

**To my mother
for the extravagance of her love
and for teaching me the power of words.**

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Introduction

This project is a collection of flash fiction, short fiction, poetry and a personal essay. Its title, “By Way of the Evening Stars” comes from a line in my piece “Lost Boy” which I feel expresses the heart of the work contained in this volume:

Before the old explorers charted their course across the waters by way of the evening stars, they had to first trust that when they lost sight of land, the earth would not fall away from the sea.

I wrote “Lost Boy” in response to a conversation I had with my mother regarding my brother’s rough and tumble existence as a musician on the road ten months out of the year and the struggle he has with faith in the face of these often trying circumstances. The sentiment I tried to convey in “Lost Boy” and in most of the pieces in this collection is that of hope and the belief that blind steps in faith are often exactly what is needed to experience life’s sweetest moments. Sometimes it is the chances taken that make an ordinary life extraordinary.

Lost Boy

What words do you speak to a brother, to a man standing at the edge of his life like a wayfarer watching storm clouds roll across the lip of the ocean? He will not be comforted by intangibles, by your fragile language of faith, as distant to him as the evening stars. The rudderless need an oar to grab onto.

You remember the ships of his childhood. How he'd stand on your bed at night with a pink doggie tucked under his arm. Together they were buccaneers, adventurers in a strange midnight land, protecting you from the tempests that swelled in the dark. It is the fearless hearts of children that should inherit the earth.

Now he's grown and unsure of his way, so it's your turn to be the watchman. And though you may have no light to offer, you can tell him this – that before the old explorers charted their course across the waters by way of the evening stars, they had to first trust that when they lost sight of land, the earth would not fall away from the sea.

Librarians

We were in the library tickling book spines when the bell rang. Classroom doors flew open like the starting gates of a racetrack. Our computer screens flashed and went black right before the fire alarm began to shriek. We thought the cafeteria had caught fire. That the fry cooks, elbow deep in canola oil, were tumbling down the halls, limbs flaming, hairnets melting down their faces. But it was just the students. They were scrambling, tripping over each other in jean jackets, camouflage gear and Italian stilettos while their teachers shouted that it was a false alarm. And us librarians? We joined them. Throwing aside our cardigans, we made a frenzied dash towards the freedom of the exit sign. A little less fashionable. A lot more drunk.

Kitten

They bought the kitten at a farm. It was a damp Sunday afternoon, clouds smudging a chalkboard sky while the apple-peeled rim of sunset curled along its edges. Rain-slicked autumn leaves stuck to the pavement like the pressed pages of a scrapbook and fog hummed against their windshield as they drove along the cracked country road. They had no destination, no endpoint in mind; they only wanted a few hours relief from the city and the white noise of its inhabitants.

She touched his arm as their car ambled past a sign advertising *\$10 Kittens: One Mile on Your Right*. He looked at her with a steady, penetrating air that, for a moment, made her feel like a child.

“I want one,” she nodded, the rebellion of her upturned nose boring a small hole in the wall of his heart.

“Ok,” he said. He spotted the farm’s gravel driveway and pulled into it. They stepped out of the car and she leaned into him, burrowing her hands deep into the pockets of her down jacket. The farmhouse stood at the edge of an endless field that spread out to the horizon. It was white, as most farmhouses are, and every bucket, tire and gardening tool on the lawn surrounding it looked frozen in time and precisely placed. Wind chimes on the porch clanked eerily in the utter stillness of the moment.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s here,” he whispered, letting his hand hover behind the small of her back.

She didn’t answer, just began walking towards the house, the stiff, cold grass crunching under her boots. She thought about how they met at the birthday party, both

carrying the same potluck dish, and recognized, in the startling clarity that wind blown straight from the lake can bring, the fragile glue of their relationship. *We seemed to fit.*

Their beginning had been so easy, so calm and pleasant. On their first date they went to dinner at a Moroccan restaurant he'd read about in the *Times*. They'd sat cross-legged on brocade pillows and chuckled over lamb kebobs at the sight of their loafers stacked next to each other on the floor. She remembered how the boys she dated in college always bit their lips through dinner, eager for that moment when they brought her home, for that pause at her door when they'd lurch forward, nervous and sloppy-tongued, plying her mouth for an invitation to come inside. He, on the other hand, was possessed of such straight-backed composure, lingering over coffee, waiting until their second date to kiss her.

They reached the house. He hesitated and pressed the doorbell gently, as if afraid to wake some sleeping giant.

"Hold on," a voice called, distant and unhurried, from the inside of the house. They heard footsteps echo on the floorboards and adjusted their collars and sleeves while they waited without talking, almost strangers to each other on this stranger's stoop.

"Yes?" A hunched black man opened the door smiling, his face folded and furrowed around eyes that were deep with a seminal patience. "How can I help you folks?"

"We saw your sign about the kitten. We want to buy one." His voice shot out, imbued with a formality that hung awkwardly in the warm, pumpkin-scented air rolling from the house.

“Certainly.” The old man shuffled back and waved his hand, scooping out the space between them. “Come in, Come in.”

“Thank you,” the woman breathed, drawn to the house and the old man and all at once desperate to get inside. As they followed the old man down a long hallway which cut a swath through the house, she peered into the adjacent rooms. They smelled of pinewood, cloves and brandy, and she admired the faded red velvet of the chairs, knowing they had been glorious in their prime.

“You’re the first people that have come by,” the old man said as he brought them into the kitchen. “I just put up that sign yesterday.” The kitchen looked like the inside of a firefly, brilliant orange with brown trim around the edges. Its glass cabinets were full of mismatched china; three cuckoo clocks hung on the wall.

The man chuckled. “You like to keep the time, eh?” he asked, nodding to the clocks.

“You never *keep* time,” said the old man, whose voice creaked as he turned towards the younger man and squinted. “It’s been my experience that you lose it.”

The man’s hands squirmed in his pockets. He cleared his throat. “Seems like you get the pick of the litter,” he said to the woman, noticing suddenly how her blonde hair gleamed in the kitchen’s amber glow, familiar and new at the same time. The woman caught this look in his eyes, and clung to it.

“She sure does,” the old man agreed. “And here they are, six weeks old and already weaned.” He brought them to the back of the kitchen where a half-dozen kittens were sleeping in a cardboard box next to the heater.

“Oh, they’re gorgeous,” she cried and reached into the box. She picked up a small kitten that lay curled in the corner and cradled her in the crook of her arm. She was the color of charcoal with milk-dipped paws and a white bib of fur around her neck. “You’re a beauty, yes you are,” the woman murmured into a tiny, gray ear.”

“Ever had a cat before?” the old man asked, coming up beside her.

“Once,” she said, “when I was very little.” She felt little again, standing here in this old man’s kitchen, and strong too, filled with the impulse and invisibility of youth. She turned to her companion, eyes alight. “This is the one I want,” she said and held up the kitten.

He smiled and turned to the old man. “How much do I owe you? Ten dollars?”

The old man cocked his head, considering the man with a slow, steady stare. “I’ll tell you what. You can have her for free.”

“No, no, I can pay for her. It’s no problem,” he jerked open his wallet and pulled out a bill.

“Nope, the old man put up his hand. “I insist. Just make sure you play with her.” He began leading them out of the kitchen. “Kittens don’t do well without play.”

They stood on the porch with the old man and thanked him again.

“Isn’t necessary,” he said, stepping back inside his house. “You folks have a good day now.” He turned around, his back receding into the dusk of the foyer as the screen door clanged shut behind him.

They walked down the porch steps and went back to the car. The woman snuggled the kitten close to her chest in the warm folds of her sweater.

“Happy?” the man asked.

She craned her neck towards him, searching the shadowed caves of his profile. “I think so,” she replied.

The man slid into the front seat of the car and cranked the ignition. The woman settled in next to him and strapped a seatbelt across her chest, careful not to wrap the kitten up in it. He backed the car out of the driveway and rumbled out on to the road. The woman did not turn around to look back, but watched in the rearview mirror as the house slipped quietly out of view, still impassive and white against the smokestack sky.

The kitten began to wake up and gnaw on her sweater, its tiny paws kneading holes in the fabric. She felt giddy with delight. She turned to see if he was looking, she wanted to share it, share something. “Rawr,” she suddenly giggled, pretending to claw his face.

He jerked back, startled. “Woah there,” he said. There was a pause. She held her breath. He smiled and patted her knee.

Her mouth quivered. She wanted him to speak, to say more. She wondered why their words were always so proper, so careful never to be charged with meaning. She looked up at the contours of his face, stark and still against the backdrop of trees blurring outside the window. She wanted to scratch him, stroke his back, call him *baby darling* and tuck his head safe under her chin.

Instead, she picked up the kitten, cupped it in her hands, and brought it close to her face. She inhaled the musky scent of fur and coaxed it back to sleep, speaking to it, whispering in that secret language of longing, which sounded much like the grind of their tires on concrete, the road that fractured behind her as they sped so steadily home.

Terminal

His body is a tool, a key unlocking
this sunlit attic of memory
where I serve ambrosia in teacups
to an army of dolls.
I cinch quilts around the thick drum of my waist
with rubber bands and hair bows,
a princess in the courts of imagination.
Rhinestones are stars,
refrigerator boxes, the deep caves of antiquity
or the offices parents from in the afternoon.
I rub dirt on my arms,
exfoliator of youth,
and believe pineapple lotion is poultice enough
for any wound.

His body, lying on the carpet
among my shoes,
seems hollowed with longing.
He reaches out his hand to stroke my thigh,
fingers trailing over my veins,
those violet, life-giving rivers,
fragile waterways of love.
The light of our living room lamp cannot tear
the shadows from his face.

Oh how I want the light of this world
to refract continuously inside him
and burn away the dark things,
wide-jawed and ravenous,
that brood there, gnawing at his bones.

See the wishes a cornered heart will make.

Let me swallow that sickness,
suck it from your skin.
Let's dance to that record skipping in the corner,
repeating the phrase of our desire,
the world will not end tonight.

Faith

Trusting that bleach in your eye

is not a fatal condition.

When the needle hits E

you can run on fumes.

That those fish sticks are kosher

like the milk in your refrigerator.

Let's shake on it.

Something about your mother's spit and –

Your father always saying

there are no guarantees

but you get your money back anyway.

Bus schedules.

The food pyramid

Rest Stop: 1 mile.

How this stuff of our hearts

lovely and fragile

will bend low

to gather itself

when broken.

