

THE LATIN WORD *FOR* EXCELLENCE and Other Stories
MICHAEL ALLEN

TO SHARON DILWORTH

AND FOR J.R. WARFIELD, *AGAIN, ALWAYS.*

THE LATIN WORD FOR EXCELLENCE	5
CARTOON CAT	8
MUSIC FOR AIRPLANES	14
THE RED DRESS	25
FIRESUITE	40
UNLOVE	49
LIGHT FROM A DEAD STAR	69
STEREO	75
EXHIBITION	86
YES	98
PERFECT KISS	108

THE
LATIN
WORD
FOR
EXCEL
LENCE

THE LATIN WORD FOR EXCELLENCE

This is where I've been flung to. This is where I've landed. I am out of the hospital. Out-patient. I survived. It defines me. But that doesn't matter here. Now. Somewhere a state away from here my parents are watching a sitcom on television. Maybe laughing. Maybe my father is sleeping. Maybe they are fucking on the big, blue leather couch, like the ocean heaving. Here there is a sign tied around my neck with string. The others and I, we sit in a circle and have arguments. We have little protracted wars. I am supposed to confront Jane on her alcoholism. Adam, Lucy, William and Billy, Jessica and Quentin. We all have signs. I remember my mother's face. I remember my mother's face. Jane is standing now, gesturing and shouting. *I am not an alcoholic.* A smile breaks across my face. It feels like the sun rising. Jane's bra strap has slid down her shoulder. She has gotten so thin. *Fuck you, I am not an alcoholic.* We are all laughing. Jane turns bright red then purple. She is crying. She is looking at me, her eyes confused. Her face goes slick like something newborn. I watch as her mouth collapses, and then she's on her knees. *You motherfuckers. You motherfuckers I need a drink. I need a goddamn drink.* Now we're clapping. Jane has done well. Jane has made progress. Jane puts her face to the floor. She ripples with tears. Everyone stands and picks her up off the floor. We are cheering and clapping. Jane is suddenly a small child, and we're holding her up. *Oh God oh God just let me go just let me go.* I am a hero. I am her hero. I imagine myself like a beam of light. I imagine my mother in the flicker of the television. My mother with her hands sunk deep in dishwater. Simple. Jane is laughing now. Laughing so hard she's hurting. *I did good didn't I didn't I do so*

good. We all nod. Our affirmative shorthand. The sign around my neck swings left, swings right as Jane falls into my arms. *Thank you Thank you.* I'm a star. I'm so high, I'm gone. Fast. Faster.

- - -

Terry, my room-mate, smuggles in a six pack of beer. Terry is prone to violent episodes. I am supposed to confront him about Eve, the girl he raped behind a strip-mall. I drink a beer instead. I take my sign off and put it on the bed. The beer tastes awful but it's been so long since I've tasted it that it's wonderful. Terry has foam on his upper lip. I'm trying not to laugh at it. All the lights are out, but I can see his shape. *This tastes so fucking good.* I know, I know. I am pushing my brother, Corey, up the back stairs. I tell him quiet. I drink the rest of my beer. I'm floating. Terry crushes a can in his hand. *Man, I wanna fuck that girl Lucy.* Yeah. *You think she'd fuck me?* I break open another. There's a bright red mark like handprint across Corey's back. Yeah, I think she'd fuck you. I'm lying, or I'm not. Memories come like a river. Flooded. I'm flooded. *I know she'd suck my cock. She sucked Quentin's cock.* Shut up shut up shut up. Something inside me rattles like an old motor. Something inside me is loose and everywhere. I check the clock. It's midnight. It's morning. Terry is up around the room, walking and talking, chattering. I should be used to it. I wish I could laugh at it. *Lucy Lucy.* He's drunk. Drunk enough to peel his tee shirt off. It hits the floor and it's a warm sound. I can't see Corey's face. I can't see Corey's face. Terry is close to me. A sour smell comes off him and I'm pulling away. *Listen.* I'm pushing him off. *What's wrong with you?* I hear his belt come off. I see my father. I push my face into the bed or Terry does and I see light. I'm naked all of a sudden and Terry is behind me, behind me, his hand on

the slope of my back, his hand underneath me. *Quiet.* I'm crying dry. Like heaving. I feel Terry up against me. No. But I don't say that. Corey. I don't say his name. I don't say his name. Terry is in me. I let him. There's nothing I can do. And I'm trying not to like it. I'm floating. I'm trying not to get hard. *Oh Oh.* I bite my tongue. Boys. My father. *Boys.* I don't even hear the door open. Terry. *Oh Oh God.* I'm brushed up against the sky. I'm belly up against the sky. Terry falls onto his bed. It's wet under me. The room spin once, then spins again.

CARTOON CAT

Here are the necessary ingredients for romantic disaster:

A weekend off from work, long promised to your significant other as the opportunity for a short vacation.

A ski chalet loaned by an untrustworthy and erratically tempered man named something like Julian, or Quentin, or Blake, who makes his living as either a headhunter or a hermetic playwright with Brechtian pretensions. Let's say the latter.

Three bottles of Canadian whisky. Two bottles of Argentinean champagne. Citron for the wife.

A steel bucket filled with assorted, cleverly named micro-brews.

Vermont.

Vermont, just sit back and picture it.

Sometimes, in the right light, it looks like the end of the world. There is nothing everywhere.

Think, you might live on the side of a mountain, and see the lights coming out of another house, on another side of a mountain distant from your own. But it's so far away that the light could be coming from a star. You might communicate in Morse code.

But you don't.

At night it is absolute dark. Whatever little ball of light you live inside is floating in infinite space. Everything is black on black.

Here is my story. This happened to me.

Winter, and especially cold. Burrowing winter. Great big Russian winter. Slabs of glacier accumulate in neighborhoods and drift into small, suburban houses. Supermarket panic. Women in parkas clutch small children and buy candles and bottled water in bulk. The worst in years, they say. Decades.

My wife. Small and, after 7 P.M., never without a vodka-tonic in hand. Calms her, she says. The St. Bernard liquid diet. There is no baby. We don't believe in them. If there were a baby, we would never be able to do our little Vermont experiment.

Blake, let's say, calls. Emerging from a fog of post-Nazism German expressionist theater to tell me that he's finally had it. He needs to see tall buildings and eat at a restaurant instead of having his groceries brought to him by dogsled across the tundra. Or something. The chalet, he says. You can have it for the weekend. The view and the flagstone fireplace 20 feet tall and the bearskin rugs.

How can you possibly say no?

Vermont, she says. That sounds cozy. The whole state like one big blanket. If only you didn't have to work.

The phone rings. The whole network is down. No one will be able to get any work done. Why don't you just stay at home. Get some personal time. This is what you've been waiting for all year.

Like the horn that signals the end of the world, there is no escaping this weekend in Vermont.

Work is life. Productivity is the only sign of human existence. If you die without leaving any sort of mark, something you, yourself made, did you ever really live? Think about it. A man a hundred years ago would spend weeks making an armchair. You

might be sitting in that armchair now. You can run your fingers on the very same fabric that the man might have ran his fingers along before you were born. Before your parents were born. That man really lived.

Definitely.

There is nothing but the job. Without the job, I am nothing. Panic sets in like a damp cloth across my forehead.

A weekend with the wife.

Before I know it, bags have been packed. Maybe they were always packed, sitting in a closet somewhere, a closet I don't even know about, ready for this.

The car is running. Out in the driveway she is scraping ice from the windshield and putting chains on the tires. Her vodka-tonic sits, lonely on the countertop. How did this happen?

On the turnpike, racing some storm which is vaguely arching towards New England, I can see Vermont looming, like something dangerous floating in the sky. I watch Massachusetts fade away. Cities turn to towns turn to villages turn to hamlets, I think, and then nothing.

You have to understand, I do not possess the courage for this. We have been married two years and we have never had a weekend to ourselves. She is a registered nurse. There is always someone dying that needs to be dressed.

No amount of Robert Bly, unchain your inner, profoundly masculine, sexually voracious, power-animal-within bullshit can save me now.

Whenever the car hits a pothole, I can hear the bucket of novelty beers. Glass against glass. It's like having a chandelier in the backseat. Vermont is full of potholes.

The chalet is up on the side of a mountain so steep and so high that it's called something like Throne of the Gods or Angel's Keep or whatever. I have to beat the car up the hill like a man might drive a frightened horse. The snow has started to come down in pillow sized clumps. The wife thinks it's all hilarious. Every time two of our wheels slip off the side of the road and start spinning out into 2,000 feet of vertical drop, she giggles.

She has brought a yak-bladder canteen full of Citron.

We're really roughing it.

Blake's chalet. It's an A-frame and it looks out over nothing. A hippie, who maybe climbed this mountain in the 60s would have cried over this view. But whenever I am confronted by large amounts of nature I close my eyes and picture an endless network, circuit boards and wires and solder all clicking together. My carpal tunnel is wearing off.

She makes herself at home. In all corners of Blake's proletarian decorating scheme there appear vases of flowers as if flicked from a magician's sleeve. Soon she is posed on a bearskin rug, God's truth, her ass raised like an expectant cat.

You might think it's strange to be afraid of a situation like this. She is a beautiful woman. She is sexually insane. She is prone to wild, leg-scissoring, rib crushing orgasms. She is not adverse to the idea of a short but white-hot period of lesbian experimentation.

This is not my style. My sex can feel sedimentary. Somewhere, deep inside me, I am sure there is a small, but very shrill, homosexual who likes to keep things extremely neat.

But this is our weekend. In my hand there is a bottle of Seagram's VO and it is all that is keeping me from running out, into the void that is the Green Mountain state, away from all this, all the way back to Massachusetts.

She strips me. It's her way. I lay back like a small kitten and she takes over. It's vaguely mythological, the way she does it. One of those goddess-in-the-form-of-normal-woman forced procreation deals. She should be wearing a breastplate with nipples molded into the bronze.

I feel like I'm Poland and I've just been annexed. There is a finger in my anus.

And then it's over. Like time-elapse photography. She looks at me with disgust. I have not performed admirably. She massaged my prostate and I did nothing but squirm and bleat. Where, she wonders, was my mind?

I tell her. My mind was back in my cubicle, with my two mugs and small fern. I was bathed in fluorescent light which strips my skin of pigment. My legs were cramped beneath me, my wrists were bound with support tape. That's where I was.

My little cave. Far away from here.

It was then I understood that our marriage had ended. Maybe never even existed in the first place.

We occupy the same space, breath the same air, but we're like acetate overlay pages, the sort I've used in countless presentations. Animation cells, layer upon layer of images pressed into one, so it seems like a whole image, but isn't.

When a cartoon cat, say, waves its arm, that's a whole new cell. Our marriage is like a cartoon cat, waving its arm. I am the arm. You're the cat. A whole new layer. It's so simple.

I want to love you.

But I don't.

We're very different people, you and I.

No spark.

It's me. Not you.

All that useless bullshit.

You go.

You go.

Someday, maybe never, but someday, you'll look back at this and laugh.

Someday you'll see that I was right.

And so on.

MUSIC FOR AIRPLANES

A town built on a bed of dirt, bright and hard with summer light, rows of houses down suburban streets waiting to sink into the ground, headstones, swamp. Benny watches his sister and her friends play in the wading pool. Sheila, at 8, is too old for the pool and when she lays down in it, bottom up, her legs kick out onto the lawn. Her feet and ankles and shins are covered with the slippery stains from the grass. Benny has the garden hose, and he puts his thumb over the mouth of it, and the water comes down all over, and Sheila and her friends start screaming as if they weren't already soaked through. Benny watches the way a pink one-piece bathing suit shifts and slides over thin strips of a child's muscle. The house sponges up the sun and glares it back at everybody. The world is yellow and steaming. Benny watches a tangle of legs, peach on peach, and smiles an inward smile, the kind no one else can see, the face of an angel turned inside out, feels cool water course down his bare back and down the back of his jeans.

Benny goes over and picks Sheila up from the lawn by her small arm, and she's still laughing until she sees Benny's face. Sheila kicks and kicks but just bucks around in the air, puts one foot down on the ground and hops after Benny, who towers over her. Benny has her by the wrist and ankle, skin lotion soft and dripping wet, and then they are in the grass together. Benny feels his jeans bunch around his thighs. Sheila is laughing again, sitting on his chest, pounding his chest with tiny fists. Sheila's friends are still in the wading pool, watching and not understanding, Benny and Sheila slide together like fish. A hum goes across the neighborhood, an engine starts and coughs and starts again and Sheila is on her feet. Benny puts himself up on his elbows and watches her run back

to the pool and flop into it, watches and stands up, finds his shirt in a heap, drenched and sticky, and carries it inside.

Inside the house Benny stands just near the door, dripping onto the doormat, and watches his mother come home from work. She comes in the door and lets her bag fall to the ground, her shoes in her hand and her feet burned from the hot asphalt. Her ring is turned around to the inside of her hand and she sees Benny.

“Your sister Sheila is in that pool again,” she says, and there is dust in her voice. She unbuttons the top of her white uniform.

“I know.”

Benny’s mother sits down on the sofa, the squeak of springs, pats herself down before deciding not to smoke.

“I told you—”

She stops mid-sentence. “Forget it.” Picks herself off the sofa, moving slow and deliberate. “Just don’t let her stay in there all day.” She disappears up the stairs, and the ceiling creaks as she walks across the upstairs.

Benny drips across the house and down into the basement, shuts and locks the door behind him and moves into the quiet darkness beneath the house. At the bottom of the stairs he peels down his jeans and underwear and dries off with a beach towel on the floor. He falls onto his bed, naked, from the heels, like a man knocked out cold in a movie. The heat is incredible and he is already sweating. The sound of girl’s laughter floats somewhere in the air, a giggle on a permanent loop, a laugh that means secrets between best friends. Benny feels himself and imagines floating up, being pressed

against the ceiling, the cool white paint and the pulsing heat of his body, moving together, the whole ceiling turning soft and opening up to swallow him.

His orgasm startles him, head comes up off the pillow, hair still damp and now bent into a strange mess. Flushes pink and whatever door inside his head had opened up to Sheila closes, and Benny sits up, suddenly embarrassed. The bedroom breathes a little as Benny cleans himself off. Stings with the memory of the stab of pleasure, bright like a piece of glass pushed into his head. Stands up from his bed, waves of heat, and Benny runs a hand through his hair. Sunlight pours in through his open basement transom like melted butter and Benny knows it's going to be a good day.

- - -

Cliff and Benny are sitting in the woods and Cliff has his father's gun, shiny like a black and poisonous insect and Cliff puts the gun to his forehead and pretends to pull the trigger, says Bang and laughs. Benny watches the gun, expects the spark and then the clap through the woods and then Cliff's head rocking on his shoulders, and is disappointed when nothing happens.

"Is it even loaded?" Benny asks, tossing a rock at a rat or a squirrel or a rabbit or whatever.

