

NOT QUITE A MEMOIR, BUT SOMETHING CLOSE

by

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NOT QUITE A MEMOIR, BUT SOMETHING CLOSE

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### **The First Time Someone Killed Themselves**

I was in eighth grade, and it happened during math class, where we had stopped doing a great deal of work because it was already May. I was only thirteen, but I remember it vividly. We were drawing concentric circles with compasses, those tools that have a sharp metal point on one end and a golf pencil on the other end. We stopped when the PA system clicked on, and Principal Smith, a rigid man who wore navy-blue ties, spoke. He said, “Excuse me, boys and girls, but there is something very serious that I need to talk to you about. Teachers, please stop your classes from their activities and make sure that everyone can hear the announcement. Thank you.” The PA system clicked silent for a second, then Mr. Smith returned.

“Boys and girls, whenever we lose a member of a community, it deeply saddens us and confuses us. There is little that we can do except be there for each other and listen

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to one another while we voice our emotions. I don't know how many of you have experiences with loss, but I'll tell you firsthand that it is not fun, nor does it make any sense. We each have to grieve in our own way."

I'm not sure what Mr. Smith's intention was, but he created a great deal of suspense in the classroom, and everyone hung their questions in the air, which had become very tense. Finally, he spit it out. "Boys and girls, last night our beloved school nurse, Ms. Rodriguez, passed away." The PA system clicked off again. Nobody really knew what to do. Bryan Hopie stabbed his compass into his desk. Mr. Festerling sat at his desk, shifting his eyes back and forth and eventually opening his lesson book. The silence was finally broken when DaShawn Reed said, "She dead? That's whack."

Luckily, the PA system rescued us from our own awkward silence, and Mr. Smith returned, sounding a little more raspy-voiced than he had a second ago. "We have a letter to send home to your parents, explaining the situation. Teachers, please send a student to the main office to pick up the letters. Crisis counselors will be available in the...nurse's...office."

I was the common go-to person for things of this nature, so Mr. Festerling sent me to the office. I was rather numb to the news. I had met Mrs. Rodriguez several times; once a year, at least, for the annual school lice check. I remember wondering why she didn't look Hispanic. She had bleached-blond hair, and she always wore a lot of very blue eye-shadow. At that time in my life, I was quite fixated on eye shadow, so that's the memory that sticks out the most to me. I was envious that she was allowed to wear eye-shadow. The fact that she was probably allowed to do anything she wanted, considering that she was a legitimate adult, most likely escaped me.

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When I reached the main office, they'd already run out of letters, and I had to go with the secretary to make more photocopies. While she was running off copies, her cell phone rang, and she picked it up. I could hear a male voice on the other end, but I could only hear the secretary's half of the conversation. "No...I don't think I can make it out for lunch today ...it's a madhouse here. The school nurse offed herself. They found her in the bathtub or something, cuts all up and down her arms and everything. Don't be a dick, Reggie, it's really sad. Yeah, well I gotta go. The copies are done."

I found it odd that she didn't say, "I gotta go, there's a student listening to me divulge the gory details of a suicide that we're apparently trying to keep from the impressionable children." But, it was too late at this point. I now had the mental image of Mrs. Rodriguez, lying in a bathtub filled with bloody water, her nurse's uniform soaked entirely through, and her blue eye shadow hovering over dead, empty eyes. The secretary turned to give me the stack of letters, and I threw up.

Since there was currently nobody to deal with a health crisis in the school, they sent me home for the rest of the afternoon. My parents were both at work, but they had called in and authorized our next-door neighbor to pick me up and take me to her house. Our next door neighbor's name was Marge, but she was affectionately called "Bobo Two-Hat" by my youngest brother, because she had taken to wearing two hats in the winter, one on top of the other. Marge was a sixty-something bachelorette with hypochondria and a fetish for outerwear. She wore gloves year-round, to protect her hands from unnatural toxins indoors and from pollen outdoors. She wore a scarf more often than not, and pulled it up in front of her mouth, to moisten the air while she

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breathed. Marge was more or less obsessive compulsive, and perhaps for that reason, my parents often hired her as a babysitter.

I sat on Marge's orange couch all afternoon. The TBS afternoon movie was *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. But every time someone took out a light saber, I would think of Mrs. Rodriguez, taking out a large kitchen knife and methodically slicing her arms into the hot running water of her bathtub. I was afraid to fall asleep because I didn't want Marge to spray me with disinfectant. So, instead of watching the movie, I concentrated as hard as I could on the clock in the living room corner. It was shaped like a cat, and its pendulum was the tail, swinging back and forth and back and forth. Eventually, the methodical motion did make me fall asleep, and while I was sleeping, I had a dream that Ms. Rodriguez replaced her fingers with compass points and drew circles all over my body, driving the compass points into my skin at the point of contact, drawing blood every time. And when she was done, I was left with so many circles of different shapes and sizes, all of them dripping blood from the center.

I woke up, and I felt like I was suffocating. Marge had put a blanket over my mouth and nose, to "moisten the breath." I sat bolt upright, on the couch, and started to cry uncontrollably. Marge was in the other, room, boiling some low-sodium chicken bullion, and she heard my sobbing gasps for breath. She came in the room and said, "Oh no! Oh dear, what's wrong? What's wrong dear?"

All I could do was shake my head, because I couldn't stop spilling my sloppy guts onto the floor and all over the living room. I was shaking my head because for the life of me, I didn't know why I was crying. It was like a spontaneous reaction in my body, a chemical reaction that had nothing to do with my real inner life. I didn't really care about

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Mrs. Rodriguez. I really didn't. I remembered her eye-shadow, I thought it sucked that she died, but our relationship began and ended with a lice comb every February and a physical in June. Now, her image was stuck in my mind, cutting herself and drowning herself in every morbid way possible, and there was nothing I could do to make it go away.

Soon afterwards, my mother came home from work and stopped by Marge's to get me. She walked in the door without knocking and found me on the couch.

"Mary Brigit, how are you feeling?"

"Fine," I said, and I got up to go. We almost made a clean escape, but Marge popped out from somewhere and said, "Oh! Mrs. Poppleton! I'm so glad that you're here. Mary Brigit is doing much better, but boy did she look green when I picked her up from school." Marge had a black cashmere scarf pulled up to her nose. She looked almost like a ninja. My mother raised her eyebrows.

"Oh? Well, I'll have to go make her some brownies to fix that, won't I?"

"Very funny, Mrs. Poppleton. You know that brownies have high-fructose corn syrup, and I just watched a program about the detriments--"

"Of course, Marge," my mother said. "I was just joking."

Back in our kitchen, my mother mixed the high-fructose corn syrup brownies while I sat at the kitchen table. I loved watching her cook. My mother was never very vocal about her feelings, but she baked them often. Instead of telling us she was sorry for yelling, she would make blondies. Instead of telling us congratulations, she would bake oatmeal raisin cookies. She always made them from the box, and she wasn't an

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exceptional baker, but there was a mutual family understanding about the value of her baked goods.

“So kid, what happened at school today?”

“I got upset, and I got sick.”

“Upset about what?”

“The school nurse died last night.”

“Who? What was her name again?”

“Mrs. Rodriguez.”

“Oh, I remember--the woman with the blonde hair. She didn’t have high sanitation ratings in the last PTA inspection.” My mother was the vice president of the Hudson Middle School PTA. I gave her the letter that we got at school, and she scanned it with a concerned but business-like look on her face. “I can’t believe they didn’t notify us first.” By us, she meant the PTA. Every time my mother spoke in the collective, she meant the PTA. When she was done reading, she put the letter up on the refrigerator. “Well,” she said, “I’ll have to remember to bring her name to prayer group. Have you prayed for her yet, Mary Brigit?”

“Yes.” I lied. But then I wondered whether imagining Ms. Rodriguez bleeding to death in the bathtub could count as some sort of prayer. I wanted to tell her why I got so upset, that it wasn’t just because Mrs. Rodriguez had died, but because she was lying in a bathtub overflowing with blood, and that’s why I threw up at school, but she didn’t ask. I also started remembering something about suicide being a sin in the Bible, so I didn’t want to mention anything before she’d prayed. I thought that maybe Mrs. Rodriguez was still living in my mind because she hadn’t been sufficiently laid to rest by my mother’s

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prayer group. They were, after all, the largest prayer group in the Saint Mary's Parish, which was the largest Catholic parish in Hudson, Ohio. There was a waiting list to get into the prayer group, because although they had "open arms and open hearts," there was limited space in Maxine Callahan's living room, and they didn't want to crowd the Holy Spirit out entirely.

That night, I laid in bed while my mother was at prayer group, trying to tell myself that Mrs. Rodriguez was being prayed out of my mind forever. But when I was about three-quarters asleep, I saw her silhouette against my bedroom wall. I could see the outline of her teased bangs, and her short little body. Her jaw was moving up and down as she popped her gum. I stayed very still and tried to slow my breathing down to nothing. At first she just stood there, but then, she reached into her back pocket and pulled out a lice pick. It cast a long, sinister shadow on the wall, kind of like the sickle that the grim reaper carries around with him. Slowly, she raised the lice comb over her head, hovering it over the silence of the room. Just holding it, ever so quietly, poised and trying to find me so she could slice me to pieces. Then, as silently as before, she slammed the comb down into her forearm, slicing into herself. She plunged it up and down into her flesh, silently, silently, but over and over again, with the same mechanical accuracy that she used to use when she was checking our hair for bugs. I was too afraid to move, but I squeezed fearful tears down my cheeks, wanting her to stop but not knowing how to say it.

I woke up and my eyes were puffy and stuck together. It was still early, and everyone was sleeping. First, I looked around my room with my eyes to check for Mrs. Rodriguez in some corner somewhere. She wasn't there, so I got out of bed and went

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downstairs. The TV was still on, and my older brother Steve was on the couch, asleep. I crawled onto the other side of the couch and fell back asleep again. There was something nice about not being alone.

The next day was fine- it was Saturday, and Steve had a baseball game that we all went to. My mother had apparently prayed for him, because he hit two home runs and also did decently in the outfield. I tried to convince my mother to let me sleep in her bed that night, because Mrs. Rodriguez seemed to stay away when I was with other people. “How old are you, honey?” My mother was brushing her teeth, so she looked a little bit rabid.

“I just get scared at night sometimes, Mom.” I said.

“Honey, there’s nothing to be scared of. We have a very good home security system.”

“I don’t feel well, though.”

“Call me if you need anything. Your father and I are right down the hall. Jordan and Steve’s room is right next to yours.”

My mother explained the layout of our home as if I was unfamiliar with it. She had a way of explaining things away, no matter what they were. She was the great explainer. I didn’t say anything else, I just walked down the hallway. I wouldn’t go to bed then. I would sit up and wait the whole night, warding off Mrs. Rodriguez until it was morning again. I sat at the foot of my bed with a book- I started off with *Nancy Drew and the Witch Tree Symbol*, but then I decided to open the Bible. I was sort of interested in what it said about killing yourself. I looked in the back of the book for some kind of index. It had “sadness” and “Saul,” but not suicide. I decide to flip through a bit to see

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what I could find, since I had all night. I had a children's study Bible, so there were a lot of cartoon drawings in between the stories. I dozed off while flipping through Daniel and the Lion's Den. There was a picture of a young boy with brown hair, surrounded by sleeping lions, who looked very content. When I woke back up, I picked up my book, and instead of Daniel and the Lion's Den, I saw myself in Daniel's place, and instead of sleeping Lions, there were dead bodies in a circle around me, with blonde hair, blue eye-shadow, and bleeding arms. They kept multiplying until I couldn't even see myself anymore. All I could see were the dead nurse bodies, and more and more bodies, until I was afraid that they would spill out of the book and onto the floor. I slammed the book shut and screamed as hard as I could.

My mother came into my room, groggy and grey. "What is it?" she asked.

"I can't," I said, and shook my head. I wasn't really sure what I couldn't do, but the words felt right.

"You can't what, honey?" My mother shifted from startled to matter-of-fact in the blink of an eye.

"I can't. I don't. Mrs. Rodriguez won't leave me alone." That's all I could choke out, and then I just started to cry again, which was embarrassing. It was always embarrassing to cry in front of my mother. She didn't miss a beat. She picked me up from my pile on the floor and pulled me into her arms. She stroked my hair, she looked me in the eyes, and she said, "Mrs. Rodriguez is dead, Darling. You need to go to bed."

