aloud.

“It’s okay,” said the doctor. Tia reached over and grabbed CarolAnne’s hand so hard both their fingers turned white.

Halloween was three weeks later, and they spent it at Rob’s apartment. Rob had PBR and a big bag of candy. They sat around the kitchen table, eating and getting more and more drunk. CarolAnne didn’t like PBR, but she kept drinking because she didn’t have anyone to talk to. Rob’s roommate Kenny had gone to bed with a migraine. Rob and Tia were having a stupid fake fight. Or, Rob was having a fake fight with Tia. CarolAnne suspected that Tia was having a real fight with Rob. There was a hard edge to her voice that CarolAnne recognized, but that Rob probably didn’t know her well enough to hear. It had started when Rob said that Tia was the best looking girl he’d ever dated, but he’d like her even if she wasn’t pretty.

“Oh, *bullshit!*” said Tia. “I’d like you, but you wouldn’t like me.”

“Not true,” said Rob. “I’d like you if...you didn’t have any teeth.”

Tia glanced at CarolAnne and laughed. “I bet you would, you fucking pervert.”

Rob rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I meant. I’d like you if you were toothless. I’d like you if you were bald. I’d like you if you were fat.”

Tia tucked her legs under her and leaned forward. She was smiling the way she did when she came to math class high or stole a sweater from JC Penny. It was the smile she used when she wanted to smash something, just to see what would happen. She tilted her head to the side.

“If I were bald?” she said.

Rob grinned. “*Especially* if you were bald.”

“I think you’re lying.” Tia stood and turned to CarolAnne. “Come to the bathroom with me,” she said.

Once they were inside, Tia slammed the door and locked it. One hand still on the bolt, she said, “I need you to shave my head.”

“*What?*”

Tia let out a hiccough of laughter and pressed a hand over her mouth. She opened the medicine cabinet and produced Rob’s clippers. She handed them to CarolAnne, put the toilet seat down, and sat.

“Shave my head!” She said again, pulling her hair ties off and shaking her head. “Please, pretty please?”

CarolAnne held the clippers loosely. “Are you sure?”

Tia twisted to look up at her. “CarolAnne,” she said. “Shave my fucking head please.”

She set clippers against Tia’s head and switched them on. They took the hair off neatly. Most of it fell to the floor in chunks, but some wisps escaped, fluttered down and dusted the tiles or settled on Tia’s shoulders and CarolAnne’s forearms. It was one of the most satisfying things CarolAnne had ever done. She loved how straight the lines the

clippers made were. Half way through, Rob pounded on the door and yelled, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing!” they called, in unison.

When it was over, CarolAnne stepped back. Tia looked like a saint on the way to the fire. She ran her hand over her head and her smile faded. She took a few quick, shallow breaths then looked up, her face blank.

CarolAnne looked down at the clippers. She took a deep breath and, feeling as if she were stepping over a cliff, said, “You should shave mine too.”

“What?”

CarolAnne handed her the clippers. “Come on, shave my head.” She nudged Tia’s shoulder. Tia stood and let CarolAnne take her place. Sitting, her hair touched her thighs.

“Are you sure?” asked Tia.

CarolAnne nodded, though she wasn’t.

The noise was the scariest thing, a buzzing like a mosquito the size of a coffee mug hovering by her ear. Sometimes, sheaves of hair brushed against her face as they fell. She’d never realized how soft her hair was.

After, they stood together in front of the bathroom mirror. Their heads looked small and delicate. They glanced at each other’s reflections, and their eyes met in the mirror. Then Tia reached over and unlocked the door. She pulled it open and they saw Rob standing there, looking a little scared. Tia stepped toward him and he set his hand gently on her head.

CarolAnne turned back to the mirror. She reached up and touched her own head. She expected it to be rough, like sand paper, but the fuzz that the clippers hadn’t removed

was velvety. She could not stop running her hand over it. The bathroom window was jammed open, and CarolAnne could feel the cold air on her scalp. This seemed like the most strange and perfect thing in the world: the breeze moving over her head miraculous as dreaming in another language.

### Try Thinking of Music

When Kenny worked the graveyard shift, the radio was the only thing that tethered him to sanity. From midnight to two the diner got the bar crowd, the college students, nurses, doctors, and policemen. This was their rush period, and except to grab a ticket from the line, Kenny barely looked up from the food he was frying. Sometimes he caught a glimpse of the customers through the service window, their outlines wavering behind the curtain of heat from the grill. The diner's motto was "Anything you want in under ten minutes!" and Kenny had it down. He flipped pancakes and burgers, fried bacon and sausage, made hash browns and home fries, did everything you could possibly do to an egg. He worked in a trance of stress. Most nights, he felt as if the kitchen were filling slowly with water, music the only thing buoying him up.

After three o' clock the diner fell quiet. This was when music became indispensable. Three is an hour for exhaustion and longing. Everything becomes insubstantial and smoky. A good DJ understands this. He knows to play a mix of strange and nostalgic songs. Kenny's roommate, Rob Warzel, was a good DJ. He worked at the radio station up the hill, from midnight to five. Kenny let Rob's music pull him out into the dark. It was almost like being asleep.

The regulars who drifted in around this time were like something from a dream, too. In terms of food, they were less demanding. They wanted the cheapest things—coffee and toast, scrambled eggs, French fries. They smoked more, and after an hour or so, a thin grey haze hung in the diner like sharp smelling fog. Sometimes they disappeared into the bathroom for long periods of time, then floated out, their eyes drifting over invisible trajectories, their fingers twitching against their thighs.

Eric, one of their three o' clock regulars, liked to leave gifts for Kenny and the waitresses. Eric was slender as a teenage girl. He buzzed his hair and chewed his nails, wore baggy black clothes and pristine white Converse All Stars. He liked sweet things—oatmeal, doughnuts, sometimes jam straight from the packet. He was gentle as a deer. His presents were always small: a tiny plastic frog with green spots; a yellow water gun; a cigarette hooked to an earring with copper wire; a white lighter with *bad luck!* written in neat cursive along one side. Kenny's favorite was an orange wind-up kangaroo wearing blue boxing gloves. When he held it to the light, he could see the little springs and gears inside it. When he wound it up, it did exactly three and a half back flips before grinding to a halt.

One night around 1:40, a group of drunk college students came in. They were probably twenty-one or twenty-two, Kenny's age, but they seemed younger. They were cocky and innocent, full of plans and trust that their lives would turn out exactly as they expected them to.

One of the college girls reminded Kenny of Tia, Rob's girlfriend. Tia was seventeen, skinny and delicate as a greyhound. She wore huge t-shirts with the names of numetal bands on the front. When she smoked, she flourished her cigarette as if it were a magic wand.

Kenny didn't talk to Tia much. He tried to avoid her when she came over. The first time Kenny met her, Rob pulled him aside and said, "Don't look at me like that. She's young, but she's awesome. You should talk to her."

“I wasn’t looking at you,” Kenny said. “She seems nice.” But instead of talking to Tia, he went to the kitchen and made himself eggs benedict. He ate them in his room and listened to Bob Marley.

The college girl wasn’t as thin as Tia, and her hair was a little longer, but she smoked in exactly the same way. Kenny found himself thinking about the way Tia looked when she crossed the street to their apartment after school. Sometimes, he caught a glimpse of her through the living room window: she stood hunched on the curb, her backpack bowing her over as if it weighted more than the moon. When a gap came in traffic, she seemed to wade across the street like St. Christopher fording the river with the baby Jesus in his arms. Jesus, who carried every sin ever committed, the heaviest child in the world.

The college students were sitting in the booth Eric always took. At three in the morning, they still had not left. When Eric came in, he stopped for a moment, then hunched his shoulders and scurried past them. He settled into a booth across the room and began rocking and scribbling in his composition book. This was what he did every night. Kenny watched him for a moment, washed in relief, then turned back to the grill.

He was making pancakes for Jonah, the tense, grey alcoholic who always wore the same green down jacket, when he heard one of the college girls say, “Hey, is he okay?” Kenny looked up and saw that the cadence of Eric’s rocking had increased. He had begun to mumble faster, and his breath was coming in sharp, quick bursts.

“He’s fine,” said Martha, the waitress. Martha did not usually work this shift, and when she did, she spent most of her time watching the clock and complaining about her



bunions. She didn't know any of the regulars well enough to tell when they were fine and when they weren't.

A boy with shaggy brown hair smirked at Eric. He turned to one of his friends and muttered something. The friend snorted. Kenny imagined leaving the kitchen, walking slowly to their table, wrapping some of the boy's long hair around his hand, and yanking his head back as hard as he could. Kenny knew he looked scary after a few hours of work: there were permanent blue-black circles under his eyes, and the heat made them bloodshot; his cheeks turned bright red; his goatee and mustache became glazed with sweat. Before work, he put his hair in a pony tale and twisted his goatee into three narrow braids. All night, sweat ran down the braids and dripped onto the front of his shirt. He imagined shaking some into the boy's face, one drop landing neatly between his startled eyes.

The girl who looked like Tia had turned to stare at Eric. He stiffened and rocked faster, tucked his chin into his chest and pressed his fist against his mouth. A neat line formed between the girl's eyebrows. It looked as if she were biting the inside of her cheek.

Kenny stood on his toes and leaned through the window. The heat from the grill burned his stomach, but he stayed where he was, gripping the metal edge of the window to keep from slipping.

"You're at his booth," he said. "Maybe you should move to another one."

The college students looked at each other, incredulous, as if they'd never been asked to give up anything in their lives. "Do we need to return his stapler, too?" said the long-haired boy. Everyone but the girl who looked like Tia snorted with laughter. She

glanced quickly at Kenny, then turned and stared hard at the picture of Marilyn Monroe above their table.

Kenny felt a soft calm descend. He always felt this way before a fight. Violence was so simple. Once you knew it was coming, there was nothing to do but give yourself up to it. He pushed himself away from the window, the rush of cooler air making skin on his stomach prickle. Taking off his apron, he walked through the swinging kitchen door to stand behind the milkshake counter. “Stop looking at him,” he said. He could feel himself smiling.

The long-haired boy snorted again and stood. Kenny stepped from behind the counter. He caught the boy’s eyes and held them. They faced each other across the diner. Kenny thought of cowboys facing off in a saloon, like in a black and white movie.

But the boy began rifling through his pockets for cash, and after a moment, his friends followed suit. They passed around the check and threw money into a pile in the center of the table. On the way out the door, the boy slapped Eric’s table and said, “All clear, Milton.”

Eric lowered his fist. He looked entirely different. The angles of his face seemed sharper; there was a tension in his arms and shoulders that Kenny had never seen before. Kenny looked at Eric’s forearms and saw for the first time that they were very strong. Eric started to rise from his seat. Kenny shoved himself away from the counter and bolted toward him. He pushed himself in front of the college boy just as Eric sprang forward. Eric hit Kenny, the force knocking them both to the ground.

“So my question is, if Eddie Vedder had died young, would we think he was a better musician than Kurt Cobain?” he heard Rob’s voice saying. “Not to impugn the status of Cobain’s genius, but it’s a question worth considering.”

Kenny opened his eyes. He was propped against the wall, Tia kneeling by his feet. He couldn’t see Rob anywhere.

“Speaking of geniuses, how about some Lou Reed?” said Rob’s voice. This time, Kenny heard the soft crackle of the radio underneath. “There isn’t enough Lou Reed on this station, let alone in this world. Here’s *O, Sweet Nuthin’* by the Velvet Underground.”

“Hey, you’re awake,” said Tia.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“She called me,” said Tia, jerking her head at Martha.

“I called a *Rob Warzel*,” said Martha.

“And he’s working,” said Tia. “But I was home. That was a really good idea, Kenny, using someone who also works at night as your emergency contact.”

It was a moment before Kenny understood what Tia was saying. Then he remembered that Rob *was* his emergency contact. Kenny had put his name down before Rob got the DJ job.

“You should go to the hospital,” said Tia.

Kenny tried to shake his head, but it hurt too much. “No,” he said. “I just want to go to bed.”

“I heard you hit your head on the corner of a table, then again on the ground. You should go to the doctor.”

“I’ll go tomorrow,” he said, though he knew he wouldn’t.

Tia sighed. "Fine. Where are your car keys? I don't think we should walk back."

"In my pocket," he said. "Did you walk here?"

"What else was I going to do, teleport?"

Kenny pictured her walking alone through the dark streets between their apartment and the diner, the streetlights making her velvety hair glow. Rob had once told him that when Tia walked alone at night, she stuffed her keys between her fingers, the sharp tips and serrated edges facing out so she could stab or scratch at anyone who tried to grab her. Rob thought it was badass, if slightly paranoid. It made Kenny want to apologize to her for the entire world.

He tried to stand on his own and wobbled. Tia slid under his right arm, wrapping her left around his waist. Martha did the same on his other side. They half dragged him out to the parking lot. Martha pulled his car keys from his pocket, then helped him into the passenger seat. She'd buckled his seatbelt before he realized Tia was going to drive. It occurred to him that she probably didn't have a license yet.

She started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. On the radio, Lou Reed sang about Pearly May not knowing the night from the day. The traffic lights flashed a steady yellow. He could see them, flicking on and off out of synch, all the way down Carson.

"Want a cigarette?" he asked, pulling a pack from the cup holder by the gearshift. Tia took one and smiled.

It was humid. The heavy air washed into the car and whipped the smoke from Kenny's cigarette into the night. When he tapped the ashes out the window, they flared and skidded along the side of the car. Tia tapped her own, then laughed quietly and shook her head.

“What?”

She glanced at him, then shrugged. “I guess it’s weird, but I think that’s one of the prettiest things in the world.”

The only light in the apartment came from the TV. Tia flicked on the hall light. It reflected off the posters Rob had taped to the walls, washing out the musician’s faces, the names of their bands. Kenny rested his hand against the wall as he walked to his bedroom. Once he snagged the edge of a poster, tearing it. Tia followed a few steps behind, as if she planned to catch him if he toppled over. Kenny pictured her trying to carry him the down the hall and almost laughed.

She hovered uncertainly outside his bedroom door while he took off his shoes and lay down. When he reached over to shut off the light, she said, “No! If you have a concussion you can’t fall asleep.”

“I don’t have a concussion,” said Kenny.

“You don’t *think* you do.” She stepped further into the room and pulled out her phone. She fiddled with it, then set it on his nightstand between the radio and the wind-up kangaroo Eric had given him. “It’s going to go off every hour, so if you fall asleep you’ll wake up again. That’s what my mom did when we thought my sister had a concussion.” She glanced around the room nervously, then said, “Do you want the radio?”

“Alright,” said Kenny.

Tia switched it on and they heard Rob’s voice saying, “...classic cover by the Cowboy Junkies” before “Sweet Jane” filled the room.

Tia ran her finger over the top of the radio and smiled a little. “This is one of my favorite songs,” she said.

“Mine too,” said Kenny. He watched her tapping her fingers gently against the top of the radio, and for the first time, it occurred to him that Tia’s being in the apartment at 3:30 in the morning was odd.

“What were you doing here when Martha called, anyway?” he asked.

Tia glanced up at him, then looked down again.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he said quickly.

She shook her head, then shrugged. “No it’s fine. I just had a pretty big fight with my mom, and Rob said I could stay here.”

“Okay,” said Kenny.

He expected the conversation to end there, but after a moment’s pause, Tia said, “She said...she said she was going to call the cops on Rob. I told her how old he was. Or...I guess I didn’t mean to, because she thought he was eighteen before, and I just slipped up and said he was twenty-two and she flipped a shit.” She bit her lip and drummed her fingers harder against the top of the radio. “She can’t really call the cops, can she?”

“I don’t know,” said Kenny.

Tia shrugged again. She picked up the kangaroo, wound it up, and set it back on the nightstand. It did three back flips, crouched in preparation for a fourth, then froze.

Tia laughed, and Kenny was startled by how pretty she looked. “I like that!” she said.

“You can have it,” said Kenny.

Tia looked surprised. Kenny was surprised, too. She picked the kangaroo up and examined it more closely. “Thanks,” she said. She raised it as if toasting him, then put it in the pocket of her hoodie, turned his light off, and left.

Kenny lay in the dark, listening to “Sweet Jane.” Outside, the sky was turning dark blue. Rob had once explained that he organized his set lists by color: every number had a color, and so did every song. He liked to play songs whose colors matched the color of the hour. “It’s All Over Now Baby Blue” was white (in spite of the title), just like one a.m.; two a.m. and “No Woman, No Cry,” were orange; “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was green, and so was four a.m.

“But the songs always sound good together,” Kenny had said. “You don’t plan that a little?”

“Not much. You can group songs by color because songs with similar colors tend to sound similar,” Rob had explained. “Tia and me talked about this once. We see songs in almost all the same colors.” He laughed and shook his head. “Like, what the fuck, you know? How does something like that happen?”

