

Between the Non and the Fiction

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A French Portrait

The young woman who still refers to herself as a girl makes her way up the four flights of stairs that sag with an ancient weight that can only be described as French. She has just paid over thirty Euros for a five-block cab ride, a mistake she notes to not make again. She is twenty-one, American and speaks Spanish and Italian, and has been in France for almost an hour. The ocean is one block away from her hotel, booked for only one night, her first night in Nice. She can hear it even though its waves are quiet. It is raining but only slightly, just enough to make her feel a little held by the moisture, a feeling for which she is silently thankful. It's early in the day, her night train from Venice having arrived around 9am. She is alone for the first time in her life, with no one she knows less than a fourteen-hour train back to Madrid. She is containing herself and it heightens her every move, in the way a piece of chocolate allowed to remain on the tongue long enough slowly becomes a part of your very taste. Aware of not rushing within her natural anxiety, she appears as a kitten might upon being brought home for the first time, stepping gingerly yet moving nonetheless. She is aware that life is *happening* to her.

Her large bag rides her like a bull, but it holds all she has to live with. She has formed a relationship with this bag, green and now sweaty where it touches her back. It is her familiar, her protector of all things she can value and hold. It silently becomes more and more a companion, now that she has only herself to share life with. She said goodbye to her friends in Italy the night before, a moment where she went through the

motions of leaving without realizing that she was, alone. But she has the green bag still, the bag she will touch more than people for the time being.

“Bon jour, Mademoiselle.” This greets her from the mouth of the young man who appears to be her age when the door is opened. She becomes aware suddenly of how she looks, but just as quickly it doesn’t matter. She has nothing to prove to him, and she guards herself with this secret. She has not showered in almost three days, but she doesn’t think she smells in an offensive way. Her long, thick hair is pulled away from her face but is still undone, and her attire consists of layers that don’t necessarily match. Black pants and two shirts layered, black and white sneakers she bought in Spain. She thinks she’s more European looking than she suspects, and this makes her smile.

“Bon jour,” she replies, meek and yelling at herself for caring because at nuas°
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‘ú^Ø‡Àj]] ÿ] C±] ”g] ;XÒ]] Å2½ts for the rumored scoff, but instead hears his accented, “What is your name?”

She tells him, and he checks his books for her reservation, the room she secured from Venice two days earlier. There is no lobby, no staff other than him. He is so young, she thinks, so young and so simply French and male. He smokes casually, romantically, and his eyes crinkle slightly without losing their oval power. His hair is dark and mildly waves on his well-shaped head. He is not very big, though not weak in presence, and he is gentle with her.

His office is peeling wall paper and water stains, a dark, rocking table papered with probably important hotel documents, smoke that knows to go right out the window kept wide open even though it’s raining, and smaller French pieces that do not match but belong. “You have a single, no?” She loves how the no means yes, and she nods, happy he is nice and simple and not aware that he is sort of taking care of her.

She is tempted to reply with, “Oui,” but says, “Yes” instead, suddenly aching for a room to be alone in, rather than simply alone in a country. He takes her a few feet down the painfully, wonderfully narrow hallway to the second door, which he tells her is the bathroom. The next door is hers, and when they walk in to the decidedly tarnished gold room, she thinks it is perfect.

He leaves her after a moment, ceremoniously closing the door behind him, leaving her with a key, something she never saw as cherishable before. She stands in her room that is two-thirds bed, the rest a charmingly small sink and mirror, pale yellow table and chair. She has never been a room that is floor to ceiling busy wallpaper. The name King Louis does not stop dancing in her mind, the pattern on the walls trellised and

ornate, a spirit from a more decadent time, peeling and uneven, gold and darker gold on lighter gold. But the bed is bedecked with a red, plaid wool blanket, completely offsetting the walls, simply humorous and comfy.

The first thing she does in this privacy in which she is not so alone anymore is brush her teeth and look at herself in the mirror for a few minutes. She cannot see anything different on her face to match the new sense of herself on the inside. Maybe the outside corners of her eyes are a little stronger, or maybe she's just looking at herself more intensely than she realizes, like peering down something deep, trying to find the bottom. She doesn't smile, instead watching her mouth settle into a Mona Lisa. She looks at the reflection and sees trust, then she turns her head to look out her view.

The rooftops wave before her, layer after layer of brilliance made dull from centuries of weather, a crop of small iron chimneys stout and staunch like little fat men observing her. Clothes hang shamelessly from string rods, and plants spill over balconies like green waterfalls frozen in time. Just above the roofs protecting the life beneath them, she can see a thin purpling gray of ocean, a line narrow and even but endless. She smiles, acknowledging the irony of this ocean view. But she can hear it and feel it, and she knows it will not go anywhere before she can bask before it.

She has not had a real privacy for weeks, forever sharing space with strangers and the foreign. She looks at her bed, a generous size for her single soul, and she aches for the lover she knows she will share the rest of her life with she has waiting for her back home. But she does not dwell, she knows this time is hers and hers alone, and she will not squander it on thoughts irrelevant.

She takes off her clothes piece by piece, almost guiltily for they are becoming as familiar to her as her own skin. She stands naked, alone and sure, then lies down on the bed meant to hold her body at that moment, in that city. She thinks about the love that has been made in this room, possibly scandalous, maybe during a rendezvous, probably passionate. She stretches out and looks over her body, allowing herself to indulge in this moment of solace and becoming. Becoming of what she does not know, but she feels it, whatever it is, coming to her. She has all of Nice, all of France, all of the world to meet, whenever she chooses. But for now she is going to lie there, ready and in her glory.

Construction and the Heart

The heat smells like syrup so I crave pancakes whenever it gets cold enough for the radiator to kick on. As a kid we'd sometimes get pancakes on Sunday mornings. Every now and then my mom would put bananas in them, and the fruit would burn our tongues in its soft but blazing heat. I liked to read the comics, TV guide and magazine insert that revealed famous people born that week. They only came on Sundays, and I usually had to wait for my mom to read them first, even if she was on the international news section and I was sitting next to her, waiting. I have a patch of silver hair that grows out of my scalp from my birthmark but is usually buried deep below the layers of red that constitute my mane. When I was young and made to wait around for something, I'd sometimes search for the silver strands and pull them out, one at a time, until I couldn't see them anymore. The silver hairs are coarser, stronger, like they belong on my head more than the red ones do.

I remember doing this in the house I moved into when I was ten. I don't think I was aware of the gray patch much before then. It was a new house that we had built, and that summer, we drove over to the acre that was to be my new home a few times a week.

There were men everywhere.

Men putting up the frame, men on ladders, men crushing beer bottles on their heads before throwing them down from the third floor that didn't have the windows put in yet. My brother and I made a small fortune recycling the cans we scavenged from the work areas.

There was Gino the contractor, Mike the carpenter, Tony the guy with the nail gun, and many, many more whose names and faces have blurred since that summer they were a regular part of my life. I felt like a budding wonder around them. I wasn't just a kid there; I was a little woman with lots to say who could play the piano. I was nearly a B cup and around 5' 6'' tall; a good two inches taller than my Mom. I got to have conversations with grown men who wore dirty jeans and pitted out white t-shirts, with a different bandana for the days of the week wrapped around their sometimes receding hair lines.

All of our furniture was in the garage for the summer because the house didn't get done before we had to move out of the old one, so we spent 6 weeks living in one of Gino the contractor's empty condos. With no air conditioning, no phone and no cable, we spent as little time there as possible. Our summer club was about two miles from the new house making it easy to stop by and check on the progress- and to procrastinate returning to the dreaded hot and boring as hell condo.

I started to really look forward to the near daily ritual of dropping by the new house. The guys were usually packing everything up for the day by the time we got there, which was perfect for having some real conversations. Real conversations meant feeling like what I said was interesting, that I wasn't going to be judged, or too smart. Plus I got to play my piano that was sitting in the garage between the couch and my parents' armoire. A little path had been maneuvered for me so I could stand and play- a bit crouched at the knee if I wanted to reach the pedal. I had played for three years by that summer, and took a great pleasure in being impressive at something. To the men,

my playing Für Elise and some Mozart was as magical as when I see a child today do something I cannot, like speak a language I don't know.

And so I was the little siren, who played for the construction worker audience and basked in every moment of masculine attention. This was all new for me. The majority of male attention in my life until that point had hardly been positive- family aside. My Dad was wonderful, my brother a friend. There were a scattering of sweet, well-intentioned lads who went to school with me, but the boys I *really* liked were always hot and cold, and toyed with my tender, newly pubescent heart. Like Rob Casella, the boy from around the corner who had been a year older in school. He had said he liked me the previous summer, or at least his scary older brother had told me so. And for a while Rob rang my doorbell asking if I could “come out”, until he was left back a grade and suddenly in my homeroom and now not a friend at all really. Now he felt more like a test, a test of how cool I was. The only test I didn't do well on. The men who worked on my house were always nice, always ready to say “hi” and wave, maybe even wink. The winks made my heart speed up.

One of the best winkers was Robby, the gentle and extremely swarthy landscaper who turned our lawn from a plot of red clay into a flowering, grassy yard. He was in his mid-twenties, of Italian descent and more man than I had ever been aware of before.

He lived in that area so he sometimes kept at work after the rest of the landscapers left. He was friendly, and very easy to talk to. It did not occur to me that a ten-year-old should not have such easy conversations with a twenty-seven year-old man. He was all

niceness; nice seems to be the best way to describe him. He was that simple. But he also emanated masculinity, which made him perfect practice for a first time flirter.

When I spoke with Robby I was aware that I was a female, and it made me pay attention to everything. I thought about my hair and how my friend's moms always told me how pretty it was, so red, and not about the kids who called me Pippy. I remembered the old men in my church that offered me a nickel for every freckle, not the taunts at recess about my 'freckle face'. These were good things to these people. Robby made me feel like I was a good thing. He looked at me the way people do who have been in your life forever and therefore stop really looking at you. Instead they just see you.

So I looked forward to Robby still being at the new house when we stopped by. While my Dad was talking to the contractors, my sister was poking around the wood slivers and my brother was climbing a tree in our wooded yard- which was by far the best thing about this new house, I talked to the men. And my Mom watched.

She saw me maintaining eye contact a little too intensely for a ten-year-old. She saw the men and how they sometimes watched me walk from the car to the house with more than a gentle curiosity. She saw me know this, and she knew I loved it. I made the mistake of mentioning Robby a few times, but not as casually as I had assumed. I would look in the rear view mirror before getting out of the car and walking up to the house, the same mirror in which she caught me in the back seat looking under my arms for sprouting hairs.

But Robby was no threat really. He was so nice, so simple. He played basketball in our newly paved driveway months after his landscaping commitments had ceased simply because he liked hanging out with my nine-year-old brother. He simply liked

playing basketball and being a nice guy. It took quite a bit of hindsight to admit to myself that a man his age should not find it so easy to really “hang out” with children. He never made anyone uncomfortable, except maybe my mother, who for all intensive purposes was extremely tolerant considering she at times had a very attractive guy innocently playing with her pre-pubescent kids- although, she did find a way to break the spell.

She told me about the metal plate in his head. It all made sense. Robby was, well, bordering simple himself. She told me about the motorcycle accident he had barely survived a couple years earlier on our pre-developed street, the old “Killer Hill”. This made Robby’s childlike gentility glaringly obvious, while slightly disenchanting me from the notion that I would be woman enough for him one day. It made me pity him, and his simple language and gentle manner became less his being a handsome rebel with a gentle soul than his being, well, Robby.

And so ended my first experience with men in the working-with-their-hands business. But it would not be my last.

Time passed and I grew and eventually was a junior in high school, driving my brother and I to class every morning. Our house had been the first on the street, and little by little our neighborhood had grown. When I was sixteen, work on one of the last lots began, and it was right next-door. Once again I found myself in the company of many

male construction workers, except this time I was in full-blown teenage-hood and pretty much on the tail end of physical maturation.

Around mid-October the foundation guys moved on and in came the framers. They put up the general structure of the home. In this posse of mainly stocky, bearded men who had cigarettes dangling from fat lips and cracks showing above dropping pants there was Lou. Ah, Lou. He was beautiful. He wore J. Crew sweaters and cute navy baseball hats that had no sports team on them. His jeans hugged his athlete's body and he was about six feet tall, and dark. I've always been a sucker for dark men. They cool off my red.

I developed a morning ritual. The trucks pulled up to the side of my yard around 7am, and I walked to the car around 7:20 to leave for school. The men were usually still hovering around with their coffees as the supplies were unloaded, so Lou was typically only about twenty feet from my car. The walk from my house to the car was the most important part of my day for almost three months. It was the only time I saw him. It made getting ready for school new and exciting. Clothes were my main concern, as was how cool I looked as I walked the 50 feet across my driveway.

It was here that I mastered the walking-but-not-looking-while-actually-noticing-everything type movement that signifies the mating ritual of most young Americans. We aren't as obvious as the Europeans nor as indifferent. I was trying to pull off both, and I guess I was fairly successful, because after two months of obsessing about how to smile without really smiling at anyone in particular and still not look like an idiot, the moment arose for me to really meet this handsome man who worked with his hands.

