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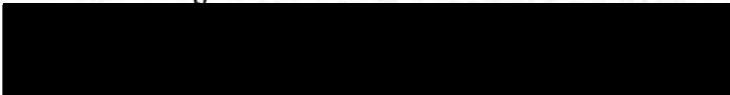
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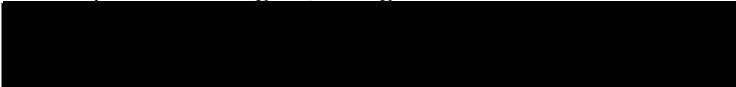
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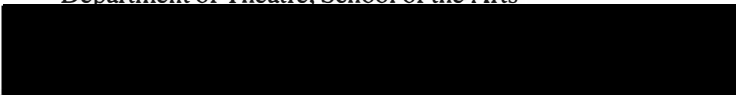
This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Amy M. Consiglio entitled *Five Days at India House* has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Fiction.


Thomas De Haven, Thesis Director, Professor
Department of English, College of Humanities and Sciences



Laura Browder, Assistant Professor



William Tester, Assistant Professor
Department of English, College of Humanities and Sciences



Janet Rodgers, Associate Professor
Department of Theatre, School of the Arts


Marita Golden, Director of Creative Writing
Department of English, College of Humanities and Sciences


Richard A. Fine, Chair
Department of English, College of Humanities and Sciences


Stephen D. Gottfredson, Dean
College of Humanities and Sciences


Jack L. Haar, Dean
School of Graduate Studies


May 6, 1999
Date

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Five Days at India House

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

by

Amy M. Consiglio
Bachelor of Arts in English
Business and Technical Writing
University of Delaware, 1991

Thomas De Haven
Professor
Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 1999

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Excerpt from the novel
Five Days at India House

Day One

Tula wedged the plastic bottle deeper between her thighs and moaned, careful not to wake the others. She had been driving in the same position for over an hour, and the weight of her body was starting make her ass tingle. Ordinarily, she might stop to stretch her legs or bang her feet against the ground, but not now. For the last 20 miles, she'd held her outstretched foot against the pedal at a stiff ten degrees, just enough to keep the car rumbling over the grooved cement that lined the interstate. She was overdue for an alignment, and the steady vibration of the front end worked on her lap like a low grade centrifuge, circling the lukewarm soda along the inside of its container in a thin stream. Tula rocked herself back and forth against the bottle as best she could, hoping to stem the numbness that comes from staying put too long. At least that's what she'd tell the others. The inside edges of her jeans felt damp.

"Great," Tula said softly, then reached down to loosen the bottle. She held it between her knees, letting the top scrape against the steering wheel. She squinted over the back of her palm into the dark stretch of road that lay ahead, and tried to focus her thoughts. They were less than an hour from the French Quarter. "Not even there yet and I'm acting like a depraved idiot," she mumbled, not aware she was speaking out loud until half the sentence had found its way out of her mouth. She shook her head in silent protest.

Tula glanced over to Abbey, who had curled up on the passenger seat. She was clutching the sides of her shirt, and using the seat belt to cradle her face. Her brown hair trailed off her shoulder in a thick stripe, swaying with the motion of the car. It was strange, seeing her balled up like that. So like a child. Over the years, Tula had seen Abbey sleeping in a dozen different positions, albeit rarely alone. But for all the chairs and bathtubs and front seats of cars she'd ended up in, Abbey had never seemed as small as she looked right now.

Abbey was the reason they were making this trip, and for once it was a very adult reason. A final send off, Lanie had said. A sort of going away party before Abbey marries Paul *and the three of us are over*. Tula remembered the look on Lanie's face when she'd said it, the three of them toasting the engagement. Tula tried to make eye contact, but Lanie just smiled into her glass. No one else had even noticed. A moment later they were raising champagnes and kissing on the cheek, Lanie started chirping about travel agents. Tula wanted to believe that she had meant nothing by it. Still, it seemed an odd way to put things.

Abbey shuddered once against the window then lay still, as if she could feel Tula's thoughts on her like a draft. Tula reached for the heater.

The radio was playing an old Beach Boys rip off, and the sound of it made Tula suddenly miss her father, with his black pressed slacks, folded handkerchiefs, and those ridiculous shined shoes. She found herself thinking of him a lot these days. Tula closed her eyes for just a moment and found herself in between them, the scratch of her mother's rough silk dress pressing through her thin pajamas, the sting of his wool of his coat against her cheek. Tula opened her eyes to the darkness and inhaled, remembering. They were always going out like that, overdressed for some minor occasion. Even in the blazing heat of South Philly summer Papa always wore a coat and tie, with the same dainty flower tacked to his lapel. Tula tightened her legs. The bottle crimped a bit from the pressure. To this day the pollen-tinged scent of gardenias made her feel a little drunk, like standing in a bakery too long. So impractical, those blossoms. By the end of the night, he'd have bruised all the petals, leaving a moist, brown outline on the edge of his lapel. A drop of soda landed on her leg. Tula turned off the radio.

She reached down again to readjust the soda bottle when Lanie sat up from the back seat. Her hair was matted against her cheek. She looked flushed.

"Did we get off the highway?" Lanie asked, her eyes half-closed.

“No,” Tula said, startled by the force of her own voice. “They’re repaving it.”

“Oh,” Lanie said, yawning. She pushed herself to the center of the back seat, then sat straight up, her legs folded underneath her, and slowly arched her thin hands toward her face like a Buddha. She pressed her fingertips to her temples, then massaged her fingers through her hair, occasionally catching a long blonde strand underneath her silver rings. Tula glanced back at her through the rear view mirror, jealous of her ease.

Lanie stretched her arms wide and grazed the windows on either side of the car. “Any soda left?” she asked, pushing out a conscious breath with her hands. She made every move seem elegant.

“Nope,” Tula said, inadvertently squeezing her thighs around the bottle. The plastic crinkled. “Not really, I mean. Just backwash.”

Lanie nodded, then rolled her head from side to side. “And princess?”

“Sleeping,” Tula said, her eyes back on the road. She could feel Lanie’s shoulders tense as soon as she mentioned Abbey, and was grateful for the silence. Tula tried to think of something to say, to fill the gap and deflect the conversation, but hours of quiet had left her too pensive for chit chat.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Lanie said.

Tula shrugged, glancing at Lanie through the mirror.

Lanie smiled. “Never thought the day would come when Miss Petul-ent Wertz had nothing to day.”

Tula stared at her through the mirror, waiting for Lanie’s eyes to meet her own.

“You promised.”

“That I did,” Lanie said, inhaling a deep breath and sighing the air out through her nose, mouth closed.

Probably some tantric trick at inner peace, Tula thought. Funny how hostile it sounded. “I could stop,” Tula said.

“For what?” Lanie asked, leaning forward against the seat, suddenly full of energy. “The soda? Aren’t we almost there?” Lanie lounged against her folded arms and held her face toward the windshield, basking in the occasional oncoming headlights like the sun. Up ahead, the street lights were growing more compact, bunching closer together until they overtook each other in one erratic jumbled mass.

Tula could barely keep her eyes off it. She felt a quick pang in her groin, like the kind she always got rounding the West Chester bend on I-95, where mile after mile of desolate hills and swampy brush suddenly splits off to the left, leaving the faint outline of Philadelphia like a prize for the first one careful enough to look. It had always been her favorite part of coming home.

“God,” Lanie said, her eyes dreamy against the glare, “even the lights look wild.”

They’d better, Tula thought, wishing for the prickly excitement she felt that morning, packing her bags, mapping the route. Cashing the check. “I just want to get there, get out this damn car,” Tula said, shifting the weight on her backside.

“Sooner than you think, my dear,” Lanie said, glancing at the round neckline of Tula’s shirt. It had a small bow embroidered in the center, and gapped a bit where it fell between her breasts.

Lanie sat back a little and turned her attention to Abbey’s sleeping profile. She was still turned toward the window, with most of her face and neck were hidden behind her dark brown hair. Lanie reached out a stubby finger and lifted a wide segment, then peeked underneath. “How long has she been like this?”

“Don’t wake her up, Lane,” Tula said, motioning with her elbow. “She hasn’t been asleep that long.”

Lanie dropped the hair and slid back into the center of the seat. They rode in cautious silence for a moment or two, neither of them sure if Lanie had finally let things go. “Well,” she said at last, “God knows she’ll need her rest.”

Tula smiled back at her through the rear view mirror. Lanie winked and turned away, her mouth drawn flat into an expressionless line.

It had been four years since the three of them had lived together, all under the same roof in that tiny one floor unit on Chestnut Street. Tula knew going into this trip that it would take a while for them to get used to each other again. Being right under each other's noses.

As it turned out, they wouldn't need to economize. But at the time, it seemed like a good idea, the three of them driving to New Orleans to save the airfare. After all, Lanie was essentially out of work, surviving on freelance camera jobs at the local TV station, and Abbey was saving her money for her honeymoon. Tula was the only one who could really afford the airfare, with her assistant branch manager's paycheck and conscientiously tight fists. But with money pretty tight for all of them, there wasn't room in the budget for a week or two of hotel rooms plus three round trip tickets from Philadelphia to New Orleans, just days after Mardi Gras. Lanie wanted to go during the height of the season, starting with shots every hour on the drive down and ending with High Mass at St. Peter's on Ash Wednesday. After all, they had survived seven hard years of Catholic school before they finally threw their caps over the grass at Arch Bishop Prendie High. Why not go out in a blaze of Christian glory, carefully orchestrated to fall around the holy days?

In the end, Tula won out, arguing they wait until most of the festivities had died down. That, plus the money they'd save by driving would let them each stay a few extra days. She'd hoped it would feel like old times. But driving through the dark on a cold Friday night, her feet tingling from lack of movement, her mind wandering to people and things she'd just as soon forget, Tula couldn't help but feel they'd compromised too much for the sake of living. Lately, it seemed she always arrived at the end of things. And once again, it was all her fault.

“Hey,” Lanie said, unfolding a leg from underneath her to press her toes into the back of Tula’s seat. She had a ring on the pinkie. “No somber thoughts.”

Tula changed her grip on the wheel. Her palms were damp. “I know.”

“No sober thoughts, either,” Lanie said, mocking her frat-boy comment with her shoulders as she spoke. She reached for the road map, and traced her finger absently along the route Tula had meticulously highlighted. She’d pressed a line straight through the paper. “I’m not going to have to make you promise, too, am I?” Lanie asked quietly.

Tula glanced back at her. She changed lanes. “No ma’am.”

Lanie looked up, then tossed the map onto the seat. “Good.”

The three of them drove in silence for next twenty minutes, the colors outside their windows growing darker and less distinguishable with each thump of the tires. On three sides, the windows of the car stayed black. The curve of the road held them just far enough away to survey the city as they sped toward it, a series of snaking streaks of orange and gold angling toward the glowing center before spiraling out from the core like the dust of a spinning asteroid.

Tula tightened her thighs around the bottle, trying to squeeze a few more minutes out of her overworked bladder. This last leg had kept them moving for seven hours straight, with only the occasional stop to pick up fluid or let some out. Abbey had slept for most of it, and with little chance of yielding control of her precious Saab to anyone else, let alone Lanie and her chronic lead foot, Tula had done most of the driving. But now that they were close enough to see the lights and smell the salt air, the minutes seemed endless. Tula was getting punchy.

She started rocking in her seat, and pressed harder on the gas. She forced herself to focus on the trip. Toilets. Pink toilets, from the brochure. The view from the balcony—their semi-private, overlooking the French Quarter, scrolled ironwork, additional \$68.40

per night, historic (inspired) balcony the brochure had promised, along with thick down pillows, late-night room service, in-room Jacuzzi. She sighed and felt a fluttering in her stomach. She squeezed her legs again.

Lanie sat forward from the back seat and reached her hand between Tula and Abbey. “Abbey,” she said lightly then shook her, like a mother waking a baby, “Look. You can see the lights.”

Tula felt a wave of relief, then waited for Abbey’s reaction.

Abbey stirred then opened her mouth wide and smacked her lips up and down, eyes closed. It took her a moment to unwind herself from the position she had been sleeping in, and a few more to realize that she was actually awake. Tula was merging toward the exit ramp when Abbey finally stared out through the windshield, her eyes glassy and white as eggs. She held onto the dash with one hand to steady herself through the turn, and tucked a thick ribbon of chestnut hair behind her ear. “All right, ladies,” she said, her voice froggy from sleep. “Check your morals at the door. New Orleans, here we come.”

Lanie threw her head back and let out her best redneck yell. It sent an unexpected chill up Tula’s neck.

The three of them laughed, then busied themselves with finding hotel reservations and tying shoes in preparation for the big arrival. They were practically humming with electricity, and as excited as they were before they left.

“God, you’d think we’ve never been anywhere before in our lives,” Tula laughed, steering the car with her elbow while she wedged her right hand halfway underneath the passenger seat in search of their confirmation number.

Abbey bent down to zip up her knapsack. Abbey’s ear hovered near the dashboard while she wedged one foot and then the other into her dull sneakers. Her hair blocked most of Tula’s view of the road. She held onto an air vent with her left hand.

Unable to see the road and uncomfortable in such an awkward position, Tula simultaneously stopped looking and closed her fingers on the scrap she'd been searching for. She tugged her arm free and sat up straight, her cheeks flushed. A moment later she noticed Lanie's arm reach up from the back seat and start feeling along the headliner, but didn't have time to prepare herself for the blast of light from the unusually intense dome light. Tula blinked hard and shook her head. She was scanning the road for street signs when she caught a glimpse of Abbey's perfect engagement ring.

She had seen it before, they all had, and admired the sizable stone. But it seemed larger and more prominent now, with her knuckles tense against the dashboard. The harsh glare from above danced over the stone's facets as perfectly as a jeweler's halogen lamp, catching each beveled edge exactly, throwing blue and yellow streams around the car. Tula thought of her own bare fingers, and the diamond bracelet she gave herself for Christmas. It wasn't the same.

"Is that the address?" Lanie asked, tugging the paper from Tula's hand. "Tula," she said, turning the paper over then balling it up, "this is the reservation request form. We need the address."

"Well, I thought you were going to keep track of everything," Tula said, steadying the wheel with her elbow before plunging her hand a second time under the seat.

"Watch the road, I'll get it," Abbey said, unbuckling her seat belt so she could search under her own seat.

"No, no, it's over here," Lanie said from the back seat, before disappearing up to her shoulders under the driver's side.

Tula sat up again, her face hot. A car sped around them on the left. He seemed to be making a point. "Jesus," she said breathlessly, scanning the road for headlights. There was only one other car on the road, a good quarter mile ahead. Then it hit her. "Oh my god, did any body check the glove compartment? I think I put it in there," Tula said, leaning over to

pop it open. A second later she felt a bump, and then the tear of muscle as her head and chest and arms slammed into the rigid dash.

Her cheekbone took most of the impact as her face met the edge of the steering wheel, her left arm traveling further into the turn signal bar. The horn let out a brief toot as her shoulder slapped the center of the wheel. Something heavy was forcing her into the gear shift from behind. She had a sense that her body was now moving forward faster than she had been driving, and yet at the same time, everything seemed to slow down, like she was watching a dull movie projected at the wrong speed. The car lifted up from behind as it plowed into the stationary metal telephone pole. Tula's seat belt jerked her back into place.

The sound of her words echoed in the air at first, long before Tula realized she was yelling. She heard the sounds again and again, *shit shit shit*, and wondered where they came from as the stiff metal of her Saab crinkled like cloth, bunching up at the corner where the engine once was. Tula's lips were forming the word again, pursed like a kiss to make the "shh," when she felt the rough fiber of the bag crush into her face, forcing her deeper into the lifeless springs of her seat. In an instant everything went white as the air bag covered her face, blocked the windshield, rammed into her mouth. Somewhere Abbey was screaming. I got hit with the air bag, Tula thought, her face humming, the tiny bones in her nose splintering like toothpicks. The car smelled of sawdust and pollen and fiberglass. Tiny bits of metal and the glint of dancing penlights hovered all around her.

"I got hit with the air bag," she said, her dry lips spread flat against her teeth. She pictured an enormous boot wedging itself into her eye socket. Her shoulders felt limp, and she realized that the seat belt had sliced into her neck. The warmth of blood seeped into the collar of her shirt, smelling of metal and damp spinach. She glanced at her lap. It was filled with the stiff shell of the spent bag, and too many droplets of her own blood. She stared at it, confused. It didn't belong there.

“I got hit with the airbag,” she said, noticing a strange quiver in her voice, a different intonation. She touched her lip, suddenly swollen and now sitting prominently above her rattled gums. She smoothed her fingers over it, remembering a softball that had caused similar damage in the seventh grade. Abbey had laughed at her then, not noticing she had a fat lip.

“Abbey?” she said too loudly, the word distorted by her swollen lip. She remembered Abbey was in the seat next to her. Lanie was in the car, too. “Lanie? Abbey?” Tula said again, hearing herself panic. She couldn’t unbuckle her seat belt.

“I think I broke my arm,” Lanie said, her voice muffled.

“Lanie? Lanie?” Tula said again, her fingers frantic against the thick black webbing.

Lanie was inexplicably calm. “I’m all right, Tula. Just. Don’t. Move.”

Tula froze in her seat. She could hear her breath beating out of her in short bursts. The sound of it terrified her. “Lanie? Abbey? There’s blood—”

“Ow! God damn it, Tula sit still! Your seat is stuck on my arm.”

Tula could feel her head shaking, as if the weight of it was too much for her neck to bear. She could hear Lanie talking, but she couldn’t seem to understand what she was saying, or control her movements. She cupped her palm against her neck and touched blood. Her head felt so heavy, and her limp arms didn’t want to obey her commands. She stared out through the windshield, and tried to imagine what had happened.

“Petula Wertz, listen to me!” Lanie barked from underneath the seat. “I want you to count to ten, out loud, right now. And don’t you fucking move or I swear to god I’ll kill you myself.”

Tula repeated the words in her head, trying to make some meaning out of them. It felt like she was back in math class, and Sister Rosalie was asking what 13 times 9 was. Tula would just sit there, blank headed, waiting for an answer. It never came. She started to feel dizzy.

“Now!” Lanie yelled, then moaned like a dog stuck in a fence. Lanie started counting.

“Six, seven, eight, nine,” Tula recited, repeating what she heard. She got to eighteen when she realized what she was doing, and a second later had unbuckled herself and stepped out of the car. Lanie was lying on the floor with her left hand jammed underneath the driver’s seat.

“A piece of your seat is stuck on my wrist,” Lanie said, wriggling herself at the shoulder. Her face was contorted with pain. “If you can just pull on it from the front, I think I can get my hand out,” she said.

Tula stared at the front of the car and started to shake.

“Tula, get me out of the car,” Lanie pleaded, her free hand pounding against the front seat.

Tula held her forehead and stepped toward the car, remembering Abbey’s sneakers as her head slammed into the dash. Abbey was still in the car. “Abbey’s still in the car.”

“Lift the lever, Tula,” Lanie barked.

Tula stared at her, lying on the floor. “You’re trapped under the seat.”

“Yes, Tula,” Lanie panted. “Lift the lever and get me out.”

Tula knelt down on the pavement and leaned into the car. She rested her cheek against the seat cushion and ran her hand along the floor in front of the driver’s seat until she found a metal box. The CD changer was lodged against the seat rail. Lanie’s hand was wedged underneath.

Tula wriggled her fingers along the outline of the box, digging at it like a treasure half buried in sand. After a few tries, she managed to get a firm grip on it, and yanked it forward an inch or two. She heard the pop of disconnecting electrical wires. Lanie slid her hand free and leaned up against the back seat. She clutched her wrist tightly, as if the bones might fall out of her skin if she let go.

Tula stared through the windshield at the bent metal tube hovering over them. She had plowed into a hollow industrial pole head on, creasing it near the center so it fell on top of itself like a tube of toothpaste. She turned her head, and noticed Abbey sitting in the passenger seat. She was slumped over, and silent. There was a crack in the side window. Tula instinctively reached for her own neck. “Abbey?” Tula asked, her voice taking longer to funnel back through her own ears than it should. “Can you hear me?”

Lanie was on the other side of Abbey’s door and had her hand on the latch, trying to open it from the outside. Her wrist looked blue. “Abbey, Abbey!” Lanie yelled, prying the door open and leaning into the car. Her wild blonde hair brushed Abbey’s cheek. Abbey twitched hard, like a bug was on her face.

“Tula, go call the police,” Lanie said, grabbing her wrist again.

Abbey moaned, and let her head roll to the side. She pressed the top of her scalp with her palm.

“Abbey? Abbey are you all right?” Lanie called in the frightened, assertive tone of rookie lifeguards and paramedics.

“Tu-la,” Abbey moaned, her eyes rammed shut. She slid her hand back and forth against her scalp in rough strokes. “Way to wreck the car, jackass.”

Tula climbed back out of the car and stepped away from the door. She stared at the crumpled mass of steel and felt her breath begin to pulse. A set of headlights lit her face, then a fast horn jerked her to attention before an oncoming car swerved into the left lane and continued by without stopping. Tula felt her neck twitching as she hurried over to the curb. She had been standing in the middle of the street.

She pressed her heels against the edge of the curb and used them to steady herself on the way down, one hand on her neck, the other outstretched and feeling for balance. She swallowed hard and shuddered. From the looks of things, she had totaled the car. The

hood was sliced almost in two, with cables and smoke and strange greasy discs littering the windshield. She had sustained most of the damage on Abbey's side, which was crumpled and oddly compressed into a space roughly half of what it required. Her damp fingers wandered to her breast and rested there like a shelf.

Tula watched while Lanie eased Abbey out of the car. She stared at them, barely able to make out her face, when it dawned on her that she had taken out the only source of light on the block. Lanie had Abbey's arm draped around her shoulder while the two of them limp-walked over to her. Abbey made a face.

"I think I can make it to the curb, Lane," Abbey said, separating herself from Lanie's overprotective grip. She shuffled the last few feet and eased her rump onto the cold concrete. The lump on her forehead distorted her features.

Tula felt like reaching out her hand to smooth it, but couldn't find the energy to make her muscles work. Her head was in a fog.

Lanie had walked back to the car and was digging around the back seat. Tula heard the hollow metal zing of her lighter and watched her back rise as she inhaled. Lanie was down to a half a pack a day, or had been up till now. Tula felt a wave of nausea hit knowing she'd just set her back a good six months.

"Where's the flashlight?" Lanie asked, walking around to the trunk. The impact had knocked the joints out of line, leaving a half-inch gap where the trunk should sit on one side. Lanie tried the key and a strong push, but couldn't get it open. After a second or two of concerted thought, she wedged her fingers into the gap and pulled, trying to pry it open with one hand. She released it with a gasp and held her wrist, wincing.

Tula looked down at her hands. It was too dark to see blood on her fingers, but she knew it was there. She stuck her first three fingers in her mouth.

After two or three tries, Lanie forced open the trunk with an unnatural moan, then squeezed her wrist immediately. She stood there, panting, with the cigarette dangling from her chapped lower lip.

Tula watched the paper crinkle and burn red at the tip of Lanie's cigarette as she inhaled deep like a prisoner. The sight of it made her feel more and more guilty. She pushed herself up from the curb and steadied herself, then headed as straight as she could for the driver's side door, her head spinning. Lanie made no effort to help.

"Here," Tula said, opening the door with a new metal creak. Her face dropped. She reached her hand inside the door pocket and pulled out her MagLite, then shut the door. She rolled the light in her hand to steady herself as she walked the line back to Lanie, her thumb automatically finding the inscription. *For Petty. Be Safe. Luv Papa.* She found the switch and pressed it, shining a hollow centered beam on the asphalt. The pattern made her sick.

Lanie reached for the flashlight, then spun it around in her good hand like a baton. She held it firm at the base with the head pointing away from her fist, just like a cop. Tula squinted at it, suddenly remembering her father giving them lessons in the driveway, the three of them in plaid uniforms and him in a suit, all practicing how to use it like a weapon. He scolded them for giggling.

Lanie shined the light just under Tula's eyes. "You okay to sit with Abbey?"

"Yes, officer," Tula said, starting to smile, then wincing when the gesture tugged at her enormous upper lip. She went to touch it with her fingertips, but stopped a few inches away from her skin, as if the weight of her hand would cause her face to swell more. Her fingers were shaking.

Lanie stared at her, stone faced and pale. She seemed to be asking something, but Tula couldn't understand what. Then Lanie turned and started down the block.

"I'll go find a phone," Lanie said into the street.

“You sure you should go alone?” Tula called, wondering what other options they had. She felt too drunk to stand. “We could all go together,” she said half-heartedly, wondering even as she said it how that could possibly work.

