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MOTHER ROAD

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MOTHER ROAD

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Lauren Hohle

Spring 2017

THESIS OF LAUREN HOHLE APPROVED BY

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"Anything I could not decipher I turned into fiction,
which was my way of untangling knots."

—Mavis Gallant, "Varieties of Exile"

Promise Me

Laura Maier was back from college and standing at the donut table in Christ Lutheran's lobby, looking at the remaining crust of an unglazed cake donut as if she had a choice to make. She clutched a droopy drawstring purse that Hannah could see contained a small rectangular box.

"Hey, how's Mizzou?" Hannah asked, stepping beside her so that she could see what Laura was staring at.

"Oh, it's good." She looked at Hannah as if she hadn't recognized her voice, as if they hadn't grown up together. "I think that oil stain is shaped like a seahorse holding a tennis racket. What do you think that says about me?"

Hannah thought for a moment. "I think I see cigarettes in your bag, what does that say about you?"

Laura shot her a focused look.

"I won't say anything"—Hannah lowered her voice—"I'm just surprised that you brought them here."

Laura softened. "I guess I *wanted* someone to notice."

They relocated to the church's roof, and continued their conversation sitting cross-legged between two exhaust fans, and away from the window they'd squeezed through. "Looks like I haven't put on that freshman fifteen," Laura said. "Cigarettes are good for one thing."

Laura pulled out her pack of Camel Turkish Golds and lit one. The box was crumpled as if it had been sat on or shoved under something. There were four or five already missing.

"I get that they're cool," Hannah said.

Laura took a long drag, tilted her chin up as she slowly exhaled. "It's just that I feel different, and people keep looking at me, expecting me to be the same." She stretched her legs and crossed them at her ankles, grabbing the empty Altoid tin she had brought to ash into. She flicked her fingers knocking her cigarette against the box's ledge.

Hannah understood what she meant. She felt different too, carrying her secret. She and Marshall had done it, had continued to do it. She was no longer a virgin, or a good Christian girl, yet people still found it necessary to apologize to her when they said the word "fuck."

"If you want to look different, why don't you just get a haircut?"

Laura, who had been inhaling, coughed at this, and Hannah thought she could see smoke trail from the corners of her smile.

"I probably should." She bent her legs back to cross-legged and straightened her back into that perfect ballet posture Hannah had always been jealous of. She shook her hair forward. "How bout a bowl cut?"

"It's for your health," Hannah said and Laura smiled again. Hannah was grateful for this.

"I have this professor who says he wishes it was the 1950s again so that he could smoke and drive a big car and not feel bad about it."

"Ignorance is bliss," Hannah said, though she didn't mean it. There was a part of her that wanted to feel bad, would love guilt to cling to her like smoke, be absorbed by her clothes and hair. It would be simpler for her to feel that way.

Instead her heart felt full and she was enjoying her body as if some gate had been opened, trampled. Marshall, her boyfriend, was tender and inquisitive, and she would catch herself daydreaming about tumbling onto the air mattress in his basement, feeling the weight of his body on hers, the pleasant jolt of her bra becoming unclasped, her hand unbuttoning his jeans.

She liked him, and liked his family, yet the only future she could imagine between them involved her getting arrested at a protest, and Marshall seeing it on the news and bailing her out, or representing the community she'd helped organize in a fight against Monsanto, and in an alley somewhere by the courthouse they'd share a deep kiss, and maybe they'd spend a night of passion together in his swanky house with its Jacuzzi and king-sized bed. Then in the morning, they'd gracefully part ways.

Marshall was going to Wash U the next year and would become a lawyer. Hannah still hadn't decided where she'd go to college. She had scholarships to schools in Illinois, Indiana, and California, like daisies, waiting to be plucked.

As Laura stubbed out her cigarette she said, "Promise me something."

Hannah asked what she would be getting herself into, but Laura insisted, "You have to promise me before I tell you what it is."

"Okay," Hannah said, rolling her eyes, but willing to risk it in order to appease her. "I promise."

"I want you to skip school and ride the train at Grant's Farm."

Hannah was surprised by the lightness of this request. She had expected Laura to ask her to promise not to smoke, or not tell anyone, or offer some vague advice about "staying true to yourself," or "opening your mind to new experiences." Grant's Farm was Budweiser's petting zoo, a place they had frequented as kids bottle-feeding baby goats as their parents drank, though they did not necessarily go there together. The train was adult-sized, at least, and skipping school

was doable. All she needed was a note. She could forge her father's handwriting, though she had only forged band practice cards, and had never left campus before.

She would honor Laura's request, or dare, which it felt more like. Hannah suspected that Laura had assumed she needed this juvenile debauchery to loosen her up, guide her away from the binds Laura now saw herself free from. Laura had always been ahead of Hannah, passing on dresses that were too small for her, but for Hannah, were the perfect size. This time, Laura was a step behind. Hannah was also no longer the person she seemed to be.

She was the kind of person, if there was a kind, who rode shotgun on I44 for miles, perfectly naked, the seatbelt settled between her small breasts. Sixty miles an hour and her clothes at her feet, her body lit by moonlight, the headlights of passing cars. She would see herself, the passenger, in geometric slices—pale and luminous and powerful. She knew, that though she had experienced it in Marshall's company, it had nothing to do with him, that feeling.

There was a slight drizzle the day she planned to skip. Hannah wore a rain jacket and felt foolish paying full-price admission at the nearly empty park. She hadn't wanted to show her student ID, and felt silly for that precaution and how her heart rate had quickened standing there.

Hannah got her ticket and found the train waiting. It wouldn't leave for another five minutes, but the conductor let her board. From where she sat, the animals were mostly out of sight, in barns perhaps, Hannah didn't know where they kept them, but even though it was cold and the rain blew into the car sideways, the grass stretching out on either side of the path was green, green, green.

The train wasn't a real train—there was no track, and it resembled a series of golf carts strung together. Hannah took the front seat so that no one could sit across from her, and

pictured herself going home early and taking a nap in her painted-brass daybed. She snapped a picture of her elbow sticking out of the train window and texted it to Laura.

Over the loudspeaker the train conductor said, "You're not in school?" Hannah flushed, which he saw, because he turned around and apologized for not turning off his microphone. His hair was white but his skin was smooth. He looked old, but vibrant, a man who ate well and got plenty of exercise. "I'm not used to seeing people your age on weekdays." His small, friendly eyes bore into Hannah. She felt as if a stake had skewered her to the seat.

"I'm home from college," she lied. "It's spring break."

"I was going to say," he said, "most places around here don't have spring break for another few weeks."

Hannah straightened her shoulders. "I know. It's been a boring visit. There's no one to hang out with." She hoped that would explain her presence, hoped the conversation would drop. An older couple slid into the car behind her.

"What school do you go to?" the woman of the couple asked, reaching her arm out of the door to close her umbrella.

The train lurched forward. Hannah hesitated. "Soka University," she offered, trying the answer on. Her father had consented to her application because of their large financial aid packages, but Hannah was drawn to its proximity to the beach, and the warm feeling she got talking to the admissions officer about the school's humanities concentration and its founding Buddhist principals. Now it appealed to her because it was beyond driving distance. She didn't trust herself, didn't want to make the decision to stay close by because of Marshall, even subconsciously.

"Where's that?" the husband asked, a note of accusation in his voice.

"In Orange County, nine miles driving from the beach," Hannah quoted from Soka's website. "My friends and I go all the time."

"You're not very tan," the conductor said off-speaker, then turning it on, he pointed out the American sycamores they were passing, and the kind of soil make-up that enables them to flourish.

"That's a common misconception," Hannah fired back, finding a stride in her role. She had never been much of an actress, was cast as a flower girl in her kindergarten production of *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, and since then had only appeared in the school musicals as unnamed chorus. But this time she was just herself, one year from now. "It's so hot most of the time that I stick to the shade, or wear a big floppy hat." She smiled and the woman smiled back at her. "I'd forgotten how friendly people in the Midwest can be."

Hannah turned to look at the trees lining the paved path. The conductor went into the history of the sycamores, and which members of the Grant family had planted them. She pretended to be interested.

"Have you been to an Angel's game yet?" the man of the couple asked. His arms were crossed on his chest, and he wore a faded Cardinals cap which he'd pulled over his eyes.

"No?"

The man said, "They could be your A.L. Team," while the conductor pointed out a bison, and the woman said, "Is it your first year?"

"Yes," she said, relieved. "And I don't have a car."

The couple understood then that it would be difficult to get there. The train crawled along, and Hannah wondered how long she could keep her performance up.

The conductor told them to keep an eye out for midget mules, a special kind of donkey bred from a Sicilian Jack and a Shetland pony mare, and Hannah found herself thinking about Laura, wondering what exactly had changed for her at college, and why she had sent Hannah to Grant's Farm in lieu of telling her about it.

She checked her phone, but Laura had not responded to the picture she'd sent.

The couple behind her asked what she was studying and what extracurriculars she was participating in, and Hannah told them what she planned to do and take, including a class she saw in the course catalogue on the conflict in Darfur. She knew nothing about it, but felt like she should. "It's complicated," she told them, when they had asked her to summarize what she had learned. "There's a long history there."

The train circled the park, and Hannah could see steam rising off of the zebras and English Stags who had packed together under the branches of a wide oak. One of the zebras looked up at the train as if they were interrupting a private meeting.

When the woman of the couple asked her if she missed home, and if she had a sweetheart here, Hannah thought of that zebra and his indifferent twitching ears. "We broke up," she told the couple. "Amicably though." She turned to face them. "We wanted different things."

The man told her that was wise and that she should focus on her studies, while the woman patted her shoulder as if she knew how fresh, how unhealed, how premonitory, this wound was. The train conductor had lost interest in her, was telling them about the carriage house collection, how much money it was worth. The rain fell steadily, then lightened up again.

Exiting the train, Hannah didn't feel ready to go home yet, wanted to stay in that space a little longer. She had made her decision, and longed for a momentous gesture. If she was old enough, she would have had a beer. If Laura had joined her there that day, she would have asked to bum a cigarette and would have smoked it looking out over the Grant homestead or possibly the pen of camels, spitting and braying and leaving their droppings everywhere. Instead, in lieu of vice and company, she bought a bottle of milk for a dollar and entered the pen of baby goats. Their coats stank with the rain, a sweet, rotting smell. She breathed it in deeply, let her lungs fill with it, then offered the bottle to the first goat that walked over to her. It sucked the milk down hungrily, latching onto the nipple of the bottle as she tugged to free it, to split it between the

goats that were now swarming her, nudging her back into the fence, the edge of her jacket settling between their chewing teeth, their soft heads gently butting her sides.

I.

After the Late Service, Before Lunch

The morning my parents forgot me, they had taken two cars to church. They each needed to arrive early, but at separate times. I was used to our family arriving earlier than most, because my mother was in charge of the church choir. But this Sunday was different. My mother was filling in as music director while Dave Schneider was on vacation. Mr. Schneider planned to retire soon, and although no woman had previously held the position, she looked at that day as a trial run. My father had also just been elected president of the congregation. During the service he would be officially installed.

We all had to dress up. My father would make a short speech after the sermon, and we were expected to stand in front of the pulpit with him. My brother Eric gelled his hair for the occasion. My father picked out his own tie, which was usually my job. My mom wore a crisp pantsuit and high heels.

I was dressed in an old Easter dress, not mine, but a hand-me-down from Laura Maier. It had a starched-stiff collar and itchy lace. I hated these dresses, of which there were many, and threw a tantrum every time I had to wear one. That morning my cereal bowl had been caught in the crossfire of my stomping and screaming. Milk and Cheerios flew across the dining room

table and landed on my mom's slacks. She changed out of her suit and into a long, billowy maroon dress I did not recognize. We left the house ten minutes later than we intended to.

The whole car ride my mom and I were silent. Eric kept switching radio stations, but everything he landed on had talking in it. Every so often I caught a glimpse of my face in the window. It was still red and puffy from crying. I expected people to notice and say something, especially Laura, who seemed to enjoy knowing I was tortured in the same way she was.

I resented Laura for growing on pace with me—as soon as the sleeves of one dress got too short, a larger one took its place. Because of this resentment, I cheated at every game we were forced to play together when Laura's older sister babysat.

I knew cheating was wrong, that patience was a virtue, and eating Play-Doh was frowned upon, but I did the first and last anyway. My dad said I was "stubborn as a mule," but my brother had taught me to say "No, sir, I'm just persistent," which my dad got a kick out of.

I felt at my most persistent Sundays after the service let out. My mother talked a lot after church, and I would tug on her handbag until she gave a concrete measurement of when we'd leave.

This had motivated me to learn to read analog clocks. I struggled at first to view the stubbiest hand as the longest amount of time, to equate each number with integers of five. Three as fifteen, nine as forty-five.

That Sunday it was a quarter till twelve when my mom told me ten more minutes. She was talking to Mrs. Renke, whose perfume stank and whose nails looked unnaturally thick. Normally, I would stand next to my mother, for as long as I could bear, to serve as a reminder of her promise. But I wouldn't with Mrs. Renke. I hated Mrs. Renke and the way my mother acted around her, how she fixed a smile to her face and kept it there. Instead of opening her mouth, she'd speak through her teeth, and she nodded so often her jewelry jangled. I sensed that the Renkes had more money than my family, but I didn't know much else because their children

were all grown up. I'd been to their house once. It had been cold and clean, with glass figurines set on the tables and shelves, that weren't for playing with, I was told, and I wasn't allowed to take off my shoes. I did not like that house.

"I'll ride home with Dad," I told her, and she put her hand up in a "hold on" sign. Mrs. Renke's eyes looked down and rested on my dress.

"*You* look nice today," she said.

I tightened my grip on my mother's purse strap, and squeezed closer, angling my body slightly behind hers. I noticed a white price tag poking out from under one of the gauzy layers of her maroon dress. She must have forgotten it as she rushed to get ready, and I knew that she would be embarrassed to learn it'd been there all morning. I leaned down to grab it.

"Why don't you find your dad?" my mom said, straightening my back by putting her hand on my shoulder, and directing her stiff smile toward me.

I gave up on the tag and went to find my father. He was usually on my team, wanted to get home and fed early so that he could get started on the lawn. In the winter he played basketball at church, but since we lived only a few minutes away, he preferred to come home first. Sometimes he took a short nap.

My father was a quiet man, agreeable. He never raised his voice and he seemed either not to care or notice my breaches into bad manners. My mother, on the contrary, was very alert. I, and most people, including those who had voted for my father, liked him without having to think of reasons why.

On Sundays lunch was leftovers if we had enough, or Cowboy Casserole, a riff on goulash, which my father made with stray vegetables and whatever he found in the cabinets. My mother would help, but she often needed more time to decompress from the morning. I would lie on their bed while she did this, tracing my finger along the floral pattern of the faded blue bedspread as she sat at her dressing table and slowly took off her earrings.

My father read me the funny pages as we ate. The Sunday comics were bigger, and in color. There were three whole pages of them, front and back. He would explain the jokes I didn't get. I looked forward to this.

After church I could usually find him in the downstairs lobby drinking coffee by the door, keys in hand, or with a group of men in the sanctuary adjusting the audio visual equipment. After leaving my mom and Mrs. Renke, I headed back to the sanctuary to look for him. He was still standing with the pastor where they had shaken hands with the congregation as they filed out of the pews. Now there were only a few stragglers left inside collecting the hymnals. Still, my father and the pastor remained with their backs against the doors and hands crossed in front of their stomachs, looking out over the room. I considered standing next to him, slipping my hand in his hand, but something about his solemn expression told me not to.

As a six-year-old, when I pictured God he looked like the pastor. This was probably because the pastor wore a white robe, and was old and bald and gentle. He talked about God as if he knew him.

I wasn't afraid of the pastor, but I kept my distance, didn't think of him like other adults. I wasn't afraid of God either, but I knew that sometimes he didn't like me, that his disapproval was linked to my parents' disapproval, was maybe the cause of it.

I liked Jesus alright, and liked the picture of him with kids on his lap and at his feet listening to him speak. It reminded me of Carpet Time in kindergarten where the mysteries of the world were explained. Like counting. I had been able to count for a long time, but hadn't thought about what counting really meant—addition and subtraction. And the water cycle. That had blown my mind.

I hated the fact that Jesus had to die, even though I was told again and again that it was good, that it saved me, because I was born bad. He was the nice one though, I thought. (I was pretty neutral on the Holy Spirit.) He would come back again, some day, they told me, and I had

a feeling I'd be alive for it. I would be old when it happened, reading books on a cushioned window seat. I'd glance outside and see him zoom down like lightning.

When he came back I would be transfigured. Transfigured, as I understood it, meant that I would be different, would look different. That people in wheelchairs wouldn't need wheelchairs anymore. We would all go to Heaven.

I knew it was supposed to be good to be transfigured, but I was hesitant. I didn't like change that much, or at least not the changes I'd been noticing.

My family still prayed at the supper table, the Come Lord Jesus, and the Oh Give Thanks, but my parents no longer asked me much about my day, or wanted to listen to my answers. Instead they discussed the district, my father's presidency, church policies and budgetary measures, all of which went over my head. Eric would sulk, eat three helpings of casserole, then go back to his computer. I was still required to ask to be excused, but it had been difficult to get a word in.

The night before the installation, I had picked at the hem of the tablecloth, waiting for a break. I thought I had found one, but it wasn't a break, simply a pause for emphasis, and I was rude and told so and scolded. I sat at the table until they finished, then bathed and was put to bed.

Other Saturdays I was allowed to stay up late and my mother would braid my hair while we watched *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. I would sit on the floor in front of the couch and Eric would have his legs draped over one side and my father would be in the armchair with his feet up drinking from a short, thick glass. In the morning I'd take the braid out and my hair would look wavy. I liked it that way.

Instead of standing by my dad, I perused the donut table. Oil had soaked into the boxes leaving dark, damp spots. The long johns were gone; they always went quickly. There were no more donut holes either. The only thing left was a half-eaten chocolate cruller that looked pretty

but left a chalky aftertaste. I licked my finger and collected stray clumps of sugar with it, then popped it in my mouth. I walked the length of the table to the drinks. There wasn't any orange juice left.

I wanted to go home. I had sat through two sermons, and had drawn in every margin of the church bulletin. All my friends had left. After the service let out we had played elevator tag until their parents came and got them. Then I was waiting.

When I was young I felt like I was always waiting. Time was either nonexistent, or a total state of agony.

I walked down the hall to the youth room. The youth room was not for children, but for the blossoming dramas of adolescents, roped in tightly of course, by God's laws. I peeped inside. Eric was playing foosball with a girl I'd seen but didn't know—she went to public school, not Christ Lutheran. He was shouting as if to show interest in her by showing interest in the game, and he used words that weren't allowed in our home, like "crap" and "crud." As far as I could tell, he was winning.

I continued down the hall to my old preschool classroom and tried the door. The classroom was unlocked.

The room looked the same, but I expected that the things that were mine would not change. This place was mine, and there was plenty to do.

I could ride one of the tricycles, climb on the jungle gym, though I was a little big for them. They would still be fun, more fun even, feeling big. There was the splatter-painted bathtub filled with pillows where I could read some of my old books. My favorite part, the art corner with the paint easels, was disappointingly paintless. There was still the big roll of butcher paper and markers and crayons, but I opted for the bathtub and chose a book about baby ducks. I settled into the cushions, propped my feet on the rim, let myself sink down so that the pillows covered my legs. I could see the parking lot from the window and the corner of my father's gray

Corolla. I opened the cardboard cover and turned the page.

When I woke up, I noticed that the lights had been turned off and that my father's car was gone. I climbed out of the bath and went down the hall. Eric was no longer in the youth room, and its lights were turned out too. My mother was not in the lobby where I'd last seen her. The donut boxes had been thrown away and the snack tables folded against the wall. The sanctuary was dark.

Only a few hours earlier my family had stood in front of the pulpit as the pastor had introduced us as, "a loving family known for their service." He mentioned my father's men's Bible study group, my mother's music, Eric's servant-event to Mexico, my foray into liturgical dance.

I had cringed when he said this. My mother had made me do it since she had organized the whole thing. I didn't think I'd ever live it down. I'd waved a ribbon wand and twirled when I was supposed to, but I hated ribbons and my itchy leotard, felt so embarrassed, so unlike myself, that I couldn't raise my eyes from the floor. I cried afterwards, said I'd never do it again, but I knew that I would. It wasn't my decision.

Like this morning's outfit. I was reminded that Christians dressed their best on Sundays out of respect for the Lord, that it was even a way of praising him—that the ruffles and lace and tulle were for Jesus. I had pictured the bearded man who wore a bathrobe and sandals. Surely, I thought, this wasn't something that he wanted.

With its lights on, the sanctuary was as perfectly normal to me as my school cafeteria—a room with boundaries, yes, but so frequently tread it had lost some of its meaning. The dark room gave me goosebumps. The stained glass windows glowed like animals' eyes, and the dim colored light made the room look like it was filled with fine mist.

I went to check the choir room. It was empty.

I was more hungry than scared. I pulled a chair up to the wall so that I could reach the

telephone. A few weeks before, a policeman came into my school with a spotted puppet dog and taught us the importance of safety. The dog's eyes were made of buttons, and one of them was loose. The dangling eye made the dog's advice feel more urgent, more cynical. He told us to memorize our phone numbers and addresses for emergencies, and I couldn't help but wonder what experience he was drawing from. I dialed my number and my father picked up. I told him where I was.

"You're not with your mother?"

I wrapped the phone cord around my finger the way I'd seen my mother do. "I'm by myself," I said again, surprised that I had to say it a second time, that my words hadn't turned into sobbing. Then my dad's voice changed, became hurried. He told me he would be there in ten minutes.

Subsequent Sundays, my father would hand me his keys after church, so that I wouldn't be forgotten again. I was comforted by how warm the metal felt from being in his pocket, but disappointed that my father, the president, would need this to remember me.

After I hung up the phone, I went downstairs and stood by the door. A large clock hung on the wall adjacent to the direction my father's car would come. As I waited, I watched the second hand circle the full moon of its face. The minute hand moved almost reluctantly. At each passing I held my breath, believing for a moment that I could strengthen its hold, before it burst inevitably forward.

Bad Guy Stew

Thursday night was trash night, and nothing scared me more than my chore, which was to scoop the clumps out of the litter box of the kitten I had begged for into a plastic grocery bag, and put it, along with the bathroom trash, in the can outside. I was a terrible cat owner and procrastinated, even lied, about having cleaned it.

The litter box was in the basement's backroom, where we closed in our pets when we left the house. The backroom had plenty of space, a concrete floor, and served as a laundry room as well as storage. Ruby, our old golden lab, didn't seem to mind a cool place to nap. Our pug Waffles followed Ruby's lead, was happy when Ruby was happy, because Ruby was bigger and older and the alpha. Bandit, my cat, liked to climb the stacks of boxes. Sometimes I'd spot him near the ceiling, kneading his paws. The black fur around his eyes made him look as if he was peering at me from behind a mask, plotting something.

I hated the backroom for some intangible reason—it was spooky. You had to walk the length of it in the dark to get to the light, a single bulb that hung from the ceiling with a pull-string I could only reach on my tippy toes.

While my fear of the basement was supernatural, my fear of the neighborhood at night was more tangible. Suburban children of my generation were wrongly, or at least hyperbolically,

taught a lot of real things to fear like kidnappers, drug dealers, and robbers. Adult men, who are alone, bodies glimpsed in shadows, were known to sneak around the neighborhood trying to get you. When I saw a shadow or heard a noise on Thursday nights, it never occurred to me that one of my neighbors was taking out the trash too. It never occurred to me that it could be one of my neighbors at all—danger had an impersonal bent.

My neighborhood was safe, textbook Midwest idyllic. My street was full of retired couples who would buy lemonade from my lemonade stand in summer, and would give me a quarter to help carry groceries, my brother ten dollars to mow the lawn. The street over was made up of young families, and the children would traipse through the connected backyards. We ruled the street; even families without kids could not contain us, or didn't wish to. We'd play tag, sardines, and capture the flag. Few had fences; even fewer locked their cars.

