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I Knew You When

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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I KNEW YOU WHEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By
Jami K. Dittus
M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Virginia Commonwealth University, May 2009

Director: Susann Cokal, Associate Professor, Department of English
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Abstract

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Four short stories and the first quarter of a novel revolve around characters sick with want, sick of and from the worlds in which they live. They crave connection with other people, often through indirect methods, but can’t always manage the connections they make with other characters. Objects take prominence as connection to the real world, comforting and static when people cannot be.
The account books were closed and Buddy had killed the last chicken. Most of what was left in the store was inedible—lavender toilet water, dusty bolts of cloth. Mary tried to slip out without her father seeing. But he always saw. “You’re needed here,” he said as she opened the door. “Where are you going?”

“For a walk,” Mary said, as she always did when her father asked. Her right foot was paused ahead of her left. She could feel the floor pushing up through the worn soles of her shoes.

“Better be a walk back to the house,” he said. They lived just behind their store, hot and cramped, eight siblings taking shifts in the beds.

“That's just not far enough,” Mary said. “I need a little air. Please.” Before he could say more, Mary was out of the store, her feet twitching forward.

It was getting too cold to be without a coat, but Mary walked fast, and the air felt good after the stuffiness of the store. She wasn’t lying to her father. She did need this. At the bus stop she hopped up and down, making her own heat, wishing she had a cigarette.

*  

The security guard stationed just inside the door was Gus, her friend’s brother, and Mary thought he had it made, at eighteen, in a black wool jacket and cap. He opened
doors for lady shoppers, tipped his hat to the men, stood all day in service to the department store’s palatial hulk. At sixteen, she’d been working for years in her family’s little store. They sold bulk grains and mothy flours, hideously large tomatoes grown out back in the yard. On a table near the back her mother mixed medicinal salves, and people came in holding babies and leading old folks, whipping off bonnets and hats to reveal scaly rashes on their scalps. Lately people could not afford what they used to, though, and mothers came in frowning and pleading to put this one on the books, thrusting their babies closer and closer under the nose of Mary’s mother, who could not at all resist the wounded and the weak, even at her own expense, or her family’s. Her youngest child, just four, empty belly aching, took to dipping his fingers into the salve base and licking off the beeswax and olive oil.

Mary wanted none of this. Her mother had tried to make her learn the salves: how to mix them, what to rub on people’s hands when they were cracked and raw. She saw the endless line of people that needed something, and her heart pounded, and she turned away, sitting on the floor in the storeroom looking at catalogs until her father found her. Necklaces, rings, things nobody needed, but her bare skin tingled—she wanted them. *Miss 1933 Wears Rubies*, said the print over an illustration of a girl, bracelets and rings slid over her gloved hands. Her lips neither smiled nor frowned. She wore a swimsuit and a fur coat, existed outside of weather or work. Her eyes were closed to such concerns, but Mary was sure that the weight of the sparkle she wore assured her of infinite possibility. The printed sketches were not enough. Mary wanted to see the sparkle for herself, and so here she was, at the entrance to the department store, with all the butterflies that her
girlfriends got over the strong-jawed twins down the road—Johnny and John—but she got them over what Gus guarded. The beautiful clothes and shoes, the silver and vases, the tinned candy tied with ribbon, and the way it all waited to be picked by ladies who could afford to pick it.

Gus smiled when saw Mary. “My girl,” he said. He was already married, so what he expressed wasn't ownership of Mary’s heart or body, but something she carried with her on her clothes, in her eyes. It was the way they’d grown up. She’d known him before the uniform and the stiff, watchful posture of work. Together they had stolen biscuits from school and eaten them on the way home, hastily making sure no telltale crumbs remained on their lips.

There was a lost and never-claimed coat that Gus hid for Mary when she came in, because her thin dress dabbed with work stains embarrassed her in here. He helped her slide on the coat, which was dark and fitted, and covered everything but a half-inch of dress hem. “And look at these,” he said, pulling out a pair of ladies’ gloves from his pocket. “I found them on the floor of the lounge.” Mary looked around before putting them on. Once they were on, though, she felt like she owned them. She noticed a sign set up on an easel, about a presentation in the ladies’ lounge—Today Only. See Exquisite Treasures from Russia. Exclusive Opportunity to Own Rare Luxury. She touched her gloved hands together. The words “exquisite” and “exclusive” felt like they included her, for now.

*
In the elevator Mary shed her parents and brothers and sisters. She was alone and the sleepy operator didn’t ask her why she had no purse. She picked off the last crumbs of their need and caution and when the shiny door opened, she was ready to coat her mouth with sample lipstick as dark as she could find. She admired herself in the little mirror on the counter after blotting her lips, and said “Yes, please,” to the saleswoman who offered her a spray of Chanel Nº 5.

A man’s voice drifted from the open door of the lounge. “What you are seeing now is invaluable ...” Mary went in and hovered behind a velvet sofa. Her shoes did not click when she walked; they shuffled conspicuously. The two women on the sofa turned around and glanced at her. Mary looked straight ahead, her mouth in a concentrated, pursed, falsely bemused position. She started to slide her hands into the pockets of the coat that was not hers, but remembered the gloves, and left her hands out. She bent her left foot in and set it on top of her right, holding herself here, to this floor, this spot.

“Exactly how invaluable is it?” one of the women on the sofa said. A man in a three-button suit stood behind a small table, where a large, jeweled egg-shaped object sat on a gilt stand.

The treasure, Mary thought. Her heart beat hard.

The other sofa-woman giggled. “A hundred? A thousand?”

“From the back I don’t think you can see the fine materials, the cut of the precious stones,” the man said.
“What good are precious stones if you can’t wear ‘em?” the first sofa-woman said to the giggler.

The man cleared his throat. “Now, for those of you involved in charity work, I want you to take a look at this next egg.” He opened the top of its white shell and produced a small portrait that unfolded into a series. “The royal women dressed as Sisters of Mercy during the War. They brought wounded soldiers into the palace in an effort to connect with the people.”

“What kind of people?” the bold sofa-woman asked, still amused. Mary stared at the egg. She could see its ruby red cross and the gold designs around it. But she wanted to see the portraits: Were the women smiling, or straight-lipped, like the girls in the catalog pictures?

She inched up, coming from behind the sofa around to its side, until she was almost even with the women sitting on it. Her foot kicked into a purse on the floor. Mary was not pale enough to show a blush, but she felt the blood in her cheeks. The woman looked over at the soft noise and smiled slightly.

Mary looked back at the table. The white egg was next to a blue one, a deep color she had never seen before. If…, she thought. If I had to pick just one… She assessed the eggs hungrily. Her foot kicked into the purse again.

“Sorry, dear,” the purse’s owner said. “I’d put it next to me on the sofa, but it just doesn’t go with my outfit. The wrong color entirely. I ran out of the house too fast to change it over.” Mary smiled nervously. The woman patted for her to sit. She did, just
barely perched on the edge. She leaned her body forward, toward the objects. There was nothing in the catalogs like these.

“The miss likes?” the man said. Mary nodded. The women giggled. The velvet of the sofa brushed the backs of Mary’s bare legs, and the touch spurred her on for more luxury.

“The materials are so…exquisite,” Mary said.

“Absolutely,” the man said. “Why don’t you come closer and see the detail?”

Mary looked over at the women next to her, who nodded encouragement.

“Can I touch one?” she asked the man softly, up at the table.

“I’m afraid not,” he said.

No blood rushed to Mary’s cheeks. She gave a small nod. She turned to walk back toward the sofa but gave her empty hand a wide arc, so that her fingers were in the orbit of the white egg. With her gloved fingers she grazed it slightly.

*

Mary walked out of the lounge with the other ladies, silent and dazed. Her coat pockets were full of small biscuits—scones, the women had said, cursing the selection—You never know if they’re fresh or stale. Still they had eaten them disproportionately to the tea they drank, and so were yawning, too full, as they entered the elevator.

“I don’t know your mother dear, do I?” one asked her, peering at Mary with a lazy curiosity. The woman put a gloved finger up to her lips, considering. A reddish patch, like a rash, peeked out from where the glove met her wrist. Mary had never seen such a well-dressed woman in her family’s store, desperate for a salve. But without the clothes,
who would know about her money?

“No,” Mary said. “I’m from out of town; I’m just visiting.” The woman nodded and Mary smiled, not at this but at thinking of sneaking Gus a scone as she handed over the gloves and this perfumed coat.

*

Mary started shivering as she got close to home. The sun was setting, and the heat of the department store had faded. She was left with only herself, pale lips, dry. She thought she’d go into the store and at least get some salve for them.

Her father let her in. “I just need…,” she started to say, but he shushed her. He took off his cardigan sweater and put it in her hands. Against the scratchy wool she thought of the smooth and precious materials she had touched, earlier, without the three-button suit man seeing. But she hadn’t felt anything through the gloves.
SOME THINGS TO TAKE CARE OF

Rochelle’s friend Milan said he only drank weekends, but that was on a Wednesday. He patted the couch next to him. “Come,” he said. “Sit.” He’d started before her with the brandy. Now he was ready to share. She hiked up her jeans, which were too loose. They’d fit just fine when she’d gotten them.

For the brandy, and also for the companionship, she would sit like a good dog. He had finished feeding her the sausages he’d fried with onions. Rochelle didn’t cook anything anymore. It was good that Milan was the superintendent of the building, and lived downstairs.

“My wife,” he said. “She’s gone.” Had been gone—two years back in Croatia now. Rochelle already knew about it, but Milan kept the trauma spinning. When he drank, he turned up the volume.

Rochelle did not pat him but she looked at him, her blue eyes which she thought looked droopy, but that read as sympathetic. Rochelle had lived in this building for a year.

“And Eddie’s going to fire me,” he cried, a fresh round. “I take too long to fix things.” Milan’s apartment was on the ground floor. His ceiling had exposed pipes, painted white, but the clanky shapes still stood out.
Eddie made him drink more, holding onto his glass like dice, blowing on it for luck, as if this throw would be the one.

“Now, there, now now,” Rochelle said. She could hear her voice sounding warm and large and nourishing, but lately it wasn’t paired with corresponding feeling inside her. “You’ll be okay.” She was going for her Master’s in Social Work. She was practiced in listening to the terrible feelings of others, and trying to help them. Since she was little, it’d been like a tic. She thought she’d have an endless supply of bandages to apply to people’s wounds. She was starting to run out.

Milan tried to put his glass down on the coffee table, but there were too many magazines stacked up at an odd angle. He put his glass on the scratched wood floor, then rested his elbows on his legs, just above his bony knees. He held his head in his hands, looking down. He had stopped actively crying, but stray tears dripped down to his chin, where light brown stubble grew in, and from there to the candy wrappers on the floor. And you, too. You will be okay, she thought she heard Milan say. But he hadn’t: it was just the noise of the wrappers crinkling under Rochelle’s shoes. Rochelle was grateful for whatever she could get. A glass of brandy was fine. She picked it up and drank from it, holding tight to it, convincing herself.

“Rochelle,” he said. She hadn’t heard her name said so nice, so tender, in a long time. Her ears pricked up. With a sweep of his long arm, Milan cleared the table of all the magazines. Their centerfolds lay open on the floor. Rochelle didn’t mind: she actually
felt comfortable surrounded by two-dimensional flesh, poreless, safe in the moment. He
looked her in the eyes. “You are a good girl. My pet.”

* 

The buildings around here seemed to blink. Rochelle stared, they regarded her,
yawned, then blinked, refusing to specify themselves as housing this or that, as holding
living people they never seemed to spit out. The houses in between the buildings were
painted colors that even under a blue sky were gray-tinged as if the sun were blocked and
indirect. She thought of this as she walked to the train, which she usually took just a
couple stops to Fordham for her social work classes.

Today she kept south into Manhattan, to drop off a late assignment at a
professor’s apartment on the Upper West Side. The scribbled address did not seem to
exist. She rounded corners, checking the same buildings for numbers that were no help.
Every so often was a tree stuck in the cement, leaves so light green and waxy with spring
it was almost disgusting. Nature was thriving all around her. The sunlight, soft as if re-
birthed from the harsh light of summer and the cutting light of winter, threw Rochelle’s
sallow skin and muscle-wasted frame into relief. Breezes rustled by, saltiness and exhaust
mixed with the scent of pink flowers wagging off of trees. She passed a little bookstore,
with a card table and a taped sign hand-lettered, reading Sidewalk Sale! The exclamation
seemed uncalled for, a dozen tattered books two for a dollar must buy two, outdated
computer manuals and the familiar mint green cover of a series book she’d loved as a kid.
Rochelle reached to touch that book, thought she wanted it, but must buy two and there
was nothing else worth the change. The shop door opened and a girl came out, holding a
folding chair with the brown color flaking off, and a box of chocolate-chip cookies.
Rochelle knew who it was immediately, the dumb bandana still tied on her head. The girl made a deep squeak, like a normally silent animal in distress.

“Maggie,” Rochelle said. Maggie was her ex-girlfriend. She kept her hand on the door as if to go back in. Her body had softened, while Rochelle was now hard and pointy like a geometry tool waiting for an assignment. Maggie just looked at her, without smiling, her eyes widening into a cat’s suspicious stare. *As if she’s not sure I won’t hurt her,* Rochelle thought. *As if were me who . . . .*

Maggie opened her mouth: “I can’t talk right now.” She put the chair down, and opened the door to go back in. A calico with crazed yellow eyes shot out, tail up like a bristle. “Get in, you fuck,” Maggie said, scooping it under its belly with one hand.

* A blonde girl in a pink dress yanked an orange cat by its tail. This was an illustration in a moral tale book for fifties children Rochelle found in a stack in the playroom of the child she babysat a couple nights a week. It was a library book that had never been returned. The child’s eyes widened at its appearance. “Bad girl book,” she shouted.

“Barbie Corvette,” Rochelle said, rolling the toy car back and forth across the carpet, trying to tempt the girl away from the book. While the child stuffed the pink Corvette with getaway clothes, Rochelle stared at the picture of the girl and the cat, the cat looking back at the girl in anguish and indignity, the girl with glee and self-satisfaction, a full high skirt to her dress. This was only one side to the book. If you
flipped the book to the other side, it became a good example, this time the girl petting the cat who wound around her legs with pleasure. Rochelle put the book in her green canvas bag.

After the parents came home, Rochelle set up sheets on the playroom couch. Late nights she now stayed over rather than drive back. She overslept in the morning and the mother came in, lint rolling her shirt. Rochelle’s cheek bore a creased and painful indent and she had dry mouth. When she stood up she stepped on something, a sharp jolt that caught her foot arch. The Barbie Corvette cracked. “I’m sorry,” Rochelle said.

The mother sighed. “She’ll get a new one.”

* 

Aside from babysitting, Rochelle had another job, at a day care for developmentally disabled adults. The place’s van, an old Ford, was a gray that had once been green, with *We Care Yonkers, NY* stenciled on the side. As Rochelle drove, Finley dug his nails into his forearms over and over; Carl wailed at every passing Dunkin’ Donuts—it’s why he was in day care; he kept leaving his aging parents’ house to break into neighbors’ kitchens, sniffing out the Entenmann’s choco-dipped. He was good at it. “I promise on the way back, Carl,” Rochelle said. She’d been doing this run for almost a year, passing outdated everything on the route, stores with yellowed signs that reordered their letters by season. She made her turn-off, bits of perforated brown steering wheel cover sticking under her nails. She looked at the pewter fairy ring on her ring finger; she’d had that dumb thing so long.
“Errrowl,” said Carl, desperate and pointing. An Entenmann’s truck was delivering to a convenience store. *And that was “Think” by Aretha Franklin. But this is Friday, and you don’t want to think,* the DJ said. *We’re taking call-ins now to vote for your favorite version of “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling.”* Carl was taking off his seatbelt.

“Not now, Carl,” Rochelle said. The tires rolled over a bump. Rochelle sensed it was a living bump, and the guys sensed it, too.

“You killed it,” said Finley.

“What,” Rochelle said. “Just a bump, nothing to worry about.”

“You killed it!”

“It was nothing, guys.”

Carl yelped and pointed, standing up, his head pummeling the van’s worn ceiling.

Rochelle swung the van to the shoulder. “Sit down, Carl!”

She couldn’t help it. She stuck her head out the window and looked at the spot where she’d been.

A squirrel tail moved in the breeze. The rest of it was guts on the road. “It will be okay,” Rochelle said.

“No way,” said Finley.

*  

Rochelle bought a 40-ounce of Country Club and a can of bug spray. She carried it out gleaming, around the corner, wearing a black t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and the number six screened in gray on the front. “You should be wearing a seven,” one of the
guys on the corner said. “No really, girl. You should be.” Rochelle didn’t smile. She
didn’t feel like she could be a better version of herself. She crossed the street as a car
turned the corner, gunning through a red light, and the driver, furious, yelled at her to
watch where she was going. Rochelle’s skin prickled, the start of a cold sweat. The
driver, the set of his eyes, he could be that man from last summer. The one who’d
attacked Maggie. They’d never caught him.

“Leave the girl alone,” corner guy said to the glare of the driver. It was too late to
get the plate number.

Before going into her building she looked across the street, up at the window with
the faded cartoon-character sheet as a curtain. The window was always closed, but now a
guy leaned out, Puerto Rican flag bandana on his head. A young couple—boy and a
girl—were looking at each other and crying in front of Rochelle’s building. The boy
walked across the street and started to yell: “I’d die for you, I’d die for you, I’d fucking
die for you.” The girl stayed quiet. Rochelle took the stairs up to the third floor. The
garbage chute was housed in a little closet right across from Rochelle’s door. The
garbage door was ajar. She kicked it so it would close, and a roach flew out. Someone
had set a pizza box on the floor inside. The roaches were all over it, plus crawling up and
down the door. Two of them made their way across to her door, stepping over the thin
line of boric acid in the crack before the jamb, feeling for a way in. The first one, she
took her Chinese-slippered foot and she smashed it, her foot down so hard the floor
shocked her bones. It was a big one and she thought she felt the bump of its body under
her shoe. She took the shoe off and saw it was stuck to the sole but still moving. She
thwacked the shoe against the tile, hard, hard. She was kneeling now, and her elbow
backed against the malt liquor bottle in the bag and it tipped over and clinked. The
second one she sprayed, enjoying the *ffffssst* the can made. The roach soaked in poison,
still moving. Rochelle did not let herself cough at the fumes.

* 

Rochelle was on her usual We Care run with the guys and the van when she
thought she was getting sick. Her palms sweated on the steering wheel, and her body felt
damp and nervous. Her stomach turned. She pulled the van over to a drive-through.
“We’re going to get a snack,” she said. The only thing she could think of was that salt
might help. She ordered chicken nuggets.

While she was waiting, a man walked up the cement path of the drive-through and
knocked hard on the side of the van. “Spare some change?” His knock made her heart
catch violently. She looked at him and shook her head, and he kept staring, he wouldn’t
leave, she thought his hand might reach through the window, but she couldn’t talk, she
couldn’t make him go away.

“Chocolate cookies,” Carl bellowed, seeing a discarded box on the ground, with
some smiling thing on it, a cartoon animal or monster. The spare-changer was startled out
of his determination and walked off behind the drive-through menu. Rochelle advanced
the van and collected a small, grease-spotted bag from the window. She reached in and
pulled out a nugget.