Kenny got up and walked quietly to the kitchen. When he passed the living room, he saw the top of Tia’s head leaning against the armrest of the couch. He got himself a glass of orange juice then sat at the table in the thinning dark. Tia’s physics textbook lay open in front of him. Kenny noticed that one of the lines of text under the heading *Electromagnetic Radiation* was circled in red, blue, and pink pen. He bent down to look. The words blurred then resolved themselves: *Try thinking of radio signals as low-frequency light.*

Kenny tired. He imagined a light heavy as water emanating from the signal tower, rippling through the sky in concentric circles. If you submerged your head in this light, you'd hear snatches of every song ever broadcast. If you touched it, it would vibrate faintly against your fingers like the racing heart of a bird. It would be warm as a sleeping girl's thigh. He imagined it flowing into the living room and brushing against Tia's hair, drifting into the kitchen and settling around his shoulders for just a second before floating out the window.

The light would be the color of whatever song Rob was playing at the moment. Tia and Rob would say that *Sweet Jane's* light was the color of the sky outside, of morning so early you could mistake it for night.



## Hot Shot

Elsa was walking to work across the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge when Rosie finally called. She was tempted to ignore it. Just walking to Deutsch Beer Haus made her angry; she wasn't sure she could be nice to Rosie. She had been working there since June. The manager had hired her even though she had no waitressing experience, because she was blonde and had a German-sounding name. Employees were not allowed to park in the customer lot, but there was never any parking near by. Most waitresses parked behind a macaroni warehouse in the Strip District and walked across the bridge to the North Side. Elsa suspected that the warehouse manager let them do this because of their uniforms—a green and gold German smock over a short white skirt and a white blouse, knee socks, and black leather shoes with rubber heels, like Catholic schoolgirls wore. If Purgatory existed, Elsa imagined it looked just like the macaroni warehouse parking lot—a crumbling stretch of concrete with a loading dock on one side, milk weed and Queen Anne's Lace growing along the fence on the other, no marked parking spaces. People in Purgatory would wear Deutsch Beer Haus uniforms and walk across the lot forever, while men in yellowing undershirts with macaroni dust on their arms and faces watched silently, appreciatively.

It was mid-September. Rosie had not called her in three weeks. A cold snap had hit the night before, and frost was on the bridge cables. Elsa stopped walking and blew on the closest one. A tiny patch of frost melted. What kind of best friend goes to college, swearing to call you and write you tons of letters, then totally forgets about you for three weeks? Especially when you have to dress like a German hooker who's just escaped a cuckoo clock.

But the idea of not talking to Rosie was worse than the idea of talking to her. She flipped her phone open and took a long drag on her cigarette. If her lungs were full of smoke, she wouldn't be able to say anything mean.

"Elsa! How are you?" Rosie shrieked. "Oh my God, I miss you so much!"

Elsa felt as if she were going to cry. She swallowed and leaned against the railing. The frost burned her forearms. She pressed them down harder, wondering if they'd stick. She could hear the Flaming Lips playing on Rosie's computer.

"I'm going to work."

"Ew, Douche Beer Haus. I'm so sorry."

Elsa laughed. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. She wanted to beg Rosie to drop out of Cooper Union and come back to Pittsburgh. There was no one to hang out with but high school kids and old heads.

"Any awesome Pittsburgh adventures to tell me about?" Rosie asked.

Elsa wanted to tell her about Misty, the head waitress. Misty's boyfriend Steve was the center of her universe. She used *we* the way most people used *I*. Last week she'd said, "Me and Steve had pierogies for dinner and we were like, *these bitches are baller.*"

She heard a door slamming on Rosie's end and a voice calling, "Rosie fucking Pollack, get off the phone! I have the *craziest* story for you!"

Rosie laughed and said, "Hey Sonya. One minute, 'kay?"

Sonya Frank was Rosie's roommate. "Who are you talking to? Say you'll call them back!"

"It's Elsa."

Elsa heard a tussle, then Sonya's voice came over the receiver, "Elsa, Rosie's going to call you back okay? I have a serious romantic emergency!" In the background, Elsa could hear Rosie laughing and protesting. Before Sonya hung up, Rosie called, "I love you Elsa! I'm really sorry! I'll call—"

Elsa lowered her phone. She was at the exact center of the bridge. From here, she could see Deutsch Beer Haus. The roof was fake thatch, which Elsa was pretty sure had nothing to do with German architecture. She squinted one eye, zeroing in on the building, and blew a jet of smoke at it. Every time a fire truck screamed past Elsa as she drove to work, she hoped that the restaurant had burned down and she'd never have to go back.

On Saturdays, Elsa shared the east side of the beer hall with Misty. She found her leaning against the wall near the pretzel heater, texting Steve. Misty's perfume, which Elsa imagined was called *Baby Prostitute*, enveloped her in a five foot bubble. She bleached the top layer of her hair and dyed the rest black. Her press-on nails had little rhinestones set into their tips. A tiny clown wielding an axe was tattooed on the inside of her left wrist, and she was saving up to get the word *Bitch* in script on the back of her neck. Misty's favorite word was *bitch*. It could refer to anything—cheese, beer glasses, lederhosen, bratwurst, Elsa's braid, Steve.

When she saw Elsa, Misty looked up and said, "The cheese bags exploded again."

The cheapest menu item was a giant soft pretzel and a bowl of dipping cheese. It wasn't even real cheese: it came in throw-pillow-sized plastic bags that didn't need to be refrigerated. The waitress with the opening shift poured two or three bags into a steam tray and stored a few more in the heated drawers by the cash registers. The bags melted

or filled with air and exploded at least once a week. Elsa slumped against the bar and rubbed the tiny zits that had bubbled up on her forehead about a week after she took this job.

“I guess someone turned the heat up too high,” she said.

Misty nodded sagely. She pointed at the cheese drawer and said, “Someone needs to keep an eye on that bitch.” She lifted her skirt a few inches and stuffed her phone into her garter. “I gotta redo my eyeliner, but when I’m done I’ll help you. I got a funny story about Steve, too.”

“Oh man,” said Elsa. She knelt, grabbed a bar rag, and opened the drawer. The smell of burnt cheese and melted plastic rose up and enveloped her.

Misty slapped her shoulder. “Don’t get sarcastic with me now, Elsa. It’s just you and me up in this bitch all night.”

The worst thing about Sonya Frank was that Rosie used to hate her. The day Rosie got her name from Housing Services, they’d looked her up on Facebook. In her profile picture, Sonya wore aviators and a trucker hat with **SOMEBODY GONNA GET PREGNANT** written on it. She was posing by a wax figure of Albert Einstein, her arm slung around his neck, her lips pursed, her fingers in a sideways peace sign. Clicking through her photos, Rosie became increasingly horrified. At one point she wailed, “She matches her eye shadow with her belt, her nails, and her *contacts!* I’m going to die!”

Elsa glanced over at Rosie, who never wore make-up, washed her bushy black hair maybe once a week, lived in band t-shirts and ratty grandpa sweaters from Goodwill, owned three pairs of tattered jeans and only two pairs of shoes—Doc Martins with

Anarchy As painted in white-out on the toes and a pair red cowboy boots that had belonged to her mother in the '80s. She thought that if Rosie didn't die, it would be because she'd murdered Sonya Frank.

The darkest corner of Elsa's heart was pleased that Sonya seemed so horrible: first, she wouldn't become Rosie's new best friend; second, now they were *both* going to have a bad year. Immediately after she had this thought, a wave of guilt rolled over her. Who wishes for her best friend to be unhappy?

The night before Rosie left for college, she and Elsa got stupid drunk. They lay on their backs in Rosie's garden, their feet so close to the little fire they'd made that Elsa worried the soles of her shoes would melt. She could see the faint halo of the moon through the clouds, which had absorbed the ambient light and glowed maroon. The sky looked like quilt batting soaked in wine. When she closed her eyes, the whole lawn spun and tilted. If she concentrated on the grass under the palms of her hands and the crown of Rosie's head resting lightly against her temple, the world stilled itself.

"My suitcase is pretty huge," Rosie said. "You could totally fit if you bunched up really small."

"Thanks, but I don't want to live with Sonya Frank."

"Sonya Frank!" Rosie shouted, her face a pantomime of horror. Her voice rebounded off the side of the house and the garage. She threw her arms straight out, like a supplicant or a zombie, then clamped her hands over her face and rolled from side to side.

When they'd stopped laughing, Rosie said. "You know what we should do? Hop a train! We haven't done it in forever."

The summer they were sixteen, they'd hopped a train almost once a week. They never rode them far—usually just into the next county. Once they'd gone to Ohio and hitchhiked back. A couple in a battered blue minivan picked them up. They shared the back with a Newfoundland in the biggest cage Elsa had ever seen. The couple was nerdy and nice. They played Tom Petty and Bruce Springsteen and talked about organic produce. Rosie kept sending Elsa text messages about how the couple was going to murder them: *these two are psycho; omg they're going to chop us up and eat us with organic fava beans and a nice chianti; they're going to feed us to the dog!!!* She and Rosie shot each other glances and tried with increasing difficulty not to laugh. When the couple dropped them off a block from Elsa's house, they ran all the way back. Elsa laughed so hard her stomach ached.

In the backyard, Elsa sat up too quickly. The whole garden spun. "Do you really want to?"

Rosie scrambled to her feet. "Let's go!" She twisted her curly hair around her hand and tied it in a knot at the back of her head.

It was three in the morning, but the walk from Rosie's house on Beeler to the Boundary Street tracks wasn't long. Soon, Rosie was kneeling beside them, feeling for the vibrations that meant a train was coming. They waited an hour and a half, but nothing came. It got colder and colder. Finally, they headed back to Rosie's place. They were standing in her kitchen eating Lucky Charms when they heard a train moaning like a whale as it passed.

Five minutes after Elsa finished cleaning up the cheese explosion, she and Misty were hit with the worst rush Elsa had ever worked. The second she flipped a table, three more left and four more arrived. It was so loud, she had to bend over her customers and shout in their ears. By eleven, her shoes and socks were soaked with beer, and sauerkraut juice and gravy streaked her smock. At midnight, she caught her reflection in a window: her hair was twisted into a braid around her head, and the loose strands stood straight up, like dandelion fluff; her smile had taken on a glazed, manic edge. When a table of sorority girls asked for more bread sticks, she nearly threw a half-full beer stein in their faces. She'd had to pee since ten.

Misty was also in a terrible mood. She kept ducking behind the bar, pulling her cell phone from her garter and texting, her lips moving furiously, her thumbs stabbing the keys as if she wanted pulverize her phone. When Elsa dropped a tray of beer steins as they passed, Misty grabbed her own pigtails and pulled them. It would have been funny if they both hadn't been stretched to transparency with stress.

"Be more fucking careful, Elsa!" said Misty. "God! Fuck! Now we gotta clean this bitch up and I got seven tables!"

"I have seven tables too, so just chill the fuck out," snapped Elsa. "I'll clean it up. I clean up every fucking other mess. Go take care of your *bitches*."

Misty gave her the finger and stomped off. Watching her go, Elsa was tempted to run after her and jam a steak knife into her back.

It was her own fault she was stuck in Pittsburgh for another year: she's skipped the SATs. When her parents found out, they grounded her for two months. But by then it was too late, the application deadlines had all passed.

The SATs were held on the campus of a small women's college. Elsa and Rosie had both gone to camp there one summer, but they'd never met. Elsa imagined herself at eleven, with knobby knees that stood out as prominently as a giraffe's and a curtain of blonde hair so long she sometimes sat on it. There was always something sticky in her hair back then—as if she magically attracted discarded gum and half-sucked pieces of hard candy. She saw eleven-year-old Elsa, a wad of gum in her hair, running past eleven-year-old Rosie, not even noticing her, and felt a wave of sadness that nearly drowned her. Soon they were going to fly in separate directions: Rosie was going to Cooper Union, because she was amazing at art. Elsa was amazing at playing electric bass, but her parents weren't cool enough to let her go to school for that. They wanted her to be a paralegal.

The path was lined with trees so old their branches touched across it. Elsa felt as if she were in a tunnel. She hated tests—inevitably, she became fixated by the sound of someone chewing gum or a blow heater switching on and off. She could already picture the room where they'd be held: blue carpet speckled with red and yellow, compressed by years of feet, beige walls with grey scuffs where the tables had scraped against them, a light buzzing in the back. If she became a paralegal, she'd work in an office with blue and red carpet and buzzing lights. If she was lucky, there'd be a plastic ficus tree that no one would ever dust. She'd forget how to play bass and Rosie would be a famous artist with no time for her. Elsa tried to imagine taking the three-hour test that would condemn her to this and felt a weight settle over her stomach and chest like a lead bib.



She turned and walked into a cluster of trees behind the nearest dorm. Thin, crunchy bark peeled off the trees in scrolls; their leaves were bright gold and red. Elsa stepped on as many as she could. The soft, golden quiet and the dusty-sharp smell of bark and leaves drained some of the panic out of her. She had a joint in her backpack that she was supposed to share with Rosie and their friend Kylie later, but a couple of puffs now wouldn't hurt. She stayed in the trees until the test was over, then caught a bus to South Side, where she was meeting them for coffee.

Elsa was putting on her jacket when Misty tapped her on the shoulder and said, almost shyly, "Do you think I could get a ride home?"

It was three a.m., and their shift was finally over. Elsa unpinned her braid and let it uncoil itself from her head. It fell between her shoulder blades with a satisfying weight. She pulled it over her shoulder, tugged off her hair tie, and unwound her hair. She shook her head and combed her fingers through it. She could feel Misty watching her, waiting.

"Why do you need a ride?" she asked.

"I just—" Misty began, then stopped. Elsa heard her take a shaky breath, then sniff hard. Elsa forgot her hair. She looked at Misty carefully for the first time. She was examining a Steelers poster as if trying to memorize it, picking at the side of her left thumb with her forefinger, twisting the hem of her skirt with her right hand. Elsa could see grey blurs under her eyes where her mascara had run.

"Sure, you can have a ride," Elsa said.

Misty sniffed again and nodded.

They walked silently across the bridge to the Macaroni lot. They drove in silence until they reached Oakland.

“Me and Steve had a fight,” Misty said. “We’ve been fighting all night.” On the front of her hoodie, a devil’s smiling face was flanked by two flaming dice; *Insane Clown Posse* arched above the devil’s head. “I don’t have a car so...” She shrugged, wiped her cheek as if she were angry with it, and fiddled with her hoodie strings. Suddenly, she began to laugh. “Where am I going to live if we break up?” she said. “This isn’t even my hoodie! I don’t have shit.”

Elsa turned onto Forbes Avenue. She wanted to pull over and hug Misty or tell her that Steve was an asshole. But she didn’t know Misty well enough to hug her, and she didn’t know Steve at all. The silence stretched between them. Elsa could have bounced a quarter off it.

“Want to hop a train?” she said.

“What?” said Misty.

Elsa had no idea why she’d said it. “Nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

“No,” said Misty. “Let’s do it. I never tried that before.”

Elsa glanced over at her. Misty’s eyes were red and puffy, but she was smiling. Elsa turned off of Forbes, toward Boundary.

The train came almost as soon as they reached the tracks; Elsa heard it rumbling toward them, the low note of its whistle the saddest sound in the world. When it rounded the corner and its headlight swept over them, Misty grabbed Elsa’s arm. Her fake nails pressed through Elsa’s coat but didn’t hurt.

“Okay,” said Elsa. “Look down the tracks and watch for an open boxcar. When you see one, start running. When it catches up to us, we grab the edge and jump on.”

Misty nodded, her eyes already fixed on the far end of the train.

When Elsa saw one, she grabbed Misty’s hand and began to run. She’d forgotten how scary hopping trains could be, how the noise flooded you, threatened to shake you apart. The train roared and screamed. Notes harmonized then fell into discord. It was the biggest, most terrible sound she’d ever heard. It made her want to bolt away even as it pulled her forward.

Finally, the car reached them. Elsa leapt forward and grabbed the edge. Her fingers scabbled on the wood for a moment, then found a metal ring. She swung her legs up and rolled in. She was still wearing her uniform, so Misty had probably seen her underwear, but she wasn’t embarrassed: her whole body was alight, vibrating with leftover fear from the leap, the thrill of having made it. She’d forgotten this about hopping trains, too: that pressure in her chest exactly between a laugh and a scream.

She rolled off her stomach and looked out the boxcar door. Misty was still running, the train fast outstripping her. If she didn’t jump now, she wouldn’t make it. Elsa felt a jolt of fear. She crawled to the edge of the boxcar and called, “Jump! Do it now!” She grabbed the metal ring on the doorframe with one hand and stretched out the other. She had no idea if she was strong enough to pull Misty up.

“Come on!” she called.