Lanie called over her shoulder, without turning her head. “Stay put. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

Tula wandered around to the passenger side door and shut it absently. The creaking metal was unbearable. Over on the curb, Abbey was rubbing her head and wincing, like she was some Hollywood kid pretending he’d been hit by a pop fly. Tula heel-toed it back to her then sat down, trying not to vomit.

“I’m feeling a little woozy, Abs,” Tula confessed. The two of them stared off toward the car, blinking. Up ahead the frenzied ball of red and gold seemed even more about of place, surrounded on all sides by black. Tula’s eyes found a line of street lights several blocks over and followed them to the center of the glowing mass. The French Quarter. For the first time, Tula realized where they were. They were close enough to touch it.

“I’m so sorry, Abbey,” Tula said, hearing the tears in her throat. She swallowed loudly. “I nearly killed you with the car.”

Abbey sighed, then dropped an arm around Tula’s shoulder. “I tell you, Tula. This is turning out to be one hell of a send off.”

Lanie’s loose-sandaled feet struck the earth like a drum, her mind forced to visions of serenity and calm. *I am one with my spirit. My spirit feels no pain. My spirit feels no pain.* Over and over she recited the stupid phrase, the rhythm of the syllables making her question why each word sounded like it did, who decided what to say, if she was pronouncing them right. She never was any good at calming herself in a crisis. Lanie was alone on the sidewalk. She could feel the blood pulse through her graying arm with each

step, but dared not slow down. She had no idea where she was going, couldn't even tell the police their location if she ever found a phone, and other than the shallow outline of the flashlight, could barely see. She pursed her lips and willed the tears back down.

"I can do this," she said, firmly, forcing her mind to believe it. She had smoked her cigarette down to the filter and hadn't thought to grab another one. Her left hand was throbbing. Inside her head, she was one with her spirit and feeling no pain, but out here, lost, alone, and unable to defend herself, she couldn't help but think the worst.

With each step a new scenario developed, each one more terrifying than the other. Even as she dreamed them she was aware of how ridiculous they were—a band of gang members swarming out from the darkness like Green Berets, slicing open her skull with one swing of a metal baseball bat, leaving her fish-eyed and rotting in the street; or worse, a crazed band of black delinquents loop a noose around her neck and drag her behind their truck until she's decapitated, all in revenge for those white supremacists in Texas—but the less likely the image, the more vivid it seemed. Lanie felt her stomach tighten down on itself underneath her jeans, and the sensation only quickened her irrationality. *Just calm down*, she told herself, desperate for neutral images or even a decent mantra to chant. She'd walked alone in far more dangerous places, and with fewer of her faculties at her disposal, without ever sensing fear. What was it about this place that had gotten under her skin?

"Oh, I must be getting old," she said quietly, conscious of how still and dark the street had become. She started to glance around in search of the street lights to better gauge her location, but the thought of moving her eyes into the immediate distance terrified her. She nestled her left arm deeper against her body and rested its weight along the top of her jeans. She could feel the bare skin along her stomach, and flashed to broken glass, disembowelings, chipped teeth. The cracked sidewalk felt angled beneath her feet. She was

sweating. “Why is there no traffic on this road?” she wondered aloud, conscious of her rising panic.

“I believe it’s in between shifts,” a man’s voice answered, too close.

Lanie screamed. She dropped the flashlight.

Abbey sat next to Tula on the curb and rocked, her long fingers weaving in and out of Tula’s tangled pile of reddish-brown curls. Her fingers were shaking. “It’s going to be fine, Tula,” Abbey said weakly while the two of them swayed, Tula’s shoulders quivering against the motion as she sobbed.

“I can’t believe this is happening to me,” Tula said, crying into her hand. She was breathing so hard it was difficult to talk. “My car. Look at my fucking car.”

Abbey rubbed her back. Gallons of blood seemed to pulse across her temple to feed the growing lump above her right eye. “This is a big city. There are plenty of cabs.”

“But that’s why I brought it,” Tula blubbered, her fat lip and dazed head making it difficult for her to form the words coherently. “To save, to cut the price,” Each breath burst out of her like air from a gun. She dropped her head into her knees. “What are we going to do now?”

Abbey gave in to her drooping eyelid and squinted through her left eye. She tried to remember what she was looking for when Tula wrecked. She spun her ring in toward her palm. “It’s all right,” Abbey mumbled, her right hand tangled in a pile of Tula’s soft curls. “It’s just a bump, on the head,” she continued slowly. “We’re all going to the hospital. The car will be fine.” She thought of Lanie, but was too tired to glance down the street. “Be glad you didn’t hit anything,” she said, nodding toward the folded pole, “well, major.”

Tula opened her mouth and motioned toward the scene, gathering breath in preparation for a new jag. Abbey closed her eyes and tried to think of something quiet. Nothing came.

Lanie's gut seized with panic as the metal flashlight bounced hard against the pavement, then rolled in an arc away from her. She squinted at the dark figure standing two feet in front of her, searching for identifying marks. Her mind went blank.

"Forgive me, please," the man said, stooping noisily to retrieve the flashlight. He straightened back up and held it out for her, handle first, so the light shone back on his rather large body. His face was beet red.

Lanie stared at the flashlight, breathless, desperate to determine how this offer could be some trick. But there it sat, the flashlight, her weapon, with an open invitation to grab it. With both eyes on his face, she started for it timidly, then thought better of it and snapped the light away from him with a jerk. The abruptness seemed to startle him.

"Oh, my, well yes of course," the man said, smoothing his hands along the front of his vest.

An instant later Lanie had a firm grip on the flashlight and aimed it directly at him. He sort of smiled, then motioned politely with his eyes for her to point the glare somewhere else. Lanie angled the beam up and down his stationary body, tracing his outline from his belly to his face, then back down to his shoes. He was at least 40, maybe more, with a thick round stomach. His skin was pale, but ruddy, like he'd had too much to drink, and he wore tiny wire-rimmed glasses in gold. He had thinning hair that sat high on his head, and he had put something in it that showed the marks where he'd passed a comb. Lanie looked hard at his taut vest, wondering what it reminded her of. The buttons were gold, ornate, and slightly off center. It fit him solidly like a sheet, almost as if the entire thing slid over his head and rested there on his stomach, rather than contained it.

"I suppose I should introduce myself," the man said, starting to take a step forward, then dropping his foot in place.

Lanie held the light at eye level and scowled. She didn't budge.

He wore what looked to be a silk scarf for a tie, knotted onto itself like some turn of the century photo. And though she couldn't be sure, she guessed the dingy, rumpled suit to be linen. Just like Tula's dad.

"Well. If I may," he said, pointing at his chest, "I am Gerard Beauregard de Maupassant, no relation." He gave a little bow, then held out his hand and waited.

Lanie stared at him, sensing herself start to relax. She fought it. Polite or not, this man was large enough to hurt her, even if she could hold her own in a fair fight. But why did he seem determined to hold a civilized conversation with a stranger, in the dark, in the middle of the street? His chunky hand was still hovering in front of her. Lanie could tell he was getting annoyed with her apparent presumption that he might possibly do her harm. For a passing moment, it seemed charming. She glanced at his outstretched palm and stiffened. Her only options were to loosen her grip on the flashlight, or to offer her already pounding wrist for him to maul. She thought it over, then poked her bruised arm forward a little, hoping she'd made the right choice.

His face softened finally at the gesture. But as soon as he glanced down to take her hand he gasped like a Victorian governess. "Oh sweet heavens, what on Earth have you done to yourself?"

Abbey sat back down on the curb and dug deeper into her purse. "Thank God," she said at last, prying the red cap off a dainty bottle of Tylenol. She raised the plastic opening to her mouth and drank in the pills, swallowing five or six before Tula yanked it away.

"Gimme," she said, digging a blood-stained finger into the tiny container.

"We need water," Abbey croaked, sliding the purse off her lap with exaggerated effort. She leaned back on her hands and stared at Tula, a red and white striped caplet stuck to her tongue. She was shaking.

"Tula, are you sure you're all right?" Abbey asked, huddled next to her on the curb.

Tula closed the bottle carefully and set it on the ground, her tongue still working the rapidly disintegrating pill.

Abbey smoothed her hands on Tula's head like a monkey, lifting sections of her matted curls to examine her blood-encrusted neck, her swollen lip, her blank face. She finished by turned her Tula's head back and forth in her solid fingers, inspecting her eyes from every angle. The process seemed to calm them both down.

"I don't understand where all this blood came from," Abbey said, less concerned than interested. The three of them had been counselors together at summer camp, and knew basic first aid and CPR. Lanie had spent most of her summer teaching 12 year olds how to French inhale.

"Ow," Tula whined, pulling her head free.

Abbey licked her thumb and rubbed it against Tula's neck despite the protest, searching for the edges of the wound. It was the size and severity of a fairly significant paper cut. "Oh, wait," she said, rubbing harder, "didn't you used to have a mole?"

Tula swatted her hands away. "Yes. No. Who cares, get off. Jesus," she said, pushing herself up from the curb and wandering a few steps into the street. A rush of blood settled behind her forehead. The road was deserted.

Abbey rose slowly from the curb. "Lanie?"

Tula turned to see two dark figures approaching, one of them holding her father's flashlight. "Who's there?" she called, stepping further into the street.

"Just me," Lanie said, sounding comfortable and calm. She had her left arm out to the side. The man next to her was cradling it, like a child.

Abbey rubbed her hands against the back pockets of her jeans. Tula stared at them sideways, still standing in the street.

"This is Gerry," Lanie said, nodding toward her escort. "He lives up the street. Offered to give us a ride to the hospital."

“Great,” Abbey said halfheartedly, wondering how Lanie could be so cavalier. She was always doing things like that, bringing home every weirdo and hippie she’d found in the alley or on the street corners. As usual, this guy wasn’t even cute.

Tula took a few steps toward the group. “Thanks,” she said tentatively, almost on the verge of tears, “but we couldn’t put you out. If we could just use your phone?”

Lanie could tell she was easing into what already sounded like a very delicate conversation. She had a sudden bad feeling.

Gerard smiled. “No no. I wouldn’t think of leaving you ladies alone in the street,” he said, holding his arms out to corral them back onto the sidewalk. “Now I’m less than two minutes this way, then it’s another five to St. Augustine’s.”

Lanie glanced at Abbey and nodded, looking for help. “Let me grab my bag,” Lanie said, starting over to the wrecked car to retrieve her thousand-year old knapsack. Abbey followed.

Tula folded her arms, trying to decide what to do. The other two had gotten their bags and were ready to go. She was desperate to get away from this place, that pole, but terrified at surrendering so much control so fast. And to this man, a stranger. She noticed Lanie and Abbey whispering by the car, but couldn’t hear them. She knew it had to be about her. Her eyes were welling up. “Okay,” Tula muttered softly, walking blindly toward the car to make one last pass by the driver’s seat. She grabbed her bag from Abbey on the way over and leaned inside the car for her wallet, a few tissues, and the folding paper map. When she had straightened up again, the others had already started off down the dark street.

Tula swung the strap onto her shoulder and clutched her lumpy bag. She trailed behind the group, thinking briefly that this was a mistake. She readjusted her bag so the strap fell across her body and tried to remember what Papa would have her do in a situation like this. She felt her eyes glaze.

Lanie was already asking questions. “Lived here long?”

“Heavens no,” Gerard said, glancing over to her politely, then stepping aside to make sure she had enough room on the sidewalk. He stood nearly a few inches taller than Lanie, who was nearly 5’9”.

“That explains it. I was wondering about your accent,” Lanie said, seeming far too comfortable, Tula thought, after just having met this man and under very tense circumstances.

“Oh you’d never place it,” Gerard said, waving his free hand near his face. He held the flashlight with the other, angling the beam so they could see where they were walking. He had the grip turned backwards. “Actually, I am Viennese, by birth, but my grandmother was Creole. You may know of her, Clementine de Lubiare? She was mistress of Mr. Beauregard Flontine, owner of a large Louisiana sugar plantation at the turn of the century? It’s abandoned now, of course, but the mansion still stands out on Route 5. Part of the Plantation tour, which you ladies should definitely consider during your visit. I think it is something like five or six dollars, but anyway.” He nearly lost his footing on a loose section of concrete, and thrust his arm to protect Abbey from doing the same.

Tula glanced at his feet. He wore braided leather sandals with dainty mesh socks. “As I was saying,” he continued, hardly missing a beat, “Meemaw—that’s my grandmother, you understand—spent her entire life in the service of that man, Mr. Flontine. What a scoundrel. Of course he promised to leave his wife, who owned three-quarters of the money and the entire plantation, and marry old Meemaw, but in reality, everybody knew he would never make good on those promises. So she stole away on steamship bound for Europe. Isn’t that romantic? New Orleans has always enjoyed a very active port, you understand. It took her more than four weeks to cross the Atlantic, and my God, could that woman vomit. Sweet heavens, you know for the life of me I cannot recall

the name of that vessel? Oh this old mind,” he said, shaking his head slightly and squinting, as if closing his eyes could help him think.

Abbey stole a glance at Lanie behind their new guide’s back. Lanie stared back, her cheeks puffed out and barely able to control her laughter. She seemed ready to burst.

“You think we should just leave the car there?” Tula asked from behind them both, trying not to sound too disinterested while she changed the subject.

Gerard slowed considerably, then opened his mouth as if waiting for the proper words to materialize. He closed it again a few seconds later, evidently making his point without saying a word.

Abbey rolled her eyes.

“I mean, shouldn’t we report it or something?” Tula started in again, aware that she was being rude, but unable to focus on anything other than her car. “What if that pole was a power line?” It sounded so trivial once it got outside her mouth.

“I think it was a street lamp,” Abbey said, tilting her head to catch a view of Tula. “Besides which, the whole thing was kind of your—well. Let’s just say you might not want the police to get involved at this stage,” Abbey said, wrinkling her nose like a rabbit.

Tula felt her cheeks flame. It was all she could do to control her tears. She felt Lanie’s hand on the back of her neck.

“Here we are,” Gerard said gaily, fluttering his fingers in front of a dingy parked car like a shiny prize. It was green, mostly, and American, with large swirls of rust along the boxy metal frame. The back window was cracked, and sealed up with peeling strips of duct tape. The antenna was bent.

Gerard stepped forward and pressed his thumb into the handle. “All aboard,” he said smiling, then shrugged his shoulders like a happy child.

Tula folded her arms against her torso and blinked. A fat tear broke against her cheek.

“Thanks again, Gerry,” Lanie said sincerely, patting his shoulder as she slid onto the front seat. It was beige vinyl, and torn.

Abbey climbed in next, then patted the seat for Tula.

“I’ll get in back,” she said, glancing behind the long seat. It was wedged all the way back on its runners, leaving a little less than two inches of leg room. Tula imagined what might happen if they crashed, her limbs trapped helplessly between the seats, the constant pressure from the rigid metal boring through to bone. She slid her fingers to her neck and brushed dried blood.

“I’m sure you’ll be more comfortable up front,” Gerard said slowly, making eye contact with her across the roof of the car. Tula felt her shoulders twitch as their eyes met, then quickly looked away. Everything was happening so fast. She couldn’t remember who had her flashlight.

“Hop in, Tu,” Lanie said, leaning over Abbey. The space they’d left her was as thick as her thigh. Tula wedged herself onto the seat and, after some careful redistribution of her body weight, yanked the door closed, pulling it hard to make sure it clicked. Gerard pressed in from the other side, forcing Tula’s soft hip into the window crank.

“There,” he said uneasily as he latched his door, his voice strained from the pressure. His stiff, smooth stomach rubbed against inside of the steering wheel.

It took eight tries for the engine to start.

They started off quietly, heading in toward the vibrant tangle of lights. Gerard turned back onto the road they had come in on, driving directly in front of Tula’s mangled car. Lanie cleared her throat.

“So,” Gerard wheezed, appearing more comfortable once the vehicle was in motion, “tell me a bit about yourselves.”

For a moment, no one spoke. There must have been something about the tone of his voice, or maybe the close quarters, that felt oddly intimate. Tula had a memory of her

Uncle Perry, with his perverted insinuations and hairy knuckles. She pressed her forehead against the glass.

“Come now, ladies,” Gerard said, his thick fingers sticking to the damp wheel, “there must be something to tell.”

Lanie repositioned her bruised arm, resting most of her wrist in Abbey’s lap. She freed her right arm and slid it along the back of the bench, touching Tula’s shoulder inadvertently. “Well, we’re from Philadelphia, mostly,” Lanie said hesitantly, glancing at the others for support. “We’re old friends, from school.”

Gerard nodded and clucked a bit with his tongue. He seemed perfectly contented with so little information, but Lanie apparently took it as a sign to continue. Tula wanted to kick her. She was incapable of standard small talk.

“We’re down here on vacation,” Lanie said, gearing up to tell their life story.

“Well, supposed to be,” Abbey interrupted, then laughed a little. “This is sort of a send off for me,” she said, sounding surprisingly adult. She was using her teacher voice, the one reserved for dental school presentations and museum tour guides. She never did finish that degree, Tula thought, picturing Abbey in a white gown with smiley faced molars and enormous pink and green toothbrushes on the walls. Four years of college plus 18 months of dental school to answer phones for a plumbing contractor. She said it gave her time to think. “I’m getting married,” Abbey said, staring out through the windshield. “When we get back.”

Gerard started to speak, drawing in a full breath and leaning forward as if he were about to offer congratulations, or best wishes, whichever was more appropriate, but stopped before any sound came out.

The engine made a choking sound. The car jerked forward two or three times. Abbey put her hand on the dash.

Gerard tightened his fingers around the wheel. "And what a lovely engagement ring," he said finally, not turning his head to see the stone. Tula had always questioned the quality, but at close to two carats there was no denying the size. Tula wondered if he had already cased it.

Abbey drew her hand back and covered the ring with her fingers. "Thanks."

"So when did your family move back to New Orleans?" Lanie asked, turning her head to face Gerard. Her shoulder rubbed against his biceps.

"Never," Gerard said, his face softening. "Meemaw raised me until I was 14 years old," he said wistfully. "She passed that July. Ptomaine poison from a poorly sealed can of tuna. To this day I refuse all fish."

Tula wrenched her eyes closed and started to sob.

"I'm so sorry," Lanie said to Gerard, her voice full of loss. She pressed her hand firmly on Tula's back, matting a pile of curls under her fingers. For once, she knew when to keep her mouth shut.

Tula clamped her mouth closed and tried to slow her breathing. The pressure from seat and the heat of the car made painfully bright circles and sparkling dots of white dance across the black backs of her eyelids. She felt a panic start to rise when Gerard entered a turn. The motion made her dizzy. She was going to be sick.

Abbey was oblivious. "Who took care of you after that?"

"From there, you understand, my life gets very complicated," Gerard said, circling his hands one over the other in a slow arc. He angled the car down a brightly lit street lined with tiny, run-down houses. "After Meemaw passed, I became the charge of my Great Uncle Luundegard in Stockholm, a Count and Meemaw's half-brother on her father's side. But he was ill-prepared to care for a brash young man, and I was too frightened to pay him much mind, having just lost Meemaw and being forced to live with a virtual stranger. So I ran away, earning money as best I could by hocking jewelry and taking odd jobs. I lied

about my age and took a job as a servant in the House of Rothschild, hoping to perfect the language and someday pass as royalty myself.” Gerard’s face glistened as he spun his story, entertaining himself as much as his listeners.

It all seemed so exotic, and fascinating, and strange. Abbey had a hard time keeping up. He was really rolling now, bouncing from castle to country, Europe to Africa, China, the States. It seemed such a contrast to the stark reality of the slum in which they now found themselves. There seemed like hundreds of houses, all piled one on top of the other, with little nothing yards, chipped paint, and sagging indoor furniture on almost every porch. Abbey stared at them as they drove past, her thoughts weaving the details of Gerard’s implausible life into imagined stories of each tattered frame. The blue one with rusty gutters held eleven children, three sets of twins. The pink one had a tomato garden out back, and every year they’d win a prize. The gray one with the tar roof held an artist, and the corner lot a millionaire. Gerard was still talking while they waited for the light to change. Abbey noticed a small goat tied to a rail.

“But weren’t you born in Austria?” Lanie jumped in, clearly confused. “Where was your mother during all this?”

Gerard pursed his lips. “We parted badly, I’m afraid. You see, she was the troubling product of Meemaw and Mr. Flontine’s unacceptable relationship on the plantation. Meemaw fled to Europe in desperation, hoping to make a better life for my mother than she herself had known. But Mother never outgrew her longing to be accepted as a full and rightful part of Mr. Flontine’s world.”

Gerard turned into the parking lot of the hospital while he continued. The three of them were mesmerized. He kept talking while he hunted around for a space, not stopping after he found a space. His voice seemed to float around them like perfume, making the details of his story little more than vessels for the sound. Abbey found herself walking in rhythm with the language, and didn’t care. The mindless pleasure was intoxicating.

“So I have always felt that my roots were here,” Gerard continued, pausing in front of the automatic doors to let the women pass in front, “despite my background overseas. I’ve actually been visiting with friends in New Orleans and continuing my research over the past few years, so I must have picked up on the dialect. I’m afraid my German never was that good, since as I said, I was raised by my grandmother, who spoke mostly French, and after leaving Rothschild for Greece I had given up all hope of becoming an official interpreter. *Lifestyle*, you understand. As it turns out I’ve found I rather prefer mingling with the natives, exploring and assimilating foreign tongues, as it were. Besides, I’ve noticed here one gets more rice when you pronounce it *raahce*. I’ve adjusted accordingly. Emergency room?” he said finally, addressing the information attendant who had been staring slack-jawed, like the others, at Gerard’s rapidly moving mouth.

She pointed them toward a line of a purple vinyl benches at the end of the white tile corridor. Lanie stared into her knapsack as they wandered down the hall.

Inside the waiting area were rows and rows of benches, some purple, some green, most of which had been ripped or burned in at least one place so the stuffing poked out. Lanie gathered her bag into her lap and sat down. Tula, more nauseated than ever, sat beside her.

Up front, Abbey and Gerard were getting directions from a nurse. She was pointing at a clipboard with the sucked end of a lollipop.

Lanie tapped her foot on the ground. Two benches away sat a disheveled woman in her 30s. She was black, but looked sallow under the flickering tube lights. She sat with her arms folded, legs crossed, staring ahead at nothing. There was a constant stream of silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

A short man in blood-stained hospital scrubs stopped at the reception desk and stood next to Abbey. He interrupted their conversation with the nurse, then nodded,

heading over to the crying woman. He was holding a metal clipboard and had a stethoscope around his neck. He looked about 18. Lanie stared at her feet.

“Mrs.—“ he checked the chart, “Labat? Hi, I’m Dr. Martinez. Your son—“ he checked the chart, “Elvin has a mild—“

“How is he? Is he going to be all right?” the woman asked, rising.

“Yes, absolutely fine,” the doctor said, talking rapidly and without emotion. “He has a mild concussion from his head injury, a few stitches across the laceration which you saw on his forehead, and a slight problem with his left leg. His right leg appears intact, although we are waiting for—“

“Slight problem?” the woman said, cupping her hand to her chest. Her lip twitched.

“Yes, it seems the trauma to his spinal column did cause a small fracture, and may have crushed several vertebrae, which would explain the lack of sensation in his limbs.”

“Limbs?” she asked, starting to rise and then stopping, her body lacking the strength to stand.

“But as I say we’re not quite sure the extent of the damage, so let’s not jump to any conclusions. Judging from the nature of the accident, he should have been much more seriously injured,” he smiled.

She narrowed her eyes as he spoke, and continued to stare at him when he was done speaking. She looked as if she might put her hands around his throat.

“For now, we need to get him into the MR—that’s a kind of x-ray for the muscles—so we can take a better look at his back. Please don’t worry though, he is in the best possible hands,” he smiled again, and handed her a thin yellow carbon copy. He waved toward the reception desk. “Now if you’ll step over to the blue desk I’m sure Rachel can answer any more questions you have, and direct you to Radiology. Have a nice day.” Lanie watched his back turn toward the woman as he walked away, and felt her jaw tense. It was like she was leaving a game show.

Tula rubbed her neck obsessively. Up front, she noticed Gerard ask for directions, then walk pointedly down the hall. Then she saw Abbey walking toward them from the counter, hands full.

“Well,” Abbey said, passing clipboards to Lanie and Tula before sitting down next to them, “we need to fill out these forms before they’ll see us.”

Tula turned it over in her hands to inspect the graffiti.

Lanie set hers carefully on the bench beside her and dug her fist into her bag. She was licking her lips and rocking, tapping one foot hurriedly against the scuffed floor.