“Eat this,” she said to Carl, who shook his head.
“Chocolate cookies,” he said, arm slung across his stomach, his body folded over as if he were being gnawed on from the inside. Rochelle put the nugget to her own mouth. She chewed on it and her stomach accepted it, meeting the grease like it needed it, until the pliant texture of the meat gave way to something hard, something crunchy she could not bite through. She extracted it off her tongue with her thumb and forefinger: a grayish piece of bone.

She threw the bag out the window.

The small bit of food turned her nervousness into a shaky excitement. She had an idea on something to bring into her apartment. A pet—her parents had not let her have one, nothing real, she had to be content with the patch of Pat the Bunny fur. Now, she could get a real bunny if she wanted one. She could get anything. She pulled the van into the parking lot of Petco. “Stay good,” she told the guys. “I’ll be right back.” The first thing she looked at was birds, a cage of green, skittering parakeets. Seed shells sprayed back and forth as they fed. She peered in. There was a dead blue one in the dish and they were eating around it. She moved on quickly. Fuzzy brown hamsters slept, half-buried in cedar shavings. She tapped the glass tank and they did not even look up, except for one, who, eyes still closed, sniffed the air, looking for the disturbance. “I want that one,” she told the red-shirted Petco kid.

“Ai-ight,” he said. “You need a cage with that?”

“Yeah, something cheap,” she said. He went to look and she slipped a box of pellet feed into her bag.

“There you go, baby. It’s a floor sample and I’ll make it half-price for you.”
“Okay,” she said, smiling but not at him, at the thought of getting home and setting up a cage to house something living, with a naturally quick heartbeat.

* 

Milan had cement and a shovel and was supposed to be filling in the holes rats made in the grass by the garbage. Rochelle paused in the courtyard with a black plastic bag in her hand. A large rat crawled out of a box left next to one of the garbage cans. She looked up to the third-floor window next to hers. Her neighbor Karina was aiming her BB gun at the rat. Rochelle dropped the bag, which clattered against the cement square outside the door. “I’m innocent,” she shouted up.

“Move it,” Karina said.

“I’m fixing it, I’m fixing it,” Milan said. He looked at the cement mix, which was still sealed in the bag. Across the small patch of grass, an orange cat hunkered, ready to attack the rat. The cat sprung. The rat’s head pulled up from the box and looked, disregarded. The cat stopped its hunting gait and stepped back. The rat disappeared into a hole in the grass.

“You’re next,” Karina said, to Milan or the cat.

Rochelle picked up her trash bag. The bottom of a small cage tore through the bottom. Cedar shavings spilled out. “You have a pet?” Milan said.

“It’s gone now,” Rochelle said. She pushed the shavings together with her foot in a flip-flop. The door of the little cage was open. Shit, she thought. Fur brushed against her bare skin. The hamster, still alive, was on the lam.
The cat pounced with success. He batted the hamster with his paws before his teeth dipped into the fur and the skin. “Bad kitty,” Milan said. The cat shook the little body in its mouth, throwing its head back.

“I didn’t want it,” Rochelle said. “I couldn’t take care of it after all.” Milan kneeled down and stroked the cat’s back.

*

That evening, Rochelle knocked on Milan’s door with two 40-ounces, plus a bottle of wine, from the Westchester family, tucked into her canvas bag. They had not given her this, but she had habits, and the wares piled up in her apartment: a box of shot glasses from a bar, forks, books, earrings she’d never wear.

Milan opened the door. At first just his head stuck out, his brown eyes wide and limpid, and he was grinning, causing deep lines in his skin. “Come in, quick,” he said. “Don’t open the door wide.” Rochelle looked at him, curious, assessing, this smile she had not seen before. She looked around the place: it seemed the same, sagging maroon velour couch, cartons of cigarettes stacked up on the coffee table, some sealed, some opened not the proper way but half the box ripped right off, cable porn on the TV with the volume off. He had tried to make a move on her, initially, but his efforts were halfhearted and she reminded him that she liked girls, and from then on they watched the Playboy channel in companionable silence, or, if his cable was shut off, he cried and she soothed. Still, he was always there, on the ground floor, and he always let her in, and he did not ask her many questions, other than “Where is other girl?” after Maggie moved out.
“I have another guest,” he said, still smiling. Rochelle put the bottles down on his coffee table. “Don’t be shy,” he called out to the room, which was still empty of life other than the silent writhing on the TV. He went into the bedroom and crouched down, peering under the bed. He found something and pulled, came back with a squirming orange cat in his arms. Rochelle settled into the familiar sink of the couch. She thumbed the cigarette burns on the armrest.


“Do not insult the company,” he said. “He is a good boy. And he doesn’t drink my brandy.”

“I hope that’s not a blow to me,” Rochelle said. “After I bring you this expensive wine.”

“I see cheap beer,” Milan said.

“It’s in my bag,” Rochelle said, pointing.

The cat dug his claws into Milan’s arm. Milan released him to the ground. “He’ll learn,” he said. “Once I give him food, he’ll be my friend.”

“Maybe,” Rochelle said. “My hamster kept biting me.”

“Maybe he didn’t like the food,” Milan said. He opened a can of tuna onto a piece of aluminum foil on the kitchen floor. “Come, kitty,” he said.

“It was a she,” Rochelle said.
Eyes reflected from within the blind-drawn dark of the bedroom. The cat stared, then gave in, slinking from under the bed to the open door, then to the food, back dipped, head turning back and forth, tail down.

He ate the tuna as if a pack of dogs were waiting around him, tongues out, teeth bared, waiting for an opening to attack. Rochelle and Milan sat on the couch and watched him eat, sprinkling each other’s hands from a torn brown pack of M&M’s. Rochelle let the coloring melt on her tongue, but these days her stomach turned at chocolate, so she spit the naked candies into a small paper bag. The first time she’d knocked on Milan’s door was not to complain about the rats, or the broken elevator. It was the middle of the night, after the attack, and she needed the number of a car service to take Maggie to the hospital. *You have to get the kit done,* Rochelle kept saying to Maggie, meaning the rape kit, repeating it flat, like a zombie. After her adrenaline wore off, that’s all she was. She couldn’t go back out to her car to drive, and wasn’t thinking clear enough to just call 411 and ask. Maybe she knew she just couldn’t handle it on her own.

Rochelle clicked the TV over to a game show. She pretended to be interested in the cards adding up correctly so that the contestant would win a car. On the second try the contestant said, “This will be it, I can feel it.” Rochelle hadn’t been able to get the whole story out, but when Milan opened the door, he had seen something was wrong, and reacted viscerally. He called for a car and went with them.

*
Maggie was the clueless, coddled sort, who had never actually worked or cooked or done anything to sustain her own life. This became apparent when, after college, Maggie and Rochelle moved in together. Maggie, cashing the occasional fat check from her mother in California, but still wanting to make her way in the city, slept till 3:00 p.m. when she would call up Rochelle at work and say that the toaster was broken. “Is it plugged in?” Rochelle would ask, swatting at the stack of insurance forms in front of her in a claustrophobia-inducing office in White Plains, jealous that Maggie was still hanging out instead of working. It was not plugged in. Rochelle’s boss, large, square, her button-downs about to rip off at the shoulder seams, would walk past and click down the receiver.

Still, they had moments, when the dim energies of Maggie made Rochelle’s sharpness lose its edges. Maggie would rub the sleep out of her eyes, and take the train up to White Plains, and buy Rochelle shrimp cocktail after work, or come with her to babysit. Which is what she’d done that one night in mid-July. They made good time, and had an hour to kick around, and went to get matching $10 haircuts at Supercuts, which, of course came out choppy, uneven, and looked bad on both of them, Maggie’s light and fine hair, Rochelle’s thicker and dark.

After the parents got back from a party, it was 1:00 a.m., and Rochelle and Maggie left the house in Rochelle’s old hatchback. They stopped at a 7-Eleven for water and considered the selection of hair cover-ups—do-rags, hot pink Yankees caps, and stars-n-stripes bandanas—but didn’t buy any. When they got off the highway and into
their neighborhood, they even found a parking space right off. It was three blocks away, which was not bad at all.

They walked arm-in-arm, steering each other around the dog piles on the cement. The humid air was engulfing at this time of night, no music, nothing, just the silent lick of the air, cooling after a stuffy car ride. Rochelle tugged on Maggie’s bandana, the regular light pink one she wore, not the stiff stars-n-stripes reject. “Hello ladies,” a passing figure said.

Rochelle acknowledged him square. “Hi,” she said. She did not look back at him after he passed, but should have felt the sulfur in the air, tinder about to spark, the jacked-up energy of this man, the way his eyes did not blink. She thought she should have known. But in another second he had pinned Maggie against a brick school wall and snaked his giant hands under her clothes, one under her shirt, the other down her pants. Rochelle, the rape crisis hotline team captain of her college, froze herself, sharpened, her body tensed, while her mind focused into a calm so flat and heavy it was a marble slab. The handle of a knife stuck out of his back pocket. “You don’t want to do this here,” she said. “Not outside. We can go to my place.” If she could just get him a block down, less isolated, the possibility of an open window, she could walk them somewhere and distract him, she could grab Maggie and they could run.

But the attacker was too drugged up to be talked down. Rochelle’s tactics didn’t stop him. She ran after a battered old van that was the only car to go down the street. As the van neared the stop sign, she clawed at the passenger side window, which was rolled down halfway. “Help…please help,” she said. The driver leaned over and said, “Get off
my van, crazy bitch.” Rochelle ran back to the sidewalk and climbed over the short wrought iron fence that separated the sidewalk from the cement front yard of the house next to the school. The sharp points of the fence pushed so far into her legs she couldn’t believe her skin didn’t break. Maggie was a few feet away, silent, covered by the large frame of the guy, and Rochelle’s whole body felt turned out, raw, ripped open, as if it were happening to her. Worse than if it were happening to her. She was right there and she couldn’t stop it. She pushed the doorbell and kicked the door. Someone answered. It was dark inside the house; she couldn’t really see him, she stepped in the house, begged the man for help, quietly, not wanting to startle the attacker and cause him to use his knife, and the man said something in Spanish, and reached to shut the door, his arm brushing Rochelle’s breasts as he pulled it back, his hand lingering, palm pushing into her flesh. She elbowed him in the gut as hard as she could and flung herself out the door. Maggie’s attacker was gone when Rochelle got back outside.

After the assault, Maggie hadn’t gone back to California, but she had not stayed with Rochelle for more than two weeks. Rochelle stayed home from her insurance-office job until she got fired from it. She made toast for Maggie, read books out loud over the whir of the box fan. The first time Maggie left the apartment was to visit a friend. The friend came to the front of the building to meet her. Rochelle could stay right where she was, Maggie said. The friend would take care of her. Maggie didn’t come back.

* 

Rochelle found her way back to the crummy bookstore, a dollar in her pocket.
She almost didn’t recognize the store without the sidewalk sale table out. She wondered why today was not a sidewalk sale day, and other days were. As she opened the door, a tired, but loud, beep went off. Rochelle wasn’t sure if she jumped back visibly, hand over her heart, or if all the jumping was internal. Just a doorbell, she told herself, trying to breathe deep and slow. She tried to think back to when she wasn’t scared of anything, but trying to get back her casual, determined energy just made her sad. She was not that person anymore: she saw herself outside of this warm, bodied energy, reaching out to pet it. She could touch it, but it was separate from her now.

The sidewalk sale table was folded up, shoved in a tight corner between bookshelves in a tiny front room. Through a wide doorway was another room, with more books and a register. Two milk crates of books were stacked on top of each other in front of the folded table. Rochelle saw the green-covered YA series book peeking out from one of the slats in the bottom crate. She thought she could save it from its fate of burial between computer manuals, and she thought she was strong and slick enough to pull it out without disturbing the top crate. She wasn’t. It started to topple, and she pushed it back with one arm.

Maggie walked over toward Rochelle and the crates, a paperback open in her hand, not looking up all the way, mumbling, “Can I help you.”

She looked up before Rochelle said anything, and slapped the book down to the side of her leg. “What do you want,” Maggie said, the meanest Rochelle had ever heard quiet, passive Maggie say anything to her.
Rochelle freed her hand from under the top crate, and rebalanced it. “I wanted to buy something,” she said.

“Ok,” Maggie said. She crossed her arms over her stomach and walked off. “I’ll be at the register.”

Rochelle, still facing the crates, stepped back from them, empty-handed. Her foot stepped on the edge of the bookstore’s calico cat’s tail. The cat hissed, and swiped at Rochelle’s bare ankle. Rochelle turned around, and squatted to the cat’s level. “I didn’t mean to do that. Don’t scratch me, asshole.” The slightly crooked yellow eyes of the cat stared back at her. Its tail swished. Rochelle stood up, slightly dizzy. She pushed her hair behind her ears, and tried to smooth its frizz with her palms. She thought she might pass out. She squatted back down again. The cat walked over and took the spot near the sidewalk-sale milk crates, where Rochelle had been. It maintained its stare. Rochelle breathed slow until she thought it was safe to stand up again. “I couldn’t help it,” Rochelle said quietly, as she walked the length of the room, headed towards the doorway into the next room. The scratch on the back of her ankle was pink and raw.

Rochelle went up to the register. “We should talk, Maggie,” she said.

“I don’t really want to.” Maggie looked around, but no one else was there, except the cat.

“We can be friends. I can fix this,” Rochelle said. “Not too much time has passed.”

“Not enough time has passed. I don’t want to even see you, and be reminded of…anything.”
Maggie closed her eyes. Rochelle had to watch Maggie pushing her eyes together, trying not to think of terror.

*

The cat, sated, licked his paws and then rubbed them on his face. His tail flicked slowly, and he closed his eyes as he bathed. “Good boy,” Milan said, kneeling to pet him, and the cat opened one eye, stopped washing for a second, then continued, accepting of the attention. Milan stood, lit a cigarette, and watched the rest of the bath, proud. The cat was satisfied because of him. “You pet,” he said, gesturing with the cigarette from Rochelle to the cat, who was settling down on a velvet painting lying on the floor—a painting that Rochelle had found in the trash, and given to Milan. Rochelle sighed, but stood up, lip snarled up slightly, and bent down in front of the cat. She started on his back, his short fur sticky, and she could feel his vertebrae under his skin. Half asleep, the cat settled into it, full stomach and guard down. He even rolled over, exposing his stomach, pink skin showing through where the fur was sparse. She was awake, large, with hard bony fingers, left with this expanse of skin, such a thin layer over the insides it housed. She had to turn away. The trust and sleepy vulnerability of the cat made her nauseous.

The phone rang and Milan, still watching the cat, answered. “Yes, Eddie, yes,” he said. “I’m fixing it now.” With the cat there, Milan had no trace of the head-ducking, shivering anxiety that just the mention of the name Eddie normally gave him. He filled up a rusty teakettle, brought out sugar cubes and a cup from a cabinet Rochelle had never seen him near.
“I finish up the holes in the yard today,” he said, smiling. “Tomorrow I will paint 5C. One thing at a time. One day at a time.” He stayed in the kitchen to wait for his tea.

Rochelle felt very alone on the couch, without the ssisk of Milan’s butterscotch hard candies in her ear, or his tears lopping down, or the alcohol sweat seeping out under his arms. She might as well be in her own apartment.

* 

Milan’s new cat had escaped his apartment. But two nights later the cat was back, limping around the garbage, an open wound around his left hip. “Poor boy, you got bit by the dog,” Milan said to the cat, who kept his distance but did not leave. Rochelle saw them looking at each other on the ground. She stood by the door with her bag of garbage, which was beer bottles.

“Oh, maybe I can fix you,” he said. He took a small red and white container poking out of the garbage and set it down before the cat.

“What are you feeding him?” Rochelle squinted.

“Some chicken pieces. Someone just threw it out.”

The cat eventually bent down to the food. Rochelle moved to throw her garbage in the bin. As the cat bit into a nugget, taking it with his teeth from the container and setting it a few inches away on the ground, then shaking it back with his jaws, the outline of his wound parted a bit, revealing a line of red interior. Rochelle clenched up. Seeing such blatant suffering rubbed up against her, and she wasn’t sure what she could do with it, anymore, now that she knew she could not prevent it, and the gut emotion that drove her to help things in need now felt like bile in an empty stomach.
Milan was not going to find a vet for this doomed thing. He didn’t have the money. She didn’t want to try, either. The cat wasn’t hers. She had enough to take care of, she rationalized. She thought of shoving the cat into a box, taping it shut with a hole cut into it, driving around looking for a cut-price vet while the thing yowled and charged against the cardboard, smearing it with blood and fluid. That just wasn’t going to work.

* 

“You killed it,” Finley said.

“Yes,” Rochelle sighed. “One squirrel is dead. But there are plenty more squirrels. See?” she gestured out the We Care van window, but there really weren’t any examples. There were stores, not trees. “Well, you’ll see at the park.”

“You did.”

“The van did.”

Finley started to cry. He was still stuck on the squirrel she’d run over two weeks ago. Rochelle narrowly missed hitting another one that was running across the road, crazed with spring. Crying kept Finley from seeing, as the car in the next lane rolled over it. The song about living among the creatures of the night started up on the Lite FM station. Rochelle shook her head. She wasn’t comfortable with changing the station, though. She knew the playlist; they stopped in 1995, she wouldn’t be subjected to Sarah McLachlan or anything else which could have blasted through her dorm wall while Maggie would have been slipping a fairy ring on her finger or splitting a bottle of pink lemonade with her, or something else both pristine and disgusting.
She didn’t sleep in her bed that night, she fell asleep in the living room, sitting on the floor, arms and head on the marble coffee table. She had a bag of cookies she’d brought home from the agency kitchenette, only two gone from the package. She ate the rest and pressed her arm against her stomach, leaned her cheek against the table, the pressure of it slackening her sugar-racing thoughts. She stared at the black-and-gold entertainment center, sort of tacky, but she was proud that she talked the guy down, got free delivery even. Eventually her heartbeat slowed, and the marble under her cheek seemed a natural extension of her body, seemed a natural way to sleep. She dreamed she was curled up in a pile, with other furry bodies, behind the glass in Petco. Some shavings tickled her hand and she woke up, the tickle was real: roaches had found the cookie crumbs in the cookie bag on the table, they crawled over her slack hand to get to them. She shook them off, only half-horrified, the other half curling against the glass of the dream-cage, as calm as she’d felt in forever. She did not reach for the spray or the shoe. Terrible, hard, and bloodless as they were, the roaches only wanted to survive. She should let them. “Eat up,” she told them, shooing them into the bag, striding to the garbage chute, swinging open the door without fear that the pizza box would still be there. She threw the bag down the chute.

“Breakfast,” she said to Milan when he opened his door. “Do you have any?” He let her in and she unwrapped caramel creams from a torn-open bag on the counter. He lit a cigarette.

“My cat isn’t good,” he said. The cat had his legs tucked under his body and his head down, facing the wall in the corner of the living room, sitting on top of two issues of
Penthouse. A loose piece of gauze bandage was Scotch-taped over the arc of his wound. “I can’t get him to eat, drink water. He stays there and does nothing, looking at the wall.”

“I think you have to leave him be.”

“I gave him some antibiotic pills from Ernesto, fourth floor. How long do you think it takes?”

“Depends,” Rochelle said.

Milan was worried, animated over something outside himself. He leaned against the kitchen counter, ashing into a wet glass in the sink. Rochelle, contented with the chew of the caramels, adjusted herself so that she was lying back on the couch, the back of her head over the cigarette burns on the arm, her feet crossed and her shoes kicked off. She picked up an old Penthouse from the table and draped it over her face, as if blocking out the sun at the beach. She looked forward to the summer, when the green on the leaves would not be so new, when the unsettling sweetness in the air would be exhausted by heat.