When Michael Jacobs moved across the street it was still warm outside but the grass had turned yellow. I had just started second grade, and he had just started third. It wasn't long before our mothers had arranged that Michael would come over to our house after school. We weren't natural friends. I thought Michael was wild and bossy, and I looked down on his frequent visits to the principal's office. Plus, he lied all the time: lied about his *real* name, a stint in the CIA, and various fickle superpowers. I hated how his lies seemed to be a test of my intelligence. We found ways to pass the time together though, played Power Rangers, or an approximation of basketball, or watched TV while setting up Mouse Trap, a game we rarely finished, but took what felt like hours to put together. Then at five-thirty, Mary, Michael's mom, would come over to our house to get him.

I loved Mary. I loved how her earrings always matched her shoes. She had red shoes, even purple ones. She had the curly hair that I, having stick-straight hair, envied. It was as if each strand had been wound tightly around a pencil. Small, springy, perfect curls. Her laugh was bright and loud and she was nice to me. She'd say things like, "Tell me what toys you got for

your birthday. We only have boy stuff at our house," and sigh dramatically, listen to what I said. She wanted a girl, not instead of Michael by any means, but in addition to him. She wanted to buy the outfits and the craft supplies, to paint fingernails and toes. She was tired of the nose-picking, the Nerf guns, and remote control cars. Many of my toys were gender neutral hand-me-downs from my brother that my mom had saved. I liked these toys, but I couldn't help but wish, or pretend to be, that kind of feminine for Mary.

My mother also must have felt this. I didn't know what their conversations were about, but I overheard words like "divorce" and "restraining order," sensed that they were adult, and went into the other room to watch TV. I must have still been within earshot, for I can recall their low voices, how precisely they pronounced their words as if to suggest that they predicated larger meanings, and afterwards, their heavy sighs, their crazed laughter.

I wished Michael could have made me feel that way, could have been that kind of friend. Instead he was more like Bandit—concealed behind a mask, removed, and out of reach.

One Thursday afternoon Michael suggested we make bad guy stew. He had just finished a solo game of throwing a football on the roof and trying to catch it as it rolled down wonky. Usually I would have played that game with him—I had invented it. The irregularity of how a football rolled pleased me in ways that other games of chance could not. I could never get as psyched about rolling a die, would never blow on it in my hands, say the number I wanted over and over, could never trick myself into thinking I was in control. But the football was almost a live animal. We'd chase it like we did Waffles when he slipped out the front door and ran in circles as we lunged to grab his collar.

"What's bad guy stew?"

As I asked this, I'd watched my hand as I ran it over the top of the grass, dislodging the loose pieces. I was miffed at Michael and did not want to play with him. In the carpool line he had told me that the stern woman who was his teacher, and who would be my teacher the

following year, was a witch. He described how her fingernails turned green when she was angry, grew rapidly out of her fingers, spiked like claws.

I wanted to go into my room and shut the door, but this was unthinkable with a guest over. Michael no longer felt like a guest, but I assumed my mother wouldn't see it that way, even though Michael had taken the football out of the box in the carport without asking. Would put his plate in the sink like my mother instructed me to do. Changed the channel.

"Bad guy stew is poisonous," he told me, in all seriousness, unzipped jacket flapping as he paced back and forth. His nose always seemed to be running. "It looks like food, and when— " he paused to wipe the drip of snot on his sleeve— "robbers come, they'll eat it and we'll be safe."

"If" was never a question, for I believed that bad guys were out there, waiting to make their move. I didn't ruminate on the word "poisonous," though I suspect I had in mind the fast-acting symptoms of the flu. Michael loved killing bad guys though, and would add the word "lethal" to his punches and kicks as we swirled the yard fighting imaginary henchmen. I never felt like I was playing the game right. I'd lose patience before he did, say all of my people (or robots) had gone home or fell asleep, and he'd notice something before I did, call out, "Look!" as a new wave of them descended the hill and ran towards us, swords drawn.

"How do we make it?" I must have asked him, for the process couldn't have been inherent. Sure, I'd played pretend on my own time. Even though I went to Lutheran church and school, I craved Catholicism's rituals. I'd make up ceremonies with beads and seashells, cups of water. I'd arrange and rearrange these items as I read litanies made from the words I knew how to spell. Michael's play was more pointed, had more tangible end goals. In the sandbox he'd construct elaborate cities equipped with sewers and canals, so that he could turn on the hose and drown all the ants that lived there.

I remember him grabbing the blue bucket that stayed nestled by the backdoor in what had once been a flower bed. We started by gathering dried leaves. I went to the far corner of the yard, the farthest away from him. I couldn't quite tell if the game was a trick. In the carpool line he had told me that after his teacher had transformed, she'd made him throw his desk out the window, three stories down. I asked him what he did the rest of the day without it. He told me he wrote on top of a book.

"What happened to the desk?" I said.

"The janitor put it in the dumpster."

I was still unconvinced, but he insisted it was true.

We crinkled the leaves so that they looked like spices. There were emaciated red leaves that looked like crushed red pepper, green ones that looked like dried oregano, ripped pine needles that looked like nothing in particular. I walked over to the juniper tree and peeled a strip of its bark. I took it back to the bucket and tossed it in.

"Looky here," Michael said, an uprooted stalk of a fern dangling from one hand. The stem had light pink veins, reminded me of rhubarb. I became excited in spite of myself. It never would have occurred to me to rip the plant out of the ground. Michael tore the leaf off and we took turns trying to cut the stalk into pieces. It was tough and stringy. We needed something sharp. I snuck inside through the back door and went downstairs to the backroom. The litter box reeked. I remembered it was Thursday and dreaded my inevitable return. But instead of taking care of it in that moment, I grabbed the hand hoe off the shelf and ran up the stairs, flew outside.

We pressed our whole weight onto the hoe and the stalk broke with a clean edge. Michael continued to use the hoe on a pinecone, chipping off bite-sized pieces.

I crossed the yard to the bush with the red berries, berries my mother had warned us never to eat. We called them "poison berries" because of this, and now they would serve their

purpose. I picked handfuls, careful not to let the juice leak into my skin. I returned to the bucket to find Michael shucking the papery covering off of helicopter seeds, adding the pale-green beans to our stew.

It reminded me of the Stone Soup story. How everyone in the town added an item, how the traveler tricked them into sharing.

We added honeysuckle vines, moss, dried grass. Added things that were gross instead of convincing or poisonous: murky rainwater from the neighbor's bird feeder, mud, sand. Then we filled the bucket with the hose, stirred the soup with a stick. We stared at it a moment before Michael suggested that I turn my back while he peed into it. The finishing flavor.

Peeing in the yard was certainly worse than pulling live plants from the ground, but I was too meek to say anything. I turned around as he asked and faced my house. It was orange brick with olive siding, navy blue shutters. The rain gutters had a mouthful of dry leaves. A wire ran overhead. The hanging blinds on the sliding-glass door swayed, blown from a nearby vent. I could see the top of my mother's head through the kitchen window as she stood over the sink. She didn't notice us, or what we were doing, but I felt ashamed as if she had.

When Michael told me I could turn around he grabbed two sticks and used them to scoop a dog turd into the bucket. It plopped in the water and floated there, the game's conceit completely shattered. The stew no longer looked edible, and I realized that it never had.

I was disappointed, which surprised me. Even though I had been initially reluctant, I had gotten excited about the project. Pretending to enjoy the game had led to actually enjoying it.

I would think of this a few years later when I read a book with the term "Stockholm Syndrome." When I asked, my mom explained it as "short-sightedness," and then, after some more prodding, as "loving your captor." The book confirmed this definition: in the end the protagonist married the cult leader who had kidnapped her from a quiet tree-lined street, just like my own.

While I felt as if I had crash-landed, Michael continued gaining speed as if he'd been rolling down a hill. He dragged the bucket to the driveway, grabbed a piece of sidewalk chalk and wrote, *If you're a bad guy eat this,* and drew an arrow towards the bucket so that there wouldn't be any confusion. With this he stood for a moment and admired his work. I noticed the fading light catch a string of snot hanging from his lip. Then we went inside.

My mom was putting a dish into the oven, as Waffles danced at her feet, and Ruby snored from her spot in the doorway. A bottle of wine had already been set on the counter next to two glasses, each with a different colored stem. My mom and Mary often had long talks in the kitchen over glasses of wine before my father got home from work. Mary would always say, "I couldn't, maybe just a little," and tell Michael to put his shoes on or find his coat. Michael and I knew better. He'd be there for at least a half hour.

Around Mary, my mother was different, not nearly as serious. One time she'd even planned a prank. With Michael and me she had made popcorn and melted marshmallows over the top, so that when Mary went grab a handful, the whole bowl of popcorn would come out with it. When Mary knocked on the door that day to pick up Michael I was bursting, so giddy that I almost ruined the whole thing.

"What's so funny, Hannah?" she'd said, eyebrows lifted and laughing.

My mother played it cool, offered the snack off-handedly as she finished fixing dinner, hollered for Michael to get ready to go.

"Just a taste," Mary had said as she reached with her index finger and thumb.

She yowled and my mother doubled over laughing, had to remove her glasses to wipe her eyes. I had never heard her laugh like that. Normally she said too much, more than anyone wanted to hear, or at least that was my impression. I remember her once trying to talk about a school board meeting at my brother's baseball game and how the other mother interrupted every so often to yell, "Swing batter! Swing!"

After we had finished the stew and gone inside, Michael turned on the TV and sat in front of it, blocking the screen. He didn't ask me what I wanted to watch. Didn't care that I couldn't see around him. I sat on the couch and Bandit brushed his back against my legs. I leaned over and made an 'O' with my hands. He put his nose in, pushed his face through. I started to worry that all this attention was because I hadn't cleaned his litter box.

At five-thirty I saw Mary's car pull into her driveway, watched her brow furrow as she approached our house, as she read Michael's message. Her shoes clacked on the concrete and the door squeaked as she opened it.

"I know that wasn't your idea," she said to me as she signaled with her hand for Michael to get going.

He didn't notice. His eyes were glued to the screen, hands tucked underneath him, legs straight out in front. The cartoon on TV exploded with color, the background rainbow and pulsing.

Mary turned to me once again. "Your whole life people are going try to make decisions for you. *You* are in charge of *you*," she said.

This was the only time in my childhood that I would hear advice like this, advice that granted me this agency. With my own parents whose idea it was mattered. If my older brother tricked me into something he was held responsible, like the time he bet me I couldn't eat the rind of a watermelon and I threw up.

Mary's face had hardened, and her lips were folded between her teeth. I couldn't stand to have her mad at me. My face got hot and I could feel the itch of tears. My mom came over then, asked Mary what had happened. My mother assured her I would clean the bucket, pretended that this would solve Mary's problem. My mother must have seen how their private conversations overlapped, how Mary had learned the hard way the importance of articulating her needs, expecting more out of people, and standing up for herself. All this would make sense to

me much later, long after they had moved out of state, after I had found, coincidentally, the same blue bucket propped like a stool underneath my bedroom window, before I learned it was my classmate Alan who had spied on me, and long after I had seen the signs and given up trying to warn anyone. In our time together after school I had only once asked Michael about his dad. All I knew was that he didn't live with them.

Michael and I were sent outside to clean up the mess we'd made. I walked over to the spigot and turned the handle. I could hear Michael dragging the stew off the driveway. I did not hear it spill across the pavement, or the street as Michael pulled it into his own front yard. I dragged the hose to the side of the house and watched as Michael positioned the bucket under his window, and then, as he kicked it over. The stew foamed on the gravel flowerbed before leaking into the ground. The lone dog turd that had flopped onto the surface looked especially pointless. Then I felt terrible again, for *we* had been sent to do something, and *he* had decided against it.

Michael seemed to have sensed this however, and brought the bucket back across the street. We took turns rinsing it, spraying it hard with our thumbs over the nozzle of the hose, and filling the bucket part way, swirling the water inside. I felt lucky that neither of our mothers had asked questions, and my hands felt numb from the cold water. The numbness felt good.

Then Michael told me that he had deterred a robber the night before who had crouched underneath his window. He hit the man with his slingshot and an Oreo and the guy got in his car and drove off.

"Are you sure you didn't throw your desk at him?"

Before he could answer I sprayed him in the face with the hose. He rubbed his eyes with clenched fists, mouth gaping. His faded turquoise t-shirt stained a dark teal. But he didn't tell on me.

When my father and brother came home, Mary and Michael walked back across the street to their own house. We ate dinner and I sulked in my room. Time passed. I thought my wish had come true—that my family had forgotten about trash night. Then my father came in, told me Eric had already taken the cans to the curb. He handed me a plastic grocery bag. I knew he wouldn't tolerate complaining. This was the deal that had been struck; this was my weekly gamble.

I climbed down the stairs slowly, but tugged the light on as fast as I could. I worked quickly, not thoroughly, litter flying on the floor, burying the smaller clumps. I usually tried to sing, to make myself less scared, but I was still upset about Mary. I felt like she hated me, that it was all over, that she'd never talk to me again, wouldn't come to my birthday party, or my high school graduation, or wedding, because she had seen the true me, the child who had failed her.

I took the bag outside. The screen door slammed shut behind me, and the motion sensor light in the carport clicked. In the dark the driveway looked long. The air was cool and I shivered. When I reached the end of the driveway and raised the can's lid, I noticed an unfamiliar car parked in front of Michael and Mary's house, and that the driver's-side door had been left open. The porch light glowed, casting long, wide-legged shadows. A man shook the handle on the locked front door. Knocked with an open palm.

I ran back inside. Told my dad about the robber.

Later, Mary and Michael came over to spend the night. Only out-of-town family had ever stayed with us, never any of my mom's friends. They slept in the finished part of the basement on the pull-out couch. My mother had asked me to take pillows and the red quilt down as she poured the wine into fresh glasses. Michael and the dogs followed me downstairs.

"Aren't you going to be scared down here?" I asked as I pulled two of the couch cushions off and leaned them against the wall. Michael tossed the quilt over his head. He looked like a ghost.

"Why would I be scared?"

His voice was muffled by the fabric, and I realized that this was on purpose, that he was smarter than I had given him credit for.

"Ghosts. And witches. They come down here too," I told him.

Then he chased me around the room making "ooing" noises while wiggling his fingers. I rounded the corner of the couch and ducked behind the piano bench. As he followed, he tripped over Ruby, who growled at him. Waffles jumped to his feet and growled too. Bandit, who had come down after us and settled himself on the last remaining couch cushion, his body wound in a tight curl, looked up confused at the blanketed pillar before him, and blinked as if to say, "Who are you again?"

Mother Road

Two years after my grandmother died, and three years after she had come to live with us, the contents of her safety deposit box arrived in the mail.

Our family didn't know about the box, and had neither continued to pay for it or emptied it. The bank had kept the contents in a vault in Florida instead of throwing them away. The items would have gone up for auction if they hadn't found our address by chance in the church directory. All this the bank explained in their letter, which my mother read when we got home after school, once to herself, and once out loud to me. There was a smaller box inside the larger one, and she decided that we should wait to open it until my brother and father were home. She folded the cardboard flaps of the outer box closed and left it in the center of the dining room table.

It was my father's mother who had died, who had lived with us briefly, who had, apparently, secrets. The grandmother I remembered was so helpless and confused that she didn't seem capable of such a thing. It was hard to imagine her having any other life at all, especially outside of the farmhouse they lived in when my dad was a boy. That part seemed as clear to me as if I had been there.

But I had been there, at least where the house used to be. It was only three miles from where my family lived now, back when our suburb was little more than cattle-track. My father and grandmother had chickens and a large vegetable garden with tomato vines and sunflowers. The house had a washing machine, but not a dryer, so in the yard they hung their wet clothes on a line tied between two trees. It even had a real cellar, which my father had been afraid of, but he'd gone down there with his mother and sat in the dark when tornados turned the sky green. The stairs creaked as they descended and the light from his flashlight illuminated a store of jars that contained pickled yellow beans.

He also told me about the wooden toy he used to have with stacked ramps for racing marbles, how it made such a soothing sound when he got handfuls of them rolling at once. In the living room they had a black and white television and an upright piano, which his mother would play late at night holding down the dampening pedal. He would wake up to it sometimes and would creep down the hall to watch her play and fall back asleep stretched out on the whitewashed floor.

My grandparents on my mother's side still lived in the house where she grew up, still had the gray-blue vinyl couch my parents sat on when they first met. My mother had broken her leg slipping on late-spring ice and had spent the summer at home, her leg propped on a kitchen chair. The three summers before that she had spent on an Alaskan cruise ship performing in a Hallelujah band. My father had played church league softball with my uncles, and had come over for a post-game beer. They dated two years before they got married.

Seeing the box on the table was unsettling. It was as if Nanna were still alive somewhere, or worse, sending us messages from Heaven.

I usually did my homework on the dining room table, but the box took up a lot of room. I could have pushed it to the side, but that felt like bad luck.

It had taken me some time to get used to the rest of her things sitting around the house. When she moved in, the upright piano moved with her, as well as a chiming clock, photos, and a box of china which my mother told me would be mine someday, when I got married. She showed me the plates before storing them in the bottom drawer of the china cabinet, underneath her own set, also a family heirloom. The china was white with a gold rim and a hand-painted swirl of rose petals. I wasn't particularly looking forward to this gift. Like many children, my aesthetic centered around neon colors. When I didn't show my mother the enthusiasm she expected, she told me, "You'll appreciate it when you're older."

Even three years later, none of her stuff seemed to integrate with our own. The heavy dark oak clock on the mantel clashed with the orange brick fireplace, stood out as sorely as her hospital bed had, which they'd put in Eric's room while he slept downstairs. He wouldn't move back in until his room had been repainted, which I think was more about covering the smell.

She had a stale decaying aroma that I attributed to her cancer, because that was what she had told me she had when my mom sent me to check on her once.

"Do you want something to drink, Nanna?"

She looked at me with her dull eyes and raised her shaky hand to point to her stomach. "The cancer is eating my insides. There won't be much left to bury."

I ran from the room.

It wasn't so much death, which was abstract, but the body talk that made me uncomfortable. My grandmother wore diapers and my parents changed them, lifting her slightly onto her side, the same way they changed her sheets. My grandmother's sister, who she had been living with previously, was too weak for this. I realized not at first, but with horror, that this meant they had seen her naked.

Later, my parents corrected me about her illness, said she didn't have cancer, but she was very old and not all there. This didn't make me feel better.

I was seven when she came to live with us, and had only vague memories of prior experiences with her. Just a powdery perfume and the sound of her black support hose rubbing together when she shifted her body weight. I remember she had read a book to me and her presence on the couch was solid, stately. She looked mountainous, impossible to topple over, unlike the rail-thin woman in the bed. I remember how she sipped coffee between pages, and how she said something to my mother about not having cream.

She was an old grandmother, had my dad when she was in her forties. She had been married once before being married to my grandpa, who had died before I was born. Her first husband had died in Normandy. When the war ended, she packed up her things and left Springfield to move back in with her family in Kansas. In St. Louis, she met my grandpa working at the desk of a Route 66 motel. She decided to stay put.

This story, when told by my father, was one of love at first sight. My mother thought of it as proof of his mother's dependency issues and lack of sound judgment. "She had to have a man. It didn't matter that she hardly knew him. No wonder her family didn't approve," she'd told me. "They didn't even come for the wedding."

My mother's summers on the cruise ship had become virtuous in memory, proof that a young lady must live independently in order to make good choices. Unlike my father's childhood home, the details were vague. I pictured her as a plucky Julie Andrews character with a long floral dress and perm. I questioned if she really did live alone, if the cruise ship would have paid for that, or if she had a roommate with whom she shared a bunk. Regardless, she wasn't beholden to anyone, not even the helicopter pilot that she mentioned drinking Rob Roys with in Anchorage. She lived untethered in the hull of a ship at sea. "I could have popcorn for supper if I wanted to," she always said, stressing its importance.

To me Nanna's story served as proof of the cruel magnetism of the city, how gravity seemed to be stronger here, seemed to hold on to people while the world hardened, insects

entombed in amber. She did finally leave, twenty-two years later when my grandpa died, and moved in with her sister. Then when her health started to decline, she came back.

"Where am I?" she asked me once, eyes wide and accusing, when I was sent to her room to grab the hamper so that my mother could do a load of laundry. I had stopped to browse through her jewelry box, try on a pair of tarnished pearl screw-back earrings. They pinched my earlobes, which I felt grow red along with my cheeks, for she was rarely lucid, and had caught me.

"Ted's house."

She stared at me, hardly blinking. She didn't seem to notice or remember that the earrings were hers.

"Remember Ted, your son?"

She pressed the button that would raise the bed high enough for her to look out the window. I took a step back.

"Where am I?"

"St. Louis?"

She lifted her gnarled hand in front of her face. "That Arkansas coal really works. It's hardly sooty at all." I didn't know how to respond to this, and left still wearing the earrings which I would immediately remove and sneak back in when she was asleep.

Nanna and I weren't the only ones unhappy with the arrangement. My mother was bitter that after both of us kids were now in school, my father had volunteered her to stay home and take care of her mother-in-law, who he had rarely spoken to in the last ten years. She also felt it was the right thing to do, so she only vented her frustrations around me.

"Your father is only remembering the good times," she'd said while cutting an apple into slices for my after-school snack. "And it's hard for me, because I remember all the times her

choices made it difficult on your father." I stuck my finger directly into the peanut butter jar while she was talking. She didn't notice. "She couldn't bear to spend an hour by herself."

Apparently my grandfather had run off with another woman, and she'd told my father that he was training with the National Guard. "She was a silly woman," I remember my mother saying when Nanna was in the room with us, as if she was already dead. "If their house was on fire she'd have told him the dog was smoking a cigarette."

As much as my mother disliked my grandmother, she never neglected her in the five months she was with us, and would play her hymns and show tunes on the piano, held her hand during the fever that finally took her.

Nanna's was the first funeral I'd ever been to, and I wouldn't have cried if my dad hadn't, but my tears were mostly of relief. Her breathing had been so heavy, so strangled those last few weeks, that I could hear it through the wall separating our two rooms. I'd even had nightmares of drowning where vines from a lake bottom pulled me under while I kicked and struggled for breath. I'd wake up with all of my covers on the floor and that choking sound so loud that I'd check my closet to make sure she hadn't gotten in there somehow. Her death meant peace for the rest of us.

They'd kept the casket open, a tradition which felt vulgar to me. Her face looked blue and dusty, and her gnarled hands looked wound, folded and ready to spring, grab me by the collar.

After she died my parents got rid of her bed and clothes, and the piano was moved to the basement where there was more room. For a while, my mother tried to teach me how to play, but by time the box had arrived we had both given up. I didn't have the knack for it.

In my room, I opened my backpack to start my homework, opened my folder, opened my notebook, but all the opening distracted me, made me think about what was inside the box. I found my mother in the kitchen hand-folding bread crumbs and onions into raw hamburger, not

knowing how to start a conversation about it. She had changed out of her work clothes and into a t-shirt and shorts. She preferred to be barefoot.

"What are we having for dinner?"

"Meatloaf, potatoes, green beans. Want to season this for me?"

I sprinkled salt and pepper on the pink lump that was forming, then poured in the eggs which she had already cracked. I watched as she formed the loaf shape, nestled it into a bread pan. We always had a meat, a starch, and a vegetable.

"Mom? Would you be able to help me with a math problem?"

"Sure," she said, then went to the sink to wash her hands. I sprinted down the hall to my room and grabbed my worksheet, not bothering to wash mine. I hadn't looked at my math homework yet and hoped that she wouldn't notice that I hadn't first tried the problem by myself. I met her at the dining room table. Her hand rested idly on the corner of the box.

We still had four years where she could help me with my homework. Freshman year of high school, after staying up late to read my notes and the chapter in my Algebra II textbook, I would scream, "I thought you said you knew how to do this!" And my mother, whose education had ended prematurely with a community college associate's degree, would scream back, "I'm not smart enough!" before storming out of the room, and the next day, tired, drinking coffee for the first time (though I'd diluted it with plenty of milk and sugar), I'd ask my teacher who would show me how to solve the problem which my mother and I had agonized over for hours in ten minutes, and I knew not to ask her for help anymore.

I sat down and spread my paper in front of the box, and my mom stood behind me so that she could read over my shoulder, as she did when teaching me piano.

Piano lessons had started out like we had envisioned them. I had learned to read the notes and took pleasure in this literacy. It was easy to practice those first scales, and I enjoyed

the encouragement, enjoyed performing from *The Beginner's Christmas Songbook* to her friend Mary and Mary's new boyfriend when they came over Christmas Eve.