Until then only a few glorious waves and hellos had been exchanged, but no real conversation. I had learned his name during a terrifying ten seconds when I let my gaze linger a little too long in his direction while walking up my driveway. From the roof (how sexy is that?) he noticed and said hello. He asked my name. I said Elizabeth. He said he was Lou. I said hi again, brilliantly, and looked at my feet as I made my way to the backdoor, trying not to fall or trip or pee until I was inside my house. As I had inevitably turned a stunning shade of crimson to match my hair, I'm sure it came as no surprise that I had encountered the mysterious framer. The moment I walked in I could not help but burst out triumphantly to my Mom that his name was Lou. Lou, the construction Adonis. My Mom might have been a little wary after the tone in my voice held that uncontrollable excitement only a lovely moment with a crush can evoke, but I chose to ignore any frowning upon my cosmic interaction with him.

Because my Mom and I had been joking about the hot construction worker- so young, so well dressed, so handsome, for months. I had not had a boyfriend since the seventh grade (and I had had two that year, which would be the pinnacle of my dating career until college). It was nice to have a common male adoration between us. It was all innocence to her. To me it was the point of going to school in the morning. I got to see him on the way.

And then the afternoon came, after the swim season had ended, which thus enabled me to come home in the afternoon and catch the end of his workday, that Lou and I talked. We mustered a conversation out of background info and current status. I remember becoming very aware that he was a man, and that I felt like a woman but still wasn't quite sure. Up close he was still handsome, but something more like reality mixed

in with his face than I had been able to picture from a distance. That moment was about closing distances.

And so happened the first instance of a guy giving me his phone number. After finding out he was a whopping 24, was going to school part time and about to graduate with a degree in graphic design, was a high jumper and loved his Mom and extended Italian family, had surfed and modeled in California for a while before going back to school, and wanted to see me sometime, I got Lou's phone number. He wrote it down on a piece of spare wood from the frozen ground with a carpenter's pencil. There was no way he could have mine; no way he could call my house and deal with my parents. This made the situation all the more appealing in an appropriately rebellious way. I did not know it then, but Lou would be the one and only great rebellion of my adolescence. We agreed to meet sometime; I would come to his place (yikes!). I walked off with the piece of wood glimmering in my winter coat until I had the privacy of my room to stash it in the wooden chest that until that point had held spare blankets.

And so I called him, and we talked. We talked and he made sure to be quiet if someone in my house picked up the line. I learned about his hunting, and that he liked redheads and had noticed me the first time I walked by. He liked snowboarding and was an uncle, and I immediately pictured myself on the white peaks of some resort, a little Italian child running up to me calling me "Aunty". I was relieved he was getting a degree, and felt slightly jealous that he had so casually taken time to hang out in California.

One time I called him from where I was baby-sitting and I took a great pleasure in telling the three little girls that I was on the phone with my boyfriend, although the real

part of me knew he didn't fill that role out the way I wanted him too. I just liked impressing them with my love life.

Eventually we settled on a date. I was to drive to his house and watch a movie. I told my parents I was going to a friend's, and gave her Lou's sacred number to call me incase they went looking for me there- a trick I had picked up from an episode of "Roseanne". I drove to his place through a ghetto in the snow, following directions that didn't force me to get on any major highway. I had, after all, just gotten my license.

We watched a movie with Antonio Banderas and some redhead, and he joked that they were us, and I felt incredible. We laid on a couch together, and eventually he kissed me. It was all magic, all soft easiness and utterly heightened excitement contained in my cool exterior. It was the third real kiss I had had, and the first to actually feel good. He told me how pretty I was, and I said thanks and blushed.

And then I didn't see him a whole lot. There was a moment we talked in my driveway on an afternoon my Mom was due home around 4pm, and he played with a staple gun against the shed in my backyard. The staples are still there, rusted. My Mom pulled in the driveway and Lou and I scattered, but she had seen us. She asked if there was anything she needed to know about, and I said no, we were just talking. So she knew, and yet she didn't. She never found out about the two times I went to his place, alone, at night. She never knew he made me feel like a goddess but that we didn't have a whole lot in common and he was, after all, 24. He was funny at times, he once said that he "wasn't the brightest bulb in the bunch", which ended up being the real reason I stopped needing his presence in my life. And he didn't do anything for my 17th birthday.

I eventually stopped calling him. But for a few months he was the reason to put mascara on in the morning and walk with a secret smile from a secret man on my face.

Estella

Estella Wilkes and I are becoming friends. She is a black woman in her late fifties and I am a twenty-two-year-old white woman about to graduate college. She has been cleaning homes for over thirty years and is a Grandmother. I baby-sit the children in one of the homes she cleans. We enjoy each other's company amidst little boys running and the fresh smell of cleaning solvent.

Both of us like to wear comfortable clothes when we're there. We know it's pointless to try and look nice; there's no one to impress other than the kids, and they're happy to run and squeal as I chase them around the loop on the first floor. It's better I wear comfortable shoes while cutting corners around antique dining sets and state-of-the-art electronics. Estella likes to wear sweat suits. They are usually mismatched and I can tell they were once bright, now dulled by years of washing and contact with harsh cleaners. I notice bleach stains on her black sweat pants; the stains are never from anything dirty.

The children love her. She's been working for the father's family since he was a child. Now she works for him and his wife and children. She comes twice a week for three or four hours at a time. Mondays she'll do the second and third floors, and on Thursdays, the day I baby-sit from noon till four so the mom can have time to do things childless, Estella cleans the first floor. She also helps with the laundry. The younger one runs up to Estella all the time singing her name with a noticeable comfort. Both of them like to try and help her clean, sometimes bringing out their fake cleaning toys to join in

the fun of vacuuming, or mopping, or dusting. Estella laughs and says, “Thank you, boys”, and she never tells them to stop unless they get in the way.

And she brings the dog a treat every time she comes, so the dog loves her too. When I make the kids their lunch, I always ask her if she would like something to eat, but she says, “No, no honey. I brought something for myself. Thank you though.” I love her voice. She lived in Alabama until she was twenty, she tells me. She’s been living in Pittsburgh ever since. She asks me if I like it here, and I say, “Yes, I do. I’d like to live in some other cities too, but I wouldn’t mind settling down here one of these days.” This reminds me of my options. My world that is up to me, that I can have anywhere. She seems pleased though, that I like it here.

Most of the time she works around us, the children and I, as if she were the woman of the house. She has a graceful way of spraying down a countertop and making it gleam so the veining within the marble pops. When she vacuums, she could be dancing with a distinguished gentleman. She knows where everything goes. I forget she doesn’t live there sometimes. Then she’ll get her own soda out of the refrigerator and take a break. It’s when she’s standing still that I notice her as not at home.

We both agree the family we work for is extremely generous. The mother will leave to get something like a massage or her nails done and leave us other women to care for her children and home, but it all seems ok. When I get to their house and ring the doorbell, the dog comes barking my arrival and usually a red-faced smiling boy-child greets me at the door and then struggles to turn the hard to reach knob. The mother, Halpen, a woman born into the kind of superior wealth only women whose first name is a maiden name can be born into, then comes to the door and smiles. She is very pretty and

gentle, but firm in what she wants. I can tell this by the kind way she will ask me to make her children lunch as she's still standing there, not yet ready to leave but aware that I'm there to do things for her. She always says, "Thank you" in a most genuine way, so it makes it ok that she's going to have lunch and read a magazine then shop while I change her 2-year-old's diaper. She offers no apologies for the life she leads, and always says thanks to those of us that help... for the money and a place in their family.

Estella and I hang out. We talk like women who share a place and time together on a weekly basis. In a way we are equals, both technically employed and on the job in a house that is magnificent and equally not ours. She cleans it; I nourish the bodies it holds. We are a team sometimes. The kids respond to her in a way that shows she has been in that house as long as their memories can reason. Her name is an original to their mouths, one of the first words uttered with familiarity. It is like she lives in that house after she leaves, and she comes and goes as if one of the beds she makes is hers.

Sometimes I bring food to eat since the boys mostly eat French fries and chicken nuggets. I offer Estella some grapes or some cookies if I bring something worth sharing. She will say yes to the food from me, but never takes any from the kitchen cupboard she dusts so well. I feel free to munch on what is lying around, but not Estella. She'll sip the can of soda she brings from home while taking a break between folding laundry and sweeping. I notice how she waits for Halpen to leave before heading to the freezer for her drink. She puts the can of pop in the freezer right when she gets there, and it is the first thing she does the moment we hear the garage door close, knowing Halpen is officially gone. I guess Estella does not have a separate beverage refrigerator in her basement, so she needs the freezer to make her drink cold quick. It's funny how we both

usually head for nourishment upon Halpen's departure. As if her house weren't enough, even with its twall and Ethan Allen grandeur.

If the boys are down for their nap the two of us sit on the soft couches and chat. She folds laundry into the basket between her legs, her body perched on the rim of the cushion. I usually find a movie to have on as background while I get some reading for school done. I try to get as much class work done as possible while I'm there. But we end up chatting. Sometimes we talk about the film, sometimes about the weather. The other day she saw a cardinal sitting on the picket fence in the backyard. We had a clear view out of the large French doors, and she couldn't get over the brilliance of the bird against the drab of the wintry backyard. We marveled together, and I made a note to myself to bring my laundry next time I babysat. The parents insisted from the beginning that I do my laundry there. I doubt Estella even considers throwing in so much as a sock with one of their loads. She folds the dad's boxers and the mom's nightgowns. It's very intimate even to touch someone else's bedclothes. Estella knows every article of clothing they wear.

I would like to know more about her life outside our house of work. Her husband called once, sounding very anxious to talk to her. His name is Duke and his accent is not as gently southern as hers. Turns out their furnace blew the night before and the repairmen still weren't there at noon. It was about seven degrees and snowing. She calmed him down, almost like she was talking to one of the boys. He seemed helpless. Estella called the repair company and told me the next week it was fixed by the time she got home. When I baby-sit I make sure I wear an extra layer. The high ceilings make the heat thinner, and I get cold sometimes, especially when I'm sitting still reading or

watching television. Estella works in her sweat suits and never complains about being cold.

She rarely sits, only when she's folding laundry. I don't like it when I'm reading on a couch and I realize she's vacuuming under my feet. I want her to sit down with me and tell me about how she met Duke. I bet she met him when she was really young, and he was in his late twenties. I'll bet he lived with his Mama till he married Estella, who I imagine with long, shiny black hair instead of the tight sparkling mound of curls she dons now. She didn't have to keep it short then to keep out of soapy pails.

I picture her with a long red dress with tiny white polka dots, sleeveless in the Alabama heat. I think maybe Duke wooed her with a new house of her own, a house she couldn't keep as clean as the homes she has spent her life making spotless. I think that her skin didn't shine like a well-oiled coffee table; it was dry and powdered. And her clothes didn't have the clean stains of bleach and ammonia. Her skin smelled like lemons but not from dusting, and her arms were toned from an active youth not yet versed in the pressures of leaving a marble counter top clean without streaks. But her eyes twinkled like they do now, like the star Estella is when we talk about the simple things two women who share a space for a moment can talk about.

I learn about her neighborhood, and how she and some people from next door got together and shoveled five driveways after our last storm. Once they were all working, the snow wasn't so hard to tackle in a group. I laugh to myself picturing Halpen and her neighbors going from door to door, shovels in hand.

She tells me that before she gets here, she cleans another house. For a woman without a family. She is very proud of her job. I think she knows I can see that there's

more to cleaning a home than simply wiping away the dirt you can see. “It’s tough work, you know. It’s tough work.” She is not bragging, she’s telling me her truth.

She asks me what I’m doing next year, after I graduate. I tell her how I don’t know for sure; I’m hoping the economy picks up. She sympathizes, and I feel foolish. Then I feel embarrassed for feeling foolish, because Estella, like Halpen, makes no apologies for her life.

And then she leaves. She leaves around 2:30 and I stay till 4pm, but she waits around for a ride sometimes. Sometimes she walks to the bus, but she’s managed a ride with the extra cold weather we’ve had lately. She puts on a little black leather cap, like something a golfer would wear to a biker club. I tell her I like it. “Oh, my daughter gave it to me” she says, pride shimmering in her voice like a pail of bubbles in the sun. Her daughter who went to college in Pennsylvania and who has a little girl of her own, who in Estella’s opinion is a devil but lovely and so *smart*, the smartest creature ever born and lives twenty minutes away.

When she does walk out the door, she makes sure she says goodbye first, careful not to wake the boys from their quiet time. I say, “See you next week!” and hope it.

I have gotten used to working with Estella. She cleans me up a little too.

Wombs

My mother says I went to the school nurse a noticeable amount when I was young because I was bored in class. This is her explanation, and everyone but me believes it. Never mind that she has worked on a pediatric psychiatric ward for twenty years. I look at it another way. I remember going to the nurse because being sick meant people caring for you. You weren't wrong to be sick, it made you innocent and immediately in need of affection, a little TLC. My mother tells people I went because the curriculum was so easy for me I found it as an excuse to leave my mundane class environment. I admit, it was easy. I felt smarter than my teachers as a first grader. But the nurse was just so nice, and every now and then I needed that stomachache to get me a smile, a little concern. My mother doesn't know that now, when I get a stomachache, I name it Mom and take care of it myself.

My mother is lying in bed right now. She had her womb removed, and I think that it is ironic that as I am getting ready to leave home for good, my first home on this earth has been removed from me. My girlfriend posed the question to me, after I confided in her about my mother's hysterectomy, that if I died, would she still be considered a mother? No womb, no child. Good question. Yes, obviously, she would still be considered a mother. Sort of like once a blank always a blank- but still. Good question.