The next day, however, I woke up and there was an outfit laid out for me on my radiator, which in the spring doubled as a clothes rack. It was my black skirt that I wore to my uncle's wedding, a black sweater that I think belonged to one of my brothers, and

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black patent leather shoes that only were worn on Christmas. My mother walked by my room, dressed in a black party dress that I'd never seen before and said, "Get ready, Honey, we're leaving in twenty minutes."

It didn't occur to me to ask how my mother was able to find the details of Mrs. Rodriguez's wake on such short notice. But somehow she did, and she decided that everyone in my family was attending with us. It took a lot of scrounging, but she insisted that we all wear black to the wake. So, there we were, in the parking lot of the Cleveland Heights Blossom Family Funeral Home, wearing an assortment of black tee-shirts, blazers, and tennis shoes. My mother shuffled us in, a little too vigorously for a funeral home, and she found the poster outside of the room that said "Rodriguez." We immediately stopped rushing and slinked in, heads down.

I had never been in a funeral home before, and it seemed a little irreverent to me. The walls were made from wood paneling that reminded me of our family's station wagon, and there were rows of folding chairs set up. Folding chairs struck me as the most irreverent part. Folding chairs went in the gym when you needed to have a meeting and there was absolutely no other place to do it. There were two large, gold-plated vases on either side of a coffin, and they had long-stemmed flowers in them that were red and blue and tacky. A boom box sat in the back of the room playing Frank Sinatra. "Heaven, I'm in Heaven," it sang, "and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak..."

Since it was a wake, I guess that people came and went quickly, but it still felt lonely in the room. There was one old man who looked dehydrated and droopy along the edges. He sat with his hands clasped together and resting on his knees, in an ambiguous position which could have meant praying or could have meant just sitting there. There

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was also a woman who looked a lot like Mrs. Rodriguez. She had the same short, muscular build, but she seemed a little younger and more confused. She sat in the back, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief over and over again. I figured she might be her sister.

My mother walked in front while the rest of us hesitated. Almost militantly, she sat down, bowed her head, and started praying. We didn't have much choice but to follow her lead. I bowed my head, but out of the corner of my eye, I watched the coffin, which was wood-paneled like a station wagon also. I couldn't see inside it, but it was open. It was open, and inside of it was Mrs. Rodriguez, as dead as ever.

As I bowed my head, instead of praying to God, I talked to Mrs. Rodriguez. I wasn't sure if that counted at all, but the first thing that I wanted to know was, "Why did you do it? It couldn't have been that bad being a school nurse. Maybe, did you want to be a real nurse, and it just didn't work out? Still, that didn't seem like a reason to kill yourself. And, if you wanted to die, then why won't you go away? Why won't you just let yourself be dead and leave me alone?" I thought that maybe if I asked her all of these questions, she would stop haunting me, and somehow I wouldn't have to look at her dead body in the coffin. I kept imagining her lying in that bathtub, blue and bloated and red and bleeding and stabbing herself in my room for some unknown reason like she had something to say to me.

I prayed and I prayed to Mrs. Rodriguez to just rest peacefully, even though something in her life wasn't peaceful enough for her to keep living. Part of me was afraid to pray to God because I thought he might be angry that I had been praying to Mrs. Rodriguez rather than to Him or to Jesus. One by one, my family members got up out of

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their seats and filed past the open coffin, Jordan in his black tee-shirt and tennis shoes, my mother in her black party dress, Steve in his black blazer that belonged to my dad, who was wearing a black button down shirt that needed to be ironed. We looked like we were wearing last-minute Halloween costumes, trying to be a family of crows on short notice. Soon, Jordan stepped on my foot with his heel and whispered. “Come on, Mary Brigit.” I ignored him at first, but then he dug his heel deeper into my foot and I got up.

I started angling toward the coffin, moving slowly and trying not to look inside. It would have been easy not to look inside, really. I could have ambled by with my eyes down, payed my last respects, and been on my way. But for some reason, I walked up to the coffin and peered in. Mrs. Rodriguez was lying there, very calmly and very serenely. She wasn't wearing any eye-shadow, and her hair wasn't quite so big. She was dressed in pale pink skirt and a blue button down sweater, and she really did look like she was sleeping. She was a lot less frightening in person.

I lingered there for a moment, and then, even though I knew I shouldn't, I reached into the coffin and pulled up her sleeve. Her arm wasn't covered in bloody welts, but there were three very neat, very precise slices into her wrist and above. I stared at them and realized that they looked very much like a choice, a distinct and planned out choice on her part, very level headed, very calculated, like a lice exam. I wasn't sure how that changed things, or whether that changed things, but seeing them somehow made things much clearer. I might have stayed, but I heard a voice saying, “Hey!” and the old man rose up out of his chair, bolted over to me, and yanked my hand away from the coffin. I must have looked startled, because he stopped and looked at me and said, “I'm sorry,

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little girl. I'm sorry." Then he repeated it, and then he looked at the coffin and said it again. "I'm sorry, little girl. I'm sorry."

My mother, who had gotten up from her seat when he yelled at me, walked past me and toward the old man. She took his hand, put her arm around him, and said, "We're so sorry for your loss." She gave him a hug, and I saw him reach his arms out and put them around her, and then just hang his whole weight on her body while she patted him on the shoulder and whispered, "It's okay. Shhhh. It's okay." His eyes were red when he went back to his seat, and my mother turned around and took my hand. She squeezed it and said, "This is part of life, honey. Now we have to go home."

### **The Corsican Crocodile**

She met him at parent teacher conference. Hudson was a nice suburb, the kind with the cardboard box houses that all looked like twisted mirror images of each other. Judy could fit her house into the five-car garage of those mirror houses, but it was okay because she was a “young professional,” and “young professionals” have a knack for living in tiny duplexes and making it look fashionably derelict. Her duplex was in a neighborhood on the edge of the giant box houses- a housing development that was called “Twin Mills,” because all of the houses were twins with each other, Siamese twins because they were connected, as duplexes always are. That’s the definition of duplex, of course.

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The other side of Judy's house was occupied by a Mexican family with a mother and a father and a daughter with two babies and what seemed like forty-five nieces and nephews that came in and out of the house all the time. Judy wanted to ask them how they had ended up in Northern Ohio from Mexico, but she could never quite pull up enough scraps of her three semesters of college Spanish that she had to take to graduate from Oberlin. A hippie liberal arts college that still had a language requirement because part of the liberal arts requirement is cross cultural understanding. Judy was disappointing her alma mater miserably.

“Porque estan su familia en Ohio? Porque estan vosotros en Oheeee? Ohioito? Shit.”

Judy was glad that Saint Ignatius Day School was for the families from the big box houses, not because she particularly liked teaching white seventh-graders who talked in their broad flat accents about video games and sleepover parties and Will Ferrell, but because she could look at any one of those kids and sum up his existence in a set of sentences:

“You have a carpeted living room with a big screen TV, you are in the rec soccer (or football, or baseball, or ballet, insert choice here), league and think that you might play professionally one day. When you realize that not everyone can be a soccer star (or football, or baseball, or ballet, insert choice here), you will already be content with your reasonably padded existence, and you will have discovered cheep beer (or Bailey's at parties), so you'll at least have something to laugh about when you distill your life into fond anecdotes, which you will also tell over beer. Throw in a heartbreak by eighteen, the triumph of getting accepted to college

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somewhere, and you'll have some emotional highs and lows that make your life seem strikingly poignant, and that will be enough. Then, you'll get a job that pays like your parents', you'll continue to live in a big living room, and you will furnish that living room with everything you could possibly want in your life."

Judy found comfort in the cynical. It meant that she was able to grasp something fully when she could crumple it up into a compact ball of typicalities and predictabilities. That was the first thing that attracted her to him- he had the same propensity for wadding the world into fist-sized portions.

He was the father of one of Judy's fifth graders, Mary Brigit. He came alone, without Mrs. Mary-Brigit. Or Mrs. Poppleton, if you wanted to get technical about it. For a second, Judy thought that he might be divorced or a widower, and that wouldn't be so bad, not bad at all. But he explained, "My son Steve is also a student here. Eighth grade. I let my wife go to his conferences, because she's the disciplinarian."

Judy had heard about Steve Poppleton because she had mediated a dispute between two of the girls in her class over who had "dibs" on him when they grew up and could get married. She had told them that neither of them could have dibs because there were many fish in the sea and they needed to put their fishing hats on and buy those little vests with the flies and feathers pinned to them. The girls never asked Judy for personal advice again. However, from that encounter, Judy had deduced that Steve Poppleton was good looking. Thus, the fact that his father was making her slightly weak in the knees was not surprising.

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“Oh that’s okay,” Judy said, across four desks that had been put together to create the illusion of a conference table. “I don’t really know what to tell you, actually. Mary Brigit is doing exceptionally well.”

“So she finally understands the venerable Dr. Martin Luther King Junior and the concept that ‘if we were not different, the world would be a very dull place.’”

“Pardon?” Judy taught European History. That was the curriculum for Ignatius fifth graders. “Actually, Mr. Poppleton, we haven’t covered and won’t be covering Dr. Martin Luther King. Martin Luther we might talk about, and we certainly talk about several kings, but no doctors, and never doctor kings.”

Mr. Poppleton smiled. “My apologies,” he said. He had bad teeth. Academic teeth. She actually knew that he was an academic because when his daughter had filled out her emergency contact forms at the beginning of class, she had written under the parent/guardian line: Frank J. Poppleton, PhD. However, Judy hadn’t expected Frank J. Poppleton, PhD to be quite so attractive, or to look her in the eyes for such a long time. After all, this was a parent-teacher conference and no lingering stares at a parent-teacher conference was an unspoken rule of the game.

Of course, she couldn’t say that, and she didn’t really want to, because his eyes were actually quite interesting. They had little flecks of red in them, even though they were brown. Or was that hazel? Judy never really could get the difference between hazel and brown. She always chose the wrong one. Hazel was more green than brown, she thought. But she wouldn’t mention it, because it wasn’t appropriate anyway. In fact, it wasn’t even appropriate for her to be thinking about the eyeballs of a *parent of one of her students*. “A teacher must be very careful to keep strictly professional relationships with

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the parents of your students, so as not to risk a strained workplace environment and a possible compromising situation for the student.”

He was still talking. Something about history curricula. Curricula. He used the proper grammatical plural. That was supremely sexy, especially considering how many men couldn't carry a sentence in a bucket. Judy's boyfriend back at Oberlin thought that he was very literarily intelligent because he was a poet and once tried to slit his wrists on the roof of the cafeteria, and she had been darkly charmed by him, found him Poe-esque almost, with the purple circles under his eyes and the anemic lines of his back and his shoulders. But one night, they were lying in his dorm room bed and she had her shirt off, which she *never* would have done in high school, and he was smoking and he used the word *irregardless*, which is a redundant flourish of the prefix *irr-* and doesn't actually mean anything different from *regardless*. But he said it with such fire, with such *conviction*, that she left him then and there. A strictly professional relationship. Strictly professional.

He was still talking. He was sort of smiling at her while he talked. Smile-talking. Was that chemistry? No. Strictly professional, Judy. “So, sometimes I joke that the only thing in a history curriculum is Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, because for years that's what my kids used to come home with. I'd ask, ‘what'd you learn in school today?’ and they would say, ‘Well, we learned the *I Have a Dream* speech.’ It's an important message, of course, but there's limited scope to it, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Judy said, “I know exactly what you mean. When we're learning our own roots, where we come from, it's important to extend those roots past our immediate

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memories, and even past our semi-immediate memories.” Semi-immediate? That is not a word, professor. Not even a phrase. Like irregardless.

“I tell that to my students sometimes,” he said. “I’m a literature professor, so it’s my job to justify the archaic. But even worse, I make people write about it too.”

The school bells had been rigged to ring at the end of every conference period, and the bell rang for Mr. Poppleton to go on to Mary Brigit’s math teacher. Judy shut Mary Brigit’s file and took a last look at this beautiful literature professor and said, “Well, I guess you have to leave now. It was nice meeting you. If there’s actually a problem with Mary Brigit sometime, I’ll call you.” She had meant to be ironic, because there was never going to be a problem with Mary Brigit, who was over-articulate, shy enough to be well-behaved, and diligent too.