Crazy Horse

In long lines at the bank or DMV, Janine likes to tell people that she works at the Crazy Horse Salon. She has the steady, unassuming air of a vice principal or someone who catalogues books in a library, so the news that she works in the fickle and transient world of outer beauty shocks most people into silence. She enjoys the expression of curiosity and surprise that creeps across their faces. Men, in particular, give her a second look. They study her paisley jumper and wooden clogs and suddenly think of her as mysterious. *This school mouse with sensible blonde layers and an amethyst brooch has the power of glamour at her fingertips?* Inscrutability is Janine's one allure. She hopes to translate this quality into a means of securing male companionship because at age twenty-six, she fears her romantic life, like her appearance, has stagnated.

Janine does not like to refer to her place of work as a beauty parlor nor to her role in it as that of a "stylist." Instead, she prefers the appropriately scientific label, "hair technician," because it affords a certain sense of dignity to her position. She is a craftsman, a constructor of beauty. And to those who might question her looks in light of her profession, she offers this analogy – you don't have to be on drugs in order to administer them.

But Janine is uncomfortable at work. The Crazy Horse is a far cry from the type of establishment she dreamed she'd work at during her eighteen months in trade school. She had envisioned spas with stone exteriors accented by trailing vine and inside, the antiseptic glow of whitewashed walls. She had wanted the Muzak of Andrew Lloyd Webber arranged over gently pounding surf, white, pillowed towels and reprints of Monet's Japanese garden hanging in the lobby. Unfortunately, in Flatbush, Texas spas are

hard to come by and the Crazy Horse was the closest equivalent that had any openings. At the Crazy Horse, Janine surmised that Crystal, the manager, had spent the lion's share of her decorating budget on the red velour that draped the walls. Crystal was outlandish, wizened and volatile. After her interview, Janine was astonished to have been hired by her at all.

"So why do you wanna do hair?" Crystal asked.

Janine gave her the polished answer that she had practiced at home in front of the bathroom mirror. She'd always been fascinated by the idea that beauty does not need to occur naturally. It can be manufactured, created outside of the womb. As a hairdresser, she wanted to do just that – wield the power of transformation.

Crystal stared at her and pursed her lips. "Are you married?"

"No."

"Divorced?"

"No."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Umm," stammered Janine, "What is the, uh, relevancy?"

"People in relationships tend to be better hairdressers." Crystal cracked her gum.

"Or at least, more interesting ones."

"Oh."

Three days later Crystal phoned to tell Janine that she had the job.

"Is there a dress code?" Janine inquired.

"The more cleavage the better," Crystal cackled across the phone lines. "I like pizzazz."

On Janine's first day of work, Crystal met her at the door. She looked Janine up and down and muttered, "Oh god, I'd be nervous letting you take scissors to my hair." She exchanged a side longed glance with Stitch, a manicurist nicknamed for the long, jagged scar running down the side of his face and his tendency to laugh at other people's misfortune. "Never trust a woman in plaid."

Janine looked down at her attire. A green and blue patterned skirt and a white shirt she had bought one size too small in an attempt to please Crystal. She shrugged as she followed her boss into the salon. There was no way she could keep up with her. Crystal was wearing fringed jodhpurs.

One of the first things that Janine learns as she settles into her job is the origin of her workplace's name. The salon apparently got its moniker from the unusual decorating theme that Crystal chose for it. "I call it barn couture," Crystal drawls to Janine. "I love it." Janine is not sure that she holds a similar strength of feeling for the Crazy Horse's design. Other than the red velour wall tapestries, the salon has sinks custom made to look like rhinestoned saddles and shampoo chairs covered in black and white cow print leather. When Janine discovers that Crystal is an LA transplant to Texas, she is not surprised. It's very likely that she has never set foot in a barn.

Crystal is as obnoxious a boss as she is a decorator. She stands over Janine when she is with a client and makes unsolicited suggestions. "Do you know, Janine? I think Cyndi's bangs would *pop* a lot more if you didn't make the cut so soft and provincial."

Or "Are you sure that frosting is the best option for Mrs. Dexter? She might look better in an all over blonde."

“Frosting is more cost effective,” Janine replies. “And Mrs. Dexter is on a budget.”

“But of course.” Crystal smiles at Mrs. Dexter and glares at Janine. She turns on her booted heel and stalks over to Stitch who is bored and painting his nails magenta. They sit in the corner and have an animated conversation. Janine is sure she hears her name and the word “antiquated” but sighs and pretends to ignore it. The next day she finds a flyer in her locker advertising a class at the trade school in new hair coloring techniques. Crystal has underlined the word *new* in blue felt tip pen, as if to suggest that Janine had learned the art of hair dying when the primary means of coloring objects consisted of applying the paste of crushed berries and tree bark to them.

Other things that Janine learns about Crystal include the details of her two divorces, one from an amateur dj and the other from a liquor wholesaler. She has a tanning bed in her living room and a Yorkshire terrier named Carlos. She enjoys rehashing the specifics of her former husbands' sexual ineptitude and discussing her own prowess in the field. She expects others to follow suit. As a routine she brings up sex whenever she happens to be cutting the hair of a particularly attractive male customer. She winks at them in the mirror and makes jokes about the length of their bangs. The skin of Crystal's neck is shriveled and prunish and glistens like a tar pit.

Crystal closes the shop early one day and asks Janine to stay late and help her clean it. As they steam wrinkles out of the zebra-striped curtains, Crystal asks Janine her age.

"Twenty-six." Janine frowns.

"I could be your mother, you know," Crystal lets out a scratchy laugh. "But if I were, I don't think you would have turned out to be quite the beacon of propriety that you are today."

"I disagree." Janine says in a soft voice.

"Do you?"

"I'm not a beacon of propriety, just quiet-natured. My reservation is instinctual."

"If I had a daughter like you, I would tell her to get out more." Crystal flashes Janine a smirk.

"I get out."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you even have a daughter?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why don't you go out?"

Janine is silent.

The next day, Janine is alone with Stitch in the salon. It is a slow afternoon and he is filing her nails. She asks him what he thinks she should do about Crystal.

"What about her?" he asks.

"She acts like I'm from another planet."

"Are you?"

"I'm not responding to that."

“Ok fine,” Stitch huffs. He pauses and rolls his tongue around thoughtfully in his mouth. "Don't seem so fazed by her behavior. She'll at least appreciate that as a sign of spunk."

"Ok," nods Janine. "Respond more." She thinks that this might actually be a good thing. She had been feeling uneasy lately, pondering the social repercussions of her habitual silence.

The door swings open and Crystal waltzes into the salon. "Greetings, lovers!" she trills as she throws her bags on the counter.

"Greetings!" Janine replies with energy.

Crystal makes a face and brushes past her. Stitch grimaces and stops filing Janine's nails. He turns away to arrange the nail polish bottles on the rack behind him.

Janine meets Donald at the christening of a mutual friend's child. They are the only two people sitting in the back row of the church. There is only one hymnbook in their pew and they must share it for the duration of the Mass. Afterwards, as people filter out into the vestibule he strikes up a conversation.

“How do you know the Ferguson's?” he inquires, nodding to the couple and their newly christened baby.

“I went to high school with Joan.” She decides that he is handsome in a bookish way. She likes his brown tweeds and scuffed loafers.

“Where do you work?” he asks.

“The Crazy Horse Salon,” she murmurs.

His eyes alight. The usual look of surprise, Janine thinks.

“My mother used to do hair,” he says.

At the brunch afterwards, Janine is surprised when he seats himself next to her at the table and again later on when he asks for her number. She repeats it to him slowly to make sure he gets all of the digits right. And after he walks her to her car, her stomach tingles as she sees him in the rearview mirror, watching her drive away.

The next day Donald calls Janine at work and invites her to go bike riding in the park on the upcoming Thursday. Janine agrees happily and hums to herself as she hangs up the phone.

“Who was that?” Stitch shouts.

Janine’s response is demure. “Someone I met this weekend.”

“Was it a boy?” Stitch’s voice is playful.

“Oh don’t be ridiculous,” Crystal interrupts. “Janine doesn’t *meet* boys.” She turns to the customer whose hair she is perming and adds, “She only fantasizes about kissing them at the movies in her charming, parochial way.” Crystal’s voice suggests that she finds this anything but charming.

Janine’s teeth clench. She squints her eyes in order to compress her tear ducts. She should quit right now, throw down her scissors and leave.

Stitch eyes her from his booth. “It’s only a joke, Janine.”

Thursday night after their bike ride in the park, Janine suggests that she and Donald stop for coffee. They sit in rattan armchairs and sip espressos, their crossed legs grazing every so often. They talk about their childhoods, favorite TV shows and where

they work. Donald is an accountant. He likes his job, the dependability of numbers and his yellow corner office. Janine tells him about the Crazy Horse and Crystal's antics.

"She's outrageous, really," Janine says. "I've never met anyone like her. And she acts like she's never met anyone like me."

"Like you?"

"Let's put it this way. She says that if I were her daughter I would have turned out to be wild like her."

"Or it could be the other way around. If you were her daughter maybe she'd have turned out to be more like you."

Janine bites her lip. "Do you think reservation is instinctual?" she asks.

"I don't know," Donald replies. "But it's a good question."

At the end of their date as they are unchaining their bikes from the bike rack, Donald asks if he can call Janine again. She agrees. They should meet for lunch sometime this week. They stand on the sidewalk facing each other in silence. Donald leans over and kisses her under the streetlights.

"Reservation," he whispers, "may be instinctual. But one should do more than just survive."

When Janine runs into work on Monday morning, Crystal is visibly upset. Janine stands back as she rummages through drawers, cursing and flinging things on the floor.

"Calm down, Crystal," Stitch tells her. "It's ok. You'll be able to find them."

Crystal doesn't say a word but abandons her search and storms off down the hall

"What's going on here?" Janine asks.

“Crystal’s lost her trimming shears.”

“Oh no,” Janine smiles, “the world is going to end.”

“Hey, cut her some slack.” Stitch is not smiling. “She got some bad news.

Janine goes about her business, sweeping her workstation and preheating her curling irons. She wonders what could be bad news for Crystal. Was she sick? Did someone die? Did the distributor stop making her hair spray?”

Crystal comes stomping back up the hall. She stops in front of Janine’s booth.

“You were late to work today, Janine. Why was that? Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“I’m sorry Crystal, but it was only five minutes.”

“Five minutes is nothing to you now,” Crystal barks. “But one day you won’t have five minutes, you got that? And you’ll wish you hadn’t wasted it being a thin-lipped mouse.”