Misty shook her head. Her cheeks were bright red; she looked as if she were about to cry. She slowed to a jog, then a walk, then stopped completely, hugging herself. Elsa clung to the steel ring, watching Misty grow smaller and smaller. The train had picked up

speed; it was going too fast to jump off now. Elsa could feel the pressure of tears behind her eyes and in her throat. Her whole body was shaking. Dark trees flicked past. The wind whipped her hair against her face so hard it stung. The train roared and screamed around her, barreled her toward God knows where.

## Dance with Me

CarolAnne heard that Layla Michaels was a stripper from Cindy Yang. They were at a Rugby House '90s party, sitting on a broken sofa under the front window. CarolAnne and Cindy were the same height, but the sofa was so swaybacked that CarolAnne, sitting by the arm, was a head taller. "California Love" was playing loudly, and they had to shout into each other's ears to be heard. A few feet away, two rugby players played beer pong against two freshmen girls. One girl had amazing aim, but every time she landed a ball in a cup, she did a weird, waist-height fist-pump, pulling back on the empty air as if she were opening a door. Her friend was terrible. She collapsed into giggles every time she missed, meaning that she giggled almost constantly.

Through an archway that opened into the next room, CarolAnne could see her boyfriend Jackson dancing with Moira Marks. CarolAnne hated it when Jackson danced with other girls, but wasn't sure if she was allowed to feel this way. She didn't like dancing much, and Jackson was such a terrible dancer, spastic even, that it was hard to imagine him seducing anyone. But CarolAnne sometimes suspected that he cultivated his spasticity. At that moment, he was waving his arms and bouncing up and down, apparently pretending to be Tupac. Moira was laughing so hard she could barely dance. She put her hands on Jackson's shoulders and giggled into his chest. CarolAnne turned back to Cindy.

"A stripper?" she said. "Really?"

"I *know*, right? How gross is that?"

CarolAnne shook her head. She could not imagine Layla Michaels stripping. Layla was a bio-chem major. She had waist-length, fawn colored hair, which she wore in

a braid. Her clothes were mostly grayish blue, cream, and brown—like a moth’s wing. Sometimes she wore a pilly fisherman’s sweater. She had wire-rimmed glasses, and she never wore make-up. She drank a lot of tea. She was probably a vegetarian, but no one knew, because she ate all her meals in the bio lab.

No one liked Layla but it was hard to say why—she was just faintly and persistently unlikable. She didn’t talk to many people. Maybe her silence was due to snobbery, maybe she thought she was better than everyone else. But CarolAnne thought not. Layla didn’t seem *aware* enough to be snobby. She drifted along as if the rest of the world didn’t exist, as if she lived behind mirrored glass.

CarolAnne’s roommate Amanda had a bio class with Layla. Twice a week, they sat together for an hour and a half, observing a mason jar of fruit flies, taking notes on their life cycle, rarely speaking. Amanda said Layla had perfect handwriting, that she was nice, but very quiet.

“She mostly talks about fruit flies,” Amanda said, shrugging. They were in their dorm room, on their identical wooden beds. The beds were raised too high to get into comfortably, but were too low to fit a bookshelf or a chest of drawers under. Milo, Jackson’s best friend, liked to joke that this was supposed to be a form of birth control.

“By the time you get in, you’re too tired to do anything. So you can’t get pregnant!” he’d said.

Amanda hated Milo. When he said this, she’d shaken her head and said, “Why do you assume everyone at this college is straight?”

The night, Amanda was sitting cross-legged on her bed, brushing the tangles out of her wet hair. Amanda's hair was almost as long as Layla's. When she combed it over her face so she could reach the knots, she looked like Cousin It, but with arms.

"Did you know Layla was a stripper?" CarolAnne asked. She expected Amanda's head to jerk up, for her to exclaim in horror. Amanda was a gender studies major.

But Amanda didn't look up; she didn't even stop brushing her hair. She shrugged again and said, "I heard that, yeah. If she wants to strip, she should strip."

CarolAnne did not know what to say. She was disappointed, and vaguely embarrassed. Amanda often made CarolAnne feel ignorant and backward, as if she were from the 1950s or a hick town where they still said "colored" and believed that women belonged in the kitchen (in fact, she did know some people in Pittsburgh who said "colored," but they were very old, and she would never tell Amanda this).

She picked up the essay she was supposed to be reading and stared at it. The window above her bed was open, and a damp breeze filtered through the screen. It smelled like wet concrete and grass. CarolAnne moved her pillow and knelt at the head of the bed, pressing her face against the screen until the frame creaked. She wondered how much pressure it would take to pop the screen out, send it drifting to the ground like a huge, lacy leaf. She didn't want to jump out of her window or anything, just lean further into the night and breathe some fresh air.

It was Milo's idea to go see Layla strip. CarolAnne, Jackson, Amanda, and Milo were studying in their common room. CarolAnne was reading *Jane Eyre*. She had

reached the part where Jane paces through Rochester's attic, imagining what the world outside Thornefield is like, when Milo snorted and shouted, "Yo! Check out Layla!"

They crowded around his computer. Under a banner that read "Jezebels: Home of Sixteen Sublime Beauties!" was a photo gallery. Sixteen stamp-sized women smiled and pouted up at them. Jackson clicked the picture with the name "Cherry" under it, and there she was. Wearing a black lace bra and a studded black pleather thong, Layla faced the camera, smiling a little. Her legs were spread, like a soldier at ease. She held a riding crop across her shoulders. On her head was a red wig, cut in a bob. The picture ended just above her knees. When CarolAnne saw it, she felt a jolt, as if someone had slapped her.

"Damn," said Milo. "That's some classy shit."

Jackson snorted. "Yeah, I love the panties."

CarolAnne glanced over at him. His he was blushing a little and his eyes were fixed on the picture. She wanted to grab his chin and turn his face away.

"Maybe I should get underwear like that," she said. Jackson looked away from Layla, smiling. He wrapped his arm around her waist and whispered, "*Do it!*" into her neck.

"Holy shit, you know what we should do this weekend?" Milo's face was bright and excited as a six-year-old's, he actually bit his lip. CarolAnne's stomach dropped a little.

"Oh fuck..." said Jackson, also grinning.

"We have to fucking go!" said Milo.

"No you don't!" said Amanda. CarolAnne jumped. She'd forgotten Amanda was there. Milo turned slowly to face her. Amanda crossed her arms.



“How did you even find this?” she asked. “Did you actually Google her?”

“I was checking my email. Someone sent it to me.”

“Well now that we’ve seen it, could you close it?” Amanda asked. She sounded as if she were speaking to a third grader.

Milo raised his chin a little. “Why?”

“Because she goes to our school,” said Amanda. “She’s one of us and we should show some respect. Plus, think about how expensive this place is! Maybe she’s stripping to pay tuition. Or maybe—God forbid—she’s doing it because she likes it. But it really doesn’t matter why she’s stripping, because it’s her fucking choice and we shouldn’t mock her!”

“Exactly,” Milo said. “*She’s* the one who decided to work at a peep show. If she needed money, she could’ve done work-study or something. If she wanted to ‘own’ her sexuality she could, I don’t know, maybe buy a nice skirt and some heels? Have a little sex?”

Amanda seemed on the verge of stamping her foot. CarolAnne hoped she wouldn’t. “That’s not the *point!*”

CarolAnne could feel Amanda trying to catch her eye. She kept her face turned away. She knew that Amanda expected CarolAnne to take her side. They were both girls, and to Amanda, this was enough to warrant solidarity. CarolAnne felt spite welling up inside her. She was sick of Amanda’s righteousness, of being told she wasn’t a good enough person because she didn’t know what queercore was, hadn’t read Judith Butler or bell hooks, and had only just learned about the Kinsey Scale. She wanted to tell Amanda that being angry all the time was exhausting, and she just wanted a break. She turned

back to the computer, but let her eyes go blurry so she wouldn't have to look at the picture.

Jackson sighed. "Maybe you should just close it..."

"Fine," snapped Milo. He closed Layla's picture, but opened another. This girl wore a blonde Britney Spears wig, a red bra, and an extremely short pleated skirt. "There. We don't know *her*."

Amanda let out an embarrassing little shriek and stomped out of the room.

Jackson sighed and said, "I know she's your friend, CarolAnne, but when she goes all feminist..."

The next morning, CarolAnne spotted Layla in the dining hall. She was scooping fruit and granola into a bowl when Layla walked in and started making herself some tea. She poured the hot water into a scuffed, green Animal Friends travel mug and added rice milk and evaporated cane juice. So Layla was a vegan. A vegan exotic dancer. CarolAnne pictured Cherry in her red wig and pleather thong, drinking vegan tea in the biology lab. She started to giggle.

Jackson came up behind her, put his arms around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder. "What's up?" he said. CarolAnne could smell coffee and peanut butter on his breath. She usually hated coffee breath, but on Jackson she liked it.

"It's *Cherry*," she whispered. "The Sublime Beauty."

Jackson snorted and stole a piece of cantaloupe from her plate. "She really looks seductive this morning," he said.

“When are we going to see her dance?” CarolAnne asked. She scooped some yogurt into her bowl, hoping to look casual.

“You really want to go?” he asked, and she could hear that he was smiling.

CarolAnne looked up and gave him a little kiss. “How could I resist Cherry?” she asked.

Jackson hugged her. “You are the best girlfriend ever.”

Layla left the dining hall just ahead of them. She had just passed through the swinging glass doors that lead outside when Jackson called, “We’ll be seeing you soon, Cherry!”

CarolAnne bit her lip. Energy tingled up her arms, as if she’d plugged herself into an electrical socket. She felt that if she walked over to Layla right now and pushed her, she’d topple over.

Layla stood still in the doorway, her face blank and smooth as the face of a Buddha. Her eyes seemed pulled back further in her head, as if she were looking at something very far away.

That evening, walking by the new science building, CarolAnne saw Layla and Amanda working on their bio project. The new science building was a web of white metal beams and floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows. Surrounded by pine trees and old stone buildings, it looked like a spaceship, the students inside like aliens conducting mysterious experiments on the flora and fauna of Earth.

Amanda and Layla were working next to a first floor window. CarolAnne could see them bent over their fruit fly jar, noting down invisible things. At a distance, without

her glasses on, it was difficult for her to tell them apart: they were close to the same height and weight, and both had long, brown hair. As CarolAnne got closer, they resolved themselves: she could make out Layla's waterproof, grey pants and French braid, Amanda's corduroy bellbottoms and the white feather she clipped into her hair every morning.

Layla fished in her backpack and produced an orange. She peeled it, split it in two, and handed half to Amanda. CarolAnne saw Amanda say *thanks*. Layla shrugged and smiled, popped an orange section into her mouth, and then bent to peer into their jar. Amanda tapped it lightly with her pencil. CarolAnne imagined the fruit flies splitting apart and swirling back together, like a school of fish. Layla looked up from the jar and smiled at Amanda like a friend.

Jezebels was a small, brick building just off the highway. A pink neon sign flashed "Live Nude Girls!" into the night. In the end, Milo had punked out, saying he had a date. CarolAnne suspected he was lying.

When Jackson turned into the dirt parking lot, his headlights lit up a cluster of teenagers walking along the shoulder of the road. One of the girls was wearing thick, liquid eyeliner, like CarolAnne used to in high school. When the girl spotted Jackson's car, she yelled "Perverts!" and threw an empty beer can. Her friends cheered. Jackson honked and muttered, "Little shits."

CarolAnne and her best friend Tia used to do things like that. Their bus stop was in front of a theater that screened porn, the names of the movies spelled out in plastic letters on a fiberglass light board. Their sophomore year of high school, CarolAnne and

Tia stole around two thirds of the letters. Eventually, the theater started using pieces of paper, the letters written in sharpie, which smudged and ran when it rained. There was still a stack of plastic letters under CarolAnne's bed at home.

Four years ago, CarolAnne would not have been able to resist the identical light board outside Jezebels. Now, she found she didn't want to look at it in case Cherry's name was there.

Inside, the light was murky. All the bulbs at were red. CarolAnne imagined that light would look like this inside a scummy fish tank made of red glass. The carpet, which climbed the walls, was red too. The ceiling was painted black. A brown, crunchy wash of salt and mud began at the entrance and lead almost all the way to a set of black double doors at the end of the hall. She could hear "Poker Face" coming from behind them. Even this far away, she could feel the baseline in her feet.

There was a black reception desk to the right of the entrance, a bored looking bouncer sitting behind it. They showed him their IDs, which he barely glanced at. As they walked down the hall, CarolAnne considered turning and running out of the club. The idea of actually seeing Layla dance made her feel as if there were something very heavy in her stomach pressing against her lungs from the bottom. She was about to tell Jackson that she felt sick and wanted to leave, when they reached the black doors and pushed through them.

Behind the doors, ten black booths circled what must have been the stage. CarolAnne imagined opening one and finding ten more black doors in a circle, behind each of those doors, ten more. She imagined walking further and further into the club until she'd walked to the center of the earth.

Over each booth was an “In Use” sign, almost all of them lit. There was one empty booth directly across from the entrance. When they opened the door, the stuffing leaking from the red bench in its center skittered across the floor like a swarm of insects. The booth was upholstered in pink vinyl. Across from the bench was a shuttered window with a push-in coin slot under it. There was a roll of paper towels in one corner. CarolAnne sat as far away from them as she could.

“Ready?” asked Jackson.

CarolAnne nodded. He fed two quarters into the slot, and the window snapped open.

In a mirrored room with pink carpet, six women gyrated. The light was extremely bright: it bounced off the mirrors and made the dancers glow. There was a copper pole in the center of the room, and a sixth girl hung upside down from it. Slowly, she rolled upright, then fell to the side, her body parallel to the floor, and spun downward. CarolAnne had expected the dancers to have perfect bodies, but they looked like normal women to her—women in clothes that CarolAnne would never wear, but still. Three of them had tattoos on their upper arms. Only one had a tramp stamp, a new looking monarch butterfly. The one dancing closest to their window had two lip rings, a belly button ring, nipple rings, and a chain connecting her nose ring to her earlobe.

When CarolAnne did not spot Layla immediately, she felt a surge of relief. She was not there. They could leave, and no one would know they had come. She glanced at Jackson and saw that he was looking past the pierced dancer, at a girl on the other side of the stage. CarolAnne looked too. The girl had her back to them, but CarolAnne recognized her red wig and black lace bra. She was dancing by a window, her hips

blocking the face of the man behind it. She was not wearing her thong. On her feet were a pair of black boots, knee high, with lots of complicated straps and buckles.

Then Cherry looked up. Her eyes, reflected in the mirror, met theirs. A slow smile spread across her face. She turned to face them, rested one hand on the mirror, and waved coyly with the other. CarolAnne felt as if her heart were trying to escape through her mouth. She grabbed Jackson's arm and the window snapped shut.

Jackson fed more quarters into the slot. His face was blank, as if he'd been hypnotized. When the window slid open, the pierced dancer was gone. They saw Cherry advancing toward them. Her hand trailed along the mirrors; it looked as if she were walking palm to palm with her twin.

She reached CarolAnne and Jackson and began to dance. CarolAnne looked away. She wanted to leave but felt incapable of moving. She watched the mirrors instead. The shutters over the windows were mirrored too. One moment, a woman's reflection would unglue, unbroken. Then a shutter would snap open, and part of her would vanish.

She heard a palm smack against the glass and looked up. Layla was squatting in front of their window, both her hands pressed against it. She was looking directly at CarolAnne, and she was not smiling anymore. CarolAnne could not help it, she looked back. Layla's eyes were green rimmed in grey, exactly like her own. CarolAnne felt as if she were disappearing. Layla hit the window again, and CarolAnne stood. Jackson snatched at her wrist, but she brushed him off. Slowly, Layla also rose to her feet and took her hand off of the window. For a moment, they faced each other. Layla's face hard and fierce. CarolAnne opened her mouth to say—what? *I'm sorry? I failed you?* What could she ever say? Behind Layla, the other women continued to dance. The mirrors

caught and multiplied them, until they became a hundred women, a thousand, a million women dancing.



## Hover

In early July, Danny noticed that someone was stealing the hologram posters. It was 8:30 a.m. Danny had just unlocked the service entrance, flicked on the indoor lights, and turned on the big TJ Maxx sign outside. The posters were displayed by the stockroom doors. He was unlocking the stockroom when he saw that the Japanese one, his favorite, was gone. The poster was a re-creation of a famous print: a blue striped wave crested with foam rose over three delicate, golden rowboats full of little men in blue coats. The men had no faces, just dots for eyes and tufts of black hair. The sky was the color of a faded, manila envelope, a purple black stripe like a long bruise on the horizon. The wave's foam curled into claws, like a witch's fingers. In 3D, it was extra intense.

He'd closed the night before with Maya, Joe, and Martin the Manager. At nine p.m., the poster was still there. Joe almost crashed a dolly into it—he was always crashing dollies into things—and Martin chewed him out in front of a group of high school girls trying on high heels. A girl in acid-green platforms stepped back, her ankle collapsing like a folding chair. She fell against Maya, who was restocking size eights. Maya caught her under the armpits and levered her to her feet. “Don't worry about it. Martin makes us all swoon,” she said.