Mr. Poppleton, who was putting on his black pea coat, dotted with melted flakes of snow on the shoulders, said, “Please do,” and he shook her hand, but kept holding it for twice as long as a polite handshake. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. Here’s my office number, in case it’s some kind of emergency. If she’s inherited anything from my son, she has a pyromaniac gene in her somewhere.”

“It’s probably recessive,” said Judy, and she was still holding his hand, proud of herself for winning this contest where the longer this handshake went, the longer they were just pretending to be casual, veiling the fact that if you believed in love at first sight they would be riding into the sunset together or having sex in the janitor’s closet.

“Well,” Mr. Poppleton said, releasing his hand to put his left sleeve on, but keeping his red hazel eyes fixated on Judy. “You never know,” and he gave her a business card.

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Judy went home that night and sat in her kitchen. Her kitchen was her favorite room in the house because she had a center island made of really thick wood and it reminded her of a cutting board that they used to have in her parents' house when she was growing up. It was really what sold her on this shitty duplex in the first place. She'd always looked at duplexes when she was growing up in New Jersey and felt bad for the families that lived there because it seemed like your whole life was kind of only half-there, or half-sized or something. Of course that wasn't true, but it could have been true, in a way. Anyway, Judy was always in the habit of second guessing herself and deep down she wanted to break that habit so she sat down and said, "Fact: Duplexes house half-lives."

After she said that, she started to make dinner. It was already ten o'clock because she'd had all of the parent-teacher conferences that night, and they didn't start until six thirty because parents had to work and nobody just worked until five anymore. She went into her refrigerator and took out a large Pyrex bowl. On Monday, she had made pasta with a vegetable red sauce, heavy on the zucchini. The zucchini plants in her garden had proliferated at an alarming pace, and she'd had to cook and freeze them at the end of the season because she couldn't possibly eat them all. She'd made a one-zucchini-per-meal rule for herself, and she was almost through her supply. She'd eaten this pasta for the past two nights. When she finally moved into her own place, her mother had given her a lot of the family's old cookware, and it was all family-sized. So Judy always cooked in these five-person portions, and she had about half a person's regular appetite anyway, so each time she cooked, she had enough for ten of herself.

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She set the table. She'd found these great glazed clay plates from a discount irregular pottery stand, and she'd bought herself a dining room set of royal blue plates and mugs that looked gorgeous on the cutting board counter. When she closed the shades and looked at her table, she could be in a little farmy neighborhood in the Ohio River Valley, where everybody recycles and plays the bongos on their front porch. When she opened the shade, she usually saw thirteen Mexican children hitting each other with the zucchinis that had shriveled and frosted over in her garden. It was okay. They could have the zucchinis.

She started heating the pasta, and she sat down on one of the wooden stools around the counter, and she put her head on her hand and thought about the incredibly attractive and witty older man that had come to talk about his daughter, and she thought about how he couldn't be *that* old because his hair was still black, not even salt and pepper but legitimately black. He'd been wearing boots, hiking boots but not the dorky-dad kind. Old ones that he'd probably gotten from Abercrombie when it still sold outdoor clothing instead of half-chopped off shirts for oversexed children. Yes, he'd like the blue ceramic place settings, and he probably loved zucchini. She went to her canvas tote bag and took out his business card.

Absolutely not, Judy thought to herself. There is no possible way in heaven or hell that you can call him because not only is he the parent of one of your students, he is the parent of your star student, and he is a *parent*, and he has a wife and come on Judy, are you really *that* lonely?

She gave herself one. She was pretty lonely. All of her friends at Oberlin had been too disenchanted with ninety percent of this American life that they were either in the

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inner city or in the developing world, working at NGOs, doing art, and smoking just as much weed as they used to. Most of her friends were still being semi-supported by their parents three years out of college though, and she'd tried to explain to them more than once that she had "student loans" to pay, and *she* had to pay them, not anybody else, and in order to do that she had to make a *profit*, yes a profit off of her job. ("It's not always a bad word, you know.")

Anyway, the equation all added up to her, by herself in suburban Ohio with nobody to share a shitload of zucchini with. A working adult like Frank Poppleton PhD would understand all of that. And he really would be doing a good deed eating this food so it didn't go to waste.

Absolutely not, Judy. You're not a home wrecker.

But just a minute ago, she *had* said to herself that she was going to stop doubting herself so much because you never get anywhere by censoring your feelings and thoughts, and you had to start listening to yourself sometime, right? So starting now, she was going to follow her instincts, and her first instinct had been to call him, right? That maybe was her second instinct because her first one was more like, "Is he really giving me his number? Why?" But her first instinct since she got *home* was really to call him. Probably. Starting *now*.

"Poppleton residence, may I ask who's speaking?"

Judy could not believe it. This was his office phone. Was his daughter seriously and actually picking up his office phone and did Judy seriously and actually think that she could call his house without something stupid like this happening? Judy hoped that she'd hang up.

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“Hello?” She was still there.

“Mary Brigit?”

“Yes.”

“Um, hello? Mary Brigit! Hi, how are you?”

“Who’s speaking?”

“Oh gosh, of course, I’m sorry. It’s Ms. Leinbower.” Silence. “Your teacher.”

Silence. “For history. Is....your....father....home?”

“He went to bed. May I take a message?”

“Yes, that would be great. I’m just calling about parent-teacher conferences. I forgot to tell him something today, about your parent-teacher conference, about you.

Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble.”

“Okay,” said Mary Brigit. “Should I have him call you at home?”

Yes, just tell him to call me at home, Judy thought. And make sure you tell your mother that your history teacher is trying to pick up your father behind her back. I’ll be out of a job and out of the duplex in no time. “No. No. That won’t be necessary. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” said Mary Brigit. “See you tomorrow.” Judy thought about what a close call that was, and then couldn’t think about it anymore that minute because her pasta was burning.

The next day, she was teaching a lesson on Napoleon, and she asked the class when he had died. Mary Brigit raised her hand and Judy didn’t want to call on her because she didn’t want to have to look into her eyes which may or may not have been

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saying loud and clear, “Why are you trying to destroy my family life?” But Mary Brigit said “1814,” before Judy even had a chance to call on her.

“No,” Judy had said. “Close though. That’s when he was exiled to Elba. He died in 1821.” It wasn’t close. It was seven years off. Why was she trying to appease her?

Mary Brigit talked back, “But he basically died in 1814,” she said. “I mean, he was lost to the world at that point.”

Judy replied with a quote from Macbeth, because she thought that maybe if she went over Mary Brigit’s head, that would shut her up. “And world's exile is death,” she said, and she laughed, so it at least sounded like a joke.

“*Desire* is death,” Mary Brigit said, “Which psychics did except.”

“*Desire* is death, which *physic* did except,” Judy corrected her, and went on with the lesson.

Later in the day, Judy decided that she was going crazy. There was no way that Mary Brigit knew that she had a crush on her father. No possible chance. The phone call had been brilliantly covered up, and Mary Brigit liked to show off her arcane sonnet references, because how many eleven-year-olds really grow up with a Shakespeare anthology lying around the house? She closed up her drawer and locked it (she always locked it, even though probably nobody wanted to steal her pens and paper clips) and was just making sure that she had all of her lesson plan books when she heard a knock on the door of her classroom, and in walked Mr. Poppleton himself and by himself, with his pea coat on and ruddied cheeks from the cold. He smiled and said, “I hope I’m not bothering you.”

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Judy thought Mary Brigit might have planted him with a secret microphone, so she spoke cautiously. “Not at all,” she said. “I was just leaving to go home.”

“Mary Brigit said that you called yesterday?” he said. “I was just picking her up from school, so I thought I’d stop by and see what you needed.”

“Oh?”

“She’s playing outside with some of her friends.” He walked out of the doorway and into the classroom, walking like he was in no hurry to use his knees, hands in his jacket pockets, just strolling casually until he spotted the right desk to sit on and he sat down. He was smiling, and he said, “I told her never to pick up my office phone. It’ll give her a secretary complex.”

Judy all of a sudden felt very strange because she was standing in front of this nonchalant man with her bag on her shoulder and her face frozen between trying to leave the room and trying not to smile and give away that fact that she was so glad that he was there. She plunged into her bag and took out a folder and said, “Well, I just wanted to actually show you....I mean, I forgot to give you a test that Mary Brigit did well on. It was just a great example of her work, and I thought you should see it because it’s technically my job to do that, as her teacher, I mean to give you her work that’s been good. I know it’s in here somewhere.”

She flipped through papers without even taking her bag off of her shoulder, and tried to find something that looked like a test. She didn’t even notice that he got up until she felt his hand still cold from outside on her shoulder and she looked up and he kissed her. Her first thought was how do they always know what’s going on, and that’s not actually fair is it, that sometimes even the strongest women in the world are so *fucking*

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transparent? Her second thought was I'm glad that in some cases I'm transparent because this is the nicest thing that's happened to me since I moved to Hudson, Ohio, and at the rate things are going, this might be the nicest thing that happens to me until I leave, which I will do eventually.

But the door was open and there were people still roaming the hallways and the room had windows and this was highly inappropriate so it was a fast kiss and then he said, "I'm going on an academic conference next weekend. You might find a lot of the material interesting. Restoration drama."

"Where is it?" Judy asked, still for some reason trying not to smile.

"Ole Miss" he said, "I can get you a plane ticket."

"Yes," she said. "That would be nice."

And it was nice. It was very, very nice. Her sister dropped her off at the airport, and she was on the same flight as Frank. They didn't have seats next to each other, but he winked at her when they passed each other in the aisles, like they were longtime lovers and just pretending not to know each other. They rented a car together, and he put his hand on her knee when they were driving, and the conference actually *was* interesting. Instead of staying in the hotel room and waiting until he came home so they could have guilty sex all night, she spent the days with him, listening to seminars on *The Man of Mode*, going out to Thai restaurants with paper lamps where they discussed whether satire is a valid tool for political writing, and they didn't even get back to their hotel until they'd finished desert and healthy glasses of port at midnight. No, Judy thought proudly, she was no kind of typical mistress. She did it with pomp.

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When they got back to the airport on Sunday night, he kissed her on the forehead and insisted on buying her a cab ride home. “I’ve got money to burn,” he said, “I’m an academic.”

“So, do I have to make another conference to see you again?” she asked, and she said it casually so it didn’t seem like she wasn’t going to cling, but she still waited long enough for him to answer because she wanted him to. He put his suitcase down, right on the sidewalk, and he took her suitcase out of her hand and put it down on the ground and he held her by the shoulders, and all the people rolling by in winter coats and caps became fuzzes in her peripheral vision. He was very serious, and she expected lines from *Casablanca* or something with equal weight, but he just said, “How about Friday afternoon? Five O’Clock. Max and Erma’s? We’ll get a drink.” And he kissed her one more time and put her suitcase in the cab and told the driver, “Now don’t drive too fast, okay?” She called in sick the next morning because she actually did feel sick, like landing rapidly after a long flight and not being ready for your ears to pop.

The next day, she went to school and finished her lecture on Napoleon. Judy deliberately didn’t ask the class any questions. She launched into the lesson and made a point to write all of the notes on the chalkboard, very thoroughly, very absorbedly. She felt stupid and paranoid. Like she was hiding from something, but didn’t really know why or what.

“So, even after Napoleon died, he was kept alive by his legacy as a legend in France. He was also kept alive by constant controversy over how he died. On his death certificate, it says stomach cancer, but people have been theorizing about cause of death for a long time. Recently, two historians thought that he died of arsenic poisoning,

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because arsenic used to be prevalent in small amounts all over the place. Kind of like asbestos today. They did analyses on his hair, because arsenic poisoning can be detected by trace amounts of arsenic in strands of hair. They did find arsenic in his hair, but actually, some people said it was probably from his hair tonic. Plus, he lost about forty pounds in the last year of his life, leading to many more conclusions that he did, indeed die of stomach cancer.”

She saw three hands up, out of the corner of her eye. She finished her train of thought and kept furiously writing on the board.

“So, the moral of Napoleon’s story is that when you’re a legend, people try to keep you alive however they can, even if that means debating over how you died. The ghosts of legends can rarely be put to rest, because we keep them awake with our own uncertainties.” Three more hands. “Any questions?”

“What’s arsenic?”

“Napoleon was a ghost?”

“My grandma died of cancer.”