We worked through book one of the same skill level books she gave her music students quickly, with joy even. We made the deal that when I got through the third book I could get my ears pierced. It would be both a reward and a new responsibility. I liked the gleaming sound of those words.

The second book was harder, the music more complex with separate and simultaneous parts for each hand. Dave Schneider finally retired and my mom was hired as our church's interim director of music. We still managed to have a lesson every one or two weeks.

On the third book we hit a wall. I could no longer manage it. My mom was patient, would tell me how I messed up, but being related, we butted heads. I would respond to criticism with, "I know," which she found defensive and obtuse, not in the spirit of learning. I thought it was easy to identify mistakes, and that what I didn't know was how to prevent them. We fought, I practiced less, and my mother worked more. We lost our routine. In sixth grade she would enroll me in band, and I wouldn't get my ears pierced until my nineteenth birthday, where within a year I would let them close after contracting an infection swimming on a college backpacking trip, and I wouldn't bother to re-pierce them until after a particularly discouraging job interview in my mid-twenties.

She looked down at my math worksheet, and I did too. "I'm having trouble getting started," I told her. That week we had learned to add and subtract fractions by finding a common denominator.

"Well," she said in her teacher voice, moving her lips silently as she read the word problem, "let's see." She walked me through the problem and had me explain why I was making each move. Her teacher voice was brighter and clearer than her normal voice, and I felt its power

even though I knew it was put-on. "You got it," she said when we were finished. She turned to the kitchen.

"What do you think Nanna kept in there?" I tapped the box with my pencil. She touched her hand to the table and her eyes flicked towards Nanna's old room.

"Usually it's important papers, or valuables. Never anything big." She frowned, thoughtfully, as she said this.

"Do you think it could be jewelry?"

"Could be."

It comforted me to know that whatever jewel she owned would be attached to a ring or pendant, that I wouldn't potentially inherit something as useless as a piano or china plates.

"But why would she keep it where she wouldn't be able to wear it?"

"Perhaps it was something she didn't want us to sell to pay for a nursing home."

I felt a thrill with how frank my mother let herself be when it came to this topic, and a pang with the realization that I'd missed her. "Was she mad that you sold her car?"

My mother sat down, picked at the sticker the post office had thrust on the box's side. "I don't think she really understood about that. Plus the car wasn't sentimental."

I fidgeted with the fringe of the placemats stacked underneath the box, kicked my toe against the leg of the table. "What about her sister—was there anything she would want to hide from her?"

My mother smiled. "I wouldn't know about that."

"Do you think she's trying to tell us something?" I looked at her, and she stood up, still smiling, but pivoting back to the kitchen. The moment was gone; I had hit the wrong note. I stayed at the table and finished my math homework as she glazed the meatloaf in ketchup and brown sugar.

When it was time for me to set the table I lifted the box in my hands and shook it. The items inside tumbled against the cardboard walls, making a dull hollow sound. I set it on the ledge of the china cabinet next to the rest of the day's mail. I stared at it all through dinner.

My father waited until after they had cleaned up and packed lunches to open it. He poured himself a brandy, and took the box over to his living room chair. He set the box on the ottoman, unfolded the flaps, and pulled out the letter, which he set to the side, and the sealed smaller box which he cut open with the Swiss Army knife attached to his keys.

Eric stood behind him and sipped from a too-full glass of milk. I knelt beside my father as if it were Christmas and he was opening a gift that I'd picked for him. He pulled out two tiny porcelain guitars.

"Salt and pepper shakers." He looked amused, not upset, holding them up to the lamplight.

Eric leaned over. "Together they say, 'Nashville, Tennessee.'"

"Why would she keep *that*?" I asked my father, as if it was his fault. "That can't be worth anything!"

My mom raced in from the hallway. "Nashville? Did you ever go there? Did she ever mention Nashville?"

My dad thought for a second, laughing, making us wait to hear the joke. "Not that I know of." He set the shakers down and reached his hand into the box a second time. He pulled out a yellowed postcard. The top of it read "Greetings from the Mother Road," in big block letters. A purple strip of highway crossed over a river with steamboats. A silhouette of buildings waited on the opposite bank. "St. Louis, MO" was scrawled in the bottom corner.

"You know, she probably set the deposit box up after she was a little out of it." He set the items aside.

"Maybe they were special to her," I said, thinking that she might have bought the postcard from my grandpa as an excuse to talk to him, but I regretted it immediately.

"It's just junk," my dad said. "It's not cheap to rent a box. Why not keep it at home?"

"Maybe she wanted them where she knew she wouldn't trip over them," my mother said, but they both looked sad that the items in the box, what was valuable to her, were worthless, tourist garbage.

My father reopened his pocket knife to break down and recycle the cardboard. He sliced the tape carefully and wrenched the bottom in order to flatten it, then retreated to the kitchen. Eric moved around the back of the chair and sat down on the ottoman. He picked up the postcard. "Look, Hannah, no Arch." He held the card in front of me, but continued to examine it side-eyed as he took a large gulp from his glass. The skyline looked neutered, insignificant and almost unrecognizable. It was not, I thought, the city I lived in.

Eric flipped the postcard over, and I was surprised to recall that my father hadn't done that, hadn't thought to check. On the back was a single cursive word: "Howdy."

How meaningless it all felt in that moment. That stupid word, the started but incomplete message. Later, I would find it funny that she paused after such an exuberant greeting, that she had convinced herself that she could embody its falsity, then immediately lost steam. With this thought the postcard took on another layer, and I came to read the absence as the road's unfilled promise. Route 66 did not deliver the kicks it was remembered for. The optimism of the song was missing.

That night, after I had gone to bed, my mother came into the dark of my room and kissed my forehead. In a low voice she told me, "I'm sorry I work instead of staying home with you." I pretended to be asleep, unable to express how much I admired her for this, and unable to understand what it was she was telling me.

I lay awake for a long time afterwards, the image of the postcard floating through my mind. The purple road seemed to be the path that had been laid out for my grandmother, from the motel, to the farmhouse, the first husband, to the second, to each of their deaths, and finally to her own. I imagined my own mother's journey as a dotted line that marked the route of the train she had taken to Seattle each summer, the ship leaving the dock, up the mountains she climbed in Alaska, then looping back again, a shape long and narrow like a flower petal. I wondered if she had saved anything from that time, and if someday, she would show it to me. I thought, not for the first time, and certainly not the last, what shape my own journey would take. Drifting off to sleep, I could hear my mother play the piano through the floorboards. I caught the refrain of the song from *Carousel*, the one that starts, "What's the use of wondering?" then continues to ask a series of questions. She hit a sour note and paused briefly, then retraced the measure that led her there, then sped the line up, slowed it down, and sped it up again, continuing the song correctly to its final conclusion, "He's your feller and you love him, that's all there is to that."

II.

Little Deaths

The Monday after we returned from the Maiers' cabin, our elderly neighbor invited us into her yard to watch the cicadas emerge from under the post of her deck. It almost looked like water, the way the cicadas moved, like rapids sliding over rocks in a stream. None of them hesitated. None of them were stunned by sunlight, or by seeing grass for the first time.

"That is disgusting," I remember my brother Eric saying, pausing dramatically between each word, and our neighbor, hard of hearing, asking him to repeat it.

More than disgusted, I was unsettled. I did not feel prepared for this swarm, had never heard of pests in such biblical proportions. More than that, I had never expected them to be lying in wait, under our backyards, natural, not a form of punishment.

"What are they doing here?" I asked her, half expecting them to be fleeing from some other larger, upcoming disaster. A fire, earthquake, or flood.

"Mating," she said. Eric cringed at this word. "It's their coming-out party, their debutante ball."

"What's a debutante ball?" I asked, feeling left out because the words didn't have as strong as an effect as they had on Eric. My mom had said that reading books would help build

my vocabulary. Surprisingly, in the harlequin teen novels I'd been reading, I hadn't come across it.

Mrs. Rimbaux described to me her own debutante ball, back when she was a young woman in a rural, but dignified, part of Louisiana. She wore long white gloves and her father led her down a beautiful staircase, just like Cinderella. She met her husband there, but kept both her shoes on and firmly planted on the floor.

As I listened, a cicada bumped into the toe of my sneaker. I nudged it away. I normally didn't kill bugs outside unless it was a mosquito. Bugs belonged outside; it was their home, and they were food for other animals that I liked better. It was only when they came into the house that I squished them, but that was a last resort if I couldn't catch them in a tea box.

The cicada bumped into me again. "It has a crush on you," my brother said, and, feeling my face get hot, I fought the urge to rip off my skin. They were not beautiful bugs.

That summer our mother promised us a dollar for every book we read, and by the time the cicadas woke from their thirteen-year slumber, I had already made twenty bucks. With going outside out of the question, Eric started reading next to me on the L-couch in the basement while our parents were at work. It was not only the coolest room in the house, but the only room from which you could not hear the grating chirp of the insects infesting our neighborhood.

Eric had spent the beginning of the summer focusing on his lawn-mowing business, running, shooting baskets in the driveway, and tanning on the deck listening to his Walkman, all part of an effort to improve himself after his girlfriend Kristen broke up with him. Now he could no longer fling open the sliding-glass door first thing in the morning and stand shirtless,

slapping his chest with his palms, greeting the day as he normally did, without one of them landing on his bare skin, without squishing them under his feet.

The raised wooden platform of the deck was completely covered with their slick armored bodies, their bulging red eyes. The cicadas seemed attracted to this material, flocked to it. Our side of the neighbor's fence was covered with their translucent discarded skins. They stuck to it like refrigerator magnets, complete replicas that looked eerily undamaged.

I would have stayed inside anyway, because I had poison ivy on my face. Not only did I feel ugly, it was a kind of ugliness that required explanation. Last week at the Maiers' cabin I had accidentally touched the leaves-of-three before smoothing my hair back. I was growing out my bangs and they were at a length where they wouldn't lie forward, or stay tucked behind my ears. The result was a carpet of welts spread across my forehead and around my hairline. After treating the rash topically, I discovered that I was allergic to cortisone. The red splotch crept over my eyebrows, down to my cheeks. I wore an "Over the Hill" gag-gift hat to take attention away from my rippled, oozing forehead.

The hat was given to me by Mr. Maier, because I had not packed one and the sun irritated the rash. The hat had been in the hall closet of the cabin since his fortieth birthday party, and was black with white writing and a gray ponytail coming out of the back. Mr. Maier had offered to cut the ponytail off, but I told him not to bother, and ended up wearing it home, the limp gray sausage curls resting on my shoulder on the opposite side of the seatbelt which crossed over my heart and rubbed uncomfortably against my neck. The hat inflamed the rash when worn at the proper tightness, so I snapped the plastic to the last possible dot and let it hang over my eyes. I felt oddly comforted by it, the concession it allowed me to hide, but still express, that awful burning feeling.

By Tuesday Eric had finished the second book on his sophomore reading list. He blamed the cicadas for this achievement, though I imagine our mother would have made him

finish the books eventually. He had tried cheating by skimming *Lord of the Flies*, but because it was a classic, my mother knew that Piggy was not the name of a pig, but a person.

The books I was reading were obscure. Not only were they unimportant, but my mother had no idea what was in them. Movies had ratings, but books did not, and the descriptions on the backs were often misleading. These books were untraceable, their existence altogether encouraged. I was reading far above my grade level. I could leave a copy of *The Necklace* lying around, its cover a black and white photograph of jewelry on a dressing table, and my dad might put his scotch glass on it as if it were a coaster, unaware that the necklace in question, a gift from the protagonist's passionate lover, would be the implement with which he would strangle her.

I don't think my vocabulary improved much from reading these books, but I did become familiar with certain adjectives, certain qualities attributed to beautiful women. The protagonists of these books, while good-natured and clever, also had wide crystal blue or piercing blue eyes, long legs, curved or swaying hips. Lips were supposed to be red and full, and hair a variation of flowing dark or dark flowing, unless it tumbled over the woman's shoulders. Skin was always smooth or porcelain, golden, or pale and dewy. I took these descriptions seriously, compared myself to these girls, the servants and double spies, cheerleaders recently awoken from comas. I was nothing like them. Instead, I was shy and scrawny, and had scraggly dull-blonde hair. My eyes were the color of dirty denim, and my skin was wrecked.

Eric's ex-girlfriend could have been a character in one of these books. She fit the physical description, and danced jazz and tap, which gave her such a strong elegant posture that a sweatshirt could hang like a velvet cape from her shoulders. Her hair was dark with layers that framed the full moon of her face. She had no bangs, no blunt edge. Only something bad needed to have happened to her.

Eric hadn't belonged in Kristen's story. He was lean, but it was more accurate to describe him as wiry. His jaw was square, but like mine, it looked more clipped than masculine

because of how small his face was. He had brown hair, but his skin was lightly freckled, and his nose was featured prominently on his face. Sometimes this made him look honest, other times it gave him a leering authority. Men in the books were more often kind or brooding, and had dark, serious eyes, tan, bulging muscles.

Kristen was supposed to join us at the lake along with the Schroeders, our other family friends. She had been invited by my mom and dad, but then cancelled. She told Eric that she didn't want to be in a relationship, that they were better off as "just friends." I can't say that I had been looking forward to Kristen coming as much as Eric had, but she had always made an effort to include me, had even taught me the dance moves she had learned during her private lesson with the lead choreographer from *Austin Powers*.

"Crank those hips!" she had said, turning her wrist while managing an invisible hula hoop. "Let's monkey!" I loved her then, sock-footed in the kitchen, arms swinging from up to down, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet. "You've got it," she said to me as I flailed crookedly, as if I actually had, as if I were dancing just like her, as if I ever could.

At the lake, the older kids included Laura, Philip, and I on a hike to an abandoned log cabin, but it wasn't that they really wanted to. They conceded after Laura's sister Steph had showed us the brittle translucent handle of a knife she had found there. She had revealed it to Laura and me in our room with the door closed, told us about it in a whisper.

We tagged along with great pleasure, heads high and proud, giddy with the thought of trespassing. After following the normal trail for ten minutes or so we cut through a clearing, then crossed a dry creek bed. "It's just past this fence," Cam Schroeder had said as if the fence weren't an obstacle, but a sign post, or line in the sand. Steph hoisted herself up, and Cam turned to her, put both his hands squarely under her bottom and pushed. Steph swung her legs over the top bar and hopped down, smiling slightly, unconcerned or else secretively appreciative

of the gesture. Cam followed, and then Eric followed but he tripped as he landed and had to run crouched a little ways to gain his balance.

Philip, following his older brother's example, turned to Laura, but instead extended his laced-fingered hands. She slipped her foot between them and sprung, snatching the chain links near the top. It was a short reach for her to grab the top bar and swing her leg over the side, scramble half-way, then drop down.

Philip climbed after her, not bothering to offer this courtesy to me.

"She's not a girl, she's my sister," Eric had said when he found Kristen and me dancing in the kitchen. He had asked what we were doing, and when Kristen answered, "Girl stuff," he looked at me cranking my hips and it suddenly felt as if the mechanism, the cogs and wheels, were turning a much bigger, more sinister device.

Starting with both feet on the ground, I hooked my fingers around the thin wire of the fence at about eye level. I tried to jam my toe into the diamond shapes, but my foot or shoes were too large, and they slipped instead of creating leverage. I tried to use my arms almost exclusively, but I was not strong enough to climb higher, could only manage to hang. The others had not waited for me, but I could still see them, had not lost track.

I tried to wedge my foot in a rip in the fence, a small slit in the metal. It was not as strong as I had anticipated and my foot sank, ripping the opening into a life jacket-sized hole. I stuck my head and shoulders through and caught myself on my hands, hair falling in front of my face, as I pulled my legs through. I ran to catch up.

The walls and roof of the cabin were so rotted, so grown over with honeysuckle, that it looked like a pergola more than anything else. I had encountered this word in a book I read that took place in Victorian England. The daughter of a textile factory owner fell in love with the family's handsome young gardener, and when her father found out about her pregnancy, he tied the gardener to the pergola he had built for the daughter as a symbol of his love, and beat him.

Inside the cabin were crumpled beer cans and yellow wrappers from McDonald's. Laura kicked the trash with the toe of her shoe as if she suspected to find something underneath, the blade of the knife, perhaps. I was disappointed by the cabin, by its disrepair, its uninteresting garbage, wished that Kristen had been there to make it more fun. She would have pointed out something that I'd missed—a footprint or freshly dug ground that suggested something buried underneath.

Eric tested a ceiling beam with his hands, then he let his whole body dangle. He started doing chin-ups and the cabin shook.

"Stop," Steph said, "You'll get us squished."

Cam grabbed Eric's legs and helped lift him, which moved the strain off the structure and into Eric's face. Eric let go, and Cam gently set him on his feet. Eric pushed him.

"Woa, what'd I do?"

Eric walked out. The five of us looked at each other.

If my mother had been there she would have reminded us that Eric used to have no problem saying what was on his mind. She would have told the story of what happened when they first brought me home from the hospital. Apparently Eric had pointed at me and said, "*That* came out of *you*?"

The five of us stood there, not knowing what to do next.

"Did he say anything to you?" Cam said, turning to me. I shrugged.

Cam wiped the sweat off his face with his t-shirt. I could see the dim outline of the muscles on his stomach. His olive skin had tanned to a golden brown. Steph offered to go after Eric, and Laura followed her sister. Philip picked a honeysuckle flower, pulled out the innards and ate it. The still unbroken skin on my face tingled.

In the morning, when I went to the bathroom and saw myself in the mirror, I screamed, waking up everyone in the cabin. Even though I knew something was wrong the moment I woke

up, the confirmation of the rash had hit like a tackle to the knees. “It will go away in a few days,” my mother said to me when I opened the door finally, pressing my hair flat with her palm in what was intended to be a consoling gesture. But I did not feel consoled, and the rash felt bigger than a temporary blemish, deeper than the valleys between the mountainous, red bumps.

Tuesday afternoon, Laura stopped by with an envelope of pictures from the trip. She had developed doubles, she told me, so that she could share. Not one of the photos had been taken before my face exploded. Instead, I stood frozen on the dock, or sat slumped on my towel wearing the “Old Geezer” hat that Mr. Maier had lent me, while Steph and Laura, wearing two-piece swimming suits, cocked their hips to the side and held up peace signs.

I threw the pictures away without showing anyone.

The next day, during our weekly trip to the library, I decided what I’d spend my reading money on.

In the lobby stood a glass display case where people in the community shared their ignominious collections, the absurd objects they hoarded in secret then bravely displayed for a week. I looked forward to the surprise of this display. KISS commemorative plates, hand-knit Fair Isle sweaters, ancient corn-husk dolls with painted-on eyes.

That day the collection was of cameras from the last hundred years. Some of them were giant and square with accordion folds, and one them even had a trick lens on the side for long-exposure candid photos. At the very end was a brand new camera—blue and bubble-shaped. It was placed facing backwards because it had a gray two-by-two inch screen. The screen, the typed caption said, was to show the digital photo, a file that could be printed from a computer, or a kiosk at Walgreen’s. A file, the caption said, that could be deleted and retaken if someone in the

photo had their eyes closed, or if the lighting was bad, if a shadow concealed someone's face. It was the first I'd heard of this power of erasure.

In the teen section I grabbed books by the armload, carried them in two trips to the front desk. The maximum was twenty-five, a number I exceeded, so I carried the remaining four to Eric to check out with his card. Eric had borrowed the car, had agreed to take me. He hated the library, but loved driving unsupervised. I found him by the magazine rack leafing through a photography magazine. (I figured he too was interested in the control a digital camera afforded.) He snapped it shut when he saw me, but I caught a glimpse of a woman's naked body, the striking pink-brown skin of her nipple. I pretended I hadn't seen anything, and he pretended with me.

He checked out my books along with *The Complete Stories of Franz Kafka*.

The cicadas weren't swarming the library parking lot, but their yeasty rot fouled the air. I pulled the gray ponytail over my nose.

"Is that why you wear that stupid thing?" he said, but on the way home he stopped at Quick Trip and bought us both slushies.

By Thursday afternoon I was halfway through a book from the new haul, whose heroine, the niece of an archeologist, was showing her untrustworthy boyfriend an excavation site at the end of a dark tunnel inside a pyramid. The team originally thought the pyramid had been looted, but then mysterious new symbols on the walls led them to an undiscovered chamber. "I'll go first," the boyfriend had said, making me certain that he was behind it all, that something would reach out and grab her.

As I read this, a cicada landed on my knee. I screamed and flung my legs off the back of my half of the basement couch, swatting the cicada with the book's back cover. "Isn't anything sacred anymore!?"

Eric looked up from his Kafka, saw the cicada cluelessly circling the floor, then smashed it with his book.

"That's a library book!"

He flipped it over to examine the damage. There was a wet brown streak across its dull gray cover. The cicada, which I had assumed was dead, began crawling towards the stairs. Eric smashed it repeatedly until the cover of the book loosened from its binding.

"You're going to be fined," I told him, but before I could finish he said, "I don't even care."

We looked to see where the cicada came from and found several of them crawling out of the laundry room drain. After pounding them flat, Eric found some sort of chemical under the sink and poured it down the pipe, sealing it finally with several strips of duct tape.

Eric and I went outside to the deck. First we sprayed the cicadas with bug spray, but this only tortured them. It did not end their lives. Then Eric found wooden skewers by the grill and we used the sharp ends to puncture their crisp bodies. We'd fit four or five in a row, holding them up for the other cicadas to see. Then I filled a bucket with water and drowned the ones stupid enough to have crawled inside of it, holding them under with a flyswatter. When this grew tiresome I ran inside and grabbed scissors from the utility drawer to cut their heads off. It's true what they say, about acephalous bodies wriggling.

I don't remember discussing it, but then we began to get creative, to mix and match. I'd skewer a cicada then roast it over the citronella candle until its body lost its sheen. Eric experimented with dunking them in water, then wax. He showed me how to make a flamethrower by lighting WD40, and he waved it at the ones flying, hovering there like broken, bloated blimps. What survived of their corpses hit the ground with an audible thud. The cicadas in the yard were as indifferent as I was to their fallen comrades, crawling over and around their charred limbs like they would any other rock or blade of grass.

In the midst of our massacre two cicadas stood joined on the patio table. They were attached end to end, and the wings of the larger one lay folded over the other's. This was how they mated. When Mrs. Rimbaux had pointed this out to me, it had looked elegant. One—I had no idea how to tell their genders—was poised on the top of the frond of a draping fern, the other on the leaf's underbelly, upside down. It didn't look like it was a strain to be in that position; instead it was almost graceful, the nonchalance of a trapeze artist reeling through the air. Their sex was absolutely still though. Sphynx-like, mirrored.

With a stick Eric poked at the feet of the mating pair. "If I can't, you can't," he said. I hadn't understood what this meant in a literal sense, especially in regards to Kristen, but from my books I surmised that his exclusion from love meant that his life would remain ill-defined, would have no story, no focus.

To avoid Eric's stick, the two insects tried to scramble in opposite directions, but were pulled drunkenly in neither. He poked at them again, and this time the smaller one was dragged backwards by the other, its front legs pedaling the air. After another poke the larger cicada back-pedaled and the smaller one flipped over, releasing them. It might have been funny if it wasn't so hideous, and this disgust made them pathetic, and for a moment less expendable.

Later that summer, I would learn the French slang for sexual pleasure—little deaths—from the forty-fifth novel I finished, and be reminded of the cicadas. In the story a young French Acadian's village is burned down by British-ruled Canada. She is separated from her family and sent on a ship to the West Indies. She doesn't know what will happen when they reach the island, but one of the sailors is kind to her.

At some point my brother and I went inside and washed our hands. It could be said that we'd won the battle, not the war. The carnage had hardly made a dent, yet I felt satisfied.

Through the sliding-glass door the scattered carcasses reminded me of the collections display at the library. I imagined their helpless bodies arranged on the shelves, the wooden

skewers poking through them, charred by flame, concealed with wax. Each death premeditated. Each death unique.

I did not feel bad about what I did, did not even question it. The sheer mass of them turned them disposable. When I had gone inside to get scissors, I caught my own reflection in the glass. My rash was so swollen I could no longer pull the hat over my eyes. Instead it perched jauntily above my eyebrows. My eyes themselves were so pinched that they almost looked shut, and the gnarled gray locks hung over my boney shoulders. I pictured this image on the back of the blue camera I had seen, and imagined myself deleting it with the press of a button.