The girl looked at Maya as if she'd sprouted a second, tiny head from the left side of her neck. Danny turned back to the Timberlands he was arranging, then snuck a look at Maya. She was leaning against the shelves, a pair of red Nikes dangling by their laces from her middle finger. Her black hair, dull with dye, was twisted into pigtails that stuck out slightly, their tips brushing the base of her neck. One was secured with a rubber band, the other with a red and gold striped hair-tie with a heart-shaped piece of plastic threaded

onto it. Along her forehead, a fringe of brown hair stood straight up. She'd cut off her bangs in the bathroom the week before. When Martin asked her why she'd done this "on company time and company *property*," she'd shrugged. "They were annoying me." She'd brushed her hand over the fringe when she said it, and Danny had found himself longing to do the same.

Every evening after he came home from work, Danny ran ten miles. In the fall, he'd be a senior. He needed to cut his cross-country time by a minute if he wanted to compete for a decent scholarship. When he stepped out of the house, the cooling air brushed his face and arms lightly as a cat. His mother lived in an apartment complex by the river, across the road from the Fox Chapel Yacht Club. As far as he could see, no one at the Yacht Club actually owned a yacht, or if they did, they didn't keep them there. Danny pictured yachts as huge, the size of houses, with hot tubs, swimming pools, and Playboy Bunnies on deck. There was nothing like that at the Club, just rows of small to medium boats, some of them docked, some hauled into a parking lot and covered in green and grey tarps. In the twilight, they looked like sleeping elephants. Danny ran past the high fence around the club, past the covered Yachts, onto a narrow road that ran behind a diner, the post office, and two gas stations, sloping up-hill all the way. The road ended on the shoulder of a highway, across from the strip mall.

He ran along the highway's edge until he reached the ramp onto the Highland Park Bridge. He ran up the ramp, across the bridge, peering through the railings at the Allegheny River, wide and green below him. Over the bridge, he had to run across

Butler, which was four lanes wide, to reach the steep, twisting road that ran behind the zoo. Once, a car's fenders just missed his shins.

He followed the zoo road to the top of the hill and into the park. At night, the park was strange and spooky. Only some of the streetlights worked. Danny ran through deep lakes of darkness, blipped across islands of light. Other teenagers gathered in the picnic areas scattered along the road. They built fires in the metal trashcans, drank beer, and played Metallica on their boom boxes. Often, they called out to him.

Sometimes, Danny saw peacocks escaped from the zoo. They strutted along the paths, haughty and ridiculous, their tails like the trains of ball gowns. Once, heading downhill toward the reservoir fountain, he saw a white deer. It stepped from the trees and stood on the path in front of him, regarding him calmly.

Before he started working there, Danny had never been inside a TJ Maxx. His mother bought all his clothes. He'd come home from school and find them folded neatly in the bed, the tags still on. The store was a maze made of clothes, kitchen utensils, jam, and scented candles. It was the size of a warehouse. The strip lights made everyone look ill. Men's clothes were on the front left quadrant: rows and rows of striped dress shirts, huge sweat pants, and t-shirts with glittery wings on the back. Junior's, Women's, and Athletic Wear took up the middle of the store. Danny had noticed that the women's clothes looked a lot like the men's, but smaller. Shoes were on the right side. In the back, near the stockroom, were shelves of kitchen supplies, throw pillows, garnishes, candle sticks, and bedding.

Danny and Joe were building a hovercraft in the stockroom, behind a pile of plastic-wrapped, king-sized mattresses that no one could move because the crane was broken and they were stacked too high to shift without one. Just in case, they covered the hovercraft in flattened boxes and old bubble wrap. They worked on it during their lunch breaks, eating Taco Bell while they worked, the greasy smell drifting up to them from the bags. They could have built it one of their garages, but half the hovercraft's magic lay in the fact that they were building it on "company *property*."

Joe was obsessed with Star Trek. The hovercraft was his idea. He'd learned online that you could make one with plywood, garbage bags, and a leaf blower. They'd already cut and superglued the plywood boards, scavenged from the dumpster behind Home Depot, into a circle five feet in diameter. The next step was to make a balloon out of the garbage bags and glue it to the board, leaving a hole at one edge for the leaf blower's hose. In theory, once the leaf blower was turned on, the garbage bags would inflate, the pressure of the air enough to lift the plywood and a medium-weight rider, sending him skimming over the floor.

"That's not really *hovering*," Danny said when Joe first suggested it. "It's just reducing friction."

"Look, do you want to make it or not?" asked Joe, and Danny had to admit that he did.

They were having trouble with the garbage bag balloon. The bags were supposed to be layered, then ironed so that they melted into one thick sheet of plastic. But they always melted too much, stuck to the iron and ripped. The smell was horrible, especially combined with Taco Bell.

The day the first hologram poster was stolen, Maya came into the stockroom to watch them work. Usually, her lunch break was an hour after theirs. Either the schedule had changed or Maya was ignoring it. Danny had never seen her eat before. She used the baby-blue dresser to climb onto the faux-iron wardrobe, then scrambled onto the pile of mattresses. When she sat down, the plastic crinkled. She pulled a bag of Doritos, a bag of Fritos, a Fruit Roll-Up, and a granny smith apple from the front pocket of her hoodie.

Danny waved and immediately felt like an idiot. He hadn't believed it possible, but he was even more aware of the smell of his taco mixing with the melting plastic. Also his running shoes, which he wore to work even though they smelled as if something had crawled into them to slowly die. When he bent over the garbage bags, he could feel the back of his neck turning bright red.

He heard Maya pop one of her bags and crunch into her apple. "Whatcha guys makin'?" she asked.

Danny bent closer to his iron. He wished they were making anything, *anything*, other than a hovercraft. He tried to catch Joe's eye, to telepathically communicate that he should not, under any circumstance, tell her what they were doing.

"We're making a hovercraft," said Joe, his voice flat. Joe did not like Maya. Once she caught him staring at a pretty customer and said, loud enough for the woman to hear, "Looks like she gets *your* beam up, Scotty."

"A *hovercraft*," said Maya. "Sweet. Aren't you worried someone's going to smell your garbage bags?"

“Martin can’t smell,” said Joe. This was true. Martin had some kind of sinus problem.

“I’m thinking of customers.”

Danny heard the mattress crinkle, then the click of her lighter. When he didn’t smell a cigarette, he chanced a look at her. She was lying on her back, a Dorito in one hand, the lighter held to its corner. Her eyes slid toward him. She smiled, then blew on the smoking corner of her Dorito.

Joe and Danny worked in silence. Danny could hear Maya chewing. Occasionally, he heard the *shink, click!* of the lighter and smelled a burning corn chip. Near the end of their break, Joe left to go to the bathroom. Danny heard Maya’s mattress rustling. He looked up. She’d slid so that her torso was hanging off the edge. She squinted at his iron.

“You’ve got that too high,” she said. “You want the silk setting, not cotton. That’s why the plastic keeps melting.”

“Thanks,” he said.

Maya pointed at him and closed one eye, as if she were taking aim. “Anytime.”

He was running through the park three nights later when he saw her standing by a garbage can fire. She was holding a 40 of Olde English. The firelight made her skin glow and turned her hair to velvet. Rancid was playing on a boom box. She was talking to Lenny Faberman, who was in their grade and did nothing but smoke pot, and Rob Warzel, who was on the team with Danny. Lenny made an expansive gesture. Maya wrinkled her nose and laughed.

If Danny stayed on the path, he'd run right past them. His whole torso seized up. He was about to cross the road when Rob waved. He cupped one hand around his mouth and called, "Danny! Danny McConnell! Get over here!"

Danny slowed reluctantly and walked toward them, his chest heaving. He was conscious of the slime of sweat on his arms and face, of the way it dripped off the hair at the back of his neck. He was wearing an old shirt of his Mom's—tie-dyed blue and white with three little penguins in sunglasses across the chest. Under the penguins, in cracked neon green print, it said, "We Be Jammin." He crossed his arms.

When Danny reached the fire, Rob smacked him on the back and said, "Danny! I can't fucking believe it! What are you doing out here?"

"He's *running*, Rob," said Maya.

Danny looked at her. She smiled and extended her 40. "Want some?"

Danny shook his head. "No thanks."

"You need to hydrate," she said.

"Alcohol dehydrates you," he said, and immediately wished he hadn't. Maya shrugged and pulled back her 40. She looked across the road into the dark trees. Danny stared at the shadows the firelight cast on her neck, at the way they pooled at the base of her throat.

"I really admire you, you know that?" Rob said. "I mean I really admire how *dedicated* you are. You're going to get a scholarship man, like a fucking good scholarship. You'll go to the Olympics or something. You know you're beautiful when you run, man. I'm not saying that to be gay, it's just honest."

Maya turned back to the fire. “What the fuck is up with boys and gay people? Like what the fuck is so scary about a gay man? They’re just *people*, for fuck’s sake.”

“Maybe you should say fuck again, Maya,” said Lenny. “You really don’t say it enough.”

“Fuck you,” she said, and grinned up at him.

Danny turned to go. He wanted to run home as fast as he could.

“Wait, don’t go!” said Maya. “C’mon, have a beer.”

She pushed the 40 at him again, and this time Danny took it. He kept one arm wrapped around his chest, hoping she wouldn’t see the penguins.

“Are you cold?” she asked. “Here.” And before he could stop her, she’d pulled her hoodie over her head and tossed it across his left shoulder. Danny had never seen her without long sleeves. Her arms were a collage of slashes and burns, some old, brown and smooth, others pink and scab studded. One or two were red and a little swollen.

“She’s marking her territory. Better watch it Danny, or you’ll be her new girlfriend,” said Lenny. He and Rob bobbed their heads to the music and sipped their beers as if Maya’s arms were ordinary, expected as the trashcan fire or the boom box.

Maya gave Lenny the finger, then took Danny by the elbow and guided him over to a picnic table near the tree line, pulling a new 40 out of a brown Giant Eagle bag on the way. Once there, Danny couldn’t think of a thing to say. They sipped their beer in silence. Danny kept the hoodie slung over his shoulder. If he put it on, it would get sweaty. Also, what if she was cold? It seemed rude to wear a girl’s hoodie, but he couldn’t decide if giving it back would be worse: would she think he wanted her to cover her arms? That he thought they were ugly or embarrassing? That he thought she was



crazy? He didn't. He wanted to tell her this. He wanted to say he was sorry she was so sad. But it was like something a boy in an after-school special would say. Danny slid the hoodie over his head. It smelled like Camel Lites and Pantene shampoo.

"You look hot in my hoodie," said Maya, nudging him.

"Thanks," he said. Then, "You look better, though." He could feel a blush creeping up his neck. He took a gulp of beer and scratched for something else to say.

Her hand rested on the table between them. Danny's was less than an inch away. He willed himself to take it. On the count of three, he told himself. You will do it on the count of three.

He counted to three.

Four.

He twitched his pinky to the side so that it touched hers. Without even looking at him, Maya twisted her fingers through his. His whole arm tingled.

"I really like this song," Maya said.

Danny had not been paying attention to the music. The song was "Ruby Soho." When the chorus kicked in, Maya swayed her shoulders and mouthed the words. Danny tapped his foot, watched her whisper, "Ruby, Ruby, Ruby, Ruby..."

The next morning, the Mona Lisa poster was gone. This poster was either disturbing or stupid, depending on your frame of mind: her hologram eyes literally followed you, tracking left to right and back again. Customers were always stepping forward and back, side to side, laughing nervously. If you stood in just the right place, you could see all her irises lined up, overlapping like cards spread across a table.

Danny was staring at the spot on the wall where the poster used to hang when he saw Martin out of the corner of his eye. Martin ran his hand hard over his forehead, then shook his head.

“Shit,” he said.

Danny jumped a little; he’d never heard Martin swear before.

“Sorry, Dan,” said Martin, shaking his head. “But two thefts in two weeks is bad.”

“The security camera’s still broken, isn’t it?” asked Danny. The security camera in this corner had been out for months, probably because Martin was cheap and figured no one would bother to steal a hologram poster, a pool noodle, Sponge Bob bath beads, or a ten pack of plastic kazoos.

Martin looked at him sharply, and it occurred to Danny that this question might have made him sound guilty, as if he’d taken the poster and was worried about having been filmed.

“Yes. It’s still out.” There was a long pause, then Martin asked, “Who else has a key to the store besides you?”

Danny cleared his throat. He wished he’d never even thought the words *security camera*. “Noreen.”

Martin nodded. “But she wasn’t in last night.”

“I didn’t steal it!” Danny said it so fast the words blurred together.

Martin looked hard at him. “Oh, no. I didn’t think you did.”

Danny took a breath. His heart was beating so hard he was sure Martin could see it through his shirt. “Oh. Um, that’s good,” he said.

Martin nodded again. "You go to the same school as Maya, right? Do you two ever spend time together?"

Danny felt himself blushing to the roots of his hair. "Not that much."

"Okay," said Martin. "I see."

Maya came in at noon. Danny was helping a woman with a two-year-old boy on a leash find the duvet covers when he saw her walking past the plate glass windows. She was whistling, spinning the lanyard attached to her ID card around her finger.

Danny and the woman had finally located a satisfactory duvet cover and were moving on to body pillows when he heard Maya yell, "I didn't take any fucking posters!"

The woman jumped and twisted her son's leash around her hand, reeling him in.

Danny heard Martin's voice demanding, "Then who did?"

"I don't know!"

Danny stepped out of the Bedding aisle. Maya and Martin were in Juniors. Maya was holding a hot pink, terry cloth sweat suit on a hanger.

"You're fired, Maya. I told you once, don't make me say it a second time. Get out of my store."

"You can't fire me! You have no proof!"

"Get out of my store!"

For a second, Danny was sure Maya was going to leap at Martin, scratch or bite him. Instead, she threw the sweat suit on the floor and said, "Fine, asshole. Go suck a bag of dicks. I hope you get raped by a bull and die."

Then she was storming toward the doors. Danny bolted forward, but before he could reach her, Martin grabbed his arm.

“You go after her, you’re fired too.”

Danny looked into his face, washed grayish yellow by the fluorescent lights, the rings under his eyes the blue-green of bruises.

“She didn’t steal any posters,” Danny said.

“Someone did,” said Martin.

A week later, they finished the hovercraft. Joe was incandescent with excitement. He’d brought his father’s leaf blower to work in the trunk of his car. Their shift ended at four, but they couldn’t take the hovercraft out of the store while it was still open. They sat by the railroad tracks across the road from the strip mall, waiting for dark. Joe lined the tracks with pennies, like he was thirteen instead of seventeen. Danny watched for a train. He thought about Maya stepping through the automatic doors into the hot afternoon, the sleeves of her shirt bunched in her fists.

Maybe because he was thinking about her, when he saw Maya walking along the tracks toward them, Danny was not surprised. She was wearing her big Korn hoodie. She held a cigarette in her left hand, which dangled by her side; her right hand clutched her left arm just above the elbow. The breeze ruffled the fringe of hair along her forehead. She was looking toward the river; she didn’t notice them until she was a yard away. When she spotted Danny, she stopped walking, raised her cigarette to her lips, and took a long drag.

“Hi,” said Danny.

“Hey Maya,” said Joe, not looking at her.

Maya funneled smoke out of the corner of her mouth. “Hey. What are you guys doing here?”

Danny hesitated, but Maya already knew about the hovercraft, and clearly it hadn’t done any lasting damage. “We’re waiting for the store to close. The hovercraft is done.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Joe pitch a rock onto the train tracks.

Maya smiled. “Cool.”

“Yeah,” said Danny. “Want to try it?”

She came to sit on the bank beside him. “Sure,” she said, nudging his knee with hers.

Danny looked down at the gravel between his feet. “I’m sorry you got fired.”

Maya’s shoulder was touching his. He felt her shrug. “No big. It’s not your fault.”

Danny wanted to tell her that it was, sort of. That if he hadn’t said anything about the security camera, if he could have stopped himself from blushing when fucking Martin said her name, she might still have a job. He nodded and said, “Yeah, still. Sorry.”

“God,” said Maya, laughing faintly. “Apology accepted.”

When the light was the soft, blue purple of a morning glory, Danny, Maya, and Joe snuck back to the store. Joe’s car was parked near the outside door to the stockroom. He was about to open the trunk when he turned to them and said, “Why don’t you guys get the hovercraft out?”

“I can’t carry that shit,” said Maya. “I’ll drop it on Danny’s foot and fuck up his running. All three of us should do it.”

“Danny can manage,” said Joe, fiddling with his keys.

Danny frowned. Joe knew how heavy the hovercraft was. There was no way he could lift it without Joe’s help. If he dragged it, the garbage bag balloon might rip.