"Shit yes," Cliff says, and waves the thing around.

Benny stands on a big rock and looks around. Through the trees he can see the highway and past the highway a row of houses and past the houses, he imagines, are people walking dogs, pushing babies in carriages, chasing after balls, jogging laps.

"Give it to me," Benny says, and Cliff tosses the gun to him. Benny closes one eye and cocks his head and points the gun at the space between trees.

“What’re you gonna do?” Cliff stumbles at Benny, at the gun.

“I’m gonna shoot the gun and see what I hit. There’s trees and there’s the road and then there’s houses. How far does a bullet go? A mile if it doesn’t hit anything?”

“Benny—”

“How many points do I get if—”

Cliff’s face goes dark and there’s a moistness to him all of a sudden, like something wet inside him popped and was now leaking. “Benny, don’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because. Because you might hit somebody.”

Benny looks at Cliff and lets the gun down. “I don’t get you, man. You brought it out here, of course we’re gonna shoot it. And who knows, we might hit something, or somebody. It’s your fault, really. If we do.”

Cliff cries. Benny thinks this is pathetic. Gets down off the rock. Puts the gun to Cliff’s head.

“Stop crying. Stop crying.”

“Benny—”

“Stop crying. You little fag.”

Cliff sniffs and his eyes are wide and Benny looks deep into them, presses the muzzle of the thing against Cliff’s head. Looks at Cliff’s mouth. Presses his own mouth against Cliff’s.

“You like that? You tell anybody, I’ll kill you. I swear.” Benny kisses him again. Wind comes across the forest and hums between the trees, some kind of music, blows up Benny’s shirt and Cliff’s shirt. Benny puts the gun down on the ground. Benny

is making a noise into Cliff's mouth, a whisper or a sigh or the sound of metal vibrating. The sound fills Cliff up, brims over, escapes.

- - -

Benny slides through the halls between classes. His backpack is slung low, around his hips, shifts back and forth as he walks. He squints until the hall turns into a tunnel, a white angel floating at the other end, floating and rippling like water, then nothing, as he opens his eyes again. Moves so smoothly that footsteps seem impossible. Benny puts his headphones on, glides. Imagines everybody's looking at him and they are. Benny steps into class and finds an open seat. Today he walks between raindrops. He leaves the headphones on.

After school Benny takes the long way home, winding and tangled, doubles back twice and changes every time, alive. Houses and houses. Benny cuts across the park, climbs up to the top of the hill and sits on the grass. Benny lights a cigarette and watches the park, other people walking across it, dogs throwing themselves into the air like missiles and coming down with frisbees in their teeth, a balloon bouncing on the wind, and nothing.

Benny sees the man first, and catches his eye. A man without a briefcase. The man climbs the hill to Benny and Benny stubs out his cigarette against the bottom of his sneaker, and the man stops short of him, shades his eyes.

"Hello there," the man says.

Benny scratches his leg up the cuff of his jeans. He watches the man watching him. A flash of skin. Benny smiles. "Hi."

"It's a nice day, isn't it?"

“It’s alright,” Benny says.

“It’s beautiful, I mean.”

“Yeah, it’s spectacular.” Benny closes his eyes.

The man is thin, not tall. His hands have veins popping out from under the skin.

“Do you live around here?”

“Not really,” Benny says.

“Long way home?” the man asks.

Benny smiles. “Long way home,” he replies.

Benny stands up slowly, stretches enough so that his tee shirt comes up and shows his stomach. Watches the man. The man checks his watch. Benny feels like he is floating in a cloud. Lifted off. Maybe slow like a movie, like smoke escaping from a slowly opened mouth, the way a feather falls to earth, or words in a dream.

“Do you have to—”

“No, I don’t have anywhere to go,” Benny says.

“You’ve done this—”

“I’ve done this before.”

“I’m not sure you understand,” the man says.

“I understand.”

They are moving across the park, together, close enough to brush against each other. No one notices and the sun keeps shining. No darkness across the sun. The man brings Benny to his house, somewhere in the center of town, lost in a crush of houses, roads, overgrown gardens, a place off the map.

“What do you want to do to me?” Benny asks. He is sitting on the man’s couch. The man gives him a drink that looks like soda but tastes like something else. Sits down next to him. No one has ever sat so close to Benny before. A finger traces the seam on Benny’s jeans.

“This. I want to do this. And more than this.”

Benny feels his pants being tugged down, catching at his knees. His head rolls back.

“Money.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need money.”

The man stops. “You don’t look poor to me.”

“Well, I am. Twenty bucks.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think— ”

“It’s twenty bucks.”

The man holds him in his hand. “Twenty bucks for this?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s twenty bucks.”

“Or what,” the man says, “you’ll leave?”

Benny closes his eyes. Feels the quiet dark of the house all around him.

“I deserve twenty.”

The man unfolds a bill from his wallet. “Ten. You’re worth ten.” The man presses the bill down on Benny’s chest.

“Ten. Fine. Ok.”

The man starts again. Benny feels something moist rushing in his head. The feeling. The feeling swoops through him. Benny can see the man's head moving. And nothing else.

- - -

Benny and Cliff are in the big swallowing darkness of Benny's bedroom, the flicker of the TV light dances around the room, the sound is way down, a murmur, a ghost humming. They lay side-by-side on the bed, watching a man touch a woman's breasts with his mouth, then the clumsy and ripe sex of pornography. Benny is hard and he looks at Cliff. Remembers the day in the woods but then beats it out of his mind.

"Where did you get this from?" Cliff asks, the movie floating in front of his face.

"I found it in my dad's old stuff."

Cliff rolls over onto his stomach. "I'm hard," he says.

"Alright," says Benny. He doesn't take his eyes off the film. A woman is doing something to another woman that Benny doesn't quite understand.

"Your sister's growing up real fast," Cliff says.

"Don't think about my sister when we're watching this."

"Pretty soon she'll be getting tits and everything."

"Shut up," Benny says, punching Cliff in the arm. Benny immediately feels guilty, watches Cliff's face change. Then something disgusts him, a shadow on Cliff's face, the way he looks at him, and Benny swings himself on top of Cliff, pins him down.

Cliff struggles but Benny holds him down. "Take it back. Take back what you said about her."

"I've seen the way you look at her. I know how you think."

“Fuck you,” Benny says, and lets some spit fall onto Cliff’s face. “You’re a liar.”

Cliff puts a leg against Benny and pushes him off, then reverses, straddles Benny’s chest.

“It’s sick. The way you look at her. You play with her in that little pool. You’re fucking getting off on it.”

“Shut up, shut up.”

“I’ll tell your mom.”

Benny pushes but Cliff has him down.

“Don’t you dare.”

“I will. I’ll tell her. Unless you let me do something.”

Benny sucks in breath. “Do what?”

Cliff bends down and his lips brush Benny’s cheek as he turns his head away.

“No fucking way,” Benny says.

“We did it before. We did it in the woods.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to do it again.” Benny is angry but doesn’t struggle.

“You’ll get in so much trouble. I swear.”

“You’re a such a fag. I can’t believe it.”

“Shut up,” Cliff says. “You’re still hard too.”

Benny looks up at Cliff. “You just wanna kiss me?”

“Or I’ll tell.”

“Then just do it and get it over with.”

Cliff bends his head down and their lips meet, slowly, supreme caution, things slow down, burn brighter. Cliff slides off Benny and they lay against each other,

something starts to happen, they rub against each other slowly. Benny feels Cliff against him and something burns through him like a spark. They pull apart. There's a streak of wetness across Cliff's cheek.

- - -

Sheila is sitting on the sofa in her ballerina's outfit, folds of tutu up all around her like a flower, like sitting in the center of a wilting rose. She is eating a toasted cheese sandwich with both hands and not watching Benny watching her. Benny stands at the bottom of the stairs, arm on the railing, the collar of his favorite shirt torn at the seam, a thick blue bruise spread across his mouth and cheek.

"Sheila. Sheila, do you want to go play in the pool with me?"

With a mouthful of sandwich. "It's cold out today."

"I know. But mom said we could go outside and play in the pool."

"Mommy didn't say that."

Benny sits down on the couch next to her. "Yeah, she did."

"Benny, I have ballet practice," as she puts down the crust of her sandwich.

Benny sits back on the sofa. "I had a really weird day, Sheel."

Sheila gets up on her knees and hops on them and is looking at Benny in the face.

"Yeah? Mommy said I'm a swan."

"A swan?"

Sheila is up on her feet and dancing a crooked dance. It is like a joke of a ballerina. Benny laughs. "See, I look just like a swan."

Benny watches her spin and spin. Imagines her spinning so fast that she goes soft and vanishes like smoke.

“Come outside with me,” Benny says. Sheila shakes her head as if she’s concentrating very hard.

Benny swallows hard and starts again. “Sheila, Mom told you to do whatever I say.”

“No she didn’t.”

“Yes she did, Sheel.”

Benny reaches out and grabs Sheila by the wrist. She stops dancing.

“Are we playing a game?” Sheila asks.

Benny doesn’t know what to say.

- - -

Outside in the wading pool, the water is cold and there’s pine needles floating. Benny sits in the water, jeans soaking up the wetness, his legs gone clammy. Early autumn wind cuts across the yard and blows his hair back. Benny watches something small moving in the grass. Three houses away someone is building a tool-shed and the hammering is everywhere, metronomic, the beat to an invisible dance. Benny watches an airplane in the sky, its shadow big against the sky, maybe headed for a crash, ducking behind clouds, then reappearing, gone and replaced, there and back.

THE RED DRESS

Mary wound the string around her hand and pulled it tight until the flesh beneath turned purple and threatened to tear. She released the string, and it slowly uncoiled, and the feeling was ecstatic. All around her world had somehow become sharper, more real. Across the park Mary could hear children playing violently, their voices bright and hard like tiny pieces of metal in the sun. She slowly realized that the two children, both boys, were her own. Mary stood up from the bench, straightened herself, tucked the old length of string into her pocket, and walked slowly towards them.

Through a haze of trees Mary could see them on the ground, a tangle of colors. For a moment she stopped and watched them undetected. Her oldest, Brian, was almost ten. She could see Brian's small hand pressed over her younger son's mouth, like a criminal would stifle a scream. Mary felt a wave of nausea swing through her at the thought. Seth was her youngest, a small and feverish boy. Whenever she thought of him, he appeared in her mind as a blur, as if he were shaking from within or simply moving too fast for her to see.

Half of Seth's face was pushed down into the dirt, and some pebbles and grass had stuck to him. Brian straddled Seth's chest. Mary wondered to herself what had caused the fight. With children it was almost always nothing. She reminded herself that children were supposed to fight, that it was an important part of being a child, that when she had been a girl she was always being hit. Mary remembered the string in her pocket and reached for it, backing away from the clearing. As she wove it between her fingers and prepared to pull it taut, for the world to come back, Mary watched a young man cross

the grass toward her boys. He moved quickly, and rushed behind Brian and took him by his collar, pulling him off Seth. The man reeled back and with the back of his hand struck Brian across the mouth. Mary felt unsteady on her feet; something inside her was being gently plucked, like the string of a violin, and it shook through her whole body. The world went like a camera's flash. Mary dropped the string.

Now she crossed through the clearing, stumbling out of the woods towards the three of them. Brian had sat down hard on the grass when he was hit, but he wasn't crying. The young man had taken Seth by the hand and was wiping away the dirt from his face with a napkin. None of them noticed Mary, until she came close to Brian and put her hand on the top of his head. Mary watched the man from behind, and he knelt before her youngest son and cleaned him like a father.

With a cough, she spoke. "What are you doing?"

The man swung around on his haunches. Mary could see that he was probably no more than 20 years old. He wore a red sweatshirt with the name and seal of a university on it, and dirty jeans. He was handsome. Mary was suddenly aware of her own clothes, the mismatch she had thrown together that morning.

"Are these yours?" he said.

"The children? I mean, yes."

The man turned away. "I'm cleaning off your son's face."

Mary chewed on her thumb.

"I saw you. I saw you hit my son."

The man stood and turned to face her. Something dark came across his face.

"They were fighting."

"I know. I mean, I saw. But still-"

The man moved closer. Mary could watch him breathe through his sweatshirt.

"My name's Charlie."

Mary laughed. "That's a little boy's name."

"I know."

Charlie smiled or half-smiled and picked Seth up in his arms. Mary was uncomfortable with his big hands around her son's body. Mary let her eyes wander across Charlie's face. He was not as handsome as she had thought.

Mary looked into Seth's eyes and saw that they were cloudy, milky, and she knew he was afraid. Mary dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand.

"I'm Mary," she said. There was a hovering silence between them.

Charlie looked at her. "Like Mary, mother of God?"

"How old are you?"

"I'm 22."

"That's right. You seemed young," Mary said.

Mary's tongue felt enormous in her mouth.

"Can I have my son back now, please?" Mary felt the need to ask politely.

Charlie set Seth down on the ground.

"Let's both call him and see which one of us runs to," he said.

Mary grimaced. "That's not funny."

She took Seth by the hand and gathered him up into her arms. Mary watched Charlie's eyes, and saw that they had wandered somewhere into the distance.

"Something on your mind?" Mary asked.

She turned, and on the crest of a hill not too far off there was a woman watching them.

"That's my sister," Charlie said.

Mary squinted. "You have the same hair."

"She's angry. See how she's got her arms crossed like that?"

Mary shifted Seth into her other arm. He was suddenly so heavy she thought she would drop him.

"Well, I don't want to keep you waiting, I mean, if you've got somewhere to go."

Charlie ran hand through his hair.

"No, I'm not in any rush." He licked his lips.

Mary watched the clouds slowly move across the sky. With her free hand he was tapping Brian's head as if it were a drum.

"I think I've seen you here before," Charlie said.

Mary laughed. "No, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well, because I'm not really the sort of person who goes to parks."

"You're here now."

"Well, you know, nature. The boys wanted to play."

"I'm positive though. I never forget a face."

Mary looked at the ground.

"I really should be going."

"No, stay."

Charlie looked as if he might step forward and take Mary by the wrist.

"I think I left something on the stove," Mary said.

"Don't lie to me."

Mary went hard as steel. "Who do you think you are? You hit my son."

"Yes."

Mary turned away and began to walk. She could feel Charlie behind her. She blushed all through her body, her back slick with sweat. Mary turned around, half-hoping that he would be close up on her, his breath all over her, but he had gone.

Brian spoke. "Mom, can we go home now?"

"Yes, yes, we're going home."

Mary stood still, and let a breeze wash over her. She put Seth down on the ground and knelt on the ground, her knees sinking into the warm, wet earth. She took Brian's head in her hands and turned it back and forth. On his cheek there was the mark where Charlie had hit him. Mary ran a finger across it. It was bright red, like the press of a kiss.