Outside I leaned down and touched a cicada for the first time with my bare hands. My bangs would have hung between us if it weren't for the hat, as they had done with the poison ivy when I balanced halfway through the fence, my body stranded on either side. The cicada's wings made the sound of cards shuffling, which I silenced with the weight of my fingertip. I was surprised to discover that the wing felt greasy. I lifted the cicada from the ground then, and cradled it in my palms. Its beady, red eyes looked but wouldn't plead. I snapped it in half like a pea pod. I seemed to watch from above, as I did this, hovering patient and roof-level as I, corporeal, swept the deck in a fury, ripping off wing after wing.

Resonance

Hannah could see Alan Baumann in her periphery, though even if she hadn't seen him, she would've felt his presence, would've been able to describe his posture without looking at him. It was always the same: his arms dangling, hands cupped loose with his knuckles facing forward, his shoulders sloping, his neck craned, and his chin tilted, glasses sliding down his nose. He had been following her for weeks.

Hannah and Dana Visconti stood talking in Christ Lutheran's youth room, cups of orange juice in their hands.

"Like a frickin' clock," Dana said loudly, trying to get Alan to "take a G.D. hint."

Hannah had told the girls at the sleepover the night before about her "shadow problem," had even gotten some laughs when she'd called Alan a "slack-jawed Neanderthal."

Dana downed the rest of her glass. "Let's go," she said, and Hannah led her through the storage annex, and through the youth pastor's office.

"Maybe he'll lose our tail."

"Your tail," Dana said. "He likes *you*."

Hannah winced. She hated this explanation, how it paired her with him, how it made stalking sound normal. Mr. Decker, her math teacher, had tried to pass off Alan's actions as misguided affection. Hannah felt like this left out something important. It wasn't normal to lurk outside of homeroom, or pre-algebra class. Normal people had conversations. Normal people wrote their own names on their unit summary quizzes, didn't try to be accused of cheating, so that they'd both have to meet with their teacher. Normal people wouldn't have called that an accident, because normal people didn't make those kinds of mistakes.

They cut across the cafeteria and climbed the stairs to the third floor where the middle school classrooms ran the length of one hallway. Half the rooms shared a wall with the school gym, and sometimes the teachers were muffled by the sound of balls bouncing. Dana jiggled the handles of each door as she walked past. They were locked.

Dana didn't normally come to Christ Lutheran on Sundays—her dad was Catholic, and her mom only went on Christmas and Easter. Hannah and Dana had spent the night at Heidi Kauffman's house, where they spent the majority of the night listening to Top 40 and struggling to contain an aerosol can of body glitter. Heidi's family took them to church, and Dana's parents had arranged for Hannah's parents to drive Dana home.

"You still have glitter all over," Hannah said.

"Where?"

She pointed, and they ducked into the bathroom to look in the mirror. Dana took her hair tie out and silver glitter rained down. She stuck her head under the hand dryer. "Maybe it will blow out." The dryer seemed to produce more of it. Her hair shimmered, and now so did the floor. Dana put her hair back in a messy bun.

"Do you think I should get bangs? Like wispy ones?"

Hannah didn't always know what to say around Dana. Open, unstructured time made Hannah feel small. She wasn't an instigator, was better with an activity, like when the glitter

started spraying everywhere. Putting a shoe over it had been instinctual. She thought maybe that's what people meant when they said "physical comedy." The idea had come from her gut. Then Dana went to check on the can, and tossed it across the room like a hot potato. It made a huge frickin' mess.

"That sounds cute," Hannah said, but Dana was busy with her reflection. When she finished, they left the bathroom. Hannah expected Alan to be outside waiting, a pool of him spreading, like a melting stick of butter. She was relieved to see the empty hallway. Hannah followed Dana to their lockers, and Hannah opened hers.

"Got anything to do in there?"

On the inside door, Hannah had taped a magazine ad of a young woman sitting next to a cafe window with a vaguely European view. The woman's posture and the porcelain cup in front of her seemed to communicate that she had important things to do, but she wasn't in a hurry to do any of them. Hannah liked the image, but she didn't think it was representative, didn't think it was her. She hadn't realized that the woman was a celebrity, which is what everyone seemed to comment on, though she was still unclear on what the woman was famous for. Having her there, and not knowing, felt disingenuous.

"I don't know," Hannah said, sticking her hand under the lip of the wire shelf and shaking it.

Next to the ad was a framed picture of her cabin at camp, posed like *Charlie's Angels*. Hannah was in profile in the back row. This, she felt, captured everything. She hadn't been sure if she had been invited to Heidi's because all of the girls on the basketball team had been, or if her presence had actually been desired.

Before the glitter started spraying, the girls tried to see how hyper they could get from drinking Mountain Dew. Dana and Heidi had bounced off the walls; Hannah drank a glass and felt nothing. Then Enrique Iglesias' song "Hero" came on and Heidi Kauffman cried. Everyone

but Hannah agreed that the song was beautiful, and discovered their mutual desire to have a boy "kiss the pain away" and ask such devoted questions as, "Would you dance if I asked you to dance?" and "Would you save my soul tonight?" Hannah thought this was stupid.

She had never cried from a song, but felt stirred by The Talking Heads' "Heaven." When her mom had to lead the choir and her family sat in the balcony next to the organ, she'd sing, "Everyone is trying! To get to the bar! The name of the bar! The bar is called Heaven!" at the top of her lungs and feel very spiritual.

Hannah stared at her school supplies. She had been categorizing her classes as Alan-free or Danger-zone, and she placed her books and notebooks for these classes on separate shelves. Most of them were in the Danger-zone by now, and she'd developed a new appreciation for band because it was held in a different part of the building where only band kids could go.

"I know Bradley Weber's combination. He told me," Dana said, though Hannah had learned the previous night that Heidi liked Bradley.

"Why did he tell you?"

Dana leaned her back against the door. "Guess what he has in there? It's not drugs, sorry."

"I wouldn't want that…"

"It's really girly. You won't believe it."

"A kitten?"

"Kittens can be boys, they have to be."

"What then?"

Dana pretended to spin the lock then yanked the handle. It took Hannah a second to notice. "A mirror?"

"Exactly. Hey, we should leave your stalker a note."

Hannah pulled out loose-leaf paper and a gel pen, wrote "STOP" so that it took up six lines. "How's this?"

Neither girl could remember which locker was Alan's, but they knew the general area, and Dana convinced Hannah that anyone else who got the note would just think it was random, while Alan would get the message. They made four more and squeezed them through five lockers' top grates.

Alan appeared at the end of the hallway. Hannah never seemed to see him in motion. It was as if he'd been staked there like a yard flamingo. He turned his head away from her and stared, feet still set, at the bulletin board. The board was mostly bare cork and lone staples holding shreds of faded paper, except for the old fire evacuation plan that hadn't accounted for an entire staircase.

Alan was uncool in a way Hannah felt needed to be punished. He lacked self-awareness, had no shame. The sleeves of his sweater were too short, and his face had a slack, feminine quality. He wasn't smart and he didn't have many friends. Hannah couldn't remember what grade they were in when he transferred, if he had gone to their church before then, and she couldn't remember ever being nice to him, which was the way Mrs. Keller had excused Alan when Hannah had told her about him after English class, hoping she'd do something about it. Alan had been waiting for her outside.

Mr. Vogel, the principal, had said something similar. Added that Christ Lutheran was a small school, maybe it wasn't always on purpose. They seemed to sympathize with her, but were reluctant to get Alan in trouble. "I know it's annoying, but he isn't exactly doing anything," Mr. Vogel had said. She understood that Alan wasn't punished because of how awkward he was, how he choked on his words before speaking, his ghostly pale-blonde hair. He could not be held accountable for his social interactions. But she could be. The fault always seemed to lie within

her—for being nice, being liked, feeling uncomfortable. Mr. Vogel said he'd talk to him, but so far, no effect.

Dana plucked the history binder out of Hannah's locker and flung it down the hallway. It landed a foot away from Alan, but he ignored it. Dana strained her face into an overbite. "Just brushing up on some fire safety!" Dana said. He ignored this too.

Hannah pulled out her Old Testament folder and chucked it. She grabbed the rest of the books from the Danger-zone and threw them too. A plastic binder skidded on the tile floor, smacked into his shin. "Stop eavesdropping!" she screamed. She knew her words were not adequate, but that her tone was right, that it captured her seriousness. He turned slowly, looked at her with his perfectly blank expression, mouth slightly open, eyelids half-closed. Then he lumbered off in the other direction, tripping slightly on his feet.

Dana burst out laughing, sunk to the floor. "He never says anything, does he?"

"It's like we just scared away a bear," Hannah said.

Dana doubled over. The glitter on her temples gleamed.

Hannah smiled as she gathered her papers which had floated every which way. She knew that Dana would tell Heidi and the other girls about this, that she had just created an event, a memory. She put her school stuff back then kicked her locker door shut. "Bet he wouldn't follow us onto the roof," she said.

Dana's eyebrows lifted. "You know how to get on the roof?"

"I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner."

She walked away without waiting for Dana, let her scramble to catch up. In the band room she opened a window and crawled through it. It was only a two-foot drop to the flat, lower level.

The girls lay on their stomachs and took turns spitting over the roof's ledge. Dana turned to say something to Hannah, but Hannah couldn't hear her over the hum of the large

HVAC units. Below she saw the glint of Alan Baumann's toe-head bobbing towards the parking lot. She took aim. Even her saliva seemed to sparkle.

Best Laid Plans

The forecast did not bode well for tent camping. I remember pausing as the four of us girls strung a tarp between three trees, thinking the clouds looked smeared as if *they* had been rained on. Of course, it had been raining. The creek was higher than I'd ever seen it, so high that it covered the platform where other years we jumped clutching the rope swing.

It was our first and only year in the tents, and the last year we'd be campers. In eighth grade we'd become Counselors-in-Training, or C.I.T.s, and help with the younger campers, but that was only those who were "adult enough." Knowing that this was our last summer made the tarp-hanging and tent-assembling feel somber, at least to me, as if Passover was approaching and I was painting blood over the door frame.

After we finished with the tarps, the girls, and only the girls, were required to meet with Linda, the assistant camp director. We crunched up the gravel road to the utility hall. Keagan carried her enormous hardback fantasy novel which she spent every spare moment of camp reading. Heidi carried Dana on her back, but dropped her, and said, "Your butt is too big. It makes you so heavy!" Everyone laughed, including Dana, who was proud of her butt and the attention it earned her.

Linda was waiting for us in a room that smelled like stale coffee and hot glue. She instructed us to grab folding chairs from the stack leaning against the wall and pull them up to the table.

I was nervous. Neither the youth pastor or the adult chaperones had told us what the meeting would be about, and I didn't know Linda very well. Our church rented the camp for Vacation Bible School, and she only seemed to be around when our parents were.

"Ladies," Linda began turning to look each of us in the eye, "I wanted to speak with you today because I know you're at an age…" She looked down at the table then, and Keagan glanced at the open book in her lap. I turned my eyes to the window where I could watch the flow of the creek. The roots of a few trees were submerged. It looked as if they had walked away from the woods to wade in the water.

"What I'm saying is, is that it's really important that you don't flush things down the toilet." She looked us each in the eye again, waited for Keagan to finish her page. "Only waste and toilet paper. That's it. What happens if you don't, is the septic tank overflows, and the septic tank is just right over there, so it's really important that you understand, you know what they say, 'you reap what you sow.'"

This was where she lost me. What *things* had she expected us to flush down the toilet? I remembered how last summer the boys cabin had tried to flush a moldy dog toy they had found in the woods. They had thrown it into our cabin, and we had thrown it back, then they flushed it. The cabin toilets didn't seem to be as fragile as the campground toilets, because they were able to plunger it down without trouble. I thought that Linda was trying to warn us not to retaliate or frame the boys (plans I hadn't considered), and was angry that we were being talked to, not the boys who had done it in the first place.

Plus, I felt I had moved on from all that. A few weeks prior as Tay Brewer and I waited for our parents after church, we had sat on the same couch and shared a Kit Kat. He said, "Kit

Kats are my favorite," as if it *became* his favorite after sharing it with me. Our arms even touched a few times, and he asked if I was going to camp.

It was not retaliation I wanted, but my first kiss. Heidi and Dana had already been kissed that winter at one of the dances the nearby Catholic church held. Heidi's happened underneath the bleachers, Dana's on the dance floor. The boy Heidi kissed had said, "I like the way your ass moves." The boy Dana kissed had said nothing. Heidi had used tongue, Dana had not. Regardless, the experience seemed to be one of personal and intrapersonal growth. I felt stunted in comparison, and imagined Tay and me sharing a Kit Kat again, walking back to the campsites in the dark, his hand reaching out to touch my shoulder, my hand on his arm as we both leaned in. There would be adults by the fire ring, and adults at the campground, but in between was a window of opportunity. We weren't allowed to bring candy or snacks to camp because of ants, the letter the youth pastor sent home had said, though I suspected it was because no one would eat in the cafeteria if there were other options. However, campers could win a king-sized bar if they got a bull's eye in archery. This was something I believed I could do.

After Bible study, most of the girls walked to the bathrooms to change into our swimming suits. The tent had felt too crowded for such an act. I was waiting for my turn in the stall when Heidi asked, "Does anybody have any extra *shorts*?"

Keagan, who had been reading next to me as she waited in line, said what I had been thinking. "Weren't you wearing shorts?"

"Well, I don't have *shorts-shorts*. I didn't need them before, but I need them now."

Dana laughed. She got the joke; I didn't. She threw her swim bag over the wall between the stalls. "I only have *yellow shorts*, I hope that's okay."

Keagan rolled her eyes, went back to her reading.

Heidi exited the stall and I entered. I was pleased to see she was wearing the required one-piece swimsuit under her shorts, which weren't yellow, I realized, but cut-off denim ones. Her swimsuit was boring though, flattering on her tan, muscular figure, but the kind a lifeguard might wear.

I had convinced my mother to buy me a tankini. She made me model it to prove it was appropriate. She was one of the upper-camp chaperones, and wanted me to set a good example. I hiked the bottoms up and stretched the top down so it didn't show the tiny strip of skin it was intended to. She agreed to it and didn't comment on how the halter's v-shape and thin foam lining made it look as if I had breasts.

We didn't talk about that kind of stuff, or rather we never had "the talk." On the first day of sixth grade I'd noticed all the girls in my class had shaved legs, except me. I asked my mom if I could shave too and she said, "You'll be shaving your whole life. It's better not to rush into it." So that night, I took a disposable razor out of my parents' bathroom and shaved my own—once accidentally with the cap still on, then a second time for real. It took two weeks for my mom to notice. I was jealous of my friend Laura, whose mother had preempted her with the appearance of a gift basket that contained razors and different scents of shave gel.

When I got to the creek the boys were already swimming. The youth pastor stood in shallow water with an adult chaperone greasing two watermelons. I waded into the creek slowly so I could get used to the water before whatever wacky, compulsory game he'd have us play. I liked how slick the water felt against my shaved legs.

We were divided into teams for a relay race in which we'd pass the watermelon across the creek. I noticed Heidi's name had been called for my team, but she was still standing on the side, still wearing her shorts.

"Coming?" I asked her and she told me she wasn't.

“They’re going to make you,” I said. “Everyone has to.” But she knew that, had been coming to camp as long as I had.

The youth pastor was in the water and the teams had started to line up. Finally, one of the adult chaperones stepped in and said, “If you girls don’t feel up to swimming, because you know, you don’t feel good, it’s perfectly okay.” She put her hands on her stomach and made a frowny face. Again, I was furious. Who did they think we were? Somehow we were both fragile, and menacing. Capable of destruction, yet incapable of swimming. Other years we weren’t treated this way.

I took my place in line and struggled as the watermelon slipped from my arms.

The next day we played water-football and Tay Brewer dunked me, which I found very encouraging. Heidi still refused to swim, but she played quarterback from the side a few times. When we’d throw the ball back to her, and she would raise her trim arms, the shadow of stubble was visible. I admired the coarseness of her armpit hair, even more so how she seemed embarrassed by it, unaware of its elegance.

Tay sat at our table at lunch. They served slimy ham sandwiches and canned peaches, but they also had chocolate milk. I didn’t finish my sandwich, and Tay asked me if he could have it. I gave it to him and watched as he peeled off the slice of ham and let it drop on the floor. It made a loud smack. He smiled, and I smiled with him.

During free time I decided to go to archery instead of swimming or canoeing, figuring I would need practice to be able to win candy. Heidi went with me, but asked if we could stop at the tents first so she could grab some *shorts*. I heard a crinkling sound from inside the tent and assumed that she had snuck in candy. For a second I felt vaguely threatened.

At the archery range I was surprised to see Keagan's book lying on a tree stump. I stared at it for a while, unable to process the familiarity of the cover: a sparkling snarled dragon reflected in the blade of a sword. I had seen it often—Keagan even read as she was walking—but without her it was strange, empty even. What was more surprising was that Keagan was participating in a voluntary camp activity. She stood with her legs spread wide, her right elbow pointed back, and her hand grazing her cheek. The bow string was incredibly taught, and the arrow fired into the target.

My mother had been put in charge of archery. She instructed Heidi and me on how to hold the bow and told us that we should never go onto the range without her signal, should never point the bow in the direction of others. I overshot and got a blister on my hand. My mom offered to adjust my grip. I declined. Keagan got a bullseye.

At announcements after dinner, Keagan was awarded her choice of candy. She took the large pack of Twizzlers and gnawed on them as she read. My stomach clenched around the luke-warm spaghetti I had eaten.

After campfire we were dismissed two by two to walk back to the campsite. The youth pastor would put a PG movie on with the projector and generator once we arrived, but the walk was supposed to be reflective. I was dismissed with Keagan, not Tay. It was too dark for her to read. She offered me a Twizzlers. I accepted.

She asked me how camp was going.

I told her it was going fine.

She said, "I don't know, you look mad sometimes."

The third morning of camp it rained. We brought our suitcases and sleeping bags into the utility hall and took turns using the dryer. The youth pastor put movies on: first *The Princess*

Bride, then *Monsters Inc*. We made stars out of popsicle sticks, played long card games like the version of Uno where you draw until you have a card to play. Our Bible study included a half hour of journaling. We were supposed to write about a Bible story and what it made us think of in our own lives. Heidi told me she was writing about Noah's ark because it was raining outside. She wrote this in her notebook after she said it. Then she turned to me again. "If you had to be stuck on a boat with one of the guys here, who would you want to be stuck with?"

Dana said, "Tay Brewer. Hannah would want Tay Brewer."

I didn't disagree.

Heidi laughed. "I knew it!"

Keagan looked up from her book.

I wrote about Jesus flipping the table over in the temple. Jesus was perfect, and he was also angry, and that meant it wasn't a sin to be angry. I was angry.

By lunch, the sky cleared up. It looked white and gray, but I couldn't distinguish any clouds. The mosquitoes came out in hordes. In the mess hall, Tay sat next to Heidi. I was so miserable I could hardly choke down my tray of chicken nuggets and canned corn. I left a chicken nugget on my plate, but Tay didn't ask for it. I threw it on the ground and no one else saw how it bounced.

After lunch, we took towels and dried out our tents. When we were dismissed for free time, I lacquered myself in bug spray before heading to the archery range. Keagan followed me. On the way, her flip-flop got stuck in the mud.

"Aren't you supposed to wear closed-toed shoes for this?"

She shrugged. "They care more about the length of our shorts."

The packing list the youth pastor had mailed to everyone devoted a whole paragraph to the girls' dress code. Girls' shorts must be no shorter than five inches above the knee. Girls must wear one-piece swimming suits. No low-cut shirts or dresses or anything see-through. Clothes

must not restrict movement or participation in camp activities. Bring nothing valuable. Minimal jewelry. Honor God. Don't distract male campers.

"Yeah, *shorts*," I said.

"Well, no, I don't think that's what they mean." Keagan plucked her flip-flop out of the mud and looked me over head to toe and back again. I could feel her eyes linger on my chest. "*Shorts* is their code for pads and tampons. They never shut up about their periods."

It was my turn to inspect her. Her figure was rather womanly. I hadn't thought of her that way because she wore baggy t-shirts and was anti-social, but sure enough, her chest rose with a fullness with each intake of her breath. "I was ten when I first had mine," she said, sliding the strap of the flip-flop between her toes. "What's there to brag about?"

"Exactly," I said, but she rolled her eyes. She started up the path, and I followed.

"Why do you come here instead of hanging out with your friends?"

I thought about telling her my plan. I thought about saying it was for my mom, but I didn't think she'd believe it. I shrugged. "Candy. I want to win the candy."

Keagan and I shared a target. After fifteen minutes I hit the circle's outer rim. When Tay and Heidi and the others showed up, I was embarrassed to be seen hanging out one-on-one with her. But Keagan surprised me—as my mom was busy giving the newcomers her safety spiel, Keagan shot an arrow straight through the center then cheered, "Way to go, Hannah! Woo!" She clapped me on my back. My mom came over and congratulated me. Tay told me, "Good job."

That night my stomach was in knots. I ate what I could, then swirled my green beans and beef stroganoff around my tray until my name was announced. I walked to the front of the room and claimed my candy. I felt oddly elated holding a Kit Kat bar that I hadn't earned, that was instead dropped in my lap. It was a secret, and nothing was better at bringing people

together than a secret. I thought Tay might appreciate the scheme more than athleticism. At the campfire, Heidi and Dana sat on either side of me and asked me to share it with them. I told them I was saving my Kit Kat for later, and eventually they let it drop. I didn't feel mad, I liked being in the middle, and I felt it would make sharing it with Tay feel even more special.

As we sang, I pictured what would happen: the dark, his arm snaking around my waist, his lips lightly touching mine. I had trouble fantasizing how we would get to that exact moment, pictured us being dismissed to walk back together, the stars and firelight, the crunch of the gravel path under our feet, and swing of flashlights far in front of us blinking as they rounded the bend. Then, I would skip ahead a little and picture our kiss. In the middle was the Kit Kat.

Campfire ended in silent prayer, and I prayed extra hard for Tay and me to be dismissed together. To my surprise we were. I pulled the candy from my pocket. "Didn't you say Kit Kats were your favorite?"

He turned his head towards me, "Yeah, are you giving it to me?"

"We'll share," I said but my hands were trembling by this point and I struggled to tear open the wrapper.

"Here, let me try." He stopped and set his flashlight on the ground. It was perfectly dark. I stepped closer.

"Hannah! Can I speak to you for a second?"

I turned around. It was my mom, and she was taking long steps to catch up. Her white shirt looked oddly illuminated, as if it had absorbed the diminishing firelight, and her footsteps seemed to echo as if the camp were in a gully, enclosed by cliffs. Clouds moved in front of the moon and stars and turned the sky black. Tay picked up his flashlight and kept walking. My mom pulled me aside and I watched as the rest of the seventh graders walked back to the campsite without me.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I wanted to ask you something, and it's embarrassing I know, but it's probably time to check if you needed *anything*, or if you've noticed any hair in odd places…" She trailed off.

"No," I turned away from her, furious. "Why are you doing this?" I recognized this as the sex-ed talk, or an attempt at it. What I should have said was, "Why are you doing this *now*?"

"Okay," she said and to my surprise she dropped it. "Just let me know."

Just let her know? How suddenly casual that line felt. How canned. I ran to catch up with Tay, to get away from her, but she had ruined my chance.

I woke up to Keagan shining her flashlight in my face. "We have to leave," she said, chewing on her dyed-black hair, "It's flooding." The rain pattered on the tarp, and I realized my feet were wet. I sat up and saw Dana and Heidi stuff their sleeping bags into their sacks.

We threw our luggage into the camp van and ran through two inches of water to the utility hall, while the adults took down the tents. It took a while to get settled: girls on one side, boys on the other. The youth pastor and other adults wanted us to sleep, but put on a movie knowing it might be difficult to do so. It was the one about Jamaican bobsledding. The team practices bobsledding in the bathtub and on grassy hills with soapbox cars. As it played, the dryer tumbled over and over. I fell back asleep without meaning to.