“They had cancer back then?”

“Will that be on the test?”

The bell rang, and Judy doggedly sat down at her desk. She was relieved that Mary Brigit hadn’t raised her hand, but ashamed at herself for being relieved. There was no way that she could know. There was also, by the way, nothing for her to know. What Judy did with her adult life, whether it was appropriate or inappropriate was totally and completely separate from her professional life and that was the end of that.

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That Friday, she met Frank Poppleton at *Max and Erma's*. *Max and Erma's* was a restaurant like her students' houses- everything was just slightly bigger than it should have been in the real world. It wasn't big enough to be Disney world, but it wasn't small enough to be the real world, and Judy felt like she was trapped in some limbo universe where her feet never quite touched the ground from her oversized stool.

They stayed there for an hour or so, and he told her a couple of funny stories about last-minute papers that he'd gotten from athletes. He'd literally gotten the same exact paper three times in one of his lecture classes, and he joked about academic integrity and other things that made Judy's mind wander to his shirt, which wasn't ironed, and she wondered whether he'd been having problems with his wife now and she'd stopped ironing his shirts. She brought up the fact that it seemed like Mary Brigit had found her out and was accusing her of adultery by quoting Shakespearian sonnets, but Frank Poppleton would hear almost nothing of that. "I brought her up on the sonnets, and I remember teaching her 147. Her mother thought it was highly inappropriate, so Mary Brigit goes out of her way to quote it whenever she can." Then, he abruptly grabbed Judy's hand and said, "I have to meet my family for dinner, I'm sorry. You know how that goes."

"No, I don't actually," Judy meant to say that ironically, but she ended up saying it spitefully instead. She tried to laugh, to maybe add some retroactive irony, but the laugh followed on the coattails of bitterness and the whole display was dangerously close to what she was actually feeling.

"What?" Dr. Frank Poppleton looked up from the dotted line where he was signing his name to pay for the two Margaritas that they had ordered. He thought it was

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really funny to order the Margaritas in giant glasses that looked like tropical cartoons, because it was winter and outside everything looked more like a newspaper, two-toned, inky, and serious.

“Nothing,” Judy said. “I was just thinking about how funny this is. I mean, how funny it is for me to be doing this with somebody.” And by *this* she meant so many of these things, the whisking away to spend a clandestine weekend in Mississippi, the older man, the secret meetings for drinks before he went off to see his family.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Well, I mean, I’m not in the habit of having relationships with married men.”

He laughed again, like she was expressing a frivolous concern, and then the waitress came back and took his credit card. He leaned over the table and kissed Judy on the forehead, which he seemed to do whenever she started having ethical concerns. It was becoming pattern behavior.

“I’m actually serious,” Judy said. “This is actually somewhat of a serious issue to me.”

“I’m not a ‘married man,’” Frank said, actually making quotation marks with his fingers around the word “married.”

“You have a wife,” Judy said.

“This is not unethical,” Frank said, looking very grave all of a sudden, and it made Judy also turn grave because she was realizing for the first time a fundamental disconnect between the two of them. For some reason, some bizarre and unknown reason, he didn’t think he was doing anything wrong.

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That night, she had trouble sleeping. She had these half-awake dreams where Mary Brigit would be out of school for weeks at a time, and finally she would get a call from the principal who told her that Mary Brigit's parents had pulled her out of school due to a "family emergency," and then fast forward ten years and Mary Brigit was selling yo-yos on the sidewalk in Cleveland trying to make a living to support her drop-out drug habit. There was a baby crying on the other side of the duplex, and Judy eventually fell asleep to thoughts of burning that half of the duplex down so she had her own solo house, even if it was a little charred and narrow.

On Monday, Judy woke up at 5:30 so she could get to the copy machine early. She was giving a test on Napoleon, and she had to make sure that she made enough copies of the test before the line got long and the copier ran out of toner and eventually broke. It wasn't like her to wait until the last minute to make up her tests. She liked to take her time and find some old political cartoons or funny quotes to include on the test. This time, she'd had to resort to an old cartoon that had a giant crocodile dressed as Napoleon with a sash and a sword, terrorizing a room full of frogs. "Corsican Crocodile dissolving the Council of Frogs!!!" the caption read. She smiled to herself as she ran off the copies.

She gave the test, she graded the test, and the next day, she handed the graded tests back to each student. There was a policy in fifth grade that every test had to be taken home and signed by a parent or guardian. When Mary Brigit brought her test back, it was signed by her father and on the cartoon, he had drawn a pair of glasses that looked like conspicuously like Judy's. She took the paper and couldn't believe that he would be so

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obvious about something like that. Honestly, Mary Brigit would almost definitely see it, and she was a bright girl, she could make the connection.

That was before the notes started. The next day, Mary Brigit brought in a note written on blue graph paper, taped shut and labeled, “Ms. Judy,” which is what Frank called her when they talked secretly on the phone at night and he was making fun of her for being too cautious. The note said,

“Dear Ms. Judy,

I am fairly immediately concerned with my daughter’s most recent grade on her previous test. It appears as though she has received a ninety-two, which, if I am not mistaken, is an A minus rather than an A. I would greatly appreciate your agreement to a meeting in the near future in order to discuss the long-term future of my little girl. I would even be happy to come to your place of residence, say, this evening. I do apologize for the imposition upon your time, but I trust that you understand the situation’s urgency.

Yours,

Dr. Frank Luther King Poppleton.”

Judy hated him because he had the nerve to send a message to her through his daughter, but she hated him more because he did it with humor and class and a totally vindicated nature that said that he was not to blame for anything that might go wrong in this situation. But she hadn’t seen him for a week, so she tore a piece of paper from her composition book and wrote, “43A Leftright Lane, Twin Mills. Ten o’clock, if you want *really* schedule.” Then, she folded it and taped it shut and wrote his initials, FJP on the front. She gave the note to Mary Brigit and said, “Give this to your father please.”

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Mary Brigit went home with the note, and Judy went home and set her table and started making another five-person pot of pasta. She mostly made pasta not because she really loved it but because cooking meat always made her nervous. There was a boy in her grade school who had died from eating a raw hamburger and the local news did a story on it where the headline was, “Meat leads to death.” That had stuck with her.

She went out to the grocery store and got some flowers. It was winter so they were selling the dark red and orange kind. She also bought a bottle of Australian wine that came in a dark bottle with a yellow label and looked just right when she put in on the table with the winter flowers, her pottery place settings and now two wine glasses made of a deep red stained glass. She looked at the clock. Eight O'clock. Two more hours. Of course, she didn't definitely know he would come, but she just had that feeling that when he got that note, he would make up some thinly veiled excuse at home (he's a professor, what kind of excuses could he use?) and come over.

Judy took out some of her lesson plans for the next day and sat with them at the kitchen counter. It was really quite pleasant, just sitting at her solid wood counter, listening to her clock tick and vaguely hearing some Mexican trumpet music playing next door. She had this overwhelming sense of autonomy for a moment. Her pasta was cooking, she had a sauce simmering and she knew exactly when to check on it. Her day for tomorrow was in front of her and she was taking it hour by hour and putting whatever she wanted into it, doing her *job*, yes her job, which was to teach young people things that she already found interesting.

She thought a little about Frank Poppleton, how he would come in the door and find her small little half-house charming, and how her pottery would make him smile and

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make his eyes swim back to when he was a poor graduate student living with four other guys in a two-bedroom apartment in New York City, and they just had these giant potlucks because they had no money, but rice and cabbage and black beans were cheap. “Gulag food,” he’d say, and she’d probably smile even though she’d heard that story twice before. But she felt like comments like that put her on the map, put her on his trail fifteen, twenty years behind him and reminded her that her life right now was a means and not an end.

But, she thought, right now. I mean *right* now, this moment, things are actually not so bad. At ten fifteen, she heard a knock on her door. She was near the end of an elaborate chapter review worksheet, so she didn’t get up immediately. Then she heard him call, “Hey Jude? Don’t make me climb in through the window, Babe.” Babe? And then, she didn’t get up at all, until he’d knocked and shouted again and even walked around to the side door before giving up and leaving. Judy got up, served herself some pasta, drank some of the wine, and went to bed in quite a good mood.

The next day at school, she felt wonderful because she’d actually slept the night before. Her first period class was attentive, her second period class actually sat still, and her third period class even asked a couple of engaging questions. But when fourth period rolled around, Mary Brigit came up to Judy with another note. Judy meant to smile and say, “Thank you, Mary Brigit,” but instead she just said “Great!” She didn’t open the note until after she had limped through her lesson, but when she did, it said,

“Judy dear,

Last night I traveled to your house

And though I shouted high and low

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And hammered high and low

Lo, you were nowhere to be found.

Yours, Truly.

Frank

The first thing that Judy did was take out a piece of paper and write on it. “It is inappropriate for you to be sending correspondence through your daughter. Please stop.” Then she realized that she would have to send that note home through Mary Brigit. So she decided that the best plan would be to do nothing. If he could be nonchalant about this, she could do the same exact thing, and he could figure it out on his own. All of a sudden, Judy was feeling very protective of her students and of her own dignity. And she liked it.

That night, Judy rented herself a movie. She rented *Scream*, because she’d always been too embarrassed to watch it because her friends made fun of her for having such “unintellectual taste.” She realized that thus far, she’d hadn’t really taken advantage of having no friends here, and now was the perfect time to do it. At around ten, Frank Poppleton came back to her house. She heard him pull in the driveway, and he knocked once, very quietly and politely. Her initial plan if this happened was to ignore the knocking once again, but something told her to get up and open the door. She did and he was standing on the front porch with a small cactus plant in his hands. He held it out to her. “This is for you,” he said, and he smiled the knowing smile that said they were partners in crime. Why would she ever want to be a partner in crime? Crime never worked out for anyone, seriously.

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“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t really want to see you anymore,” and she kissed him on the forehead, because she thought it would add a little pizzazz to the operation.

“Pardon?” he said.

“I don’t think I want to see you anymore,” Judy said. “No actually, I don’t want to see you anymore. I don’t think it’s right for me to be carrying on an affair with a married parent of one of my students.”

He hesitated, and then he put his hands out in front of him, like he was appeasing a tantrum-throwing child. “Now, hold on just a second,” he said.

“Nope,” Judy said. “And furthermore, I’m not that into you anymore.”

Frank Poppleton looked perplexed, and in that moment Judy *really* hated him for the first time because it’s hard not to hate someone when they can’t comprehend *how in the world* you could *not* be in love with them. So she went on.

“I’m actually finding that my choice to leave you gets simpler with each passing minute, and I can’t really explain why. I haven’t had a grand epiphany or even a tiny epiphany. Yesterday, I just sat still for long enough to be pretty okay without anybody but myself, and something’s telling me to run with that. And I’m practicing not “doubting myself” so that means you need to leave because at the moment, I’m always right.”

He stood still for a moment, smiled feebly and then said, “Okay. I like a woman who knows what she wants.” Judy gave him back his cactus.

She watched him walk to the driveway. One of the Mexican children was hitting his front hubcap with a wiffle ball bat. He shooed him away and pulled out of the driveway, not even pausing to honk at Judy’s house or take a long lingering look as he left her forever. She thought, no she knew, that it was because she wasn’t really

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monumental to him. It would be a problem if she were really-- at her age, love or lust or personal interest was supposed to be monumental, all of it. Because that's how you learn. You learn when things are important, and the ratio of "things in your life" to "importance of things in your life" is inversely proportional. That is, the more things in your life, the less important each one of them becomes. At another time, that thought might have depressed Judy, that picture of her life wisping into a thinner and thinner grey line with every passing year, until nothing mattered but the *really* crushing things. But tonight, Judy was okay with her dwindlingly important existence, and she even found the trailing, thinning hairs of it to be quite captivating, and she traced them with her index finger as they split and ran and ran and split into smaller and smaller trails of dust on the glass.

### **The Oberlin Yeoman**

Michele and I drove up to Oberlin together on a gorgeous October morning. We played the same mix CD over and over again, and it had all these acoustic guitar songs that made you feel like you were driving down to Mexico in the open air to escape a bum job, a bum life and cold weather. Michele smoked six cigarettes during the trip, rolling the window slightly down and blowing smoke just out the crack in the top of the window. Each time she opened her pack of Virginia Slims, she offered me one and let me decline, pretending like I sometimes wanted one, but just didn't feel like it today.