- - -

That night there was fitful sleep. Mary lay restless in her small bed, watching things play across the ceiling in the dark. Sometimes her legs would begin to twitch, and Mary would sit up in bed and pound them with her fists until they stopped. Then she would go into her bathroom and look at the bruises. They were dark and turning brown, and ached at the touch. Mary took some lotion out of the cabinet and rubbed it down her legs. She felt cool and smooth.

Mary wandered out into the house, her bare feet silent in the thick carpet. She imagined that she were a killer, sneaking toward a victim. With each step some part of

her leg was in such agony that she thought she might collapse. The sensation was electric. She held her hand in front of her face and couldn't see it in the dark. Mary wondered what it would be like to not exist.

Silently, she opened the door to her sons' bedroom and crept inside. Both Brian and Seth were asleep. In the dark Mary put her foot down on a sharp plastic toy and she bit her lip not to cry out. The taste of blood filled her mouth, raw at the roof, and she retreated from the bedroom to the kitchen. Mary took the orange juice from the refrigerator and drank from the carton. She had always scolded the boys when they did the same. The citrus burned against the cut in her lip.

Mary lay turned on the television, the volume all the way down, and sat in the uneasy light of it. She pulled her long tee-shirt down around her knees and stared at the program. It wasn't any good so Mary blurred her eyes until it was nothing but motion and static and her mind wandered to Charlie.

Mary saw Charlie's strong arm in the air and then coming across her son's delicate face with a flash of light. Inside her she felt both the sting of hitting and being hit. The muscles in Charlie's arm slid beneath his skin. Mary imagined his large hand around her thin neck. She caught her breath in her throat roughly and pretended to be choking. Mary lay flat on the couch now, her shirt pulled up to her neck and her hand was not hers but Charlie's.

Over and over in her mind she saw his hand rear back like an animal, and she felt it like a shock inside her as her hand worked between her legs. Mary felt as if she were full of tiny shards of glass.

- - -

Mary dropped her children off at school the next morning and drove to the dry-cleaners, where she picked up a set of sheets and a cocktail dress. Mary had worn the dress to a party for a co-worker weeks before, and she had spilled something horrible on it. The woman behind the counter said that there was nothing else they could do for the dress, that it was probably ruined and Mary wanted to spit at her. The woman was talking, but it was as if she were behind a sheet of glass. Mary simply smiled and left. On Mondays Mary had the day off so she thought she'd spend the day running errands. Instead she found herself at the park.

It was early so there was almost no one there. The morning air was hard and cold and Mary unbuttoned the top of her coat so the air got inside and slipped around her body. She found the bench she had sat on the day before and sat down, the wooden slats bitter through her pants. Suddenly Mary felt exhausted. She brought up her legs underneath her and curled up onto the bench. Out in the grass she watched a small bird dance. She could see it shake with every one of its heartbeats. Mary imagined her own heart's violent rhythm and soon she was asleep.

In the next moment she woke up with the sun in her eyes. Her body was slick with sweat beneath her clothes, and Mary brought her watch up to her face. She had fallen asleep for hours. She sat up and peeled off her coat and put it over the back of the bench. She felt the wetness beneath her breasts and wished she could take off her shirt as well.

Mary looked around her and was blinded by the sun for a moment. She stared into the dark of the thicket of trees where she had watched her children fight the day before and slowly it came into focus. There was a man standing in the darkness.

The man began to come out of the black and Mary stood. It was day but she expected that she would be raped at any moment. The idea was cruel but warm inside her. Someone's strange hands on her body. As she blinked, Mary realized that she recognized the man.

Charlie walked slowly towards her, like a timid dog. His hands were shoved down deep into his pockets, but he stared directly into her face. He opened his mouth but no words came out immediately, just the empty sound of air. Then he began to speak in the voice of a shameful child.

"I wasn't spying on you. Honestly."

Mary stepped back and put her hand to her mouth.

"You were watching me. There's no difference."

"Of course there is," Charlie said. "I saw a woman sleeping. I was glad it was you."

"But you weren't surprised?"

"No," Charlie said.

"You knew I'd come back?"

Charlie smiled the bright smile of a shark.

Mary stammered. "I'm not comfortable with any of this."

"You don't seem like the kind of person who's comfortable with anything."

She smiled uneasily, and then her mouth collapsed.

"What did you just say?"

"Why did you come here this morning?" Charlie asked.

Mary closed her eyes. "I don't know."

"Did you come because you thought you'd see me?"

Mary let out a short, controlled laugh, as if there was a whole reserve of mania inside her that she was holding back.

"Well, did you?"

She looked at him incredulously. "Of course not."

Charlie took off his glasses and wiped them on the bottom of his shirt.

"I came here looking for you, actually," he said.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

Mary wrung her hands. "What is this, some kind of game?"

Charlie was silent.

Mary turned and walk back to the bench and collected her jacket. She began to walk towards her car, but then she felt Charlie following her. Mary quickened her pace, and then broke into a run. Her knees felt weak as she opened her car and got inside. The heat was oppressive, and Mary almost swooned in it. She could hear Charlie's footsteps outside on the pavement. The whole world spun itself upside-down and Mary was lost in it. She imagined that she had been stuck to the roof of her car and was looking down at the seats and the dashboard. There was a sudden rush of air as Charlie opened the door. Mary had forgotten to lock it.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Mary couldn't speak.

"I'm going to take you home."

Mary shook her head no.

"Anywhere but home," she said.

In the hotel, Mary sat against the back of the bed while Charlie sat across the room. It was a nice room, and Mary had been surprised when Charlie chose the hotel. She didn't think he could afford it. On the wall there was a pastel painting and Mary could see her reflection in the glass.

There had been silence between them in the room for a long time. They had checked in and taken the elevator like a married couple and then assumed their positions. It was as if Charlie was waiting for something, the way he was sitting, his hands pressed flat on the arms of the chair as if he might spring forward at any second. Mary was on the bed like a broken doll. Beside her was the ruined cocktail dress, stripped of its soft plastic cover from the cleaners. Mary looked at it. Down the front of it there was a thick red stain.

"What happened to your dress?" Charlie asked.

Mary thought for a long time then replied with a slow voice.

"I spilled a glass of wine on it."

"It's still beautiful. You should really figure out a way to wear it."

Mary cocked her head and looked at him.

"Who are you?"

"You know who I am."

"What kind of person says the kind of things you say to a person?"

"I'm smart. And I don't like bullshit."

"It's unnatural. You asking me questions. Us in this room. What time is it?"

Charlie looked at his watch. "It's a little after noon."

"I shouldn't be here. I'm weak."

Charlie stood and walked over to the bed. There, Mary thought. It's finally happening. Someone will find my corpse drowned in the bathtub and there's nothing I can do about it. She imagined Charlie's face as she looked up at it from underwater, rippling and strange.

Charlie took the dress up off the bed. He held it and regarded it slowly.

"It's soft. I want you to put it on."

Mary laughed. "I don't think so."

"You know I only broke up that fight between you kids so I could meet you."

Mary laughed wet and hollow.

"I'm going."

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. She was overcome with pain, and sat back down.

"What's wrong?" said Charlie.

"My legs hurt. They're all bruised."

"Let me see."

Charlie bent down in front of Mary and rolled up her pants gently. The bruises were black and wet looking. Charlie bent down and kissed the largest of them.

"I did it. I mean, I did it to myself," Mary said.

He stood up in front of her. He held the dress in one hand.

"Are you going to rape me?" Mary said with more strength than she thought she had.

“No.”

“You just want me to wear the dress?”

“Yes.”

Mary started to cry. “Why?”

Charlie reached down and started to lift Mary’s shirt. Mary allowed him to undress her, and soon she was standing delicately, as Charlie slid the dress down her body. Mary kept her eyes trained on a point in the wall, where the wallpaper had recently been replaced and the colors didn’t match. Soon he was finished and he stood back to look at her.

“You look beautiful.”

"I'm not."

Mary looked at herself. The red stain down the front of the dress glowed and vibrated and Mary felt wobbly.

“Watch out,” Charlie said, coming to her and holding her upright. He lowered Mary down onto the bed. Mary felt as if she were being sunk underwater.

Mary rolled her head away from him, so she couldn’t see his face. “I’m so tired,” she said.

“I can tell.”

“That girl yesterday. She wasn't really your sister."

"No."

“But, why?”

Charlie smiled. "She was my date. She wanted to walk around the park, you know, have a romance. That's not me. Besides, you're not the first woman I tried to pick up that day."

"But I'm the only one who came back."

Charlie put his hand on Mary's leg, softly.

"You know, I thought about you," she said. "All yesterday. I couldn't stop. I couldn't sleep."

Then she laughed out loud.

"What am I doing here?"

Charlie slid his hand up her thigh.

"I thought you weren't going to rape me?"

"Is this rape?"

Mary thought for a moment. "No, I suppose not."

She let her hand run across the stain on her chest. She remembered the man at the party who had pushed her into an empty office and how they had been kissing, and his face when Mary had put her teeth into his cheek. His confused face as she smiled at him, blood on her tongue. And then his rage, and his fist coming down on her. And no matter how tightly she held her nose how it had spilled down her dress.

"Not so gentle," Mary said.

Charlie looked up at her. "What did you say?"

"Don't be gentle with me. I don't like it."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes you do."

"I don't know."

"Hit me. Whatever. Anything you want."

Charlie sat up, his face gone slack. Mary sat up with him.

"I can't," Charlie said.

"The way you hit my son. You know how to do it."

"I was angry."

"So get angry with me."

"That's not what I want."

"I don't care what you want. When you hit my son, how did it feel?"

Charlie stood up from the bed and looked at her. He shook his head in disbelief.

"Don't be so ridiculous. You drag me to this hotel and now you're scared of me.

I'm helpless. Look at me. Just hit me. Like you hit Brian. I want to know how it felt.

I've never hit my son, can you believe that? I've wanted to. It's hard not to."

"No, this isn't what I want," he said.

"I want to feel something," she said.

Mary fell back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Her eyes welled up but she didn't let herself cry. She listened as Charlie left the room. Then she stood up and walked into the bathroom. Mary looked at herself in the mirror, in her dress. She slapped herself. Her cheek flushed bright red and she hit herself again. The palm of her hand began to sting, and she closed her fist. Mary tore at her dress and soon she was bloody. She sank to the floor and began to cry. She pressed her eyes so tight that the darkness exploded into stars.

- - -

Mary found the way to her children's school by reflex. The car almost drove itself. She was just on time. The children were flooding out of the big double doors and were pressing towards the sidewalk. Somewhere in the crush of bodies were her children. Mary slowed down, as if to stop, and watched the throng. Then she pressed down on the accelerator and drove off, and watched with her good eye as everything raced away. She felt enclosed in white light, everything was shining from within, like it might burst.

As she came to a ramp leading up onto the highway, Mary paused for a moment, then sped her station wagon up the wrong way, dreaming of a kiss like the back of a hand. The same brutal flavor.

FIRE SUITE

It was not the first time I had tried to hang myself over a woman. Men are always trying to kill themselves, and usually because of a woman, or some sort of love, one way or another.

I was always telling Lupe to leave me. I used to order her to. Men are hideous creatures, full of lies and bitterness and deathwishes. We are, deep down, devils.

I had run away to Florida. There are responsibilities that the rest of the world has to worry about that Florida lets fall by the wayside. It is a community of overgrown children, like Never Never Land. There is no culture and no rules. I lived there for months, at a hotel on the beach, right in the middle of everything. In the morning I used to go out onto my balcony, naked and in sandals, and watch the water. Maybe there would be people doing morning work, or cops breaking up a late night party that had flowed into the street, but I only watched the ocean. Once I saw a party boat capsize out in the breakwater. I could have called the police, or the coast guard, or I might have run down to the beach and thrown myself into the wet to save them. I just watched, like I was asleep, watching a movie in my head.

Lupe was a stripper. She said she was a dancer, the way a secretary calls herself an assistant, but she was definitely a stripper. She was Cuban, the color of butterscotch, with long black hair that I would lie in bed tying into knots, which she would spend the whole next morning working out with a monogrammed, pearl-handled comb. She would steal me boxes of cigars and bottles of imported rum from her aunt, a refugee.

She was a magnificent lover. When she was a girl, her mother had taught her all sorts of Caribbean sex magic, which I didn't put any stake in, not believing in magic. Still, our sex was spectacular. She would be straddling me, me inside her, hissing words I couldn't understand with her tongue caught between her teeth. She tasted like spice and fire. Our love had the power to move the bed a good five feet across the floor, leaving big, ugly drag marks in the carpet.

One night she didn't come home from work, and I had the image of a sweaty tourist from the North, catching her hand as she left the club, and taking her back to his car, and above all, that she enjoyed it. I tied a rope from my ceiling fan, stood on an overturned trashcan, tied a simple noose, put it around my neck and waited for her to come back to collect her things. I wanted to hang myself at exactly the moment she came in the door.

When I heard her key in the lock, I got myself ready. When she was inside, and saw me, her face wide open, I kicked the trashcan out from beneath me. It was like I was being pulled back, dragged by my collar. Then I felt the whole thing give above me. I hit the floor hard, then I felt the fan coming down behind me, and everything was a shower of plaster and dust.

Lupe stood in the doorway, clicking her tongue at me. Behind her eyes there was something like a match being struck.

"You're pathetic, you know that?"

I tried to stand up, but was tugged back down. I was still connected to the fan.

"I know it. Could you help me get out of this?"

Lupe came inside, crossed to me and kneeled down in front of me, and her fingers were working on the noose, which had been pulled tight by my weight, and I was tracing up her legs with my eyes, into her skirt, until I noticed that she wasn't wearing any underwear.

"How was work?" I asked, turning my attention to her neck, which was bent over me.

"Work is work. It was fine."

"You're not too tired? Did you end up doing a double shift?"

"Dancers don't have double shifts. And I'm not tired. I'm never too tired to help you out of some new suicide contraption."

The noose gave a little and Lupe slid it up over my face, and then off. She put it down on the floor next to us and kissed me on the lips. Then she stood up, flattened her skirt with her palms, and let her bag, a big knit thing, fall to the carpet with a clatter of compacts, lipsticks and probably half a box of tampons.

"I have to go take off my makeup. You can come talk to me in the bathroom," she said, and walked away. I followed her into the bathroom and I watched her sit on the edge of the sink, dabbing at her face with a wet tissue.

I came up beside her, and pulled off my shirt, and put it over my shoulder. I took a pair of scissors out of the cabinet and Lupe spoke.

"You're not going to try and stab yourself with my nail scissors, are you?"

"No," I said, and I started trimming my beard. There was about three weeks of ruddy, frantic growth and I hated it. Instead of just clipping it neat, I started cutting chunks out.

“Why are you doing that?” Lupe asked. “I love your beard.”

“I know.”

I started smearing myself with shaving cream, and I wet my razor under the faucet.