“Crystal,” Stitch’s voice is a plea. Crystal glares at him and marches back to her office.

“She’s out of it today,” Janine mutters under her breath.

The clock ticks loud in the silence and Stitch says in a distant tone, “She just found out that her ex got remarried. They’ve only been divorced a year”

Later in the day, Donald calls Janine at work. “Do you want to go to lunch?” He asks.

Janine is thrilled. Her second date with him this week. “Sure,” she replies, enjoying her own lighthearted tone. “Why don’t you come pick me up?”

For the rest of the hour, Janine fluffs her hair and hums in front of the mirror. She dabs perfume on her wrists and puts on a thick coat of lipstick. Stitch stares from the corner but doesn't say a word. He hasn't a clue what to make of it.

Janine watches as Donald's car pulls into a parking space in front of the salon. He gets out to come inside. "I'm leaving," she calls out. She hears the scrape of Crystal's office chair and the scurry of feet down the hall. Janine picks up her purse and hurries into the lobby. She greets Donald with a kiss. She hopes that Crystal and Stitch are staring. That they notice the way she laughs brightly into Donald's face. Watch how he smiles, puts his hand protectively on the small of my back and opens the door to take me out.

Vice

The smell of meat hangs in the air outside the fat man's apartment. It's a heavy cloud, thick and curdled like the clots of fat in a pork chop. The fat man is known for this, for his cloistered existence, living immured in a stew of sweat, marinade and chuck-eye juices. He churns vats of chili with his fingers and uses his swollen palms to knead raw beef as rivulets of blood drip down his arms. He licks his buttered chin and flexes his lips while suckling on a drumstick. He runs his hands through his hair and leaves traces of pate and giblets in the matted thatch. And when he sits down to eat, the skin of his bare chest gleams from the oil slick of gravy sliding past his nipples. He is a wobbling hill of flesh – grotesque, absurd. But he is not so different from the rest of us walking down the hall outside his door, all carrying our own anchors and reveling in the bitter taste of metal as we shove them down our throats.

Operator

For me, the sound of true love will always be marked by the ringing of a telephone. I have yet to experience such love for myself but have watched others get mired in its sticky grasp. My brother, for instance, a fast-walker by nature, grew limbs that moved slow like honey when he fell in love – a drowsy, sensuous saunter towards the telephone. And I was always the one left listening on the other line, hearing the heave of his beloved's breath from across miles of telephone wire as he drew softly closer to his joy.

The Color of Life

Angela has a Master's Degree and a large, porcelain bathtub. These are the things she treasures most in the world. She got her M.B.A. from Boston College and her tub along with the house she rents though she loves it like it's her own. As she gets older she is finding that her search for happiness manifests itself in odd ways. This might have something to do with her childhood. Growing up, her parents preferred to read her bedtime stories from books by motivational speakers rather than Dr. Seuss. After she had learned colors, numbers and the basics of morality (sharing is good, be kind to others etc.) her parents decided to cut straight to the important stuff of life. So every night after the age of seven she fell asleep to passages from "The Seven Secrets of Successful Millionaires," instead of "Little Red Riding Hood." It was less-than-playful fare for an elementary schooler but at least it never gave her nightmares.

Currently, in her adult life, Angela is stuck at a crossroads between two worlds. She has both embraced and rebelled against her grooming as a member of society's upper crust and is thus situated comfortably in a modest brownstone on the outskirts of Philly with a Toyota Camry and good line of credit. At night, in between "Larry King Live" and "Moneyline," she thinks about life and compiles lists of her character traits and tastes in an attempt to quantify her personality. *Likes: overstuffed armchairs, discretion, corduroy, the feel of wet grass between my toes. Dislikes: ranch dressing, tardiness, people who are bad at driving, the feel of wet grass between my toes* (she is on the fence about being temperamental).

In her job as a hiring consultant for corporate businesses she interviews people for jobs with self-important yet extremely vague titles like “Assistant Managing Accountant of Overseas Industrial Affairs” and “Co-Consulting Director of Rental Retail Facilities.” It’s her responsibility to know the peccadilloes of the corporations she represents and to interrogate candidates accordingly. Sitting in her conference room with a potential vice president of public relations for a company that sells hot dogs to public schools, she might pose the question, “And what do *you* think has caused the sudden rise in obesity among America’s youth?” If he wants the job, he’d better blame insufficient exercise and bend over backwards to laud the dietary benefits of processed beef.

“Do you think I’m heartless?” Angela asks Mitch, her older brother whom she phones every Thursday.

“Darling, you’re not heartless,” Mitch’s drawl begins to thicken. He’s only lived in Ft. Lauderdale for six months and is already picking one up. “You’re just good at what you do.”

“I suppose.”

“After all, business is business. It’s not like you act that way all the time.”

Unfortunately, Angela has noticed that the languages of her professional and personal lives have begun to intertwine. She finds it slightly disturbing that the last few times she’s gone to bed with a man, she has broken the intimacy of shared sweat and bed sheets by propping her head up on her elbow and asking, “Did sexual dissatisfaction with your partners contribute to the demise of your last three relationships?” Though she professes admiration for men who participate in amicable breakups, Angela has a secret desire to be burned. This could be related to the efficient rejection of people she’s

accustomed to delivering in her job, or perhaps the fact that she has never felt the flames of unrequited love. None of her relationships have ended with a bang. Instead, they've all petered out, the passion dissolving a kiss at a time until a mutual agreement is reached that both parties want nothing more from each other than the occasional lunch date where they will meet in an outdoor café to sip lemonade and "catch up."

And Angela doesn't have the face for unrequited love – no luminous moon eyes hidden behind bangs and acne, no features of the fat girl in B movies who could be beautiful if she tried. She has the sharp, ridged face of a woman who dresses with a sufficient amount of trendy sophisticate to be deemed *attractive*. Attractive being the word that women use to describe those who will never be classically beautiful but who date enough men to make them jealous.

"I went up for company review this week. You know what they told me?"

"Hmm?" Mitch grunts across seven states of telephone wire. She imagines he is chopping onions or scrubbing the toilet. To her parent's chagrin, Mitch has been a hausfrau ever since moving in with Patrick, his boyfriend.

"Mother," he'll sigh dramatically in explanation, winking at Angela out the corner of his eye, "Don't you know that it's in my nature to nest?" He pauses, with a smirk on his face, "And who am I to resist the rules of nature?"

Growing up, Mitch was always the instigator. He was the one who coaxed, pleaded and prodded Angela into breaking the rules with him. She can trace back every childhood crime she committed to a specific whispered proposition delivered by her brother. When they were in first and second grade it was, *Let's steal those cookies from the pantry and hide them upstairs*. When they were in high school, Mitch would drag

Angela by the wrist and promise, *Seriously, Mom and Dad will never know we drove their car to New Jersey.* Unfortunately for Mitch, he had the chutzpah for deception, but none of the necessary tools – *How was I supposed to know they'd check the odometer?*

Though she often protested her involvement in Mitch's grand schemes to thwart authority, Angela was in awe of her brother. She wanted a taste of his fearlessness but at the end of the day, was too timid to face the cost. She was still the golden child in whom all of her parents' hopes were invested.

Angela leans into the telephone. "The company said that I'm great. The best they ever had – smart, instinctive, efficient." Her voice crackles with displeasure.

"What's wrong with that?"

"They also told me that I should wear less black. That I look too funereal."

"Hmm." Mitch pauses, and then continues in a philosophical tone, "I wouldn't disagree. Color is not the enemy, Angela. Why by drab when you can be fab?"

Mitch has recently assumed the job of redecorating his and Patrick's beachfront condo and is taking it very seriously. Patrick is a successful architect so Mitch can afford to spend his days at home picking through fabric swatches and custom ordering lamps in the shape of anchors for their nautical-themed bedroom. He has fallen in love with Patrick, a Georgia native, and therefore, the South. Now, whenever he visits Angela he complains about the absence of sweet tea anywhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line and offers theories about why everyone in the South is "just so friendly."

"I really think it has to do with the weather. Everyone smiles more."

"Oh God, Mitch," Angela will groan, "Please spare me your monologue on how sunlight is the antidote for a beleaguered soul." Angela does not like constant,

unwavering sunshine or phrases like “cerulean blue on a canvas sky.” She enjoys nature, even has a collection of landscapes hanging in her foyer, but hates when people wax poetic about it.

“Anyway, can you believe this? They said that I should start wearing pastels!” Angela’s throat tightens. She is incredulous that of all people her boss, Bernard Shank, a man in perpetual tweed and polyester, saw fit to give her clothing advice. He had sat behind the firm’s gleaming mahogany table with the other partners and smiled at her in his squat, mustard suit. “You just need to brighten things up a bit Angela. You’re like the walking dead around here sometimes.”

It would be funny to think that Angela’s entire life’s work had been judged on the fractional amount of minty colors existing in her wardrobe. She could almost laugh at the stupidity of it all except for his words – *You’re like the walking dead around here* – that are slipping around in her head, disrupting her thoughts, her neat, ordered organization of the world.

“Well actually,” Mitch’s voice raises an octave. “I think jewel tones would go better with your complexion.”

“Go to hell Mitch.” She is trying to remember the first time she was afraid of disappointing someone.

“Angela, that’s no way to talk to your brother.” His voice has a teasing quality.

Angela hesitates. Wonders what it would be like to be fearless. Says, “It’s no way to talk to your boss either.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” She runs her tongue over her teeth and lies, “that I quit.”

“You told your boss to go to hell?” Underneath his shocked tone, Angela senses a layer of admiration she’s never heard before in her brother’s voice.

“Yep. Just like that. I said it and walked right out of his office.” Angela cannot believe the words that she’s speaking. She feels a laugh rising up from her belly. It spills out of her mouth, down to the floor, across the hall, expanding, filling every space in her house. “I said, ‘Bernie, you know what? Go straight to hell!’”

“Because he told you to wear pastels?”

“It’s the principle of the thing, Mitch, the principle! I don’t want to change my clothes, who I am, just because they think it will make me look more lively. It’s ludicrous and I won’t stand for it.” Angela is heady with her lie and the possibilities the freedom of it entails.

“My sister quit her job on principle.” Mitch is breathless. “Well, bravo!” He begins whistling and applauding over the phone line.

“And...and that’s not all!” Angela rushes words out of her mouth. “Since I don’t have to work, I’m coming to see you!”

“When?”

“This weekend! I’m buying my ticket tonight!”

“Perfect! Patrick and I are already throwing a party on Saturday and now you can come celebrate with us. It’s a housewarming party, so bring a gift!”