Tula suddenly felt two inches tall. She had forgotten how badly Lanie hated hospitals, especially when she was the one getting treated. When Lanie was 9, her mother was diagnosed with acute fibrocystic neutremia, an excruciatingly painful bone disease that required frequent, month-long stays in the hospital for treatment. It was against the rules to let Lanie see her, being so young, but Mr. Vance would sneak her in to visit if she wore a mask over her mouth. Her mom had been through two bone marrow transplants, neither of which worked, and one of which involved having Lanie donate some of her marrow. She still had the scar on her hip. Four years later, Lanie’s mom went into a lengthy relapse, which everyone thought was wonderful, until they learned that she was cheating on Mr. Vance with a bald man from her chemotherapy support group. She left when Lanie was 9. She died a year later, when Lanie first came to their school.

Lanie closed her fingers around the cigarette and inhaled, the sound of her lighter hanging in the air until she breathed through it with smoke. She picked a stray bit of tobacco from her lip nervously, then rested her chin in her palm, the lit cigarette wedged between her top two knuckles, burning in full view. She was holding it so tightly she’d bent the paper.

Tula ran her hand along the back of Lanie’s shirt. “Oh, Lana. I forgot.”

“What? I’m fine,” Lanie said quickly, then turned to show an uneasy smile. She’d meant it as proof. “Don’t worry about it. I’m fine,” she said, motioning with her whole body. She took another long drag on the cigarette.

A hospital attendant in green scrub-pants and a flowered smock approached them. Her hair was as black as an Eskimo’s.

“Excuse me? There’s no smoking in here. You’ll have to take that outside,” she said to Lanie, not waiting for a response.

Lanie shrugged quickly and stubbed the cigarette out on the floor. Her mouth was full of smoke. “No need. I’m done. Sorry,” she said, grinding her heel into the paper with an undue amount of energy.

The attendant folded her arms and sized them up. “Need help with those forms, want to speak with a Chaplain?” she asked, sounding more like she was scolding them instead of offering help. “Just let me know. Pay phone in the corner, vending machines down the hall.” She was on her way back to the chest-high reception desk before she’d finished her sentence, arms swinging audibly against the sides of her uniform.

Abbey slid her bag off her shoulder and let it rest on the seat. She motioned for Lanie to pass her the clipboard. “Here, sweetie. I can fill out your form,” she said, reaching for it with both hands.

Lanie gripped it tightly. “I said, I’m all right.” She refused to make eye contact with the others. “Really,” she said sternly, then held her breath. She mumbled the next word so softly that Tula could barely hear it. “Thanks.”

Tula reached over and cradled Lanie’s hand in two of her own. Lanie didn’t object.

Abbey stared at her two friends and sighed. “Everything will work out,” she said to no one in particular, her fingers tracing the raised outline on her forehead.

Over the next forty minutes, they busied themselves with paper work, rechecking their own entries rather than fall back on serious conversation. Gerard had disappeared, and despite the tension his presence should have made, Tula found herself more worried that he had left them there. She was in no frame of mind for another man to desert her, no matter how strange.

“Wertz, Petula?” a man called from the reception desk. Tula felt a zing in her stomach at the sound of her name, a little like she’d been standing on line at Koch’s Deli. She grabbed her bag and headed toward the front of the waiting room, swallowing down the dizziness that filled her stomach. At the desk, she remembered Dr. Martinez, with the blood-stained pants.

“Miz—” he checked the chart, “Wertz?”

“Tula.” She held out her hand, immediately feeling stupid.

He glanced at it, then smiled. “Hi, I’m Dr. Martinez,” he said, gripping her palm and releasing it briefly, as if the gesture was cute. “You’ve got a—” he checked the chart, “minor head injury and a few bumps and scrapes from a car crash?”

Tula sucked in her lips and nodded. She held her hands in front of her tightly.

“Great. Come with me?” he said with a turn, already moving briskly down the hall.

Abbey leaned forward on the bench, supporting her angled torso with her wrists. She slid a toe toward Lanie, then slid it back. “You know, it’s all right—”

“Please, don’t,” Lanie said, facing Abbey for the first time. Her eyes looked worn. “It’s not even what you think.”

Abbey nodded. “Guess not.”

Lanie let out a full breath, then waited a long while before taking in another. Her body slumped over itself in a lazy arc.

“How’s the wrist?” Abbey said, aiming at it with her chin.

Lanie stared at it, then laughed. “Hurts like hell.” She stared at it again, as if studying the shades of green and brown. A tear landed on her skin.

Abbey moved over to Lanie’s bench and sat down, cradling her shoulders in her arm. Lanie hid her face in Abbey’s neck.

It took more than four hours for the staff at St. Augustine’s to see all three of them, assembly line style. Apparently the only one on duty, Dr. Martinez did his best to shuffle them through once their paperwork was in line. He pronounced Tula with a mild concussion and minor laceration on the neck, most likely from the seat belt nicking off a mole. Two stitches, no sleep for eight hours, and a \$584 bill. Lanie was next with a sprained wrist and Tylenol, \$467.50. By the time he reached Abbey, Martinez had gotten pretty familiar with the accident scene and had a little more time for small talk. Abbey returned from her trip down the blue tiled corridor with three buttons undone, a three month supply of Percoset, and Ronnie Martinez’s home phone number—\$182.45.

“Thanks, again,” she said breathlessly, fluttering her yellow carbon form like a fan.

“No problem,” Martinez said, supporting himself against the reception desk by one arm. He crossed his legs and smiled as the three of them wandered toward the automatic doors, Abbey’s backside swaying far more than was necessary.

Lanie was the first one outside. She finished lighting her cigarette and inhaled sharply, then balled up her form and tossed it inside a nearby trash can.

Tula stared at her, unsure of how to respond.

“I’m sorry, Tula,” Lanie said through a stream of smoke, “but there is no way I am paying for *that*.” She raised the cigarette back to her mouth.

“Huh,” Tula said, considering her options.

Abbey wandered over to them, smiling. Lanie looked at Tula for confirmation, then stared at the ground.

Abbey spotted the trash can, and headed for it. “Well I don’t know about you two, but I am feeling much better.” She folded her form into a tidy square and dangled it over the lid of the gravel-grained trash can, releasing it lightly through the purple plastic hole.

“So . . . we don’t have to pay these?” Tula asked, staring at her form.

“Technically?” Abbey asked, scrunching up one side of her face.

Lanie bent her leg easily and stubbed the last of her cigarette out on her heel.

“They’ll never find you, Tu, and if they do, just worry about it then.” She flicked the butt into the trash, then started off down the dark sidewalk.

Tula stared at the form.

“Come on,” Abbey said, grabbing the paper near the center and balling it up on its way to the trash. She spun Tula by the shoulders and started off after Lanie, nearly skipping. “Want some Percoset?”

“Will you two come on?” Lanie called, her backpack sagging against her lean, upright frame.

“What is with her?” Abbey asked, trying to make a joke.

Tula rubbed her head. “Maybe you could be a little more discreet.”

Abbey stopped short. “Excuse me?”

“Forget it,” Tula said, reaching for Abbey’s hand. “My head hurts, we’re all tired, let’s just get to the car, get our stuff, and get into bed.”

“Well,” Abbey said, frowning empathetically.

Tula sighed. “At least the two of you can get some sleep.”

Up ahead, Lanie blew a piercing note through her hand, then circled her arm. She had perfected that finger-in-your-mouth, loud-as-a-truck-driver whistle while shooting video assignments for WHYY in Philadelphia. No matter where they were, no matter what time of night, Lanie almost instinctively knew how to find them a way home. Tula flashed to the accident, and wondered why they hadn’t just taken a cab.

Lanie opened the cab door and crawled into the back seat. She was pointing to the lower right section of the map she'd brought from the car when Abbey slid in next to her. Tula threw her bag on the floor, then stepped inside gingerly and pressed the door closed behind her.

"How much to Canal Street?" Lanie asked through the Plexiglas divider. The cab lurched onto the road immediately. The force jerked them back into the seat.

"I guess we'll find out," Lanie said under her breath, cracking the window in preparation for another cigarette.

The car continued to accelerate. Abbey raised her hand to the seat in front of her and held on, her face white. Tula fumbled underneath her for a seat belt. The cabby signaled to take a right then banked hard, ramming Tula and Abbey into Lanie's sprained arm.

"Ow! Get off—" she screamed, unable to push them with her swollen, throbbing wrist. Tula scrambled to prop herself against the front seat for leverage, but the car swung again, this time sending Abbey to the far window and Tula to the floor.

Lanie rapped on the Plexiglas with her good hand. "Hey!" she barked, unable to rouse the least bit of his attention. The cab felt like it was moving about 90 miles an hour.

"Could you please, just—" Abbey started, her voice shaking. She looked unnaturally pale. "I can't," she said, breathing into her lap, "stop the car. Stop the car—"

"Stop the car!" Lanie barked, her hand starting to unlatch the door.

The cab slowed abruptly and idled, the heavy steel frame rocking from the transition. Lanie had one foot in the street.

"Eight dollar," the cabby growled in a bizarre accent, then slammed the gear shift up toward the dash. He folded his arms across his chest, and didn't turn around. "Leave tip."

Abbey lay down on the bench seat and dangled her head over the street. She was panting.

Tula felt the floor for her purse, and started to feel sick. “I don’t have, I don’t have it,” she muttered, wondering where he had left them. “Lane,” she said, turning her face to the window. She fumbled with the hand crank. *Air, get me air*, she thought.

Lanie reached in through the open door and grabbed Tula’s bag. She straightened up and held it open in the street to get more light. “How much did you bring?” she asked, noticing the significantly small amount of cash.

Tula had her cheek against the glass. She felt around for the door lock.

Abbey put her palms on the pavement and crawled out of the car.

Lanie pulled a crisp bill from Tula’s wallet and held it, bent, in front of the cabby’s window. He made a puffing sound then rolled down his window.

“Here,” Lanie said.

The cabby snatched her ten and sped off.

Tula stepped back to avoid the tires, pressed her palms into her temples and cringed, trying to force her anger to the surface. She pushed her elbows over her head and growled, then spread her arms wide as if commanding the world to listen. She sucked in a thick stream of air. “All I want,” she yelled, her left hand instantly pressing the brown bruise on her temple, “is for one fucking thing in my life to work out. That’s all I want.” Tula forced the last of her breath through her nostrils, now rigid and white. A frustrated tear slid down her cheek.

Abbey pushed herself to her knees, resting her weight on her heels. “Where are we?”

“That’s exactly my point!” Tula said, slapping her arms to her sides.

Lanie closed her lighter and dropped it into Tula’s open bag on the ground. She spun the map in her hands, then glanced around for a street sign. “He said Canal, right?” she asked, balancing the burning cigarette between her lips as she talked.

Abbey squeezed two fingers into the front pocket of her jeans and wriggled out a square of paper with Dr. Martinez's home number.

"There, Canal," Lanie said, pointing ahead two blocks with the stubby cigarette. "That's where we left the car." She folded the map as best she could with one hand, disregarding Tula's carefully pressed seams.

Tula stared at the ground. She was breathing heavy, trying to get a hold of herself.

"How do you know where the car is?" Abbey asked, tucking the phone number back into her pocket and walking over to the sidewalk.

Lanie scanned the street, then turned and started walking in the opposite direction. "This is where I met Gerry."

"Oh, God," Tula said, stopping short in her tracks. "Did anybody think to grab my flashlight?"

Abbey shook her head. "That's what you're concerned about?"

"You know, it was from my father," Tula said, expecting the statement to have far more resonance than it did.

Lanie seemed to understand. "Oh, no," she said, staring straight ahead. "Tula—"

Tula played with her belt. "I know. It's just, one of the few things I have left . . ." she started, before her voice trailed off.

Less than 300 yards away stood the stripped shell of her Saab, both doors open, hood and trunk gaping wide.

Abbey ran for it.

Tula clutched her bag to her stomach and convulsed hard, trying to remember how to breathe. Lanie held her good hand on one hip and stared at the ground.

"My clothes, they took my fucking clothes," Abbey screamed, working frantically from the empty seats to the cavernous trunk. "All our bags, the CDs, the phone, oh God, oh God."

“They stole my stereo,” Tula said flatly. She didn’t move. “They ripped out the dash, and stole the stereo.”

“All the brochures are gone,” Abbey said, her voice wavering. “The downtown maps, the hotel reservations—”

Lanie walked to the edge of the trunk and gasped. “They took the spare tire.”

Tula chuckled.

Abbey was circling the car like an animal. “My gold watch, my favorite black shoes, my *underwear*—”

“They couldn’t have wanted the clothes,” Lanie said, peering into the back seat.

Tula chuckled again. “They took the bags.”

Lanie looked at Abbey, then climbed into the car.

“Which bags?” Tula asked again. “Not all of them?”

“Yes, Tula, all the bags,” Abbey said, sliding the tiny gold cross on her necklace in front of her mouth.

Tula laughed loudly, then pitched her bag up into the air. It landed a few feet from the car with a disconcerting crack. “I had my credit cards in there.”

“Why did you have your credit cards in your luggage?” Abbey asked slowly, her stomach curling over itself.

Tula walked over to the car, a strange smile on her face.

Lanie rubbed her hand on her neck. The silver bands on her fingers clinked together as they rode up and down her skin. “What about the credit cards, Tula. The money.”

Tula smiled wider. “I packed it.”

“They stole all your money,” Abbey asked, stepping toward the trunk.

“Yup. I’ve got a gas card, a phone card, and fifty bucks,” she said, bumping her purse forward with her toe. “The rest was in the suitcase. Money, credit cards, birth

control, toothbrush” She wandered around to the front of the car and stopped in front of the open door.

“I can’t believe this. This isn’t happening,” Abbey said, closing her fingers around the cross. “You mean all we have for our entire vacation is what we brought with us in the car?”

Lanie climbed out of the car. She tossed her bag into the trunk and used the side of the car to steady it. She tugged at the zipper with one hand.

Tula sat down in the driver’s seat. She was gripping the wheel near the top, her clenched fists pressed against each other in the middle. The bent pole hovered over the car.

“I just rented 12 dozen folding chairs and 34 ficus trees with miniature sparkling lights—” Abbey blabbered, digging through her leather backpack. “I, I, have caterers bills and florist fees and photographers—”

“Tula, come out of there,” Lanie said, flipping casually through her wallet. She had \$247 and an uncashed paycheck from the television station. She liked to say she avoided credit cards on principle, but the truth was she never paid a principle in her life. She was counting on Tula to cover the cost of her room until they got back.

Tula stared straight ahead.

Abbey stepped closer to Lanie’s side of the trunk, holding her silver toned Visa card as proof. “There is no room left on my credit card. I can’t afford to put us all up—”

Lanie took the card away from Abbey, spun her around, and slid it into the back pocket of her jeans. “It’s going to be fine, Abbey.”

“You don’t understand. I put a down payment on the band.”

Lanie spun her back, shook her once, and stared into her eyes. She gripped her shoulders hard. “I really can’t talk about your wedding now.”

Abbey shifted her weight. She raised her eyebrows. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Get in,” Tula said from the driver’s seat, her fingers white against the wheel.

Abbey slapped Lanie’s hands off her shoulders. “Tula, get out of the car,” Abbey said, folding her arms. She stared at Lanie’s face.

“Come on, let’s go for a ride,” Tula said. “Let’s drive down to New Orleans and wreck the fucking car. Let’s lose all our money and sleep in the street. It’ll be fun.”

Lanie heard the tinny movement of a motor but didn’t turn around. A nondescript American junker with wide swirls of rust slowed to an idle across the street.

“Oh, Christ,” Abbey said.

“Hey, look, it’s Gerry,” Tula said, shaking her head. “Hi, Gerry!” she said too loudly, then waved with her whole arm. A second later she was crossing the street. “Did you see? They stole our clothes!” She laughed riotously.

Gerard turned off the engine and clasped his hands over his heart. “I must admit I was afraid something like this might happen,” Gerard said, removing the key from the ignition. He unbuckled his seat belt.

Abbey turned to him. “What are you doing here?”

“Abbey,” Lanie said.

“No. What was this, some kind of set up?” Abbey continued, stepping closer toward the car. “Drive us to the hospital then ditch us and ransack the car, steal all our stuff?”

Gerard smoothed his hands carefully along his vest, then settled them on his stomach. “You’re overwrought.”

“You’re damn right I am. I’ve got one pair of underwear and no money,” she said, producing her balled up panties from her bag.

“Wonder how they got in there,” Tula said, then laughed.

Gerard seemed lost for how to respond.

“Gerard,” Lanie said, a silver ringed finger pressed against her mouth, “We’ve been robbed, here. You wouldn’t know anything about it, would you?”

Gerard’s whole body stiffened. He held his tongue, clearly offended. “Most certainly not.”

“Then why are you here?” Abbey demanded, her rumpled panties on her hip.

“I was concerned for your safety, of course,” he started politely, careful to hide almost all of his indignation. “This is not the best area, I’m afraid, and as I said, I feared something of this nature might occur.”

Lanie nodded, licking her lips.

“Naturally when we were separated at the hospital—”

“We were there for four hours,” Abbey said, burying her underclothes in her backpack. “You ditched us.”

Gerard blushed. “I did visit a friend, yes. When I returned, you had gone. But as I said, I live very near here. So I thought I’d stop by on the way home to, see if everything was all right.”

Lanie rubbed her finger and thumb together methodically. “That’s sweet, Gerry,” she said, taking a step closer. “To tell the truth, we could really use a ride.”

“Oh,” he said primly, then waited. “I see.”

“Our credit cards were stolen, and we don’t really have anywhere to go,” Lanie said, making her voice trail off softly.

He straightened up. “Of course,” he said flatly. “Ordinarily I would offer you to stay in my home, but currently I am a visitor myself. On the back porch, actually. Not screened, you understand, but it does have a small sofa and a folding chair. Accommodates me quite well, but sadly, is less suited for company,” he said, glancing at his folded hands.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” Lanie said, seeing the opportunity fade. She folded her good arm in front of herself and rubbed her biceps with her hand.

“I can, of course, point you in the direction of a friend’s boarding house that is quite reasonable. Just a few blocks up the street.”

“Thanks,” Lanie said, deflated. “That’d be great.”

Gerard helped them gather what little they could salvage from the Saab and drove them eight or nine blocks before turning onto a dimly lit street. He continued to wind them back through dark, narrow streets, each one farther from the main road. Tula kept her head against the window and traced patterns on the glass.

“Here we are,” Gerard said finally, angling the car onto a gravel alleyway. He kept the engine running.

Tula, Abbey, and Lanie piled out of the car and stood on the patchy lawn, staring up at the huge house. It had large stone steps that connected the house with the sidewalk, descending from what looked to be a wooden porch. On either side of the steps were narrow strips of wiry grass. Lanie glanced up at it, noticing at last three stories under the steeply pitched roof. She couldn’t tell if it was Victorian or Georgian, but was silently impressed. It seemed more like a bed and breakfast than a hotel, with circular windows on the third floor. She lowered her eyes back down the structure, noticing that with each glance, it seemed to grow bigger.

Abbey scaled the large steps in quick hops to investigate the dark porch.

“I’m sure Robert will take good care of you,” Gerard said, twiddling his fingers at them from the top of the steering wheel.

Lanie stepped over to the car. “Thanks, again, Gerry. Should we tell him who sent us?”

Gerard smiled. “Not particularly.” He backed the car into the street.

Lanie swallowed hard. She watched him pull away.

“Okay, so this is a *hostel*,” Abbey said brashly as she bounded off the middle step onto the sidewalk, landing squarely at their feet. “Not a hotel.”

“What’s the difference?” Tula asked, holding her fingers to her temple. She looked extremely tired.

“Cheaper, for one thing,” Lanie said.

“Communal bathrooms, for another,” Abbey said, her face filled with disgust.

“What’s it, like a rooming house or something?” Tula asked, moving toward the large stone steps. She kicked the bottom one with her toe.

“Probably like a Y for out of town transients,” Abbey said. “Not my idea of a hotel, thanks.”

“So we just stay the night, you think?” Tula asked, catching something green out of the corner of her eye.

“Are you kidding? It looks gross. The chairs are all ratty and look slept on. Feels like a fucking bus station,” Abbey said, holding her hands out to keep the filth at arm’s length, suddenly prudish.

“Abbey? It’s two o’clock in the morning,” Lanie said, raising a flame to her face and sucking it in. “I’m dirty, I’m hungry, and I’m tired. We’re staying,” she said, closing her Zippo and ending the discussion.

Tula stooped to pick up a piece of green trash then held it out for the others, reading. “Here, ‘India House, Backpackers Youth Hostel. Bed and Bath, 10 Bucks a Night.’ Sounds pretty good.”

“That’s all I need to hear,” Lanie said, starting up the steps.

Abbey made a face. “You guys are out of your fucking minds if you think I’m staying even one night in this dump,” she said definitively, crossing her arms for emphasis.

Tula flipped over the flyer and glanced at the back. “Hey look, they have a pool.”

Lanie slapped her flat palm on the bell. The vibration made her rings rattle, like her stick used to do when she nailed a drive in field hockey. She twisted a ring with her thumb, remembering.

Tula peeked through the heavy glass front door back out into the street. Abbey was still pouting on the porch. “Is she all right out there?”

“Don’t worry. All we need is a male desk clerk and she’ll be in,” Lanie said bluntly.

The dimly lit room hummed with the sound of a low radio. It sounded like the blues, although all they could make out was the changing bass line. It felt eerie.

Tula stood close to Lanie in the make-shift foyer, surveying the place. There was a huge staircase along the left wall, that wrapped to a landing a few steps from the floor. It had a thick broad banister that curled at the bottom into a rosette, and delicately carved spindles, four for each oversized step. *You could move a piano on those stairs*, Tula thought, peeking up toward the darkened second floor. The whole thing was covered in deep red carpet, the worn kind you see in antique churches and historic homes. She glanced back to Lanie, who was drumming her fingers on the front desk.

The desk—a few sheets of plywood that had been painted poorly several, butting into a solid wood top—protruded straight into the foyer from under the stairwell, blocking off the lobby from the rest of the space. It was chest high and stained every few inches with those ghostly rings left by unattended beer bottles and soda cans. Tula glanced down at it again, and realized that it had probably once been the better part of a door.

Lanie moved her hand to ring the bell again, but hesitated. She glanced at the clock on the far wall. “I guess it’s a little late,” she said to Tula, shoving her hand into her pocket to still it.

Tula noticed the clock and smiled. It was shaped like Elvis, complete with blue-suited legs swinging wildly for the pendulum. It was only 1:15. “Yeah. They’ll be around,

though,” Tula said, suddenly aware of the narrow door behind the counter. Someone had scribbled “management” sloppily in black marker, unconcerned with matching the size of each letter or even following a straight line. Tula turned her back on the counter, disgusted. She could never understand how people could be so careless, bothering to write a sign or make a poster without giving it any thought, without even attempting to make it clean, legible. She imagined the hand that wrote such a sign. What was the point? *Certainly makes me respect the management*, Tula thought to herself, unaware of her rocking shoulders and muttering. *Who were they trying to impress? Damn thing looks like a closet.*

Lanie laughed a little, pleased for the return of Tula’s audible daydreams. It was a good sign. Lanie leaned on the counter and traced her finger around a water mark, following it onto the next ring wherever they intersected. She glanced around, cataloguing the space. She found herself studying everything, taking the room in like a thief, forming a snapshot of it for some mysterious future reference. It was something she liked to do, helped her settle in. Underneath the staircase on the left wall was an old, overly-painted window with a slight crack in the lower pane, surrounded by hundreds of overlapping posters, menus, bumper stickers, cartoons. Next to that was a short shelf, and the tiny transistor radio with a bent antenna, which now played a rock song. Beside that was a beige phone with a fifty foot cord, and a long list of phone numbers, written directly on the cream wall in different inks and various sizes. Then came a row of mail slots, the narrow “management” door, the Elvis clock, a peg board with hooks for keys. There were only two left.

Lanie looked back to the window and studied the piles of flyers and advertisements taped to the wall. Interspersed with these were photographs of old people, young kids, dogs, all covered with paint, or lathered with shaving cream, or smoking suspicious pipes. Some were taken in the summer, near a pool; others in the kitchen, or in the rooms, on the porch, around a mammoth marble fireplace. As she stared, Lanie noticed an odd similarity

among the photographs, despite the wide range of ages and skin tones and activities. She couldn't put her finger on it. None of them seemed related, or even aware of each other. But somehow, they all had the same look.

Behind the "management" door, a light clicked on. A tiny glow came from under the bottom and along the sides, illuminating how poorly it fit within its frame. Tula turned around.

They heard a rumbling, scraping sound, like a heavy car being pulled along a track. Tula recognized it as the drawers of a filing cabinet, being pulled out fast, one after the other. Within a few second all the drawers slammed shut. Footfalls pounded against the wooden floor. The light snapped off.