I woke up a second time to terrible stomach cramps. I blamed the stroganoff whose meat and sauce had been gray. I noticed the TV was on, though it was only a blue screen. It was still dark outside, everyone was still asleep. In the bathroom I couldn't go, but I waited a while reading the signs Linda had posted. "TOILET PAPER ONLY."

I went back to my sleeping bag, but everything outside had changed. I thought it was snowing. The ground was covered in white. It was hailing bite-sized balls of ice. It was so loud I had mistaken it for silence.

The hail woke everyone up. Linda appeared with single-portioned boxes of cereal, and a crate full of milk cartons. She informed us that she had called all of our parents. I wondered if the upper-camp was evacuating, or just the tents. If I would be one of the last to leave, or if my dad was coming. We ate breakfast. Keagan turned the pages of her book. She had started over from the beginning.

My stomach still hurt. I went to the bathroom. Linda's sign said, "PAPER ONLY!!!! CAMP WILL FLOOD!"

When I returned to the main room I saw Tay holding my Kit Kat in his lap. Heidi sat next to him. Dana and the others were gathered around. Heidi pointed to the Kit Kat, said, "She gave that to you because she's anorexic."

"Is that why she's so scrawny?" Tay's eyes caught mine as he said this. His face looked stretched and rigid, as if he couldn't unfurl the bunched skin on his forehead, straighten the hook of his eyebrows.

I returned to the bathroom and sat on the lid of the toilet crying into my hands as quietly as I could manage. I blew my nose and noticed Keagan's feet. They were wide and small and her toes were perfectly round. She wore the muddy flip-flops and purple nail polish that was so dark it was almost black.

"Are you okay?" she said.

I considered her question. “Are we friends now?”

“I could go either way,” she told me. I heard her turn a page.

I couldn’t decide if it was worse to stay in the bathroom. I considered entering the main room as if nothing had happened, as if I’d never heard them, and simply forgot something like a hairbrush on the bathroom counter.

“Should I pretend nothing happened?”

Keagan snapped her book shut. “No, I don’t think that’ll work. They’ll just do it a second time.”

I heard footsteps in the hallway, so I opened the lid of the toilet and tried to pee. I had a reason to be in there, was my thinking. The door to the boy’s bathroom creaked.

I stood up and wiped. A slimy brown residue appeared on the paper. I threw it in the toilet and grabbed another wad. The damn stroganoff, I thought, the rubbery chicken, the ancient canned food. I was eating! I had the diarrhea to prove it. I wiped again, but the slime was still there. I tried a third and fourth time, wiping frantically, not recognizing it as blood.

“Can I get you anything?” Keagan said.

I looked down at the bowl and it was stuffed full of paper. I looked to Linda’s sign, “DON’T YOU DARE FLUSH *THINGS* DOWN THE TOILET!!!” I noticed for the first time that the font of the message was a dripping Halloween type. I thought about stuffing more paper in the toilet, causing a clog. It was a futile idea, given the sheet of water already outside, and I easily discarded it. Suddenly everything clicked. It was *shorts* that I needed. God-damn *shorts*!

I thought about asking Keagan for help. I pictured her standing by the sink, not looking in the mirror as other people would, but reading her book as she waited for me, looking up from the page occasionally when she spoke, though I could not see her through the stall. I thought of Heidi in the next room leaning forward and crossing her muscular legs emphatically, spitting out that awful word, *anorexic*, showing everyone the thick lining of my swimsuit, and Tay next to her,

his arm over the back of his folding chair, gobbling my Kit Kat with an open mouth. I could see the windows in the main room, and the brown water of the creek spreading silently over the flat land, lacking the rage of a river.

I had watched the flood of '93 on television. Seen a farmhouse float down the highway. First the barn went, then the shed, and lastly the house, which moved almost cautiously, as if its joints hurt.

On the news the day before, the anchor had asked for sandbaggers. My father volunteered. My mom turned on the television, and I told her I thought I saw him on the screen, tiny, though I couldn't have. What I saw was a whole line of men just like him, passing the heavy bags one after the other.

When my dad had come home from sandbagging, he laid down, still dirty, on the kitchen floor. This felt important, representative of the sacrifice he had made, the exceptional circumstance. I thought of him as a hero as I stood over his crumpled, resting body, noticing the lines where the water lapped at his shins, unable to imagine the levee breaking despite his best efforts, because he had worked hard, had done everything that was required of him. Of course the sand would stop the Missouri River—he was my dad, and I was just a little girl.

Grounded

“Ooooh, Hannah…oooh, Hannah,” sang Mr. Visconti as I threw my backpack, gym bag, and trumpet case into the backseat before sliding in myself and shutting the door. He had been doing this Ritchie Valens schtick for years, and it didn’t annoy me as much as it did Dana. It made me feel younger than I wanted to feel, but it was still a warm feeling, that affection.

The Viscontis lived four blocks away, and we had been carpooling since the sixth grade. Dana was new to Christ Lutheran then, and during one of our basketball games, our parents, meeting for the second or third time, discovered our proximity and made the arrangement. They never really became close friends, but it was mutually beneficial. Mr. Visconti would take us to school mornings my mother taught music lessons at the elementary school, and when there wasn’t a game, my mother would drive us home.

Mr. Visconti tuned the radio. His stereo system, while wood-paneled and clearly expensive, still had a knob dial. “Let’s see what they’ve got for us today.” He only played oldies, and stopped on one of his regular stations which was playing a commercial for discount furniture. Dana sat hunched in the front seat. I couldn’t read her face.

“Ridin’ along in my automobile,” Mr. Visconti sang as the music returned. He turned the volume up for a second, then down again. “This song isn’t just about cars,” he said, taking his

eyes off of the road to examine his daughter, who said nothing, then turning back slightly to me. This movement was always a little stiff due to his suit coat. The shoulders bunched and rose. That day his tie, I noticed, had miniature race horses.

"But car culture," he said, "I first heard this song at the 66 Park-In down Watson Road where the Best Buy is now." I remembered the drive-in theater, but only vaguely. As a small child I had been taken to see *Batman Returns*, but I fell asleep before the previews had finished. Mr. Visconti stole a glance forward and turned the volume up as he sang along with the line, "Cruisin' and playin' the radio." He didn't turn the volume back down when he asked Dana, "Remember who this is?"

"Chuck Berry," I answered, but flatly, in hopes that Dana would feel grateful that I'd stopped his pestering, not annoyed that I knew the answer. She never responded, or did anything to encourage him. I couldn't help but know the answer, because I listened to what Mr. Visconti told us. I thought it was interesting, even if I sometimes thought he talked too much. I had never known anyone to speak that freely, that loosely, that directly about his thoughts, the associations he made. When he spoke, I felt like I was seeing the neurons of his brain light up.

Dana and I only had health class together at this point (I had tested into our high school's honors track), but even this was bafflingly difficult for her. She had answered "What is a testicle?" in test-prep *Jeopardy!* when the clue had been "female reproductive organ where eggs are produced," and even the teacher had laughed at her. I knew this had not been on purpose, which was what she later told our class, because I had noticed her mouth twist from blank panic to insolence. To me this was proof of both her startlingly low intelligence and social acuity.

"Hey! You got it," Mr. Visconti said, facing the road again, turning the volume louder. "Ridin' along…" He signaled, then made a right turn. If Mr.Visconti and I had been alone together, which we'd never been, I would have told him how the guitar riffs reminded me of

pistons pumping in a car engine, that slight acceleration at the top, and that I remembered him telling us that his first car had been a sky blue Buick Electra.

I wanted him to know that I wasn't mad at him, that it was Dana who was mad at us: me for breaking a bottle of tequila in front of her mother at the beginning of spring break, and Mr. Visconti for calling everyone's parents. Mr. Visconti was a lawyer, and from what I could overhear from the living room, had appealed to our parents as he would a judge. This did not matter to Dana, because she was grounded for a month. My parents had grounded me for two, but I knew that wouldn't help her forgive me.

Dana dug her hands into her backpack then flipped down her mirror. She unscrewed the cap on a bottle of mascara and plunged the wand five or six times. From the sliver of mirror I could see she'd already applied a thick band of eyeliner to both her top and bottom lids. She twirled the brush.

I never would have put on makeup in front of my dad, as a choice, not a rule; yet she layered and layered until her lashes looked like tarantula legs.

Mr. Visconti tapped the brakes and a streak of black appeared, almost like magic, on Dana's eyebrow. "Dad!" She turned her whole body toward him. "What the hell?"

"The car in front of us slowed down. That's what driving is." The engine roared as he accelerated through a yellow light. Dana was turning fifteen soon, and he had been trying to get her to pay attention while he drove so that she'd be better prepared to learn. To Dana, a permit was less a test, and more a diluted rite of passage, something you received more than earned.

Dana dug through the glove box and pulled out a napkin, which she licked, then used to scrub the black mark. "I look like an idiot."

"What do you think, Hannah? Is it that bad?"

I tried to think of something to say to her. A way to stay on her side, or a way to stay uninvolved. "The nurse might have baby wipes."

Dana flipped the mirror shut and I lost sight of her.

I had hoped that the week away from each other would have softened her. When I had left the party she'd mouthed, "I hate you," over her mother's shoulder as I turned to meet my parents in the driveway. I could have walked home, but that wasn't an option for them. The road had no sidewalk. And I had been drinking, supposedly, though my cup was ninety-seven percent Sprite. My parents didn't believe me. Dana thought I'd broken up the party on purpose. The bottle had just slipped.

We turned onto Gravois, the part in the drive where the scenery became less pretty. The buildings on this road—the dull houses and strip malls and parking lots—were wide and flat, typical of the South County aesthetic. After passing the lush grass of Grant's Farm where only donkeys were visible grazing, I turned to look out of the opposite window at the Afton Ball Fields, a dusty place that perpetually smelled like cigarette butts and spilled beer. Up the hill girls from Cor Jesu shuffled to school in their Birkenstocks and plaid skirts that they rolled at the waistband, their messy hair tied with bands of medical pre-wrap.

Chuck Berry faded into "American Pie," and within the enclosed tension of the car the slow opening piano chords felt unbearably sappy. Dana unrolled her window and let the rush of wind and traffic drown out the melancholy words. I caught only glimpses of them: "…I had my chance…make those people dance…they'd be happy for a while…" It felt futile and ridiculous, this wish. My own problems, and desire for Dana to understand that I wasn't her enemy, that I *cared* about her, felt serious in comparison to the tumultuous 60s.

Dana had been kissing Hunter Gibson on the couch when we heard the groan of the door and the creak at the top of the stairs. It took me a second to realize that it was her mom, coming from above like that, even though at each of these parties she had only been thirty or forty feet away.

We never hung out on the first floor. Dana's mom smoked. Usually it was in the kitchen over an ashtray arranged next to the portable TV, but their house had an open layout, and though I had never seen Dana's mom smoking in the living room, it smelled as if she had. Mrs. Visconti brought to mind the phrase "her nerves," as in, "the countess was bedridden because of her nerves." I had never thought of her as a bad influence, and she seemed to feel guilty as a parent, and ashamed of their smoky house, which was why the mother-in-law basement was designated for Dana and her guests. The room remained sealed, and it was Mrs. Visconti who insisted that the door stayed closed.

A few weeks prior, during a similar party, I had found Dana passed out carelessly in the guest room, with her arm hanging limply off the bed, her skirt bunched around her thighs. Hunter knelt behind her head before a circle of other boys we knew, his pants low around his knees. In one hand he covered his exposed penis, and with the other he lifted his testicles from underneath, held them perched over Dana's face. Her eyes were of course closed, but I was struck by how wide-eyed her expression looked, how innocent and foreign her face was without her normal smirk. Hunter pulled his pants up as soon as he noticed me, and I stayed in the room with Dana the rest of the night.

In the morning, when I tried to tell her, and she found that she had slept through a good portion of the party, she blamed me for not waking her up, then told me what happened was a joke, that it wasn't a big deal. She told everyone else that I was lying.

T-bagging. That was the name for it I'd hear at school, not sexual assault, yet at the time, I felt the word encompassed what Hunter was trying to do, that it suited the vulgarity of the action. I could not understand why Dana continued to flirt with him by his locker, why she let him come over again, why she kissed him. I could not understand my new descriptor, which was "prude."

"Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry," the radio played. Mr. Visconti had a whole Don McLean album burned on one of the CDs he kept in the car. He carried a leather-bound four-by-four case of burned albums, and after being prompted by a song on the radio, he would instruct Dana to pull one out of its sleeve and load it into the player, so that he could further our music education.

That day he didn't ask anything of her. And I imagined, if he had, she would have tossed the disc out of the window. It would have hardly been a punitive gesture, since the reason Mr. Visconti burned his CDs in the first place was not because he illegally downloaded music like most people our age, but because CDs became so easily scratched.

I remembered him telling us that the levee lyrics referred to the oil crisis of 1973 and of 1979, where there was a gas shortage and long lines, and you could only buy it on odd days if your license plate ended in an odd number, the same system my parents used when my brother and I argued. Since I was born on an even day, decisions made about the front seat or TV shows on even days were decided by my vote.

Mr. Visconti was silent through the lines about the king, Elvis, and the courtroom, John F. Kennedy's assassination trial, and the jester, Bob Dylan, and the resemblance of the jacket he wore to James Dean's red canvas bomber in *Rebel Without a Cause.*

He had taught me all of this. When I'd come over to socialize with his daughter, he would stop me on the top of the stairs as Dana disappeared into the basement, and remind me that I could take a movie home from the spare room he had lined with shelves, and I would pick one out before following her.

I don't know what finally brought Dana's mother downstairs to check on us. Dana's parents were older, and acted in the relaxed way most older parents I knew did. They had raised kids before, so the little things, like bedtimes and curfews, didn't matter too much.

Yet we knew enough to hide what we had been doing. Dana waved her arm "get out of here" and the boys, who had entered stealthily through the basement's sliding-glass door, hid in the guest room. I grabbed the bottle of tequila and shoved it into the game cabinet.

As Mrs. Visconti stood there asking Dana if she was hungry, and if she should order a pizza, the door of the cabinet burst open and the bottle of tequila, riding a jigsaw puzzle, came crashing to the floor, breaking on the tiles and soaking the scattered puzzle pieces. Dana had not played any of these games as long as I'd known her, yet the pieces of the puzzle were frayed from use. At one time she had loved these toys: Trouble, Sorry!, Chutes and Ladders, Jenga. We had almost gotten away with it.

Mr. Visconti turned right onto Tesson Ferry, past the storage unit facility and the flat cylindrical water towers I disdained because they made me feel like I went to school in a small town, as if you'd descend the hill to the softball field and find cows there. It's fitting in retrospect, because Immanuel Lutheran was like a small town—many of my classmates' parents had gone to high school there, and many of my classmates' future children would go there also.

After the recurring line, "the day the muuusic died," the tempo of the song pivots, increases, and begins to, what Mr. Visconti would call, "burn rubber." I remember the first time I heard it: he played it for us driving to school in the seventh grade. There were lumps of dirty snow on the side of the road, and Dana was tiny, still thin and childlike in the front seat, in her big wool coat. The drive was much shorter to our middle school, though sometimes we'd have to wait for the train that intersected Kirkwood Road. You could look down the tracks when they were empty and see all the way to the Arch.

Mr. Visconti had explained that the day the music died referred to when Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens died in a plane crash in Clear Creek, Iowa. They were on tour, and the long bus rides were cold, had given some of the musicians the flu, others frostbite.

So Buddy Holly chartered a plane, a single-engine Beechcraft Bonanza. Ritchie Valens won his seat through a coin toss, a game of chance.

“Hannah,” Mr. Visconti said, “do you remember what he’s referring to?” He pulled into the crowded parking lot.

I was caught off guard, for everything he’d said to me came through the pretense of his daughter. “The plane crash. Buddy Holly died.”

“And who should have been on that plane? Or who could have been? Do you remember their names?” Mr. Visconti’s eyes stung through the rear view mirror. They were inset and narrow, burrowed beneath his graying eyebrows.

“It was the rest of the Winter Dance Party tour.”

Those eyes. How was he driving?

“Need a hint?” he said as the car scooted around the drop-off circle an inch at a time.

I could see Hunter Gibson slamming the door of the shiny new SUV his older brother drove. He slung his backpack over one shoulder, headed inside without waiting for him. “I don’t know,” I told Mr.Visconti, and it wasn’t for Dana’s benefit; I didn’t know the answer.

“Waylon Jennings? Hannah, you should know this. It’s important.”

I tensed, hearing flat, calculated anger come from him, a person I’d never heard it from before. I felt my face grow hot.

When I slid into the car that morning, I’d still been vaguely hopeful that Dana and my relationship could be repaired.

When we started turning sixteen, a group of parents, including the Viscontis, would decide that it was safer to regulate under-aged drinking and they would take everyone’s car keys and let them spend the night. My parents would be against this, but aware of it, which I thought would matter more to me than it did. I wouldn’t try to attend those parties because I was not especially welcome. After my exile, I would end up finding a new group of friends. Intelligent,

athletic, sheltered. Friends who wouldn't have said lunch was their favorite school subject, but were too well dressed, too confident to be considered nerds. My parents would be pleased with this group.

Can you really call it surviving a plane crash when you don't get on the plane?

Lying on my bed on a Saturday night, playing the radio because TV and movies were still banned, I heard the Waylon Jennings song, "Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down," an optimistic kind of country song, with steel guitar, and looping drops at the end of the phrasing, from low to high again, the kind of country that makes alcoholism and loss silly. "Toniiiight, the bottle, let me dowwwwn," Waylon sang, and I wondered if that was what Mr. Visconti was trying to tell me, or if it was a private joke he didn't think, but hoped, I would someday understand. With this, the music made me feel a sweet kind of sad, and I knew it would all blow over, if I let it.

III.

Cross Country

In first grade I joined the cross country team and we'd practice after school, the whole motley pack of us, running circles around the playground, crunching gravel behind the swings then looping past the soccer field, sling-shotting around the backstop, and through the cove of gumball trees whose small spiked seeds stuck into the soft ground. Our coach did not time us, or if he did, I did not notice. I don't remember anything he said, but I loved how my heart fluttered in my chest, how the wind felt on my face and sounded in my ears, and how the lot of us looked like clothes in the window of a washing machine, the colors of our shirts swirling. I'd emerge from practice the way a whale surfaces—dripping, elated, a little unsure of the flat, still world.

Later, I grew to hate running.

In high school, my basketball coach would have us run ladders, and he would punish the slowest runners, which were always the forwards and centers. Guards were naturally quicker. Being short, they had less space to traverse with their fingertips, could easily touch the lines, yet they weren't given more sprints or jumps for fewer rebounds. My coach thought he was motivating us "big men." Thought we were lazy enough to need it.

My basketball coach was a small portly man with bristly red skin. What he lacked in skillful demonstration, he made up for in intensity. He had us shout "yes sir" after he gave

instructions; yet this wasn't my problem with him, because his bulldogged, shaky-jowled presence seemed to demand it. My issue was that I did not think my coach was fair. I resented him for my lack of playing time, and for not attempting to utilize my potential.

At the beginning of the season I defended the paint with two girls, both bigger than me, but dull. They'd hack at the other team, fling their bodies wildly as a shot went up (but still kept their arms down), and more often than not, it was me they slammed their bodies against, me they boxed out.

I tried to talk to my coach about this, but he resented me for questioning his authority. Said I had a bad attitude. Accused me of rolling my eyes. "You just need to want it more," he told me and patted my shoulder with his hot, stiff hand.

Midway through the season he changed to a four-guard lineup and eliminated my position altogether. When the other girls fouled out, I was their sub. In my few minutes on the court I played adequate defense, and a torrid, desperate offense. I put up rebounds and when I was actually passed to, I drove for fouls which I usually got because of the ragdoll way my body hit the floor.

After one such game during which I played the minute before halftime and two minutes at the end of the fourth quarter, I managed to hold in my furious tears until I closed the door of my father's still new-smelling Camry.

"What's wrong?" he asked, but when I told him how much I hated being on the team, his response was, "But you scored ten points tonight!"

He was not the kind of parent who yelled from the sideline, "Put my kid in!" because he deeply believed that life was fair. Plus, ten points wasn't bad, but that was the whole reason I was upset.

I told him I wanted to quit, which was maybe my mistake. He took it as if I'd asked his permission, and when he didn't give it, when he said, "You can't quit in the middle of the season," I believed him.

Quitting band had been different. My mother insisted that I enroll through freshman year of high school. When I told her I was moving on sophomore year, it wasn't a surprise. I had never really liked it, and along with music and painting, my high school listed foreign language as a fine arts elective. I replaced band with Spanish and French. These known, academic alternatives would also help me get into college. I was leaving basketball for nothing.

In the car, my dad put his hand on my shoulder and promised that if I finished the season he would take me and a friend to a fancy dinner.

We didn't eat out much, and never causally. Only on birthdays or group occasions we were invited to and could not miss. Dinner out was supposed to be a great treat, a reward for my accomplishment. Something I should feel grateful for, though it was not what I wanted. I felt paid off, and even worse, slimy, for slightly looking forward to it. I wanted to try sushi for the first time.

I spent the majority of the rest of the season on the bench, but this time it was also because I'd hurt my knee. In other circumstances I might have been grateful that the injury superseded the real reason I was stuck on the sidelines.

It happened at the end of an early morning practice. Our coach had us running ladders. My lungs burned and my breath tasted like rust. It was dark outside the small windows high above the bleachers. I had just tagged the baseline and pivoted towards the center of the court when I felt the popping sensation in my knee. The pain caught in my throat. It was a fully-grown stab of a pain, and I limped off the court, willing my knee to bend with each step.

It took me a moment to realize my coach was yelling.

"You don't stop until I tell you to stop!"

I looked at his rash-red face, in his black, burning eyes, and instead of sitting on the sideline, I turned towards the women's locker room. I walked slowly and numbly as if I was floating on a cloud.

My coach followed me inside. There were no other girls in the locker room, and I couldn't decide if this was more or less appropriate. He slammed his hand against a locker. The sound echoed and the door popped open, and banged into the one beside it. The sound startled me, and I became more cogent, uncertain of my safety.

"Get back in there, you spoiled brat!" he said.

A few years later I learned that my coach had been going through what was considered to be a "nasty divorce," and that his daughter, who had earned a college basketball scholarship, had stopped speaking to him. With this perspective, I might have continued walking through the locker room and down the hallway to the school office. But with his words my fear turned into anger, then shame, and I did what I was told. I was not spoiled, I was certain of it, and like the fouls I hoped to draw, I did not care what happened to me.

I ran five more sets as my teammates watched. The gym blurred and shook like the *Blair Witch Project*. Inside my body, my meniscus had torn, and the bones in my knee joint scraped against each other. On the sixth set I passed out.

I woke to the athletic trainer leaning over me, the smell of unscented lotion and menthol cough drops. As the bell rang for first period, the trainer helped me into the training room and up onto a long padded table. She asked me what happened. I told her about my knee, not my coach. She slid a pillow under my leg and filled a plastic bag with ice and set it on my kneecap.

"Did you feel a popping sensation?" she asked. I told her I had, but much earlier, before the last ladder, before I fainted. "You shouldn't have done that," she told me. "Even if you can manage it, pain is your body's way of telling you something is wrong."

I considered this as the ice melted and dripped down my leg. I shivered. The sweat under my sports bra and on the back of my neck had cooled. The room smelled strongly of the old cotton heating pads steaming in the metal vat. The trainer gave me a large brace to wear outside of my clothes, and my mom picked me up and took me to the hospital for an x-ray. As I lay on the table, she reminded me of the time she broke her leg, and how she met my father because of it. "It was all part of God's plan," she told me, and this felt as heavy and stifling as the lead apron the technician placed on top of me.

Later, my coach was kinder, but he never apologized. Some of the girls on my team did however, in the locker room, and cafeteria, in the hallways after school. It was always in a whisper, always consoling, as if I had been struck by lightning, or my house had been wiped out by a tornado. "I'm sorry that happened to you," they each said, as if no one could have stopped it.

From the sidelines of the games and practices I was still forced to attend, I imagined what better things I could do with my time. Read the newspaper, learn to work with wood, scrapbook, start watching *Lost*, join a stationary after-school activity like student council or debate.

After the season ended I invited my friend Laura to the sushi dinner. She didn't play sports, and our parents were friends. Because of this last detail, my dad invited Laura's dad, and decided it was a "daddy-daughter date." I hated this idea, but figured I could talk to Laura, and he could talk to Mr. Maier, and the four of us wouldn't have to hold a conversation together.