“Alright.”

“That was a joke.”

Angela’s hand suddenly flies to her stomach. “Hey Mitch, I gotta go, ok?”

“Ok doll, see you soon!”

Angela throws down the phone and runs to the bathroom. She doubles over in front of the toilet and heaves into the mouth of the bowl. When she's done, she leans back against the bathroom wall, grabs a handful of tissue and drags it slowly down her tongue.

Angela has been throwing up for weeks. In all sorts of places – at home, work, once in the mall. She ran out of The Gap, through the food court and into an alcove where she threw up into a large, open trash bin. She couldn't have made it to the restroom. When she was done, an older woman in a yellow rain jacket and straw hat came up to her and extended a palm, rubbing a soft circle on the small of her back. "You've gotta ask the Lord for His healing power," the woman said, her eyes gleaming evangelically. Angela jerked away from her and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"I have to get some Pepto," she responded.

Angela hasn't told anyone that she's been sick. Not even Mitch. She is convinced that it's nothing serious, just a stage, really. She is getting older after all and her body is readjusting itself. She's learned to carry toothpaste in her purse.

Later that evening Angela goes shopping for something to bring to her brother's housewarming. She is standing in aisle 9 of the bathroom accessory store.

"We have some more magazine racks in the back," a pockmarked sixteen-year-old employee offers helpfully. Angela shakes her head.

"I'll take this," she says, holding up a conch shell nightlight. Her brother has a taste for whimsy. In her other hand is a tropical fish shower curtain.

"Good choice."

"I know."

“There she is!” Angela hears Mitch hollering as she stands on the deck outside his condo, ringing the doorbell.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome!” He throws open the door and engulfs her in a hug

“Your hair looks fabulous. How *are* you?”

“I’m doing ok,” she untangles herself from his arms. “Nice place you got here.”

“Oh, I know. Isn’t it divine?” Mitch picks up her bags, “Wait ‘til you see the inside.”

Angela steps into a condo awash with color. Peach, yellow, sea foam green.

“It’s very bright.”

Mitch grins. “I knew you’d love it.”

As Mitch puts her suitcases in the guest bedroom, Angela walks around the living room, her fingers trailing across the furniture. She smiles to herself, thinking what a perfect room this is for her brother, how his *joie di vivre* is apparent in the tasseled couch cushions and twin dreamsicle lamps. She picks up a framed photo of him and Patrick together. They’re at a baseball game, holding up hot dogs for the camera and smiling. *How emotionally fulfilling did you find your previous relationships?* Angela bets that Mitch didn’t ask Patrick that after their first kiss.

Later that afternoon as Mitch and Patrick set up for the party – *Do not help us! You are on vacation, go relax* – Angela decides to take a walk on the boardwalk. She noses through knick-knack shops with names like Treasure Cove and Coastal Boutique. She wonders how long Mitch and Patrick will stay together. Forever? Until they get tired of the furniture? If they got married, what would their wedding be like? Definitely an

affair with all the bells and whistles. Herself as maid-of-honor in pink tulle and an up-do. Mitch would enjoy the spectacle.

At the end of the boardwalk Angela finds herself in a store filled with scented soap and unending bins of jellybeans. After roaming for an hour, turning pewter brick-a-brack over in her hands, she's standing in line with a mood cd that promises music that will *Calm your spirit and revitalize your soul!* She can't remember when she picked it up, only that it seemed to be something she was looking for.

Dozens of Mitch and Patrick's friends have come to the housewarming party. Patrick stands at the door greeting all of them and accepting gifts while Mitch passes around the hors d'oeuvres and potpourri party favors. Angela trails him with a glass of wine in her hand.

"Come here! You haven't met my sister yet!" Mitch calls out to various friends stationed at the mini-bar or dessert sideboard. "This is Angela. She lives in Philadelphia and just quit her job. On principle! Isn't that fantastic? I'm trying to convince her to move here."

Angela grits her teeth and smiles. She wishes he would stop telling people that. She surveys the pile of gifts. There is, among other things, a coffee table book on shoes since the 19th century, toilet paper printed like money and a couple of art deco vases. They know her brother well.

Mitch puts down his tray of baby quiches and grabs Angela's hand. "Come here, there is someone I want you to talk to," he whispers.

"Who?" Angela raises her eyebrows suspiciously.

“Just a friend of mine.”

“Mitch! Please don’t try and play matchmaker,” she implores as Mitch drags her across the room.

“Too late,” he whispers and stops in front of a man dressed in a business suit and collared shirt buttoned all the way up the neck. “Steve! Meet my sister, Angela.”

“Angela, Hi.” Steve extends his hand. Angela shakes it.

“Nice to meet you, Steve,” she replies.

“Oh look! The punch bowl needs refilling,” Mitch declares with little attempt to disguise his giggle and runs off to the kitchen.

Angela takes a gulp of her wine and eyes Steve with a cocked head. “What did you bring?”

“A magazine rack.” Steve chuckles.

“Perfect.” She flashes a wan smile.

“And you?”

Angela tosses her hair over her shoulder. “A nightlight.”

The sounds of the room echo loudly between them. “Shall we move over to the couch?”

“Sure,” Angela replies as she grimaces. Sourness is brewing in her stomach.

Steve sits on the couch and stretches out his legs. “So, I hear that you quit your job.”

“What?” Angela feels the uneasiness rise in her throat.

“Yeah, Mitch said it was such a noble act and that you did it to preserve your principles.” Steve nods his round, sensible head in appreciation. “I just think that is really commendable.”

Angela looks at him, her eyes squinting in the bright light of the party. His face has started to melt before her, blending in with the colors of the room and the stainless steel shine of her brother’s three new toasters. “I didn’t,” she says and grabs her stomach.

“Pardon me?” Steve leans in closer.

“Quit,” she gasps, “I didn’t quit.”

“What?”

Angela doubles over.

“Hey, are you ok?” He stands up.

“I’m fine.” She stumbles off the couch. “I have to go.”

“Angela, Angela!” Mitch is knocking on the door of the bathroom.

Angela lifts her head off the bathroom tile. “What?” She croaks.

“What is going on? Are you ok?”

“I’m great.” Her voice is a wry, brittle cough.

“I don’t believe you. Open the door.”

Angela pulls herself up on the vanity. Turns on the faucet and splashes water into her mouth.

“Angela.”

She spits out the water and wipes her face on a towel. “What?” She pulls the door open. “I’m fine.”

Mitch fills the doorway. “You do not sound fine.”

He looks almost angelic, like Gabriel, with the light of the bathroom illuminating his figure against the black backdrop of the hallway. Angela looks up at him through bleary eyes and slaps a hand on his chest. “Don’t you worry yourself Mitchell, it was just a little digestive trouble if you know what I mean.” She giggles.

As she starts to push past him, he steps in front of her. “Angela.”

“What?” She wheezes exasperation.

“Why did you tell Steve you didn’t quit your job?”

Angela gazes past him, squinting through the open bedroom window down the hall. She can hardly make out the blue ink tide washing up on the sand. Only the moon, a woman wearing sliver blush, beaming out over the waves. “I have a bathtub at home that looks like it can hold the ocean.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s wide and deep, all of it white porcelain.”

Mitch doesn’t say anything, just looks at her, the light in his eyes focused, intense.

“And I like how I can still feel the hard sides of it pressing cold against my skin...” Angela pushes her hands down the length of her hips in an unconscious imitation.

“But sometimes, it hurts.”

“Did you quit?” Mitch’s voice, persistent and unwavering, rumbles low throughout the hall.

Angela closes her eyes and releases a breath like a mighty wind passing through the long country of her body. She opens her eyes. “No.”

“Then why did you tell me you quit?”

Angela doesn't answer; she wouldn't know what to say. In what words can you express wanting a life that you're afraid to live? She turns from her brother and walks down the hall, opening the sliding glass door at the end of it. She steps out onto the balcony and lifts her chin to the wine-dark sky, letting the salt air wrap her face in a breeze. Mitch comes up and stands beside her, his palm a warm weight on her shoulder. She doesn't count the stars or look for the lights of ships hovering above the horizon. And he doesn't say anything, understanding that her words will come in time. They stand there, brother and sister, listening to the cry of gulls stretch across the sand and the surf pounding like a heart that beats wildly beneath them.

Bastille Day

All my stories begin with this image –
Singed grass.
Blacktop like a griddle.
Heat that bends petals to the ground,
steals the breath of the elderly.

The feel of rock and fertilizer
scrabbled in the gutter,
and a lake of sweat
behind my knees.

The moon has a leash on the ocean,
the cicada must widen its jaws to sing.
My pen cannot escape July.

It is the peak of gestation,
the point where that churning, surging,
and roil of sediment creates
heart and limb.

It is the month of Bastille Day,
named for a fortress overcome
by the clamor for rebirth,
and the hands of a people
reclaiming divinity.

I can see those crowds gathering,
gnawing at the gate
and teething on stone,
crumbling the bell tower crag by crag.

I wish I could have stood in the aftermath,
and surveyed the dust-cloaked rubble.
Place de la Bastille, the space that's left
when the stones have rolled away.

I too was born in July.
Three weeks late,
faking death, faking birth,
scaring my mother into the belief
I was stillborn.

But I was just waiting,
like I am still waiting
to come kicking and clawing out of the womb,
to tear down bell towers of my own.

A Narcissistic Attachment to Lost Weight

Every other Saturday
I ride the bus
downtown
to my weight loss appointment.
It's usually raining
since
it usually rains in Pittsburgh -
which is to say,
the experience
is hardly poetic.
Still,
there are times I fancy
the sky is sad
because there is less of me
under it.

Shopping Lesson

My mother is a devious woman. Really, she is, though you couldn't tell by looking at her. She is what the Bible and nursery rhymes refer to as "a wolf in sheep's clothing." In her linen capris, Italian leather walking sandals and monogrammed necklace she is a portrait of calm and respectability. However, rumbling underneath that docile exterior of Dress Barn chic is a lava flow of mischief, hot and unpredictable. My mother's taste for impulse can be dangerous to bystanders, but it is also part of her allure. People are inexplicably attracted to her.

My friends are also in love with my mother. She is the object of their most fervent admiration. "Abigail," they say after an hour of gossiping with her or making fun of someone they mutually dislike, "You're lucky to have such a cool mom. She is *so* fun!" What they find most incredible though, other than her salad dressing and punk rock circa 1970 style hair (think tufts of brilliant red sticking straight off her scalp), is her ability to nullify the generation gap. No matter that she was born in 1956, the year that Castro *began* the revolution and Elvis sang "Blue Suede Shoes" – she is seventeen years old at heart.