Joe looked at him, an odd, almost desperate expression on his face.

“We both need to carry it, Joe,” Danny said. “You know that.”

“I forgot,” said Joe dully, popping the trunk. He turned his back to them, let the trunk open about a foot, then ducked inside, rooting around in the dark. Danny wondered what he was trying to hide. A pile of Star Trek paraphernalia? An inflatable sex doll?

Joe heaved the leaf blower out. As he did, the trunk drifted the rest of the way open. Inside was the Mona Lisa hologram poster, her ten overlapping irises regarding Danny.

Danny turned to Joe. He could only stare. Joe’s cheeks reddened faintly.

“You stole them,” Danny said, his voice shaking.

Joe turned to Maya, actually wringing his hands. “I’m sorry you got fired! I had no idea Martin was going to blame you! I didn’t even think he’d notice.” Joe turned back to Danny. He paled and stepped back, his hands held in front of him, palms forward, as if Danny were going to punch him. Danny had not considered this until Joe stepped back, but it suddenly seemed like a good idea. A bright, kinetic energy ran through him. He felt the way he did before a race.

Then Danny looked away from Joe and saw Maya. She stood a few feet from them, gripping her left wrist in her right hand, staring into the trunk.

Joe looked at her, then turned back to Danny, his face blank with fear. Maya had the strangest look on her face. Danny couldn't tell whether she was sad or angry or utterly unsurprised. Finally she raised her eyes from the trunk and looked at him.

“What's the leaf blower for?” she asked.

Danny stared at her, wondering if he'd heard right. “You use it to inflate the balloon.”

“Sweet,” said Maya. “Can I have the first ride?”

Danny unlocked the service entrance and flicked on the lights. He and Joe carried the hovercraft into the clear space by the doors.

Maya looked around the cluttered stockroom. “There isn't much room here. What if we rode it in the parking lot?”

“Good idea,” said Danny.

“You need a smooth surface or the balloon will pop,” said Joe.

Danny grabbed Joe's upper arm and squeezed until the tips of his own fingers turned white. “We're driving it wherever she wants to drive it, okay?”

Joe tried and failed to jerk his arm free. “Fine,” he muttered. “Whatever.”

They carried the hovercraft outside.

“Okay, sit down,” Danny said. Maya looked at him doubtfully, then sat cross-legged in the center of the plywood. He inserted the leaf blower into the balloon and switched it on. The hovercraft slowly inflated. Maya grabbed the edges. She giggled. Danny imagined the sound drifting across the parking lot without fading, slipping through the open window of a car idling by the exit. The driver, hearing that pure, perfect giggle, would look around for its source, startled and pleased.

When the balloon was full, Maya said, "Climb aboard, Danny."

Out of the corner of his eye, Danny saw Joe twitch. There was no way the balloon could support both of them.

"Scoot up," he said.

Maya did. The hovercraft tilted forward. Danny climbed on, his legs straddling her. Maya leaned against him and pulled his arms around her sides so that his hands met across her stomach. He could feel the delicate architecture of her ribs, her stomach moving up and down as she breathed.

"Give 'er all she's got, Scotty," said Maya, turning to Joe with a grin.

Her face was amazingly close. All Danny had to do was move forward, turn her face a little more toward his own, and he could kiss her. Joe kicked the edge of the plywood and they shot toward the edge of the parking lot, skimming the ground as if they weighed nothing more than the darkening air.



### The Truest Thing

In January, Nancy burst out laughing during the Shapiro funeral. She started thinking about the name of the funeral home—Green-Schugar—and couldn't stop herself. She'd been apprenticing at Green-Schugar Jewish Funeral Home for three months, she shouldn't find the name funny any more. It made her think of green Pixy Stix. Also, elves. She understood the green Pixy Stix (naming your chapel Green-Schugar, you were asking for it) but why elves?

She started laughing during a eulogy, though the eulogy itself was not funny. It was about deer hunting. The man giving it was stocky, red-cheeked, and blond, his buzz cut so close that from a distance, he looked bald. He spoke directly into the lectern, as if it had asked him to recall his father's life. From her spot at the back of the chapel, all Nancy could see was the top of his head.

She looked across the aisle at Lenny Faberman, who worked with her. Nancy had known Lenny since she was fifteen, when he was one of those vaguely creepy twenty-somethings who hung around the South Oakland parties and dated high school girls. The parties were mostly by the lake in Schenely Park, or on Bates Street, near the University of Pittsburgh. Bates sloped up, but Nancy always felt as if she were descending a few feet into the Earth when she entered one. The air was a quagmire of smoke, all the guys wore black hoodies with faux-fleece lining, she could feel the baseline in her shins.

Lenny had kissed her at one of these parties. She was sixteen, he was probably twenty-five. It was three a.m. and most people had left already. Nancy's best friend Kylie was hooking up with someone, which meant that Nancy couldn't leave either—it wasn't safe to wait for the bus alone. She was trying to decide whether she should stay up

another half hour or go to sleep on the couch when Lenny shambled in and collapsed beside her. He rolled his head toward her and grinned. His eyes were entirely pink, deep red in the corners. Snowflakes lay in the creases of his hoodie. Nancy wondered what he'd been doing outside.

"Nancy," he said. He raised his arm and let his hand flop onto her shoulder. His muscles seemed to be made of water. The hand slid off her shoulder, brushed her right breast, and landed on her thigh. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, so she left it there.

"Nancy," he said again. "You're *so good*. You know that? Like, everyone says, *Nancy's so good*. And," he shut his eyes, swallowed, then worked his mouth as if he were trying to generate enough spit to keep talking. "And *some guys* have like, a thing about...about good girls? You know what I mean? By that? But I just want you to know that I'm safe, okay. You can *trust* me."

"That's good," said Nancy.

"Yeah," said Lenny. He scooted closer, leaned forward, and pressed his mouth against hers. His lips were chapped; she could feel his stubble scratching her chin. It was weird, kissing someone while your eyes were open. Lenny's face was distorted, his nose and the ridge above his eyebrows seemed huge, she could see his pores. The month before, she'd dropped acid and everyone's face had looked like this. Lenny parted his lips and tried to push his tongue into her mouth and Nancy jerked her face aside. She pushed against his chest and he sat up.

"What?" he asked.

"I...have to pee," she said. She half rolled off the couch and sprinted up the stairs. In the bathroom, she locked the door, then sat in the tub. She woke up the next morning

to someone pounding on the door. Her feet were under the spigot, which had dripped on to them all night, soaking her shoes and the hems of her jeans.

Lenny must have been thirty now, and she doubted he went to those parties anymore. Still, when she thought of him she did not see Lenny as he was now, but Lenny as he had been six years ago, a scruffy guy slouched in a Lay-Z-Boy, rolling a blunt, nodding his head to Biggie and heckling people at the beer pong table.

Last week, Lenny had caught Nancy crying while she embalmed an old woman. He'd stood in the basement doorway for a full minute, then said, "Did you know her?"

Nancy sniffed and wiped her eyes on her upper arm. She shook her head.

"Okay," said Lenny. He looked at Nancy's boobs, then left.

She was thinking about these things when, for no reason at all, the name of the funeral home popped into her head: *Green-Schugar*. Elves and Pixy Stix. Not for the first time, she pictured the chapel full of elves. Elves in green hats and red shoes sitting in the pews, throwing back green Pixy Stix, getting high on sugar, giggling and toppling to the floor.

She could feel herself starting to laugh: her chest was seizing up; there was that weird, sneezy pressure below her nose. Nancy bit the inside of her cheek hard, clamped her knees together, and looked at her lap. I am not going to laugh, she told herself. I am *not* going to laugh.

For a second, she thought she was going to be okay. Then she looked up and her eyes fell on Lenny. He looked very serious and solemn in his dark blue suit and blue and black striped tie. He was probably thinking about Mr. Shapiro's granddaughter, who was sitting in the front pew, directly in Lenny's line of sight. She had enormous breasts. *Epic*

*titties*, Lenny probably would have said. Nancy couldn't help herself: she pictured an elf sitting beside him. An elf with a long white beard, looking up at him adoringly. She snorted. Lenny's head whipped around, and their eyes met. She could feel more laughter rising up from her chest in a wave. She pushed herself to her feet and walked as quickly as she could from the chapel, her hand pressed against her mouth so hard she could feel her teeth and jaw through her cheek.

In mortuary school, Nancy was at the top of her class. She never once laughed during a eulogy or cried during an embalming. Then, her first week at Green-Schugar, she embalmed Sandy Lehman and everything fell apart.

Sandy Lehman was fifteen. He'd been hit by a car on his way home from a friend's house. There wasn't a lot of restoration to do, just some abrasions on his left temple and cheek. His torso was one dark mass of bruises, but that would be covered.

Nancy listened to Top 40 while she worked. That morning, his sister had brought them a Giant Eagle bag of clothes. Nancy expected khakis and a polo shirt, but she was wrong: his sister had packed jeans with one ripped knee, a Jimmy Eat World t-shirt, mismatched socks (one green, one blue), and a pair of red and white checked Vans, the white checks colored with green and pink highlighter. The clothes shook her a little. She'd never dressed a body in an outfit he would actually wear.

Nancy was bunching up the legs of Sandy's jeans so she could slide them over his feet when she heard paper rustling. She reached into his pocket, expecting to pull out an old receipt or maybe a dollar. Instead, she found a piece of folded notebook paper. Nancy opened it. The writing was cramped and slanted so far to the right it was almost

horizontal, as if a strong wind were blowing the letters over. At the top of the paper was a heading: *11/12—Geometry. The Area of a Triangle*. Below that was a one-line note:

*Lisa, I love you like broccoli loves brown sauce.*

Nancy felt something come loose in her chest. She did not want to know that Sandy Lehman had liked Jimmy Eat World and always wore mismatched socks. She did not want to wonder whether the checks on his Vans had been filled in by him or by Lisa. She did not want to imagine Lisa, but she couldn't help it: she saw a girl in a red hoodie and Vans just like Sandy's, whose long, dark hair was always in a ponytail and who never took her earbuds out, even when her iPod was off. Nancy saw Sandy and Lisa sitting toe to toe on a park bench, Lisa bent over Sandy's shoes, a pink highlighter in her hand, the green one clenched between her teeth; Sandy sitting beside her in math class, casting furtive glances at the place where the wisps of hair that had escaped her ponytail curled behind her ears; Sandy scribbling the note and then, too afraid to give it to her, folding it up and stuffing it into his back pocket.

Nancy started to cry. She threw the note on the floor but that just made it worse, so she picked it up and put it back in his pocket. She had to call Lenny and get him to finish dressing Sandy.

The morning after the Shapiro funeral, Lenny called her at six a.m. Both her roommates were still asleep—she could hear Lizzy snoring across the hall; in the living room, Carla's cat Dewey leapt heavily from the couch. He must have heard Nancy's phone ringing. He'd be pushing his head against her door in a minute, begging for food.

“We have a pick-up in Squirrel Hill,” Lenny said. “I'll see you in half an hour.”

“Okay.” Nancy pressed her face into the pillow. It was still dark outside. The wind rattled her bedroom window. When she held her breath she could hear tiny snowflakes clicking against the glass. Since Mr. Schugar blew out his back, she’d been helping Lenny with the pick-ups. Morning pick-ups were not fun, but they were worse with Lenny, who never spoke to her except to ask her to check the directions to a house. She made herself roll out of bed, feed Dewey, and brew a pot of coffee. When it was ready, she went downstairs to wait by the front door.

At exactly 6:30, he pulled up in front of the house. Nancy was out the door before he could honk. The wind was cold and hard as concrete. It smacked against her face as she jogged to the van.

When she climbed in, Lenny muttered, “Good morning.” She was so surprised he’d spoken that she didn’t process what he said next.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I said, do you want some *coffee*?” said Lenny, jerking his chin at two Styrofoam Dunkin’ Doughnuts cups. A wax paper bag, the bottom growing transparent with grease and sugar, was squeezed between them. He’d never brought coffee or donuts before.

“Oh, thanks, but I already have some.” Nancy raised her cup. She felt regretful and weirdly guilty, as if by making her own she’d intentionally slighted him. “I’ll take a doughnut though, if you’re sharing.”

Lenny gave her one of his blank looks. *You are an idiot*, it seemed to say. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

Nancy took one. She thought Lenny might try to talk to her more, but he seemed to have used up his words for the morning. They sat in their old silence, eating and

listening to the Steve Miller Band on the radio. Nancy finished her doughnut and her coffee, then started drinking the cup Lenny had bought. She knew that half way through the pick-up, her heart would be pounding and she'd have to pee so badly she'd want to vomit, but she was still sleepy and the coffee was very good. Lenny had put in half and half but no sugar, exactly how she liked it.

The pick-up was at a big brick house on Northumberland, set back from the road behind a screen of azaleas and Japanese pine trees. By the front door, frozen fishpond sat beside an ice-covered rain-chain shaped like a string of lotus blossoms. Nancy tapped it and watched it creak and sway while they waited for someone to let them in.

A middle-aged woman answered the door. She was wearing a big, green sweater. Her blonde hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, and her eyes were red and puffy. Nancy guessed that she must be the daughter of whoever had died.

The woman tried to smile at them. "You're from the funeral home?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss," said Nancy.

The woman nodded and stepped back so that they could come inside. Nancy went first, then Lenny, walking backwards and pulling the stretcher. When the woman saw it, something seemed to crack open inside her. She collapsed onto her couch, sobbing into the crook of her elbow. "I'm sorry," she choked. "I'm *so* sorry. I'll stop in a minute, I just..." She swiped at her eyes and gasped, but did not stop crying.

Nancy felt a calm descend. She could sense Lenny looking at her, wondering if she was going to start crying or giggling. He could fuck himself. Maybe she laughed during eulogies and couldn't hold it together long enough to embalm someone's pinky toe, but this she knew how to do. She sat down beside the woman and wrapped her arm

around her shoulders. Some people hated being touched when they were crying, but some people needed it. Nancy had always been good at judging whether or not she could hug someone. The moment Nancy's arm went around her, the woman collapsed against her, burying her face in Nancy's shoulder. Nancy rocked back and forth slightly. She patted the woman's back and stayed quiet. Behind her, she could hear Lenny dragging the stretcher up the stairs by himself.

While she waited for the woman to stop crying, Nancy looked around the room. The entire back wall was made of windows. Nancy watched a cat emerge from the trees and pick its way delicately across the yard. Halfway, it stopped and looked into the house, directly at her.

The woman sniffed and pulled away. "I'm sorry," she said again. "Your shirt's all wet."

"It's nothing," said Nancy. "Really, don't apologize."

The woman sniffed again, she looked down at her lap and shook her head. "You just don't expect your son to die before you."

Nancy's heart shivered. They had not had a kid since Sandy Lehman. She took a breath, tucked her hands under her thighs, and gripped the sofa cushion. "How old was he?" she asked.

"His name's Nathan," said the woman. "He's seventeen." She rubbed the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, then looked up. "It's...ridiculous, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes," said Nancy. "It is."



Nancy had noticed that people look younger after they die; if she hadn't known Nathan was seventeen, she would have guessed fourteen. His nose was slightly turned up, and his cheeks had only just begun to thin out. There were faint freckles on the bridge of his nose and chin, a beauty mark in the exact center of his neck. Little pimples were scattered across his forehead, another in the crease on the right side of his nose. His hair was dark brown and so curly it puffed out around his head like an afro. When they zipped him into the body bag, his green eyes were open.

Nathan looked like someone who would have come to parties on Bates Street. He was wearing a Bob Marley t-shirt under a black hoodie. There was a book of rolling papers and a bag of loose tobacco on his desk next to a Physician's Desk Reference. Nancy guessed that if they were to check under his bed or on the floor of his closet, they'd find a loose floorboard, under which would be a pillowcase containing pills, a handle of vodka or whiskey, and some pot. According to the paramedics, he'd probably died of an aneurism or a stroke.

On the way back to the funeral home, the snow changed to freezing rain, the drops heavy and viscous. They hit the roof and windshield with loud smacks. Within ten minutes, the road was coated in a thin layer of ice. Lenny cranked up the heat. He kept taking his left hand off the steering wheel and touching the inside pocket of his jacket. Nancy wondered if he was expecting a call. She wished he'd concentrate harder on the road.

When they arrived at Green-Schugar, they had to run across the parking lot to keep from being soaked. The stretcher was old, even in good conditions the wheels tended to swivel to the right then stick there. On a layer of slush and ice, they simply

stopped spinning. Lenny made it worse by holding his end with only one hand. He kept the other pressed over his pocket.

When they finally reached the door to the basement, they folded the stretcher's legs up and carried Nathan down. Once they'd laid him on a table and taken him out of the body bag, Lenny said, "So, uh, I'm going home. I don't really feel good..."

Anger rose in Nancy's chest. She gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles turned white. This was absolutely the last thing she could take. She wanted to smash every bottle of formaldehyde in the basement.