“I don’t think I even remember what you look like without it,” she said, stopping to stare at me in our reflection.

“Maybe when I’m done shaving I won’t even be the same man. Maybe you should leave me.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” she said, breezily.

I shaved a pink strip. Lupe closed her eyes and dabbed at her eye shadow.

“Maybe when I take off all my makeup, I won’t be the same woman, did you think of that?”

“You’re always the same,” I said.

I finished shaving myself, and I splashed water on my face. I looked at myself and then at Lupe.

“Really, I think it’s for the best,” I said.

“You think what’s the best?”

I put down my razor. “I think you should leave me.”

Lupe said something in Spanish.

“English. Please, Lupe. We’re trying to have a conversation here.”

“No, we’re not. You’re having a conversation, and I’m not listening.”

She pulled her hair off her face and covered her face with soap. She rinsed her face with warm water. I put my hand into the mess of hair falling down her back and twisted some around my finger.

“That hurts,” she said.

“It’s supposed to hurt.”

Lupe reached up and twisted my hand out of her hair. Her fingers were slippery with soap.

“You’re getting soap in your hair,” I said.

“I don’t care. You were hurting me.”

Lupe turned away from the mirror and looked me in the face.

“I don’t like your face without the beard,” she said.

“Well, now you’ve got an excuse.”

Lupe took both her hands and put them on my face, and shook my head back and forth. Then she let go of me and left the bathroom. I stood for a moment, and examined myself in the mirror. I traced my finger on the purple, bruised ring where the rope had caught against my neck. I could hear Lupe cursing in Spanish, pushing over the ceiling fan. I went out there and watched her. She was staring up into the jagged rip in the ceiling that had been left when the fan came down.

“I think we’ve lost our security deposit,” I said.

Lupe had gone quiet.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

“There doesn’t have to be a reason.”

She took her hand and wiped some of the white dust off the top of our chest of drawers. Then she rubbed her hands together and the dust went everywhere.

“That was effective,” I said.

“Oh, so now you’re going to tell jokes?”

Lupe wiped at her eyes. Some of the dust got in there and she put the back of her hand to her eye and cursed.

“I didn’t think you were upset.”

“Well, I am,” she said, between her teeth.

I sat down on our bed.

“Don’t love me, Lupe. It’s not a good idea,” I said.

“I don’t love you,” she said, searching through her bag. She pulled out a packet of tissues and mashed one up and put it to her eye.

“So, why were you so late coming home from work?” I asked.

“Jesus,” she said, and she stuffed the tissues back inside her bag.

“Are you sleeping with someone else? Just let me know.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m sleeping with someone else,” she said, with a laugh.

“I thought so.”

Lupe got up and sat herself down on the top of the chest of drawers. My eyes wandered down between her legs, again. She saw me doing this.

“You’re sick. We’re having a fight.”

“You’re not sleeping with someone else?”

She crossed her legs like a businesswoman.

“What do you care about it? You were going to hang yourself from the ceiling fan.”

“What’s his name?”

She thought for a second.

“Esteban.”

“That’s a woman’s name.”

“Maybe I’m sleeping with a woman.”

“I don’t think so. Try again.”

“Jorge.”

“And what does Jorge do?”

The sun was coming in the window and it played on her face. It was hard to tell her expression.

“He’s a construction worker.”

“Does he make good money?”

Lupe laughed.

“Yeah, he does.”

“Where did you meet him?”

She was silent. I asked again.

“In the club.”

“So he saw you dance?”

“You’ve never even seen me dance.”

“But he saw you?” I asked.

“No.”

I laughed. “No?”

“He’s blind.” Lupe smiled at me, laughing a little.

“Be serious,” I said.

“How can I be serious? This is ridiculous.”

“Be serious,” I repeated.

I was looking into the shadow in the crook between her folded legs.

“So, Jorge,” I began.

“Stop it.”

“Does he have a big cock?” I asked.

“I don’t want to play this anymore,” Lupe said.

“Does he?”

“He’s made up,” she said. “You practically invented him yourself.”

“Does he make you come?”

“You make me come.”

I stopped.

“That’s not the point,” I said.

She was crying. All the lights in the room were off and the sun had gone behind a cloud but I could see her cheeks were wet.

“I want you to leave me,” I said.

“Does your neck hurt?” she asked me.

I rubbed it with my hand. It was sore. The ring around my neck felt puckered like a burn. I winced.

Lupe came over to me and put her lips against my neck.

“I want you to leave me, Lupe. Really.”

Her hand was in my lap. She was whispering things I didn’t understand. A flush of heat went all through me. I watched the ceiling fan on the floor do nothing and then I closed my eyes.

I looked up at her. She was always on top. I couldn’t see anything through her hair, which was tangled and swaying in front of her face, like a veil. The room swelled and I imagined that I had hurt myself badly with the noose. Like there were bubbles percolating and popping in my brain. Then I realized it was just her magic. My leg was crooked under me and I couldn’t feel it and she was on top of me, loose and liquid. I couldn’t look at her so I turned my head and buried my face in the sheets. She took me by the jaw and turned my head and kissed me and I could taste something inside her like smoke. When she came, she took her hands and pushed and pushed at the ceiling until it came loose and broke open and she went up like a pillar of flame.

Afterwards we lay on the bed, hazy. Lupe was asleep but pushed over to the other side of the bed, ripe with power. I got out of the bed, and found my pants, and stood looking around the room. We had slept through the day. I felt desolate.

I took the ceiling fan up off the floor and went out onto the balcony, hoisted it up in my arms, and threw it out into the night. It spun until it turned itself over and then it fell straight down. I watched it hit the street below with a crack.

Out in the breakwater nothing was happening.

I put my right foot up onto the first rung on the railing, then took a second step, and then I was walking on air.

UNLOVE

I'm listening to the message for the third time when Terry, my boyfriend, comes home carrying a bag of groceries. I can feel him looking at me standing over the answering machine, a tumbler half-full of coconut rum in my hand. I have not even changed out of my work clothes, though my tie is hanging undone around my neck. Terry puts the bag down in the hall and comes over to me, he walks deliberately soft, like I'm a dangerous animal he's approaching in the forest.

"Did you hear it?" I ask him.

Terry puts his hand on my shoulder. "No. Hear what?"

I press the rewind button on the machine.

"Here, I'll play it for you," I say.

Terry takes his hand and turns my head to face him. I can see worry flash across his eyes. I realize what I must look like.

"You look awful. And you smell like a homeless man," he says, nodding his head. "What's happened?"

For a moment I consider relating the whole thing to him, step-by-step. Suddenly I'm struck by the urge to laugh out loud, but I push it down until it's gone. I pull my face out of his hand and the tape finishes rewinding.

"Just listen to the tape," I say.

I push play. My father's voice comes out of the machine, crackling like it's coming across time, from the past. His voice is husky and wet. Before he can even finish his introductions, I stop the tape.

"My mother is a lesbian," I say. The words come off me like steam.

Terry shakes his head. “No, she’s not.”

“What do you mean, Terry? It’s right there on the tape.”

“Well, you didn’t even let me finish listening to it.”

I finish my drink, and then I’m in the kitchen, pouring myself another.

“You don’t need to finish listening. All he says is that she’s left him to live with some woman. Some woman from the neighborhood,” I call out to Terry.

Terry follows me into the kitchen. Everything is bright and scrubbed.

“This place reminds me of a hospital,” I say.

“You’re not making any sense,” Terry says, coming towards me. “Let me take your jacket.”

Terry hooks his fingers into the neck of my blazer and I shrug it off, at the same time pouring coconut rum into my glass. I spill some it on the back of my hand and I put it to my mouth, sucking the rum off. Terry puts my jacket over the back of a chair and looks at me intently, as if I were fading out of sight.

“I don’t believe it,” Terry finally says.

“Well, my father wouldn’t lie about it. Not this. You remember what he was like when I brought you home for Christmas? He’s not the sort of guy who jokes about this sort of thing.”

“He’s homophobic.”

I drink my rum.

Terry is on his feet and taking the glass from my hand. “You’re drunk,” he says.

“That’s the whole point of drinking. There’s no point if it’s not to get drunk. Give it back.”

I watch as he kicks the rest of my drink back and sets the glass down on the table.

“You don’t need to be drunk right now. You need to be very sober.”

“I’m going out there. I’m going home, I mean. I have to talk to them. In person.”

“You already called the airport?”

“I’ve got a flight out tomorrow morning.”

Terry crosses his arms like a small child. All at once I love him and hate him.

“I didn’t get you a ticket.”

“Yeah, I figured that one out for myself,” Terry says.

I go to him and put my hands on his shoulders. He’s a dancer, and he’s got bones like a bird. He weighs almost nothing. I hold him still.

“It’s just better for me to go alone. There’s going to be all this family bullshit.”

“And I’m just not part of that. I get it.” He wriggles free from my hold.

Terry goes into the other room of the apartment. Outside it’s started to snow. Normally I’d find it all very romantic.

In the other room Terry is listening to the message. I look at the clock. It’s almost midnight. I’m suddenly very tired. I lean against the countertop. Terry comes in with the bag of groceries and starts putting them away. He’s angry, and I can feel it all over me.

“Don’t be pissed at me,” I say.

Terry doesn’t answer. I look him up and down. He’s 4 years younger than me, and sometimes it comes out when he’s angry. His mouth is squeezed into a pout.

“Sometimes I feel like we’re an old married couple,” I say, and the laughter comes up. I can’t control it, and Terry turns and stares at me, this look of disgust on his face. But I can’t stop laughing, I’m bent over with my elbows on my knees. Laughter turns to coughing and suddenly he’s there beside me, helping me up off the floor.

“What happened?” I ask. I can feel the print of the linoleum on my face.

“You fell over. Listen: you have to go to bed.”

I stand up and the room turns over upside down.

Terry has me by the shoulders. In the other room, my father has just finished talking.

“I don’t feel good Terry. I don’t feel good at all.”

“Do you need to throw up?”

I choke. “I don’t think so.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Just put me to bed Terry.”

“How much?”

I tear free of him and stagger towards our bedroom. I brace myself against the back of the couch. In the bedroom, I get undressed with the lights on. In the full length mirror I can watch myself. In the kitchen, I hear Terry break something, probably my glass.

Then he’s behind me. I’m naked, and crawling onto the bed.

“You think you can just drink yourself stupid and I don’t care?”

I mumble something, wrapping myself in a blanket.

“I don’t understand.” He’s crying now.

It's as if Terry is at the end of a long tunnel and I'm at the other end, sunk into something soft and warm and wavy. Terry snaps off like a camera's shutter and then nothing.

- - -

I'm in bed and everything is dark and my head still feels alive with something, like a part of my brain switched on and unfamiliar. I wonder where Terry is and then I find him. His head is between my legs and the feeling is slow getting up my body but finally it arrives. He slides up the bed and looks me face-to-face saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," but I just shake my head, like a bag full of water.

"It's alright."

I'm gone again.

- - -

Terry has my bags out on the curb already but I'm still in the taxi, turning my cell phone over-and-over in my hand. There's something comfortable about this. The airport is massive and a marvel of utilitarian architecture; just one big gray box. I remember coming home from college years ago, coming up the jetway and seeing my mother's small head craning around the corner and wanting to turn around and get back in my seat.

The driver comes to my window and taps it with his knuckle. I tuck my phone back in my bag and open the door to the flush of un-seasonal heat. My hair blows back and Terry immediately fixes it and I can feel the driver looking at us. Terry guides me into the terminal like a child.

We stand at the x-ray machines. They won't let Terry come through them with me without his own ticket so he takes me by the shoulders in front of all the security

people and looks into my eyes. I can feel the kiss coming. His face moves closer but I turn my head. He pulls back and drops his hands.

“Oh,” he says.

I don’t like public good-byes. I’ve never been comfortable with Terry’s total disregard for how other people see him. He is proud of us, and I don’t understand his need to make everyone know it.

Still, I reach out for him. He has started to shake so no one else but me would notice. He looks pathetic and for a moment it breaks my heart. My fingers trip down his neck.

“Listen,” I start. But there’s really nothing to say.

He is crying silently.

I try again. “Listen to me.”

When he opens his mouth there’s a wet sound and then nothing.

“I might not be here when you get back,” he says.

I put on my best look of surprise. I have known that Terry has been thinking about leaving for a while. A few weeks ago he actually packed a bag, like a woman waiting to give birth, for this inevitable moment. He says I drink too much, and that I have too many unresolved issues. His words. I am simply not strong enough right now to hold on to him.

Terry sees this look on my face and half-smiles at me. He knows I’m faking, but he doesn’t say anything. He wants his airport moment.

I look at my watch.

When I look back up Terry has gone.

- - -

Coming up the jetway I almost expect to see my mother looking down at me. It hasn't been so long since I came home for the holidays. Instead when I come up into the airport I find my brother, Mark. Mark is almost 8 years younger than me, probably an accident, and we've never been close. He is wearing a baseball hat and a sweatshirt with some team on it. We couldn't be more different.

Handshakes. We skip the awkward, brotherly hug that we always put on for my parents.

"The flight was good," I offer as I drop his hand, aware that he didn't ask.

My brother has never flown in a plane. I don't know if he has ever left the town he was born in.

He nods, like he understands something, and in a sort of grudging silence, he picks up my carry-on bag from the floor and shoulders it.

"I've still got to pick up another bag from luggage," I say, as he starts away.

Mark turns and I'm reading the words on his sweatshirt. Something about football.

"How long are you staying?" he asks.

"What?"

He looks around like he's making sure we're alone.

"You packed two bags. How long are you staying?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. Until I feel like I can leave."

We walk, Mark a few steps in front of me and I can hear him mumbling.

At the baggage claim, I stare at the conveyor belt until it doesn't even seem to be moving anymore, and when my bag comes Mark has to elbow me to pick it up. It matches the carry-on. There is no one in the airport besides a few lonely passengers waiting for rides and a man waxing the floor. The hum of it rumbles my head and I want a drink.

We go to Mark's car, which I realize after a moment used to be my father's car. The inside of it stinks of cigarettes and as soon as we're on the road Mark lights another cigarette.

I'm noticing how winter has come early to New England, and everything is gray. I turn to Mark and ask him for a cigarette. He gives me one and we sit in silence.

I'm flooded with memories of being in this car. Once the family took a road trip though Pennsylvania. Amish country. I had never seen anything so dark as the night out there. Mark was sleeping in the seat next to me, all the way across the span of the seat. I had a pair of black sweatpants on and everything was silent and I'm pretty sure my parent's thought I was sleeping when I stuffed one hand down my pants. I was young then, probably only 13 and it was over quickly. Thinking about it I start to get an erection so I think about Mark. That does it.