"Hey," Lanie called, slamming her hand into the bell again. The little nub left an impression on her palm.

The light clicked on again, then the footfalls, closer this time. The door creaked open a sliver. "Yeah?" a man's groggy voice said, his fingers curled around the edge of the door. He had a weird, nasal accent, not quite Australian but not quite anything else. A second later the door swung wide to reveal a long, narrow room on the other side, and the incredibly tall, awkward man inside it. His hair was long and dark and stringy, like the Jesus in a painting Lanie's grandmother had. His eyes were half closed. "What eez it?" he asked in that strange voice, putting his vowels in all the wrong places. He had to duck as he stepped through the management door.

"We'd like a room for the night?" Lanie said, taking charge. "There's three of us."

The tall man stared at her for a few seconds without answering. It appeared to be a difficult question. "Ah. Yeah," he said, sounding marvelously exotic. Lanie couldn't tell what he was, but he definitely wasn't from New Orleans.

"You call ahead?" he asked, squinting at them through his greasy hair.

“Nope,” she said flatly, holding her hand toward the two sets of remaining keys, hoping to make things easier. “We’re a surprise.”

“Yeah,” he said at last, reaching his arm out to switch off the barely perceptible radio, which seemed to bother his sensitive ears. He straightened up and looked back at them, apparently tired out by this exertion. “Room, eh? Right,” he said, more to himself than to Lanie. She could almost see him wondering what to do as he wrinkled up his forehead in thought. Without the noise of the radio, Lanie gradually became aware of the scent of the place—a bit musty, like a dirty carpet, with traces of stale smoke, incense, and unwashed bodies. Funny how turning one sense off always jostles another.

Tula leaned her head on Lanie’s shoulder while they waited for the man to think. “I’m so sleepy.”

Lanie felt a chill having anyone so close.

As soon as Tula moved, a hidden light bulb seemed to go off inside his head. He turned awkwardly to face the peg board and surveyed the hanging keys. Lanie watched the energy drain from him as he stood there, his shoulders curving forward.

“This guy is completely stoned,” Tula breathed into Lanie’s hair, rolling her eyes on her way to the bottom step. She dropped her chin in her hands.

Lanie moved to the counter, thinking how unusual it was for Tula to notice that sort of thing before she did. Her stomach fluttered. “Listen, we just need a room,” Lanie said, trying to keep her voice level. “Any one will do. Looks like two keys, there, so we’ll take one, or both, you know?” she said, leaving out the *it’s not that hard* that by that point was evident in her tone anyway.

The tall man stared at her vacantly, then scratched his scraggly-haired chin. “Right,” he said again, then smiled wide at Lanie. Behind the greasy skin sat two identical rows of perfectly white teeth. They dazzled. “Y’see, ah miss, it’s just not, mine to give,” he said, then shrugged. “Right?”

He started to rock as he stood there, as if following some circular motion inside his head. He leaned in closer on the second pass, steadying himself against the desk, when Lanie noticed his eyes. They were a strange jaundiced yellow, with thick red streaks. She was suddenly overwhelmed by the smell of rank clothes and vitamins. She stepped back from the counter.

“Look,” Lanie said, trying to level with him, “we just had a car accident and all our stuff got stolen. All we need is a place to lie down, maybe a shower—”

“Something to eat?” Tula mumbled into her hands.

“Yeah,” he said in that eerie accent, slowly coming back from wherever he was. A light seemed to click on somewhere in his head. “That’s why I came up heah,” he said, lifting the bag of Cheese Doodles he had evidently found in the filing cabinet behind the door. Upon seeing it again, he decided to open it, and was soon thoroughly engrossed in eating.

“You’re not the manager?” Tula asked. She couldn’t imagine eating around all that stink.

He laid his hand on the wall to steady himself, then ran his fingers through his hair. It left an orange palm print. “Not likely,” he said, staring deep into the bag. “Bob’s in the Palace.” He turned and started back through the door. It wasn’t clear whether he wanted them to follow, or if he had just lost track of the discussion. He continued eating as he shuffled away, leaving a faint trail of orange cheese particles on the floor.

Lanie stared at Tula with wide, irritated eyes. “I’m about to take the damn keys myself,” she announced, then before Tula could respond, Lanie threw her bag over the counter. She planted her good hand on the flat wood and pushed up, heaving her hips and legs onto the desk. She leaned over as far as she could and plucked a set off keys off the board with a zing. Balancing on her rump, she swung the rest of herself over the desk and landed on the other side, just in front of the open door. “Follow the orange crumb road,”

she said, slinging her bag over her good shoulder and marching back through the narrow office.

Tula hustled out to the front porch to grab Abbey.

“How are there no rooms when this place is completely deserted?” Abbey wondered as she and Tula followed the mysterious path of cheese crumbs through the gradually widening hallway. It was a central hall that ran the length of the house, snaking around rooms and through arches in that random, graceful way old homes have.

The four inch baseboard matched the elaborate crown molding above, and the broad wainscoting, which ran the length of the hall. The hall was wide enough to allow them both, and apparently connected all the rooms on the main floor. Tula tried to peek into the rooms as they passed. Parallel to the main staircase and front desk was a wide sitting room which led into a narrow sort of parlor. Behind that was another, smaller sitting room with a huge marble fireplace, then a dining area with three or four mismatched tables and clunky chairs. At the back of the house, the hallway made a sharp turn around a slovenly, mildewed bathroom, then dumped into the kitchen.

Within a few strides they had reached Lanie, who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, which apparently ran the width of the house. Just inside, the lanky man from the counter was pacing in front of the sink, his fingers deep inside the half-eaten bag.

Lanie was rubbing her neck incessantly, the metal of her rings leaving tiny red stripes on her skin.

Everything looked old and well worn, but still seemed inviting. The whole building was redolent of gerbils and curried beans, wrapped with a thin haze of bacon grease and after shave. Abbey shifted her bag to her waist and hugged it like a child. It reminded her of those old fraternity houses they’d invariably end up in back in college. They always seemed scarier when she was sober.

Lanie's stomach growled. "I hope he has more than cheese doodles," she said, rubbing her eyes. The kitchen wasn't very clean, but the overhead lights and white paint made it blaze compared to the dark hall.

Having finished his repast, their escort slouched up against the stove, exhausted. He had polished off the cheese doodles, and leaned there like a bowed plank, staring listlessly into the gaping bag. It was full when he started. "Hey," he said, aware of them again.

"Dude, I'll sleep on the floor if you'll just go back to your room," Lanie said wearily, dangling the keys in front of his face. "Or were you going to get the manager?"

"Right," he said slowly, making a gun with his fingers and pointing at them as a group. "The Palace." He ducked his lanky frame through a screen door and led them outside.

The backyard was like a large patio, with crumbling cement sections covering most of the ground. There were a few picnic tables up close to the house, a rusting charcoal grill, a long table that probably belonged in a nearby school cafeteria, and a huge, fairly new wooden deck. The entire area was enclosed in by a 10 foot stockade fence that seemed pretty sturdy, despite its grayed wood.

The three of them followed as he ambled across the yard, then climbed the few steps up to the deck. At first Tula thought it was a freestanding structure, but as she approached she realized it was attached to another house—a less elaborate, white-shingled two story with the same oversized, antiquated windows and fixtures as the India House. Instead of crossing the deck directly to the door, their leader walked around the edge, balancing along an imaginary line as if he might fall into an abyss at any moment.

"Hey, nice pool," Abbey said, trotting up the freshly painted steps. The glare from the streetlights gave the water a welcoming green glow, like it was underlit from special

bulbs. She kicked off her shoes giddily, like a kid at school dance, and dropped her bag on the ground. It was the first time she had set it down since they arrived.

Lanie followed up the steps, anxious not to lose sight of their guide. He had crossed to the other side of the deck, and was now standing in front of a large door. The rest of the wall was lined with heavy glass windows, most of which were dark.

Then, as if Lanie's thinking about him was all it took to become aware of her, he stopped in his tracks and turned. "Give us a minute, right?" he said in a flat and surprisingly lucid tone.

"Sure," Lanie said. "Got any food in there? I'm starved." Must be the smell of pot, Lanie thought, resting her bag along side Abbey's, and peering out into the blackened yard.

He stepped closer to a darkened window and raised it, then disappeared through the opening. A few seconds later, a bag of barbecue potato chips and a box of Lorna Doones flew out through the window, skidding to a stop at Lanie's feet. He climbed back out of the window with a Pop Tart and closed it behind himself. He had never bothered to turn on the light. A moment later the door closed. The three of them were alone on the deck.

Lanie held the foil bag with her teeth and tore open the top, sending a few stray chips into the pool.

"Watch it," Abbey said, dangling her toes just above the surface of the water. It couldn't have been more than 60 degrees outside.

"What are you doing?" Tula asked, finally leaving her perch at the base of the deck. "It's freezing out here," she added absently, glancing around her.

Almost directly behind the India House sat a beat up trailer. It was painted brightly, although in the dark Tula couldn't make out the design. The rickety thing sat high on piles of cinder blocks. Along side the grungy trailer was a small outbuilding, most likely a pool house, painted an industrial green or yellow and surrounded with tools.

“Feels wonderful!” Abbey said, her back arched in a perfect Hollywood. It was one of her favorite stretches at hockey camp, the Hollywood—sitting flat on the ground, they’d bend one leg across the other and wedge their ankles against their knee, heads tossed over their shoulders, torsos pressed into a deep twist. The motion had a way of raising your chin and lowering your eyes, as if designed to display your rapidly growing teenage wares. It wasn’t until years later that Abbey learned these stretches actually had a purpose. She always thought it was just something the coaches had them do for shits and giggles.

“Come on in, the water’s fine,” Abbey laughed, kicking a spray of water at Lanie, who dodged it silently. She was scowling into her potato chips, visibly trying to improve her mood.

Tula’s foot hovered around the top step leading onto the deck. She was almost to the pool when she felt a presence behind her, and turned, startled by the immense three bay garage that seemed to spring out the darkness. It recessed to the fence and filled half of the large yard, connecting with the lower portion of the smaller white-shingled house. Each of the bay doors were open, forming three huge gaping mouths. Tula stared into the black caverns, sensing something watching her.

She couldn’t turn away. The hollows grew deeper and wider as she watched, sucking her in, filling her mind with beady eyes and huddled bodies, brushing against her, groping her with long-nailed dark-stained fingers, drooling tongues, snapped teeth, wild eyes—Tula spun to face the pool. She gripped the deck rail for balance, still conscious of something’s gaze on her from behind. The streetlights flashed behind her eyelids then faded sharply, leaving only darkness, snakes, gnarled hands—she darted across the deck and flopped down on the other side of Abbey, splashing both feet into the water. She soaked the bottom third of her jeans.

“Watch it—”

“Tell me something. Now.”

Abbey dropped her heel into the water. "Like what?"

"Anything. Give me something to think about—I can't stop thinking about it," Tula said, picturing something hovering in the corner of the deck. She wedged her palms into her eye sockets.

"What?" Abbey asked, scanning the yard. "Is somebody out there?"

"Let's talk about something else," Tula said, picturing gnarled faces and groping hands wandering through the darkness. She rubbed her arm. "I thought I saw something in the shadows, and then I couldn't stop looking for it even though I didn't want to see it," Tula said, shuddering. She pulled her feet out from the pool and squeezed the excess water from her jeans. Her legs felt icy as the cool air collided with the saturated denim.

"It's probably nothing, Tula," Lanie said from her position at the door. "I could take a look around—"

"No. You're probably right," Tula said, drawing her damp knees to her chest.

"My mom had a wreath like that," Abbey said, balancing her toes just over the top of the water. "I looked at it wrong one night when I was sneaking in late and I swear I thought I saw a man's face in it. God it was so bizarre, I could hardly get through the door. Now I can't bear to look at the thing, I always see that face."

Tula watched her, listening. "What did he look like?"

"Nobody, everybody. It was a Christmas wreath, with berries and bells and crap. I think it was the combination of holly leaves, a pine cone and part of the bow," Abbey said, tracing a figure in the air. "It just looked like this guy's head, you know, a shadowy, scary outline. A bad man."

Lanie paced in front of the door. "I think I hear music down there," she said angrily, raising her hand to peer inside. She tried the door. It was locked. She balled up the spent potato chip bag and wedged it deep into a trash can. The Lorna Doones went untouched.

“Come here, Lanie,” Abbey said, lounging on her palms.

“You’re certainly in your element,” Lanie said with forced calm. She wondered what was making her so aggravated, so incapable of cooling off. Worse than being angry was not knowing how she could have gotten so far out of control. It infuriated her.

“He’ll be out any minute. Have a dip.” Abbey patted the section of dark planks beside her.

“Bring the cookies,” Tula said, squeezing water from her jeans.

Lanie kicked the box over to Tula with her foot, then tried to center herself. She inhaled deeply, held it, then exhaled, allowing her fingers to trail away from her as if mirroring her breath. She arched her back forward and unfastened her shoes, placing one next to the other on the cold wood. She heel-toed over to the others, still conscious of her breathing, then sat in the Lotus position.

Abbey tried not to giggle.

They sat in silence a moment or two, settling down into the situation. Tula spoke first. “I just want to say how sorry I am for the accident.” She gripped the cookies like a microphone. “Don’t worry about the hospital bills, or the cost of replacing whatever was in your bag—”

“Tula,” Abbey said, leaning toward her. A thin stream of chestnut hair grazed Tula’s leg. “Stop.”

“No. It was all my fault.”

“So what?” Lanie asked, reaching out her swollen hand to pat Tula’s thigh. “No one’s blaming anybody. Everything in life happens for a reason,” she said, inhaling again. “Be glad we’re all safe.”

Tula nodded. She held the box against her lower lip.

A light went on behind a third floor window.

Abbey stood up. “Looks like somebody’s home after all,” she said, staring up at the small oval.

“Yeah, where is everyone?” Tula asked, staring up at the rows of dark windows that made the India House, realizing for the first time how inactive the building felt. It was Friday night.

Abbey pulled on her shoe. “Probably all out partying.” Abbey flashed to the night life she was promised, the week of pleasure and luxury. *Don’t you want to go out with a bang?*

“I’d kill for a drink,” said Lanie. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand and yawned.

Tula yawned immediately. “Stop, God. I’m so beat,” she said, flopping down next to Lanie and laying her head in her lap. “Keep me awake.”

Lanie stroked her hair absently.

“Do you think we should leave?” Tula asked, peeking up at her. Her eyes moved to the dark sky, and focused on a distant star. “Find another hotel?”

“Where are we going to go?” Lanie asked her softly, almost whispering, as if Tula were already asleep. “It’s so late.”

Abbey stretched loudly. “I don’t know about you, but I feel gross. I’m going back in and use the bathroom.” She tucked her shirt in hurriedly and straightened the front seam, making sure the top few buttons fell open. She bounced down the deck steps and headed back toward the kitchen, walking quickly past the garage bays. Lanie watched until she had gone through the screen door.

“You okay?” Lanie asked, watching Tula’s eyelids droop. Her lashes were so long and dark they almost seemed fake.

Tula thought about the many things that could mean, and how many things had gone wrong, seriously wrong, in this long strange day. "I'm awake," she said with a shrug. It seemed the easiest answer. She was too tired to worry about the truth.

After a moment, Tula reached up and gave Lanie's leg a pat. "Not too heavy?"

"You're fine," Lanie said, staring down into her face. Lanie felt the weight of Tula's neck press into her shins as she relaxed, the back of her head cradled off the ground by the hollow of her legs. Tula closed her eyes.

Lanie felt she should say more. She found herself staring into Tula's face, her gaze lingering on the tiny corners of her delicate mouth. Tula's skin was glowing in the moonlight, almost porcelain. Her cheeks were just the slightest bit flushed. Abbey would be back any minute, and this brief, comfortable moment would be gone. Lanie shut her own eyes, trying to settle herself, stop herself.

But as her thoughts drifted back to Tula's face, and the sense of her body, the press of her skin on her own, Lanie realized suddenly that she didn't care. She opened her eyes and took a good long look, her lips parting in silent agreement. Tula's head sank deeper into her legs. Lanie felt simultaneously exhilarated and stilled.

A new light came on from the first floor, just past the kitchen. Abbey stood in front of the window and waved, then pulled a shade closed. Lanie could still see her outline through the thin fabric.

Tula stirred in her lap, sending a stray curl across Lanie's leg. "I'm falling asleep, Lane. Tell me something."

Lanie turned to her, realizing she'd been stealing glances at Tula all day. She'd convinced herself it was out of concern for her father, then the accident. Besides, Lanie noticed herself watching women a lot lately, for work. She was a camera woman, after all, and making people look good was part of the job. It paid to recognize a person's strengths, or when a woman's features were best emphasized.

“I can’t—” she said, oddly aware of memories of Tula, how she looked in different clothes, a certain light. “What did the doctor say? How long are we supposed to watch you, I mean to keep you awake?”

Tula raised her arm to check her watch, mumbling as she calculated. She dropped her arm lifelessly along her stomach. “I don’t know. I’m sure it’s fine. It was only a mild concussion anyway.” Tula closed her eyes and snuggled against Lanie’s leg.

Inside the bathroom, Abbey kicked her shoes off one at a time, then set her folded shirt down on top of them, so it wouldn’t touch the floor. It was a trick she learned at camp to keep the crickets off her clothes. She was ordinarily fairly picky about those things, but in this case, it seemed absolutely necessary. The floor was most likely an almond tile, although years of dirt and grime had turned everything a sort of hair-covered filthy gray. She curled her toes inside her socks, and thought about Paul. He couldn’t possibly handle this. She gave a little laugh as she glanced around the long, narrow space. There were porno magazines piled next to the beige toilet, and a tiny wicker trash can overstuffed with tissues and empty toilet paper tubes. The sink basin was rough from crusted toothpaste and shaving foam. He would have a fit.

Paul was an exceptionally neat person. Abbey had always thought of herself as neat—particularly around Lanie, who was much more relaxed about those things—but found that she was an amateur anal-retentive type next to her fiancé. He despised having anything out of place. She even caught him throwing away a half a bottle of Windex once because there wasn’t anymore room under the sink. *It squishes the Pledge too close to the disposal drain, and we have another bottle in the bathroom. This one has to go.* Abbey rested her palms on the edge of the sink and quietly reveled in the filth.

But even she could only take so much. *Pay attention to where you look*, she told herself, conscious not to notice the potential problem areas like the base of the toilet or the

edges of the shower stall. It was one of those self-contained fiberglass units you find in marinas, and basements, and trailer parks. She slid off her jeans and settled them carefully on top of her shirt, then stepped onto the damp bath mat. She stood there a moment, completely nude, and traced a finger along her lower belly. The bathroom door wasn't locked.

Abbey smiled. There were four beach towels on the hooks on the back of the door. She smelled the nearest one briefly, and had to step back from the overwhelming mildew. She coughed to clear the mold from her nose. It made her think of college, and then how pleased she was to be finally living with Paul, decent, respectable Paul, who washed their matching set of towels religiously after each use. *What the fuck have you gotten yourself into this time, Abbey?* she thought, turning to face the mirror.

There were dark circles under her eyes, and a hardness to her jaw that startled her. Her face didn't seem connected anymore, but made up of individual components, all pulled from someone else's body. Her eyes were bloodshot, and sunken in, and the skin around her forehead looked dirty and swollen from the bruise. Her lips were fuller, firmer, darker than they should be. Her cheeks looked weak and pallid. Her hair, scraggly and brown, had turned wild after hours of neglect. She could see several pale strands, almost white, snaking down from her scalp. They were new. She slid her hand in circles across the glass as if to clear the image, then turned away, unsure what to make of the strange person staring back at her.

Abbey turned on the faucet and stepped into the shower, not waiting for the water to heat up completely. She stood under the stream for a few minutes, letting the force of it soften her hair, roll down her back, puddle around her painted toes. She shut her eyes and imagined a layer of dirt sliding off her, washing down the drain. She tried not to think of the germs and debris she might be standing in, and forced her brain on other thoughts.

Again and again her mind went to the accident, to Tula's face. To Lanie in the Emergency Room. To her doctor's hands. To her forehead, the force of the rigid dash cutting her skin. Leaning under the seat. Glass breaking. The hood of the car. The blood. The crush. Fucking Dr. Martinez. Her pulse, the throbbing of her head. The blood. The images flooded her senses, and all at once she found herself huddled over in the tiny space, sobbing, her wet forehead pressed up against the teeming fiberglass.

Tula rolled her head a bit inside Lanie's lap, her face thick with sleep. Lanie touched a curl of her hair and twirled it through her fingers, wondering what to say. She listened to Tula's breathing and consciously slowed her own, letting her thoughts run back over the past day.

Instead of returning to the car crash, or Gerard, or even Abbey and the Emergency Room, all Lanie could picture was Tula. Tula in the hospital. Tula in the shower. Tula right here, in her lap. It wasn't attraction, Lanie knew, not sexual attraction, the traditional way. It was just the pleasure of seeing her again, having her, all alone, to spend the day with, talk to, watch. Little preppy Tula, all grown up with her tight jeans and baby doll tee shirt. Beautiful Tula, wearing her curly hair loose instead of back in that fussy braid, or her father's favorite, the junior league head band. Here, tonight, Tula could really be herself, without the bags and the clothes and the pretense that came with it. This was the Tula Lanie remembered from their college days, from her former life. This was the Tula she had always loved. Only now the living picture matched the mental image.

Lanie brushed a curl away from Tula's purplish bruise, amazed at how soft her hair felt as it slipped between her fingers. Somewhere in her head she knew that Abbey would be coming back, would see this, any minute, but she didn't care. She imagined her own hair in Tula's hand, saw it slide through in solid blonde stripes, no curls to slow the process. She tried to imagine Tula's face as she caressed her blonde hair, pictured Tula's

long fingers stroking her head. But then the image wouldn't come, or felt wrong, or was just too close, too fast. It was too risky to even think about, even though Lanie knew it would never happen. She didn't want it to happen. She just wanted to be able to picture it, without guilt.

She glanced down at Tula then, and without thinking, placed her palms on either side of Tula's face and massaged her temples, careful to avoid the bruise. It was a loving touch, meant only to please her, but the second she started, Lanie felt ashamed.

Tula opened her eyes at the sudden change and stared up at Lanie, quizzically. But instead of stopping, or talking, or backing off, Lanie waited while Tula watched her. Without changing her expression, she continued moving her fingers, tracing slow circles on her skin.

Tula stared up at her and smiled.

The power of that brief exchange shot through Lanie's body like a current. At that moment, Tula became the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, and for the first time, Lanie was proud to admit it. She closed her eyes then, with Tula still watching, and felt an intense pleasure wash over her face as her fingers delicately brushed the angel's skin.

Abbey screamed from inside the bathroom. The window flew open.

"What, what's wrong?" Tula asked, sitting bolt upright.

Lanie had sprung to her feet and was halfway down the steps.

"Come here, quick. You've got to see this," Abbey said, her face flushed. She held a towel around her with one hand and forced the window closed.

Lanie burst through the kitchen screen door and had reached the hallway before it had time to slam shut. She bumped into to Abbey standing dripping wet in the hall.

"There's something on the mirror," Abbey said, her eyes huge.

Lanie squinted at her, panting. "What?"

“See for yourself,” Abbey said, stepping toward Tula, her eyes on the floor.

Lanie opened the door tentatively and stepped into the steamy room

Inside the bathroom, the mirror was completely fogged. Traced in the center was a large, finger drawn circle, with two narrow prongs sticking out from either side. At the end of each was another small circle with little strips darting off the edges like the spokes of the sun. Down from the center of the symbol was a snaking tail, like a reptile, that ended in another little sunburst design. Parts of it were thick, like a finger, and others as fine as the thinnest edge of a nail. Lanie studied it carefully as it faded.

“What is it,” Tula asked, peeking her head around the door. The steam was starting to escape.

“Just some patterns on the glass,” Lanie said, mentally tracing the image on the glass. She followed the pattern like a maze, snaking over each curve, angle, swoop. It was so beautiful. She bent to gather Abbey’s clothes and then carried them into the hallway.

“Why did you scream?” she asked, handing Abbey her pile.

Abbey remembered wiping the glass. “I don’t know, I guess I . . . I don’t know.” She took the clothes and nodded, sucking on her top lip.

“We’re all a little freaked out,” Tula said. “Here,” she said, dropping her hand to the doorknob, “why don’t you get dressed.”

Abbey stepped back fast, bumping her heel into the wall. “No,” she said, glancing around. “Just cover me. I’ll get dressed in here.” She stepped inside the empty dining area and dropped her clothes on a table, unwrapping the towel and drying off in the dark while Tula watched the hall.