I didn't always believe that. I used to chalk it up to a clever parenting device that she designed in order to foster a good relationship with her teenage daughter, until I realized that she did watch MTV when I wasn't home. And she genuinely enjoyed it. It has gotten worse since I left a few years ago for college. A typical phone call home will go something like this:

Ring, Ring.

“Yeah?” My mom answers, rushed and out of breath.

“Hi Mom, its me.”

“Hi darling. Listen, can I call you back?”

“Umm, alright,” I say.

“It’s just that Lance from NSYNC is on the celebrity *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and he’s at \$250,000. Can you imagine? I didn’t know that he was so smart. And humble too. He’s not like the others. You can tell the fame hasn’t gone to his head. What do you think Abigail? He sounds like a nice boy, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, Mom,” I sigh, “I’m sure he is a very intelligent, spiritually connected human being. I’ll talk to you later. Tell dad I said hi.” Other than being convinced that game shows are an accurate measure of someone’s intellect, my mother is an earnest believer that given the proper location and a small amount of forethought, she could fix me up with any number of attractive male celebrities. As a routine, she stands at the grocery store checkout leafing through magazines, looking for potential son-in-laws.

Speaking of the grocery store, this is where our story begins – in Sheffield’s. Sheffield’s is grocery store best characterized by the absence of neon in its decorating scheme and by the clean, simple lines of the storefront. It lacks the bright, sloppy overabundance of fliers, coupons and want ads tacked on the walls of most food shopping venues. It’s a calm, beige store with the occasional flair of green and purple on aisle signs and employee aprons.

My mom and I have shopped together at Sheffield’s ever since it moved to Brighton when I was seven years old. It is a ritual now, a mother-daughter experience. After all, who wouldn’t want to bond over food? I load hamburger patties into the cart

and she tells me about the first time she got drunk. Previous to the establishment of Sheffield's however, we didn't have that ritual, hadn't committed ourselves to a particular supermarket. We flitted around each week from one store to another in search of the cheapest ice cream or the largest selection of deli meat. But when Sheffield's moved across state lines from South Carolina to Georgia, my mother was immediately smitten. Driving back from my art class on Opening Day of the shopping center where it was located, my mom spied it across the street and threw our tiny blue honda into a U-turn, hopping the curb, in order to go investigate.

"Abigail," she nodded to me an hour later in the parking lot, "this is where we will be shopping from now on." Her voice held the authority of a woman determined on a course of action and I knew that she was speaking the truth. We had found *our* grocery store. What was it about this place that so appealed to my mother? I think it appealed both her sense of sophisticate and of whimsy. It was a store with elegance and a ridiculous name. In essence, a food retail version of herself.

Twelve years later she is still shopping there and whenever I come home from school, we pick up right where we left off – buying canned goods and discussing life. This summer, however, our routine was interrupted by the introduction of an unexpected element – a certain cashier named Oliver.

"So, Abigail," my mom reaches her long arm, bangles clinking, over the bin of Djanou pears, feeling individual skins for the appropriate texture and plump, "you mean to tell me that on a campus of over ten thousand people, you have not found one boy suitable enough to date?"

"Mom, I am telling you the absolute truth. There aren't any. I've looked."

“But honey, I just find that hard to believe.” Though my inability to secure a proper boyfriend is my mother’s favorite topic of conversation, she is starting to get exasperated. After all, enough is enough.

“It’s not that big of a deal, Mom. I’m so busy I don’t have time for a boyfriend anyway.” I steer the cart a few steps away, hoping to put an end to this dialogue as I scrutinize the plums.

“Really Abigail, come on. It’s been such a long time since you’ve dated someone. Aren’t you getting sexually frustrated?” My mother’s voice echoes through the produce section. I cringe. This is ridiculous. I turn around to face her.

“Mom, we are not having this conversation in the *grocery store*.” My voice is strident, irritated.

“Well, where would you rather have it, dear?” My mother feigns surprise at my indigence, widening her eyes in innocence as she cradles three tomatoes in the crook of her arm.

“I’m walking away Mom, I’m walking away.” And as I whirl around to stalk off to the frozen foods section I bump smack into –

“Oliver!” I hear my mother cry as I attempt to disengage my face from the apron straps of a very tall Sheffield’s employee.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t...” My voice falters as I take a step back and look up into the face of the man I nearly bulldozed, “paying attention.” His eyes are soft and his teeth are gleaming as he ducks his head and smiles.

“No, no, don’t be sorry. I’m an idiot. I wasn’t watching.”

“Oliver!” I hear my mother shout again as she thrusts the cart, wheels squealing, over towards the spot where I am standing with my partner in clumsiness. “Is that you?”

The man with the shiny teeth lifts his head up and nods, taking a step towards my mother. “Yeah, Mrs. Sullivan, it’s me, Oliver.” *What?* My mother knows this guy?

“Oh my god. Look at you! You’re a giant! How tall are you? Where have you been? How long have you been working here?” My mother shakes her head with the ferocity of a caged tiger. She is gleeful and determined to extract as much information out of this poor man as possible. He takes her exuberance in stride saying,

“I’m 6.5. I just moved back to Brighton from Tennessee and I started work yesterday.”

“Oh!” My mother is thrown. Unused to people responding to her rapid-fire queries in such a thorough and prompt manner, she is briefly unsure of how to proceed. I clear my throat and she is revved back into action. “Oliver, this is my daughter Abigail. Abigail, this is Oliver. Do you remember him?”

I shake my head, unable to perform any of the gracious social maneuvers required in this situation, such as offering him my hand to shake or making a witty rejoinder to my mother’s frenetic introduction. You wanna know the real reason I don’t have a boyfriend at school, Mom? This is it - paralysis in the face of opportunity.

“Hi. Nice to meet you.” He shifts his stance. It seems that he feels as awkward as I do.

“Hi,” I manage to cough out. My mother frowns at me, thoroughly unimpressed by this exchange and continues on.

“So, Oliver, what are you doing back in Brighton?”

“Well, I just graduated from the University of Tennessee and am spending the summer at my parent’s house until I go back in the fall to get my Master’s degree. I’m working here to save up money to get my own apartment when I go back to Knoxville.”

“You’re kidding! That is so wonderful. Congratulations! A Master’s degree, wow!”

My mother is gushing. Gush. Gush. Gush.

“Oh, humph,” he chuckles in surprise. “Thanks.” The tips of his ears are beginning to turn pink.

“Well,” my mom continues, “James just graduated himself and moved up to Philadelphia to do finance work.” James, my brother, apparently an old friend of Oliver’s from school.

“That’s great.”

“And Abigail here,” she puts her hand on my shoulder in an unexpected gesture of maternal pride, “has just finished her second year at Brown.”

“Brown? That’s a good school. You must be really smart.” He makes eye contact with me under the blazing halogen bulbs of the supermarket but I am unable to hold his gaze.

“Well, you know. I, um...its fun. It’s colder than I expected in, um, New England. But still fun. Yeah...” I trail off – a definite case of verbal incontinence. Sensing the conversational disaster that would occur if I was allowed to continue speaking, my mother swoops in, and for once, I am glad of the rescue.

“Well Oliver, Abigail and I don’t want to hold you up here. It was such a treat seeing you again.”

“Oh, likewise, likewise.” He bends at the waist, almost as if he is bowing out of my mother’s presence.

“Well, we’ve got to make our way to the bakery now, but we’ll see you again.” My mother grabs the cart and puts her hand behind my back, ushering me away as she turns her head back to Oliver and adds with a wink, “Real soon.”

“Abigail,” my mother announces to my father over dinner that night, “has found a man.”

“What?” My father and I drop our forks simultaneously, eyebrows raised in disbelief. My mother watches in disdain as wayward peas roll across the tablecloth from the force of our silverware’s impact.

“And when did this happen?” My father turns to me, wearing the cross-examination face that he usually saves for court.

“Today at Sheffield’s,” my mom supplies in a very matter-of-fact tone. My father looks confused.

“Don’t worry, Dad. I did not find a man at the grocery store today.” I give my mother a warning look.

“What’s this about Louise?” He has abandoned his supper and propped his elbows up on the table with a sigh. His face is stern but I can see the skin around his eyes wrinkling with amusement.

“Abigail ran into Oliver today at the store. Literally, she ran into him. Anyway, you remember him, right? James’ friend from Brighton Prep? Well, he’s back in town for the summer, working at the store before he goes to get his

Master's degree." She gives me a look and intones "Master's degree" in a way that insinuates *He's going to be successful and well paid. What a catch!* She continues, "He definitely liked her. It was obvious. You should go back to the store and talk to him."

"Mom, don't be ridiculous. You always think that boys like me and it's never true."

"Nonsense. Abigail, he was blushing the whole time. Besides, you wouldn't know a boy liked you if he jacked off in front of your face."

"Mom!"

"Louise!"

"What? It's the truth."

My mother is like one of those pulsing, blue patio lights that bugs cannot resist, no matter how lethal its electric current. A week after our fateful trip to the grocery store, I find myself turning into the parking lot of Sheffield's, hoping for a chance encounter with Oliver. I'm going to take her advice, even if it kills me.

Walking alone into the store I realize that there is no item that I'm in need of, no reason for me to be here. Crap. What can I buy? I slow my walk to a saunter in order to bide my time and think. But as I pass the row of cashiers and see Oliver at register #6, I speed up again. I'm not ready for him to see me, Not yet. What am I saying? Not ready for him to see me yet? You would think it was our wedding day, not the second time he's rung up my produce.

I slip into a random aisle and look around. Personal Care, Aisle 9. This will do. I scan the shelves and grab some Band-Aids and a razor. Wait, that's a little odd. I put the razor back and pick up some shampoo. Better. I think I'm ready. I head towards the front of the store, my eyes focused on the linoleum, pretending that I don't really notice where I'm going, that it's a providential accident I've ended up in line at checkout #6.

I'm focusing on the linoleum. I'm reading the shampoo bottle. I'm...being tapped on the shoulder?

"Huh?" My head whips up with the force of a launching spacecraft. I stumble backwards, disoriented by my own sudden movement.

"Woah, there. Careful now." Oliver is standing in front of me, his hand on my shoulder. "Sorry. I called your name but you were pretty intent on checking out those shampoo ingredients." He nods his head towards the bottle in my hand.

Oh spectacular. This is going well already.

"So, umm, are you ready to check out?"