- - -

The old house comes up fast. I turn and watch the road and when I turn my head back around it's there. There's a snow shovel propped up against the front porch, half-buried in snow and ice. There's a clicking inside my head, like someone snapping his fingers over and over. I adjust and readjust my pants where they bunch around my knees.

Mark gets out of the car and starts taking my bags out and then drops them on the curb. He rubs his hands together for a minute, waiting for me. Then he starts to walk up to the house and I get out of the car. It can be hard for us to be in the same place at the same time. There's already some fresh snow on the top of my bags.

The house is dark, and when I come inside, everything seems twisted. All the furniture that I remember has been moved, maybe just a millimeter, but it seems different, out of place, and I have to close my eyes for a second. I can hear Mark talking to someone in the dark, somewhere deeper in the house. I reach for the light switch and flick it, but nothing happens. I blink and blink, and then drop my bags in the hall and follow the voices.

Mark and my father are sitting in the kitchen. Mark strikes a match and lights the burner on the stove, and puts a pot on it.

"Soup," he says, to no one in particular.

I don't look at my father, but I know he's wearing his old, gray bathrobe. I know that his hair is messed up, and there's a looseness to his face, like he's wearing a bad mask. I'm sure he's not looking at me.

"What kind of soup?" I ask, but no one answers.

I rub the back of my neck.

"What happened to the power? The snowstorm?"

Mark nods, looking into his pot of soup.

I nod back. I can feel myself getting dizzy.

When my father finally speaks his voice sounds almost feminine.

"Where's that dancer, whatsisname?" my father starts.

I turn to look at him for the first time but I don't really look at him, I look around him, as if I'm picturing the space he's covering with his body.

"Terry didn't want to come."

Mark is stirring his soup in such a way that it makes me want to hit him.

My father clears his throat.

Snow is coming up against the house and it sounds like moths trying to beat their way inside. Somewhere in New York, Terry is probably watching a movie and masturbating.

Mark is serving my father soup. I have never seen Mark serve anything to anyone. I can't see what kind of soup it is, and I can't smell it. Everything looks gray.

"Soup?" my father asks.

I shake my head and lie and tell him that I ate on the plane. I go to take my bags upstairs. The front stairs sound tired beneath me. When I get to the top I look around at all the closed doors and I can't remember which room was mine. I can hear Mark coming up the stairs after me.

"If you want to see her, I can give you the address."

"Have you seen her?"

"No."

"Are you going to go see her?"

"No."

"Why not? She's mom."

"No, she's not."

Mark hands me a slip of paper.

“There’s flashlights all over the house,” he says, starting back down the stairs.

Inside my room I dig into my bag and pull out the tiny bottle of whisky I tucked in there before I left. I drink it. Immediately I can feel something inside me vibrating, like my blood starts moving again.

In the dark I can just make out the address on the piece of paper. I fall back onto the bed. It’s the house next door to ours.

The sound of a snowplow scraping the pavement wakes me up and I come out of sleep with a start, like the shock of water. There’s a image in my head, like a shimmering hologram, something pornographic and just out of focus. I push down my erection and stand up. I kick over a flashlight on the floor. Then I stoop to pick it up and turn it on. I look around my old bedroom and I feel like a burglar or a serial-rapist snooping. I’m caught by a wave of nostalgia, brittle as sheets of glass running through me. I let the light wash over all my old posters and decorations, like cave-paintings.

I check my watch. It’s earlier than I thought. I start downstairs. There’s a tiny spark in my head, too bright to see what it is. The house is silent. When I reach the living room at the bottom of the stairs, I can see my father sleeping in his chair. Mark is nowhere to be seen. I wrap my coat around me. I have never even taken it off.

Outside I’m surprised by the brightness, the way snow seems to shine like the sun. It stops me for a second and I wish I had some gloves or another bottle of whisky. I think warm thoughts: fire, blanket, body.

I let myself think about Terry for a little bit. Terry sitting. Terry dancing.

I finger the buttonhole in my coat and smile a little.

I look up and down the street. No lights anywhere. Somewhere there's the lonely hum of a generator. I can't move.

I'm 17 again and sneaking out of the house to go down to a club in the city. I am alone and terrified. I am surrounded by neon lights and smoke and men who all seem to know each other, who nod at me. There is an uncomfortable wetness all around me, like open mouths. Still, I am excited.

My mother sees me come in the house at daybreak. She notices the tear on my shirt. A yank-mark. I feel stretched out and elastic. She looks at me.

I am standing on the path that leads up to the house where my mother is. A siren in my mind is going and going. Even as I press the doorbell. Remembering: no power. I knock.

I can see there's movement behind the door. In the adjacent window I can see the white of a nightgown. The door opens. A woman who is not my mother. Her nightgown looks soft and warm. Her hair. Her hair looks like it hasn't been out of bed in days.

I start to introduce myself.

"I know who you are," she says.

We dance around each other for a minute. I realize I've had my hand extended for her to shake. I put it down.

"You want to see Helen," she says, and for a moment I have no idea who she's talking about.

I peer over her shoulder and I can see a shape that could be my mother.

"I don't think Helen wants to see you."

"I came all the way from New York," I say.

I can see my own breath. I don't have the strength for this.

"Just tell her I came by," I say. I turn away.

My mother's voice.

"Wait."

- - -

There is coffee between us. There is something that keeps me from drinking it.
That would be the end of the silence. My mother looks as if she hasn't slept in days.

"Mom, you look terrible," I say.

I can see the woman smoking a cigarette in the other room. She is pretending to read a magazine. These two housewives.

"I know," she says. "I haven't had my hair cut in a month."

"You look tired."

"I am tired," she says.

"And dad. He looks awful."

"Your father," she begins.

I pick up the cup of coffee. It burns my hand.

"How long has the power been out?" I ask.

My mother sighs.

"Too long."

"How can people live like this? In the dark," I ask.

My mother has begun to play with a napkin. She has folded it in half and into quarters.

"Mom?"

“Yes, dear.”

“How did this happen?”

“Things just happen.” She is looking into nothing.

I stand up. “This is pointless.”

“What do you want me to say,” she says, “that I’m sorry?”

“No.”

“That I’m crazy?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

“This is your decision? Living here?”

My mother stands.

“Not for long. We’re going to get a place.”

“This is too much.”

I pour out my coffee into the sink. Then I rinse out the cup. I dry the cup.

“Where do the cups go?” I ask.

From the other room. “Over the sink.”

“I wasn’t asking you.” My voice seems louder than it should be. I’m shouting and it fills the dark house.

My mother puts her hand on my arm. “Maybe we should get out of here. Find somewhere better to talk.”

I nod my head. My eyes blur and cross. There’s that warmth again.

My mother wraps herself in an old blue coat that goes from her neck all the way down to her ankles. She disappears into it. As we walk out the door she looks at the other woman, her lover, and I'm realizing I don't know her name, but then I'm outside.

We sit in the car as it warms up. Neither of us want to drive anywhere.

She breaks the silence. "Why did you come here?" she asks.

I'm twisting my hands around the steering wheel with a satisfying creak of leather.

"You didn't have to come. Your father wasn't supposed to call you."

"So I just wasn't going to know? One day I'd come home and find all this out?"

"No."

"Then what, mom? How does. How does something like this happen?"

"How did it happen for you?"

My mouth hangs open. "That's not the same thing. Not at all."

"So you always knew about yourself?"

"Yes. Well, no. Not really. It wasn't a surprise."

"We were surprised, your father and me. And your brother," she says.

"And what is it with Mark, mom? Is he still living at the house?"

"You and your brother never got along."

"No, we never got along. Do you think it's healthy for him to still be living here? I mean, he's got to live a life."

My mother makes a face. "Let's not start pretending you care about your brother."

An image of Mark in a football jersey with his friends.

“He’s my brother. I have to care about him.”

“Well, this isn’t the time for us to start imitating a close family, is it?”

“What’s going on with that woman?”

“Her name is Lucy.”

“Nevermind, I don’t want to know. I mean, I already know what’s going on.

You’re living with her.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t answer me. I know what’s going on.”

“How is Terry?”

“Don’t, don’t switch this around on me.”

“Is he still dancing?”

“Yes, Terry is still a dancer.”

“Your father never understood that. He said ‘How can dancing be all a person does?’”

“Let’s leave dad out of this.”

She is sitting on her hands.

“Here. Let me find you some gloves.”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

I reach over and pull on her arm and one hand comes up.

“Give me your hands.”

She does.

I hold both her hands. I’m noticing how small they are.

“Are you happy?” I ask her.

“Are you?”

“No, not really.”

“I’m not happy either. Not with your father.”

“So you’re happy with this woman?”

“Lucy. And no, not really. It’s complicated.”

“I don’t understand. I mean, how is one misery better than the other? Why not just stay with dad?”

She is silent for a moment.

“I love your father. But I can’t live in that house anymore.”

“So you moved next door?”

“Have you seen what it’s like in there? Your father sitting around in an old robe eating condensed soup and your brother, working two jobs, a string of unlikeable, unattractive girlfriends, it’s more than I can take anymore. And you. You moved to New York and decided never to talk to us again.”

“I come down for holidays.”

“Don’t patronize me. I’m glad you come down to see us twice a year. Some children,”

“How can you do this to dad? I’ve seen him. He looks terrible.”

“He always looks like that. You don’t know how it’s been for me. Children never find out what’s really happening with their parents. It’s sad really.”

“I have to ask you something. It’s an uncomfortable question.”

“If you want to know if Lucy and I are, intimate,”

“Are you?”

"I'm not answering that. It's an uncomfortable question."

"Which means Yes."

"Which means nothing," she says.

"I need a drink," I say, and then I wish I could take it back.

"You're still drinking."

"Yes, yes, I am still drinking."

"What does Terry have to say about this?"

"Terry doesn't."

"Doesn't drink?"

"Doesn't say anything, he doesn't care. I think we're breaking up."

My mother smiles. "You see? You and I were always similar."

- - -

My mother and I are standing on her new porch.

"Come back inside."

I look behind her, into the house. There's no one there, but I can feel it, I know that I can't go in there again. I shake my head.

"I'm sorry."

"This is hard for you," she says.

I frown.

"I'm still your mother."

"I know. You don't have to justify yourself."

"I want you to stop drinking. I worry about that most of all. And Terry."

"I don't know if I can. And Terry."

My mother takes my face in her hands.

“You were always my light.” She smiles. And then she closes the door behind her.

I don’t understand.

- - -

Inside my father’s house my brother is lighting candles with a look on his face like a man who thinks lighting candles is woman’s work. He’s got those long matches, like Virginia Slims, the longer, the more ladylike. I watch him for a second as he fights pinky extension.

“Mark,” I say, quietly.

He turns. I’ve scared him.

“What?” he says. “Oh.”

“I saw mom.”

“Right.”

“She’s different.”

“I know.”

“I’m leaving in the morning. I can’t stay here,” I say.

Mark lights the last candle. “Good.”

I stare into the flickering darkness just this side of his head.

“Where’s dad?”

“Got drunk and fell asleep. I put him in bed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? That I’ve got to take care of him?”

“I guess,” I say, not really meaning it.

“I don’t care.”

We stand there in silence.

“Mark, why have we never got along?”

“Fuck you.”

I make a silent decision.

“Do you remember when we were kids and mom and dad took us on a road trip to Pennsylvania? The Amish?”

“No,” he says.

There’s a flash and I stop myself.

“It was a good trip. Family trip.”

Mark sighs. “I’m going to bed.”

I watch nothing as he leaves the room. I stand alone in the center of the dark. I go upstairs and get my bags. I call a cab and I sleep at the airport.

- - -

I’m unlocking the door to my apartment. There’s a thickness in my head. I step inside. The whole place smells like something. There are no lights on. I can’t see anything, but I know where everything is. Something moves towards me, a spark of white, and I feel Terry putting his arms around me but I am somewhere else. I am hurtling through the countryside, the backseat feels like a whole world, the glow from the radio, the hum of the engine coming all through me, my hand down my pants, and Mark, Mark has a sliver of light in his eyes, his eyes are open.

LIGHT FROM A DEAD STAR

At a party at my grandmother's house, out in the sun-burnt blaze of yellow grass and dust, my cousin Timothy put a shotgun in his mouth. No one was there to see it happen, and when they came to take his body away my mother buried my face in her chest. But I remember the sound, like a blunted pounding in my head, the sound that took his head clean off. Everyone spent the whole next year wondering what had happened to Timothy to make him do it. It was settled on across the family that there had been no reason. But as I grew older, I remember watching as Timothy walked from playing baseball in the field to the house, where he would discover the gun buried under a stack of old clothes, his face exploding like a dead sun forever in my mind. I could never forget it. It has become as much a part of me as anything else, as if I own his ghost.

- - -

Mark sometimes asks me to tell him about my family. To him, that I never talk about them carries all the mystery and appeal of a secret drawer that I might keep locked in my desk. I don't know what to tell him. He tells me about trips he took with his parents out to the ocean, about playing in the tide and building a sandcastle so huge and elaborate that it was photographed for the local paper, and how the picture somehow ended up in Life magazine. There's nothing I can do when he tells me these things but smile and nod, as if I were affirming some sort of nostalgic similarity between our childhoods. But lately inside my head I've stopped listening to his stories, my mind gone gray and static. And afterwards when we make love, I'm surrounded by the good warmth of him, and I try to let it swallow me up, to get lost in his great big joy.

He asks me, "Were you happy when you were a kid?"

I say nothing. There is nothing I could say.

There's a family legend that I was born in the back of my father's pick-up truck, and it's followed me everywhere. There's no escaping it, and when I was a child, my older cousins would treat me as if I was somehow worthless. We would go on long walks in the woods, playing some sort of army game, and they would all run away and leave me in the forest. When I finally would find my way back home, I'd be covered in mud and bleeding on my arms. My mother would gather me up and scold everyone with her eyes, and take me off to the side. I would never let myself cry. She would kneel in front of me and tell me what I wanted to hear. I was born in a hospital near Boston, and my father took me up in his arms and smiled at me, that everything had been clean and white. Not the filthy bed of grit, not laid out on a tarp. But somehow I always knew that the truth was somewhere in between.

- - -

When I turned seventeen I decided to tell my mother that I was a homosexual. I remember standing in her kitchen, not saying a word, and noticing for the first time how old she had become, how she sat in her chair and waited for me to speak like an old woman leaning at her radio. Looking at her, I chose to say nothing. I thought that if I never affirmed it, never spoke the words aloud, that she would never find out. I knew that it would break her heart, as a woman who had always wanted a sprawling family but had only been able to produce just one baby, I would be cheating her of her dreams.

It finally all happened by accident. For a few weeks I had been sneaking out late at night to catch the late bus to the city, and to a dance club I had seen an advertisement

for on a telephone pole. The club was terrifying, what I had been trained to believe that hell was like, dim and hot and full of men who seemed to all be slick with sweat and secrets. Somehow one of my cousins had been driving by just as I had left the place, had seen me walking out the door, that was important. He had told his mother, who had called mine, and by the time I got home there was that heaviness stretched over the house, my mother crying in the dark, sitting on the floor of my bedroom with my notebooks and magazines pulled out from under my bed, wrecked by all the evidence.