Lanie cradled her sore wrist in one hand and wandered past into the kitchen. She felt oddly powerful, as if someone had just challenged her to a fight she knew she would win. She wriggled up onto the counter next to the sink and found a scrap of newspaper and a pencil. She doodled the image on the paper, then traced over it again, methodically, the

tip of her pencil pressing deep grooves into the cheap paper. She finally tore off the design and looked at it, then folded it once at an angle, turned and folded it, then turned and folded it again. She slipped the tight seamed triangle into her pocket.

Abbey pulled her long wet hair out of her shirt and let it slap against her back. She opened the fridge. “Sorry,” she said, grabbing a bottle of someone else’s beer, “that just really flipped me out.” She spun open the top without protecting her skin and guzzled it, downing a third of the bottle in the first sip.

Tula stood in the doorway. “Just make yourself at home.”

Lanie glanced at Abbey, then shrugged. “We’ll leave a note,” she said, sliding off the counter and opening the fridge.

Abbey was clearly shaken. “What was that, some kind of ritual marking?”

Lanie shut the fridge and held out a bottle for Tula. She refused. “It was probably harmless,” Lanie said unconvincingly. She opened a bottle for herself.

“Whatever it was, somebody sure spent a lot of time on it,” Tula said.

Abbey took another long sip of beer.

Lanie stared at her bottle. Blackened Dixie Voodoo Lager. She laughed. “Well, there you have it,” she said, pointing to the devilish image on the label.

Abbey rolled her eyes, then laughed. “This is ridiculous. Let’s get some sleep.” She rubbed her forehead and kicked open the screen door with her foot.

Lanie held her bottle to her lips and waiting, her eyes on Tula.

Tula opened the fridge and removed two six packs of beer. “Come on,” she said, nudging the door closed with her rump, “I’m not supposed to sleep anyway.”

Day Two

“Raymond! Get your lazy ass up!” a stocky black man yelled as he pounded on the pool side door.

Abbey sat up first, dropping Tula’s sleeping head against the deck with a thunk. They had fallen asleep on the deck in a triangle, each with their head on the other’s backside, their legs forming the angle’s points.

“Ow! Abbey?” Tula said, rubbing her cheek. She turned to see what Abbey was watching, and made eye contact with the silk-robed leprechaun staring back at them from the other side of the deck. He was that odd combination of wiry and heavy set, and gave off a sense of electricity, even half naked in his flip flops and Leopard print pattern swim trunks, covered loosely with an untied, jacquard print robe. He looked about 50.

“Get up offa my deck,” the man said, storming toward them suddenly. The flaps of his robe swung wide as he moved toward them, his stomach solid and dark against the sharp print of his shorts. “Let’s go. Shoe! Shoe!” he barked, flailing at them with his massive arms. His toenails were thick and yellowed.

“Hey, hey,” Lanie said, sitting up at last. “Wait a—“

“Hup—” he said quickly, silencing her with the flat plane of his palm. “Don’t even go there, I am in no mood for trifling.” He glanced around at the empty beer bottles and shook his head contemptuously.

Tula straightened her shirt and started at her feet, stalling while she tried to think of something to say, some way to get out of this. Abbey was rubbing her head, taking too long to stand. They were both staring at the three green Army blankets that had been draped over them while they slept. Abbey bent down to collect them.

“We just—“ Lanie began.

“Now what did I just say to you?” he bellowed, tilting his face in hers like he might take a bite of her cheek. He turned his gaze to the pile of blankets in Abbey’s arms. “Give it here,” he said, snatching them in an unruly swipe.

The door behind him at the far edge of the deck creaked a little. The black man addressed it without turning around.

“Mr. Raymond? Help me understand why it is that my pool deck that I built on my house in my yard behind my magnolia tree whose leaves you have yet to sweep this morning is now the campground for three little white pieces of trash like we have here?” He hiked the blankets up onto one hip, exposing even more of his ink black skin.

“Right,” the man from the front desk said, rubbing his face with his palm. He was naked from the waist up, and without his shirt looked even taller than the night before. He had the longest torso Tula had ever seen, and next to the black man, looked paler than soap. The joint of his hip bone peeked out from his drawstring trousers. His slick, limp hair clung to his neck in streaks.

“At’s right,” the black man said, knocking his head to the side to emphasize his syntax. “Now *tell* me. *What* do I need to hear.” He pursed his lips while he waited, forming a stiff point with his chin at the end of his frizzled goatee.

Raymond stared, his eyes a sullen carnival.

The black man had yet to turn around. “I thought so,” he said, gliding toward the deck stairs that led into the courtyard. “I *thought* that’s what you’d tell me. I thought that you would say, ‘Scuseme Mr. Tilley, I don’t have time to talk. I got to scrub this deck, and rake up the courtyard, and cut the front lawn, and skim the pool, and oh yeah,” he said, stopping suddenly at the top step, turning slightly to stare back at Raymond. “Clean the blankets,” he said, then heaved them en masse into the middle of the pool.

Raymond ignored the blankets as they swirled and sank to the painted bottom. He kept his face calm, but still managed an amazing insolence as he stood there, watching, his

orders hanging in the air like a threat. “Right,” he said finally, punctuating his contempt with a lethargic blink.

Abbey rubbed her hand along the back of her neck.

The man raised his hand again, this time in sheer disbelief. He seemed ready to end the situation permanently when Lanie chimed in.

“Excuse me,” she said, twisting her thumb ring as she took a quick step toward him.

“We just wanted a room,” Tula added, stepping forward from behind her.

The man stared back at them, dumbfounded. “You three better hurry up and get outta my house,” he said, laughing a bit as he started across the courtyard to the kitchen, his robe flying. The three of them followed, tromping like elephants on the rickety wood steps.

“We tried to get a room last night,” Tula began, shuffling a bit to get next to him.

“But that guy,” she said, nodding toward the pool, “Raymond, told us to wait by the pool—”

“While he got the manager,” Lanie added.

“And then he never came back,” Abbey said.

The man stopped again and pointed a finger at Tula. He seemed poised to tell them off, but instead stood staring into her face. It was creamy, and pale, but not flat, like an Irish girl’s. It had a deeper warmth, some olive, some spice. He seemed to soften. He glanced at Lanie, her California blonde hair sparkling in the early morning sunshine, the edges wisping like a doll’s. Then he saw Abbey, her dark brown hair falling down around her shoulders, hanging just above her breasts, those large, round, sumptuous breasts, her tight shirt still clinging to her, her nipples hard in the crisp air. It took him a minute to catch his breath.

The loud smell of frying sausage and sharp fish assaulted them as they stepped through the kitchen. A solid, fleshy looking man stood in front of the ridiculously small stove, dwarfing it as he shook a grease-filled pan. He didn't look up when they entered.

"Morning, Derek," he said to the black man in a British accent that sounded strange, yet familiar. It was definitely different than the man from last night, Raymond, but had that same lilting quality, the strange feminine weight. Tula started assigning nationalities at random until one seemed to fit.

"Fergus," Derek said tartly, continuing through the room.

"Have a good swim, then?" Fergus asked, turning his back on them to handle something in the sink.

"Not this morning, no," Derek said. He flapped open the lapels of his silk robe, as if to display his still dry body, then made a face at Abbey. "No, I did not."

Fergus didn't bother to acknowledge him. He turned back around slowly, holding a shaved potato. He looked down into his pans. "Ah, well," he said, turning a fish with his bare fingers, then licking them clean. He looked up and noticed the women, finally, who had been staring at him as he worked, transfixed. Fergus took them in visually, each in turn, then gave the group a quick nod. He noticed the knife he had been looking for on the back of the stove, and started slicing the damp potato directly into a pan.

"What the, go on fix me some greens, or at least some fried onions and cornbread, damn," Derek whined, pinching the edge of a pan with his immense fingers. His forearms were as plump and muscled as chicken drumsticks, and the girth of them reminded Tula of a plumber, or iron worker, or someone who laid tile. Derek kept muttering. "Missed my dip, had to talk to that fool, and now," he said confidentially, smiling at Fergus, "now I got three little lovelies wondering if they can't stay with me tonight." He slid his finger from his mouth with a suck. "Come on, now, I got to fortify."

“We’re having fish,” Fergus said bluntly, his eyes on his work. “Must be Raymond on last night?” he asked flatly, the knife nearing his palm dangerously with each slice.

“How’dcha guess?” Derek smirked, then crossed to the coffee pot on the counter. He poured himself a cup and took a long swig of the dark black liquid. Lanie’s mouth watered. “Well, well, my little lovelies,” Derek said snottily, waving at them with his mug. “I guess it’s time we get down to business.” He pushed away from the counter angrily and stomped down the hall as best he could in his flip flops. Tula followed.

Abbey hung back. She nodded to Lanie to go on, moving her shoulders with an unnecessarily seductive effort. Lanie shook her head and followed Tula down the hall.

Abbey slid around behind Fergus and settled her back against the counter along the wall. She leaned on her hands and smiled. “Hi,” she said warmly.

Fergus shook the pan of sausages by its handle, spurting grease onto the porcelain stove. “It’s five dollars for breakfast,” he said coolly in that exotic tongue, not bothering to look at her, “and another two for coffee, that’s all you want, all day. You pay me, now, or settle up at the desk.”

“Oh, my friends are holding my money,” Abbey said in a breathy, overly casual voice.

Fergus turned down one of the flames, then scratched his ear. “Suit yourself.” Suddenly he took a step toward her and reached above her head to a high shelf. Abbey didn’t move, and smelled the faint odor from his arm pit as he leaned, his shirt brushing her face. He drew down a sack of flour, and stepped back to the stove, the powdery bag in his left hand.

He didn’t seem annoyed that she was blocking his space, getting in the way as he tried to work. But he didn’t seem particularly pleased to have her there, either. It was like

she was his social worker, or parole officer, someone with an ultimate interest in his natural movements, there to observe unobtrusively and make sure he was doing things right. Someone without authority or feeling, for whom he should obviously be performing, and yet, someone he didn't care to impress. His distance turned her on.

Abbey watched him dip his fingertips into the bag and flick bits of flour into a saucepan, then stir it with a metal spoon. She glanced down at her blouse, then arched her back a little, a bit surprised but still challenged by his lukewarm reaction. She had a fleeting thought he might be gay, not conscious of any other reason a man might overlook her.

She sighed comfortably, as if enjoying the brightness of the room. "So. What are you, Fergus?" Abbey asked, stretching her arms out along the counter.

"Cook," he said bluntly, like it was the stupidest question he had ever heard.

"No," Abbey laughed, leaning forward a little, "I mean nationality. You can't be American," she said, rolling her shoulders into a new position.

Fergus licked the back of a spoon, then reached for the pepper. "Don't suppose that's any of your business, then."

Up front, Tula and Lanie were haggling with Derek. He had moved behind the desk.

"That hardly counts as a room, or even a night," Tula said sweetly, slightly aware of his growing attention. The Elvis clock read 7:20. The space seemed inordinately bright. "We've only been here a few hours," she said, her hand stiff under the counter, clutching the money inside her purse.

"Ah ah ah," he said, smiling, "Don't try to slip in here with that little girlie talk. I don't give discounts for charm." He pushed one and then the other of his loose robe sleeves up then, his fingers sliding along his arms like a fighter.

Tula dropped her cheeks into her chin, and leaned on the counter like a cherub.

“Can we help it if we’re charming?”

Lanie stared at her, stunned. At first she thought they were only playing. But now it was clear that Tula was flirting, hard. Lanie turned to the glass-paned front door. Outside, the street was brilliant with sun.

Derek plucked Tula’s hand from the counter and held it up and out, as if to survey the body beneath it. “Well,” he said, his head cocked to the side, “I suppose I can’t hold you responsible for something you obviously can’t control, now can I?”

“Derek, are you giving someone a hard time again?” a young woman asked, her voice floating into the room a few steps before she did. She appeared from the hallway in a bikini top and cut off jeans shorts, smiling. She was quite definitely an American. “Fergus said you were in a mood,” she said, continuing past the counter and out through the heavy front door, down the stone steps. Lanie watched her bare feet slap the coarse pavement. Her tiny bottom hung down beneath torn shorts, twitching a bit with each step.

Derek released Tula’s hand gently, then wrapped the robe around his body, sliding his hands over his chest to tuck it inside the silk flaps. He reached below the counter and pulled out a thick book, slapped it open on the counter, and started studying it for something. He ran a hairy finger down one of the pages, his mind clearly working with each line he passed. The page was filled with scribbled entries, all poorly done in different inks by mismatched hands. Tula held her tongue.

The bikini-clad woman returned through the heavy glass door, throwing streaks of light across the floor as it moved. She smiled at Lanie as she walked to the front desk, newspaper in hand. She plopped the paper on the desk with a flourish, then leaned over to give Derek a wet kiss on the cheek. Her shorts rode up her behind even further as she leaned.

“Morning baby. All right, Marlin,” Derek said sheepishly, his face growing red.

Marlin lowered herself to her feet, eyebrows raised. She dropped a bent elbow to the counter and leaned on it, affording Lanie a prime view of her perfect ass.

She smiled broadly at the pair of them, chuckling. “Oh, we’re gonna have a fun time with you two,” she teased.

“The main house is booked solid,” Marlin prattled as she led them down the sidewalk in front of the house, a pile of army blankets and pillows in her arms. “So you’ll be staying next door, in Cairo.” Tula and Lanie followed behind with only their tiny bags from the car, their eyes adjusting to the startling brightness of the morning. Marlin led them up a wobbly set of prefabricated cement stairs and through an eight foot wooden door. Tula noticed a tiny but extremely elaborate tile mosaic affixed to the crimson shingles. It read “Cairo House.” There were brilliant mosques with Hershey-kiss shaped domes, and a swirling flower border around the snaking, Hindu-esque lettering. As she passed through the imposing door, Tula watched as the edges of the India House disappeared behind the wood.

Marlin was moving toward the back of the house. “We’ve got a band or something staying in the first two rooms, so all these beds are all taken,” she said, splaying her fingers to either side. The rooms were jammed with three sets of bunks on either side, leaving just enough room to walk straight down the middle. There was one mirror in the corner, and no closet.

Lanie continued walking, following the sound of Marlin’s voice. She was explaining the door locks or some other critical piece of information, while Tula stood in place and daydreamed. She yawned stiffly, then wandered through a wide archway, like a hole where double doors were once. There was nothing to close it off, and therefore

nothing really separating the first two rooms. Lanie was standing in a narrow doorway at the far end of the second room.

This one at least had windows, but like the front room, it lacked anything of real comfort. There was a gaudy metal chandelier in the center, which was currently festooned with what looked like wet underpants, and another lone mirror at the back. Tula noticed a pile of hair dryers, curling irons, and brushes on the floor underneath it. She couldn't imagine having to share that tiny thing with the twelve other females that ostensibly fit in this room.

Tula nestled behind Lanie in the doorway, focusing on Marlin and her instructions. "Where are they all?" Lanie asked into the empty room. It was the smallest of the house, their room, and only had four bunk beds—three along one side like the first two rooms, but only one along the inside wall, that ran parallel to it instead of perpendicular, with a window overtop with a view of the courtyard. There was no mirror, and two unimpressive wall sconces at either end. Without the large, undressed windows, it would have been as dark as a mausoleum.

Marlin called to them from some back room. "Toilet's still clogged in here, but I'll get to that before lunch. Meanwhile there's the outdoor showers beside the Palace, and a few johns in the main house, if you need em," she said, emerging from what must be the bathroom.

Tula pictured the pool house, the trailer, trying to think of how far they were from here. She was starting to put things together. "That trailer, that must be the Palace?" she whispered to Lanie.

"Back alley connects you to the courtyard," Marlin said, opening and closing an outside door right next to the bathroom, then opened another door. "Dustpan, Ajax, oh and a mop if you overflow the toilet," she said, slamming it shut.

“Where is everyone else?” Lanie asked again, sitting on the edge of an unmade mattress.

“The band? They’re off on a tour somewhere, I think the plantations this time. They’ve been in an out all week. Something like a cappella, or freeform jazz, I forget. Be back later tonight. We won’t usually hold a room, you understand, but there’s like sixteen of them and they paid for two weeks, in advance. Anyway,” she said pertly, waving for Tula and Lanie to step through the door jamb and join her in the room.

“This is where you’ll stay. You lucked out because I don’t think anyone else will be in these bunks until next week. So, pick your beds, whatever, and like I say, the bathroom’s back there. You share it with the rest of Cairo, so no bubble baths or long shits or anything. Got it?” She started to move toward the door. “Pillows and blankets come with the room, meals and booze cost extra. That’s back in the Palace. You know, the purple trailer. See ya,” she said, heading through the wide archway then out the front door.

Tula and Lanie stared at each other, equal parts overwhelmed and relieved.

By the time Abbey found her way out of India House and down the street to the back room in Cairo, Tula and Lanie were already passed out in their bunks. Abbey curled up on the nearest cot and tried to calm herself, her eyes brimming with tears.

I can call Paul, she thought, trying to find a way out of her overwhelming feelings. He thinks I can’t do it anyway, so he’s probably waiting for me to ask for help, for money to get home. What’s the problem? So he’ll gloat a little bit, so what. It’s for your own good. You know you can’t handle yourself like this. Too much temptation. Too many people wanting too many things from you, and you know what that means. Just blame it on Lanie, say she fucked it up. He’s always hated her, anyway. Just get him to pay for the plane ticket and get the hell home. You can worry about everything else later.

Lanie dropped her hand to the floor. Abbey watched her for a moment, wondering if she would wake up, then slowly turned on her side to face the wall. She tried to think of things to comfort herself, tried to picture Paul's face, but nothing would come. All she saw was the distorted replay of Fergus in the kitchen, how stupid she had been, moving towards him like that. She struggled to remember something to recite, to block out the sound of his laughter as she walked away from him down the hall, after he told her to take her hands out of his pockets, told her to "settle down, girlie. I'm a grown man." Abbey squeezed her eyelids shut, unable to stop reliving her humiliation. With each passing moment, she realized yet another way that her ridiculous behavior had further debased her. The sheer exhaustion of her thoughts soon pushed her into sleep.

When Abbey opened her eyes, her face was criss-crossed with dried, salty streaks, and her nose needed blowing. She rolled herself out of the cot and went in search of tissue.

Tula had showered, and was primping herself in front of the mirror in the middle room when Abbey walked in. "Hey. Have fun with the cook?" Tula asked, twirling her fingers into her curly bangs. She grabbed a bottle of some other tenant's hair spray and spritzed herself a few times, then dropped the bottle onto a heap of unfamiliar HBAs.

"What time is it?" Abbey asked, staring at the piles of clothes and makeup that littered the room.

"Around 4:30. We slept all day," Tula said. "I'm starving. Think there's any grub in here?" she said, nudging a pile of clothes in the corner with her toe.

"Who's making herself at home now?" Abbey asked, sitting on one of the beds. It was covered with an army blanket and a lavender and peach drape from Thailand.

"When in Cairo," she laughed, now squatting in front of a plastic grocery bag and baldly rooting through its contents.

"Tula, get out of there, God," Abbey chided, standing to walk into the next room.

"Hey, at least you ate," she said straightening up. "How much, by the way?"

Abbey was staring out the window into the India House courtyard. It was bright, and empty. "How much what? I didn't eat."

"In the kitchen, with the cook? Then what were you doing in there for all that time?" Tula asked slyly, walking back into their room.

"I don't know. Talking. What do you care?"

"Take it easy. Just seeing if you racked up a bill. I put everything in my name, and we pay when we leave," Tula said firmly, trying to reinforce the fact that from here on out, they were on her dime.

Abbey headed for the bathroom to blow her nose, but heard the water running. Lanie was in the shower now, with both the bathroom door and the door leading outside standing wide open to let out steam.

Abbey settled into an unmade bed. She lay her head back on the striped mattress, and kicked the top bunk with her foot. "Did you call again about the credit cards?"

"I'm going to do that now," Tula said. She could see Abbey was in a funk, but wasn't too worried about it. They all had a lot on their minds, and just needed some space. "You coming with me, or hanging out here a bit?" Tula asked, wedging her hands into her slim pockets. She looked clean, even though she was wearing the same outfit from yesterday.

"Where?" Abbey asked, kicking the springs above her head.

"I want to straighten out this credit card mess before my bills get totally fucked. I don't trust that operator I talked to last night," Tula said, walking slowly toward the front room. "That office guy, Derek, said he'd let me use the phone. Lanie's in the shower. I think we got it all figured out," she said, turning toward the door. She waited for some response.

Abbey stared at the mattress above her and sniffed, trying to decide.

“Look, it’s up the street,” Tula said loudly from the back of the room, pushing the screen door open, “next door, whatever. You know where I’ll be,” she said, walking out into the connecting courtyard.

Abbey lay on her back for what felt like a long time, listening to the loud rush of running water from the shower. Then the knob squeaked, and the water shut off suddenly. Abbey listened as Lanie slid the shower curtain back, the tiny rings scraping along what must be a metal pole. Lanie was singing. She didn’t realize Abbey was awake.

One fine day, you’ll look at me, and you will know our love was meant to be . . .
one fine day, you’re gonna want me for your girl, she sang lightly and slowly from the next room, her voice wavering a bit as she wiped her body dry with a borrowed towel. The sound of water in the sink soon drowned her out again, as did her vigorous brushing. She was humming through the toothpaste.

Abbey dropped her feet to the bed. She couldn’t get her mind off that damn kitchen. *Why would Fergus completely reject me?* she wondered, willing her eyes to remain dry. She ran a list of possible reasons in her head, consciously ignoring the most logical option. *He could just not like you.* Abbey kicked the top bunk with her foot.

“Hey,” Lanie said as she entered the room, her blonde hair matted to her head in slimy streaks. She looked a little embarrassed, probably to be caught singing, Abbey thought. Lanie was never shy about her body. She was wrapped in a beach towel that read Caesar’s Palace. “Tula go make her calls?”

Abbey wedged her toe under a loose spring. “Yup.”

Lanie turned her back and rewrapped herself in the towel, tucking a small piece back inside to secure it over her chest. She walked into the next room as if it was her own, and returned with a wide toothed pink comb. She carried it back to the bathroom and

passed it under the water from the faucet for a few seconds, then ran it through her blonde hair as she talked, sending slaps of water to the wood floor at the end of each stroke.

“Looks like we’ve got enough cash to stay here for the rest of the week, and still do most of what we planned, without breaking Tula’s bank account,” she said, switching the comb to her left hand and starting the other side of her head. “She wants to use the money we save on the hotel to fix the car, plus get a cash advance, which gives us near a hundred each, per day.” Lanie wandered over to her bed and sat down, crossing her legs. She hadn’t bothered to make it yet.

Abbey pulled her foot from the spring forcefully, then slowed it before it slammed into the mattress. She tucked her arms behind her head and continued staring straight up. “So we’re staying. Here, I mean.”

“What do you think?” Lanie asked, resting a cigarette between her lips as she felt inside her bag for the lighter.

Abbey turned on her side. “We’ll have to pay Tula back?” she asked, propping her head on her hand.

“Of course,” Lanie said, slapping the Zippo closed. “But we would have, anyway. Paid her for the room,” she said, blowing out a smooth stream of smoke.

“I know, I know,” Abbey said, picking at the sagging mattress. She was in no mood to think about money. She’d rather have someone else handle it, and tell her about it later. She just couldn’t help the feeling that she was being screwed.

“Look, it sounds like the best deal,” Lanie said, twisting the cigarette between her fingers. Her rings were gleaming in the sun, and with her golden hair and tanned skin, she looked as if she could be sitting inside a cabana in Mexico. Abbey noticed a silver ring on one of her toes.

Abbey breathed heavily and stared at the ground. “I need some new clothes.”

Tula pushed through the glass paned door and stood in front of the empty desk. She was beginning to wonder what it was there for, with no one ever behind it. “Derek?” she called, peeking down the hall. The front room, which looked twice as large now in the clear morning sun, was deserted. Tula shuffled over to the stairwell, and started to sit down on the middle step, then thought against it. In one quick move she hopped up onto the counter and swung her legs over. A moment later she had her hand on the “management” door and was walking through it without so much as a knock.

The office was long and narrow, with one window on the left wall. There was also a door that connected it to the wide central hallway. Tula surveyed the room, and dragged a stiff backed chair over to the fat metal desk. It looked government issue, no later than the sixties, and was covered with piles of papers, menus, and trash.

Tula pushed the junk to one side to clear a section of the desk. She dumped the contents of her bag onto the sticky surface and began organizing. As her hands worked, sorting papers and cards into neat piles, she thought of her father. It was nearing nine o’clock. He would have been at the office by now. She remembered his morning routine all through high school, making the coffee, bringing in the paper. Shining his shoes. Tula blew air out of her mouth and stared out the window, the waves of self-pity cresting.