The stale smoke and onion smell of Milan’s place, its stark, stained walls, the lone velvet art gilt-framed and lying on the floor, and this couch, hollow but supportive, the low hum of the TV without volume, she could have cried at these things, the pleasure they brought her, her one outpost, in the building, the whole block, bigger, in which she could unlatch herself.

The cat was unacceptable here.

“Why don’t I drive him to the vet,” Rochelle said.

“You would do that?” Milan said.
“Sure,” she said, and sat up on the couch. “Let’s get a box.”

*

She abandoned Milan to the drone of a *Judge Judy* episode: suddenly he liked the volume up, and his women clothed, and property disputes. He jumped up to open the door for her, and patted the box containing the cat. “Don’t be scared, kitty,” he said. The cat’s weight shifted back and forth in her arms, thumping like a heart.

“Your cat’s going to be okay,” Rochelle said. “Don’t worry.”

She rode the elevator to the third floor, and left the box on the floor while she knocked at her neighbor’s door.

“Karina, it’s really important,” Rochelle said, after explaining herself when the neighbor answered.

“If you say so,” Karina said.

Karina handed her the BB gun over the doorjamb.

The cat had been sitting still in the box, but started moving as soon as Rochelle’s feet got near. She opened her door, gun tucked under her arm, and tried moving the box through the doorway with her feet, lifting the bottom up just so to get it over the marble. Once it was in, she could dribble it like a soccer ball over the waxed wood floor. There was a slight wet spot on one side of the box.

She stopped it right before the throw rug under the coffee table, then got a knife from the kitchen drawer. She perforated a side of the box with it, not bringing it in too deep, just enough to make a thick, opened scratch. With dulled craft scissors, she cut a wider opening, then peered in. The cat was backed into the corner opposite her; she could
hear a wheezing breath turning into a low hiss. The smell, glands and fear, warm
wounded flesh, came out of the hole she’d cut and she stepped back for a minute,
swallowing excess saliva, before going back. Neither of them blinked. Rochelle poked
the gun in until it hit resistance, fur.

* 

She put the fluid-stained box in the hatchback trunk of her car. She adjusted radio
stations as she drove into Yonkers, but found nothing to sing along to. At We Care, she
got a paper cone of water from the kitchenette before taking the guys out. *It was too late,*
she imagined herself telling Milan when she got home. *The infection was too big.*

The van had an extra passenger on the way to the park, the box sitting in the front
seat next to Rochelle, on top of some fast-food bags she’d grabbed from the top of the
garbage in the kitchenette. Finley and Carl covered their noses with their hands, though
Rochelle had rolled the front windows all the way down, the air rushing, shutting out the
songs on the radio.

Finley took his hand from in front of his face. “You killed it,” he said.

“What?” Rochelle rolled up the window halfway.

“You killed it,” he said again.

“Yeah. You’ll see live ones at the park though.”

When they arrived, she carried the box, leading the guys past panting dogs with
hot pink Frisbees, to a small bridge over a narrow stream. A raccoon carcass rotted next
to a sharp rock. Nature was taking care of it. She held the box upside-down over the
bridge, aiming next to the raccoon. The cat would catch up, the pain and responsibility of his body gone, given over. Some things were natural. Some things she knew.
SOLID

The large sunflower came wrapped in clear pink cellophane, with a thin, curled ribbon tied around it. Jill cut it off with a pocketknife before she even got inside her car. The flower should look like it came from the earth, not the crummy florist shop with faded Mylar balloons stapled to the wall.

She and Stephen usually talked movies in the car, but were quiet on this ride. It was March 22 and ten years ago, Sarena had died. Jill had found her body in the backyard, hanging from the tree, before Sarena’s mom had. At 14, Jill, Stephen, and Sarena were tight; they were in the larger network of town stoners, ranging from the junior high kids to the 21-year-olds who still hung out with them, but the three of them together were mixing vodka potions, lighting candles, running sticky fingers down pages of Sarena’s Wicca spell books. They had history already.

Stephen rolled down the car window and lit a cigarette. Pieces of Jill’s long hair escaped her ponytail and blew around, curling in the humidity, imminent rain. They drove by the Amoco, Nancy’s Mart, the post office, the funeral home. They turned right and stayed straight until they came to the cemetery of flat graves.

The graves had their own vases. Carnations in gumball colors clustered every so often in the short grass, as Jill and Stephen headed for the center. Stephen slipped his skinny arm around Jill’s meaty one, and they walked, linked, Jill carrying the flower and
nothing else. Last night she tried to write something, a note, to put down with the flower, but put her pen to the paper and nothing came out, not even after she packed a bowl and smoked, her old standby for poetry, which she hadn’t written in a few years, and what she used to write had been ruined in a flood in the place she lived after high school. Her mother’s health getting worse, or the need for a place to live, had driven her back to this town, her mom’s basement.

*That dumb bitch,* Jill thought when she looked down at Sarena’s name carved in. *Sarena you are so dumb.* Because it seemed like high school was it, was torture, was boot camp for sucking the soul out of you so you could enter the world properly, but once out, you saw the other side of it, saw it was just a little stage with the orange tweed curtains around it, a play, these dramas you could watch from the other side of it, from a whole auditorium of seats.

Stephen put a lighter on the ground. Some Salems, too, three-quarters of a pack.

“I tried some,” he said. “Don’t know what she liked about the menthols.”

“This isn’t the Vietnam wall,” Jill said, starting to nudge the pack away from the grave. She was still holding the sunflower, without cellophane now, nails digging into the stem and coming up juicy.

*Jill was feeling vulnerable the next day at work. She believed it might be Sarena’s flighty little spirit hitching a ride in her flesh, trying to get out of the soulless arrangement of the graveyard. She was trying not to spend money, but she went down to the department store’s café on her break, anyway, and got a soy chai. She took her glasses*
off, opened the plastic lid, and put her face down by the hot drink. When she looked up from the cinnamon steam she saw a kid with an olive-skinned face, tanned gold, a color her pocky skin never turned in the sun. Even without her glasses she could see the thick curly lashes around his eyes, which she thought were light brown. He was setting down a book on the next table. She put her wire-frames back on. It was *The Path to Tranquility* by the Dalai Lama.

“Oh, do you write letters, ever?” he asked.

“What?” Jill said. She hadn’t planned on talking for the rest of her break, just looking, thinking. But this kid was leaning over her little table, circling his plastic drink cup so the ice cubes would swirl. His eyes were glossy in the light. She should be annoyed, but she wasn’t. He sat down at the other chair.

“Nobody writes letters,” he said. “I do. I just like writing them. I ask politely for people’s addresses and write them. They don’t write back, though,” he shrugged. “But that’s okay.”

Jill nodded. The kid leaned over to grab his book from the other table. He opened it, then underlined something in ink. She shifted her eyes to the menu board. After reading *Sail Away with Strawberry-Banana!* she stared through it, the pink-chalked words becoming just squiggly shapes.

She didn’t often care about her clothes, but as she got up to leave, she looked down at the security uniform she was wearing, which screamed Police State. It was the opposite of her XL tie-dyes. In high school, she would have never dreamed she’d be wearing such a thing. Her high school self would have hated her self now. The pretty kid
looked like a little ‘90s skater, the baggy pants, the hooded sweatshirt, the kind she’d
gone to high school with, bummed smokes from in the Unofficial Smoker’s Corner. But
he looked grown-up, close in age to her 24.

“Could I have your address?” he said.

“Yeah,” she said.

* 

“You got a letter, Jillian,” her mom said when Jill got home from work a few days
later. Jill had started working security at the department store six weeks ago. It was her
first job with a uniform. Before, she’d only worked bookstore, pet store, barn. Jill is very
matter-of-fact got written on her job evaluations. Almost to the point of rudeness. But she
sure can stock a shelf/ pack a fish tank/ bale hay.

Her mother’s wheelchair was parked in front of the TV. She was knitting as she
watched the Home Shopping channel. The letter was sitting on an end table next to bills
her mother had already sliced open with the pink-handled letter opener. The way she was
looking at the letter, she had been one step away from “accidentally” opening that.

Jill took it without a word and went down to the basement. She sat on her couch
and looked for something on TV. A 90210 rerun would do. She didn’t remember this
episode. She hadn’t been into TV during the show’s first run. She was staying up all night
in somebody else’s basement, snorting and smoking and dissolving with longhairs with
sword collections. She was gathering stones and chalking circles, lighting matches and
trying to make something happen.
On TV, Brandon was trying to have a Mexican girlfriend. She told him that she did not need a white knight to save her.

Dear Jill,

I have enclosed some writings of mine. Creative stuff. I walk around the city and then I write what goes through my head. You seem like someone who would understand what I’m trying to do.

Robert

She read the stuff—not bad, but Beat ripoff for sure. She looked to her bookshelf, got up from the couch and ran her thumb down the paper spines, searching for helpful advice she could give. She got a pen and paper. *Haven’t you ever read Kerouac? You have a good eye for detail, but you know this has already been done.*

She smiled as she wrote it.

*

She saw him again in the Nordstrom café, the day after she’d sent her response letter off to him. He was drinking something pink and slushy, with whipped cream on top. “It’s disgusting,” he said, making a face. “I shouldn’t have read the sign.” The sign called it delectable, light, blissful. His thumb marked a place in a book: *Blood and Guts in High School.* “It was only three dollars,” he said. “For a new copy. I found it at this store in the city.”

“You wander around by yourself a lot?”

“Mostly,” he said. “My brother gets worried about me and comes with me sometimes, if he’s around, but he’s kind of a jock. Have you ever driven cross-country?”
Jill shook her head. She drank her iced green tea with relief. That morning, she’d had to chase someone through the juniors department over a Tommy Gear jacket. She had sweat stains under her arms.

“I haven’t either. Not all the way. I tried once, but got stuck in North Dakota.”

“How?” Jill said.

“It wasn’t my car. The girl I was with—she called it off. Said we’re going home. I thought she was going to kill me.”

“But she was the one that wanted to stop the trip?”

“Because I thought she was going to kill me. I really thought it. I jumped out of her car while it was still moving. I started running through a field, then some trees. I ended up in jail—it was a one-room.”

“Hmm,” Jill said.

“I’m schizophrenic,” he said, speaking directly into her ear. Close, he smelled like unwashed sweatshirt and dryer sheets—some clean shirt collar beneath. “I was diagnosed last year.”

Jill looked him in the eyes and nodded, not quite solemn. “Sucks, huh?” she said. Rare and common diagnoses—high blood pressure, diabetes, Lambert-Eaton Myasthenic Syndrome, gangrene, depressions—plus overdoses and accidents had been piling onto the people she knew, for years. Stephen, too: his dad and step-dad dead. Their friends, who stayed in the town they all grew up in, whether still alive and rotting in basements, or buried. Stephen maintained his chubby pink cheeks and the dark but very alive flash in his eyes, but Jill had never had much of these things to begin with. She was not prone to
blushing, her blood vessels buried beneath thick skin, pocked in some places, pasty in others. As for the flash, she was too solid, too steady, too used to occupying set parameters to have energy like that, flighty, flipping around. She had to hold ground, keep a step ahead of tragedy before it happened. She had to anticipate, be the arm ready for the unassuming occupants of capsizing boats to grab; she had to be on solid ground to pull them to safety. She was built for it.

“It’s nothing that bad…I think,” he said. “I mean not yet.”

Jill rattled ice cubes at the bottom of her plastic cup. “I have to go back to work,” she said. She wanted to hug him, but she hesitated. She didn’t know how he’d take it, and she wasn’t sure herself how she’d mean it.

*

“Jillian, you’re not going to save him,” Stephen said. They were sitting on her couch. Stephen had forgotten to bring over the movie they wanted to watch, so they flipped channels. The best thing on was 90210, again, back-to-back reruns on cable.

“I don’t want to,” she said.

“Yeah, right,” he said. “Beauty. Tragedy.” On TV, a girl was confessing her pill habit to the other girls at the sleepover. Stephen forked up yellow noodles from a bowl on the coffee table and frowned, stopping the fork in the air over the bowl, then putting it back.

“I am neutral,” Jill said.
“You want to lift him up into unicorn land, or maybe Pegasus land, where you are the Pegasus and he can fly away on you, and use you to fight dragons, which he couldn’t do without you, and together—”

“Shut it,” Jill said. “Eat the rest of your spaghetti squash.”

“But it doesn’t have meat in it. Or grease. Those are the only things I can digest,” he said.

“They’re not getting digested. They’re clogging up your arteries.”

The cat woke up from his nap and began to knead his paws on Jill’s chest, her “Mother Earth titties,” as Stephen would say. “Ow,” she said, and pulled off the cat, his claw still stuck in the fabric.

Jill was wearing a ten-year-old t-shirt with a sea mammal on it. The environmental group, H.O.P.E. (Help Our Planet Earth) had sold them like candy. She started out a member in freshman year, till Sarena quit; then Jill followed.

Sarena used to take it all so seriously. In fourth grade, her Tiger Beat crush pictures were laminated and filed in a pink binder, which she would not let anyone else touch, not even Jill. Jill was lighter then; she gummed up her magazines with thumbprints, she was clumsy, would get excited and knock over plastic glasses with her foot, creating Coke stains on the pastel bedroom carpet. Sarena frowned, where Jill’s other friends would have found it funny. Jill had a picture of a greasy teen star taped on the ceiling above her bed, which had a quilted bedspread with matching ribbons on the throw pillows—nice (her dad still lived with them, they had money)—and she would hold a stuffed animal and stare up at the picture, and get dreamy, felt some warm energy
hover out of her and hang around in the air, and she felt that it would be met by some boy’s energy, less the greasy teen star and more what he represented—the same favorite color, the same food, the recognition of her energy and what it meant.

“There’s probably some meatloaf left at my house…I’m going,” Stephen said.

“Ugh,” Jill said. “Tell your mom I said hi.”

Stephen went upstairs, leaving the basement door open. Jill heard his voice carry back down from her mom’s living room. “Are you wearing that new mineral makeup, Mrs. Mason? No? Well your skin looks really great. Have you been getting any side effects from the new meds? Chest pains, shortness of breath, or anything? Just from the pot smoke? What?! We don’t do that anymore.”

Jill smiled. She scraped Stephen’s squash into a plastic storage container. Her cat jumped up, but his weight worked against him, and he slid backwards before he was totally on the counter. He brought a bottle of olive oil down with him. “Jeez, kitty, careful,” Jill said, grabbing a paper towel and placing it over the puddle, pushing the cat away from the glass with her now-greasy hand.

Later, she wrote:

Dear Robert,

At least you got diagnosed early and are on the right meds. That means you are pretty safe.

*

“The tank top under your shirt still has tags on it. Ralph Lauren.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do. And the cameras know, too,” Jill said, claiming authority.
The kid kicked the hollow metal bottom of the desk in the security office. Kid. Girl. Young woman? Brat. “God, if I had your job I would kill myself.”

Brat.

“If you like this shit, just go be a real cop. Get a gun. Catch real criminals,” the kid said.

Jill stared her down. “Take the shirt off. Get out of this store. Go home. Don’t come back. Or I will call the real cops.”

The kid crossed her arms in front of her chest, then uncrossed them. Then took off her polo shirt and not one, but two tagged tank tops. She stood there in her bra, a wretched pink rayon. Jill kept up her stare. Her armpits were dry. It was getting easier. She relished the seat, a cheap executive’s chair. The kid threw the tank tops at her face. “Quit looking at me, you ugly bitch. You go home. Kill yourself and do us a favor.”

The relief the chair had provided for Jill’s legs stopped and a dull throb again came up from her ankles and reached to her knees. Jill got up from the chair and picked the tank tops up from the floor. The kid pulled on her polo shirt and slammed the Loss Prevention door on the way out.

* 

Jill walked up to Robert at the café table, but did not sit down. He had a book but she did not look to see what it was. “Robbie, do you smoke at all?”

“No. But let’s go to the Nancy’s Mart you talk about and buy some cigarettes. I want free matches and a soda can with rat droppings on it. Or roach poison. Or whatever it is that if you drink it, you…”
“Shhh….”

“Okay,” he said.

He threw away his plastic drink cup and they walked out into the mall. Jill was comfortable in his spacey silence. They passed the candy store with the neon sign and the bins of gummies. A little kid was trying to run out, but his mother’s hand pulled him back. “I want to sit on the couch and eat candy. I want to go home,” the little kid howled.

“But you’re going to a party,” the woman said.

Jill glanced over. She felt for both the kid and the tired woman. She wanted to be the screaming kid and not the tired woman. Robbie stopped, as if the screams had shocked him out of space. He got in front of Jill and stopped her, too, and looked into her eyes. She could see that his eyes were intense, but med-doped. “You are sweet. You called be Robbie, not Robert. And you write me back,” he said, and touched her arm, the part sticking out of the rolled-up uniform sleeve.

Guys had smiled at her like this before, their voiced appreciative of the cigarette she had given them, the coffee she had bought them, the wry jokes she sometimes cracked. But this time, she hadn’t done anything, no favor, no analysis. She had just existed. And if she could not write anything herself, at least he had her writing again, those responses to his letters. He’d pulled something sincere out of her. If she were a different person, she would have thanked him for that.

She stayed quiet, though. For a second she was sitting on a ruffled bed lined with stuffed unicorns, and she wanted to lie back in it, feel its softness releasing her from responsibility, its cherish. She was sweet; she was candy.
*  

Jill and Robbie came out of Nancy’s Mart with a pack of cigarettes and two cherry Blow Pops, which they unwrapped at the same time. Jill asked Robbie to hold hers while she lit a cigarette. Then she took it back and licked and puffed, alternating. Two skaters passed them in the parking lot; one did a trick. “I used to be able to do that,” Robbie said. The lollipop cracked as he bit down. “Ow,” he said.

“Be careful,” Jill said.

“Everything has its limits,” Robbie said. “Too much contentment…is not good. Contentment should be pursued, but pure contentment is almost suicidal.” Jill looked at him sideways, the lollipop poised in her hand and the top of the stick turning to pink mush. “It’s his thoughts for today…the Dalai Lama.”

Jill ground out her cigarette. The air was warm. She unbuttoned her uniform shirt. They were passing an old dance studio with a new sign out front, pink script for a ladies’ gym. A thick metal door was propped open with a brick. “Sailaway, sailaway, sailaway,” drifted out, a dippy tune. “Gross,” Jill said, making a face. She continued undoing the buttons, until her white tank top stood out. “What were his thoughts for yesterday? Do you remember?”

“Too much consumption…is not good,” Robbie said, sticking his tongue out, covered in gum with sharp red pieces in it, preventing bubbles. “I like it your town,” he said, looking around.

“There’s nothing here.”
“No, where I live, there’s nothing. Big houses, all the same color, neutral, lined in a horseshoe, no trees. The old ones were cut down and the new ones haven’t grown yet.”

The road to their left was 45 mph, the town’s stores lined up on it, but there was no sidewalk, just strips of parking lots and then the traffic. “Hey Mami—Mmm -mmm-mmm,” a guy shouted out of a white pickup.

“I’ll kick your ass,” Jill yelled back, but she was not fast enough. He didn’t hear. And she didn’t even have her uniform shirt all the way off. She took it off, so she was just wearing her tank top. The air cut under her arms and she remembered her upper arms for a second, how wide they were, and pale, and heavy, and how they shouldn’t be out like this but then she remembered that she didn’t care.

“Would you really kick it?” Robbie said.