Her hair was down and cleaner than usual, and she was letting it blow in the damp wind coming from Lake Erie in the fall. She casually looked out the window in a way that made me feel very free, very adult and open to a world of learning and interesting

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people with interesting interests and open arms and hearts to the misfits who were just too fascinating for their bland-o football player and cheerleader peers. Yes, there was a new world awaiting, and that new world was at Oberlin College, where the weird were normal and the normal were weird. I had signed us up for a two o'clock tour and information session, after convincing my parents that Michele and I could drive up by ourselves and after convincing Michele to come with me.

Michele had told me about a dozen times that she wasn't going to college. Two weeks ago, we had gone to a mandatory college fair for all Hudson High School juniors. We milled around the fluorescent-lit cafeteria, going to different tables where different cosmetically crisp people had set up folding poster boards to advertise the virtues of going to Ole Miss or Ohio State or Yale or John Carroll. It wasn't terribly interesting, but it was a great time to put on alter-ego names and ask questions like, "What's your juggling department like?"

That particular question was actually somewhat legit for Michele, because she was a carnie. That's what she called herself. At first, I didn't think it was politically correct, but she informed me that, "If you wait tables, you're called a waiter. So if you work carnivals, you're called a carnie. It's not that complicated."

Her family did a juggling and acrobatics act that they took to state fairs, county fairs, school fairs, and one time, the opening act at the Big Apple Circus in New York. They were called the Miller Family Acrobatics Troupe, and they consisted of Michele, her father, and her younger brother Tony, who was a freshman at our high school. Michele's mother had been part of the act as well-- she would hand them the juggling pins and crack a couple of jokes in between acts. But she had gotten sick of being a

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“fourth-rate Vanna White,” and she had divorced Michele’s father. She stayed in Queens, and the rest of the family had moved to Ohio, where Mr. Miller had some family of his own. “Everybody has some deranged family member in Ohio, have you ever noticed that?” Michele asked me once. “I mean, yeah, *you* have family in Ohio, but of all places for *us* to drag off to? I should have expected it.”

On schooldays, Michele and I would walk to the Giant Eagle during lunchtime and buy a package of the generic brand sandwich cookies. Duplex cookies, they were called. We would take them onto the football field behind the high school, laugh about how they had an appropriately ghetto name, eat as many as we could, and then throw the rest away, because they cost about two cents per cookie anyway. After we finished eating, Michele would juggle red and blue bean bags that she kept in her backpack and offer words of wisdom about the world of performance acrobatics. One day, she explained to me that the flashier the performing troupe’s name was, the less classy the act was.

“Have you ever heard of the Flying Zamboni Sisters?”

“No,” I said.

“Exactly,” she said. “You see them on a poster and think they might be interesting cause of their name, but it’s a total gimmick. They need the name to make up for a lack of performance quality. There’s no longevity in a flashy name.”

“Oh. Of course,” I said. I didn’t tell her that I’d never heard of the Miller Family Acrobatics Troupe until I’d met her. If I had, she would have politely informed me that I didn’t know “the first two shits about performance,” so I was the wrong person to ask anyway.

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I'd convinced her to visit Oberlin with me because I told her that I'd buy her a Frosty from Wendy's on the way up and on the way home. I found out online that there was a juggling club at Oberlin and a great musical theatre department. I tried to tell her, and she said, "I'd rather fuck my father than do musical theatre."

Michele had never really been polite, and I'd never really wanted to be friends with her. We were in the same gym volleyball class in tenth grade. On the first day of class, I tried to serve and instead tripped and fell embarrassingly hard on my knees. She tried to return a serve, and she rolled her ankle. Both of us were sent to the infirmary. As soon as we left the gym, she turned toward the back door of the school, and said, "See you later."

"Where are you going?" I said.

"To have a cigarette and get a sandwich. I'm starving."

"You can't do that!"

"Okay," she said, and she walked away.

Later that day, I passed her when I was walking home from school. She was sitting in the playground, smoking a cigarette on the twisty slide. The parents in khaki pants had noticeably herded their children over to the swings. I wondered whether it was because of the smoking or the dirty Converse All-Stars that Michele had taken off and thrown aside in the wood chips.

"Hey," she said.

I tried to look at her with my peripheral vision, so I wasn't obligated to stop and talk.

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“Mary Brigit,” she said.

I waved and kept walking. She motioned for me to come sit down. I pretended like I didn’t understand what she was doing, I waved again, and I kept walking home.

Two days later in gym class, she came up to me in the locker room while I was trying to tie my too-small gym shoes in a way that would give my feet a little room to breathe. She sat down next to me on the changing bench. She wore the same converse sneakers for gym that she did for life, but they looked kind of like old gym shoes, given the holes on the sides of them. They were colored entirely black with sharpie markers, even the soles. I admired her thoroughness.

“Hey,” she said. She smelled like smoke.

“Hi.”

“I’m in a show tomorrow night. You want to come?”

“Um.” Of course I didn’t want to go to a show with her in it. It was probably a strip show. Or a drug show. Or something equally illegal and inappropriate.

“Come on- I know you don’t have anything to do this Friday.”

No, I would not go to her show and risk myself being arrested when the cops busted up the rave, and I was caught holding someone’s Ecstasy while they went to the bathroom. “I’m not sure what I’m doing tomorrow. I might have to do some stuff....at....church.”

“Hey, what church?”

“Saint Mary’s.” I picked at the “garbage pail kids” sticker on the locker room bench. Sometime in the eighties, someone had plastered the locker rooms at our high school with the pop-culture gross-out phenomenon, the Garbage Pail Kids. Due to an

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uncanny adhesive strength, stickers remained on the select bench or locker. I was picking at “Pukin’ Patty.”

“For real? That’s where we’re doing our show. Some Jesus fair at Saint Mary’s. I’ll see you there, okay?”

I did go the fair that night, because as far as my mother was concerned, it was a mortal sin to miss out on an opportunity to support the Saint Mary’s spiritual community of fun. The Miller Family Acrobatic Troupe performed at eight o’clock, in front of the handicapped ramp to the Ivy Chapel. Michele’s father did most of the talking. He was wearing black sweatpants with a green and red fabric stripe down the side, and a vest that matched the stripe on the pants. He juggled four neon yellow bowling pins. As he juggled, he told the crowd that he was a “professional pinhead,” and when he lit the pins on fire, he said, “I used to work at a bowling alley, and I can’t figure out why they let me go.” Bethany Carlson was laughing like she’d never heard such roaringly funny jokes in her life, but Bethany Carlson’s husband had left her less than a year ago.

Michele’s brother, Tony, rode a seven-foot-tall unicycle, juggled, and did a silly dance. Then Mr. Miller introduced his lovely daughter, Michele, who is “training to follow in her father’s footsteps.” Michele got up from the curb where she was sitting behind her father, juggled three bowling pins, did a brother-sister juggling toss with Tony, and then juggled nine pins together with her brother and her father. I had never seen her look less vibrant. She seemed shy. Her edgy short hair looked like a bad haircut. Her juggling vest looked like a thrift store mistake. She let herself be upstaged by Tony’s funny faces, and she blushed when her father announced to the crowd that, “Michele

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always was the smart one in the family. By the way, what's the difference between a juggler and a large pizza? A pizza can feed a family of four.”

That’s one of the reasons that I secretly hoped Michele would have a change of heart about college when she set foot on Oberlin’s campus and saw the dorms, the student union, all of the books in the library, and all of the new people to meet. I also secretly didn’t want to go to college without her. Since gym volleyball, Michele had become my best friend, and she’d made sure that nobody pushed me around except for her. I don’t know why she decided to be my personal buffer or even my friend, but it worked for both of us.

We pulled up late for the tour, because we’d stopped for forty minutes at one exit, trying to find a Wendy’s. We quickly slammed the doors to my car and ran after the tour, which we could see in the distance. When we reached it, out of breath and laughing at each other, the tour guide said, with a large smile on his face, “I’m sorry, this tour is full.”

Michele looked at him. “Excuse me?” she said.

“Are you looking for the two o’clock tour of Oberlin College?” He said.

“Yes,” I said. “I was on the reservation list. Poppleton. P-O-P-P-“

“I’m sorry. If you don’t arrive within ten minutes of departure, we let the walk-ins join the tour.” His name-tag said “Chad,” and he wore a maroon Oberlin sweatshirt, jeans, and the kind of shoes that hiking parents wear. He was very neat and chipper.

Michele stared at him blankly.

“It’s a tour, Chad.” she said.

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“Yes,” he said, and he laughed. It sounded like a snide laugh, but I thought I’d give him the benefit of the doubt and write it off as corny.

“We’re outdoors.”

“Yes. We are.” This time, he was definitely snide.

“You’re not going to run out of seats.” Michele had a point.

“No. We’re not.” He made eye contact with a frizzy mother in the back of the tour as if to say, “Can you believe this girl?”

“Then how can the tour be full?”

“Regulation,” the tour guide said. “We must keep the tour to twenty, at risk of diluting the amount of information and attention that each person receives.”

“Okay. Sorry,” I said, and I pulled Michele’s elbow. We could just get lunch, walk around a bit, and catch the four o’clock tour.

“That’s okay.” Chad re-entered tour-mode. “If you want a self-guided tour map, you can pick one up at the admissions office.” He pointed to a white silo-looking building on his left. “And to my left is the Williams Ice Rink, where youth hockey leagues practice during the week. In the winter, it is open for free admission to Oberlin students, so many of us like to go skating on Saturday nights. Kinda different, I know. But I think that a lot of us do things a little differently here. But it’s good times all around, really. Excuse me, you two need to leave.”

“Okay,” I said. I turned around and started to walk, but Michele stayed put, looking at Chad and saying very quietly, “If we are outdoors, we are allowed to stand wherever we want. Right now, we want to stand in the vicinity of your tour. We’re not on the tour. We’re just taking a walk, okay?”

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There was a very pale woman in the back of the tour with a very pale son who shook his head as Michele talked. The woman said, “Manners, please,” under her breath.

Chad’s arm fell from its pointing stance. “You may stand wherever you want, except for in the vicinity of my tour, because a tour is technically a moving extension of the admissions office, and the admissions office is private property.” He started walking again. “On your right, you’ll see the Savage Stadium complex, where the Yeomen play football. Oberlin's extensive outdoor athletics facilities include twenty-three playing and practice fields; a five-mile cross country course; a one point two five-mile fitness trail; twelve all-weather tennis courts; Jones Field House; the thirty-five-hundred-seat Dill Field and Savage Stadium complex, which includes an eight-lane all-weather running track.”

I turned around one last time and started walking away, assuming that Michele would see me and pick up on the fact that I didn’t want to fight this battle anymore. Instead, she yelled at me. “Mary Brigit, come back!”

I knew I should just keep walking, but instead I stopped and said, “What?”

Michele put a fist in the air and said, “It’s time you learned to fight for what you want!” She pointed her raised fist toward the tour group, which had stopped to admire the outside of the Stadium Complex. I walked toward her.

“I want to go on the four o’clock tour.” I said.

Michele continued her speech. “This is a total load of bullshit. Who cares about the fucking field house? Who cares about the fucking...whatever that mascot is...the Yeoman?” She decided that the rest of the tour needed to hear her revolutionary zeal. Gaining on the unsuspecting prospective students, she shouted, “You know what’s ironic

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about your mascot? A Yeoman is a farmer. A peasant farmer. I have a good statistic for your brochure: What percentage of the Oberlin College student body consists of actual Yeomen? You could take a survey. Oh--here's another: What percentage of Oberlin College students actually know what a Yeoman is? I'm more of a Yeoman than you all could ever be. I'm the fucking mascot of Oberlin College! It's nice to meet you all!"

Chad pulled out a walky-talky and put his hand over his mouth so I couldn't hear what he was saying. I tried to touch Michele's shoulder to maybe make her stop, but she put her arm around me and said, "This here is my dear friend, Mary Brigit Poppleton. Now, she is a diligent student. Diligent." She punctuated the air with her finger. "And she would like nothing better than to go to your fine institution, to grace your institution with her exceptional skills, particularly in the fields of literature and history." I felt a larger hand on my other shoulder, and I turned around to face a rocky looking campus security officer with sunglasses on. A short, fat campus security officer with thick, regular glasses had Michele by her shoulder.