That was when I had been kicked out of my house. She would take me back a week later, on the condition that I spoke to a priest and that I never brought any of my filth into the house again. But in that week between I lived in the fields near my house, wrapped in blankets and praying that I would not be discovered. It didn't take long at all for my cousins to show up at my house, wanting to know where I was. My mother tried to force them away, she called the police. She could see what was in their eyes.

After they had found me in the field, they tied my hands behind my back and led me into the woods.

“Remember when we used to play army in the woods?”

I like to pretend that I left myself, that I somehow floated up and out and that I don't remember what they did to me once we reached the creek.

- - -

In bed with Mark, I watch as he sleeps. We met when I was working as an English tutor, the only work I could get, putting advertisements up at high schools and churches. He was my only student, and we slipped into a very comfortable friendship. There was something about him that reminded me of the boys I had been attracted to in

the movies when I had been young, wayward and stupid. Orphans who seemed older than they were, worn tough by the streets but tender inside.

We became lovers almost by accident. He seduced me. I would never have been able to do the reverse. At 25 I had never had a boyfriend, never been with a man. Mark had to teach me everything.

- - -

Sometimes, when Mark and I sit over breakfast and the telephone rings, I actually wonder to myself if it will be for me, if it's my mother calling from out of the darkness.

- - -

There is a photograph of myself and my cousin Timothy when we were very young. We were born almost simultaneously, and we often shared birthdays, gathered together at joint parties to save money and time. In the photograph we are standing in the tall grass, arms around each other's shoulders. The camera is at such a distance and wobbly, probably held by one of my drunken aunts, that it's unclear which one of the boys is me and which is him. Sometimes I imagine that I'm on the left, sometimes I imagine I'm on the right. It doesn't really matter. We had been named in homage of each other. We were both Timothy.

- - -

Mark and I smoke a bag of marijuana that he's been saving for a special night in the bottom of his sock drawer. We lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling and talking. Talking is dangerous for me, I'm afraid that I might say the wrong thing. There are words I can never say, that are so full of memory that my voice would probably fail and then Mark would know, he'd understand. There are things that must be kept secret.

Mark has started asking questions. Being high has made him bold enough to question by guardedness.

“Why do you never talk about your family?”

I roll over onto my side, away from him. He puts his hand on me and pulls me back.

“I just don’t understand,” he says.

I am exhausted. A wind comes through the house like a wave of black leather, heavy and all over me, and I sigh, knowing that I will tell him everything. His eyes are blue like a cartoon, still wet. The sort of color that only exists in the movies. As I begin to speak, I feel as if I am falling away, like a puzzle slowly coming apart and scattering across a table. I don’t listen to myself, I don’t need to. I’ve said all these things in my mind a thousand times. They are as much a part of me as anything. Instead I watch Mark’s face. I wait for him to spring from the bed and leave, even though I know that he won’t. These are memories lashed across my back in scars. I can only imagine how they must seem to him.

Afterwards, my mouth is dry. I leave Mark on the bed, and I wander into the kitchen, dazed by confession, and find something to drink. I tip the juice into my mouth, and I watch as Mark follows me. There is no light but what is coming from the refrigerator. He wraps his arms around me, digs my face into his chest, and all I see are stars.

Later he asks me about Timothy. What he looked like. I conjure up a picture in my head.

“He looked like me. He looked exactly like me.”

In my head, Timothy is like a burning photograph. His face bubbles and sweats and finally vanishes into ash. I remember walking through the woods, being led by my oldest cousin, and being tied to a tree. I remember thinking about the taste of the gunmetal in Timothy's mouth, and how he'd burst out, up and gone, and escaped all this, the cruel destiny of our name. Such freedom.

In Mark's arms I feel the absence of the ghost.

STEREO

Jessica comes out of the bathroom in a flood of yellow light and for a second I can't see anything but her shadow but then she comes into focus. She's put her dress on and she does a little drunken spin in across my room. She crashes into me and puts me against my desk with a creak. We're both startled by the noise and I clap my hand over her mouth. Her eyes are wide open and we wait and listen, making sure that no one is coming to see about the sound. Then we start to laugh under our breaths and Jessica takes the bottle from my hands. I tell her how much I like her hair as she tips the bottle back and I watch her throat as she swallows.

I sit down in front of my mirror and Jessica kneels in front of me with her bag of make-up spread open on the floor. She keeps sweeping her little make-up brush over my eyes, which are closed, and I'm smiling, squirming my feet.

"It tickles," I say.

Jessica puts her hand on my chin and holds my face still.

She finishes with the eyeshadow and then Jessica and I are standing up while she does my mascara. I watch her out of the bottom of my eye as she flicks her hand back-and-forth like a magician with his wand. Then she digs into her bag and holds out three different tubes of lipstick.

"You can put it on yourself," she says, dropping them into my hand. Jessica lays down on my bed and stares up at the ceiling.

I'm thinking about color.

"What do you think? What color should I use?"

I've got red, purple or black.

Jessica shrugs her shoulders and then collapses into giggles.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

She sits up. "Nothing, nothing.

I choose black. I'm up so close to the mirror that I can't see anything but myself.

The lipstick goes on easy.

Jessica is behind me. "You look just like Robert Smith."

I look at myself from all sides.

"Robert Smith wears red."

Jessica leans forward and kisses the back of my neck. I smile but I don't let her see it. Her dress rustles against me, a rough sound that I can't connect with the soft look of it. Her hand comes around and trips over the waistband of my pants.

I turn around to face her.

"What?" she says.

"Where's my jacket?"

I go over to the chair I threw my jacket onto and I pull it over my shoulders. I take the bottle off the floor where Jessica left it and I take a hot drink from it, the burn goes all through me and I wipe my hand across my mouth. I imagine that this is how they drink in the movies.

Everything in the room seems clearer and I'm fascinated by it for a second. Something about my old red beanbag chair seems glossier, like its been buffed to a gloss. It catches the light from the one lamp and I wonder if I could see my reflection in it until Jessica is next to me telling me it's almost time to go.

I check the clock by my bed.

“But they aren’t here yet.” I’m talking about our ride. It’s our first college party.

Jessica dances a little more, shaking her hips back and forth in her short black dress that I tell her makes her look like Madonna but really doesn’t, not at all. She glides across the carpet without her shoes on. There’s no music on.

I see the wash of headlights come across the room and I immediately switch off the lamp in my room. The headlights turn off but I can still hear the thump of music.

“We have to go. They’re going to wake up my parents,” I say.

Jessica does a final twirl, her foot up like a ballerina and almost skids to the floor but I catch her and move her towards the door and into the dark hall. We move silently. We are carrying our shoes in our hands.

We slide into the car. I don’t know either of the boys sitting in the dark, but I am pressed up against them, my arm bent at a crooked angle. Jessica is talking, leaned up over the seat at the driver, and in the dark I imagine that I can see her words, all blown up and glow-in-the-dark, shooting from her mouth and spilling all over the car. All the boys seem to know her, but no one introduces me.

The car rumbles and creaks underneath me. It’s old and I’m terrified every time we take a hard corner, the metallic smell of liquor coming from somewhere, and then I see one of the boys take a pull from a fifth of something. Jessica snaps it out of his hand and tips the bottle back.

The boy in the driver’s seat fumbles for a cigarette and lights it and for a moment the car drifts into the other lane. It’s night and there’s no one but I’ve got my hand wrapped around the armrest.

I imagine the sound of a car collapsing. The squeal of metal like an animal being pulled apart. I close my eyes. It's difficult.

Jessica. "So, where are we going?"

Boy. "A friend's house. Richard. You don't know Rick Dawson, do you?"

Jessica. "No. Wait."

Boy. "No, you don't know him."

I open my eyes. We're on the highway and the windows are down. Jessica's hair is blowing everywhere, into the face of the boy sitting next to me, who I'm looking at. I take the back of my hand and wipe it across my mouth, and it comes back black from the lipstick. I wipe my mouth again.

"Richard Dawson, Richard Dawson," Jessica keeps saying, as if she's going to put a face to the name.

The boy she's talking to is shaking his head.

"I know that name from somewhere, I'm serious," she says.

The boy sitting next to me looks at Jessica.

"I'm Richard Dawson," he says.

Laughter comes up all through the car and I'm laughing too, drunk on camaraderie or maybe too shy not to laugh, and Jessica crosses her arms and looks out the window.

I want to kick her out of the car. I want to see her roll down the side of the road.

- - -

Richard Dawson and I are standing by the keg and were not talking. He has spilled his beer several times. His shirt is open and there is a brown beer stain down the front of his tee shirt, across the logo for Public Image Limited.

I cough.

"I like them," I say, pointing at his shirt.

He looks at himself like he can't remember his own shirt.

"Oh. This band, yeah. You don't know them?"

I smile. "A little."

Richard stares off into the party. I watch him breathe for a minute and then I start to talk again.

"I'm 16," I say.

"Really."

I start to pump the keg. "I mean it. I'll be 17 in February."

"That's interesting," Richard says, pouring the foam out of the bottom of his cup and onto the floor.

"I guess so. My mother says we're going to have a party."

I squeeze the nozzle and I pour myself another beer. Richard reaches over and takes it from me. "You're doing that wrong. You have to tilt the cup, like this. Or else you'll get too much foam."

"Thanks," I say, with a smile on my face that could break glass.

Richard finishes pouring my beer and then he hands it to me. For a second our fingers meet and I'm uncomfortable.

"17," he says. "17. I remember when I was 17."

I sip my beer, which is awful. “How old are you now?”

“I’m 20. Just.”

An older man.

“Do you go to school?” I ask.

Richard waves his hand around like he’s swatting a fly, or he’s clearing the air.

I start again. “This is your house?”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, it’s my mom’s house.”

The stereo plays: “Charlotte Sometimes” by The Cure.

Sometimes I’m dreaming. While all the other people dance.

I feel dizzy. Like my head is stuffed with clay and I take a step back to steady myself. I feel Richard grab my shoulder and say Whoa, and he pulls me back. He smells like lemon Pledge.

“You smell like Pledge,” I say.

Richard laughs. “Yeah, I use it for cologne.”

“You’re joking. I can tell.”

“Yeah.”

Richard pats himself down and finds two cigarettes, puts them in his mouth and lights them. He hands one to me.

“I don’t smoke,” I say.

“You do now,” he says, and I take a drag. I keep the cough down.

Richard licks his lips and smokes and looks at the floor, looks at his hands. He bites his nails and there’s two scars on his knuckle like a snakebite.

“Who’s that girl you came with?”

I cough a little and Richard smiles at me. I unbutton the top button of my shirt.

“Are you wearing lipstick?” he asks me.

I blush.

“You’re wearing lipstick.”

“Not really. I mean, I took it off.”

“No, it’s cool. Don’t worry about it. All kinds, you know?”

“All kinds. Right.”

I sip my beer, and Richard takes my hand and tips it.

“Just knock it back. I want to show you something.”

I swallow and swallow again.

In Richard’s bedroom the stereo is playing: “Just Like Honey” by The Jesus and Mary Chain.

I’m sitting on the side of his bed as he feeds his pet spider.

“What do you feed it?” I ask.

“Oh, bugs and things. He’s just a baby.”

“How do you know it’s a He?”

Richard laughs. “I don’t.” He puts the cover back on the cage.

“Do you ever take him out?” I ask.

Richard digs through his desk. His room is just like mine. He comes up with something hidden in the palm of his hand.

“Are you cool?” he asks me.

“What do you mean,” I ask.

“Have you ever done coke? I mean, have you?”

I shake my head no.

He opens his hand and small bag of white powder unfolds itself.

“What do you think?” he asks me.

“I guess so,” I say, rubbing my hand on his bed.

“You can say no if you want. It’s no big deal to me.”

“No, it’s cool. Really.”

Richard cuts a few lines on the back of a record sleeve and hands me half a plastic straw.

“Do you know what to do?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

I bend over and take a long sniff, as if I’m trying to smell something really faint and far away.

There’s a buzz and a snap and then something sort of opens up inside my head.

I lean back and rub my nose. Richard is taking off his shirt.

“It’s good,” he says to me, even though I wouldn’t know the difference.

I watch his back as he bends over and does a line. He’s got a small black tattoo on his shoulder that I can’t make out. I don’t ask what it is. Richard comes back up and smiles at me.

“Go again,” he says. And I do.

We lay down on the bed and Richard rubs my chest and asks me how it feels.

“How is it supposed to feel?”

Good. Echo.

I'm staring at the ceiling and imagining cutting it into perfect, identical squares.

Mental geometry.

On the stereo: the steady click of the needle at the end of a side.

"Take off your shirt," Richard says to me.

I'm laughing. "Why?"

"I took mine off."

I sit up and unbutton my shirt and Richard helps me pull it off.

"This doesn't feel like what I imagined it would feel like," I say when I lay down.

"In the movies everybody gets all hyper."

"Don't worry about it," Richard says.

He gets up on his knees and then he's straddling me and looking down at me. He brushes back his hair and I can see something in his eyes and then I realize it's my own reflection.

I can feel him pressed against me and it makes me feel a hundred different things at once. Most of all I feel like my whole body is pumping, pumping.

"Can I touch you?" he asks.

"You're already touching me," I say, and he looks down at his hands braced against my chest.

"Can I touch you more?"

I nod my head Yes.

As he unbuttons my pants: "Have you ever done this before?"

"No."

His hands are warm. I feel the top of my head come off.

- - -

Richard and I are laying on his bed, and my pants are pulled up kind of awkwardly. His back is turned to me and he's wrapped in a blanket. I find the clock next to the bed but it's not plugged in. There's still music out in the rest of the house so I sit up and shake my head a little.

I button up my shirt and pants and I smooth down my hair. I open the door and step out of the room. Someone asks me where Richard is, and I tell him before I can think that he's sleeping and I get a strange look.

"Have you seen this girl? Looks like Madonna, Jessica?"

"I think she got a ride home."

I start walking.

- - -

I'm on the street outside Jessica's house and I'm freezing, cut down to the core, just dying out there, tossing rocks in an old cliché at her bedroom window until her light comes on, almost regretfully, and she opens her window.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

"You left. I had to walk."

"You disappeared. You're the asshole."

"Come down here."

"It's freezing."

"I'm down here. I'm freezing."

"Fine. Fine."

She closes the window and turns off the light and in a few minutes she appears on the stoop of her house, wrapped in a blanket.

“Come here. What?” she says.

“I have to tell you something. You’re not going to like it.”

“What if I don’t want to hear it?”

I pause. “Did you have fun at the party?”

“No, it was awful. They kept playing the same record.”