She told me about her surgery the same way she usually delivers serious, personal information. We're always alone, this way we can cry without anyone else seeing us being emotional. This time she had to do it on the phone, since I was at school and

unable to be cornered in some moment in passing. She called me, alone, a phenomenon unto itself, to tell me she was having her womb removed, a hysterectomy. I knew something was going to be said ceremoniously when it was just Mom, no Dad or sibling to pass the phone to.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yeah, Mom. Hi.”

“How are you?” Note the timidity of her tone. I knew there was something at stake when she wasn’t giving me the gently inquisitive what are you up to.

“Good... good. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to call to tell you I’m having a hysterectomy in a few weeks.” I could hear a scared woman through the phone, a voice not easily swallowed by a daughter. She didn’t sound scared, but I knew she was terrified. I just knew, the way I can always tell when my sister was on the verge of tears even when she was smiling and laughing with her friends.

“Will you be OK?” First thought in my head.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be fine.” Sometimes we need to trust in words more than we care to acknowledge.

I had been sleeping at ten in the morning on a Friday, and after she told me and I had asked her the few medical questions that I could arrange well enough to present to her, I was left alone. I pulled this knowledge around me like a black quilt and tried to go back to sleep. Ended up dreaming about lifesavers and ropes.

I didn’t get to be around for the surgery, was still out of the country. I always wish I could have been there. I imagine what it might have been like.

She wakes up momentarily from her post-surgical reverie, and I see her wince.

“Hi”, I say.

She mumbles a greeting moan, and I look at her with nothing else to say. My womb hurts right now, like something is leaving it before its ready. I put my hand on hers, the other on my belly, and say yes to getting her a drink of apple juice.

“I cannot show this to my parents. They will *kill* me.” I put an extra little something on the “kill” part, because it’s how I truly felt. I was terrified to show them that report card, that piece of paper with the fateful C+ on it. The plus meant nothing. It wasn’t an Apple or a Baker; it wasn’t of these two clans, though one less respectable than the other, of acceptable grades. My English teacher Mrs. Wilson who had been my favorite teacher in my best subject lost an assignment then refused to believe me when I insisted I had in fact turned it in. It was one of the first moments in my life in which an adult disappointed me. I became completely disenchanted with teacher-hood, a state I had previously revered since school was something I had always been good at. Really good at. She lost it and now I had a C+ since my homework grade plummeted from a zero being added into the average. And now I was fucked. In simple, acutely human terms, I was fucked. I would be grounded- and for a considerable while. I knew this before I even got home from school that day. I grounded myself while hearing my mother’s eventual voice in my head.

So I ripped it up. Before I could stop myself my hands had turned the record of my fucked-dom into small, nearly square scraps, their jagged edges hot from my frenzy. I ripped the whole thing but made sure I kept all the pieces. I knew I would have to show her eventually. It was funny, really, how inescapable I was from myself, even then.

After a few days the secret became too much so before I went to bed one night, on a night my mother had already retired to her room since she had work early the next day, with my Dad in some other city on business, I meticulously taped the pieced whole again, and carefully wrote a little letter explaining my fear of her reaction to my unjust C+, that I was so sorry, I promised no more grades under an A, and to please not be mad at. I tipped across the hall and slid the letter, written on my first stationary, under her door that had no light coming through the crack.

A few minutes later my door flew open, and my mother, so angry she could barely talk, threw my re-ripped report card back in my face, and spat out, “We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

That was one of the ways we used to communicate with one another.

My mother is home now, unable to really do much. Although she has no visible scars, she is hurt, and I think I know this unlike anyone else in our house. The men, meaning my fellow newly adult-aged brother and Father, can’t fathom it really, and my younger sister is too young to have spent much time thinking about the power of her womb. Not that I really know what its like. My mother needs to lay and rest, not lift anything and not drive. When she told me there would be no visible scars I first pictured what that meant the doctors would do to her, and I cramped on the inside. It’s a blessing,

I guess, the medical miracles that make the complex less complicated, but still. It was extracted like some hard to reach lost thing that fell down a hole with a barely fathomable bottom. It seems like it deserved more respect than that. Because sometimes you need the scars on the outside to help mend the rest. Sometimes you forget you should still be healing.

My mother asks me if I have made the salad yet, and I say, “No” because I haven’t. She looks her expected irritated. The Boy Who Cried Wolf pops in my head as I head to the fridge and begin taking out lettuce but no celery since I don’t like celery. I cut up some melon too since I know Mom loves it but she has an allergic reaction if she prepares it herself. Her hands swell. I also set the table without being asked. This is the point really, to do things for one another without being asked. But if you do everything for everyone else all the time, then what is there left for them to do? Especially if they have the time to do it themselves. I used this as my reasoning for years when it was time to begin chores. Always wait till asked to unload the dishwasher. Always wait till she says something about my clothes on the floor. Always wait till it’s her birthday or during a goodbye to say, “I love you.” It goes both ways.

My mother used to spend nearly four hours in the car every afternoon shuttling us kids around from activity to activity. Driving to the pool for my sister and I, back to the high school for my brother, off to the rink for public skating, back to get one of us at a music lesson. She manned the gold Volvo station wagon, her head held proud for at least eight years. I drove to Boston for the first time in high school and remember thinking that it only took three hours and was a long time to be sitting still. But she is not of an

active nature. Maybe it's because it was never nurtured. No gym class for girls where she went to Catholic school. Her brothers played some baseball. She learned to square dance in Long Island. I've been told that the more active you are growing up, the greater the odds that you'll have a healthier adulthood. I remind myself of this when I feel my own womb ache each month, thinking maybe this is a little too much, that mine might give out sooner than I want it too also. But I run at least three miles a day. I've always done sports. I should be fine, right?

My little sister walks in and announces she'll be going out tonight, and can she stay out till 12:30am? My mouth drops to the floor, and I sit back and wait for the obvious shoot-down. Why would she even try, especially with our mother unable to drive anywhere and Dad out of town for the night on business?

"I have a ride both ways."

Now I wait for the curfew to be mentioned. I wait for the battle I know I would have been ready to meet to commence. I wait for my mother to retaliate with one of her bullet-strong replies to the ridiculous. For this is ridiculous. My curfew was at least an hour earlier when I was her age, and every time I readied myself for an extension, I knew a brilliant and messy fight would ensue. Our fights always bring out everything there has ever been tension about, no matter what it begins about. A curfew battle can lead to a weight issue war; a homework grade to a you-never-have-anything-positive-to-say/you-are-never-grateful-for-anything-ever battle. It can be quite glorious really.

But my mother is weak now, and I watch in slow horror as she simply concedes. She doesn't look pleased, but she doesn't put any kind of effort into getting things her

way, into getting things *right*. My sister, apparently not as phased as I would have been, says, “Thanks” and quickly leaves the room, careful not to break the odd tension that hangs in the air. My womb aches suddenly, and I look at my mother, wondering when my worthy adversary became so indifferent. Maybe it’s wisdom. Maybe it’s all her scars the rest of us can’t see, but I know are they, deep below the surface. I know my name is on some of them.

I Knew You As A Virgin

I knew you when you were a virgin
Before he wet his fingers with you
Before he opened up your sky with his need
To know you

I knew you when your name was a secret on his tongue
Before your flower became a star
Before the cantaloupe's juice ran a stream down your thighs
Over your knees
Between your toes

I knew you before the smell of latex triggered the feel of sheet on skin
Before you saw him see the beauty in the curve between a rib
And a breast's beginning

I knew you before you lost your river
Before you left your present in someone else's bed
Before your hair smelled like his

I knew you before you realized you were cold
The nineteen years before him

I knew you as a virgin, girl
I knew you as a virgin

I'm Sorry, James

He asked me for a pen
And even though I had one
I said no
And it was like I stole his words
Or even killed them
By letting them drown in his mind
In the fluids of forgetting and
The wet that's left
When passion moves on

What if they could have saved
Or at least changed
The world

I wonder
And feel bad

La Discoteca

Man sweat dominates these establishments
bright dark holes where bodies pump
and drinks are drunk I cannot hold my head high here
am not proud or certain of my curves and my coloring
my red
my angel kisses
a head taller even than most things male here
like a fifth grader in gym class, the only one with a flow
and yet so rhythmless
and wise.
I avoid the male gaze.
It permeates the cloth I use
to both show off and protect, like a window,
the glass that holds a fancy drink.
“He” eyes flicker like pairs of dancing moths

but I had to go to Spain to learn to dance,
had to taste sangria made in the old way
to feel a rhythm there, in that holy place.
Other men’s hands on my hips-
that sensitive jutting of bone and tension from within,
all of this
a beat once foreign
an ocean visible
but from the chlorine harbor of a pool separate from the rock
and wave
my eyes burn all the more
now that I know what another’s salt tastes like.

I always knew I was only meant to be touched by you
But I had to go to Spain to learn to dance.

Tanning

I lay here, stretched out, my womb spread
into a gentle mound on this lounge chair
angled toward the heat, watching
the flat ones dangle and toy with their bodies
their bathing suits
their reflections.

Some girls here are not built like me;
straight up and down, tightly woven creatures
arcless wonders
their wombs narrow,
no blossom
no swell in the lower half, my own
tide, below the waist.

I sit up and my womb relaxes with me.

It lays
curled up
like the babies it will one day pour out
a small sleeping thing
warm dough wrapped around something
strong like muscle.

I will not stand up and walk around this pool deck long and straight
I will uncurl myself
from myself
and simply move
from one place
to another.

Sunburn

Since we last made love, my belly was burned
by the sun
so it has peeled into the map before you. Your own body's heat
feels so good on mine
like white icing on the tongue, a soft kiss
all over, the opposite of pain.
You take a common but not unbeautiful pleasure in
peeling away parts of me
the old parts that were made old by too much time
exposed.

I was pale and pinkly suited the first part of the day-
ended up ripe and between the right temperature that night
calling for a redo with the sun, a little less time out there
although the moments I let myself truly bask,
I could feel the blaze go between my legs and up
to that holy place.

I missed you then, but no more than usual really.

A day on the beach left me bubbling and salty, sand in my ears
days later like finding a stray hair of yours threaded through some
garment or a smell-triggered memory.

Little rice paper pieces of me have fallen to the recently changed sheet.
I look down and see your face an inch
from my belly's button where
deft fingers peel my burned skin off in small reams.
They outline my healing middle, dead cells
rubbed away, picked at and tenderly, patiently removed.
But I think how they will never really disappear
like you will never really disappear.

Summer and a Piano in the Garage

A siren at ten years old
I did not know what I was doing to the men

Our home not yet ready to live in
Our furniture left for the summer in the garage
I played for the men who built my house
And tamed my yard

My little piano made accessible through a maze of end tables
And couches. I had an audience

Mosquito bites, my mom catching me through
The rearview mirror- that heightened lens
Desperately searching under my arms for something to take a razor to

A shred of dignity
As I waited for my body to catch up.

Flamenco Revelations

I am having dinner with my Dad at the same Italian restaurant we've been having an early Sunday pizza at for the past twenty years. We are waiting for our pineapple and ham pie, a taste I picked up in Spain where raw pigs hang, skinned or unskinned, from every other shop window. We started this ritual when I was two, coming into Bimonte's for our last dinner before going home to Mom. I grew up shuffled between two households, the arrangement being the ever so popular Dad's every other weekend, holiday and a month every summer. We ate early, as soon as the place opened. It was halfway between my Mom's house and my Dad's, and when I was growing up I needed to be back home with Mom, the place I really called home, by 6:30 so I could get settled in for the upcoming week. As I sit here as a twenty-two-year-old, I still feel the anxiety in the back of my eyes, like watching a film where you expect something awful to occur at any moment. It's exhausting, this state of readiness. I am anticipating someone he knows walking in, someone I haven't met yet. I am waiting for the introduction, that yes, I am his daughter. I am hoping that whoever is involved in this littleing of me will be able to hide their shock that he is my Father, that this handsome, young, fit man begot *me*, the heavy, awkward, and slightly masculine young woman sitting across the table. And the looks we get. Sometimes people even say out loud, "Really, *she's* your daughter?" the italics scraping at my heart like a rusty claw. Most people handle their shock appropriately, saying, "Nice to meet you", or simply nodding with a smile, seeing that we were eating and therefore engaged. Or they are just happy to be exiting the situation. I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. I wait, ready for this encounter

that probably won't happen- we don't always run into people, especially new people, but every time we do I feel more ready to quietly deal with my Dad's bracing himself, like the connection between us might break him one day.

* * *

I've known since I was little that my Dad didn't think I was pretty. I've never noticed him looking at me absently doting, not the way I've seen the father's of friends of mine look at their children. When I get dressed up, he might say, "You look nice," but never with enough sincerity to make me feel it as anything other than obligatory, the kind of thing one would say to anyone who is dressed up who usually isn't, not that he's unkind or neglectful. He is a personal trainer, the kind of man you expect to see doing info-mercials for uncomfortable looking exercise equipment, wearing spandex, a ponytail at the base of his shellacked head. He was young when I was born, only twenty, and my Mom was thirty and an ex-trainee of my Dad's. A celebration dinner of her losing her goal weight of eighty pounds after a year of one-on-one training sessions with my Dad gone too far was my beginning. I was the aftermath of their wine and her finally being thin enough for him to look at sexually. Now I'm twenty-two and the spitting image of my Dad in my Mom's body, one of those girls people look at and think, "Wow, better her than me."