"Excuse me," he said, "Please come with me."

He was talking to both of us, but Chad shouted, "The one on the left," and the sunglasses policeman let go of me and grabbed Michele's other shoulder. She didn't miss a beat.

"You know what?" she said to the policemen, "I'm glad you're arresting me. I don't want anything to do with this campus unless I'm sitting behind bars!"

The fat policeman said, "I'm sorry Ma'am, we don't have a jail on campus."

"You wouldn't," she said, and she spit in his face.

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I looked at the policeman wearing sunglasses and mouthed, "I'm sorry." The rest of the tour was watching, captivated by Oberlin's own scene of uncivil disobedience. Michele was sitting down, and the fat cop was trying to make her stand up and walk with him. She wouldn't speak, and she wouldn't stand up. He started pulling her by the elbow. The sunglasses cop turned to me and said, "We're just taking her to campus security. It's next to the dining hall. She'll have to fill out some forms, and then we'll just give her a ticket. Probably a noise citation or something. Nothing to worry about." Then, he walked over to Michele and grabbed her by her other elbow. The two policemen hoisted her up and carried her by her elbows, silent and cross legged back toward the main part of campus.

When they were just a swinging trio in the distance, Chad proceeded. "Now, we're going to head back to the Wilder Bowl section of campus, where we can go to the Mudd Library Collections- despite the name, the Mudd Library Collection is anything but lowly. It's actually one of the largest collections in the United States."

The pale woman from the tour stared at me for another couple of seconds and then caught up with Chad and the gang. I stayed put outside of the football stadium. I thought that maybe I should go and get Michele from campus security, or maybe I should have gone with her in the first place. But I was tired, and the last thing that I wanted to do was sit under fluorescent lighting and look at peeling posters about drunk driving while I waited for Michele to fill out her paperwork. And a couple of levels under that, I wanted her to think, just for a little bit, that I wasn't coming to get her at all. And a couple more levels under that, I was glad she had gotten arrested and hoped that she was locked up with a surly ex-con with thing for carnies.

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I walked into the football stadium and strolled along the bleachers, listening to the metal hum of each step and imagining the vibration traveling in rings around the stadium and into the grey sky. The sky was always grey from September until May in Ohio. Sometimes the grey meant snow, sometimes it meant rain, sometimes it meant a subdued lack of precipitation that just dampened everything. I sat on the bleachers and they made the back of my legs numb. There was a girl running around the track with earmuffs, leggings, and a windbreaker on. I ran track when I was eleven, and I placed third in the mile at states because there were only three runners. I was still proud of myself, for some reason.

I walked out of the stadium. The ground was dry and brown and crunchy, like the ground outside of our house all winter. From September to May, the sky was grey in Ohio, and everything else was brown and crunchy. I crunched on the grass, listening to it fold underneath my sneakers, and I zipped my coat up to the top. I heard a crow in the trees behind me, and I walked toward the clump of forest behind the football stadium. I couldn't find a trail, so I picked my way through the dirt between the trees, which were orange and yellow. They made me nostalgic for some kind of fall memory that I'm sure I had somewhere. I looked at them and remembered the smell of bonfires and roasting marshmallows and heating coffee in a percolator pot over an open fire, while the morning was still quiet and dark. I'd never done any of those things, but I imagined that they would be very nice, and I wished I had a camping kind of family.

I started jogging. I heard more crows, and my feet got a little damp because my sneakers were made of canvas. Michele was probably at the security center right now, being questioned or being released or just being asked to leave politely. She would tell

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me as soon as I saw her, I'm sure, and she would yell at me for not standing up for myself more against that "turd of a tour guide." I picked up the pace a little bit, and thought that maybe I wouldn't go get Michele at all.

I was running at a pretty good clip, hopping over rocks and hearing birds occasionally, but mostly paying attention to what my feet sounded like on the ground, making soft but definite marks in the dirt, over and over and over again, in sync with my breath, which came out of my body grey like the sky and like October in Ohio. When my lungs started to burn, I kept running, and when my legs began to burn, I told myself, one hundred more yards. My ears hurt from the cold. It had been a long time since I'd felt my body so distinctly. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe I needed a hobby. Michele had her juggling, but all I had was church and school and going to sleep and waking up.

I pictured myself on a map, and I envisioned the forest on the map, stretching far beyond Oberlin's campus, and if I just kept running, I would come out somewhere that I'd never been before and have to find my way back to my car, just by using the light of the moon. I was leaving the campus, leaving Michele, leaving this afternoon that had embarrassed and immobilized me, and taking myself into the great unknown, all by myself on my own two feet. I saw a break in the woods, and I pushed myself for fifty more yards. I came out in a clearing with several brick buildings, and I bent over to catch my breath and taste the freedom.

Over my own breathing I heard, ever so vaguely, Chad's voice saying, "So now you'll see the dormitories on South Campus, where many underclassmen live. Everyone says it's a great place to start building community, to start getting to know people, even if it's a bit of a hike to the main quad. Really, it's good times all around." I walked a couple

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more yards, and I found myself boxed in by four brick buildings with dark windows. One of the buildings had a spray-painted sheet hanging out of it that said, “Dorm Wars ’02: Scamps Champs!”

I didn’t know what a Scamps Champ was. I turned to go back into the woods, but instead I just stood and looked behind me at the clump of trees-- it wasn’t even a forest. I heard the crows again, and I squinted and could make out the field house and the skating rink through the trees. I turned back and went to find Michele.

When I got to the campus security center, she was sitting on the curb, smoking a cigarette. She looked up and said, “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” I said. “Why aren’t you inside?”

“They gave me a citation. Disturbing the peace or some shit like that.” She flashed a small ticket that looked like a receipt. “You’re out of breath, what happened?”

“Nothing,” I said, and I sat down on the curb next to her. I was waiting for her to explode, for her to finally put her cigarette out and say quietly but severely, “Why the hell did you leave me?”

She put her cigarette out, but then she just said, “You ready to leave this hellhole?” and she stood up.

I stayed seated, giving her one last chance to challenge me so I could finally say what I’d been thinking this whole time, which was “I don’t need to follow you around all over the place, and I don’t need to go where you want me to go. I have my own personality, and sometimes I want to make decisions that aren’t yours. I don’t have to get up if I don’t want to and I was ready to let you just stay in jail forever because I’m tired of supervising you, and you really messed things up for me today, okay?”

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But she was patient. She went into her back pocket, got out another cigarette, and cupped her hand around her lighter while she lit it. She took a long drag and looked up at the sky while she exhaled it slowly. “Is it dinnertime yet?” she asked. “It’s getting dark, right?”

“How did you know to wait for me here?” I asked. That was the best I could do.

“Where else would I wait for you?” She got up.

“I mean, I could have just left without you.”

“But you didn’t,” she said, reaching to help me off the curb. I got up without her assistance and started walking to my car. She was silently smoking, because for all of her temper and her self-importance and her self-righteous invented indignances, Michele could read me. She knew that I wouldn’t have left her there, or maybe she knew that if I tried to leave her, I couldn’t get very far. And now, she knew that I needed to brood in silence until we stopped for dinner, and I was able to swallow my self-disgust with fries and a Frosty. She was right, and I tried to hate her for it, but there’s only so much you can hate the things that are true.

**Bethany Carlson Reads *Prevention* Magazine and Finds a Semi-Effective  
Way to Keep Her Mind Off Things**

Tool, fool, drool, cool, mule, rule- the Golden Rule, to be exact: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's what Father Philip drones at me while I sit in uncomfortable pews in the stained glass building that on good days is called a church and on bad days is called a shitty excuse for me to get out of bed on Sunday morning when all I want to do is roll over into the fetal position so I can shield myself from the damn Midwestern constant fucking cold.

While I sit in the pew, I rhyme, because it keeps me from falling asleep or throwing my lipstick at Father Philip or sobbing silently through the doxology. I read in *Prevention* magazine that you can play mental games to keep your brain "supple and able to take on everything that a high-powered woman of today needs to handle on her

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journey into old age.” One of those games was rhyming. You start with a word and rhyme it until you run out of words. Then you start again with another word and the dream is that you can eventually get on doing it forever. And ever. What an endeavor. How clever. Like Trevor. But I don’t think that proper nouns count, because if I let myself rhyme proper nouns, there’s always the chance that I’ll accidentally say “bread” and get far enough that I think of “Fred,” which is the last word I want to think of because Fred Carlson is my husband who doesn’t live here anymore.

I met him in a bar at Ohio State, The Easy Breezy, and he grabbed my ass as he was leaving. For a girl who grew up on Weight Watchers and hostile looks from her mother when she wanted an extra piece of cake even on her Goddamn birthday, that was a real mark of chivalry. Because if we’re talking about *true* knights, then a real shining armor kind of guy knows when a woman needs you to grab her ass because sometimes (and this is something we don’t usually say) you *need* to feel like a piece of meat so you don’t feel like a pile of shit.

So, I guess you could call me easy, but you’d just be denying the fact that we don’t survive unless somebody needs us in a really primal way. Which brings me back to the reason I can’t get out of my bed, which is one of the Sealy drop-a-bowling-ball-on-it-and-your-sleeping-husband-won’t-know beds that doesn’t have a purpose anymore because Fred has already left, and he didn’t take the mattress with him. He took the television because I said, “Take the piece of shit, it’s part of why our relationship has never worked, Fred.”

“Please. Bethany,” he said. “Don’t swear like that.”

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“Like what? You don’t want me to say the word shit, Fred? I’ve heard you say much worse in your day.”

“We’re not in college anymore.” Fred looked at me in the evangelical, transformed manner of someone who has finally seen some *light* and has to share it with you by illuminating your own regression.

“Oh, you don’t need to remind me of that.” I said that to imply that he couldn’t hold an erection anymore because that’s a fact. It’s also true that I’d been sleeping on the couch in the living room for the past six months by choice, so even if he wanted to hold one, he’d have to do so in his hand.

“What is that supposed to mean?” He knew exactly what it meant.

“Nothing, Fred. Only that your old age is totally evident in the way that you belittle me every opportunity you get.”

“That’s bullshit, Bethany, and you know it.”

“Now who’s swearing?” I said that because the higher someone’s pedestal is, the more you want to watch him trip and bust his ass.

I picked up swearing in a prayer group. Fred and I joined Saint Mary’s together when we moved to Hudson, Ohio. I was the Jackie O of church ladies, because we come fat and I was fat. That’s the way we’re made and the way that we’re supposed to remain. As it was in the beginning is now and ever will be--with stretch pants, bouffant hair, and feet that look too little for our bodies and are stuck in Keds on casual days. Oh, and there’s a secret code of conduct for church ladies. It’s a list that includes:

1) Being fat

Or

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- 1 A) it's okay to be skinny if you're an *old* lady
- 2) Being able to cook full spreads during mealtime, including several types of casseroles, which shall be given away to people for necessary celebratory events.
- 3) Being part of a prayer group in which you fold your hands, close your eyes, and justify gossip if you follow it by a unison "Amen."

I came from a serious lineage of church ladies, and Fred came from a lineage of not-church men. He was actually from Kentucky, the northern part that was almost Ohio, but not quite. He went to Ohio State on a lot of financial aid because, as he accidentally told me on our third date, his family lived in a trailer. It slipped out when he was telling me about the time he overheard his parents having sex because the walls in a trailer are really thin. I didn't hold it against him because when someone's embarrassed about being poor, they have this accidental downtrodden attitude that makes them need you a little, even if they don't do it on purpose. And there's something about someone needing you that makes it really easy to think that you might just maybe love them.

But this isn't about me and Fred, it's about me and not-Fred. It's about not-Fred because I started swearing, and I started swearing because of Maxine Callahan's prayer group. I was asked to join after we'd only been in the church for two months. My secret was that I wore pious prayer t-shirts that shouted to the Lord in cotton and iron-on letters and made it look like I had Jesus on my mind even when I was at shopping Belk's. There was a waiting list for Maxine Callahan's prayer group, but one day after worship, Laurie Poppleton side-stepped over to me and said out of the side of her mouth, "We're having a prayer meeting at Maxine's tonight."

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“That’s nice,” I said.

“You should join us,” Laurie whispered, not making eye contact with me. She wasn’t really an inviter. She was very open mouthed and argyle-wearing, and she had perfect pearl necklaces, but you always felt like underneath it all, she might be secretly condemning you or at least giving you constructive criticism.