This wasn't what happened. My father bought me a corsage, a wilted pink carnation surrounded by baby's breath. It clashed with the khaki pants and burgundy sweater I had picked to wear. My mom made us pose for a picture.

At the restaurant I stowed my crutches against the wall. My dad held the menu low and close. This angle caused him to look down his nose at the restaurant's offerings, made him appear like a snob. I suspected he needed glasses, but this was something he didn't want to admit.

He ordered tempura, preferring fried food to raw fish, and I was reminded that he was poor once, had grown up on a farm and still preferred well water. Mr. Maier ordered sake to share. Laura and I were uncertain of how many rolls to get. My dad suggested we round up.

When the waitress came back with the small bottle of sake, Mr. Maier requested additional cups, and the waitress did not card Laura or me, which I assumed was because we were with our fathers. When she returned she accidently brushed into my crutches and knocked them over, which made an irrevocable crashing sound in the near-empty restaurant.

Mr. Maier proposed a toast. "To Hannah," he said, "who did the right thing, not the easy thing." We all took a sip. The alcohol burned my throat.

My father added, "In the real world you won't always agree with your boss. During the Clinton administration…" I stopped listening. He worked a desk job for the post office, which felt pretty bipartisan to me. Laura refilled her sake cup as he spoke, and neither of the men seemed to notice. I smiled in spite of everything, and she tipped more alcohol into my cup before kicking over my crutches. Amidst the clatter my father lost his train of thought. Then our food came.

I wasn't great at using chopsticks, and the sloppy way I ate felt wrong with the decadence of the meal. The pieces fell apart when bitten into, but were too large to be bite-sized, making it difficult to chew.

I liked the food, and it wasn't the wasabi causing me to tear up, or the salt of the salmon roe souring my stomach. Laura's defiance had reminded me of something my father had said when I first started playing basketball in second grade. I was on a coed team and the boys wouldn't pass to me. My father told me, "Just go under the basket and wait for them to miss." It was good advice. I wondered what had changed.

After my knee healed, I played three-on-three in gym class. Our kindly gym teacher did not call travels, so we pretended to be NBA stars, took giant, moon-walk leaps to the basket, swung our arms on defense like ballet dancers dressed as great-winged birds.

"I miss basketball sometimes," I said to my brother Eric that summer, after a full Saturday of mowing lawns. The kitchen was filled with the stink of cut grass, and my skin felt warm from where the sun had scorched it. I liked yard work, especially mowing, and how it was considered to be a boy's job. A thick knot had formed on my bicep, and I found myself touching the muscle tenderly, flexing in the mirror.

I enjoyed working with Eric, or *for* him, as he always told people. Eric made a lot of scolding jokes like this. They weren't usually funny, but they were always literal, utterly sincere.

Eric chugged a tall glass of ice water. "You quit," he said, as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. I couldn't tell if he was kidding. Regardless, it was as if I had no right to miss basketball, or had turned in all attachment to the sport, all emotional consequence, at the end of the season with my washed and folded jersey. In a way, I admired my brother's dogged sense of clarity.

When Eric came home from Truman State three weeks into his first semester, he was not called a quitter in my presence, and he did not seem upset. "It didn't feel right," he said when I felt brave enough to ask him why he left so abruptly. I was helping him move his stuff back into his room, which I had already claimed as a study in his absence. After he answered, he flopped face-first onto his bed.

After Eric moved home he expanded his lawn-mowing business. He hired me, and on weekends we raked leaves and shoveled driveways in silence as thick as wet wool. I was thirteen, and the moody kind, at least around family, so it took me a while to realize I was angry with him, and even longer to realize why. Little by little I had been plotting my own escape, first at my uncle's house the previous Christmas as he and my brother discussed the best kinds of snow shovels in excruciating detail. Lying on the floor and staring at the lights of the tree which no longer had presents under it, I imagined I was elsewhere. It was simple: A nonexistent coffee shop down the street, and myself at a clean corner table drinking an Italian soda and eating a salad without Jell-O in it.

Over the course of that visit, as these mind-rotting conversations took place, I found myself celebrating Christmas in one of those pink Florida bungalows, taking solitary walks on a sun-lit, yet windy beach, exchanging presents with a future husband, presents we had combed thrift stores for instead of buying at the mall, and eating Christmas dinner at a boisterous Cuban restaurant with dancing, because I hated turkey, and why not.

Then I was enlisted in the Peace Corps and I tucked button-up shirts into my shorts and dug irrigation ditches and planted trees and sweated meaningful sweat with well-meaning people, and my body felt tired in that satisfying way from exercise, the heavy muscled kind of pain, not a sharp twinging one.

And finally, I was a college student in an anonymous city, a combination of real Chicago and TV New York, wearing a long dark coat and riding the subway. I was serious in these images, which were less like fantasies and more impressionistic, more like a costume I tried on and inspected myself in standing in front of the dressing room mirror, deciding whether or not I should buy it.

Eric had chickened out.

In a year, he would transfer to SLU, and spend his summers mowing his way to a degree in computer science, and not long after graduating he would move out of our parents' house and into his own, a house he purchased with cash and spent his weekends landscaping immaculately, preparing steadily, for his future bride.

He would live a good life, though what makes a good life is relative, and in my twenties, after I graduated with a liberal arts degree, I would be the deadbeat of the family, drifting from job to job, underemployed certainly, unhappy mostly, a quitter, but never stuck.

On the way to my first cross country meet I broke down in the back seat of my mother's car. It was only the two of us, and I was shaking with nervousness. I don't remember being scared of losing, or of losing by an embarrassing amount, but scared of that starting line, posing crouched forward, toe on the chalk, tense and frozen and waiting for the loud blast of the horn, permission to begin.

As she pulled into a parking space, I told my mom between sobs that I didn't want to race.

"All that, all that work, for this?" she said to me, resenting all the days I'd stayed late after school. When I wouldn't relent, she told me that if I didn't race that day I would quit the team altogether. Through blurry eyes I looked at my laced shoes, my shorts, and up to the crowded parking lot, and the rows and rows of proud parents on the sidelines. I was reminded in that moment that quitters stayed quitters their whole lives. I did not want to race, but I did not want to quit the team. More than anything, I wanted to run.

Neighbors

These were trying times. That fall, our gym teacher—our gym teacher of three years who had watched us as we'd begun to fill out our "Property of I.L.H.S." t-shirts, kept us safe from muscle strain by insisting we warm up before stretching, and adjusted our grips on the wiffleball bats so that we'd all have the pleasure of hard contact—had been hit on the head by a field hockey ball which had deflected off of the metal bleachers causing a ringing sound to accompany her fall, her body's complete stillness. Having fallen at such an angle that her temple hit a rock, she was now in a coma. With death, we could have said she was in Heaven, but she wasn't dead. She wasn't really alive either, lying in the hospital with her eyes closed, surrounded by flowers and signed cards and teddy bears in plaid skirts holding field hockey sticks. We did not know where she was.

Around this time our school started offering scholarships to Bosnian refugees. They sat hunched together in the cafeteria, sneaking glances at us over bottles of Orangina and other weird European food we didn't have names for. They were uneasy about us, about America, about Christians especially, and even though many of them had emigrated as children, they were still reeling from their own global, yet private traumas, tragedies we could feel emanating off them in tight, angry waves.

We had heard that during the war, Vedad's father had killed himself, had hung from a rope on the tree outside his bedroom window. We had also heard that Hunter Gibson had found a chicken beak in one of their meat pastries.

Our school, our school was trying to ground us, not in way of punishment, but in a way to keep the earth solid beneath our feet. We were enrolled in a world religion class called "Neighbors" and we spent a lot of time puzzling over transubstantiation, and at what crucial moment in time the bread becomes the body, the blood no longer wine. It was hard to believe that they were actually these things, and it was not just a metaphor, or symbol, because symbols and metaphors always stood for something, were rarely anything in and of themselves.

Perhaps this was a symbol: The baptismal tank at the First Baptist Church of Lafayette. The five-foot plate glass in the center of the chancel, like a big screen TV. Adults were baptized inside and the congregation could see God's grace delivered in the same way they could watch football or fish being fed.

We went there on our first Neighbors field trip, and the pastor of the church let those who wanted to climb inside. It had been drained; yet when my classmates descended it still looked womb-like, though dry, though they were fully grown.

What does this mean? our catechism would ask, but for the most part we'd forgotten all the answers.

When the Mormons came to speak to our class we were nervous. We knew they had some shady dealings—polygamy, and the baptizing of the dead. They had wacky ideas about the afterlife: Personal planets! The forty virgins! But their faces, they looked so young, weren't much older than us actually. And with their uniforms (white short-sleeved shirts, black slacks) they wore weary expressions, waited patiently for our teacher to take attendance. Then they noticed the Hardcore CD sitting on Marci Collin's desk in the front row. It was new, had been released while they were on mission. They asked her if she liked it. She said yes, it was really good, and

pulled out headphones and her portable player. "Do you want to listen?" she asked them, and they told her no, they couldn't, they weren't allowed to then, but were happy that she liked it, were looking forward to hearing it in two years.

Then there was the Lutheran pastor visiting from India, who had incorporated elements of Hinduism into the congregation's worship practices. This wasn't what he talked about, though; no, he told us about living on a mountain, and his dogs, and how they kept being eaten by wild animals.

The first dog—he loved this dog—would follow him as he made his rounds to the sick and elderly to serve communion. Then one day, he came outside and the dog was not there, but he could see its outline inside of a cobra.

The second dog, to replace the first dog, barked quite a bit. He joked that he should have had the dog join the church choir. But again, one morning, the dog was gone, his innards streaked across the courtyard. This he believed was by a tiger.

The third dog died this way…

The fourth dog that…

The fifth dog was still alive, as far as he knew.

We didn't know what to make of this parable.

It was spring by then, and the weather had changed. The air was sweet and wet like a child's hot breath. "One short, one long," our mothers would have said if we were still children, unsure of what to wear. Pants and short sleeves, or shorts with a jacket. That was what spring meant to us.

To our poor gym teacher it meant nothing. She hadn't noticed any change.

Our gym teacher's condition remained stable, but her skin had begun to yellow, appeared almost powdery, and the muscles in her arms and around her jaw had begun to slack. We no longer recognized the patients that shared her hospital room, they had either died or

recovered, had stopped watching *Maury*. When we visited, which was less and less, the TV hung silent and blank, and our prayers became compulsory, less inspired. The flowers by her bedside wilted and were not replaced.

That spring, we attended a Seder dinner, but we were still hungry afterwards, so we met at Fuddruckers for cheeseburgers, but even this wasn't satisfying. There was something else absent from our guts.

We first noticed this absence on our trip to the Hare Krishnas, but it wasn't until after they fed us cookies, and told us stories about Rama and Krishna, the blue people, and the infant eating butter, the young boy playing a flute, the god-child, the prankster, the model lover, divine hero and Supreme Being, that we realized how comforting it was to sit on the floor with our legs crossed, to smell incense, to look at the pictures the woman stretched out to us with her smile, her storytelling aids. As we pulled away from the temple, standing, our arms reaching through the bus windows, our voices raised in song—*Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare*—(just like that stranger taught us, though not, perhaps, in fully sincerity,) that we realized we had lost something, that we were sad to leave it behind.

When did this happen?

We could not pinpoint the exact moment.

We were told, that if our gym teacher ever woke from her coma, she would be a vegetable. We thought this was the most horrible word that could be used to describe this concept. It was cold and everyday, and a word we saw too frequently around us, a word we pushed around our plates, spit into our napkins. What would happen to her?

When our bus pulled up to the mosque we saw, I'm pretty sure we all did, Lejna, one of our classmates, one of our refugees, trace her finger on the glass in the shape of the round onion dome. Watching this, we wondered, what it must have been like for her, living in our square Midwestern city and how this shape might have connected her to the home she had been taken

from, and perhaps, struggled to remember, the people she had lost and left behind. We knew so very little, we realized, but this unknowing felt less like a hole in that moment, and more like the full curve she had drawn. After, we would be led into the prayer hall, and would see the hanging lamps, and the beautiful tiled *mihrab* which our guide said, in this part of the world, always pointed east, but as spring slogged into summer this is what we'd remember: the squeak of the glass, the tall minaret, the half-moon of her fingernail.

Goodness

"My curfew does not apply to *where* I go," I told my father during one of our rare weeknight dinners together, "just what time I need to be home." My father believed that bad things could only happen after midnight, or rather only bad things would happen after midnight. My curfew, appropriately, was at that time. I had plans to volunteer on Saturday afternoon, but my father was against this.

This wasn't the first time we'd argued, rather a continuation. Out of my friends, I was always the first to go home. I told my father that if I had wanted so desperately to do drugs and have sex, I could have. I could have at 3 pm, or 11:30; my parents weren't supervising me most of the time. My father did not like this logic, or the opportunities it suggested.

I found his fear unwarranted. I took pride in my wholesomeness, how it usually granted me more trust and independence. My teachers never questioned me when I asked to go to the nurse's office, and the nurse never felt her authority questioned when I'd take a nap on one of her canvas cots. She never tried to diagnose me. I went when I was tired, and she accepted this. Even asked me to check on her dogs when she went on vacation.

My father might have sensed something more dangerous, something further off, something elusive that he could not keep me from. He saw me as a hippie. My waist-length hair didn't help. He was possibly worried that someday a picture of me with my head shaved would appear in the newspaper. Most likely he suspected that I was smoking pot. Regardless, my father was not interested in what I had thought to be the limits of our social contract. He didn't want me driving to North St. Louis alone.

"I'll only be alone while I'm driving," I told him, spearing a brussel sprout off my plate, "I can call when I get there."

Like many waning empires and authoritarian governments, reason did not trump his suspicion. My father distrusted my freedom to assemble. Little did he know that my friends were not as liberal as I was, that they were just as scared of my "Jesus was a socialist" claim.

I shoved the brussel sprout into my mouth, and my father sighed, stirred his food around his plate. I noticed he hadn't served himself any vegetables, and I felt more convinced, more righteous for this.

Ultimately, I got my way. I don't think I convinced him, but I'd already signed up for the park clean-up, and an older woman from our church who had been a missionary in rural Alaska would be there. She was as tough as her skin looked—could scare away bears with a single syllable. "Ha!" she'd say to them, and I imagine it was not the volume but the spitefulness in her voice that made the bears head back up the mountain. This hardly comforted my father, but it made him concede his case. His teenage daughter wanted to help poor people. Who was he to stop her?

Peace Park had the usual grass and picnic tables, but it also had a small shed that was used as a food and clothing distribution center. Otis, the man who started the center, had come to my elementary school once a year to lead chapel. He told the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and how he met Martin Luther King in the Birmingham jail. Otis had wide kind eyes

and a short salt and pepper afro. He always wore a bright muumuu, and his neck was thick with beads he said had been given to him as gifts. Why he wore them all at once, I couldn't tell you, but it caused him to exude a fullness, an abundance that was unusual in my life. He'd process down the aisle playing "Jesus Loves Me" on the ukulele, stopping to shake our hands.

Like most hippies, I thought of love as freedom.

On my fourth or fifth visit to Peace Park I sorted and folded donations, then combed the park for trash. This was the usual routine, and I enjoyed untying the black garbage bags that had been dropped off from some mysterious part of the city, and finding sport coats with wide lapels, Cardinals give-away t-shirts with players I'd never heard of. I took pleasure in organizing the packs of pantyhose by color, so that they formed a taupe, beige, brown, and ebony rainbow.

We combed for trash every Saturday, even if we didn't see any. Otis wanted us to check for needles so that children wouldn't find them. The volunteers wore heavy gloves and we had a specific box for disposing of them safely.

I remember two things about that day: One, the sky had the brilliant blue clarity that I haven't seen much outside of the Midwest. Two, a friend of Otis' had parked her minivan in front of the donation center, and opened the trunk to reveal a wall of diapers. The rest of the volunteers helped her unload her cargo, and stack it neatly on the shelves. I kept looking for needles.

At the far end of the park I paused to rest my back and fix my hair, which had fallen across my sweaty forehead.

On the street next to the park was a hundred fifty-foot brick Corinthian column, painted white. It had apparently been a water tower, and was now used to as a beacon for planes. I thought it looked stately and European. Around the park were two-story brick houses, also old and beautiful with ivy growing down their sides, even the ones with boarded-up windows.

On the far side of the column, I saw a woman with thread-thin braids and large hoop earrings waiting at a bus stop. She had a baby on one hip, an overstuffed diaper bag at her feet, and a four-year-old holding her hand. The four-year-old bounced on the balls of his toes. With one hand he shook his mother's arm, and with the other, he pressed his crotch. The mother rolled her eyes, I could tell even from this distance.

"I *asked* you to go before we left!"

The boy said something I couldn't hear, and the mother swiveled her hips so she could read the bus schedule. Her hoop earrings swung like pendulums, glinted in the sunlight.

"Can you hold it? Are you sure you're not just nervous?" The mother turned back to the boy, cocked her head to the side.

As she did this, the baby reached his chubby fingers towards her shiny gold earring. He wrapped his hand around the metal and pulled.

The mother shouted and the baby cried and the mother touched her hand to her ear and saw blood. She grabbed the bag off the ground and slung it onto her shoulder. She hurried down the street, pulling the stunned four-year-old behind her.

A fluorescent-pink zippered wallet had surfaced from the bag as she'd shifted it onto her shoulder, and tipped over the side. It landed on the sidewalk.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. A young man, or teenager—he couldn't have been much older than twenty—who was heading towards the bus stop from the opposite direction, picked up the wallet and yelled "Hey!" to get the woman's attention. When the woman didn't turn around, he jogged after her, holding the pink wallet in front of him and using his spare hand to hoist up his sagging pants.

Just then a police car rounded the column and pulled over. Two officers got out and told the man to stop where he was. One had a hawkish nose and bristly red beard stubble, the other

one, who was younger, had a smooth porcelain face and a pointed chin. Both stood with their hands on their hips. Meanwhile, the woman disappeared into a house.

I left the garbage bag I had been holding in the grass and headed over to them. I thought I could clear up the misunderstanding.

I was used to talking to police officers. On weekend nights, my friends and I would play ultimate Frisbee at Crestwood Park with a light-up disc. We were technically trespassing on a field connected to an elementary school, but I took pride in how wholesomely we broke this law. We were teenagers exercising in an inclusive, non-competitive way on a Friday night while our peers were drinking and finger-banging each other in their finished basements. When cops caught us, which was usually when a new person parked in the lot instead of down the street, I detected disappointment at our lack of spray paint and empty beer bottles.

"What are you guys doing here?" one officer might say.

"Playing Frisbee, sir."

"In the dark?"

We would show him the purple and green disc.

"Isn't it hard to guard each other in the dark?"

We laughed, told the officer it was half the fun. We were calm when speaking to these police officers, because we felt perfectly innocent. We got good grades, voluntarily went to church. The trouble we created was not the result of some moral failure, but an oversight of the law. What space was there for us? Where we were supposed to go? This was what kept us out of trouble.

Usually it would end with a warning to keep the noise down, or we would be told to leave. These weren't the only times I'd seen a police officer look the other way. Once in middle school I went over to a classmate's house to work on a school project, and her dad, a sergeant, took us to Walmart to buy poster board. On the car ride back to her house he told us he'd seen

two people shoplifting, but that he didn't want to report it because of the paperwork. It was only candy, and since it was inexpensive, he let it go. This surprised me at the time, but my classmate said it was pretty normal. "It's never worth it," she said about these mysterious other examples.

I crossed the street and stopped in front of the two police officers, but neither acknowledge my arrival.

"I know how this looks," I said, "but I was at the park, and there was this accident and this lady dropped her wallet. He was trying to give it back to her."

"I don't see anyone," the smooth-faced officer said.

The teenager pointed to the building. "She went in there. We could give it back right now."

"Not so fast."

Then the officer with the stubble asked the teenager for his driver's license.

I could see from that moment that it wouldn't be easy to persuade them. The officers reminded me of my father when we argued, how he didn't seem to have a reason behind his actions beyond wanting to stay in control.

I'd run into problems before. One Saturday an overweight cop had showed up to our Frisbee game asking, "Who's your ring leader?" When no one gave a name, the police officer started to pace in front of us.

"A, you're breaking the law," he said, breathing heavily as he paused to look us each in the face, "and number two, just because you're playing a game here doesn't mean you're not also responsible for the bathroom graffiti."

But the officer told us to leave without any other consequence, and we went to Sonic and mocked him as we ordered over the intercom, "A, I'd like a large cherry limeade, and number two, I'd like a large order of cheese fries." Andrew Baker ended up asking Shelly Fischer to prom this way, "A) I think you're really great, and number 2) Will you be my prom date?"

"I mean, do I look like I'm in a gang?" Andrew had said pointing to his slim chest as we walked over to the neighborhood street where we'd parked. We walked in the middle of the road even though we had the option of tree-lined sidewalks. His shirt said "Fellowship of Christian Athletes" on the front.

Andrew had been the first person to say anything, opening the door for our arrogant teenage anger. "Why did he have to talk to us like that?" someone else added, which led to a, "We're not fucking stupid," and, "Can you believe he tried to get us to rat each other out?"

When we got to our cars we realized that our friend Deon, who was the only black kid in our class, was gone. We called his phone but he had left it in the glovebox. Everyone else drove off while we waited for the cops to leave. Then Andrew went back to look for him.

Deon had apparently bolted when he saw the lights flashing and hid in the creek. His shoes were wet, but we laughed at this. "It's fine, we weren't going to get in trouble," I told him. I believed this.

The teenager reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a black leather wallet. He handed over his license and the officer took it to his vehicle and radioed the dispatcher. The dispatcher replied in an unrecognizable garble. The teenager looked at me for a moment, then averted his gaze. His eyes were moist and heavily lashed, almond-shaped with the outside corners reaching higher than the inside ones. The whites of his eyes were almost ivory. As he turned I could see the muscles in his neck clench.

"He didn't do anything," I said to the baby-faced cop still next to me, choosing the active verb. "He was trying to give it back."

"Miss, let us do our jobs. We just want to make sure this wallet wasn't stolen." He gesticulated with the wallet as he spoke. Up close I noticed a water stain stretching from the bottom of the pink fabric. The brown edges of the stain shimmered.

"It's a makeup bag. Why would anyone steal a makeup bag?"

He glanced down at the item in his left hand. He squeezed the tab of the zipper between his right hand's thumb and index finger as if he were testing it. Then he let the tab go.

"Miss, he is a suspect," he said, choosing, as I later replayed the scene in my mind, the verb "to be." It wasn't what he had done, I would come to understand, but who he was in the officer's mind, the connotation of his appearance: black, male, young. The column in the center of the road loomed over us, casting a long, unmistakable shadow.

Did I know about racism before this happened? Sure I did. I'd listened to Otis' story. In history class I'd learned about slavery, reconstruction, and the civil rights movement, had done well on the tests. Did I know that it existed today, in everyday people? My whole school would have said yes. It was well known that our white-haired science teacher Mrs. Schmidt was racist, because she gave Deon and the other black kids in our school detention for little things like talking in class, or not having a seminar form filled out completely, whereas when Andrew Baker lit a Kleenex on fire, she had laughed, "Boys will be boys."

We easily explained Mrs. Schmidt's racism to her having been a missionary in South Africa in the 1950s. We knew she treated minorities unfairly, but she was one person, a disrespected person. A) She was ancient, and number 2) She was a terrible teacher who would read aloud from the King James Bible in order to prove the existence of dinosaurs. To her, it was still up for debate.

Did I understand my own participation? No. I never batted an eye when our school chanted "Test Scores" and "That's alright, that's okay, you're going to pump our gas someday," at basketball games when we played our sister school, primarily black, located on the north end of the city. They always beat us, which was why the cheering was so vicious. Our tuition paid for their school, we would say after defeat, taking credit in a small way for their achievement. I was on a scholarship reserved for the children of church workers, but I didn't think of myself as

"paid for." That hadn't occurred to me because I was jealous of Immanuel Lutheran North's Apple computers.