"You aren't sick," she said. "And you aren't leaving either. How am I supposed to get home if you take the van?"

For a moment, Lenny seemed unable to speak. Then he said, "Take the bus. I'm leaving."

"No," said Nancy. It was so cold in the basement she could see her breath. Outside, the parking lot was beginning to look like a skating rink, the branches of the trees around it encased in shells of ice. She gestured to the window. "Even if you wanted to, you can't drive in this."

Lenny looked out the window. His jaw tightened. He stood still for a long moment.

"Fine," he said. "I need you to help me with something."

Nancy opened her mouth to say that she'd help him clean Nathan up and that was it. Before she could, Lenny reached into his coat pocket and produced a snake.

Nancy jumped back and banged into the embalming table.

"He belonged to Nathan," said Lenny.

“*What?*”

Lenny lifted the hand not holding the snake, then let it drop helplessly to his side. “They don’t take reptiles at animal shelters, did you know that? That’s where dead people’s pets go, animal shelters. What’s gonna happen to him if they won’t take him?”

Nancy looked at the snake. He wasn’t very big, probably he was just a baby. His scales were leaf brown, overlaid with bands of black like the shadows of light on water. He lay listless Lenny’s hand. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Lenny...Nathan’s a *kid*. His mom’s going to want that snake. You have to give him back.”

“But—”

Nancy opened her eyes. Lenny was holding the snake cupped in both hands, now, staring down at him as if he were a sickly kitten. She felt a waver of pity. “You know I’m right,” she said. “You have to give him back as soon as the ice melts.”

Lenny looked up at her, sad and scared. His face seemed ten years younger. “If I say I took him, I’ll get fired.”

Nancy had the urge to touch his shoulder but restrained herself. “I’ll go with you,” she said. “We’ll say it was a mistake.”

Lenny let out a short, weak spurt of laughter. “What the fuck kind of mistake is that?”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll just...figure it out.”

Lenny shook his head, but she could see that she’d won. She stepped toward him and said, “What do you want me to do? To help, I mean.”

“One of us just has to keep holding him or he’ll get too cold. We can take turns.”

“Okay,” said Nancy. “You keep him warm, I’ll start on Nathan.”

“Thank you,” said Lenny quietly. He walked over to the far corner, where there was a space heater, and switched it on. Before he sat down, he jerked his chin at Nathan and said, “Doesn’t he remind you of someone from Bates?”

“Yes,” Nancy said.

Lenny nodded. He cupped his hands around the snake and blew into them.

Nathan’s mother wanted a traditional Jewish funeral, which meant that while Nancy could not embalm him, she needed to wash and dress him. She reached out and touched his cheek with the tip of her finger. When people asked why she’d become a mortician (usually it took them a while to get around to asking, they seemed afraid of the answer), Nancy said it was because she wanted to help people. This was true, but not entirely. It was a Bates Street party that made her want to be a mortician. She was sixteen, it was July, seven months after Lenny kissed her. She’d made her way to the kitchen for another beer, and found the door blocked by a crowd of people. She could hear girls yelping, a boy’s voice yelling, “Shit, *I’m* not touching it!”

“What’s going on?” she asked the guy in front of her.

He shrugged. “There’s something gnarly on the floor.”

Nancy had always been intrigued by things other people found gnarly. She wormed her way to the front of the crowd. They were standing in a wide circle around something small and grey-brown in the middle of the kitchen floor. A dead bat, its wings curled around it, tiny feet tucked against its stomach. She knew it probably had fleas, but it seemed so sweet and sad. A body, all alone.

Two girls with bleached hair and a white guy with dreadlocks stood closest. One of the girls pushed the boy's shoulder, trying to get him to pick the bat up. He shook his head resolutely. "Naw, man. I'm *not touching it.*"

"I'll get it," said Nancy. She stepped forward and scooped the bat into her hand. It was light and cool, the fur on its body very soft. Its wings had the same velvety feel as earlobes. She touched its turned up nose. It felt like thin, expensive leather.

Nancy noticed that the room had gone quiet. She looked up. Everyone was staring at her. Some looked shocked or disgusted, but most looked awed, as if she'd performed a small miracle. She was tempted to say, *For my next trick, I will make the bat disappear!*

Instead, she walked to the back door. A boy opened it for her, as if she were royalty. A few people followed her outside and across the tiny back yard. Once she got to the chain link fence, she stopped, unsure of what to do. Should she bury the bat? Was that weird? She looked over her shoulder at the people who'd followed her. They were all watching her as if she knew exactly what to do. Nancy knelt down and set the bat on the grass, then dug her hands into the loose dirt around a row of pansies. She scooped out a hole, lowered the bat in, and patted the earth down. On her way back to the house, she passed Lenny sitting on the back steps, smoking a bowl. He touched one hand lightly to his sternum, extended the other so his palm faced the sky, and bowed to her.

It seemed too simple to say that the bat was the reason she'd become a mortician, but it also seemed like the truest thing. She wanted to ask Lenny if he remembered that night, but was afraid to conjure any Bates Street party. If she did, the kiss might flash into the room and hang between them.

She went to the big sink under the window and filled an enamel bowl with warm, soapy water. She carried it back to the table and gave Nathan a sponge bath. She combed his hair and cleaned under his nails. She covered him in a plain white shroud. Every now and then, she glanced up at Lenny. He sat on the basement floor in the pool of light cast by a lamp, tapping his left foot in time to a song in his head. Nancy could almost hear it.

## Missing Water

Jenna and Lenny returned to the lake for the first time a month after Lucy died. They went during the day, which Jenna had never done before. Walking down the long flight of old, stone stairs that lead from the street into the park, Jenna felt that something small but essential was different. She didn't realize until they turned onto the path that lead to the water's edge what it was: she could see. The steep, crumbling steps, the path studded with mud puddles, the budding leaves on the trees—she'd always come here in the dark; she'd never really seen these things.

At night, the lake was weird and disorienting. Going there was like going into a dream balanced on the edge of a nightmare. The lake was man-made, tucked into a gully at the bottom of six flights of steep black stone stairs. An overpass ran directly overhead. If you swam out to the middle and floated on your back, instead of looking at the stars or the matted clouds, you looked into a strip of metal and concrete. Cars rumbled overhead all night long. Orange streetlight leaked over the edges and shimmered in the dark water. A thin skin of gasoline and algae floated over the surface. On one end, a big drainage pipe emptied into the water. At the other end was a creek, over which a low stone bridge arched. When you stood underneath and shouted, your voice echoed like a ghost's. Most people came to the lake to get drunk or high, and through the veil of drugs and darkness, people seemed to appear out of nowhere; without a flashlight, you couldn't tell who anyone was unless they called out or stood right beside you.

In daylight, the lake was de-clawed. Jenna could see cigarettes ground into the bank, muddy beer bottles glinting in the tall grass or winking at her from gaps between rocks. A soaked red hoodie lay crumpled on a log; a pink ballet flat lined with purple and

yellow flower-print corduroy sat neatly on a rock facing the lake. It seemed to be looking for its owner on the opposite bank, waiting patiently for her to return.

Lucy had freckles on her ears; she was supposed to wear glasses but didn't; she had memorized *The Princess Bride* and *Hook*; she thought the word "fluid" was disgusting; she hated Naya Holland because Naya had beaten her out for Stroke Seat in the Women's Lightweight Varsity Four over the summer; she had a deviated septum; she had to make her thumbs and forefingers into L-shapes and hold them in front of her face to tell left from right, and sometimes she still got it wrong; her big toes were shorter than her second toes; once, while they were waiting for the bus after practice, Lucy sneezed and Jenna saw a blob of snot shoot out of her nose and flop onto her upper lip. Lucy pulled her school kilt out of her gym bag and wiped her face with it. "That's fucking gross," she said, examining the snot dispassionately. This was Lucy's special power: she could do things like blow an accidental snot rocket, then wipe it on her kilt and not seem weird or disgusting.

Lucy and Jenna's hair was exactly the same shade of brown. Lucy had pointed this out their first day on the water together. It was the first real conversation they'd ever had. That year—eleventh grade—Jenna was switched from Bow Seat in the Women's Lightweight B Four to Bow in the Lightweight A Four, where Lucy rowed Two Seat. Before then, the edges of their lives had brushed in a million small ways without intertwining.

They'd rowed up to the marina from the boathouse, and they were waiting for the B Four and the launch to catch up. All the way up the shallow channel that lead from the



boathouse to the river, Jenna stared at the dimples that formed on either side of Lucy's spine when she rowed.

When Lucy turned around, Jenna thought she was going to say, "What are you looking at?" This was ridiculous, of course. You had to stare straight ahead to stay in sync, and Lucy was straight ahead of Jenna. Still, when she saw that Lucy was smiling, she was surprised.

"So I've been meaning to tell you this all morning," Lucy said. "Our hair is *exactly* the same color. Is that creepy of me to say?"

"Not at all," Jenna said. She felt as if she were glowing.

Everyone said a boy had died at the lake, but Jenna didn't believe it. Like all urban legends, the story was both consistent and vague: the boy didn't have a name, he was new in town or he was someone's cousin from the suburbs. He had always died "a few years ago, like maybe five." Five years was a good number. The person hearing the story would have been eight or nine at the time. None of her friends would have been old enough to drink or trip at the lake, so none of them could have known the dead boy. That was why he had no name, and why no one could remember hearing about it on the news—who pays attention to the news when they're eight?

Lenny had told Jenna the story of the dead boy three years ago, the first night he let her come to the lake with him. They were sitting on the bank with all his friends. That afternoon in their grandma's back yard, Lenny had taught her to smoke. It took her three cigarettes to learn how to inhale. When Lenny told the story, Jenna was concentrating so hard on smoking correctly that she missed the beginning. She was fourteen, a tight knot

of excitement and fear in her stomach, the idea of finally hanging out with her older cousin's cool friends almost too much to handle. Lenny was twenty-three. He dressed in huge black hoodies and baggie jeans like all the other old Heads. A Marlboro Lite always hung from the corner of his mouth. His curly brown goatee reminded Jenna of pubic hair. She'd told him this once, but he refused to shave it. Lenny was taking classes at the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, and sometimes wore his black PIMS t-shirt when they went to the lake together.

Jenna thought Lenny was one of the best people in the world. He was more like her brother than her cousin. They lived with their grandmother. Lenny's mother had dropped him off when he was a year old, then disappeared to Mexico. No one knew who his dad was. Jenna had lived with her grandma and Lenny since she was six. Her mom was an alcoholic; her dad was married to someone else and not interested in knowing her. ("No good!" their grandmother often said. "How did I raise such no-good children?")

Lenny and Jenna's bedrooms were in the basement. A folding rubber screen attached to rusty metal tracks in the floor and ceiling was supposed to separate them, but it was hard to close, so they left it open. Jenna knew that a teenage girl sharing a room with a guy in his twenties was weird, but she didn't care. She also knew that most of her friends thought Lenny was creepy. She was sure that if they knew he always had Fruit Loops for breakfast, that he watched *Mystery* with their grandmother and drove Jenna to school every morning, they'd realize he was wonderful. But they couldn't see all the good parts of Lenny: he was the stoned undertaker with the pubic hair beard whose only apparent talent was telling stories.

Lenny was so good at telling the story of the dead boy that even though Jenna knew it wasn't true, a delicate tendril of fear ran through her every time she heard it. She didn't understand why until Lucy died. By the time she figured it out, Lenny had stopped telling the story. Even the prettiest girls couldn't draw it out of him.

“We've heard that one too many times,” he'd say.

Lenny told Lucy the story of the dead boy the first night Jenna brought her to the lake. The three of them were sitting on a big, smooth rock by the bank with Maya Lamott, one of Lenny's friends. Maya was stoned, and she kept asking Lucy her name. The third time she did it, she said, “Lucy. I got it now, I'm sorry. Lucy and Lenny. That's cute! You two should date.”

Lenny shook his head, grinning. “I don't think Lucy wants to be my girlfriend,” he said. Lucy put her arm around Jenna's waist. Jenna felt a jolt in the bottom of her stomach. “Yeah,” Luc said. “I've already got my woman.”

“So that's why I never see you talking to boys, Miss Jenna” said Maya. She flicked the end of her joint into the lake, then turned to Lucy. “Has Lenny told you about the dead kid yet?”

Lucy shook her head and reached for her beer. As she did, she slid her arm away from Jenna's waist. Jenna felt a dip of disappointment.

“What dead kid?” Lucy asked.

Jenna could see Lenny gearing up for the story. Something seemed up click together inside him. He sat up a little straighter, swigged his beer, and focused his eyes

on the opposite bank. It was as if he could see the dead boy standing there, drunk, weaving a little, unaware of his fate.

“He died when I was thirteen. He drowned right there.” Lenny pointed to the spot across the lake where the huge drainage pipe periodically spat water into the lake.

Lucy stared across the water, frowning. She pointed with her beer bottle. “There? By the pipe?”

“Yeah, right there,” Lenny said. “It was two in the morning. It was too dark for him to see. Plus he was fucked up.”

“So he was too drunk to swim?”

Lenny shook his head. “You can swim fucked up pretty easy, people do it all the time. But when you’re high, you forget to look where you’re going. He headed straight for the pipe, we all saw him. It was unreal. He was swimming in a straight fucking line,” Lenny traced a trajectory across the water with his hand. “He couldn’t walk straight, he couldn’t talk right, but he could swim straight.

“I saw he was headed right for the pipe.” Lenny paused and tapped his fingers against the neck of his beer bottle, then shrugged, smiling bitterly. “I shouted at him to stop but he didn’t hear me, his ears were underwater. Sometimes he came up for air, and then I’d shout really loud, but he never noticed. The last time he came up, he was under the pipe. The edge is sharper and thicker than it looks. He hit his head pretty hard, I saw it split open. I *heard* it. It made a hollow noise, like cracking a coconut. He went under before anyone could get to him.”

A cool breeze ruffled the scummy surface of the lake and rattled the dying leaves. Lucy wrapped her arms around her shoulders. Jenna could tell she was picturing it: the

boy hitting his head on the pipe and going under, unconscious and helpless, trailing a stream of blood from his broken skull.

Lucy slept over that night. She'd never come over before, and Jenna was worried that Lucy would think the house was tiny and rinky-dink, which it was. For the first time in her life, she was self-conscious about sharing a room with Lenny. When they reached the basement, Jenna hung in the doorway, clutching the frame, as Lucy circled the room, staring at their jumble of posters, the stacks of books on the floor—*Little Women* under *Embalming for Beginners*—their dirty clothes tangled in the same pile by the washing machine, their beds on opposite sides of the room. She realized that her grey bra was hooked over the back of Lenny's desk chair. Jenna wanted to melt. She stepped toward Lucy.

“We share a room. I guess it's pretty weird.”

“I guess it's pretty awesome!” said Lucy. She flopped down on Jenna's bed and laid on her back, her arms and legs spread so they touched the corners of the mattress.

“This is the coolest room I've ever seen! I want to move in with you.”

Later that night, Lucy curled up so close to Jenna they were almost spooning. She pressed her chin into Jenna's shoulder and whispered, “Thanks for inviting me over.”

A lot of people thought Lenny was stupid, but they were wrong. He was one of the smartest people Jenna knew. She wished she could list all the reasons in public, into a microphone. For one thing, he knew about Jenna and Lucy before there was anything to know. He talked to Jenna about it one day, while they were cooking dinner. On

Wednesday nights, their grandma drove to the North Side for Banjo Night at the Elk's Lodge, and Lenny and Jenna cooked for themselves.

Lenny was stirring a pot of macaroni and cheese. Jenna, who was cutting weight for a race, was making salad.

"How's your girlfriend?" Lenny asked. "I haven't seen her since Saturday."

Jenna's stomach squirmed, but she rolled her eyes and said, "Oh your wit, it is sharp as a Samurai sword."

Lenny glanced at her, then looked back at the stove. "Who says I'm joking?"

Jenna set her bowl of salad on the table harder than she'd meant to.

He didn't bring it up again until midnight. He was lying on his bed, reading a comic book. Jenna had to get up at five for practice. She was almost asleep when she heard him say, "I think people love who they love, Jenn. That's all I was trying to say. I think that's the way it works. So you should do your thing and not worry about it."

Lucy usually carpooled home with Corinne, who rowed Three Seat, and Mary Ellen, their Cox. On Fridays, Jenna joined them. Fox Chapel was far away from the lake, but it was more fun to get ready to at Lucy's: she had more clothes and better make-up than Jenna, her mom didn't care how loud their music was, and Lenny didn't seem to mind driving out there to pick them up.

Lucy kept her make-up baskets on her bedroom floor, by her full-length mirror. One night, while they sat cross-legged in front of the mirror, they started talking about what kinds of Barbies the other three girls in their boat would be.

"Mary Ellen?" asked Lucy, opening her mouth wide and applying eyeliner.