Still, I went to the prayer group. Maxine Callahan actually lived in my neighborhood, which was one of the nicer housing developments in Hudson. Fred had studied markets and management in college and gotten a solid job at a plastics molding company. He kept moving up, and before I knew it, we lived in a “nice community,” and Fred was teaching Sunday School and serving on the church board for social events planning.

Maxine’s house was filled with tall windows and lots of light that made reflections on the perfectly off-white carpet. Her hair was molded into three bulbs of poof on the top and the sides of her head. She laid out a platter of cocktail weenies, tiny lemon meringue pies and Crystal Light in a blue glass pitcher. There were six women aside from me at the prayer group. Four of them were fat, one of them was medium-fat, and Laurie was fit because she was part of the new generation of church ladies who did leg lifts and side bends to be muscle-bound and ready like *Prevention* says to take on the world of the modern woman. We sat around Maxine’s coffee table, and Maxine closed the shades and said, “Well *finally* we get some privacy, right ladies?” The ladies said “Yes” with an exhale. Some of them said “Damn right,” some of them said “Hell yes,” and one of them even said “Fuck” when she thought nobody was paying attention. One of the church ladies turned to me and said quietly, “We can say whatever we want here because it’s just

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us, so let yourself go dear.” I liked the idea of letting go. I liked it so much that I started “letting myself go” outside of prayer group, every now and then, every here and there, saying things like, “I can’t believe those damn kids took our mailbox flag again.”

“Beth- they’re just local hoodlums. They have no other outlet.” Fred had recently picked up the habit of altruism and was trying it on for size. Rather unconvincingly. I tried again.

“Damn hoodlums can’t just take our mailbox flag whenever they want to. Who do they think they are, getting off like that?” Fred walked away from the conversation, out of the dining room, where he was reading the paper and I was ironing yet another pair of his grown-up khaki pants. He started wearing khakis when he evolved, upwardly developed into Mr. Go-to-the-office, Mr. Home-Office, Mr. All-I-Ever-Talk-About-Is-The-Office-Because-I-Think-It-Validates-Me.

I liked things better when he wore a pair of white-trash light jeans that I knew he got from K-Mart. I remember thinking to myself, I can’t ever tell my mother he wears low-down brand jeans, because you can buy accessories at K-mart, but not the staples. Really. But he was dangerous so it was okay. He gradually stopped being dangerous, in a time-release unraveling of the trailer-park k-mart blue jeans thread, which made up who he was, meaning he was slowly unraveling into nothing.

I am resentful of this unraveling because when I said “I do,” I meant that I’d do everything for this man who couldn’t do anything for himself except drink too much on Saturday, Sunday, *and* Monday and ask me to iron those damn jeans. I committed to sitting on the edge of the bathtub while he vomited into the toilet at the end of the night, and then I committed to tucking him into my bed with the Laura Ashley sheets that had

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been stained with his vomit before. I liked that because it made me feel like he was promised to me with the mark of bile and cheese fries and too much ground beef because he never did learn how to eat a balanced meal.

So that's why, twenty-five years ago, when my mother looked at me with her fat little eyes and said, "You should just be conscious of the decision you're making, Bethany," all I said was,

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

She was doing a flower arrangement for the church. She said, "I mean," while stabbing flowers into foam that left green fairy asbestos dust on our kitchen table. She stabbed, stabbed, stabbed daisies into green foam, violently and silently, so vigorously that the lard on her arm wiggled with the reverberations of daisy into flower-foam. She did not finish her sentence, I married Fred, and he surprised everyone by graduating with impressive credentials, landing a job (a real job), and following in the footsteps of the venerable Mr. And Mrs. His-Wife's-Parents.

Our years passed together, and I had to start praying. Praying led me to swearing, and swearing was my tiny way to finally rebel from grinding the same wheel day in and day out and living exactly like, I mean *exactly* like every other upstanding, church-going, Walmart-shopping family in Hudson, O-fucking-hio.

O-fucking-hio did it. I put the word fuck in the middle of Ohio, so every time Fred would say the name of his own home state, he would be reminded of the profanity from whence he came. The profanity, like primordial muck, from whence he rose, muck that forms the molecules of his body, his mind, and his eternal soul because as it was in the beginning it now and ever will be, muck and vomit and trailers without end.

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My clever insertion of profanity into statehood happened at the end of a dinner party at the Poppletons', with the prayer group ladies and their families. We were gossiping about the McNallys, who couldn't have children, and Laurie said, "Well. Don't repeat this, but I've heard it said that John McNally has battled with some...erectile... dysfunction." Fred shook his head with such false and genteel *pity* for John McNally and said, "What a shame. What a shame." I thought about how John McNally was a grown man, and how he didn't need Fred Carlson for anything--not to be his friend, not to lend him a pound of sugar, not to help him cut his lawn, and definitely not to shake his head and say "Poor, poor John," because Fred Carlson likes the way that his ratty face looks when he is feeling sorry for someone.

So I said, "Fred knows quite a bit about erectile dysfunction." Some people looked down at their tuna noodle casserole, but some people laughed. Fred saw them laugh, so he laughed with them, but under the table, hidden beneath a crocheted tablecloth with lambs sitting in the grass, he ground his foot into my foot, suffocating my littlest toe, smiling, and breaking every bone in my body because he'd finally left the realm of boring old guy and entered the realm of maniacal beacon of morality.

I whispered, "Fred." He didn't stop. I tapped him subtly on the wrist. He didn't stop. I stabbed him in the forearm with my fork, and he stopped. Then he said, "Thank you for dinner, Frank, Laurie. Bethany and I have to be going now."

So "O-fucking-hio" happened in the car after Fred had stopped crying, *crying* because even Mr. New-Age-Suburban-Jesus weeps when his wife stabs him. And, pretending like he ever honestly talked to me, he said, "Bethany, I don't know what to do with you."

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“Nothing,” I said. “That’s all you’ve ever done with me.”

“Bull,” he said. “That’s a load of bull.”

“You believe what you want to believe, Big Man,” I said.

“Bethany,” he said. “I’m doing my best. I’m doing the best that I can.”

“Well,” I said. “If you’re trying to be the most disengaged husband in O-fucking-hio, you are doing a lovely job. Congratulations.” He pulled over, and I think I got whiplash, but I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want him rain down on me with pity and pretend like he cared. He looked at me, eyes watering, and he said, “I am doing every single thing I can so we can have a respectable family. I am working twelve-hour days, I have joined our church community, I have taken up *golfing*, Bethany. Do you want to know how much money I spent on a set of golf clubs?”

There it was, from his own mouth. The once-upon-a-time tale of Fred Carlson becoming more excruciatingly typical with every passing day of his life. That’s why I felt like I couldn’t breathe when he was at home with his catalogues, his big screen television, his business suits, and all of the things that I didn’t marry him for because a changed man is not always a better man. So I just said, “Well it’s not my money, so I don’t give a shit about your golf clubs.”

He just looked at me with his theatre-of-mercy eyes and said, “I don’t know what else I can do for you.”

I said, “For starters, you could not abuse me.”

“Bethany, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just don’t know why you said that. That embarrassed me, Bethany.”

I couldn’t stand the eyes any more so I said, “Just take me home, asshole.”

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I'd never said things like this before, but I liked the way that asshole and shit and especially fuck-in-the-middle-of-words sounded in my mouth. I also liked Fred's face when I said them. I realized that I'd finally figured out a way to get to him. So I just kept them coming. I saved them up for when he got home at night. It was my little secret because only Fred got to hear me in my peaks of verbal revenge, and he would *never* tell anyone because think of the mark that would leave on his reputation! For example, I would say things like:

“Shut the hell up, dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes,” or

“You don't give a fisherman's fuck about how my day was,” or

“Don't ask me to iron another one of your damn clown outfits. Go back to the circus, douchebag.”

Any kind of man with some balls and some originality would have found a way to work through this. He would have sat down with me, took my hands, looked me in the eyes and said, “I love you, and I know that when you verbally brutalize me, it just means that you're hurting, Baby.” But all I got was the charity face and silence that grew until it was permanent, because instead of taking my hands, he took his TV and left.

That was three months ago. So now I get fruit baskets and bundt cakes and sometimes the flower displays after church. I especially hate the flower displays because they bring me back to the day that my mother stabbed daisies and said, “think about what you're doing, Bethany.” And I have to think about what I did and maybe wonder whether it was the best tactic in the world.

And when people come to my house, I do my best to slip quietly into bed, sink into the no-impact mattress, and decide very definitely that I am not here and I don't need

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to talk to anyone. I'm sure that prayer group is praying about me, and I try to send them spiritual vibes to say that this was possibly my fault, just enough to open me up to the possibility of forgiveness. I would mail him some of his things and even pay for postage, but he hasn't sent me an address and he probably won't. So, everyone will continue to think that he was sleeping with another woman, committing petty crimes, or beating me, and I will continue to know that he was really just *bothering* me and sometimes that's enough.

So mostly, except for on Sundays when I try to go to church, I tuck myself under the covers and rhyme, time, lime, mime, dime, crime, climb, grime and exercise my brain so I can take on the world in my old age and take my mind off of whatever I might be trying to take my mind off of, thinking of the golden rule now and again, and still rhyming and rhyming until sometimes I sleep, which is nice.

### **War and Peace**

When I was younger, my grandmother always seemed glamorous. Once, I found a greeting card in a store with a flapper on the cover. She was winking and wearing dark-lined makeup, and she was just begging someone to take her home for the night. She reminded me of my grandmother, so I bought the card and sent it to her.

My grandmother never actually looked like a flapper. She weighed about two-hundred and fifty pounds, and she had for as long as I'd known her. But she wasn't a Midwestern kind of fat. Instead of looking like pale dough all over, her body was round, and her face was angular and decorated with hot pink lipstick and dark eyeliner. She wore bangle bracelets and perfume so she jingled and smelled wherever she went. And she chain smoked, so her voice was an octave below my father's. She told me once that when

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she was a secretary at a dental school they would tell her, “Cecile, we love when you answer the phone because we just love hearing your voice.”

She moved in with my family when I went to college because she could take my bedroom. She used to live in Manhattan, but her apartment was no longer rent-controlled, and she literally could not afford to stay for another month without depleting over half of her life savings. (“I’m on a fixed income and the vultures are throwing me out on the streets! They’d rather have an old lady’s blood on their hands than charge a reasonable amount of money for that dump.”) The plan was to move her into a townhouse or a retirement home somewhere nearby our house in Hudson. But my family figured it would be easier if she just moved in with us in the meantime. I was glad, because replacing me with a tenant sealed the deal that I was no longer a part of my family.

I’d gone to the University of Michigan because it was the cheapest state school that wasn’t Ohio State, Ohio University, or Miami of Ohio, the pattern in the previous three being fairly obvious: they are all in Ohio. I was actually planning on going to Ohio State until I ran away from home instead of sending in my deposit. I’d spent the years of my adolescent life pasted to the wall like a highly dispensable poster. Everywhere I went, I would just peel myself off of one wall and put myself on another-- I’d spent my life in the shadow of my best friend Michele, who’d recently developed a drug habit and a boyfriend, and in the bulldozing paths of my two older brothers: Jordan was two years younger than me, played three varsity sports, and once constructed an elaborate collage of naked women on my locker. Steve had become holier-than-thou since he’d graduated from Ohio State, joined the working world, and started leading a youth group. He only spoke to me if he needed to inform me of a new mortal sin to watch out for. (“Always be

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on the look out. They'll get you like snipers.") It beat the wedgies, but was not quite enough to sustain our relationship. Reaching my breaking point, I ran away to Long Island to be an au pair for the summer, and when I got back, I told them that I had paid a deposit to go to Michigan rather than Ohio State, because I did not want to stay in the state of Ohio for another minute longer than I absolutely had to.

That marked the first schism. Now that I was actually making life decisions without even conferring with my mother, we had officially broken up. My mother did not break up with me loudly, and she did not make a scene. But her point was expressed loud and clear when I brought the first semester's tuition bill to her and she said, "That's nice Honey," and continued painting a rococo border around our fireplace. (She was taking an art class.)