I was sheltered. I think I understood this. I did not expect violence. I had only once seen a fight in real life. We'd been playing Frisbee at a park near our church, and a drunk guy from Andrew's old school came up to Andrew, asked him if he knew a guy named Mac Johnson, and even though he said he didn't, the drunk guy kept saying, "Your *boy* Mac really fucked things up for me last night!" He took a swing and hit Andrew in the jaw. Andrew hit back. It surprised me how slow and silly the fight looked, nothing like the quick cuts of movies. Andrew was long and gangly, resembled Abraham Lincoln. Cocking his arm back and swinging took four whole seconds. Shelly kept screaming, "Guys! Stop!" which felt like an overreaction to what was transpiring, even though Andrew's nose had started bleeding. Finally Deon jumped in like a flash of lightning and tackled the drunk guy to the ground, pinned his arms behind him.

"Enough!" he said. His voice was authoritative, but he didn't raise it. The drunk guy's friends wandered over eventually and stuffed him in the backseat of their Jeep. All this on a Sunday afternoon.

The first officer returned from the car, but held onto the teenager's driver's license. He turned his back to us and formed a huddle with the younger cop as they unzipped the bag. The younger cop reached inside and pulled out apricot-colored lip gloss.

"See? He was trying to give it back," I tried again, pleading now. "I saw the whole thing."

This was before cell phones had video, or at least before my cell phone had video. I looked behind me at Peace Park, hoping that Otis or one of the volunteers unloading the van would lift their heads like our congregation did when finishing a prayer, would see us and know what to do. I wished that the elderly Alaskan missionary would let loose one of her blood-curdling laughs.

The radio garbled again, and the older police officer told me to go home. "It's not safe," he said, shrugging, as if safety was outside of his control. The younger officer led the teenager over to the car, pressed him against the hood, patted him down.

"I didn't do nothing, honest. Honest." He kept repeating that "honest."

When I didn't start moving on my own, the older officer escorted me to my car. I flinched as he placed his hand on my shoulder to guide me across the street. I looked behind me, startled, and saw over my shoulder the younger cop push the boy, now handcuffed, into the back of his cruiser. His hair flattened as his skull clipped the car's metal frame.

It had all happened so fast.

In my previous encounters with police, I had only once been scared. It was when my brother Eric had first gotten his license, and we were returning from Shop and Save where our mom had us pick up salad greens. Driving up the hill on East Watson Road we got stuck behind a slow-moving bicycle. "Push him off the road," I said, "I'm hungry!"

Eric wagged the steering wheel lightly, mock swerving. It looked just like how people in movies drove. As we came over the hill Eric passed the rider, and we saw that he was a policeman.

He pulled us over, signaled us with a miniature flashing light attached to his handlebars. Eric wouldn't look at me. His face had gone scarlet, even under his reddish-brown eyebrows and the wispy hairs sprouting from the underside of his chin. He pulled onto the shoulder and rolled the window down, immediately apologizing. He told the officer he hadn't realized who he was.

"Even if I wasn't a police officer," he said, "it's the law to share the road."

Car-happy, we had needed this reminder. The police officer looked at Eric's license and registration. He didn't have anything to run them with and just read them over carefully while we watched. His thigh muscles bulged from his too-tight shorts.

Eric and I both thought he would be in big trouble for threatening a policeman like that. Jail had crossed my mind, though Eric was still a minor. The cop gave the papers back and scolded us, reminded us how dangerous it is to bike because of cars, how not-funny my joke was. But that was all that happened. Afterwards I felt ashamed and grateful to this man.

That day at the park the officer stood on the cracked sidewalk and watched as I unlocked the door of my car and sat down. I was still wearing my protective gloves as I put on my seatbelt, stuck the keys in the ignition. I was shaking so badly that I blew through a stop sign at the end of the block. Someone driving an old Buick on the perpendicular street slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting me. The sound of the squealing tires caused me to brake and swerve. My head hit the sunshade as I came to a stop. In my mirror I saw the officer turn briefly, but he didn't flag me down. I took note of the crinkled skin on his neck as he looked over his shoulder, and the smoothness that returned once he looked away.

Even then, I still believed in some scrap of justice, thinking that in that moment the officer might have committed my license plate to memory, that I would be ticketed for running through the stop sign. For weeks I dreaded going through the mail. The ticket never came.

I had confused goodness with whiteness, worn it like a shield.

After the incident with the wallet, I would try and obtain a police report, but would be unable to complete the form without the name and address of the person involved. I would call the station, but never find out what happened to the young man.

Instead I would begin to see invisible shields more and more, their edges blurring a line around their wearer's bodies. Over time, these distortions would become almost blinding. Like a smudge on a pair of glasses, they were everywhere I cared to look.

In the aftermath of Ferguson, I would sit at my computer for hours terrified, but unsurprised, at an achingly safe distance. My stomach churned at the comments I saw disparaging the protesters, especially those who broke windows at the Galleria Mall. "How

stupid," Andrew Baker had written on Facebook; "this is what got Michael Brown shot in the first place." I would be living in Los Angeles as I read this, in a neighborhood that was only affordable because L.A. had not yet forgotten the Rodney King riots. My hair would be short by then; I was no longer a hippie. I did not believe, though many people I grew up with insisted, that "love wins." As I sat reading the news, I tried to absorb from the walls of my apartment the ghost of that former riot: the burning desire to dismantle everything that led to this.

But for the moment I would drive past my house, sickened by the cowardly obedience that led me directly to it, and sit in my car at Crestwood Park as children pushed each other on the swings, kicking their legs until they were high enough that their landings made the gravel crunch.

And then, nights, when I came home at curfew, I'd sit on the deck before unlocking the door, before going inside and slipping into my parents' room to whisper, "I'm home," before waiting for my father to grumble and roll over in the dark, before brushing my teeth and changing into pajamas, I'd sit, stretching my absence minute by minute, as they slept soundly, the clock pushing forward into early morning, the time of the day that they were so afraid of.

Basements

"The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void…"

—Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias"

My mother had faith in the basement. She trusted the ping pong table, TV, and video games to absorb whatever raucous energy teenage hormones created, block or distract our dangerous urges. She believed that if we had healthy outlets, wholesome ways to have fun, we wouldn't need to rebel. It was rather Montessori of her.

Then I brought home my first boyfriend.

Marshall was polite and he dressed neatly. He wasn't what my mother would call "a bad influence." We were both good kids. Good Lutherans. We wanted to save ourselves for marriage. It was expected of us, but we had our private reasons. Marshall's had to do with faithfulness, and how he hated his dad for cheating on his mom. My own had to do with the idea of finding my soulmate.

I liked Marshall, but I didn't think we were soulmates, more like close companions. I appreciated how we could complain to each other, could criticize our school and the people in it,

could present our feelings without editing them first. Plus, it drove me crazy how he touched just the ends of my long hair, as if it were a sleeping child he was afraid to wake.

Soulmate or not, I found the clenched muscle of his forearms and the delicate, almost feminine curve of his mouth irresistible.

At one point, my mother had walked in on us while I was lying supine on the basement couch, and Marshall was on top of me, our middles touching. We hadn't heard her on the stairs, only when she cleared her throat. Marshall scrambled over to the next couch cushion as I sat up. I cringed as Marshall's hand wiped the saliva from his mouth.

"I would feel more comfortable," my mother had said, looking somewhere to the right of where we were sitting, "if you wouldn't lie down like that."

"Of course," we both told her and apologized.

After this she began to throw in a load of laundry when he came over, so she'd have an excuse to check on us. Our washer and dryer had timers though, and would buzz when they needed to be emptied. This usually gave Marshall and me enough time to sit up from our reclined positions, unlock our lips.

Marshall's house had main-floor laundry, and his mother did not make excuses to go downstairs. She was what was considered to be a cool mom. She was younger and her clothes were hip. In middle school, she had taken Marshall and his friends to T.P. girls' sleepovers. She had a good throwing technique, Marshall told me, had taught him to hold the tail of the toilet paper as he tossed the roll. She also "drove like a maniac," peeling off when the trees were covered with a magnificent squeal of the tires.

It was clear that Marshall's mom, or Amy, as she preferred to be called, was lonely. When I'd come over in a group of friends, a few of the girls would always end up chatting with her in the kitchen or helping her bake brownies. She liked having girls around, and I think she felt bad for her son, for the ideal childhood she wasn't able to give him. Marshall's dad had left

when Marshall was eleven, and his brothers were four and five. It had been hard on him. When we first started dating Amy would give Marshall money to take me out to dinner or buy me flowers.

Most weekends though, Marshall and I would snuggle on his basement couch and watch movies, while Amy watched TV with his brothers upstairs. Marshall liked the Hollywood greats—Scorsese, Coppola, Kubrick, and comedies with actors from *Saturday Night Live*. He was impressed that I had watched *Apocalypse Now* in middle school, and surprised when I told him I had borrowed it from Dana Visconti's dad.

"It's weird that you used to be friends," he'd said, and I thought first of Dana's dad, then realized he was talking about Dana. Dana was known for hosting wild parties, and rumors about what happened there spread throughout the school.

"We were never close," I said, but for a second I missed Dana, then I shared with Marshall something I had never told anyone before: what had happened freshman year, why Dana and I had stopped being friends. At one of her parties I had prevented a classmate of ours from assaulting her while she was passed out. I had told Dana about it but she hadn't believed me. Then I accidentally broke a tequila bottle in front of her mother and we'd both gotten grounded. She'd told me that she hated me, and we hadn't spoken since.

This was an example of what I called "deep talks," a category into which I divided the people I knew: people who shared their lives, and those who locked them up, or convinced themselves they had nothing to say. Marshall and I had "deep talks" frequently.

We never made out during the movies we watched. We would pause them or wait for the end. How much of my blooming sexuality was informed by the repetitious loop of DVD menu music? In retrospect, it was a fitting soundtrack for the endless kissing. As the song was kept from its coda, looping back dutifully to the beginning, so were we denied meaningful completion.

Kissing was enough at first. We trusted each other, and never felt pressured, which made us feel comfortable, so much so that the kissing turned to heavy petting, and heavy petting to painful aching, and painful aching to whatever could be accomplished by reaching underneath each other's clothes. We felt hungry and ashamed, toeing this line. We looked for, but couldn't find, a firm answer in the Bible about the morality of oral sex. We guessed it was still wrong, but thought it was also the best we could manage.

I felt guilty every time Marshall flushed the tissues we had used to catch his semen down the toilet. At summer camp, the bathrooms were plastered with signs saying that anything but toilet paper would clog the plumbing. I think knowing that tissues weren't supposed to be disposed of in this way, but never actually seeing the harm in it, compounded my moral confusion.

When I was with Marshall, I felt like a different person. I had never been affectionate, hardly ever initiated hugs. But when we were together, it was as if my whole body were swollen, bursting with it.

I had a good reputation, but wasn't considered nice or warm. I asked too many uncomfortable questions such as, "Why do mission trips spend so much money on travel? Wouldn't it be better if we just sent the money?" and "What does Jesus have against stem cell research?" This kind of curiosity wasn't valued, but earning straight A's and willingly attending Bible study Wednesday nights was. It amazed me, like the cool feeling of Marshall's tongue on my labia had amazed me, that I could possess all of these qualities; that I could be both cold and warm, faithful and challenging, and that I could be loved for all of it.

Fall of my senior year, my mother announced that I would attend my church's first abstinence retreat, "Changes and Choices." Though I was a regular in youth group, I was not

interested; the idea of it embarrassed me. Sex wasn't something that was talked about. I had never been taught the birds and the bees at home, yet somehow felt too old for it. At school, I had gotten the biological version of sex-ed. While I knew about puberty and babies being born, the act itself had only recently graduated from the vague notion of two naked people lying on top of each other.

My mother worked at the church though, and had an allegiance with the youth pastor on conservative versus contemporary splits. When a member of the congregation complained that she, a woman, had helped serve communion, he defended her in their staff meeting, and backed her plan to have a Christmas Eve service without the blast of the organ.

The abstinence retreat was the youth pastor's idea, and was considered contemporary.

I was the first signed up. Then my mother called Marshall's mother, and encouraged her to do the same. Being good-natured, but not particularly worried, she agreed.

The retreat was nothing more than a heavily structured sleepover at the church. There were biology lessons, group work, guest speakers, and recreation breaks. We watched videos, ate pizza, and learned about AIDS. We wrote and presented skits, and due to an adult volunteer's prudent embarrassment, were rushed through the condom-banana exercise.

Late in the evening, when the youth group was a little loopy from the lack of sleep, a little buzzed on caffeine, and the normal social barriers were breaking down, the cafeteria where we were sitting became not a cafeteria at all, but intimate, confessional. The youth pastor, after asking us not to repeat it, told a story intended to illustrate that losing your virginity was a terrifying, horrible experience, and it's best to go through it with someone you love and are committed to forever.

The story was about how he and his wife had saved themselves for their wedding night. They had a wonderful ceremony in her hometown in Indiana and were very happy. Then they consummated the marriage in a hotel room three stories above where the reception was held.

She cried the whole time, and afterwards dressed and took the elevator to the lobby to call her mother. She told her that she wanted to come home and asked for a ride. Her mother talked her down from this. She went back to their room and they went to sleep. Now, the youth pastor said, he's quite good at it and his wife enjoys herself.

I stared at my feet during this story, uncomfortable and aware that sharing this was inappropriate. I knew his wife—first as the picture above his desk when he had started his job at the church, a pink-cheeked senior in college, and not yet his fiancé, and then as a living breathing person. The woman in this story was the same woman whose photo hung adjacent to this early picture, hair done up in curls, posed in front of a red barn in a wedding gown, holding a bouquet of yellow daisies.

This was the same woman my family had helped move into her studio apartment before she and the youth pastor were married, when they were still just engaged. The apartment had mud-brown carpet and a little two-burner stove, and a window that peered into the alleyway whose dumpster people were always rooting through, pulling out rusted skillets and clothes hangers, lamps shades, the detritus of moving out in a hurry—left behind items that are harder to carry than replace.

The woman who, once she and the youth pastor were married, accompanied the youth group on a service trip to Cleveland, and who had wanted desperately (but didn't think they could afford) a t-shirt from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and whose face shone when the youth pastor surprised her with it, a loving reckless action.

I had stood next to her at the gift shop, had watched her trace her index finger under the collar of the shirt, lay the fabric against her chest as she might an infant, then gently fold it before turning away, saying, "I can't justify the price." And this, I thought, was what had transpired between them, that ordinary shirt, a great capacity for hope, and an intimate knowledge of disappointment; the bubble of romance and the credit card debt supporting it.

I wanted to weep for her remembering this; picturing her alone by the alleyway window looking forward to moving out and in with her husband, of permission to desire and have exactly what she wanted.

"I can't justify the price."

I caught Marshall's eye.

The church's basement was unfinished, and used primarily as a storage closet. I knew that the key was on top of the door frame because all the choir music and handbells were stored there. The room smelled like old paper, smelled like what I thought of as the 1970s. I pulled the cord for the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling. Together, as the rest of the youth group slept, we pulled the thick mats that were used to dampen the sound of bells and chimes into the center of the room. On top we spread Marshall's sleeping bag, and shaking, fell against each other and removed our layers of clothing, searching blindly, with our mouths and hands, as if we thought we might find something, something that had been lost and buried, an unknown, ephemeral substance that we had neglected so far in our lives.

IV.

The Lunch Shift

Tuesday lunch was always slow.

"It's not even worth coming in," Angela said, leaning against the serving station while Hannah punched in her table's order. "It's so slow, it hardly even pays for my parking. I wish I could only work weekends."

"That's why I take the train," Hannah said.

"Come off it, you don't even have a car." Angela threw a lemon wedge at her. They had this conversation every Tuesday, every Wednesday for that matter, and the bickering was a sign Angela liked Hannah. They were close in the way coworkers often are. They had nothing in common, would never socialize outside of work, but the slow shifts where they folded hundreds of cloth napkins into pyramids created intimacy.

Hannah saw Angela more than her friends, but sometimes she wondered if she was Angela's best friend, because Angela liked to share everything with her, took Hannah through each OkCupid date she went on, play by play, whether it went well or badly. Hannah knew the names of Angela's cousins, how her parents had met, and where she lost her virginity, which was in the backseat of a car parked at Tommy's and she *to this day* found the smell of chili arousing. Hannah wasn't a big sharer, but it always caught her off guard how well Angela could read her.

On Saturday Hannah had come into work wearing the same clothes as the day before. This wasn't that unusual, and as servers they always wore all black, but Angela noticed immediately. They made eye contact as Hannah went into the office to clock in, and Angela had said, "You spent the night with someone." Hannah let the door shut behind her and was relieved when Angela didn't follow, startled to find Angela waiting for her in the hallway.

"Who was it? When do I get to meet him?"

"You can't," Hannah said, then regretted the implication.

"I can't? What, was it a one-night stand? Hannah!" She leaned forward as she said this, crossed her arms, let her mouth hang open.

"No, it's not that," said Hannah, pushing past her and heading towards the busy dining room where it would be more difficult to continue this conversation. It both pleased and angered Hannah how shocked Angela had looked. Did it count as a one-night stand if she'd known him forever?

Two college guys, sweaty and straight from the gym, seated themselves in Angela's section. They were the kind of customers that only came to The Tartan during lunch because it was significantly cheaper. The owners wanted to preserve how during the depression they fed the poor and downtrodden staff meals out of "the shanty." Angela looked at the boys' sweat-soaked shirts and sighed. She preferred the dimly-lit glamour of steak dinners, tumblers of Laphroaig, oysters, and scotch eggs. She slid her note pad into her apron. "I hate young people."

"How do you think I feel?" Hannah said, and Angela punched her on the arm.

"You know they never tip."

Angela was nineteen. She still lived at home, didn't really need the money, though she spent each paycheck quickly. Hannah was twenty-five and on her own. More than money, she

wanted what she thought of as a "real job"—a job that required a college education, a job without foot-pain or food smells, a job with dignity.

"Bet you ten bucks they both order chicken breasts."

"I'm not taking that bet," Hannah said. "It's basically a fact."

Hannah dragged the ice scoop across the cooler's small pile of cubes, raking them into the front left corner. She watched as Angela greeted her table.

Angela extended two long vinyl menus towards the boys, but they shook their heads, put their hands up to say that they wouldn't even touch them. Angela set the menus on the table's ledge and sat down in the open seat. She did this frequently, but only with men. She flipped her long hair over her shoulder, then perched the tip of her pen on her order pad. Angela laughed and put the pad back into her apron pocket. Then she stood and flexed her arm muscles. One of the guys laughed and leaned back in his chair the way boys did in elementary school. The other hung his head, smiled. Angela walked back to the servers' station with a frozen, open-mouthed expression.

"TWO chicken breasts. Each!" She typed the order into the computer and Hannah filled more water pitchers. Angela took one of them and left it with the college guys, and after watching her walk away, they greedily refilled their glasses.

Angela was a much better server than Hannah. It was a game to her. She was always finding new, ridiculous ways to upsell. "You can't have a pot pie without ordering a Guinness, don't be such a Yank!" she'd say, or, "You're celebrating? You need custard! That's what my family always has," which she'd confided to Hannah was a total lie.

Angela's whole posture changed for each customer: For hipsters her arms went slack and her spine curved to the side. For wholesome middle-aged couples and tourists she'd bounce slightly on the tips of her toes. With men she closed her eyes halfway, and smiled with one side of her mouth as she found a reason to lean over. Hannah was always telling her she should be an

actress. Angela wasn't interested. Eventually, but not anytime soon, she wanted to go into hotel management.

Angela only started working at the downtown steakhouse a few months earlier when her parents got sick of how much money her gap year was costing, but Angela was hoping to make what she referred to as "the big leagues" by fall. "There are some hot ticket shifts," she told Hannah frequently, referring to the nights where the restaurant was closed for private events, when only the best servers were scheduled. "Lion's Club socials, fraternity reunions. That's where you make real money."

Working as a waitress didn't feel like a game to Hannah—it felt like her life, was her living. She would have liked to have made more money, but she thought what Angela did was disgusting. Hannah didn't feel right manipulating people. She tried to be kind, attentive, to recommend the restaurant's best items, not their most expensive, and hoped that this would be enough.

She already had her bachelor's degree, and four unpaid, unappreciated internships at local nonprofits that hadn't led to employment. She was tired. Tired of applying to jobs, tired of hearing about the wonders of networking, tired of having to sell herself—Lutherans were taught to keep their noses down and to work hard—that's how you got noticed.

Like most things her religious upbringing had taught her, keeping her nose down hadn't helped in the wider world. She was an atheist, but against her better judgement, she still felt deeply Lutheran.

When she started college, she was quiet about her Christianity, which was conflicted, even before she got out of it. Out, she always thought, as if her church community were all of St. Louis or a dense patch of fog. Eventually questions of eternal life stopped mattering to her, and she would tell people she was a humanist if religion came up, but working in restaurants had made her less and less certain of staking her belief system on the goodness in everyone.

Last week after her Friday dinner shift, Hannah had met Cam Schroeder at The Prince, a cozy basement bar that TV shows frequently filmed in. Cam was a family friend who had been in her older brother's grade. She hadn't seen him in years (he had moved to Seattle), but when she noticed on Facebook that he was in town for a week-long conference at UCLA, she reached out. After sharing a plate of fried gizzards, and a pitcher of Hite with shots of soju dropped in, she let it slip that she no longer believed in God. Told him a switch had flipped.

Cam said he was relieved, and Hannah was relieved, for she hadn't told anyone from home before, hadn't realized that she was ready to, that it was perhaps why she wanted to see him. Cam was no longer religious either, but hadn't been sure if Hannah still was, thus the nervous drinking. He attributed his own deficit of belief to science. He had been working late one night in the lab during graduate school when all of a sudden, through the microscope, he saw not just the cancer cells dividing, but the cruel hunger of nature, how impossibly silly it was to believe in a god.

After hearing this, Hannah felt dishonest for using the switch metaphor. She had no lab moment, and oddly, didn't really care about what was possible or impossible. Now she thought of her loss of faith as a balloon deflating, or a frayed rope whose threads had snapped almost imperceptibly, one by one.

She kept this a secret from her family because she knew how much it would pain them, and she didn't blame them for this. What bothered her was their pity. How sad it was for her to know things, to use critical thinking skills. How her crappy job somehow corresponded with her moral failure.

When Hannah first moved into her apartment in Koreatown she attended a "Community Dinner" that had been advertised with a sandwich board on the sidewalk. "Free food!" it had said. It didn't mention that a church sponsored the meal, and that the "community" in question consisted of the homeless people she passed daily, with all their carts

parked outside. She was lonely, and wanted to meet people, but was upset by how much attention the organizers of the event gave her compared to the disheveled men and queer teens in the buffet line next to her. "Hi! How are *you*?" and "Would *you* like more salad? What's *your* name?" and "Where are *you* from?" It was if she were their safest bet. The most likely to be saved.

The church group served spaghetti with ground beef, spinach salad, and brownies. The food was better than Hannah had expected, and money was tight. But after the pre-meal prayer, and the "entertainment" which was a teenager with braces painting a sunset to the accompaniment of another teenager playing the violin, Hannah decided never to go back.

She felt far past saving, and it frustrated her that she still had one foot in the door. Like how her mom always made a point of mentioning her new intergenerational Bible study group when they talked on the phone. Was it because she really enjoyed it? Or was it because she wanted to bait Hannah into discussing her own faith, why she hadn't found a church since leaving home? Hannah never knew what to say.

That night with Cam would have saddened her mother, but to Hannah it had been triumphant.

Cam and Hannah had had sex in his hotel room, and while it wasn't spectacular, it was tender, and Hannah found herself deeply touched by the way he reached up and brushed her hair behind her ears. This person who knew both versions of herself. Had known her in childhood. Had seen her the summer that awful poison ivy rash covered the skin he'd lightly traced with his fingers. She lost her breath a little thinking of this, remembering how undesirable she felt, how at odds with her body. And really, this confirmed everything she knew—she had always found more comfort in moments of human tenderness, much more so than a belief in a higher power.