Because I don't have a pretty body. I have an awful body, a body awkward and plagued with health issues and an inability to conform to the expected. When I was eight-years-old I wasn't growing enough so I was put on hormone injections. My knees

grew together and my ankles collapsed in over the next few years. The insoles didn't seem to help much. I was born chubby, and stayed chubby until I was old enough to simply be fat. My breasts are small, too small for the curves and bulges that make up the rest of me. When I look at myself I see how utterly un-sexual my anatomy is. My neck is square and loose, and I took on most of my Dad's face, strong features with no real softness, sparse femininity. I could be in drag- I've been told I look like a man. I try to avoid this by wearing lots of pastels, long skirts and tops with ribbons or bows. I like how I dress, although I'm aware that the body they cover is less than desirable. I'm only twenty-two and have thoughts that I will never know the touch of a man in passion, that I will have to have science inseminate me if I want kids one day. I've already done a little research as to the methods they use and how much I should plan on saving so when I'm thirty and still a virgin I can get pregnant. This doesn't bother me as much as one might expect, I think I would have been content growing up with just my Mom.

And I'm smart. I've been smart as long as I can remember, grasping on to that word because it is the only compliment I feel I've ever earned unsolicited. I taught myself Spanish by watching the Spanish channel as a child with my Puerto Rican babysitter, Rosie. She was the kid of one of my Mom's friends from work. Rosie was great, in her late teens, beautiful and dark, her words working their way through her accent, leaving her mouth like little songs. I made her speak to me like the people on the TV station I wasn't able to understand so she would talk to me in her native language. I've learned German, all the romantic languages and have started Chinese since college. I'm smart and I know what people think of me before they say anything. I can tell when they look at me whether or not they're looking past my commercial to the world, my

wrapping that presents the package that is me- smart and wise, not afraid to face the insensitive, the superficial. I have my Dad to thank for this.

The pizza has been brought to us, and even though I am ravenous I try to appear indifferent to the food placed before me. We always sit in the back booth, and we go the moment the door opens at five o'clock. I live alone now, a college graduate home for the summer. I spent all four years away for college, opting to study in Spain. I'm starting work in September for an international company. I'll be working in mostly Latin America for the next year or so, and I'm very excited. I've missed the security the foreign has to offer me.

In college I wore big scarves all year round and sunglasses all the time. Being short and blonde in Spain allowed for a sense of anonymity, as most women dye their hair blonde anyways and the people are generally shorter. My size seemed less an issue, or maybe they made it less of an issue. Either way I was happier.

When I was a sophomore my Dad came to visit me in Madrid for Thanksgiving. He didn't know anyone, and I was the only one capable of speaking. We ate out three times a day, and stayed in a hotel room with two single beds. It was his turn to come; Mom had come the previous year. I think he was taken aback at first, walking around with me and standing out more than I did for once, his athletic suits and sports hats, his height and basic Americanisms making him much more obvious a foreigner than I was. I smiled to myself the first time he was assaulted by gypsies and I was left alone. I even waited a moment before coming to his rescue, shooing them away in my perfect Spanish, yelling, "*Déjale!*". He looked at me with relief, and walked a little closer than I remembered him doing at home.

In cafes he didn't fidget around, on the lookout for someone he knew. "This is nice, honey. I like only knowing you here." I tried to smile, took it in terms of us not having any distractions during our meals. By that point in my life with him I was already learning how to take the things he said as sad little comments from a man whose world was even sadder and littler. I knew my life was taking shape around something much more true than the ideal of physical perfection. He settled into his menu, asking me to translate. We dined and chatted, left alone except for the occasional waiter's inquiry. I got to tell him about my life there, how I loved my classes and hated my roommates, girls who based my merit on the fact they could not borrow my clothes. I had told him these things during expensive phone calls, the really personal details spared with the sound of cash running down the drain. We had no excuses this time.

"Dad, I really like it here. There's something about the way they live, there's no crunch to get to work, and work work work, there's so much less pressure and everyone is just really laid back. I feel much more relaxed, and my blood work has been better every time I get it checked at home."

"That's wonderful..." he said, mouth working it's way through a particularly chewy piece of *calamari fritta*. "But are you getting enough exercise? And I don't know about the food here. It's heavily oiled and then you end up putting a lot of salt to deal with the blandness." This was normal, his commenting on my eating habits, how much I worked out. It was impossible, the man had made a career out of combating flaws, making the weak strong, the fat thin. He was still recovering from my complete lack of coordination. He put me in T-ball as a five-year-old and I had a contact percentage a little under 1 for 10. I remember him pacing behind the backstop, pulling hair out and

looking at the ground, up at the sky, anywhere but at me, who was taking three times as many swings as the other kids to even come close to hitting the ball. And then I would have to run, my little legs unable to really stride amidst my chubby thighs, my knees already angled in, lungs heaving and plagued with asthma, and my eyes ready to cry.

“I walk most places now Dad, unless it’s really cold in which case I take the metro. But it doesn’t get nearly as cold here all winter as it does back home. And I try to buy fresh fruits and veggies at the markets, I do.” I looked at my plate, not wanting to have to justify my eating habits, my living habits under the pressure his eyes always emanated towards me, judgment dancing in time with his ignorance. I didn’t tell him I walked only when I had time to stroll- if I had to be there in a hurry my legs never got me there on time. But he didn’t need to know that. I never worried about it, and the less he had to work with the better. I had learned by then to not concern him with the details of the life I led, the life he was always watching from the outside, the only thing permeating my inner world his inability to really *see* me.

As time passed in Spain and our usual contact was reduced to quick phone calls and occasional postcards, the sting of his words lessened, as if time were blowing on my wounds, cool and healing. His visit with me that year only strengthened the truth of his new effect in my life, the truth in which he didn’t hurt so much anymore. This did not mean, however, that no feelings were provoked, even if I had already closed off some of my heart to him.

“You know, if you eat more broccoli and try holding your breath while you’re waiting for...” and he was off. I focused on the handsome Spanish *camerero* who had been gracing us with his presence all night. I felt safe looking at him while he was

walking around; he never really looked over at me. When he stood beside our table, my elbows rested just inches from his crotch, and I wouldn't look up. Then I had to ask for the check, they don't bring it to you in Spain unless you ask. They assume you want to sit and chat for hours even after you've stopped ordering and have a pile of cleaned plates in front of you. "*Nos puede dar la cuenta?*" I asked the handsome waiter, loving the impressed expression he took on when he heard my accent. He had probably thought we were two stupid, monolingual *americanos*. I loved this reaction, and I got it all the time. This was much better than having to introduce my Dad or myself and deal with the skepticism at us being father and daughter. Sometimes even I doubted it too.

One night we went to a flamenco performance. We had a traditional Spanish dinner with *una ensalada mixta*, *sangria* and *carne asada* served to us amongst other tourists in search of something official and Spanish, all the while bombarded with toe-stomping mixed with bodies in motion. It was a violent poetry, the way their bodies suffered to restrain the upper parts of their form while their feet and legs moved at a pace seemingly unhuman. Clad in costumes that outlined what it meant to have a body, this force would build up until the entire dance would fuse into a kind of controlled spasm of energy, lifting off ground and twirling, toes still touching and arms winding about like flowers in a torrential bouquet. The different segments all began with a woman dancing alone, beautiful and stoic, her energy flowing but still unto herself, intense and keen on her personal motions, what her body was trying to say. Then a man would emerge, and

the same thing would happen, though his of a more masculine nature, until the two would silently fuse into a pair, all the while remaining apart in body, never looking at one another but connected all the same. The tension between them would build, as if only they could see the cord pulling them together. The dance was performed amidst the music made from a group of older men donning black pants and cool, white collared shirts with the top few buttons undone, masculine and focused. One sat with a guitar in his lap, and two others stood beside him, one just singing and the other stomping his feet and clapping his hands, serving as the percussion section. Their voices rose above the guitar played in the flamenco style, the man's fingers plucking a waterfall of notes, like a rainstorm where only one drop hits the ground at a time. Their voices had no vibrato, and it was more a shouting, talking kind of song. But they resonated and seemed to help lift the feet and legs of the dancers themselves as they moved in accordance with the rise and fall of the voices. The song was beautiful, telling a tale of love.

My Dad, of course, did not understand anything they were saying, but he appeared to be taking it all in. He sat in the one suit he had packed, eyes fastened to the people on stage, wonderment replacing the subtle look of being slightly overwhelmed and uncomfortable yet somehow indifferent, which was the expression he had been wearing since his arrival. We watched with mouths open, food whole and unchewed balancing precariously on our tongues. I wondered why they bothered serving anything; the force of the dance was so preoccupying it made eating feel inappropriate. I wished I could bottle that atmosphere and carry it around, uncorking it whenever I felt the need to eat, yet was happy to be enjoying a meal like that in the presence of so much beauty.

We walked back to the hotel afterwards, my fingers tingling from the dance that was running through my head. “Their bodies, unbelievable, I couldn’t imagine moving like that” he projected into the night air. I agreed with this, “I didn’t think it was possible to move your feet so fast and have the rest of you stand still. It was like they were suspended apart from their legs, their toes.”

“I just loved it, I just did,” my Dad continued. I was so glad we had found something we both enjoyed watching, I was thinking of maybe getting tickets to another dinner before he left. He didn’t want to stop. He talked about their bodies, how hard and toned they were, how in control they were of every movement. I tripped a few times on this walk home. “I wish I could have taken photos to show the people at the gym. Or a video! Maybe I can rent a video and we can put it on as the background for the aerobics classes. Those images might really motivate some people to get their asses in gear. It made me wish I could at least go jogging here, is there a place I can go early in the morning?” He went on and on about the streamline effect their dresses gave them, and I added that they almost looked like fish, brilliantly colored and enlaced with a fluidity, the tails of some of the costumes sweeping out after the women like a peacock’s feathers. “They were so perfect, so beautiful.” He wouldn’t stop. But had we been walking in silence we would have heard the echo of my thighs brushing against one another in beat with my step, my uneven step that sounded like a lopsided record spinning on the empty sound of the last track. It was like I wasn’t there and he was talking to himself, the differences between the dancers and his child unconsciously bounding from his brain and out of his mouth. I couldn’t say anything. I chose to smile and agree, knowing that he didn’t care about the message behind the dance so much as what the messengers looked

like. I hummed the flamenco song, looking at the buildings whose shadows were blanketing out path with an ancient cloak, admiring the window boxes dripping ivy and flowers still in bloom. But at least I still had the song in my head.

“Pass me another slice, Eliza. You’re not eating that last one, right?” says my Dad, as I nod a “No” and hand him the remaining piece that has been taunting me like Christmas Eve for the past ten minutes. I choose to not ask the question that formed immediately in my head, “Why would you assume I’m done, Dad? Is it because *you* want me to stop eating, or because my appetite is satiated?” But I don’t, instead allowing him to wallow in the role he has made for himself. I let him think he’s enlightening me, fathering me, nurturing me into the person I know he wishes I were. We didn’t meet anyone this evening that required an introduction, so I am considering it a success.

We will meet for dinner on Sundays the rest of the summer, and I will wait throughout these meals in anticipation. I will be aware that a restrained look of skepticism might be shot my way, but I will meet with him anyways. When I go to Colombia in the fall, I will call him when I get there safely, and give him the information on how to reach me. He will call me once every two weeks, and we will email so the distance between us doesn’t become too official. I will see him on holidays, and we will continue in this way that we are, in our own special dance where we never touch and try not to make eye contact. I’m happy we dance though- it’s easier than fighting.

The *Bocadillo* Encounter

There was an after-rain moisture in the early morning darkness that shimmered in the blackness of the streets when she walked, the streetlights gently strobing in rhythm to her pace. The club she had just left in the nearly dawn hours on that Sunday morning, (or was it Saturday night?) left a beat in her head, the groove of bodies moving and feeling nothing but the pulse of one another in time to light and sound. She was living in a foreign city for a few months, studying, learning. Walking with her roommates from the club towards the metro she was in her usual heightened state of awareness. Every moment since she had gotten off that plane the world had come at her. Things that used to slide into her life, like introductions to new faces or finding out how to get to a new destination now took an awareness and effort that could be exhausting. The fusion was no longer mindless, she was aware of it at all times. So walking with her girlfriends from the club to the metro was not just an easy stroll. She was taking it all in, every moment seeming of the utmost importance, like a film. Moments were not there to fill time; they all had a point, a meaning. The night was almost over but still black, the sunrise still hidden behind the buildings. Space was lit by electricity, the hum of neon and streetlights, car lights and apartments peopled by this ever-awake city.

On the way to the metro, which did not run for another forty-five minutes, the girls could smell the deliciousness of frying food, a smell which only felt that appealing when one was coming down off a night of movement and dehydrated dance. They changed their course and walked across the street towards the blue neon sign that read “Bocadillos”. The taxis dominated the streets, white with green trim, and in true

European style paid little heed to the three young women crossing over. The *cafetería* was hazy with smoke, the plain brick red linoleum floor moderately dusty and slippery with the remnants of *patatas fritas*. Old Spanish men sat on the bar stools that lined the room, newsboy hats and mustaches with cigars poking out from underneath, and the center of the room had tall round tables where people stood and ate. A light that could have been fluorescent had it been brighter lit the room, and the nondescript yellowish walls bounced a glow around. Smoke rose thick and permeated everything, along with the heavenly smell of frying Spanish ham. They stood in line and placed their orders for ham and cheese sandwiches, then found a nook to observe the room from.