Lanie removed the towel and began dressing. She pulled her shirt over her head, dragging the rank armpits past her face. “God. I still stink.”

“Tell me about it.” Abbey had her face to the wall. She was picking at the loose paint.

Lanie stood up and pulled on her jeans, straightening the pockets with the backs of her fingers. Something crumpled through the pocket against her leg, and she had to fish it out before she remembered. She felt a slight zing as her fingertips grazed the edges of the folded newsprint, conjuring up images of dripping candles, steamed mirrors, beer bottles,

music, and darkness. Lanie pulled the tightly seamed triangle out of her pocket and held it close to her stomach.

Abbey swung her legs to the ground. "Let's go home," she said resolutely, as if this was a decision they had been avoiding for some time.

Lanie stared at her blankly.

"What?" Abbey asked, suddenly perky. "This is stupid, staying here, totally broke."

Lanie slid the paper back into her jeans slowly and zipped her fly with one hand. "We have money," she said finally, crossing the room to hang up her towel. "Tula does."

"It's not even the money, really. It's just the idea. I mean what are we doing, really? Haven't we outgrown this already?" Abbey asked, her face deepening a shade. "I mean if it's a matter of saying I'm over my head, then fine, I'm over my head. Let's just go before it gets any worse." She stared at Lanie's towel to avoid eye contact. The letters were distorted as it hung from its hook. All she could read was Pal. "I need to think of Paul. It's not fair to him."

Lanie took a step forward. Abbey flinched. "Well," Lanie said, sitting down. "You've had me worried."

Abbey focused on the letters through the folds in the towel, willing her head clear. P-a-l. P-a-l. "Cha—fuck off, Lanie. Nothing happened. Does something have to happen?"

Lanie twisted the ring on her index finger sharply. Her skin burned a bit from the friction. "If you can't admit it to me," Lanie said, rolling the ball of her foot along the wood floor.

Abbey refused to look at her, her eyes locked on that damn towel.

"I know, it might seem like, it's none of my business—"

"You're right. It is none of your business," Abbey said, a sudden tightness in her throat, her pulse racing. She swallowed hard.

“What if I had sex with Paul, then?” Lanie said softly.

“What?”

“I said what if I fucked Paul? How would that make you feel?”

Abbey laughed incredulously. “You never did anything with him.”

“How do you know?” Lanie said, challenging her, her hands on her hips.

“You never did anything with Paul or any other man,” Abbey said cruelly, then stared wide-eyed at Lanie after actually having said it. Her shock grew as the look on Lanie’s face seemed to confirm it.

Lanie’s face went white.

Get off this, Tula told herself, watching the view of stockade fence and short metal trash cans through the narrow office window. *Stop it*. She heard the sound of crumpling metal, felt the punch of the air bag. Remembered Abbey’s sneakers. Lanie’s arm. She wiped her eyes with her palm.

Before she could stop herself, Tula slammed her hand onto the old-style phone receiver and started dialing, the faint bell of the ringer lingering. She was halfway through the number when she realized who she was calling. “Well, it is Saturday,” she laughed a little to herself, amazed at how natural it felt to call the bank, how utterly normal to think of it first. She checked her account at least once or twice a week, and knew the number by heart. Half listening to the recording, she pressed the buttons at the right intervals and continued sorting through her piles. The familiar tone of the automated attendant soothed her. She was still sorting when she heard the hallway door open, and turned her head.

“What have we here,” Derek said in that smooth tongue, slipping into his own office like a voyeur. He shut the door quickly and walked over to the “management” door, closing it, too. “Make *a* call, you said. I’ll have to watch what I offer you from now on,” he said, reprimanding her slightly.

Tula had just gotten her account balance. She obediently hung up, etching a line of numbers on the back of her hand, conscious to start speaking before she was finished writing. "I'm sorry, Derek, I guess I misun—"

"Easy, baby, no big deal," he said, smiling stiffly. "Just keep your voice down. And finish up," he said then, his eyes narrow, then walked back out into the hall.

Tula's stomach cramped instantly. She resigned herself to make only three calls and get out fast, then spent nearly five minutes trying to decide which three she could live with. "Stupid. This is stupid," she said, dialing the number of her Visa card first, one finger pressed against the phone book. As the phone rang, she thought about how to explain things, what she would say.

She called two other credit companies and canceled her accounts. Then her car insurance, health insurance, Western Union, a towing company, the machine at home, her office. She called the bank again to make sure she had her numbers correct.

She glanced at the clock. "Only thing you left out was the national weather service," she muttered into the empty room, forcing herself out of the chair and away from the desk. In a burst of energy, she bunched the orderly piles of receipts and numbers and notes she'd separated so painstakingly into one giant ball and wedged it into her purse. She nudged the chair across the room with her foot and simultaneously jotted a short list of phone numbers on the back on a ~~stray~~ envelope, half bent over the desk. Tula stuffed the envelope into the outer flap of her bag and headed for the door.

Lanie watched Abbey's face change from surprise to confusion to anger, then pity. Lanie shook her head in disgust.

"Lanie," Abbey started, unable to look her in the eye. "Just forget it. I didn't mean anything by it."

Lanie leaned in to get a better view of Abbey's face. She was staring at the ground. "Then why did you say it?" Lanie asked, spinning the ring on her index finger. She stared through the window into the courtyard, not sure where they were going with this.

"I don't know, it was just something stupid to say. Like what you said about Paul."

Lanie nodded slowly. "How do you know I just made that up?"

Abbey blew out a puff of air. "Lanie." She laid back on the bunk and kicked the mattress above her with her foot. "Because I know you, okay?"

"You do."

"Yes, I do," Abbey said, sitting up to face her. She felt her eyes glazing over. "I know how you think and what you expect of me and my relationship with Paul. But apparently, you know as little about that as I seem to about who you choose to have relationships with."

Lanie stared at her. She bit her lip.

Abbey nodded.

"Maybe it's not any of my business," Lanie said coldly.

"Maybe not."

Back inside the India House, Tula leaned against the management door lightly until she heard a faint click. She raised her bag to toss it over the front desk, but pulled it against her body quickly when she noticed people in the next room.

"Hire a new desk manager?" Marlin asked Derek, moving her tanned foot inside his fingers. He was massaging her brightly painted toes as the two of them sat together on a raised-weave, ancient-looking couch.

Tula stared at the back of Marlin's neck, unsure how to get out from behind the desk without jumping over it.

“Naww. We just had a little misunderstanding about what ‘can I use your phone’ means.” Derek raised Marlin’s foot to his lips and kissed it, then pushed her stiff leg away from him like a boom as he stood. She let it drop back to the couch heavily, and continued filing her fingernails. She never once turned around.

“Lift up the flap,” Derek said, pointing to the far end of the desk. Tula stared in that direction dumbly. Derek shook his head.

He slid the far corner of the desk up effortlessly, moving it on some invisible hinge, then rested the flap back on the desk top. He held his hand out for Tula to walk through.

She took it. “I’m really sorry about the phone. I’m happy to pay for all my calls,” she said, trying not to fidget with her bag. She didn’t have a good grip on it.

Derek drew her closer to him by the hand. “Oh, I know you’ll pay for those calls,” he said, watching her. His eyes were shiny copper, like two pennies suspended in a bowl of cream. “We just have to get a little better *understanding*, of each other, if this thing’s gonna work out between us.”

Tula felt her scalp tingle at the suggestion. “Oh, you mean staying here.”

Marlin laughed from the next room.

Derek’s face moved even closer this time. “Right.”

Lanie stared out the window into the courtyard and listened to the drumming of water on the base of the tub. Abbey had been in there for nearly ten minutes. The steam was starting to fog the window by the back door.

Lanie held the end of her hair between her fingers. She could see the edge of the deck from here, and remembered the feel of the cold planks against her legs. She slipped a few strands of her hair into her mouth and sucked lightly, tasting the waxy cream rinse she’d loaned herself from one of the other occupants.

She tugged the hair free from her lips, and walked over to the bed to finish dressing. Her mind wandered as she navigated the holes of her clothes, poking arms and head and legs through. She thought guiltily of Gerard, how strange he seemed, how ashamed she was for automatically assuming the worst of him. She remembered Tula's face as he'd offered them a ride, Tula's face in her lap.

Never did anything with Paul or any other man. Lanie slid her palm to her neck and rubbed it absently, trying to imagine what could have led Abbey to make a blanket assumption about her. She thought casually to those bad sex movies on the pay channels she'd seen, for the camera moves, the lighting changes. Sure, she watched them whenever they came on. *Everyone watches that stuff, or else they'd take it off the air. It's not like I'm renting porno's, buying those magazines. Hell, I'm single, and sex is sex,* she thought self-righteously. She rubbed her hand along her jeans, and pictured herself scanning for those movies late at night, usually conscious of the volume or with the TV muted entirely, so her neighbors couldn't hear through the wall. She felt the embarrassment coming back, but fought it hard.

She remembered those initial rationalizations about sex, desire, her needs, herself. *I'm watching for the men, but all's they show is breasts, so you learn to live with it.* She felt her cheeks warming. *It's supposed to arouse you, that's why it's there.* She thought of her dreams, her fantasies, how unsettling they had become. She remembered the last time she had sex with a man, and her inability to get aroused without picturing a woman's body, a woman's breasts, on her own. *The female body is a beautiful thing.* She felt her calm slipping away as the humiliation and anger of that silent discovery returned, still unresolved.

Lanie wedged her hands into her pockets to straighten them, embarrassed by her own thoughts. Her fingers found the edge of paper still crammed in her pocket, then tightened on it and pulled it out.

Lanie unfolded the triangle carefully, already aware of the complex series of circles and lines she'd drawn on it the night before. She sat on the bed and smoothed the creases of the paper against her knee, careful not to smear the lines of pencil with her finger.

She tried to imagine what the symbol stood for. She had come to think of it as a warning sign, a sort of spiritual bullshit detector, sent to her to help keep life in focus, or remind her how it easy it was for things to get out of hand.

The water squealed off from the other room, sending a jolt of alarm through Lanie's stomach. Her first instinct was to hide the drawing, to stop thinking about it, but almost as suddenly she was filled with a wave of power as palpable and warming as thick syrup. Lanie placed the tips of her fingers along the outside edges of the symbol, pressing against it like the corners of a ouiga marker. Abbey could walk in any minute, she thought, concentrating on the stillness and power she just felt. She forced her mind to stay clear, picturing only black behind her clamped eyelids. *I can do this*, she thought to herself, willing dark the edges of her mind's eye, seeing the void advance across her forehead like a drape. *I have power*, she thought, slowing her breathing to match the vibrations of her fingertips on the paper. She was pressing so hard she could feel her fingernails cutting into her leg through the paper through her jeans, and fought hard to keep the image of her own white knuckles against the image out of her thoughts, away from the hard-won black.

"I have power," she said aloud, feeling the wash of strength overtake her senses as it had moments before. She wanted to smile, to laugh, to scream, but dared not lose this precious moment.

In the other room, Abbey stared at the pattern traced into the foggy mirror. "Holy shit."

Derek released Tula's hand and started back to the front room to join Marlin on the couch.

Tula stood in the hallway, watching them. They were just sitting there in the empty room, not talking, not reading, not doing anything. There was no TV, and the radio behind the desk was barely loud enough for Tula to hear, standing so close to it.

Tula took a step toward them, and leaned her shoulder into the curve of the archway. The front of the room faced the porch, and the large windows went almost from the floor to the 12 foot ceiling. They were covered with thick velvet drapes, worn thin from years of sunlight and neglect. Tula stared through the age-warped glass, over the porch and all the way across the street. She found herself staring at the large stone structure, following the edges of each flat rock as it bled into the next, separated only by a narrow stream of crumbling gray mortar. She wondered what such a beautiful building was doing so close to a place like this, filled with cast-away objects and other people's memories. After a moment she noticed the door, a small cross cut into the center of the wood.

"What's for dinner?" Marlin asked, her blonde hair trailing over the armrest of the couch. Tula glanced down, realizing she was close enough to touch it. Or pull it.

"Shrimp gumbo, combread, and the rest of that apple sausage," Derek said slowly, then glanced at Tula. He motioned to one of the wing chairs by the windows. "Welcome to join us, Miss—" he smiled, waiting for her to say her name. He had written it down himself that morning when he checked them in. It felt like one of many games he liked to play, all designed to keep her on edge.

"Tula," she said, the word sounding awkward and bland.

"Tula," he repeated, nodding as he listened to its melody. He wet his lips. "Sit with us, Tula."

"Oh, no thanks," she said too quickly, switching her weight on her heels. Everything about her felt awkward, like the whole world was off on some slow cool vibe, and she a jumble of static, pointless energy.

“Suit yourself,” Marlin said, nudging her foot deeper into Derek’s palm. His fingers held it firmly while his thumbs burrowed into the arch in small circles.

Tula tried to center herself, to force an ease. She thought about the money. “I was wondering, is there anyplace close by where we could get something to eat?” She felt her stomach rumble. “Cheap?”

Derek smiled. “Yeah.”

The back of Marlin’s head moved, probably from her silent laughter.

Tula’s calm eluded her. “Well? Can we walk there, or do I have to call a cab?”

“You can walk,” Derek said slowly, watching his fingers work. “It’s about 20, 30 feet, straight back.”

“Lanie, get the fuck in here,” Abbey called from the bathroom. She was standing in front of the tub, holding the Caesar’s Palace towel around her.

Lanie sighed heavily from her position on the bed. She had torn through her paper and left little half-moon divots in her jeans. “What—” she called, trying instantly to reclaim the sensation she had just lost.

“Real cute. What is this, supposed to be some kind of joke? I told you I don’t like this shit, and now you’re tormenting me.”

“What are you talking about?” Lanie said, slowly rising from the bed.

“You’re little voodoo drawing. I can tell it’s a fake, too.”

Lanie ran for the bathroom door and stared breathlessly at the mirror. Traced on the glass was a new symbol, this one a series of triangles connected at the center with a squiggly line, like a third grader’s lightning bolt.

Abbey felt her knees starting to give, and sat down on the edge of tub. “What the fuck is going on around here?” She was pale in the fluorescent light, and slightly clammy. “That you think this kind of shit is funny?” she asked, her voice wavering. “You know?”

I've got a lot on my mind right now, and the last thing I need is more goofy shit from you." She held her forehead in her hand, trying to work herself into tears.

But Lanie could barely hear her. She was transfixed by the glass. The drawing was much cruder than the one in the bathroom at the India house, but the sheer force of seeing it was overwhelming. Each line carried the thick weight of a finger or thumb. The simplicity of the design—three triangles connected by solid lines, then intercut with the crude lightning bolt—spoke to her, somehow directly to her, even though she had no idea what to make of the message.

The back door to Cairo was open, and without the heat of the shower, the image was starting to evaporate. "Here," Lanie said, leaning in to turn the knob. "Get the water back on."

Abbey jumped up to avoid the spray. "Lanie? What are you doing?"

Lanie's face was flushed. She turned back to the mirror, as if admiring her own handiwork. Her tongue probed the edges of her mouth while she thought.

Abbey gripped her by the shoulders and gave her a good shake. "Lanie? Stop." Lanie stared back at her, her mind clearly somewhere else. Abbey shut off the water. "That's it. Out of the bathroom."

"Leave me alone, Abbey."

"No. Out, this minute," Abbey insisted, dragging Lanie by the arm. She struggled against her until Abbey pushed her into the hallway, almost tossing her into the wall. They stopped and faced each other, each of them regaining their balance.

Abbey clutched the towel near her armpit. "What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you acting this way?"

"I'm not. Nothing is wrong," Lanie answered, amazed at how quickly she could return to that feeling of powerlessness, of foolishness, how easily she could be bullied into conformity just because Abbey or anyone else willed it so.

"Did you draw that thing?" Abbey asked, blocking Lanie from reentering the bathroom. Abbey knew she had, but hoped that she could shame Lanie into an explanation, if not an apology. She'd probably have to wait a good three days for that.

Lanie considered the question, and started to say no, but stopped herself. Abbey looked impatient. "Yeah," Lanie said, her eyes swelling with pride. "Yeah, I guess I did."

Tula stomped her way back to the kitchen, grateful to be away from Derek and Marlin, who seemed to be having a great time making her feel uncomfortable. She could smell the cooking shrimp as she walked through the house, and pictured the white bits of garlic and creamy butter leaving a greasy trail on the top layer of gumbo. Her stomach growled audibly. Just inside the door stood Fergus, who was stirring a cast iron pot on the stove. Raymond was washing dishes at the sink.

Tula stood in the doorway and moved her bag from one shoulder to the other. Neither of the men seemed to notice. "Hey," she said, trying to sound casual, "What's a girl gotta do to get some dinner around here?"

Fergus eyed her from his post in front of the burners, and offered a lewd smirk.

Tula's heart sank.

Abbey sat next to Lanie on the bed, retracing her steps. "So you didn't draw it," Abbey said finally, feeling the need for a cigarette.

"No, I just, I mean—" Lanie slumped her face forward and rocked it between her knees. "God! I just felt so strong, you know? Really powerful."

Abbey crossed her legs. "I'm sorry; you drew the symbol with your mind?" She motioned for Lanie to pass her bag.

"How else can you explain it getting there?"

Abbey gripped the cigarette between her lips while she ripped through the bag for the lighter. "Someone else could have drawn it, Sherlock."

"But I was in there before you were. And Tula. She showered first." Lanie lit Abbey's cigarette then passed the flame in front of her own.

"The same way someone could have drawn it next door," Abbey said, blowing out smoke nervously. She saw herself slide her hand across the glass, then inhaled again.

"Apparently, a whole lot of people in this town are into this witchcraft stuff. Look around you. This isn't exactly the safest haven on the block." Abbey ashed onto the floor, barely missing her own toes. She clutched the towel around herself a little tighter, realizing the extent of her discomfort with the place.

Lanie was rooting through her bag for a scrap of paper and a pen.

"I really think I want to go home."

Tula burst through the back door, her bag in front of her like a shield. "God! I hate all men." She threw her bag onto the far bed and flopped herself on the bed parallel to the one where Abbey and Lanie sat. "I just bought us three dinners."

"And this has caused you to disavow the entire male gender? Must be some bad meat," Lanie said, leaning back to tap her cigarette into a candle holder on the windowsill.

"No. It's just that Fergus is such an asshole." Tula sat up to face them. "You know, the cook?"

"I know him," Abbey said bluntly.

"Well, then you should know all about it," Tula said, rubbing her hands along her neck. "I guess he put the moves on you, too? God, and he's so gross about it. Really

crude. Everything I said he twisted it around so it was sexual,” Tula said, reaching for a puff from Lanie’s cigarette.

Abbey held hers close against her face, letting the smoke stream against her skin, burn her eyes.

“I mean, not that that’s a bad thing,” Tula went on, “right, especially because he’s so good looking, and that Irish accent kills me. Oh, I found out he’s from Ireland. That other guy, Raymond? The one that stranded us on the deck last night? He’s from New Zealand.”

“No shit,” Lanie said, taking back her cigarette. “What’s he doing here?”

“So what did Fergus do?” Abbey asked. “I mean, you’re okay, right? We could leave—”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. I know I’m making a big deal out of this for nothing. I guess it’s been a long time since anyone’s really flirted with me, like that.”

Lanie laughed out loud. “You’ve got to be kidding. People flirt with you all the time.”

Tula’s face brightened. “Not like this. You know what I mean.”

“No. What do you mean?” Abbey asked.

“I mean he wanted to have sex. Right now.”

Lanie glanced at Abbey, then down to the floor. “Are you sure you weren’t misreading it?”

Tula rolled onto her back. “I wish. He came right out and asked me. He said, ‘Whotcha say we skipta’ me room for a bit uf a tumble before dinna.’ Raymond was right there, too. It was awful.”

Abbey stubbed her cigarette into the floor. “Maybe he was playing with you. Making fun.”

“Probably,” Lanie nodded, not really believing it, but wanting to support Abbey. She could tell she couldn’t stand having someone else on her turf.

“Who knows,” Tula said, rolling onto her side. “At least he cut me a deal on dinner. Three meals, ten bucks.”

Out in the courtyard, nearly 15 people had gathered around a cafeteria table and a few hot plates. As Tula, Abbey, and Lanie walked the ten or so steps from the back porch of Cairo to the base of the steps leading out of the kitchen at India House, they were amazed by the vivid detail they had missed the night before.

What had looked like a dingy, abandoned trailer now stood as the shining purple monument known as the Palace. It filled the space along the back fence in between the Cairo and the India House, defining the edge of the center courtyard. The outside of the tin structure had been intricately painted with an almost glowingly bright purple, and rich greens and sweeping golds as accents. It even sported two matching onion domes in paint on either end, adding to the illustrious air.

Underneath them on the cement patio lay a Mediterranean looking mural, with the requisite maidens in togas and lots of archways and grapes and a series of impressive trompe l’oeil effects, like tassels and urns and large swoops of beads, that made it difficult to walk on without losing your footing.

Over by the deck, Fergus had set up his table, and was ladling large ceramic bowls of gumbo to the crowd that milled nearby. Next to him, a dark, curly-headed man was slicing palm-sized hunks of cornbread from a baldly charred pan.

Someone had a radio playing. A few people were drinking beers in the pool. There was a woman behind the bar now, passing out cups to Derek, Marlin, and a middle-height man who looked like he might play professional soccer. His head was completely clean shaven, with a dent the size of a bell-pepper on one side. The three of them were laughing

at whatever the woman behind the bar was saying. She kept pushing her black frame glasses up by the center as she spoke. Tula squinted to get a better look.

Lanie shook her head from side to side, taking it all in. “There’s that stoner, Raymond,” she said, nodding toward the three-bay garage. He had another bag of Cheese Doodles and was seated in a rickety lawn chair.

Tula nodded, still concerned with the shape of the dented man’s head. A few feet away, she noticed two plump blondes with an air of money about them. “Don’t leave me stranded,” Tula whispered to Abbey.

If they had been in a bar, the first thing they would have done was to scatter and mingle independently. It often took hours for the three of them to converge again, this or the other man in tow to present as a gift to the one in the group he was best suited for. But here, in the fading afternoon sun, Tula felt unprepared to handle herself without the support of the group.

Abbey nodded as she started over to the fence, leaving Tula and Lanie to fend for themselves.

“What do you expect?” Lanie asked, moving Tula toward the clump of people that formed the line for gumbo. Then Lanie remembered herself, and shrugged. “I think she’s had kind of a rough day.”

Tula held her tongue. “Sorry to hear it.”

“Maybe we’re all just getting under each other’s skin.” Lanie leaned in toward Tula’s ear as she picked up a chipped bowl.

Fergus stared at Lanie from behind two large steaming pots, as if trying to place her name. “Gumbo, homemade apple sausage, rice? Cornbread, collards, and beer over there,” Fergus said, motioning for Lanie to grab her own cornbread from the plate.

“Here, let me,” the curly-headed guy offered, balancing an extra large piece on the edge of her bowl.

"Thanks," Lanie smiled, lifting her head as if asking his name.

"Steve. I work the desk."

This one sounded Australian. "We could have used you last night, Steve. Thanks," she said again, continuing down the line.

Fergus held the edge of Tula's bowl after she gripped it, using it to draw her hand closer to him. "And what will you be having this evening, Miss Too-ra-lou-ra-lou-ra?"

Abbey had positioned herself in between the two puffy blondes by the fence and was alternately picking from their plates with her fingers.

"So there's not a soul from New Orleans in this place, then?" the shorter, stockier one asked, shoveling a mound of rice into his mouth with an end of cornbread. His skin was a ruddy bleached white, speckled with pink and red flushes underneath. His hair was platinum.

"Not that I've met," Abbey said, turning her attention to the other man's plate.

"I'm Hugh," the taller one said. His hair was a bit darker, a truer blonde, but his skin was the same translucent pale. "This is Frank," he said, nodding toward his friend. Hugh had bits of sauce stuck in his unruly mustache. His eyebrows were almost pure white. "We're on Holiday in the States. Trying to get to know the different regions, see the people."

Frank nodded. "Thought sure we'd see more niggers here."

Tula and Lanie wandered their way over to the edge of the deck. The music from the radio was a little louder, an upbeat Zydeco song.

Lanie wondered where to begin. She noticed Abbey in the corner, a strange man's hand in her mouth. "I know this is her bachelorette party, but don't you think that's taking things a little too far?"

Tula licked the tines of her plastic fork, trying to mop up all the grease. "It's just one week, Lanie. It's going to take a while to get it out of her system." Tula studied Abbey for a moment, trying to decide if she was crossing some line.