Though she left Cam's room early the next morning, dressing and searching for her slip-resistant clogs quietly so not to wake him, Hannah felt proud of herself for this encounter, felt like she was making progress undoing all the unhealthy puritan values she'd been raised with. For as much as her brain believed she was sex-positive, it was difficult for her to feel confident, comfortable with herself. And around girls like Angela, Hannah felt like she was in middle school again, couldn't help but feel prude, dowdy even. She couldn't always tell the difference between a "third-wave feminist" and the patriarchy's "willing participant." She wasn't sure what had changed from her brazen teenaged self who'd once had sex in the basement of her church. She had kept this a secret until her sophomore year of college, and she wondered now if in doing so, she'd been reckless, like how storing precious photographs in a damp basement is reckless. Prone to rot. In recent years she'd taken to giving herself a pep-talk to help her reach climax, "You are liberated!" she'd remind herself, "this is revolutionary!"

Hannah folded a new stack of napkins, though they had plenty at the server's station. Then she walked into the kitchen to retrieve more clean forks. She thought about texting Cam. Late Saturday morning, he had texted her to ask if he could see her again. She'd said she'd check her work schedule, and let him know. She hadn't been sure if she wanted to see him a second time.

She was worried the magic of their night might be ruined, or worse, she might really like him. She could imagine the two of them getting a nice dinner, conversing easily, drinking heavily, and meeting again between his sheets. She could imagine getting breakfast, taking him to the LACMA or the La Brea Tar Pits. She could imagine hearing her mother's surprised but pleased Midwestern "Oh!" on hearing her plans to visit him in Seattle. She could imagine her and Cam getting married, and settling down, having a dog or a kid, and moving closer to their folks—but no, Cam didn't want that either.

When Hannah returned from the kitchen, Angela told her, "Carl's in your section. I'm jealous. Tell him I'm jealous."

Hannah groaned, and took her time tidying the forks in their basket. Carl was a regular, an older man, handsome, fit. Angela referred to him as a "silver fox," but Hannah thought he was a pervert, unbuttoned his shirts too low. Last time she served him he had called her "baby."

Hannah grabbed a menu and filled a glass with iced tea and extra lemons, the way Carl always asked for it, and walked through her section to the corner booth where Carl was waiting. As she took his order, the din of voices and the clank of silverware sounded strange. These sounds lined her waking life, yet, as she listened closely, something was unfamiliar. At first she thought it was like what usually happened when she wrote a word by hand. The longer she looked at it, the more she questioned its spelling. Then she realized someone was speaking German.

"That's everything I want," Carl said, wrapping up his order. He winked, handing Hannah his menu, "All that's listed, anyway."

Hannah nodded, half-listening.

Hearing German always made her picture an overweight man delicately moving through a room, preparing for a party maybe, or working as a hairdresser. It was heavy, effeminate shuffling she heard, like ducks passing in a row.

Her maternal grandparents spoke German which never sounded angry to her, even though that was the stereotype. Visiting her grandparents one Christmas, she attended a bilingual church service with them. Hannah must have been four or five, because she remembered reading the German words as she would any other, phonetically, not always understanding what they meant. An older woman, a friend of her grandmother's, stuck her boney finger on the page of the bulletin and corrected Hannah's pronunciation. Hannah argued with her; she was certain that u made an "uh" sound, not "oo." The older lady laughed at her for her stubbornness, and as

they left an usher handed Hannah a brown paper bag that contained a red delicious apple, an orange, and unshelled peanuts. Hannah was perplexed by this gift.

As Hannah headed back toward the server's station she realized the speaker was a woman in her section, an older woman, whose hair was short, curled, and gray. Next to her, a thin middle-aged woman nodded in agreement. The third woman at their table picked at the table cloth. She was younger than both of them, and looked as if she could have been related to Hannah. She had the same long nose, small inset eyes.

Hannah saw their food waiting in the window and grabbed it, balancing the plates on her arms. She smiled as she approached them. "Alright, here we are," she said, and set their meals down in front of them, listing each item. Caesar, French dip extra horseradish, club sandwich. But something unusual happened. No one confirmed their order. No one thanked her. No one even looked up. The older woman kept talking, her words like the flutter of sheets on a clothesline. "Can I get you anything else?" Hannah said, still trying to sound pleasant, but annoyed that they weren't acknowledging her. When they didn't reply she left to greet a new table.

Hannah was filling water glasses when she realized what had happened. The women were praying. She had interrupted them. It hadn't even crossed her mind.

She hadn't been home in eighteen months. She hadn't even gone to church last Christmas. This still felt weird to her, even though she had never gone to weekly services since being on her own. *Unser Vater*. The Lord's Prayer. Living in Los Angeles, away from her family, away from the Midwest, it wasn't something she expected to hear.

Hannah knew exactly what to do. It wasn't out of sympathy. It was the answer. It was as if her hand had shot up in class, or she'd thought of something too funny not to say, and couldn't help but blurt it out, even though it risked hurting someone's feelings. It was exactly what she knew her mother would have wanted.

She took the water pitcher back to the servers' station. This trip would need to look singular, her apology her sole purpose. She approached their table.

"Excuse me," she said. The women looked up. Hannah bowed her head and continued. "I just wanted to apologize for interrupting your prayer. I didn't realize until just now that that's what you were doing. I feel really bad."

The women smiled. "That just warms my heart," the oldest woman said. She set down her fork. "Thank you so much." She looked around the table for confirmation.

"It's no problem," the middle-aged woman said. "I've seen you. You're working hard."

The youngest woman nodded.

"It means so much to me that you came back here," the oldest woman continued; then she stood and gave Hannah a hug. "Don't you worry," she said softly into Hannah's ear.

Hannah could feel Angela staring at her. "Thanks," Hannah said, taking a step backwards. She bowed her head again, this time from embarrassment. It was going too well. Then, as if her tone could apologize for her act, "Can I get you anything?"

"We're just fine," the middle-aged woman said, and Hannah went on her way.

Each time she refilled their water, they smiled and asked her questions about her life, listened attentively to her answers. By time she brought them their check, her skin felt as thin as paper, a poor excuse for a levee—the truth, and her natural unpleasantness, seeped through, lapped at its edge. She was relieved when they left.

She took the check presenter back to the servers' station, opened it so she could file the signed receipt. Inside was a hundred-dollar bill.

Old ladies never tipped well. A hundred dollars was gaudy, was punishment.

"Where'd you get *that*?" Angela said, rushing to the computer to punch in her order.

"Carl gave it to me," Hannah said and pocketed it.

"Silver Fox? No! He's never given me that much."

Hannah shrugged. "He told me he likes me better than you, then handed me the money."

"No way." Angela's face broke into an open-mouthed realization. "You fucked him, didn't you? He's your mystery guy!"

"He said he'd leave his wife for me," Hannah said, managing to force down the corners of her mouth which were reaching for a smile.

"I don't believe you. You're too good of a person," Angela said.

"Am I?" Hannah asked, thinking again of Cam, and the text messages she hadn't sent, but Angela had already slid into a corner booth. Her pen was poised on her order pad, ready.

Where She Left Them

The last time Hannah returned to St. Louis was for her brother Eric's wedding. Her dad had bought her plane ticket because she was in graduate school, *finally*, and couldn't afford it. Hannah had bought her expensive bridesmaid's dress though, and was hoping to wear a pair of shoes she vaguely remembered buying for a high school dance. Silver, peep-toed, kitten heel.

Hannah's room was always slightly different than how she left it, though she never remembered exactly what was in her closet and desk drawers and spent the first night reacquainting herself with them, sorting through and throwing out school notes and letters, as if she were peeling them off of her body, shedding them like the skin of a snake. Adding to her confusion were the charity donation pick-ups which always seemed to be a week away. The clothes Hannah left in her mother's to-donate pile had a habit of returning to her closet, in particular the dress she wore to her first communion, which no longer fit, and which she wouldn't wear even if it did. It looked dated. Baby blue with a high neckline and capped sleeves, the window in the back that tied into a bow. She had left it in the pile again and again, with other items she no longer wanted or needed, until finally she delivered them to Goodwill herself. This was how most of her visits ended: in an angry flourish that kept her from missing anything for

months at a time, but would inevitably soften, and her affection for her parents, for her home town, would creep back in.

The night before Hannah was to fly away to college, she was irritable because her parents kept insisting she was trying to pack too much, that she wouldn't have room in her dorm. Dorms were small, they kept saying, as if they had been to her particular dorm and peeped in all the cabinets. They took her to Chevy's Fresh Mex for a farewell dinner, which was a treat, though their moods were strained and Hannah had not finished packing.

The restaurant was in Crestwood Mall and had been a favorite of hers as a child because they gave children balls of tortilla dough to play with while they waited for their dinners. She was not offered one when she walked in, but Hannah saw them lined up at the hostess station with crayons stuck in them like birthday candles.

"We could stop at Bed Bath & Beyond and see if they have any of those vacuum-pack bags," her mother said, turning the heavy pages of her plastic-encased menu. This was a compromise, Hannah understood, but it would do nothing for the airline's fifty-pounds-or-less weight requirement. "Or we could mail you your winter clothes."

Hannah excused herself and started toward the bathroom. It was inside the restaurant, not the mall, next to the El Machino, the conveyor-belt oven that cooked the tortillas. She stood and watched it for a while. The machine flattened the balls of dough, spun them across four tiered plates, dropping them down, level by level, as the dough puffed from the heat. Finally they crawled along a belt much like the moving walkways in airports, and were dropped in a heap, where most of them deflated. Winter clothes? She was moving to Southern California, did her mom not understand what that meant?

It was hot by the machine, and the Plexiglas that kept her from getting too close was slightly steamed. She did not know what the future would bring, but she knew she wouldn't need her oversized wool coat. That would stay in the hall closet and be brought to her at the airport when she came home for Christmas break.

The problem was, she didn't quite know what she would need, and she liked her pillow and didn't want a different one.

She was heading to school early for a week-long camping trip. It was something for out-of-state students that she had applied for. Her parents would join her for Parents' Weekend and rent a car and take her to Target to buy a bedspread, hangers, cups and bowls, pens and paper, and other school supplies. Out of Hannah's graduating class she was one of five students to leave Missouri, and the only student to leave the Midwest. In her application letter she had described herself as adventurous, which she wanted to be, but doubted was true.

The first night Hannah spent at school she would get in too late to pick up the sleeping bag she was renting for the trip the next day, and would sleep on the bare mattress, worried that she'd made a mistake. Eric had come home from college midway through his first semester, then transferred to SLU and lived at home. He had told her, "It didn't feel right," which annoyed her at the time, because she was already planning her escape, and he had squandered his. He hadn't given it a chance, she thought, but her first night at college, she found herself understanding exactly what he meant.

Hannah smelled something burning. She noticed a single tortilla had gotten caught between the plate and the glass. It was dark brown where it touched the metal, the edges of it thin and curling, then normal on the backside where it crossed in front of her. An employee noticed and stopped the machine. Then, after pulling on a pair of heavy gloves, she opened a small door in the side of the case and retrieved it.

Hannah returned to her seat and opened her menu. She had hoped that choosing a college was like choosing an item off this list. Most of the meals had the same ingredients—beans, cheese, chicken, steak, or shrimp, peppers and onions, tortillas, served with salsa. Most of the items would have pleased her. It was not like finding a soulmate, she told herself.

After she graduated she would attribute her choice of school as changing her entire life, though she had no idea what would have happened to her elsewhere, had heard those stories about twins who grew up on different sides of the country with different families, and how they both became dentists, married women named Mimi, and were active members in local acapella groups.

When the waiter returned, she ordered the steak fajitas, which were served on a sizzling skillet. She liked how the bell peppers and onions picked up flecks of burnt meat.

The next time she would come home she would be a vegetarian, but she did not know this yet, had never been too particularly concerned with the fate of animals, was still ignorant of the environmental implications of cows and methane gas. And Chevy's would never taste as good as in her memory, California would spoil it for her.

When her food came the waiter told her that the plate was hot and that she shouldn't touch it. The fajitas made a sound like radio static and smelled divine. He set the plate slightly out of reach, towards the center of the table. Without thinking, Hannah grabbed the plate to move it closer to her. It was only when she removed her hand from the heat that she could comprehend how much it had hurt her. She watched as the welt reddened and raised, surprising her slightly with its immediate blister. She ate the rest of her meal with her hand against her ice water, angry and embarrassed.

Hannah and her parents would not stop at Bed Bath & Beyond after dinner, and Hannah would pack wildly and ineffectively with one hand and a leaking Ziploc of ice cubes. Her clothes would be wrinkled and damp when she reached California, and she would forget her

toothbrush that morning, which would make her feel poor, alone on the opulent campus, its dry summer heat and wide shallow fountains more light and decorous than anything she'd previously known.

When she'd pack at the end of her first year at college, she would throw out most of what she'd lugged with her: the t-shirts from high school dances and the basketball team, picture frames and stuffy pairs of closed-toed shoes. She'd wanted less stuff, didn't want to be so materialistic, especially because she felt her materialism was uninteresting, no longer important to her. At one time she may have found a drawer full of discount tops from Kohl's—where everything was always discounted, always felt like a deal—comforting the way being surrounded by acquaintances could be comforting, safer somehow than the inspecting glare of those who really knew you. But her dorm's communal storage was limited, and she'd started dressing more efficiently, had a stack of sundresses and simple cardigans that she wore to class and found to be just as comfortable as what she deemed her Missouri clothes.

She made a lot of bitter and half-hearted jokes about being from Missouri. She'd call someone a "hoosier" or mention something like a fall hayride, and her peers from Los Angeles would look at her like she was an alien. So she'd add, "Life in *Missoura*," to the end of her comment or memory alongside a yokel shrug. She referred to her religious upbringing as "brainwashing" and changed her accent to blend in, rounded her 'o' sounds so that they no longer sounded like a bookcase had toppled over and flattened them. Over time she lost touch with her high school friends, learned what her Lutheran education had failed to teach her, and what to order at Korean restaurants. She fought with her parents about politics, didn't speak to them for months at a time, made the excuse that she was busy with school, until they hardly noticed her silence, while she made plans to spend summers on campus, and move to the West Coast permanently. The idea of home had moved with her, like her deceased grandma's guitar-

shaped salt and pepper shakers, which Hannah, on her first trip back after graduation, tossed last-minute into her carry-on bag.

She remembered being disappointed as a child when her father pulled the shakers out of her safety deposit box instead of valuables, but when the TSA agent inspected them, holding them close to his face, she realized her attachment was more than just kitsch, was worried suddenly that he would take them from her. The man unstopped the rubber cork from the bottom of one and used a pair of long tweezers to remove a two-dollar bill. They marveled at the date: 1899. The salt and pepper shakers would move with Hannah to four different apartments, but the bill she'd sell for eighty dollars to help pay for a filling.

When Hannah came back for the wedding, the furniture in her room had been rearranged, and a self-portrait she'd painted in her high school visual art elective was propped on the dresser. "Feng shui," her mother had said from the doorway, gesturing with a sweep of her hand, "From our exchange student." Hannah set her suitcase down as her mom stepped inside without an invitation.

Hannah's mom wore a silk scarf around the collar of her blazer, dressy from work, which she left early to pick Hannah up from the airport. The scarf looked awkward to Hannah in that position, and seemed to betray the deep insecurity behind her mother's desperate grasp at professionalism. She was once immensely proud of her for exactly this. Her hustle to get the church to hire her felt rooted in ambition or passion, instead of a desire for control or climbing above her class.

Normally, Hannah would have closed the door behind her, but that was when their pets were still alive. She couldn't remember if that was a family rule or if it was because their dog Waffles always dug through the wastebaskets and trailed used Kleenex through the house. She

was tired from the flight and didn't want to talk, but the expression on her mother's face suggested an agenda. Hannah guessed that her mom probably wanted to go over the schedule for the evening and for the rehearsal the next day, but to Hannah's surprise she tilted her head toward the painting and said, "Li Min thinks you have artistic talent."

Hannah hadn't thought about painting, or that painting in particular, in quite some time. She hadn't pursued the arts, though she enjoyed them. Her mother chose the music for their church's services, led all the choirs. "Public policy can be creative too," Hannah said, interpreting the compliment as a slight. She knew both of her parents had trouble understanding what she was getting her master's in, and due to their political differences, she had trouble explaining the course work. She had just finished a class on criminal justice reform, which assumed a belief that there was a need to reform, which contradicted the Lutheran belief of earning everything that happened to you, the passive attitude towards "God's plan," and the patriotic conservatism that upheld policemen and the law as deserving infallible respect. Regardless, they were glad that their intelligent daughter no longer worked in a restaurant. This had disappointed them, though they never said so directly.

She knew that she and her parents were more alike than they gave each other credit for, but she was frustrated with how little they understood the economy. Her father worked some sort of white collar position in the post office; she never really understood what he did, though she'd been to his office, a large corner suite with an official-looking wooden desk. After she had graduated with a degree in "Humanities" he had asked her what her long-term goals were, what she wanted for her career. Hannah didn't feel like she could answer this question. If given the money, she would have stayed in school forever. When she'd failed to reply her father had asked, "What do people *need*?" which made her feel useless. She didn't feel needed at all.

Once Hannah had left the sandwich shop for the steakhouse, she made decent money as a waitress, but it still embarrassed her how often her mother suggested that she move back home

and get an internship. She had returned to visit occasionally, but could not imagine living there. For one, she'd have been required to go to church, something she hadn't done, without even really deciding to, since she'd left for college. Plus, she'd had internships, and they hadn't led to anything.

It was not that she liked being a waitress; it had crushed her on her last visit to learn that Dana Visconti, the dumbest girl from her high school, also had that job, though at a sports bar where the servers wore low-cut tank tops and booty shorts. Dana had gotten a twelve on the ACT, and would see her own job as more prestigious. After learning this, Hannah made out with her ex-boyfriend Marshall at a bar. She had spent the evening performing as someone not bothered by her own life, someone who laughed loudly and had Bohemian-sounding hobbies. She listened intently as Marshall talked about law school, was jealous, almost ravenous in her attraction to him. Then when she saw him tip less than ten percent, she became immediately disgusted, ashamed of herself. She was not becoming the person she thought she would be: a bold reminder that everyone else had settled. Nor was she becoming the person other people thought she would be: wholesome, but vaguely off-kilter, married to someone she met in the Peace Corps, a backyard with a sculpture made from recycled wine bottles, a member of one of those contemporary churches that roast their own coffee beans.

To Hannah, the painting wasn't special, and it occurred to her that Li Min had no idea what she actually looked like, wouldn't know that her eyes weren't as big, her nose wasn't as small. If she hadn't painted it, she wouldn't have recognized herself.

"I'm sad you won't get to meet Li Min," her mother said, leaning forward, hands gripping the edge of the mattress. Li Min was with a tour group in Las Vegas. She had visited the Grand Canyon, and would travel to L.A. before flying back to China. She'd left last week and would be gone by time Hannah got back.

It surprised Hannah that her parents would host an exchange student. They seemed to enjoy their empty-nester life, had relaxed significantly. They ate out more, saw more movies, chose parking spots close to the church, instead of parking down the street. Growing up she'd been told that it wouldn't look right for her father, the president of the congregation, to take a prime spot, and later, her mother, an employee. It seemed weird that they'd want a teenager again, to enforce the rules and curfews. It was possible they were lonely, even though her brother lived just across town.

Hannah opened the top drawer of the dresser. A t-shirt, her t-shirt, she realized on closer inspection, lay freshly washed and neatly folded in the otherwise empty drawer. She had caught the shirt at a pep rally her sophomore year, and had left it behind. Li Min must have worn it for a spirit day, and Hannah wished she could have been there to give it to her.

Her mom laughed. She was looking at the floor, then looked up to catch Hannah's eye. "She called me last night. She said, 'Las Vegas makes me believe in magic, but the Grand Canyon made me believe in God. Thank you for telling me about Jesus.' Isn't that cool?"

It was Hannah's turn to look away. The line sounded invented, slightly racist, or at least misunderstood.

Hannah used to worry about selling her answers to these kinds of questions, was worried that if her parents realized how her faith had drained out of her since she left they wouldn't help pay for college, and she would be forced to drop out. Now that she was independent, now that she had a future again, they no longer held that power over her.

"No, I think it's strange, actually," Hannah said, opening the doors to her closet and kneeling on the floor.

"Strange? Because of the magic?"

Hannah thought about how she wanted to explain, that it wasn't the magic part at all, that the whole thing sounded as silly as magic to her, then realized that she didn't want to explain, and that she didn't have to.

With her heart beating faster, Hannah reached her hand to the shoe tree in the very back of the closet. A moment passed, and her mother let the comment drop.

Hannah searched the shoe tree's cubbies, but found them all empty, except for her old high-tops—shoes she hadn't missed or needed. Then she understood. Having Li Min stay with them was like having a do-over.

An ugly thought crossed her mind: Li Min had stolen her shoes, taken them to Las Vegas. Then Hannah thought of the neatly folded t-shirt she had returned, and felt ashamed for accusing her, even in her mind. She knew Li Min had had nothing to do with it. And at that, Hannah remembered what had happened to her shoes. She had worn them to a party one winter break in college, when Shelly Fischer was house-sitting a ridiculous mansion in Clayton. Shelly had served wine and cheese, and Hannah had dressed up. It was one of those weirdly warm winter days with a high of sixty, and she felt fancy, grown up—different and shiny and confident. She remembered stepping in a decorative river that divided the kitchen between the fridge and center island. She was drunk, and she remembered looking down at it in disbelief. Why would someone have that? And why would they put it *there*? The water was dirty, had cat hair floating on its surface. The dog walked over periodically to drink out of it. The river was only an inch or so deep, but it was enough to soak the fabric. She must have taken her shoes off, because she also remembered burying her toes in the lush shag rug in the attic playroom, as the women she had once been close to had a frank discussion about sex. In high school none of them felt like they could talk about it, but that night they discovered their journeys away from religious purity had coincided. How much easier it would have been with someone to talk to! They sighed, gulped their wine, clutched unfamiliar stuffed animals to their chests.

Hannah had slept over, had packed a bag with a toothbrush and sweatpants and rubber-soled slippers. She must have worn the slippers home, left her heels there.

Hannah asked her mom if she had any shoes she could borrow. Her mother looked pained, but pleased by this request. They went to her parents' room and Hannah sat on their bed as her mom pulled out pair after pair of scuffed brown and black loafers and clogs, nothing appropriate for a wedding. Crestwood Mall had closed by then, but hadn't been demolished yet, stood blank-faced and abandoned. They drove to a Payless, bought cheap but reasonably fashionable pumps that Hannah planned to leave in her closet for the next wedding she would come home for, but the heel of her left shoe would snap while dancing a still slightly embarrassed version of the Macarena with her brother and his new wife, and Hannah would instead kick both shoes to the side of the dance floor and go barefoot for the rest of the evening, even when she went outside and drunkenly took a drag off a stranger's (a cousin of the bride's?) cigarette. There would be no other wedding.

But that night, with her brother's wedding waiting on the horizon, with the shoes still in their box, Hannah went to sleep in her old bed, a tourist in her old life.

After the lights had been out for some time, Hannah rolled on her side, and slid her hand under the pillow, which gave her head a little more support. Inside the pillowcase she felt the sharp corner of heavy paper. She reached her hand inside and retrieved a smooth photograph. She turned on the light to inspect it. The picture had been taken in front of a thin mountain and contained what Hannah could only assume to be Li Min's parents—a middle-aged Chinese couple posed with bicycles, smiling. The man's lips were full and his face handsome, though the skin around his jawline sagged. The mother peeked out from beneath a white bucket hat, oddly young-looking in her old woman garb, her pink capris. Li Min must have been homesick, must have hidden the picture there so that she could pull it out when she went to sleep. Yet, it was odd to find it. Had her mother, who had always been so proper about those

sort of things, forgotten to change the pillowcase? And how could Li Min, who had loved her parents so much, forget their photo? Leave them carelessly behind? Yet she had already left her parents in China, and was touring now instead of running into their arms.

When Hannah left for California her own parents had encouraged her to pack lightly. She hadn't listened, and instead struggled to stuff as much as she could into her suitcase while her burnt hand throbbed. At the time, she thought the burn would leave a scar: a glaring red stripe down her thumb and forefinger, a reminder of how stupid she had been for grabbing the plate. She had thought that all scars were permanent, but this one had lightened with age, tanned over, then completely disappeared.

What ever happened to Hannah Mueller?, Hannah heard a nameless voice asking as she traced the corner of the photograph with her unblemished fingers. She had wanted to leave St. Louis, and her parents had let her go, and that night—lying there in the room that no longer felt like it belonged to her, those happy strangers in her hands—she found the distance between them comforting.

VITA

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