A man walked in from the drizzle and was immediately noticed by the whole gathering of early morning eaters. He had on the apparel of a bum, jeans with so much grime the denim was hard to distinguish, holes abounding. His once plaid button down shirt had been worn into a mess of colors, and a dingy green vest settled loosely on his thin shoulders. He stumbled in the door setting off the bell that signals someone coming or going. His entrance registered a change in the restaurant. She felt the scope of the room focus on him, longer than it had on the other people who had entered since she had been inside; a camera's shift from panning to focus.

Once he was enclosed in the warmth of the restaurant he unevenly made his way around the bar ledge that lined the room, veering into people eating. He didn't say much that was understandable, but he lowly grumbled to himself as he made his way around the room. He loomed for moments on certain couples, then reared back off balance into the center tables, again aimlessly floating about. His mumbling was hard to make out in the foreign language, but it was obvious he was upset about something, life perhaps. She

noted the reactions of the people she took as regulars. They looked at one another, tacitly remarking this obtrusion as if it were a pity, but no surprise.

She stared, frozen, as if she was seeing a sight that held her against her will. Her first reaction was that this man was dangerous and sorry. A wave of pity mixed with a heightened guard for herself washed over her. She instinctually saw this man as a threat, but to what exactly she didn't know. He continued to stagger and loom over customers, and then he came towards the girls. The European standards for personal space were much more liberal than that of Americans. She was still getting used to how close people stood while talking, their faces half the distance from hers than what she was used to. This drunk man with his wide, red eyes and sweaty face put himself directly in front of her. In that instant a recognition struck her, literally, as if she had been hit in the stomach. Her inside dropped, and she was overwhelmed with the rare feeling of experiencing both shame and pity for oneself in the same instance.

It was at this moment that she realized her father could be that man. In a different country with a different accent he could be her father. This realization brought down upon her both the weight of her love for him and her guilt for her reaction, and it rocked her unsteady with a mixture of self-reproach and anger. She shrugged against the wall with this understanding; her body suddenly needing to make up for the support her heart usually gave her. Her father had been sober as long as she had been alive, or at least able to sense such a thing. It wasn't until a few months before that she found out. Her brother had gotten into some trouble at school with alcohol, and her parents felt inclined to warn him about the genetics that could lead to something he did not want to deal with. She had never been much of a drinker, so it had remained something left

unsaid. Her father had been on the recovering end of alcoholism for over twenty years, so this part of his life had not been divulged to her. When she found out her Dad had been going to meeting twice a week or so since she was born, rather than staying late at the office as she had always been led to believe, she was initially shocked but by no means floored. It made sense why her mom never cooked with booze, or why her dad took plain tonic at parties. Her parents not drinking was so consistent that she never really thought about why, assuming they would simply rather not, whether it be to serve as an example or an aversion to taste. She didn't care much for the taste herself.

But this man in front of her changed things. He magnified the truth of her instinctual reaction toward this condition, this disease that possibly ran through her own blood, to the point where all she could feel for that moment was guilt. Upon seeing this sorry figure of a man, drifting around obnoxiously irritating everyone he came near, as a what-might-have-been of her father, she could not have felt more ashamed for her judgment. The drunk man took on the face of her dad, and in one flashing instant she saw how his life could have been so different had he not made a few crucial choices. But what if this man had made those choices too but did not have the luck to go with them, the support system her dad's family had offered. Her mom had been true and trusting and a constant source of help, and she supposed the idea of herself as a baby probably helped motivate him as well. She could not shake the feeling that this man saw through her eyes what she had been thinking: he was a sorry nuisance who had fucked up his life and was now fucking with everyone else's.

So she looked back at him. He was only a few inches from her body, and when she looked up he felt it and turned his sweaty, red neck to face her. She met his gaze,

which was surprisingly steady in comparison to the rest of his body. The hum of the restaurant had lessened when he walked in, and now it had come to a stand still. They held one another through their eyes, her face set calm and ready, his prepared for a confrontation. She did not know that this man had had a family at one point, a family that no longer spoke to him, or even knew he was alive. She had no way of knowing that after he lost his job at the airline he had worked at for six years, he stopped going to meetings to pick up hours from wherever he could get them, helping buddies under the table whenever possible. He even got a job as a part of the *limpieza*, the public cleaning crew. Then when the money was still not coming in fast enough, the tensions in his household- his family that consisted of a loving wife and two beautiful children, grew to where he took a drink one night, then drove into a parking lot the next day and drank an entire case, alone, in one afternoon. It didn't take long for him to lose his family, his wife taking the kids to her parent's house. The last time he had given up drinking, which had been six years before, was his final chance with his family. He had put them through years of disappearances, embarrassments, and emotional stress. Once, right before the birth of his second daughter, he had driven home drunk and lost consciousness in a ditch for two days. But since that moment, after his wife told him it was either committing to being sober or her was going to lose his family, he had not taken another drink- until six months ago. That was when the last link to life had been lost. Since then he had basically begged all day and drank what he could.

She looked at him and he looked back, and it was this prolonged moment of exchange that caused the manager to come out from behind his bar and remove the drunk man who had crossed the line from tolerable nuisance, pitiable, to a viable issue affecting

business and the comfort of his customers. The drunk man's gaze when looking at the girl had gone sober, and she held it as he was pushed, not harshly, out of the restaurant.

“Remember when he used to come in here with Raquel and the girls?” murmured one patron as he was being removed from the restaurant.

“So sad, it's so sad.”

In the last moment before he was out on the street, she smiled at him. His eyes opened a bit wider, and cleared.

Eileen

My girlfriend Eileen told me on the night before her wedding that she wasn't in love with Michael, her groom in waiting. They had been dating for over five years though, and she didn't see how she could say no, or why she would even want to say no, because what would that say about her? Who stays in a relationship for five years if they're not really in love? Lots of people, I thought. Or at least in love enough to get married when they ask you? She asked herself this question, this tragic and awful question no woman should ever think to ask herself, when no one else was around, when I wasn't there to hear her and offer another voice. She pondered these thoughts with her own reason, with her own soul, a soul that was willing to make a decision based on someone else's consequence rather than her own. I told her she needed to think about this in terms of her, but she only sighed and told me it wasn't that simple. I wondered how a shadow of love could flesh into a tragedy without anyone feeling it coming. For Eileen, the whole relationship was the calm before her storm.

They met while she was a junior in college and working in the library, the film department. He was a foreign policy professor, and came in now and then to pick up films with subtitles about important things. He was young, exotically un-American and new at our school. He had an accent of the eastern European persuasion, and he spoke seven languages. He was short and had a mustache, and the beginnings of a dark beard a few hours after shaving. When she realized he had been coming down to the film room more and more often, noting he didn't stop in unless she was working, she was flattered. "No one has ever done this before, Meg. I've never been sought after. It's like getting

flowers for no reason.” When I asked her if she dug him, she replied, “He’s not all that handsome, but there’s something about the weight of his voice. When he talks to me he doesn’t look past my shoulder or at my chest, he looks me in the eye. He makes me want to pay attention.”

She was an art major, something her family was extremely apprehensive about. Her dad had never held a job after the war, and her mom was obsessive about employment. She was the second oldest of five Irish-Catholic children, and although she was always academically accelerated, she couldn’t deny her art was what she really wanted to do. She had grown up in a household where one pizza was shared by seven people, if they were lucky enough to order it, a house in which her dad insisted he was “looking” for work while her mother sweat herself dry from pulling in an income sufficient to barely raise their large family. She was a secretary long before their day of appreciation became a Hallmark marketing scheme, and spent much of her twenties and thirties working for men who rarely took the time to learn her last name. Had her mom been given a choice, Eileen swears she would have traveled the world, childless, reading books and strolling through museums and gardens. Her mom was rather asexual, her dad an ex-marine. The only thing Eileen knew when she was looking at state schools she could afford on scholarship was that she needed an art program. Her portfolio of water color female nudes and charcoal sea-scapes got her into SUNY Pratt, and she didn’t offer any apologies to her mom, who told her if she was going to be an artist she had better never marry, since she’d be lucky to support herself, let alone a husband and the children that would inevitably follow.

I met Eileen during orientation our freshman year. We lived down the hall from one another, and since I was a music major we were in the same buildings a lot. We easily slid into our friendship; both aware and unaware that we were going to be extremely close. She knew everything about my divorced parents and childhood without siblings, and she told me everything about her own existence prior to college. It was like purging, sometimes, the way we talked to one another. Relief, bonding, whatever it was, we were close.

Which is why I was completely taken aback at this news, this information she had never once insinuated during the five years they were dating. When Michael asked her to his place for dinner after a few weeks of his stalking her in the film room, she went, and I helped her get dressed in something mature but mildly sexy. I remember her leaving our dorm of squealing girls in a knee length cream skirt and sculpted black blouse, her face a mixture of determination and curiosity, only a tinge of nervousness. He was about ten years older than us, twenty-nine, and Eileen never felt taken more seriously than when she was having a clandestine conversation with him between the film shelves. She didn't find him particularly funny, he had mastered six foreign languages so the nuances of English escaped him at times. She wasn't intensely attracted to him, she told me the first time they kissed she was overtly aware of his being barely her height, his mustache scratchy and his mouth awkward, like he was trying too hard to do it right. But he was sweet. In his firm, serious ways he could be tender. He took her to foreign films, usually waiting until there were fifteen minutes left or so before taking her hand. But he opened every door, and always told her how nice she looked whenever they greeted one another.

And there was the natural excitement that he was faculty, he was older, he was foreign and mysterious, and he was a man. She marveled at the thickness of the hair on the back of his arms, and the mature way he dressed, with a slightly European flare. When they went out it was never to any local places. He took her to hole-in-the-wall restaurants where no other prestigious faculty member might frequent, and they went at odd hours. She hardly saw him on campus, and he didn't have that many friends on staff so their exposure was hardly eminent. I was tacitly sworn to secrecy, as was anyone he told, we assumed.

And then she graduated and they were still dating. It had been over a year and a half, and although Eileen didn't walk around with hearts in her eyes or a lightness in her step, she was content. I kidded her about settling down, but she brushed these ideas away like a renegade piece of hair and launched into new topics of conversation. She stayed in the area; her work was getting noticed by some local art dealers and she had secured a position as a teacher giving private classes on watercolor brush strokes and how to work with human models. They lived independently, she in a small studio about ten minutes from his basement apartment. I moved two hours away, into a graduate program. But we still spoke a few times a week, and she seemed as close to happy as she always did with Michael. She updated me on his status with a safe and solid, "Michael's good, we're good" and that would be it. The three of us didn't go out together; the few times we had met had been slightly awkward, the discomfort hovering in the air above our heads with the subtle weight of a humid day. He was nice enough, always greeting me with an average handshake, a "Hello, Meg" and a smile I was never quite sure was being directed at me.

One day Eileen and I were shopping alone, I was visiting her and giving a recital at our alma mater, and she asked me if I thought I had met anyone worth calling the love of my life. I had been making my way through my early twenties in fine, three-month relationship style. I was starting to dread the onset of my late twenties, a time I had been told was like a rat race to at least secure a semblance of a long-term relationship, if not a fiancée. I told her, “Of course not, who has?” and smiled weakly. She looked distantly past the shoe rack we had been picking over, and I asked her if she was thinking Mikey, as I liked to call him, was the one. “Maybe,” she offered hopefully. We quickly moved on to discussing where we were going to eat lunch.

Michael proposed to her by writing her a letter and leaving it on her easel. This was probably the most romantic thing he had done in the four and a half years they had known each other. She told me it was very straight forward, that he thought they were ready for this next step, that he wanted to be married to her. If he wrote about the beauty of her art, or the beauty of her soul she never told me. She added, during this oddly emotionless conversation, that she was going to say yes. “Well good... Eileen, good, right...?”

“Yeah, I’m going to say yes. I’ll call him tonight and tell him my answer is yes.’ Her voice sounded reverie-like, as if what she was saying wasn’t actually her reality. Like it was an idea. An ideal. I tried to discuss it with her further, to feel out her definition of love, and what made a marriage worth committing too. I was so commitment phobic, I couldn’t really judge her, at least openly. I had no idea what a relationship was like after four and a half years. I had yet to like someone longer than four and half months. So I let her go, to tell Michael she was going to marry him.

There was one night in our dorm room freshman year when a bunch of us sat around, avoiding work and naturally congregating in one girl's room for a little female connection. Jane Wilson, one of the few girls who had slept with anyone, swore her latest conquest was the one. She had had a vision while they were having sex of them walking out of the church, all of us throwing rice at her veiled head. Most of us virgins reveled in her divulging any tidbits from an actual sexual encounter, so after she told us how good it was, how he of course held her afterwards until he had basketball practice, we asked her how she knew he was the one, which was, of course, secondary to the details of the actual sex. "I just do, I know girls. I haven't felt like this before..." and she rattled off every cliché regarding true love written in women's magazines world wide.

Eileen, usually quiet during these potentially rowdy get-togethers, surprised us with a question of her own. "Jane, what happens after you stop loving the loving him part and you find yourself still married?"