"She's not ready for marriage," Lanie said finally. "And even if she is, Paul is not the right one. The past two days are a perfect example of that." Lanie motioned toward Abbey, who was frowning at the larger of the two blondes.

Tula stirred her gumbo. "That's not for you to say."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not. It's her life. What she does is her own business," Tula said, moving a salmon-pink shrimp around in her bowl.

Lanie set her plate down on the edge of the deck. "Even if she hurts herself, that's her business? Even if she screws up her whole life, and his, because she's too pig-headed to see that she can't take the responsibility of married life, that's her business? You don't just go into something like this lightly. You've got to really be sure—"

Tula watched her, sensing the objection was really about something else.

"Using Paul like some kind of security blanket, just so she doesn't end up a 50 year old slut hanging out in the hotel bar at the Marriott? You're saying we should just ignore it, and let her screw every guy in town?" Lanie's skin was getting hot. "If she wants to get laid so bad, then she shouldn't be getting married. You can't have it both ways. You've got to choose." Lanie sighed loudly, avoiding Tula's gaze. "That's all I'm saying."

Tula picked a bit of food from her teeth. "You just don't like Paul."

"No, I don't. But that has nothing to do with this."

"I think it does. Abbey is really in love with him, Lanie," Tula said, making eye contact. "This isn't a joke to her. It's going to be a big enough lifestyle change for her to settle down with just one man. Give her a week off."

“We do things differently in Cape Town,” Frank smiled to Abbey, not bothering to chew what was left in his mouth before he took a long swig of his beer. “Don’t tolerate that sort of foolishness.”

“So you provoke violence in hopes that someone, some black person, will try to kill you?” Abbey asked Hugh, stepping out from the crook of his shoulder. He had leaned his hand up against the fence and was trying to cradle Abbey against his side.

“Ha! I’d like to see the Jig who’d take a pot shot at me,” Hugh said, liking his mustache as he knocked Frank on the chest.

“But who cares about them,” Hugh said, leaning in again. “I’d like to learn a bit more about you, Abbey.”

“Well,” she said, reaching up to stroke the edge of Frank’s earlobe, which happened to be nearer. “What would you like to know?”

Hugh stepped closer, barely able to contain his excitement. “What sort of man do you like to take to bed?” He slapped Frank again while the two of them laughed like overanxious school boys.

Abbey slid her palms down her sides, pretending to smooth her shirt. She hooked her fingers into her belt loops and leaned back against the fence, arching her back so her hips jutted forward. “Great, big, black ones.”

“Excuse please,” a lanky, angular looking woman asked Lanie as she passed by the deck. “Where is beer?” She was wearing a short black knit dress that stopped almost a foot above her bony knees, and had heavy brown oxfords on her feet like a man.

“Over by the side table, there,” Lanie said, pointing toward the outer edge of the India House. The woman nodded without smiling, and glanced at her male counterpart, a shortish, stern-faced man with incredibly short, spiky hair brushed straight down around

his face. They both wore small dark sunglasses that barely covered their eyes. The bony woman's glasses were cobalt blue.

"Danke," she said flatly and loped toward the table.

Tula giggled into her gumbo. "Jesus. Are we the only Americans here?"

"I think so," Lanie said, still staring after the German couple. "But do not forget the Marlin," she said, mocking the woman's heavy accent. "She is from Maryland."

"Ya," Tula chimed in, "Unt vee are from here. Also." They laughed together for a moment, never really forgetting the serious disagreement they were in the midst of having. Tula set her empty bowl next to Lanie's on the deck. "You having fun?"

Lanie sipped her beer. "Yeah. I mean, considering." She raised her purple arm as proof. Lanie looked around the courtyard, scanning the faces for some sense of normalcy, regularity. Everywhere she looked she saw odd people with unusual clothes, strange movements, unfamiliar details. "You?"

"Yup," Tula said, catching sight of a brightly-clad Caribbean woman over by the garage bay. She was standing near Raymond and his Cheese Doodles, probably trying to strike up a conversation, but didn't seem able to break in on his thoughts. So she just stood there, alone, slurping the gumbo from her bowl, and trying to look comfortable. Tula thought of the woman from the hospital, the one whose boy had something wrong with his legs, and wondered if he was home from the hospital yet. She immediately felt strange having connected the two.

Lanie noticed the woman, too. "You know Abbey mentioned that she might want to leave. Probably to see Paul."

Tula tried to picture Abbey's fiancé on this vacation with them. She stared into the garage, and superimposed Paul's on Raymond's body, pictured him lounging in that rickety webbed chair. It didn't work. "Well, we should call him at least. The accident." Tula saw him again in the open bay, this time in a polo shirt and khaki shorts, the chair a

hunter green Adirondack, his hands holding a paper and a rocks glass of Dewars. "Unless she already has."

"I don't think so." Lanie was staring at the black woman, who had started to stack the empty bowls and cups she noticed lying around the garage. The woman was whistling, as if the work gave her a reason for being there.

"Do you think we should leave?" Tula asked, not able to look Lanie in the face.

Lanie thought of Abbey, and her insinuations. The deck. Leaving now would buy her some time, to think about things.

"Find a hotel, I mean?" Tula said, her hands in her pockets.

Lanie started to gather their bowls and plates. She stared at Tula then, her hands full of dirty dishes. "No," Lanie said, her face and neck crimson with blood. "I want to stay."

Lanie carried the stack of dishes over toward the woman, and left Tula standing by the deck.

As soon as Lanie started across the courtyard, Abbey made her move. She tried to get Lanie's attention without calling her name, but Lanie was intent on going into the garage, probably to tell off Raymond for leaving them to sleep outdoors last night. Abbey glanced to Tula, who was climbing the stairs to the deck.

"Hey," Abbey called, hopping the last few steps across the courtyard.

Tula kept moving toward the pool. The radio was much louder now, an unknown roadhouse blues song. Abbey followed Tula around the pool to the makeshift bar, where a few people were standing. Most everyone else had climbed into the pool, either stripping to some version of their underclothes, or having thought to wear bathing suits.

Abbey leaned against the plywood counter and waited for the woman behind it to offer her a beer.

“I hear you want to go home,” Tula said, noticing the back of Marlin’s head bobbing in the pool. It was an aquamarine, and stood five feet above the ground. The deck had been constructed to hide most of the sides. Someone had painted mermaids and sea horses along the bottom, and a small Persian palace in the center.

Abbey drummed her fingers on the bar. “Yeah? Lanie tell you about my second voodoo visitation?” She paused a bit without turning around, knowing her news would get Tula’s complete attention. “She drew some kind of made up triangle shit on the bathroom mirror to spook me out. And that’s not the half of it.”

The bartender stepped over. “Hey. The beer with dinner is over at the other table.” Tula found herself surprised to hear another American voice. She had short black hair and heavy glasses like Buddy Holly. She sounded like she might be from Chicago. “You want a cup for the keg, it’s five bucks. That’s all you can drink, though.”

Tula fished two fives out of her jeans, feeling generous after this morning’s phone calls. Still, she knew a big decision was facing her soon enough.

The bartender waited for the money before turning around to fill their cups. She wore plain jeans and white tee shirt. It was what Lanie would call “a look.”

Abbey stared at the ground, imagining Paul’s reaction to a woman dressed like this. *She looks like a dyke*. Abbey turned to search for Lanie, her stomach tense. “Thanks,” Abbey said as she took her beer, her voice small. She had become increasingly aware of how much things cost, particularly since the element of luxury she had bought into when they planned this trip was now tied up in rooms, meals, and hopefully clothes. Not to mention doctor’s bills and paying to fix the Saab. Dr. Martinez. “Any ideas on how we’ll get back home?”

Tula took her cup and sipped it. “Well, the car should be done by the end of the week, in which case, we drive it home. Otherwise, I guess I’ll just take some more

vacation and wait for it. You two could take a train, or fly, but that's more money.

Besides, it should be driveable by then. But what's this about Lanie?"

The two of them moved over to the edge of the pool and sat down along the edge. While the rest of the world seemed content to float and spin the day away inside the pool, Abbey and Tula rested, rehashing the details of the past 24 hours. Abbey confessed her obvious and seemingly uncontrollable encounter with Dr. Martinez in the Emergency Room, which led to the shower and the symbol. She confessed to Tula that she had smeared the glass before steaming the room.

"I can't help feeling like someone's out to get me," Abbey said, straightening the edge of her plastic cup with her teeth.

Tula just sat there, unable to dismiss the fear.

"Then Lanie, drawing the triangles on the mirror just to torment me. She so much as told me she was—she tried to pretend she had slept with Paul."

"What? No way," Tula said, staring into the top layer of foam. She raised the cup to her lips, but had no interest in drinking the warm, hoppy beer. It was pale, like urine.

Abbey waited for Tula to say more. She still wasn't sure how—or if—to bring the matter up. "That's what I said."

Tula pictured Abbey and Dr. Martinez slamming into each other. She felt a wave of guilt crest in her stomach like acid. "We should go to a real hotel. Get away from some of this."

"With what? This is already costing as much as before, with the car, and look where we are." Abbey dipped her toes into the water.

"You guys aren't paying for the car—"

"I wanna call Paul," Abbey worried, "but I know he's not going to understand. He's not very tolerant of these things."

Tula watched the water lap against the edge of the pool. The radio was playing the chorus of *Lay Down Sally*. Derek was back in his Leopard print swim trunks. He started to sing along. “Would you tell him? About the Emergency Room?”

“No way,” Abbey said, almost laughing at the thought. “That has nothing to do with us. Besides, it would only hurt him.” Abbey stared at Marlin, floating on her back, her legs wrapped around Derek’s waist as he dragged her around the pool, singing. “I just wish I could talk to him about all this, the symbols and the accident, just how I’m feeling, without getting blamed for it.”

Lanie dumped the last of the cups into the large garbage can at the edge of the garage. “I’m Lanie, by the way,” she said, extending her hand to the black woman. They had been working side by side for the past ten minutes, policing the three bays of the garage, not bothering with chit chat. Raymond stayed in his lawn chair, silently observing the two of them work.

“Missy Liza,” she said in a wonderfully Caribbean tone. She wore a narrow cut black wool skirt and a brown turtleneck with a brightly colored batik pullover top. Her hair was braided at the roots and tied back in a broad swatch of cloth. “Nice to meet you, Lanie.”

“It’s Raymond, right?” Lanie asked, advancing toward his chair.

“Oh, don’t bother with him,” Missy Liza said, rubbing her biceps briskly to keep out a chill. It had to be close to 80 degrees. “Mr. Raymond likes to laze about, eating his cheesy doodle, smoking ganja, and skipping out on his chores.”

Raymond balled up the empty bag of Cheese Doodles and pitched it toward the trash. “She’s just pissed to be stuck cleaning ladies toilets,” he said, his nasal New Zealand accent a stark contrast to Missy Liza’s.

“Well then,” she shot back, “if someone here would get off his duff and fix the pull chain once in a while, I might be in a better humor.” Raymond leaned back in his chair.

“You work here?” Lanie asked, trying not to sound disappointed. “Cleaning bathrooms?”

“If that was all. Sometimes I cook, others I clean, mostly I make up for what Mr. Layabout fails to do.” She took a swipe at Raymond, too far away to risk hitting him. Her movement caused the sleeve of her batik blouse to rise up a bit, exposing the inside of her dark forearm. Lanie’s eyes grew wide as she caught a glimpse of the complex pattern of raised scars that covered her skin, apparently burned there as a design. The outer edges looked like a series of triangles and straight lines, intercut with a jagged lightning bolt.

Abbey felt a ripple of water , then noticed Marlin swimming up to them. She was wearing a cream colored bikini made out of macramé. The open stitch work was startlingly revealing.

“This conversation is way too serious,” Marlin said, swimming up to the edge of the pool where Abbey and Tula sat. “Laurel!” she yelled, motioning for the short-haired bartender to join them. She inadvertently sent a spray of water onto Tula’s jeans. “Bring us a couple and get your ass in here!”

Tula set her beer down at her side. With a small gesture, she splashed a few drops of water at Marlin.

“I’d be careful, dear,” Marlin teased, reaching her wet hands up to grab Tula’s calves, sending water all over the lower half of her legs.

Tula laughed awkwardly, more uncomfortable with a stranger holding her legs than with being wet. She suddenly felt Laurel’s knees pressing into her back.

“Shall we?” Laurel asked Marlin from the deck of the pool, the two of them instantly plotting against Tula and Abbey as if they’d all been friends for years.

“Woah, woah,” Abbey said, scrambling back away from the edge. She grabbed Laurel’s ankle with one hand and steadied herself with the other. “She goes, you go,” she said, smiling. The four of them froze in an unsure standoff, the stakes mounting as each wondered how far the others were willing to take this.

“Okay,” Marlin said finally, then jerked on Tula’s legs. Laurel managed to push her knees into Tula’s back at the same moment, sending her sliding into the pool. Abbey shifted her weight and knocked Laurel from behind the knees, throwing her and the two beers she was holding onto Tula and Marlin, who hadn’t had a chance to get out of the way. Abbey hurried away from the edge, laughing, as the others splashed water and sent curses her way.

“Who’s king of the hill now?” she laughed, punching her fists into her sides and flipping her chin into the air. A second later, Derek had his dark hands on her waist and picked her up off the deck, her legs kicking furiously, then dumped her into the pool.

Lanie strained to keep her attention away from the noise of the pool.

“It’s simple work,” Missy Liza said, carrying the stack of dirty gumbo bowls across the courtyard to the kitchen steps. “And it pays for my lodging, plus a little extra to set aside so I can go to be with my sister Odette, in California.”

Lanie followed, staring constantly at her forearm, hoping for a longer look at the symbol. She could hear the laughing and screaming from the pool, and figured Tula and Abbey were finally starting to have a good time. It was a small rationalization, but enough to free her mind from the guilt of stranding them. Whether they were happy or not, Lanie knew she would follow this woman anywhere, determined to know the meaning of that mark.

Lanie opened the screen door to the kitchen and let Missy Liza pass through ahead of her. Inside the house, the room was a comfortable late afternoon dim, not dark enough

yet to warrant the shock of a lamp. Missy Liza set the dishes down in the sink and turned on the water.

“She came to this country when she was 14,” she said, rolling the sleeves of her thin cotton batik top up over the sleeves of the turtleneck. Lanie hopped up on the counter and watched. “I was 11. My mother had just died, and my father thought it would be good for us girls to try to make something of ourselves, away from home. So she started sewing, and selling her designs at Port-au-Prince.” The sink was filled almost to the top with suds. Missy Liza pushed the sleeves of her turtleneck up to her elbow, exposing the intricate scar. Lanie made no effort to hide her interest.

“After a while, she made enough to hire help from the other ladies in Marbial, where we are from. Soon, the man who had been buying most of her work offered her a position in his company in Los Angeles. Said he was an import, export man. Wanted to sell her clothes to the rich Americans who lived there, said they wanted a taste of the Islands. Ahh. Never worked out, of course. But she stayed in California, selling clothes. It’s warm.” Missy Liza slid her fingers into each bowl, rubbing the sides with an old rag. With each pass, Lanie could see a new angle of the scar design, its raised edges forming a shiny contrast to the smooth flat skin underneath.

Missy Liza stared into the wall over the sink, focusing on nothing. “*Z-ami lwe se aja sere. Z-ami pre se kuto de bo. Ouay?*”

Lanie stared at her hands, not wanting to move. “I’m sorry, I—”

Missy Liza smiled, sharing a secret with herself. “I said that when your family leaves you, it is money in a safe. Sometimes, new friends are the same way. Good to know they’re there, but no good, too. They can help you, comfort, or they can trick you, hide your money, leave the drawer empty,” she dumped the suds from a bowl back into the sink. “Are you like that, Lanie?”

Lanie watched her face as she spoke, looking for some hint of how to answer. Missy Liza kept washing, stroking the inside of each dish with the damp rag, then running it clean under the faucet and laying it to dry on a towel spread on the counter. Lanie had become engrossed in her movements, dumbfounded.

Missy Liza shut off the water, and dried her hands on the edge of the towel. "You were studying my arrestation. I thought you were a *pettit -fey, mambo. Vaudouan*." Lanie curled her legs tighter on the counter. Missy Liza smiled.

"I don't know what you mean," Lanie blurted, careful to keep her fingers and toes close up against her body. She was overwhelmed with the suspicion that Missy Liza would somehow snatch them up and pop them into her mouth.

"You want to see it?" she said, pushing her sleeve up past her elbow and extending the inside of her forearm to Lanie, as if she was planning to inject her with a needle.

"Look. Look at it. My father did this."

Lanie touched the edges of the scar lightly, still uncomfortable with the sudden trust. The raised skin was grained like meat, and felt as if the tissue had been stripped off and wrapped again and again around the burned place, forming a higher wad of sinewy striations with each pass. Simply laying her fingers on the wound was enough for Lanie to sense how incredibly painful such an ordeal must have been. Missy Liza was smiling, her ~~hazel-eyes~~ much softer in the pale dusk of the room. Lanie's initial image of the power of this ~~strange new system~~ of voodoo, was starting to fade.

Missy Liza pulled her arm back to her side, and slid her sleeve down. "This sign, is of the *Masisi*. Pervert." Lanie backed onto the counter before she could stop herself, her face an insulting mask of fear. Missy Liza continued, her smile softening. "He found me, with Odette, playing in the bath. We were too old to be naked together, he thought. So he branded me with the arret of *Masisi*, the symbol of perversion. He meant it as a sign that I would be kept pure, away from that sin."

Abbey and Tula burst through the kitchen door, dripping wet and laughing. They were followed by Marlin in her bikini, then Derek, then Laurel. Laurel was cleaning her glasses on the edge of her soaking shorts. They were all out of breath.

“We’re going out,” Abbey laughed, not noticing the quiet she had just disturbed with Lanie and Missy Liza. “Hey,” she said, noticing the new face at last. “To some Dixie bar. You wanna come?”

Tula wrung her shirt out on the kitchen floor, sending a stream of water to the tile with a slap. Laurel laughed insanely at the movement, which made Tula laugh at her. “But first we have to get some dry clothes,” Tula said, running a hand along her mouth.

Marlin stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. “Last one up gets Derek’s clothes!” she screamed, then raced up through the house, her whoops trailing behind her like a pink fog.

Tula hovered a moment at the door, never hearing Lanie’s response. “You coming?”

Lanie stared down at her toes, and wiggled them a bit. The silver ring on her pinkie toe was cutting into the ball of her foot from this angle. She dared not move. “Not just yet. Go get changed.”

Tula stared at her a moment, then shrugged, and followed the trail of wet footsteps through the house.

Missy Liza moved back in front of the sink. “I think it’s time we had some tea.”

Abbey followed Laurel through the bedroom door. The room faced the front of the house, and on the third floor, afforded a prime view of the building across the street. There was an elaborate stone studded crucifix carved into the stucco. Laurel stomped over to the window shade and yanked it shut.

“Grab a pair of jeans,” Laurel said as she stripped off her tee shirt and kicked her feet free from her waterlogged shoes. “You’ll have to get a shirt from Marlin.”

Abbey glanced around at the various piles of clothes, at least one near each of the four bunk beds. She eventually pulled a pair of Levi’s from an unfolded pile in the corner. Laurel was reapplying her lipstick in a section of the cracked mirror propped over the bureau. Other than the beds, it was the only piece of furniture in the room.

Abbey moved over to the door and wriggled out of her wet jeans, trying to contain the water in a small puddle. She pulled on the dry pair, then noticed a man staring into the room from the hallway. She turned her back on him and finished buttoning the fly, embarrassed to be caught off guard.

“Travis, get out of the hall,” Laurel called, her own pants cracked open to reveal her green undies and a very small, cobalt blue moon tattoo with three gold stars. She was brushing her hair back in quick vigorous strokes, the motion of the brush jerking her black glasses from side to side.

Travis smiled at Abbey, then stepped out of sight.

“God, that little freak is always watching me dress,” Laurel said, tossing the brush into the corner of the room. Abbey stepped to the closet to root for a dry shirt.

“Hey,” Tula said, appearing behind her in tight black pants and a silver rayon shirt. She had it unbuttoned over a tight black tank top. There were matching rhinestone studded daisies in her hair.

“What happened to you?” Abbey asked, soaking up the transformation. Tula’s usually pale lips were now blood red, the wisps of her bangs swept off her face and into the strategically placed barrettes.

“Marlin,” Laurel said, noting her displeasure with the *tres fashionable* look on her way out the door. Tula shrugged at Abbey, the two of them now alone in Marlin’s room.

Lanie settled into one of the wing chairs by the window in the front room. The glass beaded chandelier hanging from the center of the room was festooned with enough Mardi Gras beads that it looked like it might fall from the weight. She leaned her head back along the edge of the chair to study it, feeling the crush of the velvet curtain against her cheek. "How does this place go from being full of people to being deathly quiet in a matter of minutes?" she asked, her gaze wandering onto the ceiling of the next room, and the other chandelier.

"They get so crazy to go out, party in the Quarter," Missy Liza said, drawing her legs up onto the couch. "This place is here for them to eat and sleep."

Lanie held her tea, still too hot to drink, and glanced around the room. She could hear music playing from upstairs, and the occasional scream from Marlin or some other girl being chased from one room to the other. She noticed the empty fireplace at her right, and imagined it as a cauldron for heating the thick iron rods that Missy Liza's father must have used to burn designs into her skin. She couldn't tell if Missy Liza was proud of what her father did, or if she wore the scars as testament to his cruelty, and that's why she felt so at ease to talk about them.

"So ask me. About the burning," Missy Liza said, staring deep into her mug.

Lanie thought back to just a few hours ago with the voodoo paper, and the sense of power and complete energy she felt. She wished for it back now. "Do you agree with what he did?"

Missy Liza sipped her tea. "Of course not."

"Then why do you talk about it, why did you show me?" Lanie asked, ignoring the waves of heat seeping through her cup onto her sensitive fingertips.

"I said why. I thought you were a *Vaudouan*. A voodoo worker. I had a feeling you would come. That's why I left you the *vève*, on the glass."

Lanie felt a tear forming, irritated and betrayed by her swelling emotions.

Missy Liza blew into her mug to cool the tea. "I knew you would understand. The Masisi. It is something that you struggle with, even now."

Lanie felt her chin shake, and raised her mug to her lips to try to stop it. She watched a tear drop into her tea. She wiped her cheek quickly, then bent over to set the steaming mug on the ground.

"Don't be ashamed," Missy Liza said. "It was years before I knew this about myself." She glanced down at her forearm, flexing her fingers to make the singed flesh dance. "My father, in his grief. He was so foolish. Scared of the air, the water. Fire. He mistook two girls playing for sexual desire. We are sisters!" Missy Liza's face curled into a disturbing mix of joy and regret. "Little did he know, his branding only drew my attention to a desire, a passion, buried deep within myself." She smoothed her dark palm across her own face, leaning into it like it was a lover's hand. Lanie watched her stroke herself, and felt the comfort of Missy Liza's skin, felt her own tears being wiped away. She swallowed hard.

"That is what drew for you, Lanie. To stop the burning from coming again."

Excerpt from the full-length play
The Culture of Ascent

The Culture of Ascent

Cast

Nina, 24, mountain climber
Alex, 28, Nina's husband, climber and documentary filmmaker
Helena, 82, Nina's late grandmother, an Italian immigrant, present only in memory

Muse (voice of Swedish climber Anja Christa; coach; feminist reporter)
Viper (female sports announcer; physician / authority; Senator; reporter)
Talisman (male journalist; lobbyist; Senator; voice of Japanese sponsor)

Set

A fluid area that quickly shifts between all outdoor / non-home locations and the front parlor of Grandma Helena's brownstone. In it, a remote-controlled video camera, a tripod, and a working television with a VCR are set up and aimed at the couch. The floor is littered with video tapes.

Scene 1

The sound of breathing is heard, amplified. It builds from rhythmic to exerted to strained throughout the monologue.

Lights up on Helena, in a 1940's-era housecoat. She stands in the unreal "non-home" stage space, and holds a shallow pan. She spreads her fingers inside it as if forcing dough into the corners.

Helena

(Laughing) Your mother never did have the patience for pizza. Oh she could eat it all right, so hot from the oven it scalded the roof of her mouth. Burned the tips of her fingers. And she knew, she knew how hot the pan gets at 500 degrees, so much bubbled oil underneath, and a spoonful on top to keep the tomato paste moist. Your Mama. She learned just like you to make the "peetz" the old-fashioned way, no cheese! Ahh. It's like she didn't care, hm? Some days, the look on her face, I thought she would dare the sauce to burn her. Couldn't wait. But not my Nina. You, God gave some sense.