On the stereo in my head, “Small Town Boy” by The Bronski Beat.

“So listen to me,” I say.

“If you’re going to tell me you slept with some girl, I’ll just die,” Jessica says with a smile on her face that can so quickly turn to teeth.

“It’s nothing. Nevermind.”

“You got me up for it’s nothing nevermind?”

“Yeah, I’m a little drunk.”

“Go home. Go to sleep.”

“Alright.”

Jessica kisses me on the lips and then glides back inside her house. She closes the door behind her and I stand there for a minute, after she’s gone, and look into the glass on her door, at my face, the shadows all over it, recognizing some things, afraid of others.

EXHIBITION

Craig's brother, Jason, had been staying with us for a couple of days. Craig went upstairs to take a shower before the night shift and Jason helped me clear the dishes from the table and into the sink. Then I stood over the sink and washed the more fragile plates by hand, and Jason hopped on the counter next to me, and watched.

"You and Craig have been married for five years now?" he asked.

"Five years. You know that."

"Are you happy?"

I turned and looked at him, my hands deep in soapy water.

"That's not the sort of question you ask a lady," I said.

I looked back into the water and to the plates beneath and smiled to myself.

"I was just curious. He's never around," he began. "You must get lonely all alone in this house."

I swept a piece of my hair out of my face with a foamy hand. "Are you asking," I said, "what I think you're asking?"

Jason jumped down from the counter. He was six years younger than my husband and still had that childish bluntness to him, like a hammer, not graceful, nothing slippery about him. He didn't know how to lie yet. A stranger in my house that thought he had the right to break all the furniture, or write savage things on the wallpaper. He was beautiful and rosy, not yet a man, stuck somewhere between. I had to stop myself from touching the back of his neck.

Craig came down from upstairs with his hair still wet and flat against his head. He saw Jason and I talking, came over to us, and kissed the back of my neck, the top of my shoulders.

"You two keep out of trouble. I gotta go to work." Craig was gone and left behind the trail of his aftershave. I smelled it for a moment before I reached to Jason and took his hand.

"Come with me," I said. "I want to show you something." Jason looked at me with strange, wide eyes. He let me lead him into our the bedroom I shared with my husband.

"Please, sit down," I said, gently pushing Jason down by the shoulders and onto the bed. He watched as I started to unbutton the top of my dress, then stood."

"Wait," he said. I put my finger up to his lips and shushed him.

"Don't worry," I said. "Craig won't ever know." I motioned for him to sit back down on the bed. Jason sat down, and I continued to undress. I took off my bra and tossed it onto a chair. I saw him looking at me.

"It's alright, you can come and touch them if you want."

Jason stood up slowly, as if unsure of himself, but he came to me just the same. He was very close to me, and I could feel the heat coming off him. He didn't touch me.

"I'm serious," I said, laughing. "Go ahead. I don't mind."

"I don't know if I want to," Jason said, blushing." I took his hand in mine and put it to my breast. We stood like that for a moment before he began to speak. I looked down and watched Jason tap his foot, a lopsided rhythm.

"They're not real, are they?"

“No, they’re not.”

Jason smiled. “I don’t mind,” he said. “They feel nice, but just, I don’t know, different.”

“Have you touched a lot of girl’s breasts?” I asked.

“No, not a lot,” he said. “But enough.” He paused. “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“The surgery.”

“Oh,” I said. “That.” I took his hand away from my chest. “Why don’t you sit down again and I’ll tell you.”

Jason sat down on the bed, and crossed his arms over his lap. I could tell he was covering an erection and the thought of it flushed through me. “This is really strange,” he said.

I undid the top of my skirt. “I know.” I took my glass of wine off the dresser and finished it. “Sometimes I just need someone else around. Craig always works nights.” I slid down my skirt and kicked it aside.

“Now,” I said, “I’m going to show you something very special. You’ve probably never seen anything like it.”

Jason screwed up his face. “I don’t get it,” he said.

“Close your eyes,” I instructed.

“I don’t want to.”

I leaned over and pressed my fingers down on Jason’s eyelids and closed them. “Now keep them shut until I tell you to open them.”

Jason smiled and laughed by sucking the air into his mouth, a sound I had heard Craig make right before he came.

“Don’t be nervous,” I said, as I slid my underwear down to the floor. I stood there and breathed a little before speaking. “Alright, you can open your eyes.”

Jason opened his eyes and looked at me, then up at my face. He looked puzzled and I smiled at him. “Here I am,” I said.

“Is that what I think it is?” Jason said, pointing.

“Jason, it’s not polite to point.”

“Well, is it?”

I reached down and removed the piece of nylon that I had left wrapped around my penis. I let it fall to the floor with an elegant sort of drift. Jason’s eyes grew wider.

“Yes, it is,” I said.

Jason scooted back onto the bed.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said.

“Does Craig know?”

I laughed and walked to the closet, and slid into my silk robe.

“Of course he knows,” I said. “We’ve been married for five years.”

Jason looked at me, and then looked away. “I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing complicated about it. I was born a man.”

Jason took a pillow from the top of the bed and pulled it around and held it to his chest as if it were a stuffed animal.

“I’m sorry I surprised you, but I thought you deserved to know.”

“You’re a man?”

“Not entirely. Not anymore. I’ve been taking female hormones ever since I was your age. But some things,” I nodded down towards my lap, “can’t be helped.”

Jason got up from the bed and walked to the opposite end of the room. I watched him.

“How did you meet Craig?” he asked me.

I smiled at him. “I was an exotic dancer. Craig came to the club.”

“A female exotic dancer?”

“Yes.”

“And nobody noticed that you—”

“Nobody noticed.”

“How did he find out? Why didn’t he leave you?”

I looked at Jason. The itch in the back of my head that meant hitting. “He didn’t leave me,” I said, “because he loved me.” I stopped and stared him down. “If you’re going to ask those kind of questions, I’d suggest you stop talking altogether.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I believe in absolute honesty. You were bound to find out sooner or later. Craig wasn’t going to tell you, but you’re staying with us. If you had seen me by accident, who knows what you would have done?”

“I would have left,” Jason said, stammering.

“And that would have broken Craig’s heart,” I said. “He’s so happy to have you here.”

Jason closed his eyes. “Have you ever been with a man?” I asked.

“Shut up,” he said.

“Alright, I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

“Why do you do it? Dress like a woman.”

I sat down in a chair. “Because, Jason, I am a woman.”

“No—”

“I am a woman,” I said, enunciating. “Just because I was born with male genitalia doesn't mean I wasn't meant to be something else.” I watched as Jason gulped as I said the word ‘genitalia.’ “Calm down, please.”

Jason looked at me. He closed his eyes and blew out air in a cool, clean stream. I felt it on my cheek. “I’m sorry, I mean, I’m sure you’re a very nice person, but I think I have to leave this room now.”

“You can only work through your fear,” I said, crossing my legs, “through confronting what you don’t understand.”

“Don’t give me that psychological crap,” he said. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“I think you should take off your clothes,” I said.

“Oh no. Not in a million years.”

I kicked my foot rhythmically. “You’ve seen me,” I said, “and now I think I should see you.”

Jason swallowed hard.

“I don’t want to have sex with you, Jason. If that’s what you’re so worried about.”

“I don’t want to take off my clothes.”

“Would you let me take them off for you?”

Jason looked around the room. “I need a drink.”

I stood up and poured some wine into his glass. I crossed the room and handed it to him. Jason drank deeply and then set the empty glass down on the dresser.

“We’re all strange underneath, Jason. I want you to see that.”

“If I take off my clothes,” he began, “will you let me go?”

I smiled at him. “I’m not holding you here against your will.” Jason turned and saw that the door had been open the whole time. He slowly started to pull his tee shirt over his head. Once he had it off, he stopped at looked at me, then down to my lap.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s not going to get hard, is it?”

“No. It doesn’t do that anymore.”

Jason dropped his shirt onto the floor. “Good.”

I watched as Jason undid his pants with trembling hands. They fell to the floor and he stood for a moment in his underwear.. “All the way?” he asked.

“It’s only fair,” I said.

“Yeah, but I didn’t ask you to get naked.”

Jason turned away from me and slid his boxers down. “Close your eyes,” he said.

I closed my eyes. There was silence for a moment.

“Jason?” I asked.

“Open your eyes,” he said with a shaking voice.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He was naked. I smiled at him, and he tried to smile back. His hands were shaking. His penis was erect.

“It’s because I’m nervous,” he said.

I held out my hand to him. “Come here.”

He crossed the room. Jason gave me his hand and I felt the moistness on his palm. "Which hand do you masturbate with, Jason?"

"I'm not answering that," he said, trying to pull his hand away.

"That's fine."

"I'm not going to touch you," he said.

"I understand. Just stand here with me."

I stood up and Jason and I looked at ourselves in the mirror.

"What's that scar?" I asked, noticing a puffed area of skin on his chest in the shape of a kiss.

"I had a mole removed when I was 19. I know, it's disgusting."

I leaned down and put my mouth to it. Jason twitched.

"Nobody's perfect," I said, and I turned away.

- - -

It was late three nights later, Craig had been at work for several hours and I was enjoying my time to myself. Jason had left before dinner with a girlfriend, someone from the town he had met since he had been staying with us. I had Jay Leno on but I wasn't really watching it. I heard Jason pounding on the door to let him in. I got up, and slowly, slowly I went to the door and opened it. He stumbled into the house and I could smell beer on him, not just on his breath, but all over him, in his clothes. I put a hand up and stopped him.

"Is there beer on your shoes?"

Jason looked down at himself as if he'd be able to tell. "Probably," he said.

"Take them off and leave them on the steps. You're not tracking beer all over my carpet."

Jason stooped down and then sat hard on the floor, pulled his old sneakers off and tossed them outside onto the concrete steps. "Now," I said, "you can come inside."

"Are you fucking with me?"

"What do you mean?"

Jason smiled at me. "Trying to boss me around."

"Never. I would never do that," I said, smiling my brightest smile.

Jason came into the house. I watched the back of his neck. "What happened to you? Where's that girl?"

"That girl," Jason said. "She dumped a pitcher of beer over on me and ditched my ass back at the club." He paused. "Bitch."

"Well, I'm sure you deserved it."

"What's wrong with you? Two nights ago you were showing me your," he leaned into me, "stuff, and now you're being mean to me."

"Just because I showed you my, as you so eloquently put it, stuff, doesn't mean I like you when you come into my house drunk and angry, Jason."

"Most girls like me drunk and angry. But you're not a girl, are you?"

I stood up. "I think you should go upstairs and go to bed. I'm trying to watch Jay Leno."

Jason sat down on the sofa. "I'm not tired."

"Stop being a child."

"I want to watch the show. I like Jay Leno."

I sat down on the opposite end of the sofa and crossed my arms. "Fine. You can stay, but don't talk to me, or mess up any of our things or," I pushed his feet off the coffee-table, "put your feet on my furniture."

"You're sexy when you're angry," he said. "I liked you when I first met you. You know, before I knew you were a man."

"I'm not a man."

Jason flung himself on top of me, and groped down between my legs. "What's that then?"

I struggled against him. "That's nothing."

"Feels like something. Here, feel me."

"No," I said, and wriggled out from underneath him. I turned my back to him.

"You know," he said, "I've been thinking about what happened that last night. Do you think you'll ever go through with it and just get that dick of yours chopped off?"

I was crying and I didn't know why. "Craig and I are saving for the surgery."

"That's why Craig works nights?"

"Yes."

Jason came up behind me. "Let me see it again."

"No."

"Why not? I've already seen it. It's so weird. It doesn't do anything. Does it still piss? Or do you go sitting down?"

"I'm not going to answer that," I said.

"I could make you show me."

I spun around to his face. "You can't make me do anything."

Jason leaned in and kissed me hard on the mouth. I pulled back and wiped him off me. "Cigarettes. You taste awful."

"You taste great. What is that?"

"Don't you ever do that again. I'll tell Craig."

Jason grabbed me by the arms. "Tell him what? That you stripped for me, and made me strip for you?" He came in and kissed me again. I pushed my mouth shut.

"You're going to have to do whatever I tell you to do."

I broke free from him and tore across the living room. We were lit by the television. Jay Leno finished his monologue.

"What do you want me to do? Strip for you again?"

"Yes," Jason said.

"I'm not," I said. "I won't touch you."

"Get naked. Stand there. I want to see you again."

I shook with crying. Jason's face was out of the light. "Take off your dress."

I started, but then I stopped. "I can't. This isn't how these things work."

Jason came over to me, and put his hands into the neck of my dress, and ripped it down the front. My buttons flew around the room like bullets. "What am I going to tell Craig? He bought me this dress. What have you done?"

Jason stopped. He was watching me cry. I was kneeling on the floor in front of him. Then I felt his hand on my shoulder. He lifted me up. But he didn't look at me, he looked around me, somewhere else. I closed my eyes and waited for it, the kiss, or his hand across my face, but it never came. I listened as he climbed the stairs, and then I

heard the sound of his door close. I stood in the center of the room and let my torn dress fall to the floor, the way a snake slides out of its skin.

YES

A guest reading and a visiting author. Tweedy and puffed up to maximum capacity, he reads from his latest, unpublished book. I'm sitting up with some of the faculty, and Jennifer is here somewhere, but I'm doing my best not to look for her. The author pauses as he flips the pages, takes in a big wheezy breath that reminds me how much I want to start smoking again, that raw feeling in throat that, to me, feels like being alive.

Martin, a gray-haired professor that I'm connected to through a mutual love for brown liquor and cynicism, leans forward from behind me and whispers in my ear.

"I don't think the old boy is going to make it through the reading," He nods up to the author.

"I've got two twenties that he collapses on the last page," I say.

"Or just after he finishes it, as he curtsies."

We sit and listen for a few moments. Someone in the story is painting a portrait of a dying woman.

I lean back. "Who invited this hack?"

"He's a friend-of-a-friend of the department. He's loaded. Books are bestsellers," Martin says.

"I need a drink."

"We all need a drink." Martin produces a flask from his coat and waves it by my face. In the dark of the auditorium I take two pulls and hand it back. "Thanks. You're a fucking saint."

Maria, an adjunct professor seated in front of me, a stern and matronly woman with a cord connected to her glasses, turns and shushes me.

Martin leans forward, "Ignore her, she doesn't have tenure. I can have her fired." He hands me the flask.

"I'll have her killed."

The author coughs into his sleeve. With his free hand he twiddles his thick moustache.

"He looks like Teddy Roosevelt."

"A walrus," Martin responds, wetly.

I scan the crowd of students. "Is it just me or do the freshmen just keep getting uglier?"

Maria turns and shoots me a look that's supposed to edify me. I smile at her, the fake smile of a politician, or a doctor.

I lean forward. "You know, Maria, you could probably crack a walnut between your ass cheeks."