"Oh Eileen, relax, what's divorce for?" and we all laughed, some of us louder than others. I looked at Eileen, sitting cross legged in jeans with paint stains, her expression she put on whenever she wanted to look fine, look ok, as to avoid being asked what was wrong. But I knew this look; I had sat in on enough phone calls, listening to her end of the conversation that usually consisted of her murmuring, "Yeah, Ma." Afterwards, she would update me on the status of her siblings, none of who appeared to

be as self-motivated as Eileen. Her Mom would be working on a new, thankless task for her job, and her Dad would sometimes be newly employed as something like a bus driver or a security guard, other times in between, what he always considered, new careers. For the first few minutes after hanging up with her family, Eileen would sit with the receiver in her hand, absently turning her watch around her wrist, looking fine.

On her wedding day, Eileen wore a dress as virginal and pristine as one of her blank canvases, knowing it would only be a matter of time before the days of her life would color it all in. I sat in the small audience that consisted mainly of her siblings and their dates, her parents, grandparents and me, the only friend she kept in touch with enough after college to warrant an invitation. Michael's best man was one of Eileen's brothers, and his only guests were the three men he had become friendly with at work over the past five years.

She divulged her little secret to me about five minutes before she walked down the aisle, her Father's arm appearing more wrapped in hers than the other way around. Her Mother had just flitted in and out like the brisk breeze she was, just frigid enough to put her waning daughter back together in time for the ceremony. Eileen looked like a wax figurine in a room a smidge too warm. She was sweating slightly, and her features were slightly dulled with the make-up her Mother had insisted upon having done professionally. When her Mother ran out of the room in the back of the church meant for

women about to begin the happiest moment of their life, Eileen spoke her little truth about Michael, and I knew there was nothing to be done.

“I know I’m not in love with him, Meg.” This did not detonate as one might expect. I just rubbed her tightly buttoned back and told her she still had time, knowing nothing was going to change.

“Eileen, you haven’t said ‘I do’ yet, you don’t *have* to go through with this.”

“It’s not that, Meg, I’m ok. I just wanted to say it out loud.” I looked at her face, sagging with the weight of a compromise too big to handle on the inside, and smiled weakly.

Eileen married Michael and within a few months she was pregnant with what was to be her only child, a son. Michael applied for a Fullbright to France, and so they moved to Paris for a year, which was wonderful for her work, horrible for her sapling marriage. Michael had his first of many affairs, which was the most scandalous turn possible considering how long it had taken Michael to even kiss her. He told her he was sorry a few times, the women were always young students, and he even used the reasoning that she had made him more confident and he was just curious about other women. By her son’s fifth birthday they were divorced, and she has been struggling with Michael about child-support for over a decade. She fell into and out of love a few times over the next few years, never willing to marry again, always happy though that she at least had her child. “I knew that day, the day I went through with the marriage it was for a reason. I

wouldn't have Sean if I hadn't. So I'm ok with everything, Meg" she tells me when we talk about that past, about the silly things women will do because they think there is a greater happiness than their own at stake.

The Father

The train making its way from Paris to Madrid prattled along the tracks as an old woman would through a conversation with a younger, busier person. The Priest sat there listening to the monotonous rambling of the hulking train over track after track, slowly growing more and more impatient. It was a night train, so the massive metal locomotive traversed the distance between Paris and Madrid at a fraction of the pace, as would a day train, in order to allow the passengers a smoother ride more conducive to sleep. But Father McKiernan felt each movement all the more exaggerated, each groove on the track heightened and extended, and there was no way he was going to sleep much that night. They had been moving for a little under an hour, and Father McKiernan had been trying to read when in walked a man with two children. The traveling compartment was tight for one person, let alone four, but that is how many it slept. He had considered himself lucky, supposing he was alone. But he had not thought about people who might have been loitering in the eating compartment of the train. He could not begrudge them their space, however, so he quietly moved his belongings into the puny space allotted him and continued to read.

The man with, presumably, his own children, was tall and blond, not particularly handsome but strong-faced. He walked in behind a young girl and boy, roughly ages 5 and 7, and tried to have them not bother the Priest. Father McKiernan could remember his own heightened self-awareness while in the presence of Priests when he was a boy, and he was often amused at the antics some would go through in order to improve themselves, as if he were the eye of God himself. And it did not matter if one was even

Catholic; it was like his clothing alone invoked a need to be good. Men straightened their ties and stood a bit taller, while women would lower a skirt or raise a neckline. Children would be made quieter, more composed by their parents. All of this was highly amusing to Father McKiernan, who knew that Priests were no better in soul or stature than anyone else. He did not receive personal messages from God on how to behave perfectly towards all of humanity, nor had he received any insight as to why things were the way they were. He still stuck his fingers in the peanut butter he and the two other Priests shared. He still lied, occasionally, like when his mother asked him if he had heard from his sister, Molly, who had not been on speaking terms with their mother for three years. He had not heard from her either in four months, but did not want to alarm his mother, nor deal with the situation at that particular moment. Father McKiernan felt at most points in his day like Joe McKiernan, Joseph Michael McKiernan, Jr. It was usually only during his prayer that he felt something inside of him, holy, but he did not necessarily connect that to his being a priest. He had felt the same way as an eight-year-old, kneeling in the pew amongst his family at mass as a child, or in his bed before falling asleep when he would have his truly private moments with God. When he was only Joey, before any official vow had been taken, he felt something within himself that told him his life was to be focused on God. He still played baseball and went to school dances, kissed some girls in high school and struggled with his grades at times. But he always knew God was there.

So when this father of two came in and immediately tried to make up for years of misconduct from his children in a single moment with a Priest in the room, Father McKiernan could only laugh to himself, maintaining his focus on the national bestseller

he was reading. Some expected priests to read only the bible, so the modern forensic mysteries he was used to traveling with sometimes threw those who saw him, especially if they had read it themselves and knew of the two or three racy or violent parts. This man with his children, however, was busy negotiating the ridiculously small space that was the sleeping cart. They were forced to maneuver themselves by Father McKiernan's long legs and hefty bag, for he was going to Madrid for three months. The man instructed his son, named Luke, to sit next to the Priest, and a look of horror came over the child at the thought of behaving perfectly for the next fourteen hours. They were an American family, he could gather that much from their accents. He decided to remain quiet, hiding the fact that he too spoke English, but the Irish kind. The father gave his son a look, and Luke sat, pouting, to the right of the Priest, scowling furiously at the coloring book in his lap. The man sat directly across from his son, with his daughter, apparently named Jenna, positioned in front of Father McKiernan. She was staring silently at the Priest, closed-mouthed and observant. Her legs dangled beneath a light pink jumper with white shiny shoes adorning her feet, a graying stuffed bear enveloped in the crook of her arm. He peered at her from over his novel, not lifting his face to show he wasn't reading.

Since it was only 7:30pm, the compartment had not been made into a sleeping cart yet, so it was a good thing half of the people in their room were under four feet tall. The adult men's knees were just shy of touching the child's positioned directly in front of them, and it would be another hour or so before the train staff walked through and lowered the beds from the wall. Finally committed to their situation, the inevitable introductions commenced, beginning with the two men.

Father McKiernan decided he might as well say hello. “Hello, there” he said mildly, having looked up from the book he had not really read since they had walked in.

“Oh, hello.” He appeared somewhat relieved that the Priest knew English. Father McKiernan knew what it was like to be in a land with a language barrier. He had traveled throughout most of Europe and parts of Africa and Asia at this point, lecturing about his studies on his specialty in academia, the Crusades. With his keen interest in the Spanish Inquisition he had traveled to Spain on countless occasions, this time to speak at the Complutense, Madrid’s equivalent to an American state school. “I wasn’t sure if you spoke English and I have no idea how to speak French or Italian.”

“Oh that’s fine, I can only imagine how it might be to be managing two children as well as myself. Where are you from?”

“We’re from Atlanta, Georgia. And you, I’m guessing Ireland?”

“Yes, I’m from County Cork, it’s in the South.” That was when Jenna, having quietly observed all of this, decided she had a question.

“Why does he say things different, Daddy?” Her voice cooed and hopped over every word, but she kept a keen focus on Father McKiernan while directing her question at her Father.

“He just speaks in a different accent honey, like how Grandma says things a little different than we do because she lives in Boston.” This seemed to satisfy Jenna, who returned her full attention to the man whose knees were inches from her own stockinged legs. “This is the first time we’ve really gone anywhere.”

“Oh don’t worry about it, sir” he replied jovially. “I’m Joe, but if you prefer to call me Father McKiernan that works too.”

“Thanks, uh, Father, I mean Joe, uh...” He blushed a little but kept talking. “I’m Sam. And these are my kids, Luke and Jenna.”

He said hello to both of them, but then a silence ensued, and Sam began to fuss with Luke and the juice box he had just handed over that was already half gone, most of it on Luke’s shirt. Father McKiernan could feel an intuition emanating from Jenna’s small, pinkly dressed body, her teddy bear strangled in her elbow with her intensity making itself felt through her pale blue eyes that remained steadily fixed on his face. He peered at her from over his novel. She looked like a little lady, her cotton jumper a mini version of what a grown woman might wear. He noted how focused she appeared, like she was sitting there just waiting for something to happen. She seemed affected by everything that was going on, but at the same time completely composed. Her teddy bear was immovable in the vice that was her arm, and she did not fidget or even swing her feet that were a good foot above the ground. She looked like she was ready to take on anything, and he was tempted to provoke this intensity. But he decided to remain silent, figuring he might be an annoyance to this family that was obviously under a lot of stress with the traveling they were undertaking.

He was not accustomed to being in such close proximity to children. He saw them walking around the neighborhood his church was in, and he saw the Catholic kids who attended catechism and sometimes mass on a weekly basis. His brother had three children, but they lived hours away so they were reserved for holidays. Now he was surrounded by children, and there was nowhere else to go unless he felt like maneuvering

his way through the train to the dining cart. He was surprised to find himself not all that uncomfortable. He had never had a conscientious affinity with children, nor an overt repulsion. They were so rarely felt a presence that he had not taken much time to think about what he felt about them. He acknowledged that there were times he would be at his brother's house for Christmas and he would feel a foreign, deep pain when the truth of his priesthood paid him a visit, the reality that he would never have children. But these moments were fleeting. Most of the time he was subtly relieved he would never deal with incessant questions, constant care and an unceasing toll on his heart. His nephew had gotten ill as an infant a few years earlier, and he remembered the thickness and authenticity of the pain coming through the phone in his brother's voice when he called him from the hospital asking if he should have a priest come and perform the last rights on his baby son, who was on a respirator having had some sort of violent allergic reaction. His brother sounded like his world was ending, like the color in his voice was drained and all that was left was a tired fear. "I can't do this, Joe. I can't do this. There's no way in hell I can make it if he doesn't." Joe, on the other end of the line and not sure which role to play, the priest or the brother, told him to trust in the way life works, that he was strong and so was his son, and that God would take care of things. But all his brother could say was, "Joe, I'm trying to think about that right now but I'm telling you, I will not make it through this if he dies."

His nephew did pull through, and at the time it was a further testament to Joe of the glory of God. He had been twenty-seven at the time, and it was his brother's first child who he had only met at the Christening a few weeks earlier. He had held the baby, seen how happy his brother and sister-in-law were, his mother glowing over her first

grandchild. That was seven years ago, and he had just started to feel like a real priest. He had finally been placed on his first assignment in his first parish. Surrounded mostly by other aspiring priests in seminary and there-after, he had had little to do with women or children, his nephew being the first baby he had held since he was twelve and awkwardly given his neighbor's newborn to hold for a minute while the mother looked in her purse for something.

But sitting there in the sleeping cart on a slow-moving train going from France to Spain with a man and his two young children, Father McKiernan was seeing them in a way he had never seen children before, in a way he had never looked at a Father before. It was funny, he was called "Father" on a regular basis, but he had never associated the priestly title with that of the genetic role. Maybe now that he was older, with the drive to become a priest replaced with the state of being one, he was seeing this family as something different. When his brother had gotten married, Father McKiernan was twenty, and the last thing on his mind was marriage. It was not something he lamented, the fact he would not marry, or have a family. He was totally immersed in becoming a Priest, in studying the scripture, in his ever-increasing moments of being conscious of God. He felt justified as a Priest, that the world was a better place for his having become a Priest. In his mind, God had potential in everyone's life, but most people ignored this. He did not want to be one of them, he felt he took the initiative to make God his life's center. But as a young man he had not fathomed the depths of what he would have to sacrifice.

Hours passed on the train, the children behaving relatively well, aside from the occasional sibling spat over a marker or who got more sips out of the can of soda Sam

had been passing between the two. Father McKiernan watched all of this in relative silence, appearing engrossed in his book. Jenna and Luke were changed into pajamas, heads pushed through cotton neck holes with staticky hair resulting. Teethe were brushed and bemoaned, and bedtime stories were read. The beds had been lowered from the walls and Father McKiernan was perched on one of the top bunks, listening to a fairy tale told to two children by their father. The kids were to sleep on the bottom beds; it was safer with the rocking of the train. He had been observing this family all night, and with each passing moment had been filled with a deep, yet subtle anxiety. It was like watching one's true passion finally being made clear, except it was while watching a film, unreachable. Or as if he were hearing the piano for the first time, knowing he would never be able to learn to play that well, but also knowing that would have made him happier than anything else in the world. Father McKiernan imagined he had these children to share dinner with, take to school in the morning and read to at night. He wanted to call his brother and ask him how it was, what it felt like to be a Dad, not just a Father. He peered over the edge of his narrow bunk at the children who were hugged in the crook of their father's arms, listening intently to another fairy tale. They had avoided his eyes all night, huddling close to their father.