Helena continues working, as if the conversation hasn't stopped. Lights up next to her on Nina, who runs furiously (either in place, or using a mini-tramp or a treadmill to keep her moving). Her breathing grows louder. She continues running through Helena's monologue.

Helena (Throws the pan, furious) What did you expect me to do? Eh? I had no money, no job—they would have taken away this house, Mallory! How else could I have fed you and kept a roof on your head, and your daughter? Don't say that. Don't you raise your voice to me. You don't, you don't understand—stop it. Stop it now! Keep your hands off her! No I won't listen to that. Not in this house, not ever! Baby. This is between you and me now. For God's sake look at yourself. You can't even stand up.

Nina stops moving abruptly and paces around the darkened stage, panting with fear. Lights up gradually to show Nina pacing in the front parlor of Grandma Helena's brownstone. She has just returned from a long run through the city at dawn.

Nina tries to catch her breath before taking her pulse. She disrobes slightly as she paces the room, slowing her breathing.

She crosses to a chart taped to the wall and makes a note, nodding, and gasping for air.

Nina Thirteen-two. Not bad. Not bad at all.

She grabs a bottle of water and empties it in one swig.

Nina Alex?

Nina sits on the couch in front of the camera.

Spot on Helena in the corner of the room.

Helena (Sobbing) Let me take her, please. Can't you see what you are doing to her? *Mio dio a cielo, chidere*—It's not right. It's not right. *Che brutta faccia*, it's not right—

Nina (To next room) Jesus, come on!

Lights out on Helena as Nina stirs on the couch. She turns on the camera.

Nina *(Speaking into it)* Just ran a three mile—shit. Training Log for Nina Scott, day 243. It's ah—5:30 am. Just finished a three mile run through the valley in just over thirteen minutes. Goal is three miles in 12, so I'm looking good. I should reach that before the qualifying climb next week. What else. Waking temperature 92, pulse rate 40, appetite good, mind clear, vision strong.

Nina leans over and pulls a paper from under the chair cushion, reading it.

Nina I think that's all the physical stuff. *(Continues reading)* Oh, yeah—monthly blood work due back from the lab—

She stops the tape and rewinds it audibly while she does a quick search of the room.

Nina Alex, get up! Where's the mail?

Nina returns to the couch empty-handed. She starts the recorder.

Nina Glucose and urine strips looked normal. I haven't heard from the lab on the oxygen levels, cholesterol and all that, but I'm not worried about it. I feel good during my runs, and I'm practicing my climbs with the clear bag sealed over my head, now, so I can adjust to the reduced oxygen. And I'm up to fifteen minutes, before I get lightheaded, so that's up. No problem with that.

She holds the remote control in front of her and pauses before switching off the tape, as if considering whether to continue. She shuts it off.

Nina stares offstage toward the bedroom and squints, contemplating what to do.

Lights up on Helena in the opposite corner, with the shallow pan. She is upbeat.

Helena See how delicate, Nina? The dough is very light. That's what gives the crunch when it cooks. You have to smooth it very carefully so not to break. Use a little oil on your fingers. That will help to stretch it. That's it. *Bene, molto bene. Che bella figlia, mia Nina*—Ah ah ah, not so stiff! See? A hole in the corner. If we leave it, it will burn. Watch me. Use steady pressure, with all your fingers, and move out, out, slowly, even, until you touch the edge. Hold it

Helena there for a moment and it will stick. Good. Now watch me, eh? We're going to fix that hole . . .

Lights out on Helena abruptly, as Nina turns her attention back to the video recorder. She changes the tape quickly, excitedly.

Nina I'm doing it without you! Alex?

Nina glances at the sheet and reads quickly.

Nina (Upbeat) Psychological. Please respond to the blah blah, taking special note zah zah zah. How do you feel? I feel great. What is your goal? To reach the summit of Mount Everest. To be the youngest female climber to make it to the top. (*Glances at the sheet*) Why are you doing this? To, uh, To—shit.

Nina makes a face, then pauses the tape. She rewinds it audibly then records again.

Nina To reach the top. To be the first female to summit on her own, on her first climb, with no climbing team. To document the physiological changes that occur in the body at high altitude, in women. To further our research and bring us all home safely. Prove we can do it. Bring us home.

Nina shakes her head. She rewinds it audibly then records again.

Nina (Solemnly) For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to scale the highest peak on Earth. This trip will, ugh.

She rewinds again, really considering the question before continuing. She presses record.

Nina Why am I doing this. I'd say "because it's there," but that's been said before. The problem is, it's true. I want to do it because I know I can. My grandfather . . . he was a climber, and my mother and dad, too, they both loved to climb. They'd do anything for it. When I was young, we'd go to scaling walls and Pike's Peak and all that. So I guess I caught the bug early. I used to dream about scaling Mt. Everest, the three of us, there together. First family ever to summit. Well. Dreams don't always work out. My dad . . . he doesn't climb, anymore. My mom either. Neither of them even made it out of the country when they were into it, let alone . . . now. But for a long time now, as long as I can remember, really, I've wanted to do this.

Nina I almost can't explain it; it's like there's this great big icy dare just waiting for me, taunting me. And I know I can do it, I can feel it. It's what I'm supposed to do with my life.

Alex walks in during the taping, rubbing his eyes. His presence startles Nina. Nina shuts off the camera

Nina Hey. Good morning.

Alex What are you doing?

Nina I'm taping.

Alex I thought we agreed, Nina.

Nina You were asleep.

Alex You know you can't answer the questions yourself. You have to be interviewed.

Alex snatches the remote and plays the tape back, listening to Nina's recording in the background. He cringes.

Nina Welp, then get your butt out of bed. *(Softer)* It's just the answers that are important, not the questions.

Alex 'It's what I'm supposed to do with my life.' God. *(He throws the remote on the couch next to Nina.)*

Nina So now you don't like the answers, either.

Alex You've got to be kidding me.

Nina What? I meant that.

Alex I doesn't matter if you meant it. It sounds ridiculous.

Nina Yeah, yeah.

Alex It's my fucking film, Nina. We're going to erase it, and do it over.

Nina *(Disregarding him)* Cranky, cranky—I don't know how you're gonna make it on the mountain, no coffee, no paper, no extra snooze.

Nina reaches toward Alex as he rewinds the tape. He lets her cuddle him, but stays gruff.

- Alex How I'm going to make it. Did you run this morning?
- Nina Of cour—
- Alex Are you at 12 yet?
- Nina 13-2. But it felt good, you know?
- Alex That's behind schedule.
- Nina It's not like I'm planning to run up the mountain.
- Alex That's behind schedule. Either we're going to do this or we're going to do this. Sometimes you act like it's no big deal.
- Nina Listen, at least I went running this morning.
- Alex You've got to be the best, honey. Anja Christa is this close to beating us up Everest, and if she takes the lead, there goes our angle. Don't you want to be the youngest woman to make it to the summit? We'll never get any coverage with her in the spotlight. You have to be totally dedicated. There can be no other distractions in your life—
- Nina No shit, Alex. What is wrong with you? (*Smoothing his hair*) You were so restless last night.
- Alex I don't have good news.
- Nina What is it.
- Alex I think we should set up the camera first.
- Nina Just tell me, Alex.
- Alex It's not something I can just blurt out—
- Nina What is it?
- Alex Your lab results are back.
- Nina And? What? Is my oxygen up? (*Slowly*) Is it worse?

Alex stares at his hands.

Alex I really think we should be filming this.

Nina Why, to catalog my breakdown? Did they find something wrong, Alex? (*Beat.*) Jesus, will you stop looking at me like that. Tell me what it said—

Alex I—I don't know how.

Alex moves toward the camera.

Nina goes to the bedroom to find the results and returns, reading the letter from the lab. She is stunned.

Nina How long have you known.

Alex Since yesterday.

Nina (*Through tears*) I see.

Alex points the camera at Nina, then walks away, his back to her.

Lights up on Helena in the corner of the room, clapping her hands together as if entertaining a little child. She sings a rousing Italian folk song: Quando Mama Soltzia Villa. Nina grows sicker as the song progresses in her head.

Lights fade on Helena. Nina does not move.

Alex holds his hand out to her, but does not look at her. Nina stares at his hand.

Nina Look at me, Alex.

Alex returns to the camera.

Nina Why won't you look at me, Alex.

Alex Because you'll see how I feel. You know what this does, Nina. You know it. And I know it. And I'm not ready to give up everything we've worked for. And I know deep down that makes me a shit. And I hate it, and it shames me, but in the ball of my gut I know it's the truth. (*Breaking down*) And when I look at you, I see everything we hav—I have, everything *I* have *chosen* to give up, to sacrifice, for this. I don't want it, I don't want it. Not this choice.

Alex We shouldn't have to choose. (*Buries his head.*) It's not right. I can't think about this and do what I have to do. If I think, then I'll start to—I can't. I can't do it. Not now.

Nina (*Wounded*) Are you through?

Alex Don't judge me for being honest, Nina. For knowing myself.

Nina Now are you through?

Alex stares at the ground, checking himself to see how far over the line he has gone.

Nina Huh. Can we just, hold each other, for a moment? I mean, before we talk about completely changing our lives and rethinking, rethinking every *fucking* thing—can we just sit together and say to each other, gee honey. What a shock?

Alex hugs her. Nina sobs.

Alex It will be all right. Everything will be all right. We'll find a way to work through this.

Nina How? How can we possibly work through this?

Alex Nina—

Nina How, Alex? What kind of plan is there for a (*choking on the words*) pregnant climber—

Alex Let's not talk about it now. I've had a few hours to adjust, to think through things, but you need some time. To think about things.

Nina I don't want to be pregnant, Alex.

Alex I know.

Nina No, you don't know. I don't want it. I don't feel it. I can't have this now, I can't be a pregnant climber, Alex, this won't work. This won't work for me.

Alex (*Heavy sigh.*) I know.

Nina (*Pacing*) I can't have it. I can't do this. I'm not ready to be mother. I mean, there's no alternative.

Alex We've got plenty of time, to take care of—

Nina I can't *not* have it, Alex. That's not an option.

Alex (*Confused*) Okay.

Nina What do you think this is?

Alex I just thought, I mean, we always said, and you agreed—
decided, you decided what we would do. So. If things are
different now, then, I guess, okay—

Nina Yes, things are different now. I am five weeks and two days
away from a flight to the base of Mount Everest, Alex. Do
you understand me?

Alex Yes.

Nina And now I have to give all that up.

Alex (*Slowly*) If you want.

Nina No I don't *want*, you selfish prick. What I want is to be
three days from yesterday and having my period, on time,
every month, like I'm supposed to. That's what's supposed
to happen, Alex. Not this.

Alex I know.

Nina So there is no reason for me to be pregnant. This is not part
of my plan.

Alex I know.

Nina If you say I know one more fucking time I'm going to
squeeze your throat so tight your eyeballs pop out.

Alex What do you want me to say, Nina? That it's great? That I'm
so happy? That this is easy, just chucking it all. That you
should have an abortion—

Nina is hurt by the word.

Alex Is that what you want? I can't even say it, and you think you
can do it.

Nina Don't threaten me—

Alex That's fine. You know? We've had setbacks before. First your mother barging in on us, with all that AA shit—

Nina Just stop.

Alex Then your Grandmother got sick, her funeral. She left us this house, we moved in here—all during training, all testing your focus. Then your mother starts in again, trying to contest the inheritance—

Nina Stop it.

Alex Why? We got through it. Our focus changed, life got in the way, and we accommodated. We still managed to keep the climb at the top of the list. This is no different.

Nina I can't be pregnant and climb.

Alex So don't be pregnant.

Nina I can't—

Alex So don't climb.

Nina This is not a snap decision, Alex.

Alex No. This was an arduous decision, that we both made, and struggled with, years ago. Excuse me if I don't care to relive it.

Nina Why don't you just say it.

Alex Say what?

Nina Say that you want me to end it.

Alex Why? So you can blame me for the rest of your life? What if I want it? Did you think of that? Let's say I want to keep it, let's have this baby and spend the next 30 years playing house, then you'll resent me for taking away your dream.

Nina So one word from you determines my whole life? I asked you to say what you thought, Alex. That doesn't mean I'll do what you say.

Alex I knew you would do this. I absolutely knew it.

Nina What's that supposed to mean?

Alex It means that you're not really—
This is a test, Nina. You need to come to your own
conclusion on this one. We talked all through this before.
You know where I stand. This is on your head.

Nina Well I want to keep it.

Alex Fine.

Nina Good.

Alex Great.

Nina I'm glad you approve.

Alex I don't approve! God! Are you even serious?

Nina The truth emerges.

Alex You haven't given this any thought. You're just trying to
push me, to force me into making your choice for you, and
then take all the blame.

Nina I didn't capture your sperm in your sleep, Alex. You had a
hand in this, just like me. You have a hand in this choice,
just like me. I'm just the warehouse. We both bought the
goods.

Alex Well I'm not ready to pay. This is not about our future. I
want to make babies with you, Nina. I want to be a father.
But I can do that in ten years. I can't climb this mountain
forever. Neither can you.

Nina I just don't know if I have it in me.

Alex Which?

Nina Either.

Alex So that's it.

Nina Alex—

Alex No, I knew it.

Nina Knew what?

Alex Which is it, Nina? I can't take much more of this. First your mother needs you, then your grandmother needs you, then the house needs you, now the baby needs you.

Nina Oh, give me a—

Alex I need you, Nina. I need you to focus on your commitments to me and this marriage and this climb. If I didn't know better I'd ask how it . . .

Nina How what? You think I wanted this to happen?

Alex I'm just saying it's all a little convenient.

Nina Fuck you. I have never had anything more inconvenient in my life.

Alex You needed something to get in the way, so you could back out of the climb.

Nina Don't you dare—

Alex Don't deny it. You know it yourself. Your run times are down. You're still not up to 20 minutes with the oxygen depleter on the short wall. Admit it. You started thinking about the next four months, about fifteen vertical feet over the North Cym, and you knew you couldn't hack it. You're not even there yet and you're petrified you're going to fall. So you fell early, didn't you?

Nina Don't you lecture me on commitment. It's my house we're selling, it's my money that's taking us on this little adventure. It's my body that's climbing that hill, not yours. It's my story that's the point of your little movie—and that's all it is, Alex. A movie. Not a film. Not an expose. A movie, shot on a ridiculous video camera.

Alex I'm converting it to film after I've narrowed the footage—

Nina Nobody cares about conversions. If it's not on film it's not a film—

Alex That's how people do it, Nina. That's how dreams get accomplished. You do what you have to do to get it done.

Nina I'm selling my grandmother's house!

Alex We're back to this again.

Nina Yes, we are. Because what are you offering? Nothing.

Alex Don't turn this around.

Nina You know, she passed over her own daughter to leave me this house, a house she worked her whole life just to afford. And the first thing you'd have me do is sell it. Nice.

Alex You are the problem here, not the baby. You are sabotaging this trip.

Nina I'm scared, Alex! Okay? I'm scared. I'm scared to sell the house. I'm scared to sell out my family for a plane ticket, to reduce my grandmother's legacy to a pile of money—

Alex Spare me the melodrama.

Nina No? How about the truth. I'm scared if I have this baby that I'll hate it, that I'll never make it up Everest and I'll hate it like my mother hated me. I'm scared of what I'll do to it, of being alone with it, of having it inside of me. I'm scared to stand here with this thing depending on me when I'm not sure I can depend on myself. I'm scared if I give it up then I'll never forgive myself. I'll never forgive you. What if I do? I do and I can't ever have a kid again? What if I do, and I go to climb and I don't make it to the top, or I do make it but not before somebody else, or I summit and the top is just a flat step on a tall hill? What if it isn't enough? What if I die, or worse, that I live and have to find a way to deal with this overwhelming sense of failure?

Alex starts to straighten up and pack his tapes.

Nina I can't do this, Alex. I'm not equipped to be a mother. Don't you understand me?

Alex You're not ready for this climb.

Nina Don't tell me what to do. If I can't be honest with you—

Alex It's foolish and irresponsible to try to train through this—no matter what you decide. I don't know what I was thinking. This is too much for you to deal with. Foolish and—

Nina Having a child would be foolish and irresponsible. Frankly I'd rather put it out of its misery than subject another living thing to what I went through. With her and with you.

Alex Nice.

Nina I'm serious.

Alex What are you saying. Either you want it or you don't.

Nina I want it.

Alex Fine.

Nina I want the climb.

Alex (*Softly*) Fine.

Alex moves to touch Nina. She jerks away. Nina climbs on the (exercise machine of choice) and works out, feverishly. Alex straightens up the house, then sits in front of the TV and reviews his tapes.

Lights up on Helena during above action.

Helena (*To a child*) You are such a pretty girl. Don't cry! That's how boys are, mm? Little boys with little minds and big mouths. No granddaughter of mine is an ugly horse-lipped welfare case. You should laugh when you hear that, it's so ridiculous! (*Beat*) Well, she's not here now, Nina. I don't know. I miss her, too.

Lights out on Helena . Alex puts in the tape of Anja Christa.

Alex plays the tape. Helene wanders through Nina's thoughts intermittently. Lights up on her when she speaks; there is never a break in the video. When Helene speaks, she speaks overtop of the video. The audience must strain to focus on one or the other.

NOTE: Dialogue shown side by side is performed simultaneously, with Nina / Alex / Helene's dialogue taking precedence (others lower their volume drastically).

Announcer (VOT)

“And in the world of mountaineering, a new face has emerged at the head of the pack. 26 year old Anja Christa from Sweden is well on her way to becoming the youngest woman ever to reach the top of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world.”

Anja (VOT)

“Ever since I was a little girl, I had a dream to scale Mt. Everest. My father has scaled, my uncle has scaled, my mother has scaled—all have reached high, high, high, and Papa once reached very near the top. We climb together, we climb apart. It’s in my blood. I have worked very hard for this opportunity, and I am strong climber without oxygen. “I am grateful for the support of the Height Foundation and of my country. I know I will reach the top.”

Announcer (VOT)

“At 118 pounds and only five feet three inches, little Anja doesn’t seem likely to achieve her monstrous goal. But inside that tiny frame beats the heart of a champion.”

Coach (VOT)

(Swedish) “She was always a climber, ya? Mountains are way of life here. Anja developed as a climber at a very young age. Unlike these others, she knows how to handle herself in high altitude.”

Nina

Not again, will you turn that shit off? I’ve got enough on my mind without that Swedish waif crawling under my skin.

Alex

You’re going to be on the same hill at the same time, Nina. You’d better get used to it.

Nina

God damn ESPN.

Announcer (VOT)

“With over 150 climbers losing their lives on Everest since it was first scaled in 1953, little Anja’s dream is not an easy one. In truth, the extreme altitude kills more people than the climb itself, causing severe dizziness and coughing spells. Just imagine what usually goes on at 26,000 feet above the sea—airplanes fly, with pressurized cabins.”

Anja (VOT)

“When I climbed the [Kolomundo], I suffered a mild form of altitude sickness? Coughing, diarrhea, and such. I snapped one of my ribs from coughing, but I still climbed my own way down. No oxygen.”

Announcer (VOT)

“With her extensive background in mountaineering, Anja Christa is used to mid-height climbs without supplemental oxygen. Most climbers bring small tanks of oxygen with them when they climb, enabling them to receive a steady stream of air through a mask. Otherwise, their bodies are forced to function on one half or even one third of the normal amount of oxygen. Such extreme conditions take their toll on the brain.”

Helena

Get down from there, child! Bookcases are for books, not little girls. Just like my Vito. Your grandfather used to love to climb. First trees in the park, then sides of buildings to wash windows, anything high. Your mother, too, before the drink—this is not a talk for a little girl. Go wash your face.

Alex

See that? Right there, in the corner. That’s Bob Costas. Jesus.

Nina

You’ve seen that tape 100 times, and that’s the first time you noticed he was there? Nice detail, Alex.

Authority (VOT)

“The air near the top of a mountain as high as Mt. Everest is very, very thin. In order to prevent serious injury, climbers must and almost always do rely on additional oxygen, via an oxygen canister or tank. Without supplemental oxygen, the body cannot exist for long periods at extremely high altitudes. Climbers who ignore this advice—no matter how experienced—almost always experience brain injury as a result.”

Announcer (VOT)

“But hard-core climbers rarely listen to the experts. Instead, they look to life-long mountaineers like the Sherpas, natives to this icy mountain, who have been climbing Everest, and reaching the summit, for years.”

Anja (VOT)

“It’s the family way. My father was a climber, my mother, too. This was their dream as much for me. I am a child of this mountain.”

Announcer (VOT)

“To experienced high-altitude climbers, like Anja Christa, Mt. Everest represents less of a technical challenge than a mental one. The entire mountain is a virtual sheet of ice, with constant streams of air threatening to literally blow climbers off the mountain at higher elevations. Unlike some of the

Nina starts to look haggard.

Nina

I know it’s mental but I’m feeling exhausted all of the sudden.

She continues working as hard as before.

Helene

What are you doing to her? She’s just a child, Mallory! You can’t drag her with you to every bar in town. You left her at the bus station so you could go off with that, that thing and do whatever it is you do for what, for money? For booze, or worse. Don’t bring your filth into this house. You are a cancer on us, on your own baby!

Announcer (VOT)

more technically demanding mountains, Everest is for the plodders. Put one foot in front of the other, day after day over a series of weeks, and with the right training, assistance—and money—you're likely to reach the top."

Nina struggles to continue.

Alex watches her, pained, then turns off the tape. He stills her on the machine.

Alex We need to make a decision, here.

Nina I know.

Alex Maybe . . .

Nina Alex—

Alex Maybe there's a way to go to Everest, and not sell the house.

Nina We need to talk, about the baby.

Alex This is about the baby.

Nina Not another scheme, Alex. I can't take it right now.

Alex You said yourself we need an angle.

Nina There is no way to get funding for a climber who can't climb.

Alex Maybe not. But you're pregnant.

Nina I'm going to bed.

Alex Listen to me. You know in your heart that you don't want this baby.

Nina How can you just say it? Just like that?

Alex It's time to cut our losses. This is self-preservation time, Nina, and it won't be pretty. Think of everything you're doing to yourself to make this climb reality. You know that this child will not work.

Nina I'm scared—I don't want an abortion—

Alex You don't need one.

Nina Stop.

Alex Listen. What if, we went ahead with the climb, with you pregnant, and made it work to our advantage?

Nina You're too disgusting for me to listen to, okay?

Alex How is this any different than climbing over dead, frozen bodies, clinging to the side of a mountain that they never conquered, just so you can reach the summit? People die on Everest. There are casualties. This is one.

Nina What are you saying?

Alex We don't want this. We didn't plan this. Let's make the best of the situation and get what we can out of it.

Nina How?

Alex You know you're not going to keep it. But no one else has to know that.

Nina Who cares if I'm pregnant?

Alex Everyone. This is our angle. This is our edge. You're start a media frenzy—half the people will be outraged that your attempting it at all—

Nina Attempting what?

Alex To climb Everest pregnant.

Nina You're insane.

Alex The other half will be falling over themselves to support you, learn from you, boost you up. This is it, this is our edge.

Nina They'll crucify me.

Alex All we need is one, one supporter, with lots of cash. There's got to be some women's libber out there riding the pro choice bandwagon.

Nina This isn't pro choice, Alex. This is pro torture, torturing the unborn.

Alex No one has to know.

Nina What?

Alex You don't want this baby! How are you any different from a crack mother living on the street, shooting up three times a day? That child is tortured every moment of its life until she either dies herself or kills it.

Nina That is so not the same.

Alex You'll be the ultimate working mother!

Nina Ha!

Alex Think of it. Research potential. Remember when women weren't even allowed to work when they were pregnant? Maybe this is just the next step. Seeing how far the body can go, how much it can endure. If you're strong enough.

Nina So I announce the pregnancy, like a gimmick, and start the climb with the baby intact? Is that it? Then when I'm half way up or too tired or whatever, then I just miscarry. Morning after pill, all that?

Alex shrugs.

Nina You've got to be kidding. That is the most—

Alex I know, I know. Barbaric. But is it? We know the truth. We know, just us, that this baby is never going to work. You're only a few days pregnant now; we're talking cells. If we do this, if we do it this way, we can get what we want, and keep the house, and get a little help from the media.

Nina They're certainly willing to help everybody else.

Alex It can be our secret. No one has to know.

Nina *(Laughs)* I can't believe we're even talking about this.

Nina touches Alex's cheek, then gives him a brief kiss.

Nina We're tired, we're stressed, we're talking crazy. I'm going to bed. Maybe I'll have some idea of what to do with myself in the morning. Come on. Let's act normal for a few minutes.

Alex In a minute.

Nina exists. Alex picks up the phone.

Vita