“Future Dominatrix Barbie,” said Jenna. “All coxswains are future dominatrixes.”

Lucy hooted with laughter, and Jenna felt a bloom of pleasure at having said exactly the right thing. She selected some glittery blue eye shadow and said, “What about Naya?”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Supermodel slash First Female President slash Savior of the Whales slash Curer of Cancer slash Heinous Bitch Barbie.”

“I think that’s already a type of Barbie,” said Jenna. “Sorry. Only non-copyrighted models can be suggested.”

Lucy shoved her gently and shook her head. “Screw you. What would Corinne be?”

“Republican House Wife Barbie.”

“What about me?” asked Lucy.

Jenna wanted to say, Best Friend Barbie, but was worried it would be too cheesy.

“Human Metronome Barbie.”

Lucy shook her head. “If I was really a human metronome, I’d be Stroke not Two Seat.”

“I’d be Eliza Doolittle Barbie,” said Jenna. She knew that making yourself look bad often made other people feel better. “The token poor person.”

“Shut up!” Lucy said, and shoved her again. But she was smiling.

“There’d be a button on my back, and when you pushed it I’d say, ‘The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain.’”

“Shut *up!*” said Lucy.

“Oh Henry Higgins, you’re too good to me. Thank you for letting me into your beautiful house. I will not besmirch it.”

Lucy tackled Jenna. They fell sideways onto the carpet, Jenna’s head resting on a pile of dirty clothes, Lucy on top of her. Jenna could smell her hair: Garnier with a little grease underneath.

“Let me up!” said Jenna.

“You are *not* the token poor person.”

“Alright I’m not!” Lucy sat up a little, but stayed hovering over her.

Jenna sat up a little bit too. “Just let me say...you ‘ave an *orf’ly* noice ‘ous, Miss!”

“Oh my *God!*” Lucy shrieked, and collapsed onto her again.

Their faces were so close. Lucy’s hair tickled the sides of Jenna’s face; some brushed the fingertips of her left hand. There was an elastic moment, full of held breath, when Jenna felt an idea rising to the surface like one of those weird bubbles of air that sometimes rose out of the Allegheny River. When they were in middle school, a whale somehow made its way into the Allegheny and got stuck. Some people from the zoo got it out, but whenever they saw one of those bubbles, Lucy yelled, “Oh my God, a whale!” and Jenna pictured a huge, dark figure gliding below their boat, weird and miraculous, completely out of place.

Now, with the words *oh my God a whale* running through her head on loop, Jenna brushed her fingers against Lucy’s hair. She expected her to pull away, but Lucy lowered her chin just perceptibly, so more of her hair rested on Jenna’s hand. Jenna stroked it tentatively, then wrapped a few strands around her fingers. She stared at the faint freckles



on the bridge of Lucy's nose, afraid to look at her eyes. She could feel Lucy breathing harder than usual. Her left hand tugged Lucy's hair lightly. The tip of Lucy's nose was touching the tip of Jenna's. Jenna tipped her face up slightly. Lucy lowered hers, and they were kissing.

Two weeks before school got out, Jenna, Lucy, and Lenny drove down to the lake. It was one of those warm, blue evenings when the smell of the air makes you want to do sprints up hill and never go inside again for the rest of your life. Jenna felt as if her skin had been lightly electrified. She was riding shot-gun, next to Lenny. Lucy was in the back, but she'd unbuckled her seatbelt and wedged her torso into the gap between their seats. She twiddled the radio dials, changing a song when it was clear that Lenny really liked it, turning up the volume until it deafened them, then turning it down so they could barely hear. She kept brushing her forearm or her hand against Jenna's thigh, leaning the crown of her head lightly against her waist. Lenny was telling them a story about mortuary school. Once he paused to say, "Stop feeling each other up."

"How about I feel you up later?" asked Lucy.

Lucy had just switched from "Light My Fire" to something by Britney Spears when they came to the intersection by the steps leading down to the lake. Lenny was always saying how dangerous this intersection was. The cars coming down hill on Schenley Drive, from Squirrel Hill to Oakland, had a stop sign, as did the cars going in the opposite direction, which was the way Lenny, Lucy, and Jenna were headed. The cars crossing the bridge into Oakland—the same bridge that ran over the lake—did not have a stop sign.

Lenny had stopped to wait for a car coming across the bridge. He swatted at Lucy's left hand, which was on the radio dial, turning the music up. Lucy's right hand was on Jenna's thigh. She wasn't holding on to anything when the blue jeep rounded the bend from Schenley Drive to Oakland, swerved into their lane, blew through the stop sign, and hit them.

The after Lucy's funeral, Lenny and Jenna stayed up till two watching *The Shining* in their room. Their grandma made them tea and toast. She added a shot of bourbon to both their cups. She'd done this after their grandfather's funeral, when their beagle died, and the first time Jenna got her period. Jenna thought bourbon was disgusting. It tasted like misery. But she'd finished her tea at seven, nine, and thirteen, and she finished it that night. When he saw that her cup was empty, Lenny went upstairs, brought the bottle back, and poured a straight slug into her cup. Jenna downed every mug he poured her. Soon, she was dizzy from bourbon and exhaustion. Her head was resting against Lenny's chest, and she felt him speaking before she registered what he'd said.

“Life is so fucking stupid.”

If Jenna had had the energy to speak, she'd have agreed. Life was fucking stupid. It was stupid, like a soap opera, to get to be happy and then get hit by a car. Death was stupid, too. There were no rules, no moral laws that applied to who died how.

She wanted to tell Lenny that she'd figured out what made the story of the dead boy at the lake so scary. She'd figured it out during the funeral, in fact: to go to the lake, row a boat, drive a car, swim in a pool, drink beer, walk to the library, go to school, get good grades, apply to college—just to keep living—you had to believe you were

invulnerable, that bad things happened only to people on Oprah and the 11 o'clock news. But the story knew the truth, knew the skin of the safe, reasonable world was thin as tissue. Knew that under all your bravado, you didn't believe you were safe at all.

In the ambulance, Jenna had dreamed about a whale. Later, the accident would come back to her in chunks that threw themselves into her daily life without warning or reason. She'd be walking down the street or sitting in class and suddenly she'd fall out of the present and into that evening. She'd see the huge, blue car—some kind of van? Or jeep? She never found out—suddenly there, filling up the whole windshield. Lenny screaming, a sound she'd never heard coming from a human—terror distilled. Lucy's neck bent at an impossible angle, her eyes still open and blinking. Lucy was definitely alive when they pulled Jenna out of the car and strapped her to the gurney. This was something Jenna came back to again and again. It was one of the first things she thought when she woke up in the hospital, so when her grandma told her that Lucy had died, she felt as if she'd been lifted up and set gently down again in Thailand or Colombia, some world that had nothing to do with the one in which she lived.

In the dream about the whale, Jenna and Lucy were rowing in a pair, a two-person shell with one oar per person. Pairs were hard to balance. If you didn't stay in synch, if one girl pulled harder or pulled an airstroke—missing the water completely with her oar—you could tip.

It was evening. The sky was dark blue, the river black. There was no breeze. Jenna and Lucy were in perfect synch: they cut through the water as if friction were a dream.

They were rowing in the exact center of the river. They'd just passed the capsized tugboat that Lenny liked to swim near in the summer, when a huge bubble of air burst in the water on their starboard side, Jenna's side. Without thinking, she jerked her oar away, pulling it into the boat, leaning as far to port as she could. She felt the shell begin to tip. Lucy looked back at Jenna, her face more quizzical than alarmed. Jenna tried to lean back to starboard, to push her oar out, but it was too late, their right shoulders were already in the water. Then they were under the boat, their feet strapped into the foot stretchers. Boats were supposed to float even after they flipped, but theirs was sinking, pulling them down with it. Jenna yanked her feet out of the stretchers and began to swim to the surface, yards above them. She could see Lucy swimming beside her. Lucy turned to her and grinned, as if this were the most amazing thing they'd ever done. She gave Jenna a double thumbs-up.

Lots of weird stuff floated underwater with them: Jenna's pink Minnie Mouse Desk from elementary school; Lenny's Kid Rock poster; the door to the workout room with the sign that said "Beware, All Who Enter Here;" Lucy's favorite neon orange lace thong; Jenna's pearl gray Confirmation Bible.

The water was getting darker and colder. Jenna realized that they should have reached the surface by now. They were swimming in the wrong direction, toward the riverbed. Lucy was ahead of her. Jenna needed to tell her to turn around. She reached out to grab her foot when a vast, dark shape ghosted below them.

Jenna hesitated for a second, and in that second, Lucy swam just out of her reach. Jenna's muscles were painfully tense, she wanted to turn and swim as fast as she could in the opposite direction, but she also felt as if there were a rope in the center of her chest, tugging her forward. She saw that Lucy was swimming after the shape, speeding up. She kicked after them as hard as she could.

As soon as she saw it drifting over the river floor, Jenna realized she'd known all along it was a whale. It was huge, bigger than a city bus, the dark purple blue of a new bruise. Lucy was treading water beside it. She laid her hand gently on its left flank. When she laughed, a silver bubble bloomed from her mouth and drifted slowly to the surface. Jenna wanted to tell her to stop touching it, but couldn't think of a good reason why, or a way to speak under water.

Lucy beckoned. She was still smiling at Jenna, hair swirling around her, air bubbles beading on her cheeks, neck, and chest. Jenna wanted to go to her, but she didn't want to get any closer to the whale. She felt that she shouldn't, that she wasn't allowed. When she didn't move, Lucy rolled her eyes. She took one hand off the whale's side but left the other in place. Turning, she began to swim away from Jenna, one arm paddling, the other trailing along the whale's side. Jenna wanted desperately to swim after her but knew she couldn't. Knew the way she knew what heat and light were, without having to be told. She looked into the whale's left eye, old and eerily human, neither cruel nor gentle. Those tiny, human eyes so strange in an animal the color of loss, the size of fate.

### Everything Talks to Everything

The morning after Lu left him, Josh bought a house for seven thousand dollars. He had no illusions that the house would make her come back; it was more like the outline of a house than an actual place to live. It was a tall and narrow, made of wood and painted the grey-white of fog. When he first saw the house, it was foggy. He was walking down Merriman Street, hung-over, and as he passed it the house seemed to materialize out of thin air. It was as if it had existed in another world and had appeared in this one just for him. The rising sun lit up the right side and made it glow. It was next to the Birmingham Bridge, and between the eastern wall and the bridge pylons, a splinter of river flared gold. Hanging from the right second story window was an old bed sheet with “FOR SALE BY OWNER” painted across it in Day-Glo orange. Josh stepped up to the front door and knocked. He knew that it was too early, but he felt compelled. It was as if the house had cast a net around him and was drawing him in.

The guy who answered the door had a bihawk that was dark brown at the roots and bleached blonde at the tips. It looked as if he'd dipped his head in light. He held onto the doorframe and squinted at Josh over his mug of coffee. When Josh asked him how much he wanted for the house, he took a long slurp and replied, “Seven thousand.” Josh had to ask him to repeat himself. Seven thousand dollars was less than he'd spent on his car. But the guy said the house was a piece of shit with asbestos tiles in the entrance hall, and no heat or electricity.

“Still want it?” he asked.

Josh tipped his head back and stared at the front wall. There was something elegant about the way the paint was peeling, especially on the doorframe. Without

thinking, he pulled a large curl off and held it in the palm of his hand. A soft breeze rocked it back and forth like a tiny cradle.

“I guess I do,” he said.

He paid for the house with a check. That morning, illegally buying the shell of a house seemed like the perfect thing to do. Lu had left him after ten years with only the outline of a life. She’d moved to Cleveland with her friend Safi. They were going to start a collectively owned tattoo and piercing parlor with another tattooist and a Dutch piercer whose name, stupidly, was Tatu.

“What about our shop?” he’d asked, when she told him. It was around three in the morning. They were sitting on opposite ends of the couch. Lu faced him, but Josh was looking at the muted TV. There was a nature show on about deep-sea fish. A fish with a severe under bite and either a lamp or a third eye protruding from a stalk on its forehead swam past a coral reef.

Lu sighed. “Josh it’s not like there’s a shortage of good piercers in Pittsburgh. You and Bill will find somebody great. Besides it’s not *our* shop. It’s not your shop. It’s Bill’s.”

The day she packed, he went to the shop at nine in the morning even though it didn’t open until noon. He imagined Lu arriving in Cleveland. She’d get drunk with Safi and say how horrible she felt for going, and Safi would say she’d done the right thing because they were thirty-one and Josh had not yet started his own tattoo parlor or even proposed to her. He was stuck, Safi would say, and maybe she was right.

The house was Victorian, built, like the rest of the houses on the street, for steel workers. The previous owner hadn't been lying: it was a piece of shit. It had a leaky roof, rotting wood, no electricity, and lead pipes. But it was also little, just two bedrooms, a kitchen, a small dining room and a smaller living room. There was woodstove in the living room; the back yard ran all the way down to the Monongahela.

His first night there, Josh couldn't sleep. It was one of those heavy, muggy June nights that Pittsburgh coughs up every year, a preview of August. The air seemed to have an actual texture. Josh half believed that if he grabbed a fist full and squeezed, he'd open his hand and find a shimmering white and grey ball in his palm. His sleeping bag was thin and light, but he felt as if he were slowly steam cooking inside it. He stared at the orange and yellow flowers on the wallpaper, then rolled onto his back and stared at the empty light fixture. Plaster scalloping ran around it like a braid around a Swiss milkmaid's head. He stretched his left arm straight up, closed one eye, and traced the braid with his finger. In the dark, his tattoos bled into one blue-black mass, like a bruise running from his wrist to his shoulder.

Then he remembered the sleeping porch. In the back wall of this bedroom, a double door opened onto a small, roofed porch with a low cast iron railing running around it. You could see the river from there. Josh imagined some Victorian steel worker seeing that double door, that sleeping porch, and feeling rich and lucky.

It was cooler outside, but not much. A damp breeze moved across the porch and ruffled his hair. Weather like this always made him think of his older brother. When they were kids, Josh and David sometimes slept in their garage. The summer Josh was ten and David was thirteen, they slept there almost every night. That summer, their mother was



pregnant with their little sister, Rosie. In the fall, Josh wouldn't be the youngest anymore, and he couldn't get his head around it. Josh knew it couldn't be true, but when he thought of these sleepovers, it was always raining. He could see it falling in a silvery sheet outside, bouncing off the concrete and sprinkling their feet. Under the static of the rain, David's portable radio was always playing Pearl Jam.

Josh punched his pillow. He didn't want to think about David, who had spent the last two years of his life in their mother's house getting drunk and stoned every day, listening to Beatles records that he bought online and watching zombie movies with Rosie. He'd killed himself three months before his twenty-sixth birthday. Josh could barely remember his funeral. When he thought hard, only two moments swam to the surface:

The first was sitting in the receiving room, compulsively eating mints while relatives and friends filed past and said how sorry they were.

The second was burying the body. Even though David was a suicide, they had a traditional Jewish funeral. David was buried in an untreated pine box, nothing holding the lid down but four pegs. After the gravediggers lowered the casket into the ground, the mourners covered it. The gravediggers were Josh's age, and they seemed to find this strange—Josh guessed that they'd never worked at a Jewish cemetery before. They smoked and watched, perplexed, as people in good clothes scooped orange, clay-heavy dirt onto the casket. Rosie was only twelve at the time, and so small and skinny that the shovel of heavy dirt seemed in danger of snapping her arms off. Her face was fierce and determined. Josh knew not to try to help her.

Now, it occurred to Josh that he was six years older than his brother ever had been. It was the strangest thing, to be older than your older brother.

The walls of his new house were covered in huge flowers the color of mustard and pea soup. There were black spots of mold in the corners, and everything smelled musty and faintly, unpleasantly sweet. Josh read online that you could remove old wallpaper by mixing fabric softener with hot water, washing the walls, and then using a scraper to peel the paper off. The internet made it seem easy, but it wasn't. Instead of coming off in long, wide strips, the wallpaper came off in shreds, chunks, and more often than not, quarter-sized flakes.

He was taking down the wallpaper in the small bedroom when he found the drawings. Pulling down an unusually large strip next to the door, he exposed half a face. It looked like a child's drawing: a bubble-head, one big, long lashed eye, half a mouth with an improbable number of teeth, and a tiny, detailed ear. It was done in pencil. Josh's chest began to buzz. He climbed to the top of his ladder and gingerly peeled off the next strip. When it came away, he saw the whole man: a stick-figure body, a small mustache, and a narrow top hat.

Josh called Bill, the owner of the tattoo parlor, and said he was sick.

"It's all that lead and asbestos," said Bill. "That house is a death trap."