Father McKiernan spent the night drifting in and out of a motion-filled sleep, the train and his new thoughts keeping him awake for the most part. The children were not sleeping well either. Every now and then Luke would call out, "Dad?" just to make sure he was there. Jenna was quieter, occasionally letting a gentle moan out when the train swerved or became particularly rocky. Father McKiernan could hear the Dad soothing his children, could feel him worrying and offering a soothing affection. At one point

Father McKiernan woke up to the Dad sitting on the edge of Luke's bed, rubbing his back and humming softly "You Are My Sunshine".

A little later he felt their Father get down from his top bunk again, this time because Luke had to use the bathroom. Even though he was already up, he did not immediately respond to Sam when he heard, "Excuse me, Father? Father, are you awake?" After a moment Father McKiernan slowly replied, "Yes, what is it?" as groggily yet unperturbed as he could muster.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but my son needs to go to the bathroom but I don't want to wake Jenna, she finally fell asleep a little while ago. Would you mind keeping an eye on her while we're gone, it won't take that long."

"Oh, absolutely. Go ahead, I'll watch her." And with that he was placed in charge of the sleeping girl, father and son making their way out of the sleeping cart as delicately as possible. But with barely a few feet between beds in any direction, Jenna could not sleep through two bodies making their way out the door, and as soon as the door shut she was fully awake and in a mild panic.

"Dad, Dad...?" She had a sleep in her voice, lengthening the words as she worked herself awake. Her pitch rose at the end of the second "Dad", anxiety rearing in behind her query.

"He'll be back in a moment, dear. He just took Luke to the bathroom." Hearing his words in the once silent darkness startled him, he realized how frightening this might be to a five-year-old, alone in a weird, dark moving room with no father or brother there anymore, just the quiet man who was a priest, his voice looming from above. He waited for her to panic, start crying, scream even.

And was surprised when after a moment of taking in what he had said, the girl replied with a mild, “Okay.” His heart swelled at the hint of trust in her voice, at how she believed him and was not afraid anymore, knowing he was in the room and she was not alone. He was tempted to see just how comfortable she was, he wanted to ask her a question about their trip so far, or had she liked the story her dad had read them earlier. But he wasn’t sure, he didn’t want to upset her in any way.

“Are they coming back soon?” Jenna asked Father McKiernan.

“Yes, honey. They’ll only be a few minutes longer.”

“I like how you talk” she said, her voice softly making itself felt in the darkness.

“I like how you talk, too.”

“Sarah isn’t afraid of being on trains.”

“Who is Sarah?” asked Father McKiernan.

“My bear, her name is Sarah. And she’s not afraid to be on the train.”

“Oh, I see.” He didn’t know what else to say to her except, “I like bears.”

“I only like this bear, real bears are scary. But she’s not real, you know.”

“Oh, yes, well that’s obvious. But I still like bears. In fact, I have a bear at home. But he’s a boy and his name is Buddy.”

“My friend Jack has a cat named Buddy!” She was so happy with this connection, this coincidence, it was quite moving. Father McKiernan was just about to tell her about the parish cat he and the other priests owned, named, ironically enough, Beelzebub, but he doubted she would get the humor in this or know anyone else associated with that name. Maybe he would just tell her he had a cat, and go from there.

But just then the narrow door hinged open and in walked her Dad with a barely awake son. “Daddy!” she exclaimed. Father McKiernan pushed himself back against the wall of the cabin, letting this moment of reunion pass.

“Thank you, um, Father.”

“Oh, it was no trouble, I can’t sleep that well anyways with the rocking of this train.”

“Well, either way, thanks. I don’t think I’ll be asking any more of you tonight.”

Sam then tucked Luke back into bed, kissed Jenna good night and heaved himself back on the other top bunk. Father McKiernan rolled to his side, facing the wall. He did not want to look at this man, this Father of other things, of a life he would never know. He did not want to be faced with the reality that his only experiences as a Dad would be lived vicariously through his brother, or on occasion, through men like Sam. He did not want to think about a possible regret, that maybe he had chosen the wrong kind of Fatherhood. As he tried to will himself into an official sort of sleep, he pretended he had not felt a tug of jealousy, of bitterness upon his heart for having had to choose one Fatherhood over the other. He lay there, feeling the heavy and cumbersome train make its way over track after track.

Salvation

We have just left the picnic that follows church every Sunday afternoon the weather will permit an outdoor get together, where the people of my congregation can discuss the just heard sermon, remark about the truth from Minister Krigly and most importantly, gossip first about ourselves, then about the unsaved souls that make up the rest of my small, slow town. This event that has been as ceaseless and reliable as Sunday itself my whole life. My father drives us back home, five minutes down the road, dark and dirt covered, each divot as familiar as my own skin. Mama is humming a song my Grandpa would surely call the voice of the devil if he knew what the words were, and I smile remembering her staunch agreement earlier this evening that yes, the Beatles will be the downfall of this nation. As we turn in the driveway Grandpa Jeremiah's substantial girth melds itself into my side, but this oppression only lasts a moment. We all slowly remove ourselves from the car, full and tired from another afternoon of fried chicken and pecan pie, pretending to be people we are not. I wait for Grandpa to get out of the car, careful to not look concerned. But he takes so long now, and I don't mind waiting to walk him inside. Daddy walks briskly in the front door, Mama right behind him carrying the empty plate that presented her collard greens to the picnic hours earlier.

“What are you waiting for, Silla? Go on in, honey.”

“I'm looking at the moon, Grandpa,” I say, and put my face to the sky that is barely still blue but not black- my favorite color, with a perfect half-moon hanging against it like a pearly earring.

As we head into the house together I make sure to not walk too close to him, even though I want to. The man resents help. I head upstairs but stop halfway up; aware my parents are talking about something I'd like to listen to. Grandpa, fatigued from the one day a week he really leaves the house, heads silently upstairs and passes me, sending a little wink my way. I can hear my parents' discussion begin the moment Grandpa shuts his door. "Really, James, could you maybe next time be a little *less* involved with the conversation? I don't think the rest of us were able to get a word in edgewise." The sarcasm from my mother's voice rings the air like a pristine bell.

"Maura, I told you this last week, if I open my mouth there's not gonna be a whole lot of people who like what I have to say, especially your father, so it's better that I keep quiet."

"You could have just stayed home, we could have at least talked about you in your absence. And what was so hard about the conversation today? It was really no different than it always is, why couldn't you humor him?"

"Every man has a breaking point, and I don't want this to be responsible for driving me over the edge. I cannot listen to them, and your father will jump on any chance to prove I'm not living up to... well, you know! The older he gets the harder he is to swallow. And enough already, Silla's gone to bed."

I listen to this conversation from the top of the stairs knowing exactly what the other is going to say. Daddy doesn't come to church with me and Mama, he hasn't once stepped through that archway in the fourteen years I've been going, always partly against my will, ironed and starched into the pew with our family name on it, nestled between Mama and Grandpa, as Mama likes to say, like a rose between two thorns. When I was

younger, I would throw tantrums at not being allowed to find God outside like Daddy. Mama explained, as long as Grandpa was out of earshot, that when I was a grown-up I could find God wherever I wanted, but at that moment I needed to get into my dress and Maryjanes before I felt the wrath of her hands across my bottom. Now I just go and like to think about whatever I suppose God feels is worth my thinking about when I'm in that pew. Sometimes I tune into Minister Krigly- sometimes his voice leaves me no choice if its cadence overpowers the sermons I tell *myself* when allowed to think freely for a long enough period of time. Mostly I think about my friends, and I try to remember to thank God for everybody I know, like I'm supposed to. Lately I've been thinking about Jackie, the one friend who doesn't sit in my church with me on Sunday mornings.

I know Mama and Daddy have made up when I stop hearing anything at all, I know they're hugging and whispering sweet things to one another. In order to marry Mama, Daddy had to swear he would find God, and when that happened he would be welcome to come to church where he could show his faith properly. Now, when we go to church, Daddy goes hunting, where God is for him, he says. He'll come to the picnic afterwards, though, to make Mama happy, to let everyone else there know he really is a devoted husband. They were married outside, the Spanish moss nearly touching their heads beneath the tree under which the ceremony was held. I'm told the only reason the wedding wasn't forbidden was because Daddy served in World War II, his four purple hearts beating true enough for Grandpa to respect him, conceding a great soldier would eventually come around after the memory of his battles faded. Grandpa Jeremiah served in the First World War, and his bronze star shines almost as brightly as his blue eyes, the only feature on that man with any light behind it. Most times he's sort of brooding, but

he never gets all that angry with me. But I've seen those eyes blaze with the glory of God, the fury of the flames of hell, and everything in between. This afternoon, his eyes took on a blue lit by something he swallowed long ago, something that had been rising within him the last few months. Grandpa is getting old, even to himself now, and we're all feeling it. We feel it with every slowed movement and every excused cough, wet and laden with dampness.

I'm on my way to meet Jackie Owens, the heathen from down the road. He and I have been friends since our Mama's started doing their washing together, both looking for a little company with their babies in baskets. "Washing gets done a lot easier with someone to talk to," Mama tells me. "I know they don't have the glory of God in their lives, but that doesn't mean Ellie's not fun to talk with. Besides, I'm doing the Christian thing by having her over to use our machines, she'd be doing it by hand otherwise." I asked Mama once what made them different from Daddy not going to church and she told me, "Daddy has God in his life, he just chooses to find Him outdoors is all." I know Mama really likes Ellie because she makes her laugh; Mama always has little roses on her cheeks after seeing Ellie.

The dirt on the road that connects the families that have remained cloaked in rural seclusion kicks up mini brown clouds as I walk, and I like knowing I'm leaving a trail behind me. As I near Jackie's house I can see the break in forest as his house and the dry plot of land it sits on come into view. Tires litter the front yard, and broken bottles

sparkle with the green of sun through leaves. In our younger years these shards of glass, broken in harmony to his father's yelling, were emeralds, the colorless pieces diamonds. But his Daddy's gone these few days, off to Savannah for a funeral of an army buddy. I don't knock on the door with the screen broken through and instead walk right up to Jackie's room.

"Hey, Priscilla," he says without looking up from the comic book gracing his lap. I wonder how he would react if it weren't me, silent and knowing, standing in his bedroom. I think he would be scared, Jackie's a lot easier to spook than I am. He still refuses to go in the woods at night, always sending me out for the night crawlers we use to fish with.

"Hey," I say, and nonchalantly make my way past his chair, aware that my thighs brush the corners of the pages still holding his attention. My jeans are tight now; I haven't gotten around going to town to buy a new pair. I look in the mirror and notice the curve of the denim around my bottom and hips. "Are you going to read that all day, or what?" I finally ask, trying to sound indifferent.

"Hold on a minute, I'm almost done," he bites back, then grins. Jackie's older than me, two grades ahead but only a little over a year in age. He's finally taller, and lately I've been having a hard time pinning him down whenever we wrestle. The other day in my kitchen he spilled his glass of water down my shirt after I told him his hair was starting to look like a dust bunny, just blonder. I chased him out into the yard, fueled by his intervals of running backward, daring me to catch up. Out of breath and sweating I lunged at him and we were on the ground, his weight pressing down on me complete and safe. We stopped after a moment, whoever the winner was not caring, and looked at one

another strong before leaping up and brushing the dirt off our bodies, excited and distracted by what just happened. We walked back into my house to finish our sandwiches, oddly silent until Jackie cracked a joke at how weak I was getting in my old age, as if fourteen meant I was something new.

I sit on the edge of his bed and watch him finish his comic book, hoping he doesn't look up and catch me, mouth open, seeing him for the first time like this.

Minister Krigly is telling us, his loyal and sweaty congregation, about the evils of temptation, how one must be STRONG! (his voice climbing this word up the deep stairs of his throat) in the face of the devil, and that one must guard one's ears and eyes against the workings of the dark angles, those fallen from the holy grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Grandpa Jeremiah is on my right, his massive middle seeping its way into the crook of my waist, his fat resting on my relaxed elbow. Mama is on the left, pretty and fanning herself with the weekly bulletin. I am only catching the words Minister Krigly considers worthy of yelling strong enough that they linger in the air weighted with humidity and souls repenting. I was told as a child by Grandpa that service was a time to think of everything evil I had done that week, to make a list in my head and tell it to God, who would be always listening and ready to forgive me if I was truly sorry. I remember how exhausting this made Sunday mornings, afraid of forgetting something and having to live another week with that sin, like the time I forgot to tell God about my stealing Mama's cookies she had made for the church picnic. I lived in fear of God "striking me

down!", something Minister Krigly enjoys yelling this as the consequence for the unsorry sinner, all week long. I know now this is not the case, so in church I usually tune out everything I can, content to think about whatever makes its way in my mind amidst the words of the Minister. I figure if my mind can find it with God watching us all so closely at all times, then it must be ok to think about instead of the sermon.