“I would,” she said. “Try me. I got suspended for beating people up in high school. Not even for me…for my friend Sarena. She was this tiny little thing; the boys ragged on her for wearing black lipstick, but then they’d always try to lift up her skirt to see if she wore underwear.”

“Hey Rent-a-Cop…want some fries?” Stephen said out the window, whooshing into the parking lot they were walking across in the Buick borrowed from his mom, a fast-food hamburger in one hand. “Introduce me to your friend.”

“I’m Robert,” he said.

“Well, Robert, I’m Stephen. And I got a job today. I have money! I’m going drinking. Dancing later, beer now. Get in, Robert. And your hot parole officer can come, too.”
Jill was too tired to give Stephen a look, or to remember that she didn’t really like bars. She pulled the back door open with her left hand. Her right was in a fist, and when she opened that she saw a white stick, chewed and stained on top. Had she finished the lollipop already? And what had she done with the gum? She looked to the right, the road that led behind the church as she pulled her thick ponytail tight, arms up in the breeze, half a leg in the car. Robert spit his gum out before getting in. “Someone’s going to step in that,” Jill said.

“I know. I hope it’s sticky and the guy is wearing shorts and calf-socks and he puts his knee up really high in the air and says ‘Goddammit’ really loud and his kid is shocked.”

“Whatever. I swallowed mine. It will be in me for years, undigested,” Jill said.

“A souvenir...reminding you of this glorious day when I had money,” Stephen said.

“It is a nice day,” Robert said. All four windows were rolled down and the breeze brought up smells from the earth. An ambulance turned its sirens on, heading in the direction of the electric towers near the townhouses where Jill lived. She reached for her phone, pressed her mother’s number, just to check.

Stephen threw a ketchup packet at her. “Today is not your lucky day, Jill.”

*

The bar, in New Brunswick, had happy hour and some fratties were shooting pool. Jill unbanded her hair and arranged it so it sat over her chest, though she had a boy on each side of her. The place had a jukebox that seemed stuck on the same songs from
the early ‘90s. Suddenly sick of smoke, Jill leaned away slightly when Stephen lit up; she
pushed the ashtray so it was in front of him rather than her. When she shifted, her arm
went against Robbie’s, which was bony underneath his gray sweatshirt sleeve. She
remembered him as more meaty than skinny, though she had only known him for a
month. “You are getting water, right?” she said, low, but solid, not a whisper. Stephen
was chatting up the bartender, a bored guy in a Cannibal Corpse t-shirt.

“I can drink,” Robbie said.

“Not on those meds,” Jill said.

“Just not a lot,” he said. “I’ve done it before.”

Jill sighed.

“Jill, if only I had money, I’d buy you some Jim Beam. Oh wait, I do have money.
Pour her something, friend,” Stephen said to the bartender. “Don’t worry, she’s off-duty.”

Jill used her right foot to nudge the back of her left shoe down. The black oxfords
did not breathe. Robbie had a pint set in front of him. They talked about the time-space
continuum. Robbie’s eyes moved around in their sockets, where usually they were set
almost to doll-position, the lids shuttering in measured increments, the thick lashes
brushing the skin on beat. “I want to play pool,” he said, looking to the corner, where
guys in backwards baseball caps clapped each other on the shoulder. “You have to sign
your name,” the bartender said. “The list is on the wall.”

He went over with a pencil. The guys took turns looking at him, a disruption in
their flow, not what they had planned in the motion of their games. Jill wanted to take his
name off for him. She should have gone all the way to expulsion when she could have, in
high school. But she came back, her mom signed papers, Jill stayed in school even when her mom wouldn’t let her back in the house and she stayed with friends who poured vodka in Snapple bottles in the mornings. She stayed and what was on the other side? A job with a polyester uniform. She stayed because she knew there was another side, though she never believed that the spells would change anything. Something bigger than the spells had arranged things, alchemized a girl into a breathless thing, fluid into stiff in just minutes. Taken another one and vaporized her excitement, bound a spirit that was light into a solid prison, with weight, with rocks, genetics and circumstance.

There was still cherry on her tongue from the lollipop, and it made the beer taste worse. She took the bourbon shot and didn’t chase it. She watched Robbie lean over the felt and stare a path to a ball, while the guys behind him smirked and mimed beatings with their sticks.

“I think you’d like it,” Stephen was telling the bartender. “It’s ‘80s night. I’ll be closing the place, 4:00 a.m. You’ll have a good hour to party by time you get out of here.” The bartender nodded in quiet consideration and put Stephen’s phone number in his pocket. Jill watched as if she were inside a fishbowl. Robbie finally came back from his round; he was sweating a little, happy as he could be. He’d explained it was like signaling a plane to land with a really faint light, getting his emotions to match up across the plain of slowed-down neurotransmitters. Or like diving down after a penny on the bottom of the pool, trying to pinch it in your fingers; by time you’re down you’re not sure if it’s actually a penny or a trick of the light.
Robbie took off his sweatshirt and put it on the barstool. He hugged Jill from behind. “Thanks for saving my seat,” he said.

“You’re welcome, I guess. No one else was going to sit there,” Jill said. Robbie sat down and started on another beer. Jill noticed some of his hair sticking up, and she reached over to smooth it.

“Would you go to a swing dancing class with me? I want to learn,” he said. Jill wanted to laugh at the thought, but she didn’t.

“Sure,” she said. “Sure, I’ll go.”

* 

That night, Jill lay in her single bed, which was in a little alcove in the basement. The alcove had the only window, a rectangle, longer than it was wide, showing grass and soil and a bit of bluish light. Jill drifted in and out of unsatisfying sleep. She heard a tapping sound. “Dammit, Mom,” she said, thinking her mother had let the cat out and now the cat was tearing at the flowers outside, flinging up dirt against her window. But her feet hit a big lump as she started to get up, and she realized the cat was curled up on her bed. The tapping became more insistent. Jill put on her glasses and saw Robbie’s face, grayish in the dark light, outside her window. She kneeled on her bed and opened the latch. “What’s wrong? What are you doing here?” Jill hissed.

Before saying anything, he turned his body around so his feet were first, and started to slide through the window. Soil dropped from his Etnies sneakers onto her bed. He made it through and propped himself against the wall next to the window, sitting on the bed like a stuffed animal.
Jill snapped on the table lamp. “Robbie? What’s going on?”

“I need to stay here, Jill. My parents are going to make me go into the hospital. I don’t want to,” he rasped in his monotone.

She looked at his face in the dim light, the model-y cheekbones, the thick lashes against dark under-eye circles. His lips were dry, pale, parted slightly. She took a small knit blanket and went to wrap it around him. “I don’t think they can make you go,” she said.

“They’re going to. They’ll trick me. I’ll be stuck in there forever. I need to stay with you. Jill, you won’t let anything happen to me. You’re such a good friend, Jill. You’re saving my life. I’m glad I met you.”

He’d all but broken into her house in the middle of the night. He got dirt all over her comforter. And what could she do but take her blanket and wrap it around him? She sighed. She wasn’t sure that she was glad. She wrapped the blanket and let her arms linger around him for just a few seconds. Guided by the dim moonlight, she brushed a footful of dirt crumbs off her bed, then reached for her phone on the nightstand and dialed. “Stephen,” she said into the receiver. “Are you home? Can you drive over here? I need your help.”

She looked at Robbie, hunched up against the wall. She didn’t feel attraction. She didn’t feel neutral. She felt revulsion. She was going to have to get Stephen to lead him to the car. Stephen could drive this kid back home, drop him off to his parents. She’d sit in the backseat, drawing pictures in the humidity on the car window.
“What are you doing here?” he asked, backwards baseball cap dirty, hair underneath, dirty. He had glazed eyes and a lazy grin. I worked with him at the pet store, where I’d been for about a month, my second job since high school ended in June.

“Looking for a pedal, same as you,” I said. It wasn’t even midnight, but the boys were out, crowding the amps, the drum kits, the guitars on the wall.

The Midnight Sale promised deep discounts.

So we’d driven there, me and Lia. She needed a guitar pedal. We needed it, to produce the sound we wanted. We made each other tapes, fast songs, loud songs. This is what I want, I would say, or she would, and we’d nod our heads at the breakdowns that whipped back into noise. When we played, though, it was so quiet, so light, hopping-bunny melodies and hesitation.

The guy I knew nodded and walked off. I watched him select a pedal from the display and plug in.

The kind we wanted were locked up. “That’s it, that’s the one,” I said. I had circled catalog descriptions of the sounds they made and given them to Lia. She chose the Metal Zone. It would make anything heavy.

“How do you find someone to unlock the case?” she whispered. We were both nervous. There were no other girls in the store. I shook my head. One salesguy sat on a
stool, playing a red Fender for a 14-year-old boy in a Korn t-shirt, whose mom was probably waiting in the car. Two more boys stood behind him.

There were boys everywhere, and some men, the one old guy who always stood close to the wall with a floor model and played something like Deep Purple, staring at anyone who came close, like an animal with a meal he did not want to share.

*

We’d practiced before the sale. I’d picked up Lia and we went to a small studio surrounded by a patch of woods. You walked up precarious wood steps and inside you waited for the proprietor to appear, five-four and bloated, an unbleached Vince Neil, to unlock a room for you. The walls were pasted with pictures, the proprietor younger, grinning, with Poison, with Ratt, with beer promo girls in bikinis.

“One hour or two?” he asked. Two was a better deal, but we placed warm bills from our pockets down for one.

There were two rooms, one large, one small, both lit only with red bulbs, a Halloween basement with staticky, half-busted amps as big as coffins. We got the small.

“Are you ready?” I said.

“Yep,” she said, but played two notes and stopped, sucking in air. “Can he hear out there?”

“Probably not,” I said, but I knew he could. I’d been here once before, with Davey, who had really wanted to cover a certain song, make it faster, and he really wanted a girl to sing it. We tried. He wasn’t bad. I wasn’t fast enough. We came out
sweaty and unsatisfied. *My band used to play that song,* the proprietor had said, nodding to Davey.

“You sound good, keep going,” I said. “I’ll catch up, I’m still tuning.” I would tune endlessly, waiting for the green light to pop up on the electronic tuner, to tell me what my (non-discerning) ears could not. But I was determined to try, to get us here, both Lia and me, to stay here. We were going to hold our ground.

*

The way back to Lia’s house was through wooded roads that were near pitch black at night, and seemed even darker after the Midnight Sale. Only when I started driving to her town did I understand I should click on the highbeams. Before, I hadn’t known the need for them. Where I lived, every inch was crowded and lit. Deer grazed in small boxed yards; shopping carts rolled down paved hills and onto the highway’s shoulder, stopping at piles of meat and bones from the deer that hadn’t made it. Streetlights and store lights illuminated this; the roads had continuous traffic. Lia’s town, the houses were a lot bigger and farther apart, back roads with nothing but the tar and the curve of painted lines. The deer could still hide, most times.

“Tell me where to turn,” I said. Driving was getting to be a drag, not like when I first got my license and drove down the highway after closing at work, all the way to the Holland Tunnel, then turning around and coming back. The straight-shot drive was enough, with damp warm air through the cracked windows and a tape on loud.

Lia came out of her daze and looked out the window. “You already missed it,” she said.
“Ha-ha, we are listening to Davey’s tape,” I said. Davey—the guy I used to play with—had done what he said he would, made it uncomfortable for us, here, thinking that it was impossible to just up and move across the country and record for your favorite label. You can’t just do that, but he did, and was on tour, not even a year after we’d sat on the floor of my bedroom and asked the Ouija board how long the Spice Girls had left and when would Lia and I find a drummer and if Davey was going to be famous.

Up ahead on the right was the beginning of a dirt-and-gravel driveway, the one space carved out in the woods that started just past the road’s narrow shoulder.

A locked gate closed the rest of it off. I recognized it as the vivisection lab the hardcore boys liked to protest. They held up signs with mutilated animals printed on them, and then piled into cars, laughing, headed for vegetarian brunch to which the girls never seemed invited.

I steered my old Civic into it, slow enough, but the balding tires skidded and we were unsteady for a second, too close to the fence. I half-expected some boy to be there now, ready to shout in my face, me trying to explain that I was on his side. I faced the car back towards the road, where it looked like no one was coming, or was going to come at all at this time, but there was a sharp curve I’d need to get in front of to turn left, and you couldn’t really tell what would pop out.

I breathed hard. I hit the gas. Headlights rounded the corner fast as I was still turning. “Jesus,” I said, steering the wheel all the way around. The pickup and my car missed each other by inches, but he didn’t honk as he hurtled down the road, and I didn’t, and Lia didn’t scream; the whole thing happened without noise. It didn’t seem right.
My heart beat hard like waking up from a deep sleep after you are already supposed to be at work.

Then the highbeams fell on something light in the middle of the road. “What is that,” I said, a little panicky because I already knew what it was. Its head was still moving, neck straining up from the asphalt, mouth biting air. Its body didn’t move.

“Baby deer,” Lia said. I stopped the car in front of it, scared to steer all the way around it, crossing the yellow lines, in case another car came up fast on that side. Scared to run over it, the immobile back legs stretching out close to the almost nonexistent shoulder, the guardrail. The wide canal beyond that ran quiet, so dark the water was invisible, you only saw it through spots of the moon.

“What can I do? I can’t take it to the vet! I don’t know where any like, sanctuaries are!” I was seeing myself trying to shove a body in the trunk, then trying to explain it to Davey, or Jim, the guy I worked with, or any of their vegan hardcore boy friends, who yelled so hard for “the animals.”

The tape was stuck, garbling an Avengers cover of the Rolling Stones. I pressed stop.

“There’s nothing I can do, right?”

“Right,” Lia said. “Go around it—you need to go.”

“I could call the police,” I said. “I will call the police.”

Clenching my jaw, I drove us around it. Lia’s small hand held the handle over the window. I flipped the tape over and turned up the volume.
“It knows what it’s doing,” Lia said. Lia worked cleaning cages in a vet’s office. She said you could get used to anything in a week, even a day sometimes.

She knew I was still worried for the deer. I drove slower than I should have, and kept looking in the rearview, and thought I saw its body move. Then I didn’t see it at all.

She took out Davey’s tape and put a new one in. One of our favorite bands started up. “I pretty much just taped the whole record,” she said. “I forget if there’s anything else on there.”

We sang along to the two singers, who traded off except for that one song where their voices blended, two keys off meeting in another key. It was supergood when they got to that one note, we both nodded at it, like a whistle only our insides heard. I tried not to think of the deer limping off to the woods, internally bleeding probably, bones broken. *Please just die. Die quick*, I chanted in my mind.

By time I came near the weird short bridge where I had to turn, the baby deer had lifted off me just enough to let me think about Other Things, like the pedal and how good it would be, like enough callus on my fingers to let me play for a long time, like the practice we would have tomorrow with the boys and how we’d hold it together.

But then in the road was a full-grown deer. Standing. As I neared it I reached some point of calmness and in those seconds I clicked off my highbeams, then the headlights altogether. *The light paralyzes*, Mr. Bairdulles had said in driver’s ed, where we didn’t get in cars, just watched scare movies in the health room. If the light was gone the deer would hear the noise of the car in the dark, and it might run away in time.

In the absolute natural dark I still shut my eyes for the impact.
“Ugh,” Lia said.

The seatbelt was at is lock point, not letting me move forward any further. “Lia?” I said.

“I’m okay,” she said. The music store bag had thrust up from the back and was now sitting behind my moon-gray hand on the gearshift. I touched the bag—the pedal inside. My hand came up wet. My foot was still pushing the brake pedal down to the floor. The engine purred normally. The deer’s body blocked most of the windshield. I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to know if it was still moving at all.

“You need to get us out of the middle of the road,” Lia said. “Someone might come up fast behind us.”

Each big pulse of my heart made my head feel larger and meaner. I did not want to turn on the lights.

“I don’t want to turn on the lights!” I said.

“Just hope the car runs,” Lia said.

The blood—tinny-smelling—mixed with shit in the air, like the cow farm my mom used to take baby-me to visit. I reached up for the interior light. It worked. I clicked the headlights. They worked. A back hoof was on the windshield, near a crack where the blood had come in and dripped down the dash. Lia’s side had the head hanging off the hood. Blood drooled off the tongue.

“See if the car starts,” Lia said.

It did. My hands made prints on the steering wheel.
“Stick your head out the window and try to get to the shoulder,” Lia said. I made it over, though the shoulder was so narrow on the canal side that my two left tires were over the line.

“Can we get it off the hood?” I said.

“I think we have to,” she said.

“You can take the front end,” I said, offering her the less-worse part.

We stood on each side of the hood and pulled forward. My hand was in the stiff coat of the lower back, trying to pull the flesh into a handle. But the deer was too lean and I had to reach around the trunk and tug. The leg on the windshield was bent back in the wrong direction.

We pulled. It slid. Down the hood, over the grille, and the body slabbed to the ground. No twitches. No detectable breathing. *It’s better that way*, I thought.

I was not the kind to carry Handi-Wipes in my car. I licked my lips and pressed them together before the dry air sucked all the moisture. My hands were bleeding from cracks on the knuckles and I had my fingers curled and poised not to grab or scratch but to try not to feel the blood smeared palmside—if my hands were splayed straight the blood would have more surface area to spread. Lia had given in and wiped her hands on her pants. The tip of her nose was red and her nostrils were getting raw. I had in my car a receipt (*one pedal at $79.99*) and a *Punk Planet*. I gave her some pages and used the bulk of it to coax the mess off the windshield.

*  

“You ask,” I said. “I’m weird about that.”
“You,” she said. I shrugged and asked the guy if there was a hose on premises.

“No,” he said.

“Can we have a bunch of cups then?” I pointed under the Slurpee machine.

He shook his head. “Cups are inventory.” He put down his bikini chick magazine and took a good look at me and Lia—the up-and-down assessment kind. I saw what he saw—short Lia shivering in a zip-up sweatshirt, fitted gray pants stained with bloody marks in the shape of fingers, dark, straight hair that hadn’t been dyed or forced into any style it shouldn’t.

“Get some gallons of water,” Lia whispered to me.

“Right,” I said. “Good idea.”

“You two been clubbin’ turkeys?” the clerk said.

“No, not really,” I said. I turned to walk back to the fridge for water. Lia stayed where she was, blank and shaking. I pulled on her sleeve. I didn’t want to leave her alone.

Over on the far right of the parking lot where there was just one other car, a dull blue Oldsmobile with a Megadeth sticker on the bumper, I uncapped a water and poured it out on my windshield. I got in to turn on the wipers, then out to rinse once more. Then whooshed the rest of the water over the hood. Lia handed me a stack of napkins.

“Nice,” I said about the puddles we left. “Super. They’ll test for murder.”

We shoved the bloody logo napkins in the trash, where a once-bitten hotdog rested on the rim.

In the bathroom as Lia and I ran hot water on our hands at the same time. The thawing hurt and the cracked places on my skin turned extra bright red.
I looked up into the mirror, and the inch-and-a-half black roots in the blond scared me for a second; they looked like tarantulas under the lighting and my skin crawled. I saw the tracks of dried blood on my acrylic leopard-print sleeves.

I pictured the plush pink carpets in Lia’s parents’ house, and me tracking in something from outside, or a fresh leak of blood from my hand. It was so late, and the door would creak, my keys would drop too loud on the kitchen counter. Her father hated noise. I couldn’t take her home now. “You want to just go to the diner?” I said. “If we fall asleep, we’ll never wake up in time for practice.”