"Could be," said Josh. He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening peeling wallpaper, stopping only when the entire room was finished. There were two other men in top hats next to the first one, each with a different type of mustache. A huge, striped cat crouched beside the closet. Its pupils were diamond-shaped and lines radiated from its

irises. Its tail curled over the top of the closet, wiggled down the other side, and rested along the baseboard. Josh imagined a child pushing his bed against the wall and standing on tiptoe to draw it. A huge, grinning monster covered the far wall. It did not look unfriendly. There were spines up its back and a mane around its square head. It had three sets of legs with uneven numbers of meticulously drawn toes. The children had attempted scales, starting with the tip of the tail and moving up, but had quit halfway through. On the wall perpendicular to the monster were two height charts marked in an adult's neat handwriting. Above one height chart was the name Noah, above the other, Jack.

That night, Josh lay out on the sleeping porch picking off the feathers that had leaked from his sleeping bag onto his hands, which were sticky with fabric softener and old glue. They smelled like canned flowers, women's deodorant, and the rotten spines of books. It was August fourth already. Tomorrow was the eight-year anniversary of David's death.

That night, he remembered something else about the funeral: Rosie sorting the records. They'd come back to the house with the mourners hours before, and the reception was finally over. Josh was exhausted. He wanted Lu. He wanted to hug her and bury his face against her neck and smell her, but he couldn't find her. He decided to go up to his old bedroom and take a nap.

He had to pass David's room to get to his. He was so tired that he didn't notice Lu sitting on David's bed until she called his name. She had taken off her shoes and socks and covered her lap with a blanket. There was a plate of brownies beside her. Rosie was on the floor by her feet. She had changed out of her funeral dress and into her Star Wars

pajama bottoms and what looked like David's green plaid shirt. David's entire record collection was spread out on the floor around her. Rosie crouched over the records, inspecting them. As Josh stepped into the room, she picked one up, pulled it out of its sleeve, checked something on its surface, put it back in the sleeve, and set it down on her left. Then she moved on to the next one.

Lu nodded to Rosie and said, "She's checking for scratches."

Josh gingerly stepped over the records and collapsed on the bed beside Lu.

"Why?"

"I just want to make sure his stuff's not messed up, so I can archive it." Rosie's voice was tense. She picked up *Revolver* and pulled it out of its sleeve. "I'm going to copy them onto CDs so they don't wear out."

Josh felt even more tired. He lay down on his back. Lu lay down beside him. He could feel a square of sun from the window lying across his stomach like a blanket. Lu rested her head lightly against his shoulder. He lay there, listening to Rosie sorting the records, until he fell asleep.

On the fifth of August, Josh abandoned the wallpaper and started the plumbing. When he turned on the taps they spit out brown water, flecks of rust, and lead. The guy at Home Depot said he needed copper pipes, but they were ridiculously expensive. Josh could only afford enough for the main water line and the kitchen sink. Changing them was almost easy, though. It was like following a road map: start at the water meter and find the main pipe, which runs to the back of the house. Change it. Go upstairs to the kitchen, open the drawers under the sink, change that pipe too. Connect the new pipes,

and you have clean water. When he finished, he felt giddy. He wanted to show Lu what he'd done. He started to walk out of the kitchen before he remembered that she was in Cleveland, setting up her collectively owned tattoo and piercing parlor, thinking about anything but him.

He dreamed about David that night. In the dream David was twenty-five, tall and gangling as a heron, wearing a plaid shirt and jeans that were slightly too short. They were standing in Josh's kitchen, with its cracked, orange Formica and linoleum the color of nicotine-stained fingers. Josh bent down and opened the cabinet under the sink. He showed David the new copper pipe, glowing in the darkness. "Isn't that cool?" he said. "I've never changed a pipe before."

David didn't answer, and when Josh looked up, he saw that David wasn't even facing him. He was standing by the window, looking out at the river.

"Hey!" Josh said. "Aren't you going to look?" He was unbelievably angry. His chest and throat were tense, as if someone had strung an elastic band between them. His fingers twitched the way they did when he wanted to hit someone.

"Hey!" he said. When David didn't turn, he sprang to his feet. The kitchen was so small it only took him one step to close the distance between them. David was a head taller than he was, but Josh had been able to beat him up since his sophomore year of high school. He grabbed David's shoulder and spun him around. He could feel the soft, old flannel of David's shirt, under it, the warmth of his skin.

David's face was very calm. He looked right into Josh's eyes. David's left eye was blue, the right green.

"I forgot what your eyes looked like," Josh said.

The next day when Josh turned on the coldwater tap in the kitchen sink, the pipes moaned like sorrow. When he turned the water off, the entire house clunked and rattled. The last thing he wanted to do was go into the basement, but he found his flashlight and went anyway.

His flashlight beam sparkled on a puddle at the foot of the stairs. The air smelled like wet concrete and something rotten. He shone his flashlight on the ceiling and saw that the water pipes were leaking at the joints. Changing the main line must have shaken them out of place. Josh felt a wash of despair. He did not want to deal with leaky pipes or moldy wallpaper or fried circuits. He felt as if the house were getting bigger and bigger, broken pipes sprouting from it like fungi.

He borrowed some money from his mother and spent the next month in the basement. Rust stained his hands orange, pipe goo oozed down his arms. It smelled as if a family of squirrels had crawled into his plumbing and died. He could never get the smell entirely off of his skin. He'd get whiffs of it when he was at the tattoo parlor, and he was sure his customers could smell it too.

Sometimes he thought about Lu while he worked, but mostly he thought about David: the way his face seemed to switch off sometimes, as if he wasn't inside his own body; the way he'd sit across from you during meals, nodding like a plastic dog on a dashboard, until you asked him a question about himself, to which he'd almost always reply, "What?"

There was the time, about a month after David moved in with their mom and Rosie, that Josh tried to take him to Neil Young night at the Elks Lodge. All month, Josh

had been fighting the idea that something was different about David: everything about him seemed slightly altered. It was as if he were imitating himself, as if he'd been erased then redrawn in a dark room.

A block away from the Lodge, Josh realized that it was going to be more crowded than he'd anticipated. Bikes were locked to every street post and parking meter; the building's porch was packed with smokers. Josh was half way up the steps before he realized David wasn't with him. He turned and saw that he was standing on the sidewalk almost half a block away, hands deep in his pockets, looking out into the street. Josh jogged back to him.

"What's up?" he asked.

David jerked his shoulders up and down. Without turning to face Josh he said, "I'm not going in."

"Why?"

"I just don't want to."

"Well what do you want to do?" asked Josh. He could hear the exasperation in his own voice and it made him feel guilty, but not guilty enough to stop being angry.

David shook his head. "I really don't know."

The time he thought about most was the night David drove Josh and Rosie to Ohio to buy firecrackers. It was summer, and David seemed a little better. The trip was his idea. Josh remembered how strange it felt, being in the car with both his siblings. Rosie sat in the backseat, quiet and watchful as a cat. She tapped her fingers against the window out of synch with music on the radio. Josh was twenty-one that summer, and he hadn't lived at home since he was eighteen. He hardly saw Rosie anymore. He couldn't

think of anything to say to her. What did you talk to eleven-year-old girls about, anyway? Even when he was eleven, he hadn't known.

On the way back, they pulled over at a rest stop. Rosie and David went in, but Josh stayed in the car. Night was just beginning to fall, and the automatic floodlights in the parking lot flicked on just as Rosie and David left the rest stop. Rosie stopped walking and stared at the lights, her mouth a little open. David, who was carrying a big bag of sourdough pretzels, laughed and swung the bag gently at the back of her head. Rosie jumped, then smacked David in the stomach and ran back to the car, giggling. She wrenched the back door open and threw herself into the seat.

“Quick, drive away!” she said. “He’s coming! He’s going to get us!”

Josh wasn't quick enough to play along, he couldn't find a way to push the game or the joke or whatever it was further. Then David opened his door and slid into the car, tossing the bag of pretzels into the backseat.

“I've got you both in my clutches now,” he said, starting the engine. He squinted hard at Rosie then Josh. He was trying not to laugh. “There's no escape. You're doomed.”

It was one of those times when David's former self seemed to flicker into place. It was neither the first nor the last, it wasn't even the most remarkable, but it was the one Josh remembered most clearly.

Josh found David in the garage. What bothered him was that the memory wasn't sharper or blurrier than any other. Shouldn't something this important present itself like a film played in your head—every detail clear and inescapable? If not, should you even



remember it at all? But the memory wasn't photographic and it wasn't repressed. It was just a memory going grey at the edges.

He and Lu were planning a road trip. Their car was old, the jumper cables lost long ago, and Lu was worried they'd break down. Josh's mother kept a spare set of cables in the garage and she'd said he could borrow them.

He'd walked up the driveway and pushed open the garage door. David was inside, hanging like a Halloween decoration. Josh thought his eyes were tricking him, but the second he thought this he realized that they were not. He felt weirdly calm. The world seemed muffled, as if he were wrapped in something thick or suspended in water. He thought of cannon-balling into the public pool and sitting cross-legged on the bottom with his eyes open, watching the silver bubbles of his breath rise to the surface.

When he finally finished the pipes he wasn't proud, just exhausted. It was the beginning of September. Soon it would be cold, and before that happened he needed to fix the wiring because he couldn't turn on the pilot light without electricity. How he was going to pay for new wiring, he wasn't sure.

He went upstairs and sat on the sleeping porch. It was the only part of the house he still liked. He was looking at the river through the scrubby trees on the bank, thinking about nothing in particular, when he heard someone coming up the stairs. He stood up. The house looked abandoned. It was probably a homeless person looking for somewhere to sleep, and he didn't have a knife or a wrench or even a beer bottle to defend himself with.

But it wasn't a homeless man, it was Rosie. She hovered in the middle of his empty bedroom next to a square of light from the front window. She smiled when she spotted him. Her bushy, black hair was lit from behind, and it glowed around her face like a halo.

"Hey," she said.

"I thought you were a hobo," said Josh.

"Sorry, no." She crossed the room and came out onto the porch. "I realized today that I haven't seen you in, like, two months. So I thought I'd come over and say hi. I brought you house-warming presents." She unzipped her backpack and produced a slightly squashed red geranium and a six-pack of Yuengling. "I'm sorry it's smashed."

She was taller than him by about three inches. He wasn't sure when this had happened. He took the geranium, rubbed one of the velvety leaves between his fingers, and said. "Thanks. How did you get the beer? Do you have a fake ID?"

Rosie frowned. "Josh. I'll be twenty-two in October."

Josh felt himself flushing. He sat down on the floor again, set the geranium near the railing, and took a beer. "Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*." She reached up to brush her hair out of her face. It seemed to take her longer to do this than most people, as if her hand had further to go on its journey to her forehead. Her arms and legs were a little too long, like David's. But David was always falling over himself. Rosie's movements were elegant. His sister was lovely, he realized. Somehow, he'd missed seeing it until now.

"I'm sorry about Lu," she said.

Josh nodded. He didn't know what to say, so he asked, "So...how are you?"

She shrugged and grinned. “Sababa, sacapunta. Y tú?”

It was as if someone had zapped the back of his neck with an electrode. When Josh was eleven, his favorite word in Spanish was *sacapunta* (pencil sharpener). He and David had just returned from their Birthright trip to Israel, and the only words they’d retained were *sababa*, Hebrew for “it’s all good” and *habibi*, Arabic for “my darling.” For a year, they went around saying “Habibi. Como estas?” “Sababa, sacapunta. Y tú?” But he thought they’d stopped saying that when Rosie was about two years old.

“Where did you hear that?” he asked.

Rosie frowned. “You guys used to say it all the time, and for the longest time you wouldn’t tell me what it meant. It really pissed me off. Remember when we bought those firecrackers? David said it to you on the way home, and I got him to explain it. I was so disappointed. I thought it was this amazing secret but it was just some bullshit about pencil sharpeners. I can’t believe you don’t remember. You were the one that was all secretive about it when we were little.”

Josh could have sworn the porch shifted a little under him. What else had he forgotten? How could you share so much of the same life with a person and remember it differently?

“You know what’s really dumb?” Rosie said. “I missed that *sababa* is Hebrew. I said it to my Spanish teacher on the first day of seventh grade and she looked at me like I had two heads or something.”

Josh surprised himself by laughing. It felt strange to laugh, like his body had almost forgotten how. “You also called her a pencil sharpener.”

Rosie folded herself onto the floor and opened a beer. “Yeah, well...maybe she was one.”

He pictured a huge, electric pencil sharpener with googly eyes, wearing a blonde wig and a flowered dress. It wasn't that funny, but he found himself laughing almost hysterically. He slid down the wall until he was lying on his back. “Habibi,” he said. “Como estas?”

“Sababa, sababa, mi sacapunita.”

They were quiet for a long time after that. Finally, Rosie said, “I really like your house, by the way.”

The summer of the Birthright trip was also the last summer Josh and David slept in the garage. Josh couldn't remember the final sleepover, probably because he hadn't expected it to be the last one. They hadn't made a conscious decision to stop. It was just something that ended, the way games with imaginary characters end. When he thought of the sleepovers now, the one that came back to him most clearly took place not that summer but the summer before it. Josh was ten, David thirteen. It was August, and the air pressed against them like a huge cat. They'd taken a big bag of Doritos, two cans of Mountain Dew, and David's portable radio out to the garage. The floor was cool and slightly damp. The cold radiated from the walls and seeped into their sleeping bags.

It was raining hard that night. The rain bounced off the driveway and into the garage. It was so loud that David had to turn the radio up. They were lying on top of their sleeping bags, and Josh's feet were wet. He wiggled his toes and shone his flashlight on them. Then he shone it into the night and watched it light up the rain. He wondered what

moths and other bugs did when it rained. Wouldn't it ruin their wings? Could that kill them?

When he asked, David shrugged and said, "I don't know. Maybe they hide under leaves."

"But how do they know to do that?"

"The air pressure changes, they can feel it."

The radio played "Jeremy." The rain began to peter out. When it stopped, the cicadas started singing. Josh listened to the noise rising and falling, jumping from tree to tree.

"Why do cicadas make that noise?" he asked.

"I don't know. Why do you think I know this stuff?"

Josh shut up. Lately, if he got too annoying, David would leave and sleep in the house. He shone his flashlight on a huge spider web by the garage door. He couldn't see the spider. David sighed and said, "Maybe that's how they talk."

"Bugs don't talk," said Josh. He knew David was humoring him. He wanted to seem older, like he got the way things really worked.

"Sure they do," said David. "They say, 'Where's the fuckin' food?' and 'Shit! A bird!' and 'Hey lady cicada, wanna bang?'"

Josh laughed. When he laughed while lying on his back, only his chest and stomach moved, and the laugh seemed louder and deeper. It was the best way to laugh.

"Do you think all animals talk?" he asked. He hoped it wasn't a stupid question.

But David said, "Of course. They have to."

"But like, between species. Do cicadas talk to cats?"

David did not answer immediately, but Josh knew he hadn't fallen asleep. Finally he said, "Sometimes I think maybe our cats are psychic. Like, I think they know when you're sad or something."

Josh thought that could be true. Houdini, their oldest cat, always came to his room when their parents were fighting.

"So if cats can understand us, I bet they understand cicadas too," said David. "Which means everything talks to everything."

The next morning, Josh woke up very early. The fog from the river was so thick that Rosie, asleep on the other side of the porch, looked blurry and faint. Josh lay on this back for a while, then stood up, stretched, and went downstairs to make a pot of coffee. By the time he finished and came back up, the fog had burned off a little. He could see the river, glinting gold through the scrubby trees on the bank. When Rosie woke up, he'd show her the drawings in the small bedroom. Maybe she could help him with some of the wiring before she went back to Cooper Union. She'd be going back soon, he realized, probably at the end of the week.

Josh sipped his coffee. He leaned against the railing and imagined what Rosie's life in New York might be like. He saw her walking down some narrow, dirty street with a canvas under her arm, talking to her friends about Jackson Pollack. But he knew that this was a cliché, not what her life was like at all. If David were alive, he'd know which neighborhood Rosie lived in, the names of her school friends, the painters they liked. He'd have seen her art; he'd have made Josh come to New York to see it too. David was the one who told Josh that Rosie could draw in the first place. He'd once shown Josh a

birthday card Rosie had made for him. On it, a group of zombies ran away with a birthday cake.

David had said, “You’re not the only artist in this family, Josh. But I don’t think she’ll go into tattooing—no offense. Look at this drawing, man. She could do stuff.”

That was David at twenty-five, shabby and skinny, holding Rosie’s drawing as if it were a holy relic. That was one version of him. There was also dead David in a pine box. David at eighteen, wired, excited, on his way to college in Portland. David at thirty-four, only a vision. And David at thirteen, just beginning a growth spurt that gave him stomach cramps so bad he vomited nearly every morning for a month. Josh saw him lying on top of his sleeping bag with his hands folded on his stomach; his feet wet with rain, his hair a corona of static. He saw him shake the rain off his feet, look into the heavy darkness above them. “Everything talks to everything.”