- - -

Martin and I stand near the bar at the following cocktail party. I watch some of the freshmen girls and some of the more effeminate boys snuggle up to the author as he sits in residence in an overstuffed chair, signing books.

"Martin, tell me something?"

"What do you want to know, my dear?"

I wave my hand at the crowd. "Does all this fawning make you nauseous?"

"I recommend another drink. It's an open bar."

“I need more than a drink,” I say. “I’m already drunk.”

I’m up on my tip-toes looking over everybody’s heads. I find Jennifer’s bald head.

“That’s a dangerous habit,” Martin begins.

“We all have our faults, Martin,” I say. “Don’t tell me you’ve never.”

Martin dabs at his forehead with a handkerchief.

“Come on Martin, never with one of those eager, faggoty boys you teach?”

I watch Jennifer cross the room. “Oh God, she’s going to talk to Teddy.” I turn to Martin who had leaned himself against the wall. His eyes are closed. He might be sleeping. I make my way across the room.

I find Jennifer before she gets to the author. She’s got a copy of his book in her hands. I snatch it from her.

“Where did you get this?”

She turns bone white. “What’s wrong with you?”

“You didn’t actually buy this, did you?”

Jennifer makes the universal shorthand for quiet down. “Yes, I bought it. There’s a table right over there.”

“You enjoyed the reading, then?”

“Yes,” she says, reaching for her book.

I lean in close to her, and I let my lips brush her ear. “I’m afraid we won’t be able to see each other anymore.”

“What?” she says.

“I can’t fuck anybody who reads bad books.”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” Jennifer says, sensing the game.

“Oh, you don’t?”

“No. After all, I read your books, and you still fucked me.”

“That’s not a very smart thing to say. I sign your paychecks.”

She presses herself against me. “Did I insult you?”

“Very much.”

“Did it hurt? Did I hurt you?”

“A little. Just a little sting. My pride,” I whisper.

Jennifer grabs my wrist and puts my hand on her breast. We’re surrounded by people.

“Let’s go back to your place, and we’ll see if I can hurt you some more,” she says.

I pull back. “That’s not the way it works.”

“What?”

“You don’t hurt me.”

“You can’t take it?”

“It doesn’t get me off. You know that.”

Jennifer smiles. “You never know until you try.”

I put my hands on her shoulders. “I’ve tried. Believe me. I’ve tried everything. This is it for me.”

“You sound so desperate,” she says.

“I’m not.”

“Have you ever done it with an animal?”

“Shut up.”

“Have you ever let a woman fuck you?”

I squint at her. “How, pray tell, would a woman fuck me?”

- - -

I’m shaving over the sink. Jennifer is laying on my bed, trying to pretend she’s not watching me. I can see her in the mirror, turning to look and then turning away. The semester will be over soon and she’s nervous. She’ll be going home and I’ll be staying here. I haven’t made her any promises and I’m not going to. I keep shaving.

When Jennifer lays on her back, her breasts don’t fall to the side, which I thought meant they weren’t real but it turns out they are.

I dry my face. “Did you finish grading the exams?”

“Do we have to talk about school?”

I hang the towel on the door.

“I asked you a question.”

Jennifer rolls away from me. “I’ve still got about 10 left. I think you’re writing them too long.”

“I don’t think so. How are they?”

“Pretty awful.”

I’m standing naked in the bedroom.

“Look at me.”

Jennifer stays put. “No.”

“Look at me. Do it.”

She turns to look at me and her eyes drift. She focuses in on my cock and I smile.

“You want that?”

“I have class.”

“I don’t care.”

“I have your class. It’s Friday. We have recitation.”

“Fuck it. You’re staying.”

I’m standing by the bed. The way she’s looking at me.

“I can’t stay. You know I can’t.”

I bend down and look her in the eyes. “That’s what makes it good for me.”

“What about me? I’ll get fired.”

“Then you’ll have to find another job.”

“I’ll have to drop out.”

“I’ll find another girl.”

Jennifer goes dark. “I know,” she says.

“You know what?”

“You’ll find someone else.”

“You have to stay. You’re staying.” I’m hard now.

“Ask me.”

I close my eyes. “What?”

Jennifer rolls away from me. “I want you to ask me. Ask me to stay.”

I sit up and lean back. I don’t look at her. I look at everything else. “I did.”

Jennifer crosses her arms over her breasts.

“No,” she starts, “you didn’t. You told me. You told me I’m staying.”

“There’s no difference.”

“I grade your papers—”

“Jesus,” I say.

“I do whatever you want. Ask me. I’ll say yes.”

I’m silent. I can feel the inside of my head vibrating. I stand up and start to get dressed.

“What?” she asks. “What did I do?”

“I’m going out.”

“You’re such a baby,” she says.

“You don’t get me at all.”

Jennifer crawls across the bed. “Just ask. Say ‘Will you stay here tonight?’”

“I’m not going to say that.”

Jennifer starts to collect her things. She gathers them against her chest.

- - -

Jennifer and I drive out thirty miles from the city and get a room at a nice bed-and-breakfast, and the old woman who runs it seems to think we’re father and daughter. We have breakfast with her and her old housecat and I’m thinking of an old short story I might have written, something about an innkeeper with a daughter for a slave. Jennifer and the woman have a detailing conversation about what there is to see in the town. I shut myself off and go over my plan.

We unpack and take the car into the little town. There’s snow on the ground and when the car slides Jennifer gasps and holds onto the seat, or sometimes my leg. We’re the only car on the road. We find a supermarket that’s open, and empty.

We walk awkwardly through the aisles.

She stars. “I’m surprised to agreed to come with me.”

“Whatever do you mean,” I say.

“After what I did to you.”

“Let’s just not talk about that.”

We walk in a fluorescent silence. “Thank you,” she says.

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” and she gives herself a secret smile that she doesn’t think I see.

“You’re falling in love with me,” I say.

“No, I’m not.”

“You better not fall in love with me.”

“What are you talking about? You think I’d do the kind of things I do with you if I loved you?”

“You came here. You came with me.” In my mind I flash back to meeting Jennifer after class, inviting her for a weekend in the country. My plans were completely formed then. I would let her see the real me. Teach her a lesson. This is love?

I send Jennifer to find a six pack and I look around. I pick up a pack of condoms, some hand lotion and a ball of twine, and watch the cashier’s face as he rings the items up.

Jennifer and I drink the six pack outside in the car and then I tell her to get into the back seat, and she does. I open the ball of twine and tie her wrists together, and then I tie her to the door handle. She’s squirming now and I remove both her shoes.

“If you keep moving around it’ll just hurt more. The knots get tighter if you fight them.” She stops struggling.

I'm inside her and I watch as another car pulls up a few spaces down. I slowly roll down the window so Jennifer doesn't notice. Only a crack.

"It. Hurts," she says.

"I know. I know."

Please.

I'm so far gone that I'm watching it all play out like I'm floating above the car and staring through the roof.

"I'll scream. I swear," she says. She means it, or she doesn't.

I see a raw place where the twine is digging into her wrist.

"Tell me. Tell you you're in love with me."

"Fuck you," she says.

"Were you testing me? I told you, you'd better be ready."

"Get off me," she yells, "Get off me."

"I'm not the kind of man you fuck in the ass. I'm the wrong man to fall in love with." I look into her eyes and I can see she's crossed over. "Are you sorry? Tell me you're sorry."

Jennifer pulls her head up and I feel her lips on my neck. Then she opens her mouth huge and her teeth dig into me. I feel something wet open on my neck and I pull out of her.

"You're a bastard. You're insane," she says. "Get me out of this."

I don't untie her right away.

We sit at opposite ends of the car, sea of leatherette between us. I'm watching every twitch on her face.

“You had to know. This is who I am,” I say. “I never pretended.”

Jennifer turns her face away. “Stop looking at me.” She stares out the window.

A woman and her son push a shopping cart past the car.

“My wrists hurt,” she says. Somehow this makes her seem like a little girl to me.

“I know,” I say. I laugh to myself. “That’s the point.”

“You don’t know how to love somebody,” Jennifer says, not looking at me. She picks at a seam in the backseat with her finger.

“I don’t have to. What’s so important about love?”

Jennifer looks at me. “Nothing. Nothing.”

Somewhere there’s the clatter of groceries. Hundreds of miles away a stack of papers in my office slides from my desk onto the floor. Jennifer sits up straight.

“Take me back,” she says. “Take me home.”

She starts to cry. I let her. She rumbles and rumbles, like a storm cutting over the water, like the hull of a great ship creaking, rolling over. I almost want to reach out and touch her. Something inside me breaks then stitches, and my hand stays at my side.

PERFECT KISS

In the time between the beating of a hummingbird's wings. A blink.

I am driving. This is me.

This is my silver car heading for the bridge. Silver and wet like the back of a seal just out of the water. The world has gone slick. The road is nowhere.

You are in the passenger seat, sleeping or passed out, the smell on your breath like the sticky bottom of a bottle too long in a cabinet, hard and brown.

The way your hair looks when the moon or a street light hits it. A second of light that splinters across my eye.

Any second now.

I watch you open your eyes. Maybe you see the lights flashing reflected in the windshield. Or the guardrail or the water 200 feet down.

You open your mouth. A question. Something stuck in the back of your throat. The beginning of a word.

When the car breaks through the guardrail, the sound of someone putting a fist through tissue paper.

We're flying or sinking.

The world goes on pause. Caught in a flicker of light.

You look so confused. You have half a second to have one final thought. A great book you've been planning for years. Everything unsaid, everything. The water is coming up.

I open my mouth like my head is so full of teeth that there's no more space left and I need to make room.

A moment of unbearable poignancy.

Here. Let me take you back. You've forgotten all of this.

I am running my thumb across your lips and you don't know it. Your eyes are closed.

I imagine how the car will be broken apart.

Something in my head is spinning like a reel of film.

We are standing in the kitchen. There is water boiling and I put my arms around you from behind and you let me hold on to you for longer than I expect.

There is a strange scar on the back of your neck like someone put it there with the edge of a fingernail.

I wonder if it was me, or someone else.

I imagine your face with my fingerprints all over it, my palm print pressed into you like you were made out of clay. Twisting you around, making you someone else.

The second hand on my wristwatch hovers. It is waiting to move.

There is a big, deep blackness coming up. I can see it. I watch the waves trip over each other.

Listen.

I am standing in your bedroom, and you are laying in your bed. There are stains on your bedsheets.

I am preoccupied. The world flips over. We are upside-down.

As the hood of the car buckles, I am imagining someone crushing a plastic cup in their hand. A sound like aluminum foil.

We are into the black.

I have enough images in my head I could rebuild this piece-by-piece.

Sharp like lightning in my head. We are rolling.

1997 Honda Accord. Silver. Racing stripe. Cloth interior. Maroon. The silver paint on the passenger-side door handle is flecking away from years of restless fingers working.

My face is pressed against the crack where the bathroom door doesn't close. I can see you. The scar on your back in the shape of a kiss.

I want to be the one who put it there.

Your stomach starts pulling tight, sucking in, but I don't stop.

I feel my arm break against the steering wheel. Turns into splinters of bone. A word is repeating in my head.

There is water coming in through the windows. It pours slowly, almost a trickle. I can't help but watch it.

You are coming around. There is something dark and wet striped across your forehead.

The bottom is about 60 feet down. The car flutters to it like a feather.

I am following a trail of footprints in the snow.

I am walking through the woods. I am naked.

The radio is playing something. A song that sounds like love. That sounds like a hand across a face.

We are sitting somewhere dark. You have your pants off. This is obsession.

A trail of footprints leading through the woods. I am following you.

You open the door of my car in front of your house and we smile at each other the way two friends smile at each other when there are things to say but neither one knows how to say them.

Right now the moon is pulling the tides.

Back and forth.

You take a deep breath. And then another.

Something inside you skips like a groove in a record.

I am looking at you looking at me.

The water is up to my knees now. There is a word repeating in my head.

Grace.

I put my head on your shoulder and I wrap my arms around you and we are under blankets and we are so close together that I forget which leg is my leg.

I imagine.

You die first. I watch something floating in the water. The water is around my chin.

Listen. This is how the world ends.

This is what I've always wanted to say. I'm done.

Any second now.

Any second now.

A moment of unbearable poignancy.

Here. Let me take you back. You've forgotten all of this.

I am running my thumb across your lips and you don't know it. Your eyes are closed.

I imagine how the car will be broken apart.

Something in my head is spinning like a reel of film.

We are standing in the kitchen. There is water boiling and I put my arms around you from behind and you let me hold on to you for longer than I expect.

There is a strange scar on the back of your neck like someone put it there with the edge of a fingernail.

I wonder if it was me, or someone else.

I imagine your face with my fingerprints all over it, my palm print pressed into you like you were made out of clay. Twisting you around, making you someone else.

The second hand on my wristwatch hovers. It is waiting to move.

There is a big, deep blackness coming up. I can see it. I watch the waves trip over each other.

Listen.

I am standing in your bedroom, and you are laying in your bed. There are stains on your bedsheets.

I am preoccupied. The world flips over. We are upside-down.

As the hood of the car buckles, I am imagining someone crushing a plastic cup in their hand. A sound like aluminum foil.

We are into the black.

I have enough images in my head I could rebuild this piece-by-piece.

Sharp like lightning in my head. We are rolling.

1997 Honda Accord. Silver. Racing stripe. Cloth interior. Maroon. The silver paint on the passenger-side door handle is flecking away from years of restless fingers working.

My face is pressed against the crack where the bathroom door doesn't close. I can see you. The scar on your back in the shape of a kiss.

I want to be the one who put it there.

Your stomach starts pulling tight, sucking in, but I don't stop.

I feel my arm break against the steering wheel. Turns into splinters of bone. A word is repeating in my head.

There is water coming in through the windows. It pours slowly, almost a trickle. I can't help but watch it.

You are coming around. There is something dark and wet striped across your forehead.

The bottom is about 60 feet down. The car flutters to it like a feather.

I am following a trail of footprints in the snow.

I am walking through the woods. I am naked.

The radio is playing something. A song that sounds like love. That sounds like a hand across a face.

We are sitting somewhere dark. You have your pants off. This is obsession.

A trail of footprints leading through the woods. I am following you.

You open the door of my car in front of your house and we smile at each other the way two friends smile at each other when there are things to say but neither one knows how to say them.

Right now the moon is pulling the tides.

Back and forth.

You take a deep breath. And then another.

Something inside you skips like a groove in a record.

I am looking at you looking at me.

The water is up to my knees now. There is a word repeating in my head.

Grace.

I put my head on your shoulder and I wrap my arms around you and we are under blankets and we are so close together that I forget which leg is my leg.

I imagine.

You die first. I watch something floating in the water. The water is around my chin.

Listen. This is how the world ends.

This is what I've always wanted to say. I'm done.

Any second now.

Any second now.