At 10:00 a.m., we had to be in a town forty minutes away, in the basement of our drummer, or a drummer, the younger brother of a friend. There was a guitar player, who used to be the sax player in my ex-boyfriend’s ska band. And then there was a singer, my ex-boyfriend, nervous and weepy since his band broke up, yet excited at the possibility of a new band with girls in it, how totally equal and P.C. that would be. I’d told him how lame that sounded, and don’t ever say P.C. again, and it’s not equal if you are thinking of girls as a novelty, but I still told him I’d join. He had a P.A. system, the other boys had the best new gear, free practice space, the friends who booked shows.

Maybe it won’t be so bad, I’d told Lia a couple weeks ago when this was in the works. We can still do our own music. But it will be good to play with a full band.

“Pancakes would be okay,” Lia said.

“You can take a nap if you want,” I said. “I’ll stay awake.”
I drove to the diner, the one with dark pink booths and seashell prints on the walls, like it were a bathroom or a Burger King. In the lobby was a Ms. Pac-Man and a cigarette machine.

The round shatter on my windshield wasn’t so bad, but I didn’t want to think about the money to get it fixed. “Is it illegal to drive it around like this?” I asked Lia as I parked.

“Probably,” she said. She smiled a little.

“The dents on front can fuck off, though,” I said. I left my coat with dried animal blood on it on the front seat and grabbed both my bare arms as the wind bit through my black t-shirt as I ran.

Lia, across from me, leaned into the straw of her milkshake, her eyes closed. I burned my tongue on a French fry. The salt tasted like life. I wasted quarters on “Paradise City” and “Sweet Child O’ Mine”—I could not help it. I always did. But they hadn’t come on the table jukebox yet; they were queued behind back-to-back Kenny Rogers and what I think was Jamiroquai.

I’ll order a cup of tea and sit very still, I thought. I sat with my back against the wall and my legs straight out on the length of the seat. I crossed my arm across the top of my black kilt and closed my eyes, too, Axl’s tinny whine finally coming out of the jukebox next to my left ear.

“Wake up, sweetie! Don’t party too hard,” I heard, and opened my eyes. A middle-aged woman with teased blonde hair and red lipstick bleeding over the borders of
her lips was touching Lia’s shoulder as she walked towards the exit. She laughed as she left; apparently what she saw when she looked at us was carefree, drunk kids, not the messy, anxious girls who’d just killed something and moved its body like butchers.

“Wake up, sweetie,” I said to Lia with a half-smile.

“What are we supposed to play today?” she said, her cheek red where her hand had been. “I want to be able to play it.”

“You will. I told them what song.” I said. “The one we joke around with. We’ll work it out when we get there.” I knew she’d be more worried about being able to play in front of the boys, and not be judged harshly by them, than anything else. I needed her to not be scared, and carry the weight of the music, because I certainly couldn’t do it on my own, with my bad ears.

The sun was shining through the window. I looked down and saw tons of lint on my skirt and stuck to my tights. The hot water for my tea was no longer hot, the lemon and the sealed bag waiting by the cup.

“You are good, you know, and have a good ear,” I said.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Plus you can actually see where something’s going and make changes. You can write,” I said. “It takes me forever just to find the root notes.”

Lia took a deep sip of milkshake and then slid the glass to the edge of the table.

“I’ll drink it,” I said. The ice in it had melted and the air beat into it had deflated. It was warm strawberry soup. I finished it.
We took the check up to the register, next to the gold-edged bowl of mints in pink, green, white.

In the diner bathroom I touched my cheek and used my nails to extract a small piece of glass. I wiped my cheek with a wet paper towel and was left with a pink indent where the glass had gone in.

*

“Here goes,” I said, and dragged my amp to the door and rang the bell. Lia stood quiet with her soft guitar case across her back and less awkward amp behind me. Max, the drummer, answered and said to come on in. It was Saturday morning and everyone was home—mom, dad, sister, and grandma. They all smiled as we walked by, and the sister helped me with my amp.

“She’s almost deaf.” The sister cocked her head back towards the grandma. “And Mom and Dad are used to Max playing. You guys can play as loud as you want.”

In the basement my ex-boyfriend was stopping then playing the song on a boom box. In the stops, the ex-sax current guitar player was pulling off the Slash parts perfect. “He’s supergood, great, a musical genius actually,” my ex-boyfriend said.

“This is Lia,” I said, “and Lia this is”—I pointed to everybody in turn and said their one-syllable boy names.

Lia looked down, then away from them, up towards the wooden stairs that led out. She was so calm as she watched me hit the deer. With her bare hands she dragged the broken body off the car, the blood and waste and heavy meat. But the thought of playing
a few chords for these—let’s face it, kind of lame—guys was going to give her a panic attack.

“Oh I forgot the pedal!” I said to Lia. She looked at me, her eyes widening. She bit her lip and dropped her pick, probably from sweat. The pedal was her shield, her protection, the only way she thought she could do this, and she was all that, for me. “Let me run and get it.” Up the stairs and through Family Time in the living room again (Boggle was now out on the coffee table): “Forgot something! Be right back in,” I said without looking at them. It was a terrible feeling, that impending judgment. Even though Lia was good, when she got to playing, she was not so good that her playing would save her from it, would make her not a girl but pure, unquestionable skill.

“You kids sound great,” the grandmother said.

Outside the air was cold and clean, so much that breathing it aggravated my insides. I unlocked the passenger side and leaned in, reaching for the music store bag, where the deer blood had stuck. It was frozen but it still smelled fresh when I was so near to it. The pressure of leaning made me burp, hot air that tasted like the worst rot. I knew what was coming. I had time to slide the pedal out of the bag before I puked into it.

I left it under the car and went back in, forcing my cold hand to play C E A D C B A G A as fast as I could on my bass. “Stop!” the ex-sax current lead said. “Your E string’s flat.”
Letter: Abi to Michael

22 is a dangerous age. That’s what my older brother told me when I was in high school. He was about to get married. He was about to have a kid. He said you either have what it takes by then, or you don’t. The decisions you’ve made are starting to set stuff in place. Job stuff, yeah, but also the character things. The way you’ve reacted, grown around what’s been given to you.

This is when you can’t blame your youth anymore. You might have a year or two to slide around with, but somewhere there’s a line. The world has lost its responsibility to you. You are now responsible for it.

I brushed him off. I had a box in my closet of thrift store decorations set aside for whenever I got my first apartment. At 22, of course I’d be ready.

Before then, I had other things to think about.

Abi, June 2008

I needed a job. I walked around town like I was 15, peering in the dry-cleaning place, the strip mall pizza place with scowling, sweaty men looking at me from back by the ovens.

No one was hiring.
My town had no sidewalks. There were neat grass mounds that ended suddenly at concrete. On the main road, I walked just past the fresh-painted line of the shoulder. I had no music with me, and the dry wind breathed in and out of my ears. Subarus and Cadillacs came up loud behind me. SUVs with Jets stickers honked and passed each other in the no-passing zone.

Eventually between the thick curtain of green and brown I saw blue.

A tarp flapped from the top of a low, brick building, revealing letters. 

_The Modern_, I saw.

A worker in overalls blocked the rest.

When I reached it, I stood between the lines of a fresh-painted parking space and stared up. The guy on the ladder climbed down.

_The Modern Man_, said the full thing. My heart sank. I knew nothing of men’s clothes. I barely knew ladies’.

I was wearing a skirt, for comfort rather than style. It was black, stretchy material gone nubby with washings, and it ended at my knees, though it was made to be a miniskirt.

My armpits had sweated through my shirt: a white t-shirt but the nicer kind of t-shirt, a thinner hem at the neck. That morning I’d put on two coats of deodorant: not even the ladies’ extra strength, but the men’s. Protection was my only accessory, and it failed.

The front door was unlocked. Brown paper covered the plate glass, but the door gave. I entered, heart pounding from the long walk. I wasn’t even sure if I was in my town anymore. I could be in the next one over; I could be on the border. The only other
businesses in this clearing, a corner on the road, were a just-closed Boston Market and K-Foods, a convenience store which’d aped the big red K from K-mart. The Modern Man gleamed, and didn’t look sad.

“Hello?” I called. “Hi?” I pushed my voice to be as loud as it could, but it was still pretty quiet. And small. Cute-ish. Like how people, over high school, college, had described me. And it pissed me off.

Only shadowed light came in through the covered windows. I tried to adjust my eyes and make it so that the khaki pants hanging on metal racks in every direction, some racks covered with giant, thick sheets of plastic, appeared normal and not creepy. I needed to make friends with these pants.

“Hello,” someone answered. A male voice more squeaky than deep, but I still couldn’t see him. Black sunspots hovered over the clothes, the gray nubbed indoor/outdoor carpet. The air inside was cold and shocking. “Who are you?”

“I’m looking for a job,” I said, pulling the bottom edge of my shirt up and down, flapping some cool air in to dry my sweat. But nothing was drying: the sweat just became colder.

A very tall, thin guy in black pants and a white button-down appeared. Even in the shadow I could see the white outline of an undershirt beneath the button-down. “Who are you?” he said again.

“I’m sorry to bother you. I’m just wondering if you are hiring.”

“I am looking for someone,” he said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Do you have a name?”
“Sorry,” I said, again. “I should have, um, introduced myself. It’s Abi Finnerty.”

He extended his hand for a shake. I gave him the wrong hand, not used to these things, extra out-of sorts from the feeling of standing still after walking for so long. He looked older than me, but I wasn’t sure how much. I was an adult, 22, but I just thought of myself as 22. Everyone adult still seemed older.

“This is my store,” he said, gesturing. Then, twisting around a bit, looking behind him—“my dad’s store. I’m running it, though.”

“I think,” I said. “It looks great. So far. Wow—really modern. Different from, um, the other men’s clothes stores.” My voice went up at the end like a question. I shouldn’t do that, I chastised myself. I’m supposed to declare things. (I’d learned a lot in Public Speaking, my sophomore year of college, but I never took the exam, which was speaking. So I failed.)

“Oh,” he said. “You know men’s clothing.”

I nodded vigorously.

*

I started the next week. I worked days, endlessly pacing around the displays, righting plastic, headless torsos when they tipped over from too many shirt layers. I thanked God I didn’t have to pick their clothes—someone came in to do that, to roll the sleeves and pop the collars just so.

When I wasn’t pacing, I crouched down behind the counter, taking too long to open boxes of plastic bags. As I sliced them open, I worried about having to talk about fabrics and cuts with the customers, exposing my lack of knowledge.
But it turned out all I really had to do was nod. My first customer was a red-cheeked middle-aged man who grabbed a polo and came up to me where I stood off to the side of the cash-wrap, half-hiding as I half-assedly sorted pairs of socks that didn’t need to be sorted. “Watcha think of this?” he said.

I looked up from the socks. My gaze hit in the middle of his chest, where his hand held the hanger against his body. “That’s a good choice,” I said. The orange-sherbet color of it was awful. He put it down on the counter and I rang it up.

It was the nights that were becoming a problem.

That evening, I walked home extra slow from work. Four years ago, for high school graduation, my father gave me a white Cavalier. It looked like his old police car, without the official markings. I was happy to have it, but I kept banging it up. Now it needed new brakes. It was my responsibility to get them, but instead I just walked. The skin on my feet was slowly getting hard. The blisters on my heels and little toes were solid red lumps instead of pink, fluid-filled.

It was still light by time I got there. I opened the door and closed my mouth, pushing the air out from my nose. The only sound inside was the central air when it struggled to maintain the hold temperature.

I tracked my feet across the thick pink carpeting that covered the whole house, downstairs and upstairs, the stairs themselves. Normally we took our shoes off, but in case I had a new foot scratch or blister, I left mine on. Dirt was easier to clean than blood. I was done with college and so I wasn’t even supposed to be here. My parents didn’t say it, but I knew. My brother had been out for years. He studied abroad in Ireland and stayed
there. By time he was my age, he was married and his wife was pregnant. I didn’t want to
get married young. But at 22, I wanted to feel different from a teenager.

I hung my messenger bag in my closet. From my small window I could see the
beginning of sunset, the orange and pink in the clouds. I looked down and saw my mother
sitting on the deck, drinking from a can of store-brand Slim Fast.

I sat in my little white armchair: rounded and swiveling, I’d dragged it home from
where I found it down the block, discarded for pickup in front of one of the neighbors’
houses. I didn’t turn on a light until the sun went all the way down and my room was
fully shadowed.

There was nothing on the floor of my room, no clothes strewn on the bed or chair,
no real papers on the desk. I kept everything in the closet, which was large (long rather
than deep) with sliding doors. My bed was twin-size, fluffy, no pattern on the comforter,
picked out by my mother. Then the bare-topped dresser, white with silver handles. No
mirror. Off-white walls, no art, and I’d thrown away the posters I’d accumulated at
college: ripped Monets, broken-up bands.

Silently encouraged by my mother, I kept it like a guest room. And it was. Of
course I’d have to leave.

I took a box of Saltines from my closet and ate some, dry, Dust-busting up the
 crumbs after myself.

I got back into my chair, throwing my legs over one of its arms, my back against
its other. Like I was in junior high, twisting my hair around my finger as I talked to my
best friend on the phone, annoyed if I had to hang up for dinner. I hadn’t had an actual
best friend since about junior high. I stared at the phone: dusty dark pink in its own small bed, a corded thing from years ago instead of something newer, cordless.

I loved my chair because it was ‘80s. In it, I felt like I was a teenager in that time, come home from shopping in stores that sold blow-up palm trees. I had a perm, I rolled my jeans, I had a boyfriend who rolled his and called me every night. Except of course I was not, and I had none of those things—just the quiet, just myself.

I couldn’t take the silence. I needed to explain myself to someone.

I went back to my closet and reached past the Saltines, my guitar in its case, and came up with a piece of paper, yellow lined, with Ryan’s number. We “went out” in senior year of high school, then went to different state schools for college. Once in a while I ran into him. He would say things like “you should stop by my house,” but he moved a lot, in and out with roommates, and I didn’t know where his house was.

But last time I’d seen him I’d walked away with his number, though I couldn’t remember if he offered it or I asked for it. I unfolded it, the numbers written in his left-slanted writing, his name written in my script.

A girl answered.

“Hello, is Ryan there, please.”

“He moved out,” she said.

“Oh. Do you have his new number?” I said.

“No,” she said.
I might have said *thanks anyway*, but I didn’t remember, after hanging up the phone. I could hear my heart in my ears. *Stupid*, I told myself. *He doesn’t really want to talk to you anyway. It was good, good that he wasn’t there.*

But I didn’t think it was. My need to talk was a growing, ugly thing. It could eat up someone’s want, or not-want.

*

If I could’ve put a mini-fridge in my room, I would have. Since I couldn’t, I waited in my room until my thirst was so great that it overtook everything. Most nights I drank water from the bathroom tap. When that wasn’t enough, and tonight it wasn’t, I went downstairs for soda.

My mother, much taller than me, was leaning back in the recliner, her t-shirt, in bright Lane Bryant orange, clashing with the muted chair. She looked sleepy already, and I envied that. If I could relax and go to bed early, then I wouldn’t have to stay up and think—following people’s trails of friends online, sorting stacks of old papers, notes from people I didn’t know anymore.

“Your father’s not home yet,” she mumbled, as I walked between her chair and the TV.

He had to stay and work in the evenings, sometimes. It seemed like a lot of times, since I’d been living back here, but it wasn’t like we would eat dinner together or anything.

“Oh,” I said. It was almost better that way. He tended to be hypersensitive when it came to me. Any noise I made would be magnified ten times to him, and he’d tell me to
cut it out in a desperate, hateful way, like I was doing it to bother him on purpose. So
now I could grab a soda and pop it open without feeling like (or him feeling like) I was
stabbing him.

So that was one reason why I didn’t like to come downstairs. The other was my
mom, and the TV, which I did not want to watch with her. I felt uncomfortable watching
it with her, but didn’t know exactly why. It wasn’t like when I was younger, when I
feared a sex scene would suddenly pop into the movie, as they did sometimes, and I’d
have to glaze my eyes and pretend that I wasn’t paying attention, that I didn’t know
something was going on. That way my mother would not feel compelled to diffuse the
situation, telling me to close my eyes—I’d already have them closed.

Now it was a more general discomfort—the way she’d clear her throat, absently,
or say “heh” at a line she thought was funny, and I would have to respond to that. An
active expectation; too many fake sounds echoing back and forth. Me thinking how bad I
was that I couldn’t stand to sit still with her.

It was easier to walk past and pillage her stock of Diet Rite. I took two cans and
went back to my room and drank them, their coldness and their air filling me.

* 

It was eleven that night when I checked my e-mail. I faithfully checked three
different accounts and, as usual these days, found nothing. I scrolled desperately through
blogs: no new posts. The same product reviews, parties, exciting news of design jobs
from people I’d gone to school with.
After tracking in circles, I felt anxious. I needed something *next*: another address I knew I could jump to. Otherwise, what? I’d turn off the lights and take that anxiety to bed, staring at the blank wall my bed faced, hours of no sleep.

When I thought of somewhere else I could go online, I felt lit-up with relief. Temporary, but something. My old AOL e-mail account, with the dumb screen name I’d had forever but couldn’t really use anymore—I’d had to switch to staid combinations of my real name.

I signed in, and the too-excited male voice assaulted me: *You’ve got mail.* Fuck. I muted my computer but it was too late. I felt embarrassed to be checking this account; I worried my father was now home and I was making extra noise. But I was here now, scrolling through the lists and lists of spam—*come on over, lonely?*, *your love destiny revealed, size matters, someone has sent you a message!*—and I remembered Ryan and I e-mailing each other, through this account, him saying I’m just about lonely enough to open one of those, and me saying yeah, I know what you mean.

I considered each subject carefully, instead of checking “delete all.” I didn’t want to miss some great piece of mail that might have wormed its way in. Someone real who couldn’t help but think of me, wondered where I was and what I was doing. Around me the central air breathed, taking over any natural sound the summer bugs outside might be making, singing to each other across the yard big as a state.

On about the third page of the inbox, I checked the delete box next to another subject line like, “a message from….” But the source of the address hit me, and I unchecked the box.
It was sent a few days ago from MySpace, which housed my old “singer/songwriter” profile. I hadn’t posted any new songs or looked at comments in a year. Maybe more. I felt stupid putting it up in the first place, but I’d done it. Things don’t work, my brother said, how they used to. He was six years older than me and used to trade tapes with people through the mail. Xeroxed-artwork-covered demos and things. He had them stacked in his room, and when he went away to college I looked through them, restacked them, probably got them out of order, though he wouldn’t have cared.

I didn’t have actual pictures of me on the profile, though. Just random photos of objects, some scanned-in drawings. I hadn’t ever played out anywhere, so what did I have to put up? Me sitting on the carpet of a bedroom with my guitar. Even if I had played out somewhere, and someone was there to take a picture, I didn’t think I would want it online. Those tapes in my brother’s room never had photos, just line drawings, some handwriting. You could listen to the songs and think what you wanted to about the person singing them, in a room somewhere faraway or close.

I had three songs up on the profile, and I was never really sure what I wanted to get out of them. I did not add a lot of friends to my profile, or make it look good to attract attention. I let it stand on its own, default white background, black font. At times I told myself: someone will listen, and something that I’m saying will reach them. *If just one person,* I thought, *feels the way about one of my songs the way I’ve felt about certain songs, then that is enough.* But it was hard to maintain that teenage emphaticness. In fact, it was only a part-time feeling in the month that I turned 20, and the year after that, I never thought of it at all.
But I didn’t take the songs down. I wasn’t writing anything new, and I may have lost some feeling about what the old ones were and what they could do, but I wasn’t ready to bury them.