"Oh! Yeah, sorry. Here are my purchases." Here I go, eloquence in action. I hand him the Herbal Essence and Band-Aids.

"So," he hesitates, smiling at me in an odd, knowing sort of way that I can't decipher. I hold my breath. He asks, "do you want paper or plastic?" Right.

"Uh, you know? I'll just put them in my bag." I hand him my money and take my purchases, shoving them into the cavernous mouth of my purse. "Ok, well," I don't want to linger but I'm not sure how to exit gracefully. "See ya later."

"Yeah," he says, still flashing his secret smile. "See ya." I hoist my purse further up on my shoulder and scuttle away like a bug.

I walk into my mother's bedroom and by the look on my face, she knows where I've been.

"Oh, you didn't?" she gasps.

"Yes," I mutter. "I did."

"Oh Abigail, this is a proud mother moment!" She scoots to the end of her bed wrapped in a satin dressing gown and kicks her feet with giant, yellow banana slippers on them over the edge. Then she grabs my hand and pulls me up next to her, whispering conspiratorially, "Tell me everything."

"Nothing really happened."

"Oh now, I don't believe that. He was there, wasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"So what did he do?"

"Well," I tilt my head and say, "he smiled at me a lot."

"He did?" My mother sits up a little straighter.

"Yeah, in a sort of funny way though. Like he knew something I didn't."

She leans forward, "Did he do anything else?"

"No, why would he?" Geez, what was she expecting?

"I don't know." But my mother starts giggling and I can see there is a nefarious gleam in her eye. She's been up to no good.

"Oh my god, oh my god. Mom! What did you do, what did you do?" I'm shrieking now as she begins to giggle even harder. I tackle her onto the bed and pin her wrists with my hands.

“Abigail, its no big deal.” She is biting her lip, trying to restrain her grin.

“Mom, I am not letting you up until you tell me what happened.”

“Ok, ok. It’s nothing major. Just give me my wrists back and I’ll tell you.” I move off, and face her eye to eye. “Well,” she says gravely, “I might have gone to the grocery store this week without you.”

“Yes?” I’m waiting. I’m waiting.

“And I might have seen Oliver while I was there.”

“Yeah...”

“And,” she looks up at me with wide eyes, pausing for dramatic effect. “I might have told him that you were in a bit of a rut.”

“WHAT???” I jump off the bed.

“And that...” Oh my god, she’s not done. “He should do something about that.”

“MOM!” I think I’m going to throw up. Either that or knock her lights out.

“I just, you know, said that you thought he was attractive and that maybe he could help you get your confidence back.”

A sucker punch to the stomach could not have hit me with more force. “What?” I gasp, drawing in ragged, uncertain breaths. “You said what?”

“Relax dear, it’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal? You told a boy I like that he should date me because I’m in a rut! Holy shit mom, holy shit.” I’m pacing around the room, hands in my hair, absolutely incredulous.

“Abigail...”

“No, shut up Mom. You don’t get to talk. You have done quite enough talking already. Holy shit.” I drop down to the carpet, I don’t think my legs can hold me up any longer. “Oh god,” I moan, “I can’t believe you said that to him. Now I can never *ever* see him again.”

“Honey.” I hear her plaintive voice floating down to me from the bed.

“Don’t you “honey” me. You are still not allowed to talk.” I put my head in my hands and stare at the carpet.

“Are you really mad at me?”

“Yes, at the moment you could say that I’m fairly upset.”

“Oh.” The bedspread rustles above me and I hear a thud on the floor as two enormous, fuzzy bananas creep their way into my line of vision. “I was just trying to help.” The smiley faces on the banana slippers twitch as she curls her toes. Despite my anger, I let out a snort of laughter.

“Mom.”

“Yeah?” she asks with hopeful intonation.

“Don’t ever, *ever* try and help me again, ok?”

“I’m so sorry. No more helping, I promise!” I angle my head up at her and she grins, not looking all that repentant.

“Seriously, Mom. I’m not kidding.”

“Me neither darling, me neither.” Her back is to the window where streams of afternoon light are coming in and filtering through her crimson hair. The room is aglow in the bright wash of color reflected off my mother’s head and her banana slippers, and I know

that I cannot trust her. She is a devious woman, my mother. And somehow, strangely enough, I cannot hate her for it.

Nine Months

One

The wide mouth of the sun has sucked the marrow from this city.

Two

Will you stay with me after the fireworks? he whispered. *What fireworks?* I asked. And he kissed me.

Three

Gram's been repeating herself lately. "... he looked so silly with that handkerchief over his nose, dipped in lavender so he wouldn't have to smell the brine from the sea." As if the details of the old stories could keep her safe from fog. *Smell the brine from the sea.*

Four

Jasmine. Rust. Maple syrup on a Sunday. The breath of the world lives in the hollow behind his ear.

Five

Drought conditions, Day 146. Soon, even the rocks will open their mouths and cry out for rain.

Six

Her pink teacups don't look right in my kitchen with no ceramic birds to watch over them.

Seven

I hate his beard and how my eyes say *I love you*, even as he walks away.

Eight

Looking out the window, the only words I can muster come from a line in my favorite Stuart Dybeck story: *A fine rain has been paving the streets with mica.*

Nine

Today's sun is new and curling around the earth like the hair of a newborn child.

Serenade

The cobblestones of the French Quarter, original skin of the city, glisten with the evening dew. The afternoon rain had lingered but a breeze from the east swept in over the marshes and carried it away, renewing the clarity of night, that dark lucidity of a Louisiana summer sky.

The salt air wraps around the old man, pressing on his skin and breathing into his neck like a lover. Under a streetlamp, he scuffs his shoes on the cobblestones and raises the saxophone he grips like a secret to the cracked flesh of his lips.

This is the moment when all things catch their breath.

Houses rising up from the narrow corridors of the street in shades of pale pink and yellow, glimmer like stars. The streetlamp spills honeyed light into the hovering mist. Seagulls pause among the clouds. On a balcony high above, a mother waits for her children to call.

And the old man, knowing the truest language of this world, blows into the mouthpiece of his heart, and croons the moon to sleep.

Pet Shop

“Percy!”

There it is. Do you hear it? My mother’s voice.

“Percy, can you come up to the front please?”

It’s 5:30 in the morning and we are the only two people in the store. She doesn’t need to use the intercom but she does anyway. She likes the sense of formality she feels dialing “9” and hearing her voice boom out over of the loudspeaker. Yelling for your kid must be a more novel experience when technology is involved.

“Yeah, I’m here.” I stroll to the front of the shop past shelves of fish food and dog leashes. Out of the storefront window I can see “Hannigan’s Pets” flashing neon on the rain-soaked pavement. We don’t open for three hours but Mom likes to turn on the sign the minute she walks in the door. She says it’s an expression of solidarity with our neighbors across the street, the Waffle House and 24hr Quick Mart.

“Percy, you need to sweep out the cat pen.” She is batting her hands in front of her face and coughing. “There is too much hair flying around in here.”

“It’s cause the Persians are shedding.”

“The Persians are always shedding. It’s because you didn’t sweep it out yesterday like I asked you to.” Her voice has a flinty edge. She taps her Halloween orange fingernails on the countertop. “Or the day before, or the day before that.”

I turn my lips inward and squint. She’s a volatile woman, continually hinging on either anger or indifference. A few beats of silence thump in my chest.

“So, go clean it out. I’m about to asphyxiate.”

“Ok.” I grab the broom. I always agree when her face is wrinkled like that, the skin folding and furrowing around her eyes. My mother’s boyfriend James calls it her “bulldog face,” and erupts into barking noises whenever she uses it on him. He thinks it’s clever, says he does it to break the tension but he doesn’t know her like I do.

“Godammit James! Will you stop that and take me seriously for one second?”

“Babydoll,” he’ll croon, raising his raw, red, construction site hands, “You know I take you seriously,” though he can never keep the smirk off his face. She’ll storm around the kitchen, slamming cabinets and muttering under her breath until he’ll sidles over to her, flattens the hair behind her ear and laughs into her neck. She never pushes him away, just stands there, arms hanging, until he winks at me and says, “Ok Junior, you can go on and play outside now.” I’m twelve, I don’t *play* outside.

I’m still sweeping when the rain tapers off and the edges of the sky begin to brighten. I hear the rustle of newspaper in litter boxes, the creak of hamster wheels and parakeets warming up their lungs. All over the store animals are starting to wake up.

“Alright Percy, let’s get breakfast rollin’!” My mom comes swinging out of the stockroom throwing me a bucket and some gloves. She’s smiling, in a good mood again, the halogen light overhead reflecting in her eyes.

It’s time to start doling out the food. We move in tandem around the store. She lifts the aquarium lids and I sprinkle in fish pellets. I pick up the cocker spaniels while she shovels chow into their bowls. She goes over to the corner and flicks on the radio. One look at her face tells me I’m in for two hours of the Beach Boys and Supremes.

“Mom, please,” I beg, “anything but this Oldies crap.”

She whips around. “What is your problem?” she says, her face tilted down to look me square in the eyes, “Are you trying to start something?”

“What?”

Her face is grave. “Having no respect for your musical heritage is a serious offense.”

Oh boy. Here she goes.

“So I think your punishment should be...” She runs over to the corner and turns the crackling radio up full blast.

“Mom, stop it! You are so cheesy.”

“A sing-along!” She high kicks a black denim leg into the air and hops around in her ratty tennis shoes. “Baby there ain’t no mountain high enough!” She grabs my hand and starts doing the twist.

“Mom, let go! You are embarrassing yourself!”

“I’m not letting go until you sing!” She is shaking her head of apricot-tinted hair from side-to-side in time with the beat.

“Ain’t no valley low enough,” I grumble.

“That’s right!” She links her arm in mine and intones in throaty vibrato, “To keep me from getting to you babe.”

“No more, no more!” I pick up my bucket and move over towards the birds. She follows me, taking the towels off their cages and humming. I scoop out sunflower seeds and pour them into the feeders. I like the rhythm of the movements – scoop, pour, scoop. I could do this all day.

My mom opened Hannigan's Pets six years ago after my dad ran off and my great-aunt Val died. My dad left us the Chevy and some of his old clothes, Great-Aunt Val left us forty grand. My mom had always loved pets and my dad never let her have one so opening up a pet store was her way of getting back at him. I think for my mom, just the idea that one day he might roll back into town and find out that she'd built a pet shop with all the money that he'd been so close to having makes all the effort worth it. She's tight-fisted with her grudges.