I hear Grandpa cough, and it's not as intermittent as it is constant, as if his throat is forever commenting on Minister Krigly's sermon. This coughing has no harmony, it is all illness and decay, not a polite dry clearing of the throat. He holds a handkerchief to his mouth, not even bothering to put it back into a pocket between uses. I look sideways at him so he doesn't see I'm not completely immersed in the sermon, and suddenly remember him making me candy from cherries, chocolate and peanuts he'd pick himself. On the day I stepped on a baby bee with bare feet, he scooped me up as I was sweaty and crying, and whispered I was going to be OK, it was just a little 'ole bee, and he had some candy that would fix me right up. After the pain lessened and I was told the bee was dead, I felt bad about having killed it, it was after all only a baby. It was just lying on the dirt for some reason and I stepped on it. Grandpa sat me on his generous lap said to me, "Silla, don't you worry about that bee. It had no business getting in the way of my Grandbaby, and it serves him right for leaving his stinger in you. If the Lord meant for bees to sting people, He wouldn't have made it so they die after they attack. This all happened for a reason, Silla. Now you know to watch out when barefoot. So hush, and I'll get you another piece of candy." I knew the bee hadn't really attacked me, but when he speaks, Grandpa has the ability to just sound *right* all the time, even if what he's saying isn't actually true.

Afterwards, Grandpa slowly makes his way out of the church, no longer able to kneel down and kiss the cross with our family name on it, emblazoned into the pew. His leg that he swears still has a bullet in it is very stiff these days, and he curses the Germans every time he goes from sitting to standing. Grandpa was seventeen when he enlisted in the army, leaving home for the first time, leaving our southern cradle. Before he left for the ten-mile walk to the nearest bus station, Grandpa's mother cursed him for abandoning her in the life she had made for them, the life she didn't want to be left alone in. She told him it was sacrilegious; children did not leave their mothers like this. He was headed for the devil; he would be lucky to come back alive. He'd be lucky if she gave him a Christian burial after this. Mama tells me this story anytime she thinks I need to be reminded that there are much worse mothers in this world, no matter how unfair I think she is being. She remembers her Grandma as a small, vicious woman who spat when she spoke and carried a bible around her waist in a leather satchel, a reminder of the "truth of our Lord". Her own truth was pretty hard to admit to. She became pregnant at fifteen, temporarily seduced by a traveling salesman peddling cookware. Thrown out of her home, she threw herself on the mercy of the church, and was taken in by an understanding family in our present day congregation until she gave birth to Grandpa Jeremiah. She heralded Christ as her salvation, raising her only child with the name, touch and spirit of the Lord in their every move. Grandpa prayed every morning before school, every afternoon when he came home, and before every meal. He read scripture to his mother before bed every night, and would have lived off holy water had it been possible. Mama tells me these things whenever I moan about going to church or church school. "You have no idea what your life could be like, Silla. No idea." I don't know

what to say to these details about her father, or about her own past. Although Grandpa did not raise her with the same stringency, he held his own upbringing within himself like a deep breath and let out little by little. We all felt this subtle breathing in our lives.

I watch Grandpa this afternoon during the picnic. He sits the whole time, and I bring him refills of his favorites on paper plates. A helping of Mrs. Thomas' macaroni salad and Mrs. Mallow's cheesecake make him smile, and he tells me to give him a kiss, putting a finger spotted with age to his cheek. He says to whoever happens to be around him, as if he is summoning the attention of his courtly attendants, that his Grandbaby Silla is growing to be a beauty just like her mother.

Jackie and I are walking back home from school and our hands keep brushing against one another. I finger the cross around my neck, a gift from Grandpa, the same wooden cross his Mama had given him on his fourteenth birthday. It was given to me when I was born, but I didn't start wearing it until Mama was sure I wouldn't lose it. The days are a bit cooler now, the heat of the deep summer receding each day into something calmer, with less tension in the air.

"Want me to carry those for you?" he asks me, referring to my pile of books. I have carried my own books for the ten years we have been walking to school together.

"Why?" I ask, not sure why the answer is so important. I am stalling, feeling out the new air between us. I think about my moves around him now, I think about how I look and what I say.

Jackie mutters, “I don’t know, just thought I’d carry them for you.” I silently shove them in his hands and whimper a “Thanks”. We have another twenty minutes before we get to my house, and we walk by the small post office before reaching the dirt road that leads to home for us. As we walk by, Grandpa walks out, and Jackie and I stop to say hello. It’s not often I see Grandpa outside our house, unless it’s at church.

He doesn’t see us and walks slowly, back curved under his own flesh, his strength dependent on his cane. “Grandpa!” I yell when we are a few feet away. He stops suddenly and waits for us to catch up and face him, he can’t turn around that well. “Hi Grandpa.”

“Hello, Priscilla,” he says evenly, not bothering to remark at the surprise of us running into one another in front of the post office. “Who’s this?” he asks with no apologies, and sends a gaze towards Jackie, his eyes the intense blue that makes your eyes squint when walking outside from a dark house.

“You remember Jackie, right? Maybe it’s been a while since you’ve seen him. I think the last time was at a birthday of mine a few years ago.”

“Hello, sir,” says Jackie, respectful and clear. Grandpa focuses on him for a minute, just long enough for us to feel his gaze as more than a look. Grandpa’s face goes from mildly cranky to noticeably agitated, and I am embarrassed, remembering the lecture he gave Mama after seeing him at my birthday party.

“He’s a heathen, Maura, Godless and nothing but trouble. I don’t care how gentle a soul he is now, we all have our judgment and we all become grown. That boy should not be around here, he’s just going to grow up into a heathen like his Father.”

“Oh hush, Daddy, they’re just playing. They run and fall and laugh, he doesn’t preach to her about the devil.” Mama was the only one ever capable of speaking up to Grandpa, and it only happened once in a while. I was eight when I overheard this conversation, lurking in the shade of the kitchen while they talked on the porch. After that meeting, Mama stopped having Grandpa stop by when Jackie or Ellie was over. This was before Grandpa moved in with us when I was ten. I took it that they were not to be mentioned around him either. Apparently Jackie’s Daddy had never gone to church, nor had Jackie, and that made him unsalvageable. Mama once mentioned the fact that Grandpa’s own mother had not found the Lord until she was fifteen, and this silenced Grandpa on the Jackie subject. He conceded the boy was still a child; there might be hope for him yet. We stopped talking about him though, so Grandpa pushed this threat to my holiness out of topics worth discussing. But our meeting of him brought him right back to the forefront of Grandpa’s crusade against the sacrilegious.

My stomach is flipping within itself like there are corn kernels bouncing around my skillet belly, and this moment becomes more than I care to risk. I try to think of a smooth way to exit this situation. I don’t want Grandpa to think I’m avoiding the public realm with him; he’s been making self-pitying comments lately on being old and burdensome. At church the other day he joked about his slowness, and how much he didn’t *do* nowadays. “Idle hands! Lord, I’m in trouble if hands are enough to get involved with the devil. I’m idle practically all day, ask Silla. I don’t move unless it’s for supper or the bathroom!” And then he let out one of his trailing coughs, and everyone listening laughed even though I’m sure more than one person was stifling a pitying murmur.

“Uh, Grandpa, are you headed home?”

He continues to look at Jackie like Jackie has a knife to my throat, and answers me without turning his head, “Yes, Silla, and so are you.”

I don’t want to leave Jackie. I find myself thinking this in the face of Grandpa’s expectant huffs, and I know what I really want.

“Well, Grandpa, I was on my way to Jackie’s to pick something up for Mama, from Ellie.” I try to not look at Jackie as I tell this lie, unsure of where it came from and a little frightened and delighted at how easy it is to fib like this. I’ve never lied to Grandpa before, ever.

“I’m sure you can pick it up some other time, or that your Mama can get it. Come on, Silla.”

“Oh, but she needs it this evening, Grandpa. I won’t be long; I’ll see you back home. We need to get going, you know, lots of schoolwork to start.”

“Goodbye, sir,” Jackie says with strength behind his words.

And so we depart from Grandpa. I kiss him on the cheek, and he mumbles a “Goodbye” without looking in Jackie’s direction. I know he stands in the street watching us move away from him, like a man who has missed his bus. I don’t want to look at Jackie, I am sorry for Grandpa’s reception of him. But we continue on our way, allowing for a few minutes of silence to make the moment officially worth noting.

“I’m sorry, Jackie. I don’t know what to tell you about him, he’s stubborn and old.” I say this to him while watching my feet step one after the other, wishing our way with one another was still that mindless and easy.

“Don’t worry about it. He looks a little sick though, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, Mama seems worried.” Jackie puts his hand that doesn’t have books in it in mine, and we walk to my house, silent and barely breathing, as if a real breath might break whatever moment it was we are in.

When I get in my house I go straight for the kitchen knowing Mama is there making supper.

“Mama, you need to tell Grandpa that I brought you a magazine from Ellie’s, that you asked me to pick it up from Jackie’s after school.”

She looks up from the carrots she is peeling into the trashcan and says, “Why?”

“Because I ran into Grandpa with Jackie this afternoon and told him that was why I couldn’t come back here with him, that I needed to get something for you from their house.” She looks at me quizzically, but only smiles and says, “Ok, I’ll be on the lookout, Silla”.

“I figure as soon as he gets home Grandpa is going to tell you how he saw me and Jackie at the post office this afternoon, after which he will lecture about the evils of the Godless.” She chuckles, taking the edge off. I don’t care to talk about that moment, all I want is to be in my room where I can think about the tipping of my world that is going on. Jackie left my house after giving me my books, smiling as he walked down the road. I just watched him, admiring the certainty his steps invoked in my head.

“Don’t worry about it, doll, he’s harmless.” I nod and ask what is for supper, set the table and go upstairs to wait for dinner to be ready. Grandpa’s tone stings like a

grapefruit in my head, and I mouth the words I wish I had said to him in defense of Jackie, words that would fight for him in a way Grandpa might see clearly. *Judge not thy neighbor, for it is the Lord who sees us for what we truly are.* I don't even know if this is scripture, but I feel it's something Grandpa might say to me if I were acting in an unChristian-like manner. Up in my room I look at myself in the mirror, trying to figure out why I look so familiar on the outside but can't recognize myself on the inside.

Grandpa is lying in his wide wooden box, the lid closed over his face that is being put to rest with an expression of knowing a little more than the rest of us. I smile and think this is exactly how he wants us to remember him, slightly ahead of our game, a bit wiser than the rest of us poor, ignorant souls that didn't take his word as seriously as we should have. Jackie is standing behind me, his hand on the small of my back but no one can see this since we are all crowded around the hole Grandpa is being lowered into. He died in his sleep three nights ago, Mama asleep on the couch in his room. I went to see him for the last time the day before, part of me knowing it was going to be the last time. He had not eaten for days, couldn't swallow anything other than some luke warm tea. Mama said he went into and out of consciousness, at times preaching like he was the glory of God himself, other times quietly crying out for his wife who had died twenty years earlier.

Mama insisted I go in alone to say goodbye. I had not really spoken to Grandpa for two months, since he assaulted Jackie at our house during Thanksgiving dinner. I

decided it was time for them to try being introduced again, hoping the public atmosphere would keep things calm. Jackie and I had only hung out at his house since that afternoon with Grandpa, and although Grandpa tacitly knew where I was, he never asked, as if the truth might change something. I was glad he didn't ask, because I didn't feel like having to tell him that Jackie was more than a childhood playmate. But that didn't mean Grandpa was above making some remarks about it.

During grace one night, Grandpa added to his little sermon about being thankful we all had the light of God in our lives, even Daddy, that we needed to remember to pray for those other, less enlightened people who we might see in school, or walk on the same road with, or even borrow things from." I sat in my chair and looked at my plate, some of me livid, most of me thinking it would be too hard to say something.

The week before he died he fell into a kind of delirium where he went on tangent conversations with the dead people in his life. He yelled at his own Mama, saying things like, "I'm leaving, I'm leaving Mama and you can't stop me. I'm leaving and you're going to be Ok, you and your bible will wait for me." Other times he whispered to his wife, Savannah, the Grandma I never met. "I'll be late for supper tonight, doll. You and the girls don't need to wait for me. But be sure to save some of that cooking for me, you know I love everything you make!"

During Thanksgiving, amidst a table of fried turkey and roasted catfish, three different stuffings and cranberry sauce, Grandpa made subtle remarks about being ever so thankful for having Christ in our lives, "Or at least *most* of the lives seated here this evening." By the time the pecan pies were brought out, I had excused myself, grabbing Jackie by the hand and taking our plates to the porch.

I didn't talk much to Grandpa after that night, and in the glow of his bedroom, the air heavy with the suspense of not knowing exactly when his soul was going to be taken to, what he assumed was, a better place, Grandpa looked important and pitiful, his face collapsed with the effort it took to simply breath. I sat next to his bed and said, "Hi, Grandpa", bracing myself for his reply I was assumed was going to concern the state of my mortal soul, since of course Jackie had tainted the sanctity of my being by then. Instead, he looked at me with a slow, mindful smile, and pointed to the bible on the table next to his bed.

I took it and handed it to him, but he shook his head and said, "Take this, child, and read it. You cannot buy salvation."

I looked him dead in his eyes that were a poisonous blue by then, as if an evil potion had been poured into his sockets and pooled. I smiled, placed a hand over his and squeezed, letting him know I had heard him. But I didn't dignify his voice with a reply.