I opened the e-mail. *I think you crawled inside me and read my mind*, the message said. *Most people’s songs are stupid, nattering about love. Or they can’t sing at all and they just want to post pictures of themselves dancing in a half-shirt. You’re different, though. I can tell.*

--Michael

No one had ever written me about my songs—but, like I said, I hadn’t given them much reason to. I refused to solicit attention. If they really want to, let them come to me, I thought—and carried this thought around like the piece of “protection” quartz from the rock vendor at the craft fair I’d kept in my pocket in elementary school. That pink stone never kept me from scrapes on the gym class asphalt, or much else: *chicken legs*, some of the kids used to say when I wore shorts. *Chicken Legs is bleeding*, when I fell in the gym class sprint to the chalkboard eraser set on the ground to mark the distance.

So who was this person who had come to me? I clicked on his profile. His default picture wasn’t his face but was a black-and-white photo of an old train. He had one other picture, and that was black and white, too—himself, taken from a distance, behind the wheel of an antique car on display in a museum. His face was long and pale, hair cut very short and it looked gray in the picture—I figured light brown, dark blonde in real life. His expression, from the point of distance, read as neutral. You could not see if he was happy or sad to be there, strapped into the seat.
It said he was my same age, and that he lived in South Carolina—a state I’d never really thought about. Interests were: transportation, libraries, *Saved by the Bell*. The “who I’d like to meet” section was left blank.

I’d have to write him back. I swigged the last from the second can of soda—a strange tropical flavor, nothing that existed for real in nature. I got out of my desk chair; I sat cross-legged on the floor and leaned back against the bed. I had some thinking to do, and for once I looked forward to it.

*

The next day at the Modern Man, my boss decided that I was up for an observation, to see if my interaction with customers was feeding sales. “First of all, you should get some new clothes yourself,” he said, looking me up and down closely, for the first time since he had hired me.

I thought if he didn’t say anything at first about my self-culled uniform of well-worn black skirt and shirt that was sort of a t-shirt but not really, that meant he was okay with it. I was selling men’s clothes; I was there to point to shirts and shuffle khakis back and forth. So I thought I could sink into the comfort of the details of myself going unnoticed, the way they wouldn’t if I worked in a women’s store.

The clothes that he was wearing were not so “modern.” They weren’t even things we sold at all—baggy black suit pants, the thin, old-looking material of his white button-down shirt. Not clothes for a “modern man” of 26. Even I knew that.

“Sure,” I said, trying not to show my bit of shame, which had twisted itself into my silent insults of him. He looked back down at my legs, knees bare and showing from
under the line of my skirt. “Where did you get all those scars?” he asked, in a change of tone, somewhat interested, somewhat concerned.

They were my playground scrapes, those deep ones in which bits of gravel had sat. They hadn’t healed well, and so were odd-shaped and shiny.

I wished I had covered them. But hadn’t expected anyone to look so hard as to notice.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“Little kid stuff?” he said.

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

He leaned back from me slightly, and his voice changed again. He looked left, right, behind him and then back to me, bending his height forward so as to look directly into my eyes.

“You should wear pants, then.”

* 

After work I went to the mall to get pants. I thought maybe I could get my mom to take me—she liked going to the mall, right? (I had to ask myself, and answer myself—yes, of course.) She wasn’t home when I got there, though.

I jabbed my key into my car door in the garage. The driver’s side had a big indent, streaked dark with the evidence of whatever I’d hit, there. I pulled it open and strapped myself into the gray seat, drawn all the way forward so my feet could reach the pedals properly, and started it, backing out super slow, testing the power of the brakes.
They scraped, but the car stopped okay. For now. I was used to bumping into things with the car, but thinking I might not be able to stop it, I might not have any control and it would keep moving and not listen to me, was my worst driving fear. *We used to have the brakes fail all the time*, my mom had said about her early driving days. She’d pedal the air forward with her hand, dismissing my fear. *Get the money and get them fixed*, my dad said. *And no I’m not calling the garage for you.*

I turned the music off to listen to the scrape, so I could judge if it got worse. If I die, I thought—it will be because of those goddamn pants. I pictured the remorse of my boss, beating his head against the cashwrap until his forehead bled. That was wrong, though. He wouldn’t really feel like that, and it would not be the pants, just me, something I’d let happen.

The brakes held out enough for me to make it there and back. I slunk into my room with a large plastic bag containing pants. One pair, a thick stretchy fabric that fit my waist but hung loose in odd spots on my legs. They’d have to be good enough. I also got a matching jacket, charged to the store credit card I signed up for. A whole suit to wear—who could argue with that.

I turned on my computer and went back to the message, and typed this reply:

*M�튐hieal,*

*Thanks for writing. I almost forgot I put those songs up there, but it’s good to remember.*

I wasn’t sure what to do with myself after that.
My brother used to have pen pals for a while in high school. I was jealous of the envelopes he’d get, thick, covered with stickers and magic marker scribbles. Things cut out of magazines and glued on, or sometimes a page of a magazine was folded into an envelope. I was 10, and did not have a lot of friends, certainly none who lived far away and wrote to me. The envelopes came heavy for about a year, maybe more. One morning before school he got a phone call. My mother stood in the doorway of his room while he took it, and I stood behind my mother.

I saw him nod and hang up the phone. *Jason, what was that about?* Mom asked.

*It was about my pen pal,* he said. *That was his dad. He said that my pen pal killed himself. He thought I should know.*

Jason stopped writing people after that.

*

My message to Michael had been kind of closed. I wrote a song a few years ago; he heard it now and it touched him. That was a closed, perfect circuit—there was nothing more I could offer. In all the time I used to think about music, and hoped something I wrote would get inside someone, I never thought about what would happen after it did. It was too many years watching movies that were all buildup to a kiss. I believed the kiss was it. Who cared what came after? That imperfect stuff that I now realized was terrible work, or just didn’t work at all. He could take his reaction to my song and do something with it, make something, affect someone. But that was none of my business. If I was touched that he was touched, and I smiled or something, and skipped over the fat
carpenter ants on the sidewalk instead of stepping on them, then that was my life, and it stopped there, with me. My work was done.

But if he thought hard enough and was interested enough, he could work around my dead-end words and construct another response. I wasn’t gunning for that—I really didn’t think I was—but if it was there, then I’d think about responding again.

I stuck a bendy straw in a fake cola and drank.

I checked my mail. He’d written back.

He was so into my style, he said….and I’m not just saying that. I’m not telling you I think your songs are rad, beyond rad really, so that I can get in your pants, or something. I don’t even know what your pants look like.

I’d just taken them off and thrown them into my closet, where they could rot until my next shift. I ate oyster crackers in my underwear while sitting at my desk. I smiled to myself at his pants comment. It was funny. Of course he wasn’t trying to get into my pants. On the second read, I could see that it was on the surface, and cute. At first I was a little offended, seeing the assumption that it was up to him to judge me, to decide if he wanted me, as if I was here waiting, open, and it would be my lucky day if he thought I was worth getting into—and if he didn’t, the same—I would be agreeable.

I plowed my hand into the box of crackers and held them under my mouth, crunching them in one by one. I stared straight ahead, at the monitor, and I didn’t look down until a dark spot caught my eye. A cracker was moldy. More than one was. The mold looked like burnt flour at first, but it wasn’t. My stomach clenched around what I
had already eaten, as I threw the rest back into the friendly-seeming box with the joyous cartoon fisherman on it.

*My pants are terrible,* I wrote. *They’re 98% polyester, 2% viscose. The viscose is the good part, I guess. It keeps them from being 100% polyester. This is what I get for being too quiet and not “making connections” before I graduated.*

*

At the Modern Man, my observation (or: the observation of me), still had a ways to go. My boss had walked off after the pants incident, come back with an insanely large cup of coffee with a palpably bitter scent, and stalked around the store, taking some kind of inventory. He left me alone to man the store in the afternoon, and I was relieved. The coffee scent lingered, though. I breathed it in. Because there were no customers, I unbent paper clips and scratched light pictures on my arms.

Today, no such luck.

“This is not some teenage job,” he said, his large hands moving in opposite directions in the air. “You are a sales professional. You make sales.”

“Yes,” I said, though to me, I was just here to ring things up.

I adjusted the black blazer I now wore, though underneath it was my same white non-t-shirt. “It’s about service,” I said.

He pumped his chin up, then down, in one definitive nod. “Yes,” he said. “Good customer service. And what does that mean to you?”

“You give them what they want.”
“No,” he said. “You give them what you want, and you make them think that it is what they want. That’s how you do it as a sales professional.”

Maybe I should have wandered into K-Foods and seen if they were hiring. I was beginning to regret this job I’d found, the sparse, gleaming store at the end of my walk. K-Foods was dark and narrow, layers of grime on the floor. Little shelves stocked with stale packages of Twinkies and Saltines: it was a place of pure need, and no upsells.


As usual, it was a while before we had a customer. A guy around my age came in scowling. My boss was standing behind me by the register. I set down the bottle of Windex and the paper towels I’d been using to clean the counter. There was no dirt on the paper towels. My boss didn’t touch me, but I sensed his hands behind my back, itching to push me towards this unsmiling face. “I need Dockers,” the customer said.

“Welcome to the Modern Man, sir,” I said, trying to smile. “As you can see, we’ve got quite a selection of pants.”

“Size 32. I’m in a hurry.”

“Let me give you a tour of our latest stock.”

This guy had a huge stain on the front of his pants. I was not the staring kind, but this guy noticed my quick glance and then look-away into space.

“It’s a Frappucino. I spilled a Frappucino on my lap,” he said, glaring.

“I never did like them,” I said, walking quickly towards the khaki wall.
After he left, my boss approached, trying to hold his eyebrows down into a stern position. “You could’ve sold him a shirt,” he said.

“He didn’t get any caramel on his shirt, though,” I said.

“And you did not offer sympathy at his stain.”

“I did,” I said. “I told him that I never liked Frappucinos.”

“That’s disagreement. Men don’t want to hear that.”

I took another paper towel from the stack below the register. I sprayed more Windex on the counter. “I thought I was getting on his side.”

“You can’t do it like that. You,” he said, gripping his can of energy drink—one of the ones that looked like it was for biker dudes, all flames and black background—“are a woman. You have to reassure him, come at him with a soft voice… ‘poor thing’…If you did, you could’ve gotten some add-ons.”

“You think?” I said, careful to stay neutral. I felt uncomfortable, light-headed. Some part of my intestines was sending a prickly feeling out to my limbs—a warning, or just advice? Recognition, or resignation?

“I know,” he said, smug but not actively trying to be. It just was. He just was. I was the one who would need to change my voice.

“And eye contact,” he said, squatting down to the floor where I was, putting his hand under my chin, forcing my face upwards. “No, you’re still not doing it. Even now.”

I tried to put my eyes on the level with his. They seemed faraway behind his rimless glasses, deep-set and so dark that I couldn’t tell what was in them.
You sound like me, Michael wrote in his next e-mail. He said that he wanted more. I took it to mean my music.

I might have a tape, I typed. I recorded some things on an old four-track. But that means you have to have a tape player.

Of course he did, he responded. What kind of person did I think he was? He was, he wrote, the kind of person who bargained for Hall & Oates cassettes at the sad excuse for a flea market he went to.

I knew sad. And I also knew Hall & Oates.

I opened my closet and started pulling things out. I crawled back to my desk with a cassette tape in hand.

Letter: Michael to Abi

I’ve had the same job since I was 15, except I run the rides now and I didn’t at first. I was the dude who yelled at you through a megaphone (Wakeland Park, too cheap for a mic system) to get you to waste your money at the pop-a-balloon-with-a-dart game. Except I hated yelling so mostly I just folded my arms and waited. Then I had to do sanitation for a while. I should’ve quit then, but I didn’t. I really wanted to run the North Star coaster. I was always on time and never called out sick, and when I did the balloon game my money was always on count. After two summers I got a ride: the Skymaster. There’s a total redneck, a super-old geeze, who won’t give up the North Star because he can sit up there with a cooler of beer and he couldn’t do that if he were on the ground.
Michael hoisted out the full bag from the garbage can, and put in an empty one, but the can retained the vomit smell, most likely not from actual vomit but from God knows how many congealed layers of pizza cheese rotting at the bottom of the can, too far down to clean. The bag of trash, now sitting like a four-foot-high beanbag to his left, did not even have close to that odor coming out of it. Bees paid no mind to the full trash bag. They kept buzzing around the now-empty, totally rank can. One of the bees stung Michael’s hand as he reached through them to tuck in the edges of the new bag.

“Ow-fuck-dammit,” he said. The shock of the sting—more like a sharp pinch—shot through his body. Normally, the garbage wasn’t even his job. He was the operator for the Skymaster, and sometimes the Scrambler. Operators didn’t have to do the garbage. But dumbass Gary was out sick again, which was likely a euphemism for out smoking weed, and the manager asked Michael to do this as a favor, and Michael said yes, because he was a good employee, one of the only ones.

And this is what he got for it, he thought. “Fucker,” he whispered. He couldn’t even have the satisfaction of killing the bee. It was dying, or dead, already. Dragging the garbage behind him (but lifting it up slightly from the ground, so as not to let the asphalt break open the bag) with his good hand, he headed for the First Aid station, which was a little office off to the side of Country Grillers, the log-cabin-looking cafeteria where you could watch the cook shaking the hush puppies into the fryer from an open Ore-Ida bag.

The “nurse” on duty was the sister of the fry cook. Both sisters had curly gray hair to their shoulders, the top parts of it pinned back sloppy.
They reminded him of grandmas that he’d never had, and he resented both his
injury and the woman who swabbed it and bandaged it up.

“Ya got to be careful. Them bees get crazy,” she said. She smelled of unwashed
polyester and cigarettes when she got close.

“Tell me about it,” Michael said.

“You’re not allergic to ‘em, are ya?”

“If I were, I would probably be dead by now,” he said.

“No need to be morbid,” she said. A large, dark-colored old air conditioner
wheezed in the background. The beige metal door busted open, and a parent entered,
pulling in a little girl with a pink t-shirt—Hannah Montana—and blood on her knees. The
skin had split open, and gravel stuck in with the blood.

Michael stood up, and brought the chair closer to the door, closer to the girl, so
she wouldn’t have to walk as far. Lord knows the idiot parent wasn’t carrying her. But
they stayed standing, not paying attention. Michael, with his half-numb, half-throbbing
hand, wrested the sweaty doorknob out of the parent’s hand. “You’re welcome,” Michael
said, squeezing out the door. He hated when he did something nice or polite and the
person did not even look at him, much less say thank you.

The air conditioner inside was old, but it had been doing something. The thick,
humid air outside was that much worse by comparison. The four-foot-tall garbage bag
was still waiting to be taken to the Dumpster.

To do that, he had to pass the picnic area, long benches under a fake-log roof,
bucktoothed, smiling two-dimensional squirrel characters staked in the grass by the
entrance. Bees buzzed around the remains of a cheap sheet cake on one of the tables.

When he was back here he thought of his kindergarten self in a bad way. He felt small and vulnerable, like he was then. His stung hand throbbed.

He also felt the weight of seeing how busted everything looked now. If he could assure himself that the squirrels and the logs were fresh and sparkling back then, and it was the “hand of time” and disrepair that made them look bad now, that was one thing, and possibly bad enough. But what if this place had never looked good, and he’d just thought it did back then because he didn’t know any different or better?

He reached the Dumpster and got rid of the trash. He avoided the bees hovering over a red puddle by a discarded Icee cup. He had a mind to pick it up, but because of the bees, he didn’t. Then he walked back toward the rides with a sense of failed duty and embarrassment.

*

Michael was glad his shift ended at six o’clock today. The sky was still daytime-bright, and the air hadn’t cooled any. He didn’t like getting off work later, when the sky was deep blue and the air smelled sweet beyond the burned burger smoke. That made it the kind of night that you were ashamed to be spending by yourself, inside, or both.

He didn’t have to wait long for his roommate Scotty’s Taurus to pull into the lip of the parking lot. Michael had answered Scotty’s roommate ad two years ago, and they’d become a practical sort of friends, though Scotty didn’t seem to understand why Michael winced when he called him his “wingman.” *Uh, because I don’t hang out in bars helping you score chicks*, Michael had explained. And it implied that Michael was not ever going
to be the center of the action, but he should be ready and willing, happy and privileged, to work towards Scotty’s goal.

Michael opened the passenger door and got in. The Taurus still smelled of the artificial peach air freshener Scotty’s mother used to douse the car in before she gave it to Scotty. “Me and the guys are gonna grab some wings before the party. You wanna go?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Michael said. On one hand “the guys” were awful. On the other, Michael didn’t like feeling like maybe the case was that he wasn’t good enough to be “straight chillin’” with them, and not the other way around. His quietness always surrounded him like a moat, even when he didn’t feel like he was being especially quiet. More and more he just fed it with cold water, thinking worse and worse snide comments about the existence of everyone else. This made him feel like he’d dug the moat himself, for his own protection.


“I’ll be fine. Just drop me off at the library. I need to work on my project.”

*

Michael took a step forward and felt the sensation of slime under his right sneaker. He leaned his body forward, almost toppling over to snap on the cheap white floor lamp. His brown leather Skechers was in the middle of a greenish puddle. His left foot was a centimeter away from stepping on the pale, chubby hand of his roommate, passed out on the floor, mouth drooling contentedly, bright pink cheeks pushed up as if he were smiling.
“Son of a bitch,” Michael said. Scotty twitched like a cat poked in its sleep. If he stepped forward, he’d get a vomit footprint on the light beige carpet in their apartment. More mess for him to clean up. Scotty or his friends certainly wouldn’t take care of it, though it was their mess. Light beige carpeting and white walls—like all the apartments in this “garden” complex. Its own weird neighborhood of two-story brick buildings, facing each other at odd angles. More suited for older ladies with cats, but mostly populated with students from the university a mile away.

He bent over and untied his shoes. He started to leave them there but thought better of it, and turned around to pick them up, lest Scotty barfed again, and his shoes were really ruined. Who’d buy him another pair? Michael thought. Scotty would think of some excuse, or worse, not think at all, make a promise and then simply forget about it for the rest of the summer. The student loans Michael had out were already making him sick in their amount. His Wakeland Park job made him enough for food, but not much else.

He carried his shoes soles up, turning his face away from the acidic slime on the right one.

The door to his room was open. “What the fu-uck,” he said. He switched on the light with his elbow. Some girl, with too-yellow hair divided into shades of margarine and congealed butter, was curled up on his bed, a plastic Kroger bag hanging from her hand.
Michael grabbed the bag. Its handles were tangled around her fingers, and he yanked hard. Her hand flinched back in reaction. “Heeyyyy. Thass my bag,” she said, eyes still closed. “I might puuuuke,” she said.

“Well, you’re not going to. Get out!”

She kept grabbing for the bag. Michael held it out of reach, then set it on the floor and put his shoes on top of it.

He grabbed her ankles and pulled her feet, still in bejeweled flip flops, over the side of his twin bed. She opened her eyes. “The fuck are you? Where’s Scotty?” she bleated.

“This is my room,” Michael said.

She stretched her arms. She yawned casually. She blinked her eyes and stood up, slightly unsteady. “Oh. I thought it was Scotty’s.”

“Yeah. It’s not.”

“Something stinks in here,” she said. “Ugh.”

Michael inhaled sharply and expelled the air through his nose. He crossed his arms over his chest. Something his dad used to tell him was pouting. But I’m ma-aad, Michael used to say, in those kindergarten days. I’m angry.