We'd started out small – a litter of cats, goldfish, and some chew toys. My mom got a lease from the strip mall and her sister Sally flew out from Wichita to help us paint the store. It was up and running within two months though we didn't make any money for eight. But Mom said it just needed sticking out and she was right. It's still just the two of us but now we got purebreds, exotic parrots and a whole section of how-to books for pet care. Every Saturday morning and after school on weekdays she makes me come to the store and work with her. She calls it learning responsibility, I call it free labor.

"Percy, can you get that?" It's 11 am and my mom is trying to persuade a nervous first time customer to take the plunge and invest in a pet. The phone is ringing.

I put down the box of collars I'm shelving and run to pick it up. "Hannigan's Pets," I answer.

"Hey there sport." It's James.

"Hi."

"Can I talk to your Mom?"

"She's with a customer."

“Well that’s ok,” he says in an eerie, sing-song voice, “I need to talk to you anyway.”

“What about?” The words come out in a short, sharp breath.

“I think we should spend some time together this weekend.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you around.”

“No, I mean time for *just* the two of us.” Funny how his tone of voice doesn’t showcase his sudden enthusiasm to hang out with me all that well.

James and my mom have been dating for two years. They met at a karaoke bar on her thirty-second birthday when she sang an off-key version of “More Than a Feeling” and he bought her a drink. That’s not exactly what she told me – *James and I met when I was out celebrating my birthday with Sheila and he noticed me from across the room* – but I can fill in the blanks. James owns his own trailer on the east side of town in one of those mobile communities with plastic flowerbeds. But I ‘m sure his neighbors don’t to recognize him because he’s never there. He spends most of his time at our house or at Schulte’s, the bar around the corner. He goes to Schulte’s after he comes back from work to play ping-pong, or as he calls it, “the working man’s sport.” And in those rare moments when he deems it acceptable to converse with me, I get the whole theoretical lowdown on ping-pong.

“It’s a game that requires great presence of mind,” he’ll say, biting down on a cigar and waving his thick hand for emphasis, “to which corner should one volley the ball? Do you gently tap it or send it slamming over the net? One has to think on his feet.”

“Right,” I reply, have nothing else to say on the subject.

“But it is also a game that takes your mind off the world and its many problems, which is why I call it the working man’s sport. Because the working man needs to have an outlet. Do you hear what I’m saying Junior?”

“Yep.” I agree with him because whenever he makes this speech he’s usually buzzed, sitting on the recliner and in control of the remote. If I say anything to piss him off, he’ll throw me out of the room or purposely watch golf, which I hate.

“So then,” I say flatly into the phone, “what do you wanna do?”

“Hey there sonny, don’t sound too excited about it.”

Oh trust me, that won’t be a problem.

“Well,” he continues, “we’re gonna go down to the practice fields and hit off some innings on the old diamond. Sound good?” His voice tells me it wouldn’t be wise to disagree.

“Sure, that’s fine.” I look over towards my mom. She’s netting a dark blue Beta fish out of the tank. Apparently she’s sold her customer on buying an animal of the aquatic nature.

“Listen James, I have to go. Mom’s about to ring up a customer and I gotta go get her an aquarium from the back.”

“You just remember to tell her I called,” he warns.

“Ok.”

“I’m looking forward to Saturday.” The timbre of his voice is thick with meaning that I can’t decipher.

“Yeah, see ya.”

“Percy, who was that?” My mom trills as she comes up to the counter.

“James.” I step away from the register. “Do you want me to go get a tank for that?” I nod to the bagged fish she’s holding.

“No, actually, I’ll go to the stockroom and get it. Why don’t you ring Mrs. Peterson up so I can go return James’ call.”

“Fine,” I say.

My mom starts walking away. Halfway across the store she turns around and calls out, “Oh yeah, Mrs. Peterson? Just remember that if you want to buy another Beta later on, you’re gonna have to put it in a separate aquarium.”

“Why is that?”

“Two Betas won’t survive in the same tank. They’ll just end up attacking each other. I don’t really know why, it’s instinctual.”

“Hmm,” Mrs. Peterson intones.

“Your total is \$24.85,” I say.

I’m sitting on the barstool watching Mom cut up potatoes for dinner.

“Are you gonna put that weird sauce stuff on it like you did last time?” I nod to her growing pile of vegetables.

“It’s called marinade, Percy, marinade.” She turns around and gives me the eye that says *I’ve told you this a million times before.*

“Fine. Are you going to put *mar-in-ade* on them?” I scrunch up my eyebrows and draw my syllables out nice and slow.

She laughs. “Shut your mouth.”

“Make me.”

“Percy.” Her voice intones a warning but I know she’s not serious.

I turn back to scribbling down numbers in my math workbook and she keeps cooking. Every now and then I glance back up at her. Her wild hair sits up in a curly bun on top of her head though it’s starting to unravel as she leans over the pot of boiling water on our stove. She’s wearing an apron I bought for her two Christmases ago that’s got prints of flying pigs on it and block letters that spell across the chest, “I said I’d cook when...” She had laughed so hard when she unwrapped it. I still think it’s hysterical.

“Hey there folks!” I hear a gruff baritone and the creak of our kitchen screen. James is here.

My mom turns away from the stove with a smile on her face. “Hey honey.” Her voice is soft and lilting. She lifts her arms up and wraps them around James’ back.

“You’re back early.”

“I know,” he leans his nose against her neck, “It was a quick plumbing job.”

I cough and James pulls away from her.

“What’s up, sport?” He doesn’t even look at me as he plops his tool belt on our counter in one swing of easy familiarity.

“Nothing.” Sport is such a stupid nickname. I know he can hear it in my voice. He locks eyes with me for a moment and turns his back.

“I have a proposition for you, Audrey.”

“Hmm, what’s that?” My mom is standing on her tip-toes, getting plates out of the cabinet.

“I think the two of us should take a weekend.”

“Take a weekend and do what?”

“Go somewhere. Take a mini-vacation together for a night or two.”

“Really? What about the shop?” I can tell she is trying not to sound excited at the possibility of a trip.

“C’mon, you can leave it for one day, can’t you?”

What about me?

“What about Percy?” She looks over at me.

James rolls his eyes but tries to laugh good-naturedly. “I think he can handle a 48hr separation.”

The timer on the stove buzzes. “Oh! Dinner’s ready. Take your seats gentlemen, I’ll bring out your food.”

I hop off the barstool. “Actually Mom, I don’t have an appetite. My stomach kinda hurts.” I start to walk out of the kitchen.

“Percy.”

James cuts her off. “I’m sure he’ll be hungry enough again soon.”

I leave and lay down on the couch in the living room.

“Anyway, about our trip...” James continues, his voice edged with impatience.

I can hear my mom interrupt him from the next room. “If he’s not feeling well, I should go take his temperature.”

“Leave him.”

“James,” her voice rises in irritation, “it will only take a second.”

Her chair screeches as she pushes it back from the table. I can hear her feet padding on the carpet as she comes down the hall to check on me. James sighs hard from the kitchen. I smile and burrow deep into the couch cushions.

It's Saturday night and I'm with James who is parking his truck, a red, paint-chipped monstrosity. He yanks the emergency brake into place and jumps out onto the gravel. "Get your glove," he shouts. We walk onto the barren, lit field. We are the only ones there.

"Let's throw around the ball," James huffs as he trots over to the outfield.

"Ok." I follow, my cleats kicking up dirt as I drag slowly behind him.

"C'mon Percy, pick up the pace!" He is hopping in place, warming up, shaking out his massive, hairy limbs. It would be a laughable sight except for the fact that his movements are perfectly controlled, measured. Though his belly is hanging out over his shorts, there is no mistaking the fact that he is a powerful man.

We start tossing the ball back and forth. "So your mom tells me," he says, "that you've been enjoying your first few weeks of middle school."

"Yeah, they've been okay." I pause and take a breath. "I like my classes."

He laughs, a hard, loud burst from his throat. "When I was your age, I didn't care so much for classes."

I can't say that I'm surprised.

"I was more into sports." He gives me a leering wink, "and girls."

I stare back at him. Is he expecting a reply? "Great," I say.

"Not so much anymore though, I'm not like that. I'm a one-woman man."

Even better.

"What about you, Percy? Any girls you got your eye on?"

"Not really."

He screws up his eyebrows. "And why is that?"

“I dunno. Haven’t met any good ones yet, I guess.”

“C’mon, there’s gotta be some hot numbers marching around that school of yours.”

My shoulder swings back sharp as I catch the ball. He’s pitching harder now, my palm stings inside my glove from the force of the impact. I toss the ball back. I don’t know what to say to him. “Maybe I haven’t been paying attention.”

“Well you should.” The ball comes faster this time, sailing straight at my chest so that I am barely able to catch it before it hits. “At your age, it’s just unnatural not to notice.”

“What?” I raise my voice. “You trying to say something?” I throw the ball back as hard and as fast as I can. It hardly makes a noise hitting his glove.

He laughs and looks me dead in the eye. “I’m saying that a boy has to give up his mama sometime and stake out his own.”

I have no time to catch the ball. It whizzes through the air so that I have to throw myself on the ground in order to avoid it. Dust flies up in my face and clouds my eyes. I swallow dirt and the chalk of the baseline.

“You ok there, son?” James lifts me up by the crook of my elbow. I push him off.

“I’m done with this game,” I say, hurling my glove to the ground.

“That’s what I thought.” His voice is full of quiet triumph.

We walk back to the truck without exchanging a word. He waits for the rattle of the engine after he’s turned his key and I cinch the seatbelt tight around my waist. We pull out of the gravel lot and onto the back route road through the woods. The pine boughs

hang low over the truck as we drive and I can't help but notice how our headlights swim the dark like two fish silently heading home.

Name

Marcia Makowski was the one I waited for, my Friday at 3 o'clock who always barged into the salon twenty minutes late, the soles of her gold sandals slapping unrepentantly on the tile.

"Nina," she'd bellow, flexing her toes as she plopped down in the chair. "I think you're gonna have to shave the bunions today." And though she'd sigh and sip wine while I pumiced her feet, her hands would never lie still in her lap.

As my harl muh nee, my grandmother, as you say in English, she looked like a woman who had married for money. She had it, that wax mold smile – lips rigged tightly over her teeth – that belonged to most women accustomed to posing, whose glowing complexions are a manifestation of their sense of duty rather than an indication of their love.

Once, she asked me about my name.

"Nina can't be what you're really called," she accused, nodding to my hair, my skin, my tear-shaped eyes. "That's an American name."