“But I’m ma-aad,” Michael said, and something else, but she still grabbed the bag. “Really,” she said. “I might really be sick now.” She clutched the bright pink fabric of her sweatshirt.

She was taking too long to leave. Michael thought that she wasn’t grasping any of the gravity of her trespass. She wasn’t threatened enough to apologize to him—he didn’t carry enough weight in her universe to be apologized to. And, of course, his room only
smelled bad because of his shoes that stepped in Scotty’s mess. Now this girl would forever associate Michael with disgustingness.

He glared at her, willing threat and power into his saucer-y blue eyes. She stumbled over her own flip-flop. She sat on the floor with her knees up and her arms around them, like she wasn’t going anywhere. “I need water,” she moaned. “Hey can you get me some? Thenk youuu,” she said in the high-pitched, directly flippant tone common to a certain type of girl all over.

A type of girl Michael couldn’t stand, even when they weren’t flopping around drunk and stupid in his apartment. Their thank you’s were commands. They had already decided that since you were a male, you were in service to them, you worshipped them, and it was a glorious experience for you to do them a favor. “Just because you paid someone to put those shitty highlights in your hair doesn't mean I think you’re hot,” he muttered. He couldn’t quite say it loud enough for the girl to hear, even though she was so blitzed she likely wouldn't remember anything tomorrow. Michael, however, remembered everything, even on the rare occasion he drank a lot.

“Wa-terr…where’s my water?”

“In the kitchen,” Michael said. He hooked his arms under hers, and forced her up from the floor.

“Scotty…where’s my water…” she whined.

“Don’t confuse me with that douchebag,” Michael said, fortified by his action. He started taking backwards steps, dragging the mostly dead weight of the girl. He made it out into the little hallway, and around the corner into the living room, which opened into
the kitchen. The girl smelled of sweat, and some perfume that was probably expensive and probably some dude bought for her, but smelled no different from the fake Armani spray his aunt wore. When he reached the sink, he maneuvered it so that he was walking forward. He shoved her off of him so that the piece of counter in front of the sink hit her in the gut. “There you go,” he said.

He walked back to his room, half-smiling to himself. He took off his shirt and pants and went to bed. It had been a long day and he was glad to sleep. He turned so that he faced the blank white wall that his bed was shoved up against. Bluish light glowed from the window. The blinds were pulled halfway up and the view showed the parking lot outside. Dark asphalt and light cars. A cat leaving paw prints on Scotty’s windshield. He rolled back over the other way. He heard nothing coming through his thin closed door.

But he saw his shoes upside-down on the plastic bag. He wasn’t sure if he could actually smell the vomit from his bed, or if the sight of the shoes activated something in his brain, his nose. He had to pull his comforter, generic boys’ hunter plaid, over his face. In the space under the covers, he was alone with his breath, darkness. He sighed, relaxed. His own breath came back to him with the metallic-flower scent of the girl’s perfume. He gagged, a quick, reversed hiccup, and went to sleep with no covers.

* 

“You gotta watch it, man. Brittany said you were rude to her the other night,” Scotty said. He chugged a protein shake from a plastic shaker bottle. Michael looked at him over the open refrigerator door.
“What?” Michael said. “She was the one who wouldn’t get out of my room.”

“You just don’t know how to treat women, man,” Scotty said. “I’ve seen it. Any girl that comes over here, you—”


“Jeez…attitude.”

“You sounded like a girl the way you said ‘attitude,’” Michael said.

“I hope you don’t talk to your Internet girlfriend like that.”

Michael exhaled loudly. He looked at the contents of the fridge but couldn't connect the foods with their functions. He regretted ever mentioning anything about Abi to Scotty. Breakfast, he thought. What do I want for breakfast.

Eggs, bread. Papa John's from last week. A cheap pack of processed cheese torn open. Its individually wrapped slices stared at him. He hated that stuff with a passion.

“Who bought this?” Michael said.

“Huh?” Scotty said. He put the shaker bottle on the counter, the remains of the powdered mix sticking to the milk congealing on the inside. There was one thing Michael liked about him. That was that he always answered Michael, no matter what. Michael couldn’t deal with silence on the other end. He felt like an idiot for talking, for saying anything, for breathing, if someone ignored him, or didn’t hear.

“The cheese,” Michael said.

“Oh. Kraft singles, bro! To make some grilled cheese.”

Michael put the cheese into the vegetable drawer on the bottom, behind a dried-up pack of button mushrooms and a couple stray cans of Icehouse. He stood up and pushed
the drawer shut with his foot. The drawer was slightly off-track and wouldn’t shut all the way. Michael kicked it, then closed the refrigerator. “Well, don’t use my frying pan,” he said. “I can see you ruining it.”

* 

He went to school hungry. In the lecture hall, dining-dollars kids slurped fruit smoothies, knocked over the Frappucinos at their feet. The room smelled of caramel syrup that burned your throat it was so sweet. Michael wouldn’t have to be in this lower-level sociology class if he hadn’t had to miss last semester. If his dad hadn’t got so sick—no, if his mother was not such an insane bitch, a selfish one, that she could care for anyone outside herself.

But she was, and she couldn’t. She lived with her sister, Michael’s aunt, in a one-bedroom house smaller inside than Michael’s apartment. His mother got the bedroom, a natty wallpapered thing with a hole in the middle of the wall, which his aunt had made to get the cable wire through. The middle of the wall—it killed him. The aunt slept on the couch, in her own house.

Michael took notes. He wrote everything down that the professor said that had a number in it. The guy next to him kept closing his eyes, drooling on his laptop. The class was pretty stupid, but Michael had the need to take everything in. Something might be important, and he had to make sure not to miss it. Things rested on him. A long time ago, his mother used to walk him to the store with her. The slab sidewalk was arranged over uneven mounds of dirt—or, the tree roots pushed the dirt up eventually, and the slabs responded, cracking with the pressure. His mother’s favorite thing to say was step on a
crack, break your mother’s back in a singsong voice. Michael took everything literally.
He sweated and kept his eyes on his feet, maneuvering around the fucking tons of cracks.

When he thought of these times—a long long time ago, he was three—they had no hazy film quality or fuzzy halo around them. The scene of the walk was in relief, not black and white but sharp color, though it carried the feel of an old Twilight Zone or Hitchcock movie. There were birds up in the trees, flocking and readying themselves.
When his mother first took to her bed, later that year, he thought he’d overlooked a crack, stamped his sneaker right down on it without realizing.

The minutes seemed to eat themselves. The lecture was over. Other students were packed up and ready to go, though they had so much stuff they’d unpacked and splayed around their seats. Michael put his handwritten notes in a folder. He was wearing his work shoes, fat black low-top sneakers, because he hadn’t had time to clean his real shoes. They surprised him when he looked down—he hadn’t remembered he was wearing them, hadn’t expected to see them. They looked like absolute crap with his jeans. It was a good thing there was no one worth impressing, in this class.

On the way to the computer lab, he passed a girl—short, with dark hair in the sea of mostly blonde, whether natural or fake—that he’d been in a seminar class with once. They’d sat next to each other most of the time. They never really talked, but she made sarcastic comments under her breath and Michael would expel air from his mouth or nose to show that he agreed, that he thought like that, too. He looked at her, groping for eye contact. When she shifted her eyes his way, he smiled, did a slight palm-up wave from his arm down at his side.
She did nothing back. Nothing clicked, connected, recognized Michael. She didn’t do a *hey-stupid!* double-take at his wave. She just walked past. Michael walked as fast as he could towards the brick ledge outside of the lab. He sat down on the end of it, under the shade of a tree. He slammed the back of his right sneaker into the wall, like a kid swinging his legs that forgot the momentum they’d picked up. It shocked the lower bones in his leg. That pissed him off. He’d pissed himself off. He’d scuffed the fake leather of his sneakers. His stomach ached. His jaw ached. He thought of gnawing on the edge of the brick until it cracked off his teeth. Somehow the feel of his bone matching forces with the earth would be comforting.

After a minute he went inside the lab. He chose one of the neglected old computers without a flat-screen monitor. Most of the other students would rather wait for one of the new computers than dare use one of these. He put off checking his e-mail because if nothing from Abi was there, he didn’t want to see it: the nothing. So he rolled his anticipation around his mouth like a jawbreaker. He didn’t want its layers to sour down, the mass to shrink. Stupid songs from *Pretty in Pink* hummed through his head, and he was kind of embarrassed for himself, and for Scotty, who was the one who kept TBS on day and night. They are not the gnawing, insistent pop songs of today, Michael told himself. They are from another time so it is okay to like them. He thought of *The Breakfast Club*, which also came on in those TBS marathons. He did not care for Molly Ringwald’s character but instead for the girl at the back table in detention who kept her mouth in a thin mute line and shook dandruff out of her dark hair. He liked her before Molly Ringwald gave her a makeover with eyeliner.
He thought of Abi as being like that girl. Smushed up in the corner and ready to bite at anyone who came near, like an abused dog. She would talk to no one but him. She was asleep for days or years until he found her and Emilio Estevez’ed her out into the world, or at least the school parking lot. What next, what then. Michael’d never had either one of those. He just knew that he wanted that moment of abandoned connection, the perfect kiss to recognize his lips.

Nothing’s perfect, man, Scotty told him more than once, when Michael made a snide comment about one of his friendly girls or “dates” as he called them. It wasn’t necessarily how they looked, though that was some of it. These girls were so obvious, and spilling-out, and fleshy. They wore tube-top dresses that showed tan lines tied around their necks. They oversprayed themselves with musky perfumes and laughed at things that weren’t funny. You could never imagine that they floated down from your dreams.

He got antsy in his seat. He couldn't bear leaving without checking his e-mail, but he couldn’t bear checking it. Do it, fool, he told himself.

There was something from Abi. He smiled to himself at the shaky tension in his body began to release.

I’m going to send you a tape, the e-mail said, and maybe a letter. Because this shit is getting too You’ve Got Mail. A movie my mom made me see with her on OnDemand. A bad movie. Very, very bad.

The tension had dissipated into a warm, light feeling, like his heart was pumping out real blood, thick with oxygen, for the first time. Soon, he’d have a letter, something on paper to touch, from her. And a tape, with songs of hers that no one else had. The
Internet girl thing was so tacky. Paper letters seemed way more dignified. He thought of the Craigslist ad he’d seen a few days ago, some old dude who was very “horney” and looking for his “solemat.” Michael cringed at that. He logged out of the computer and started on his way outside. Scotty was supposed to pick him up and drive him to work. Wakeland Park was a good 20 minutes down the highway. Michael’s phone vibrated. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Scotty.

“Hey man, um, listen,” Scotty said.

“Are you gonna be late? Don’t tell me you’re running late.”

“Well, it’s like this. I got Brittany in the car. We’re hanging out today.”

“Okayyy…” Michael said.

“And, um, she doesn’t want you in the car. She’s upset at y’all’s encounter the other night.”

“Oh, Christ,” Michael said. “Tell her to close her eyes or something.”

“Naw, man. She’s fuckin’ piss—upset. She’s real upset.”

“Well my boss is going to be real upset if I don’t show up to work.”

“Can’t you take a bus or something?”

“There’s no buses that run out there. You know that!”

Scotty sighed. “Well, man, I can’t give you a ride today.” His voice switched to a low, hissy whisper. “I told you, you gotta treat women better.”

“Women! Ha. The day you bring home a ‘woman,’ I will treat her fine.” Michael hung up. He struggled not to feel an awful panic at the back of his throat. Scotty was the only person he could depend on. That fact grated on him: the obligation to be nice, to not
mess up, so he didn’t lose his ride, but also the recognition of himself as a person. Without their conversation, mundane as it was, Michael would have no evidence of his own voice. Without Scotty’s puke to step in and Scotty to get mad at, Michael would be left with anger that was not a righteous reaction to an event outside himself. But of course, the sense of dependence and obligation also caused part of himself to twist the other way, to resist, to be a douchebag to Scotty.

A cab would cost, like, a million dollars, or might as well. The fare would be as much as or more than he would make in his four-hour shift tonight. Fuck, Michael thought. He never called out to work. He always made it. It wasn’t just for fear of his boss. It was also the thought that they needed his body there. If he wasn’t there to run the ride on his shifts, it would be a problem. They might have to close the ride, or, if they could get someone to cover, Michael figured that person would be cursing him out under his breath, the way that Michael cursed out Gary when he had to do Gary’s job. Michael didn’t want to be thought of the way he often thought of other people.

He started walking towards his father’s house.

His father lived in an unofficial halfway house. The owner rented out rooms, and sad or sick single men lived there, on Social Security or child-support-docked wages. When Michael’s dad got so sick that he couldn’t work anymore and afford his house, he moved here, and kept his old van in the dirt lot carved out in the back of the house.

Once he was on the road, the distance wasn’t too bad, but it took forever just to get off campus. Michael looked at his watch, and started to jog. It was a good thing he was skinny, kind of cold-blooded: if he was anything like his dad, bad circulation. He
didn’t get pink and sweaty, like Scotty would’ve, after a minute walking up a slight incline.

His backpack was book-heavy, its straps digging into his skin. The very feel of it reminded him of the Sociology book, the bobo class he had to take to make up for last semester. Then, before that, his father hooked up to the dialysis machine, trying to joke as his blood came out of him and got clean. Surrounded in the clinic by wizened, white-haired men with yellow eyeballs, and obese women with purple feet or amputated legs. Before that, seeing his dad barely conscious on the bathroom floor, sweating and awful, unable to ignore his diabetes anymore.

He wished he had his sunglasses. His eyes were starting to ache, and see everything as yellow. The main drag that led away from campus was lined with empty lots of dry grass, and a few empty office buildings with mirrored exteriors. They’d been there since Michael was little. His had dad explained that at one time, people thought there’d be more than enough business to fill them, but then there never was. When he was little, Michael was fascinated with the mirrors, which stood out silvery blue in the landscape, making everything Michael had known seem ugly, wrong, old-fashioned, small. Birds smash into those kind of buildings and die, his dad said. No one thought of the cleanup before they built them. After his dad told him about the birds, Michael covered his eyes whenever they had to drive past them, horrified for the birds, who thought they were flying right into the sky ahead of them. They didn’t know any better, the people who built the mirrors were stupid and cruel, and the birds were going to break their necks. Michael was scared that if he looked he’d see one die right there.
He cut across one of the empty parking lots, weeds growing tall from the cracks in the asphalt. He glanced at the periphery of the building. Yep, there was a dead one. Head twisted back, scrawny legs sticking up. The building still there, serving no good purpose, looking dated. But now he thought the birds were at fault for not knowing. They couldn’t have noticed half their flock was gone, and warned each other?

Letter: Abi to Michael

I’m sorry to hear you’re having roommate trouble. I had that in college. My trouble now is that I live in a room by myself, and the rest of the house is my parents’. I’ve spent a lot of time here. Instead of traveling abroad my junior year, I moved back home. My senior year, I got a single on campus. Now I’m back again. In New Jersey, if you don’t have a ton of money or a ton of friends, then you will be living with your parents until you are 30—easy. Maybe 32.

Abi, College

February of my freshman year, I barely did any schoolwork. It started taking me too long to read things. I was distracted by the chatter around me: not just my roommate and her friends, quizzing each other from chem textbooks in the hallway, or the dude, bro, hey dudebro in the cafeteria, but the grating noise of the whole college landscape, which told me that I was alone here, that I did not fit in here, not in my own room, not in thousands of 18-22 year olds. The shock of the first semester was officially worn off, and
now things were getting done here, things were getting made: relationships formed, dissolved, reformed all around me, in the time it took for me to try to read a chapter.

I tried to warm up for doing homework by reading flyers I found in my mailbox or in common areas. I immersed myself in Chinese food menus, not ordering, just scanning up and down. I read about a campus swing dancing club (every Thursday), and I read in-case-of-fire procedures. I smiled to myself with I finished a flyer, breathed deep and hoped to maintain the focused blood flow to my brain that would allow me to do my homework.

One Sunday night, in a mauve armchair at the end of my dorm hallway that I turned toward the wall, so as not to be seen so obviously, and with my purse on my lap, to look like I was waiting for someone and that I would be going somewhere, I read a flyer about Campus Help, with exclamation points and clip art of a large, outdated cordless phone on it.

It told me that I could to the Student Counseling Center and sign up for therapy. I felt the nervous excitement of someone who has found out, via note, that the boy she has agonized over all year has told someone that he “likes” her.

But when the possibility has become real, the weight of your expectations for it is terrible.

Since I was sixteen, I’d fantasized about therapy. I’d never gone, just read about it. Anaïs Nin on the analyst’s couch, Elizabeth Wurtzel saved by antidepressants. I even read off-looking, cheesy books in the Self-Help section. Therapy, I thought, was where I could take my amorphous, gooey, silently-screaming self and make a gesture of
submission with my wrists facing up: Help me. The psychologist (-iatrist? Analyst?) would nod and do it. I’d be made into something solid. The world would make sense. After working myself up for months, I took my case to my mother. She said no—they’ll dope you up. You don’t need that.

* I need, I started to say. My lips opened but my jaw locked up, dominated by pain that came from my throat. I dropped it. I couldn’t bear to push. The rejection of my need was too raw to face. I saw therapy from my mother’s eyes: fluffy talk, modern bullshit, quack docs, despair is not to be luxuriated in. Suck it up.

* I stayed quiet, about to walk away, decimated. She continued. *Why would you want to talk about things to some stranger? That’s not for people like us.*

* It seemed to me, though, that we were those people who would do that. Central- aired, wall-to-wall carpeted house, new furniture. Beautiful white cabinets and an island in the kitchen, a house more clean than the cluttered sitcom family houses, which had ugly afghans on the couch and food strewn all over the counters. I had old pictures of my mother’s family. I heard clipped stories about them. Many different houses, apartments, because my only-child mother and her parents moved if they couldn’t pay that month. Sometimes they stayed with a weird uncle, a mean aunt. The poverty of it was as far away from me as the time.

* That night I dreamed of therapy. Blue paint on the shrink’s walls like tropical water. In that room I sank into warm safety.

* I woke up rolled next to the white wall of my dorm. My sheets with pink Hawaiian flowers on them (sale, Target) were balled up. I’d torn the bottom sheet right
up over the mattress. My roommate twitched in her sleep. White sunlight spilled through the cracks of the blinds and onto her face, making stripes in the shadow. Outside the window was not real outside, but the light as it came through the windows in the cafeteria, and then into my room. In the rooms across the hall, the windows faced out—trees and things—but my side of the hall faced in. If I looked out the window, I’d see hooded-sweatshirt boys chowing eggs, three stories below.

I turned off my phone’s alarm, though I woke up before it went off. I always did. My roommate, though: not her. She had a clock that played music as the alarm, always some awful, obvious song, something Nickelback or Kelly Clarkson. I usually tried to go to the bathroom before 7:45, to avoid hearing it grate out her welcome for the day. The bathroom was in our room, like at a hotel. It was white and clean, new-ish, the opposite of the mildew-and-puke-laced communal bathrooms my brother told me existed when he went to college. I almost wished for that horror story bathroom instead of the one in my room, which seemed not as private, when my roommate could see when I went in, could hear everything, would know the dandruff shampoo was mine.

I shut the door. I flipped the switch for the fan, but it didn’t work. I heard Britney Spears blaring out beyond the door. “Abi!” my roommate’s voice called out over it. I put my forehead down on the counter next to the sink, and my hands over my ears, an exaggerated response that was good only for showing someone else how you felt. Alone, it was useless. “Hey, Abi!” She still hadn’t turned off the alarm. Any minute, she’d start singing along. I couldn’t own up to ignoring her, so I cracked open the door.
“Yeah?” I said. I tried to put coldness into my voice, but what I wanted to project never seemed to translate. There was something in me that shut out my desire from my voice. Was that my fault?