"I changed my name, Eun Kyung, when I came here," I explained. "To make things easier."

Her hands lifted to her mouth and she bit the wedding band on her finger.

"So you changed your name because you thought a different one would give you a better life?"

I nodded and her face moved, folding in on itself, skin twisting around the corners of her lips and eyes. It reminded me of the old Korean folklore that says if you laugh and

cry at the same time you'll grow hair on your bottom, so you must be sure of the thing you'll do."

I almost said that aloud but thought better of it. Instead, I smiled. And she held out two colors of nail polish and asked me which one I thought she should choose.

First Date

It was tense in the movie theater, thick with fear and the sticky mist of too many perfumes coupling in the dark. Silence hung like the velveteen drapes sagging down against the walls. There were no shuffling hands in popcorn bags or the scuff of tennis shoes hiking up the center aisle.

“Are you scared?” I asked him.

“Terrified,” he said.

Violins whined and scratched as the girl onscreen climbed the rickety staircase. I hunkered down in my seat, splaying my fingers in front of my eyes. She crept towards the door, wet hair flattened onto her shivering face. The lungs of the audience suspended breath. She grasped the doorknob. His arm clamped onto mine. And she jerked the door open.

“You ready?” he asked as we got up, the house lights smudging faces in the humming crowd. It wasn't until we were outside, walking under the cleansing wash of snow, that I realized he hadn't let go of my hand.

Danger on the Mountain

-or-

Gillian Learns to Ski

At age nineteen, I am still coming to grips with the reality that I am not a natural athlete. Am I energetic? Sure. In shape? Occasionally. But hand me a ball, racket, bat or any other athletic accessory and I find myself feeling somewhat bewildered. Considering my complete lack of hand-eye coordination, the fact that I couldn't ride a bike until I was ten and my overriding natural instinct to avoid all forms of physical exertion, this shouldn't come as a surprise. Still, I can't help but feel indignant when someone suggests that I am anything other than a capable sportsman. To know your weakness is one thing, to have the discussion of it become a source of amusement for your friends, is quite another. Nevertheless, it is purely my own foolishness, my irrational need to prove everyone wrong that brought me last Saturday to the precipice of a mountain high above the Pennsylvania foothills where I attempted, for the first time in my life, to ski.

Okay, back that up a bit. I have actually tried to ski once before. I was fourteen and my single endeavor consisted of loitering around a ski lift for a half an hour until I came to my senses and beat a swift retreat back to the lodge, forsaking chapped lips and the possibility of brain damage, for the more pleasant company of egg nog and a muffin.

That experience aside (or perhaps, as a result of it) when one of my fellow RA's suggested at a meeting that we organize a ski trip for our college dorm, my offer to help chaperone it was not met with overwhelming enthusiasm.

“C’mon guys,” I said, trying my best to ignore their panicked expressions.

“What’s the big deal? It’ll be fun!”

My troop of co-workers exchanged meaningful glances, holding what seemed to be a brief, telepathic summit. *She looks pretty determined*, they squinted. *But who are we kidding? She’ll never actually make it down the mountain.*

And in that moment, my resolve faltered. What was I thinking? That I, a girl straight from the corn-fed byways of the southern piedmont, in possession of no particular physical aptitude and without the finesse or agility to fake it, was going to participate in perhaps the most dangerous of all winter sports, or at least the only one that would require me to sign a waiver in case of death or horrible disfigurement? They were right; I wouldn’t make it down the mountain. Time to bow out gracefully and collect my dignity at the door. But then, as I looked over at their faces, grinning confidently in the knowledge of their own athletic superiority, I knew that it was too late. I was locked in. I was going to have to brave the slopes and prove to myself and to them that I, despite all evidence to the contrary, would be able to ski.

The heater on the bus clanks and sputters. It’s 9:30 in the morning and thirty-odd college students are yawning, watching their breath turn to fog in the crisp, February air. The scene is idyllic. Iridescent shards of sunlight splinter through the windows of the bus as its wheels crunch over the icy pavement. Excitement is stirring.

“Who’s ready to ski?” my friend Joanna shouts. She is standing up in the aisle, stylish and pristine in her white snow gear with curly red hair licking her shoulders. She’s self-assured, suave, and an accomplished skier. She has promised to help me today, and

suddenly, buoyed by her confidence, I am filled with hope. I can do this! What is a mere mountain in the face of courage and determination?

“Who’s ready to ski?” Joanna shouts again.

And this time, I respond, pumping my fist high into the air, “I am!”

It’s funny how quickly one’s mood can change. Even forty-five minutes earlier, strapped into my skis at the bottom of the lift, I had been okay. Looking at the outdoor map of all the slopes at the resort, I felt like I had some idea of what I was getting myself into. For instance, it had seemed smart to stay away from slopes named after natural disasters – The Avalanche, The Blizzard, The Typhoon. My speed sounded a little more like places an elderly British gentleman might stay while on holiday in France – The Continental, The Royal, etc.

Now, however, as I teeter at the edge of The Imperial, clutching my poles to my chest and sucking in lungfuls of air, it has become clear that my thought process was severely misguided.

“Do you think you might be ready to try it now?” Joanna asks, the patience in her voice beginning to show signs of wear. I have, in fact, been telling her “Just give me a second” for the past fifteen minutes and I can tell that my efforts to stall our inevitable descent have begun to annoy her, ever so slightly

“Okay, okay, fine. I’m ready,” I whimper, crossing myself, desperate to remember the final words of the Lord’s Prayer.

“Alright then,” she whoops. “Let’s go!” She heaves her body forward, digs her poles into the snow, and then, she’s gone.

This is it. I know I have to follow her. I muster my flagging courage, set my jaw, and push off.

Immediately, I begin to scream. My reaction might be premature as I've only traveled about four feet, but speed has never been my thing and to be at the mercy of any amount of it sends me spiraling into a panic.

"Joanna, what do I do?" I yelp.

"You're fine," she yells. "Just remember that to slow down, you have to turn!"

"You have to what?"

But it's too late. I'm off, plummeting down the slope and veering uncontrollably to the side.

"What do I do? What do I do?" I screech, but I can't hear her answer. Only her laughter, trickling like champagne down the mountain as I bellow with all the fire in my belly that *those goddamn trees had better get the hell out of the way!* And as I speed violently towards a clump of leering evergreens, I can only think about Sunny Bono and how he at least got to be a senator and have sex with Cher before he died and that its not fair that I have to go this way seeing as I've never even been kissed.

Poof.

The world is white and cold. I cannot move. I can only lift my face enough to notice that I am buried deep in the bowels of the tree line.

Joanna pokes her head through a curtain of branches. "Get up."

"No," I mutter, hunching my shoulders into the ground.

"*Gillian,*" she warns.

"Leave me alone."

“Fine. You asked for it.” And by the tone of her voice I can tell that she is about to embark on a tough love mission in an attempt to rouse me from my new home beneath the snow.

I feel a hand on my back. “Get up you motherfucker,” she yells, yanking my scarf down so she can shout into my ear. “Get your fat ass outta this powder and go!”

Spurred into action less by her stinging epithets than by the realization that snow has somehow managed to work its way into my bra, I heft myself up, grabbing nearby tree trunks as leverage.

Joanna is waiting for me out on the slope. She has regained her composure and transformed herself back into a model of maternal compassion. After I wobble over to her, a clumsy snow beast emerging from its wooded den, she sighs and clucks her tongue. “Darling,” she says, reaching her fingers into my knotted mass of hair, “You’ve got some twigs all up in this shit.”

The second half of my trip down the mountain continues much like the first. I establish an alternating pattern of skiing and launching myself into stunning aerial maneuvers that leave me wheezing in the snow, my humiliation at belly-flopping in such a spectacular manner exacerbated by the fact that squadrons of sixth graders are barreling towards me and laughing as I struggle wildly to get out of their way.

However, as the afternoon progresses, I am beginning, little by little, to build my confidence. My fear of becoming a quadriplegic has receded to the point that in my head, as I fumble down the trail, I can hear the voice of Dick Button, Winter Olympics commentator extraordinaire, tracking my progress for the good people at NBC.

“Well, there she goes, Bob. She’s picking up speed, holding nicely there. She’s looking steady and...Oh! What a collision! I hope that little boy’s parents have health insurance ‘cause that’s gonna leave a mark. Now, back to you in the studio.”

The sun is sending its final flares up above the tree line as Joanna, having exhausted her patience holding my hand through the less-than-strenuous rigors of the bunny slopes, decides that I am in need of a challenge.

“Gillian,” she says, laying her hand on my shoulder and looking deep into my eyes, “I think that you’re ready for The Cobra.”

“The Cobra?” I gasp, eyeing the cavernous mouth of the trail that rises up beside me. It’s a steep and sinister looking slope with the corners of night already creeping their way onto its icy surface. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She nods, master sensei imparting power to her most prodigious pupil. “I’m sure.”

Chins up and shoulders square, we trudge towards the lift with a newfound sense of purpose – to end with a bang. It’s our last run of the day and as we board the ski lift for the final time, I am filled with a sudden rush of pride. Ha! The Cobra. Who should be afraid of such a thing? Not I. Not the girl who has, in a single day, faced off against such foes as The Eastsider, The Conquistador and The Wrangler, and come out alive! Oh no, I can already feel that this will be a glorious end, a prize jewel to put in my athletic crown. But just as we reach the top of the peak and I am leaping off the ski lift with the fire of triumph gleaming bright in my eyes, the unthinkable happens – my skis cross.

“Noooo!” I cry, my voice echoing out into the desolate air. It is before I have even laid a ski on the back of the mighty Cobra, that it has conquered me.

But somehow, as I’m tumbling past the other skiers, I realize in one clear moment that I am exactly where I’m supposed to be – on my stomach skidding down the side of this mighty mountain, hat gone, skis flying off behind me, the wind on my face, the night at my back, eyes tearing and my mouth wide open, eating snow and loving it.

Blues

Can you tell me who plays the blues?

I cannot say why I need them. Only that tonight, as snow drifts past my window, high above this glittering sprawl, there is a certain melancholy in the air. And for once, the clatter of the streets, heartbeat of the city, is not song enough for me.

What can I ask for? I want the low, sweet whine of the sax and the throb of bass echoing in my bones.

I don't know much about it, only what I remember from the old days. My father and I rolling around town in our beat-up Sentra, listening to Miles Davis and the croon of his unmistakable horn. He smelled of baseball gloves and cologne, my father, who always told me to never be afraid of where you're going because still round the bend may be a new road or secret gate to lead you home.