“You going to breakfast today?”

I grabbed my toothbrush and put toothpaste on it. I measured off the excess with my finger. “No,” I said, without poking my head out the door. I brushed so hard my gums bled.

*

I moved through carpeted back mazes that snaked out from the cafeteria. The counseling center was in the same building I had lived in for months. I could’ve looked for signs of it sooner, or listened hard at the orientation seminars instead of staring around the auditorium, trying to identify potential friends. But I didn’t, and I hadn’t.

I got lost three times before I found the door. It had no window in it. I had no way to see a picture of what I was getting into. I just had to open the door and step in. I turned the silver handle.

The door wouldn’t budge. I pulled it harder, towards me, then dropped it, embarrassed. I shuffled a few feet to the left and leaned against the wall next to the fronds of a large, fake potted plant.

I half-expected someone inside to open the door and investigate the noise, to look for me and take me in. I waited a few minutes. No one did. Too embarrassing to try again, I thought.
I started to go back the way I’d came. I heard the door open and turned around. The door had swung open wide and I ran to catch it, smiling at the girl who was walking out, for two reasons—she wasn’t wearing a college-logo sweatshirt, and because she had opened the door for me, though she didn’t know it.

“Have fun,” she said.

“Thanks.” I was optimistic now. Even if next time I came, I’d have to shift my weight next to the plant until someone else opened the door.

When I went in the smell of tuna fish hit me. The receptionist was forking it up from a large plastic salad container. She wasn’t even a kindly old lady—just a work-study girl.

“How can I make an appointment?” I said. A question where it should have been statement.

“You have to fill these out,” she said, mumbling from behind a full mouth. An onion bit fell onto her Greek-lettered t-shirt. I took the clipboard and the poorly Xeroxed stack of papers clipped to it.

I slunk into a chair in the darkest corner of the room. As my butt hit the puffed pink vinyl I saw there was a boy there, in the next chair. Fuck—he might think I sat there because of him, when really I’d tried to be as far away from people as possible. His legs were crossed at the ankle. He had a repetitive sniffle—more like a snort—that made my hand flinch and smear the ink on the forms almost every time it happened. The tuna-onion smell pervaded the room.
Have you ever had thoughts of doing harm to others? the form asked. Rate the strength of your feeling on the scale of zero to five.

I looked at him from the corner of my eye. His mouth hung slack, sucking in as much air as possible. His eyes were hooded and red.

“You in my anthropology class?” he asked. He’d sensed even my tiniest movement.

I expelled air. He sucked it up, spit it back—germy. I had to breathe that in.

*I don’t want to talk to you,* I wanted to say.

But I didn’t say it, because I had a lot of forms to go. I’d have to sit here for a while, and if I pissed anybody off, if I offended anybody, I’d worry. I looked down and circled zero on the form. Then I looked up and my mouth twitched into an appeasing smile. “Maybe,” I said. “It’s a big class.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He nodded.

I broke into a cold sweat that never appeared on my skin. It hovered just below.

I started to draw a squiggly line around my circle on the zero. *One,* I thought. *I should say one. I’ve got to be honest if I want them to help me.*

“You’re pretty small though,” he said, after a pause. It had taken him a while to think of a way in.

I looked at the squiggly line around the zero. I paused before fully circling the one. *Two,* I thought.

“I am,” I said. A statement, not a question.
Do you ever think of doing harm to yourself? the next question asked, in crooked, spotty print.

He chuckled a little. He thought that he was funny. He sniffed. He uncrossed his ankles. He spread out his knees and got more comfortable. I inched my legs toward the other side of the seat, towards a table with an issue of *Men’s Health* laid out on it. I chewed on the inside of my cheek and held the pen over the row of numbers, not looking, waiting for that drawn feeling, like my eyes were closed over a Ouija board.

His name got called. Someone with a clipboard came out of the back for him, welcomed him. I let my pen pull toward a number.

When I was done, I gave the clipboard back to the receptionist. She wiped her mouth with a napkin. I shuffled back to my chair and my heart pounded. I couldn’t watch her read it, so I pulled a magazine off the table and opened it. I stared at the same cologne ad. Its sample scent smelled nothing like what its name suggested.

“Abigail?” the receptionist said, loud and looking around, though I was the only person in the waiting room now. I stood up too fast at the command of my name and the magazine fell off my lap, flapping open on the ground. A good, well-behaved girl, I leaned down and picked it up before walking to the desk.

“Yes,” I said, soft, questioning at the end.

She looked up at me, tuna salad gone, suddenly interested in being a welcoming presence. She tucked her highlighted hair behind her ears, and earrings sparkled out. I doubted they were real anything, but I probably wouldn’t know.
“Good news,” she said. “You’re not an immediate case. You don’t have to have the Crisis-Assessment Session with Mr. Raynard. You can come back in a few days for the regular intake evaluation. Can you do Wednesday at 10?”

I nodded. She wrote out an appointment card, putting my name in fat blue script. I’d cultivated those squishy a’s and circle-dotted i’s in sixth grade, but then I gave up on it. “You’re not a danger to yourself or others,” she said as she handed it over.

* 

The girl who held open the Counseling Services door for me was tall, thick in the legs in what I thought was a good way. Calf muscles. Curve. Power. She wore a short dress that showed them off. I saw her smoking outside the building as I came out with my appointment card. She fussed with her pink cell phone, thumbed the buttons, and then shoved it in a jacket pocket and concentrated on her cigarette, pulling everything she could from it. I wished that I smoked. I didn’t. So I clutched my appointment card and went by. I turned back and looked—she waved, just her fingers, from a solid palm.

“How was it,” she said, not quite a question. She laughed immediately. “You want to go get something to eat?”

I thought of the lunch rush in the cafeteria, the crisp vegetables that ended up tasting like old burger grease. That whole charred smell in the air.

“How,” I said, to stall time.

She tucked a piece of her bleached-blond shag behind her ear. Her cigarette butt was still lit on the ground. She stepped on it.

“Where do you want to go,” I said.
“Off campus,” she said. “I go off campus.”

I smiled. We started to walk. I knew nothing just off-campus and walkable but a 7-Eleven. We didn’t head that way.

It was hard being with people, sometimes. This was something I hadn’t really noticed in high school. But spending a few months in college, cut off from it all, threw this thing about me into relief. When I had a conversation (rare), I’d feel pressure to keep it bobbing—to throw bread to the other person to come get it like ducks, all the while worrying that I did not have enough bread. It was going to run out. I’m not sure why I felt that I held the bread bag, that I had all the bread.

Walking with this girl was okay, thought. She lit another cigarette. I snapped my sugarless bubble gum. We stayed at the same pace—my small legs walking fast, her big ones long but slow. In her larger presence, I sank down comfortably.

We left the rounded grass boundary of campus and went into the street. An eggplant-colored minivan honked at us. The door-opening girl—I didn’t know her name yet—gave the tiniest turn of head, and a big, quick, contemptuous smirk at the driver, while giving him the finger.

We told each other our names once we were inside the store, which sat at the end of a small strip mall in a sketchy area. She was Jessica, a sophomore. The store sold dented cans of food, dry goods about to expire. She threw things into the orange plastic shopping basket with abandon, and then we got out of Food and into Household Goods, where there were bins of pillows shaped like beer bottles. She put her basket down, grabbed a Corona one, and sneered at it. “What the fuck,” she said, “is this.”
“Something that should be in a dorm room,” I said. “Along with fish swimming in a popcorn machine or something else that shouldn’t be a fish tank, and some road signs. Not actually stolen ones. Replicas.”

She laughed. “Yeah, for the dudes. We’re supposed to have these.” She pointed the beer pillow towards a shelf with hot pink corduroy “husband” pillows.

“Gross,” I said. “I think my mom tried to get me one of those. She had these ideas of what I needed, but they turned out to be off, or wrong.”

“Then you feel all itchy and guilty when you say you don’t want the stuff,” Jessica said.

“And embarrassed. For her and for you.”

*  

“I don’t think you’ll find anything in there,” Jessica said. We were talking about therapy. Jessica was old hat at it. She’d gone to see two different people in high school—she’d begged her mom and it worked for her. When Jessica told the first therapist about how she thought she was so ugly that she wanted to die, the therapist brushed it off—you’ve got a cute Polish nose, he said, and then kept asking her to describe sex with her boyfriend. Still, she went until the insurance ran out. The next person was worse, all business. I eat until I’m sick, Jessica told her. I can’t stop. The woman asked her if she was still doing well in her classes, because we need to get you to college.

We were in her dorm room, which was in another building from mine. An older building, three stories of brick and peeling white window paint.
She ate off-brand cheese curls until her fingertips were bright orange. I nibbled on those sugar-covered fake orange slices—thick and gelatinous inside.

“Maybe,” I said. I used that head-bobbing, smoothed-over, agreeable adult phrase. I chewed on the candy.

“It *is* that way,” she said.

“Why do you still go?”

“I don’t know,” she said, licking her fingertips back to regular color. She stopped after two. She tucked her legs under her on the bed. She looked defeated. “Can you hand me that bag, please?”

I handed her the thin plastic bag, the freezer kind for ice cream. She took a spoon out of the drawer on her nightstand. The drawers were clear plastic, and she’d taped some postcards on each side of the knobs—a mix of 1970s beach scenes and those black-and-white shots you can buy at the bookstore, normal people looking exotic and glamorous because of the dark lipstick and curled hair of the times.

“Birthday-Party Flavor,” she said, peeling at the waxed cardboard tab that opened the gallon of ice cream. She didn’t offer me any. She didn’t worry about dripping it on her bedspread. She just started to eat, kind of staring off into space, her hand knowing exactly where her mouth was.

It was five o’clock and dark. I hadn’t noticed the change of sky until it happened. Out the open window (the old radiator cranked out too-hot heat), I saw the tiniest tinge of blue behind the skinny bare tree branches, then it was gone and the sky was flat and black. I thought of the flavor of birthday parties, all the ones I’d known—that white
chemical icing, too-sweet blue or pink roses also made of icing. The birthday person
waiting to judge the presents, my anxiety of if I’d given the right thing. The artificial
situation reaching for fun, almost always veering off.

Still, though, I felt as if I were in some kind of fortress. The light in Jessica’s
room emerged as a dim, friendly yellow against the dark outside. It cast the slight of
shabbiness of her decorations and the slight cheesiness of her leopard-print bedspread as
a snapshot of a glamoured or sentimental time—or the potential to be one to someone in
the future. I placed a half-eaten orange slice back in the bag, gooey with spit. I could be
gross here with her. Cross-legged on the floor, I leaned back against her bed. I stopped
looking at her eating her ice cream. I looked at the wolf posters and dream catchers
hanging above her roommate’s bed.

“Is she Native American?” I asked.

I heard the spoon click against Jessica’s teeth.

“What?” she said. “Oh…her. Shit…her.” Then there was quick rustling—the
carton back in the bag, I thought.

Jessica launched herself off the bed. I turned around. She strode out the door with
the bag. “I’ll be right back,” she told me. The thin wooden door stayed half-open. The
bathroom for her floor was catty-corner across from her room.

I could almost make out the sound of retching. I turned on her TV to make it not
an issue. I remembered a summer job I’d had in high school, calling about subscription
renewals for a local newspaper. I was the youngest one there. In the two-stall ladies’
room one day, I heard violent puking going on in one of the stalls. I hovered by the stall
door. *Do you need help?* I asked. The sound continued, then paused. *No,* the person said, sounding mean, or just affected by the force of the puking. Would anybody answer ‘yes’ to that question? It was kind of like asking someone how they were. You just said fine or ok no matter what.

Jessica came back in. The smell of Listerine washed the small room. She sat on her roommate’s bed, facing me, and leaned down to stage-whisper, “She’s not Native American. She just sucks.”

“Um, yeah. My roommate, too. She has her science crew and they are all normal dorks together, completely wrapped up from the outside world.”

“Lucky bitch. She fits right in.”

“I like your room so much,” I said. “It’s better than mine. I like being here.”

“Maybe you can move in,” Jessica said. She slid off the roommate’s forest-green comforter and onto the floor. She peeled back the edge of the comforter and crouched down. “See?” she said, and gestured.

“What?”

“Those little bundles. The sage supply is low. She burns it when she’s anxious. She’s thinking college might not be the right place for her.”

I laughed.

*

Jessica came with me and waited while I had my intake interview at Counseling Services. “I don’t feel like going to Psych this week, so this can be like, an independent study,” she said, putting her feet up on the coffee table in the waiting room.
A jolly-in-the-cheeks woman dressed in red and pink led me back through a hallway and into the room. I looked in any open door on the way back. All I saw were conference rooms with Diet Coke cans on the tables and inspirational posters on the walls. This did not seem to bode well. “I’m Sandra,” the woman said once we sat down. She looked at me like a dry-food cat with a plate of wet food. She fingered a rhinestone pin of a heart up high on her sweater. “It’s not too much, is it?”

“What?” I said. Despite Jessica’s warning, I still felt an excited-scared feeling in my body at the thought of starting therapy, like moving toward the first big drop of a roller coaster.

Sandra gestured down her outfit. “The pin, with all of this? Too festive?” She sounded genuinely worried.

“Oh yeah. It’s Valentine’s Day. I almost, uh, forgot,” I said.

“I can see why. Kind of sad, isn’t it, having a therapy appointment on Valentine’s Day.”

I squinted at her, trying to assess her tone from her face. Everything looked dead serious. It was there that I began to thrash against the roller-coaster harness, wanting to squirm out, trying to remember that I’d chosen to get on this ride.

But she did ask me good, probing questions, even if they were just from her Xeroxed checklist. I’d never spent so much time talking about myself out loud. “I try to keep in touch with my high school friends,” I said. “I mean, sort of. I have a MySpace profile. But I don’t put much personal information on there, like what I’m really doing. I
don’t feel comfortable saying what I really think or feel or am doing. I like to keep
myself, I don’t know, you know, like, on the downlow.”

Sandra’s mouth went stick-straight. Her eyes widened, and she leaned forward, as
if to stop me from making a grave mistake. “Abi,” she said. “Do you know what you just
said? Do you know what that means?”

I couldn’t believe that I’d just given the essence of myself, the center of my
problems, in my MySpace profile. Maybe this person was good at her job.

“The downlow,” she said. “Is when married African-American men have sex with
other men. So, Abi. You are not on the downlow.”

I didn’t know if she had the most sincere desire to educate me, or if she wanted
me to feel stupid, or if she thought she was helping me by telling me there was one more
thing that was not wrong with me, but I just sat there, nodding expressing nothing, and
this was not good enough for her. She was waiting for me to apologize, to feel
embarrassment or shame, remorse of some sort.

I resisted. I’d done nothing wrong, and I didn’t need to be made to feel bad. “Oh,
I didn’t mean it like that,” I said, as clear and possessive of the air as I ever sounded. I
crossed my legs at the ankle and looked beyond her, to a poster with an eagle in a blue,
blue sky. At least I could tell Jessica about this and we could laugh. Maybe that was all I
needed to do—to tell someone else what happened to me, someone who saw things as I
saw them. My brain, or my heart, whichever Sandra’s questions were meant to probe,
they could stay closed, like tight walnuts in a decorative bowl, not meant to be eaten.

*
I put off going back to counseling services, and Jessica and I did get our wish: her sage-burning roommate decided to go back home. I applied to switch rooms, and was approved. I carried my possessions by arm through the slush chunks on the ground between dorms. My science-major roommate was dumbfounded—but if no one moved in, she’d have the room to herself, and who could argue with that. Once I was settled in, the first thing Jessica wanted to do was to order food. We huddled around a red-printed menu like it was a fire and we were cold. The winter light reflecting off the snow outside was sharp and blue-tinged. It made the old yellow light from the overhead bulb in our room seem weak, dusty, cloying. I pulled the blinds down and shut them. “Ravioli or tortellini?” Jessica asked.

“I don’t know. What’s the sauce?”

“One is tomato. One is pesto.”

“I just want spaghetti,” I said. “You should get…I don’t know. I can’t decide.”

“Me neither.”

The choice held a lot of weight, mainly because the food was not cheap. The money had to be spent just right. What would taste best going down? What would taste worst coming up? I was pretty sure I knew what Jessica was thinking.

She held a pencil over the menu.

I read, and silently rejected, the entire list of fried appetizers, then repeated the process. “Penne alla vodka,” Jessica said, in a dazed tone, still considering.
And for some reason I was so happy to be here. Locked into this tail-chasing dialogue. We spun, alone but together, intent on catching something both threatening and familiar. The momentum of the intent and the familiarity of the threat keeping us safe, so long as we kept chasing.

Jessica ended up choosing fettucine. She called the order in—I wouldn’t have done it. At the same time, Jessica needed me, both to make the delivery minimum and to not have her need and intent collapse in on itself, to be shown for what it was. Right now, we were just two “coeds” having a “girls night in,” and “treating ourselves” to some “yummy-delicious” pasta.

This is what it looked like to the delivery guy. Instead of someone bored, we got a lascivious, interested one. I got mad at such attention, because my baggy clothes and dry, pale lips and unstyled hair meant that I was not trying for this attention. I didn’t want to be visible in that way. When I was anyway, that’s when I got mad. And when I got mad, I didn’t feel able to speak it, to make any threats that I couldn’t follow up on, or that would piss off the dude and leave myself open to a violent reaction.

We hated him but we gave him a couple bucks for a tip anyway. “I don’t want him pissed off at me,” Jessica said.

“How come you can be mean to people on the street who honk?” I said.

“They don’t know where I live,” she said.

“Still, though. They’re in their cars, protected by glass. You and me, we’ve got our feet and our skin. We’re open to the elements.”
“Eh, doesn’t bother me as much. Outside is not my space, anyway. If they spit, or something, it’ll land on the ground, be soaked up there.”

We climbed the stairs from the ground-floor common area.

“That guy doesn’t know our room number, though.”

“Still, close enough. He could find out pretty easy.”

Hearts beating fast, Jessica opened the door while I swung the plastic bag of tin plates of food inside. The light was welcoming. We’d left Jessica’s tiny white TV on, but mute, and I saw that it was time for Dr. Phil.

“OhmyGod, Dr. Phil,” I said.

“You watch that shit?”

“I love it. It’s so great. Really,” I said. I turned the volume up. Dr. Phil was already busy barking order at disorder. He was always so incredulous at the stupidity of people.

Garlic invaded the air. I sat on the floor and peeled back the white cardboard cover from my food. I got a plastic fork and was comforted by the emphatic TV dialogue. Jessica was digging in the bag. She tossed a piece of bread at me. “I think they gave us extra,” she said, and bit into her own piece violently.

* 

I never puked up anything. Jessica didn’t rub off on me that way. It was more like I managed to eat small bites of things as long as she was around, where if she wasn’t, I couldn’t bear to. I took comfort in her excess, her large glommy bites. It was good to know that someone was taking these bites. I admired her for that. She was sad that I
never finished my food, not even close, and she took out her sadness by eating the food I left. Probably she was also sincerely excited for the extra food. I wasn’t offended. I understood. It worked out. We tested ourselves against each other, and did not talk about it. The bites of food I took seemed smaller than they were, in her larger presence, and this made it okay for me to eat them. In this way, I was able to maintain a low but unhazardous weight. I may have been bad for her, though.
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