If this had happened to me at any other point in my life, I would have followed very specific step-by-step instructions:

- 1) Tear up slightly and say, "What?" (Meaning, "What do you mean you're refusing to pay for my college education? I thought we sort of had an agreement...")
- 2) Let the tears brim over my eyelids and down my cheeks and say, "Mom, I'm sorry."
- 3) Wipe my cheeks off, go upstairs, and enroll at Ohio State.

But this was the new me, and I decided to take out loans, get a job, and make it very clear that I wasn't coming home for Thanksgiving because I had to *work*, sorry. My father helped me out a bit by sending checks in the mail, using the memo space to label them as checks for "alabaster" and "band-aids," working his way through the alphabet in

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silent resistance to the iron bitch, keeping his rebellion quiet because for some reason, I think he still loved her.

The second schism happened during Christmas break, when I was forced to come home because our dorms closed and there was nowhere convenient for me to stay. Besides, not coming home for Christmas was almost too dramatic. The name of the game that I played with my mother was “How angry can I make you while still making it look unreasonable for *you* to be outwardly angry with *me*?” On top of it all, I missed my father and my brothers, and I wanted to witness Grandma living in my former room. It was a nice ironic touch, that my mother had replaced one source of familial resentment with another. But her coup de grace was when she insisted that I sleep on a cot in my room with Grandma.

“Mom, it’s fine. I’m going to sleep on the couch.”

“Mary Brigit, even though you’ve gone to college, this is still your home, and I will not have you lolling around our house like a vagabond.”

“Funny,” I said. “I have very little financial dependence on this household, and I am no longer a minor, so I don’t know how much this is technically my home.”

“Would you like to pay rent?” my mother asked me. I would have said, “Sure,” except I knew that if I did, she would actually charge me. I took the cot from her and folded it out onto the floor in my room. She had put my childhood *Winnie The Pooh* sheets on it. Fine. If we were going to fight a war of attrition, so be it.

By my third night home, I was attritioning quickly. First of all, Grandma snored. Grandma snored like the world was ending and she needed to suck all of her belongings into her nasal passages so she could make her escape. I knew that she snored because

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when I was younger, I would be able to hear her down the hall when I was trying to sleep and she was visiting. I had no conception of what it would be like to actually sleep in the same room as the roaring thunder. By the third night of break, I had averaged three hours of intermittent sleep a night, and I was beginning to understand why my grandmother was twice divorced.

I brought it up to my mother while we were sorting Christmas ornaments. Each year, we had to count out ninety ornaments from the seven boxes of decorations that our family had accumulated. My mother would not allow us to put any more on the tree, because she said it looked cheap. So, a week before Christmas, we would get the boxes and choose which ninety ornaments to put up. I shouldn't have done it this year. I should have gone to the mall or taken a nap or done something else to send the message loud and clear that things were not in fact the way that they used to be, and it had *everything* to do with me and her. But, in keeping with the theme of "everything proceeding as usual," I sat down with the blue and red glass bulb ornaments and made sure that the color ratio was even. Also proceeding as usual, I was not doing a satisfactory job.

"Honey, there are twice as many blue bulb ornaments as red ones," my mother said.

"Sorry."

"It's fine, dear. Just fix it."

"Sorry." I took three red bulbs and started wrapping them back up in bubble wrap.  
"I'm just really tired."

"Do you have mono?" she asked.

"How would I have gotten mono?" I asked.

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“That’s what happens when you party excessively and kiss people indiscriminately.”

“Oh.” I said. “It’s probably mono then.”

“Is it your grandmother’s snoring?” my mother asked.

“Does Grandma snore?”

“Oh, a bit,” my mother said. “Would you like to move to the couch? I’d hate for you to lose sleep.”

Would I like to move to the couch? Was there anything else that I’d like to do more? Not in the immediate future, at least. I would give anything not to have to sleep on that ironing-board cot with snore-zilla herself sleeping right next to me in my childhood bed. “No,” I said. “I’m enjoying Grandma’s company.”

“Good,” my mother said. “Make sure you put some scotch tape on that bubble wrap.”

“Of course,” I said, and I wrapped the entire remaining roll of scotch tape around the bulb.

In the meantime, I got some earplugs. They worked decently, although I had to wait until Grandma was asleep to put them in. She liked to talk before we went to bed. She would sit in my bed, reading a book. The night before Christmas Eve, Christmas Eve-Eve as we used to call it, she was re-reading *War and Peace*. At least, that was one of her books. She had three books at any given time, one for the morning, one for the afternoon, and one for the evening. *War and Peace* was the evening book. She’d put several of her books on my shelf on my desk, but she’d left a lot of my other things in the room. She hadn’t taken the framed certificates off of my wall, and she’d left my

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graduation pictures sitting on my dresser. “I just love looking at your beautiful face and all of the beautiful things that you’ve accomplished.” My mother tried to clean up the room a little bit, but Grandma hadn’t let her. She said, “I feel like Mary Brigit is in this room with me, and it fills me with warmth.” I could imagine my mother’s face when Grandma said that to her. No matter what she did, she could not subtly remove me from this household in order to shock and amaze me when I came running back home with my tail between my knees. Not with Grandma around. Yes, Grandma and I were a team.

Tonight, I got into bed before Grandma had turned out her light and closed her book. “Hello, my Darling,” she said.

“Hey Grandma,” I said. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m just wonderful,” she said. “Simply grand. This book. This Tolstoy. Oh, what a masterpiece.”

“That’s great.” My rapport with Grandma had become almost suspiciously agreeable. Everything Grandma said at the dinner table was witty. Every opinion that Grandma had was not only correct but nuanced and interesting. Every laugh that Grandma and I shared was an inside joke that we would recall specifically when my mother was around just to keep her obviously out of the intergenerational loop.

“Have you read it? *War and Peace*?”

“No, I haven’t actually. I’ve heard it’s good though.”

“Marvelous.”

I rolled around in bed for a few minutes, hoping that Grandma would take the hint and maybe turn the light off. Instead, she talked to me, “Darling?” she said.

“Yes?” I rolled over and looked at the ceiling.

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“I hate to ask you for anything. You’re already so kind and generous.”

“What do you need, Grandma?”

“Oh, no, no. I could never ask you to do something for this old lady.”

“Grandma. It’s fine. I like it when you ask me for favors.”

“Well.” She put a bookmark made with pressed dried flowers into *War and Peace*. “When your mother was younger, we went to Pennsylvania to see the Amish, your mother, your uncle and I. Oh, and she was so precious. She loved the Amish. She was twelve years old and the way she stared at the wheels on those wooden buggies! She just stared at the horses and the animals with those wide magical eyes and said, ‘Look Mommy. They live off the land here. They do.’ We were only there for a day because I had to go back to work. I was working at the dentist’s office. But we went to the gift shop, and immediately, she spotted this doll. You know, the Amish make dolls without faces, so this doll had a black white face, and I thought it was so ugly. But she just zoomed right in on this little doll with no face and a little bonnet and she said, ‘Mommy. That doll wants to come home with me.’”

I nodded periodically, just so Grandma knew I was still listening. She tended to wax poetic. More than that, she tended to wax long. I had trouble envisioning my mother as a bright-eyed child marveling at the Amish, quaint as they were. But my grandmother had that tremendous mother’s propensity for amending the past over and over again until it looked so different from the present you couldn’t pick it out of a crowd if you had to. It created a deliciously aggravating contrast to my mother, who allowed the past to congeal and hover right over her shoulder like a cold bowl of Jell-O gathering dust, but always threatening to tip over and stain your jacket if you weren’t careful. A new hobby that I

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had picked up at the dinner table was asking Grandma questions that were loosely based on my mother's childhood and watching her recount their history together. Last night, we had heard the saga of my mom's first date. By the end of the story, her date was six foot nine, built like Hulk-Hogan, and came *this* close to proposing to her at the end of the night.

"But your mother," Grandma capped the story. "Your mother, even when she was fourteen years old, knew what she wanted in life, and she wasn't going to let any handsome man stand in the way." My mother, by the way, managed a *Subway* in the Cedar Valley Mall and refused, as a cardinal rule in our household to ever talk about her job. But back to Grandma, who was still telling the story of *Laurie Poppleton and the Amish doll*.

"And I didn't buy the doll for her. At the time, it seemed foolish and too expensive. Oh, and she cried. Right there in this little store with wooden floors and the sawdust on them, and this wonderful round Amish woman with rosy blush cheeks behind the counter came over to your mother, who, bless her heart, was sitting on the floor just sobbing, saying, 'Please, Mommy, just let me get the doll.' And this wonderful woman leans down to your mother and says, 'What's wrong, my dear?' Your mother says, 'We have to leave, and when we leave, I will never see my dolly again, and I'll miss her.' And the lovely Amish woman says, 'Which doll, my dear?' And your mother wipes her little nose and points in the corner, and the woman says, 'Wait just a moment.' And I'm standing still, ready to walk out the door, but I can see your mother just following this woman with her eyes and watching her pick up the dolly and hand it to your mother and say, 'I think you ought to take this doll home with you.' And your mother's eyes fill with

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joy. They just get as wide as saucepans, and for some reason, I snap out of it and tell her no way, she can't take it."

"Good for you, Grandma," I said. And I meant it. I don't think she heard me.

"You know, we weren't in the habit of taking gifts from strangers. We weren't wealthy, but we had money for God's sake. And, I thought she was getting too old for dolls, she was too old to be making such a scene, and I just said, "Thank you very much ma'am, but we won't be taking any dolls today.' Your mother didn't start crying again. She was stark silent. But those eyes! She was shocked. She looked at me like I had just done the most terrible thing in the world but she didn't say a word. And you know what? I don't think she ever forgave me for it."

"But Grandma," I said, "That was totally justifiable."

"I thought so," she said, "But you should have seen those eyes, Honey. Sometimes, a mother just does something, and she can never take it back."

I wasn't sure exactly what to say. It's funny how you get older and you start to see how many people hate each other and you never realized it before. Perhaps the biggest disconnect between adulthood and childhood is that adults are much more compelled to play nice, and because they have so much practice, they're very convincing. When you hit your late teens, it becomes the default to like everyone, and if there's someone who you don't like, they've got to be an axe-murderer, or you're immature and not an understanding individual. This system makes it easy for us to get along on a daily basis. However, it also contributes heavily to what my psychology professor Dr. Atkinlee likes to call "heavy-ass boulder luggage." "And eventually," he said in class one day, "Your

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bag gets so full that it up and bursts at the seams, because the past is a heavy motherfucker, and ain't no bag I know can carry it forever.”

Maybe it was because of my new pop-liberal-arts vocabulary that I was being introduced to, but I noticed the heavy-ass boulder luggages lying around all over my house, particularly between my mother and my grandmother. I began to piece things together ever so slightly, remembering the fact that my mother had no photo albums before her wedding album. Remembering that it was interesting that my mother, the ever-zealous proponent of higher education had herself not gone to college. (She met my father when she was temping at the dean's office at John Carroll and he was a first year professor. He had been fascinated by her constantly-changing headband collection and intrigued that a woman with such a flair for hair accessories could be so cold.) Wondering at the fact that my grandmother was not at all like my mother, who took tri-weekly aerobics classes at the Hudson YMCA and only wore mascara on to Church on Christmas Eve.

They were nice to each other, and my grandma always gushed, but I also remembered one Thanksgiving evening after Grandma's dinner table conversation had dissolved from pleasantries to national politics and from national politics to personal politics and ended with my mother smashing a wine glass against the Pyrex mashed potato dish and calmly excusing herself for the evening. Grandma went out to smoke a cigarette. My brother Jordan followed my mother upstairs. My brother Steve shook his head and went to watch TV. My father and I sat in silence at the table, and then he started picking the shards of glass out of the mashed potatoes. With a cupped hand full of broken

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glass, he said to me, “Grandma used to be a bitch and an alcoholic. Now, she’s just a bitch.”

Most likely, there was more than one thing that my mother hadn’t forgiven Grandma for, and the doll was probably only the beginning. But you don’t actually say that to Grandma, do you?

Grandma had gotten up out of bed and she was shuffling around in her large leather handbag. My mother had offered her my drawers, but she’d insisted on living out of suitcases and her purse, so she wouldn’t be imposing. I was also living out of my suitcase, so I didn’t have to unpack and repack to go back to school. My room wasn’t all that big, so it looked like an extravagant refugee camp with all of our impermanence splayed across the floor. “Now, I was looking at one of my catalogues today,” (Grandma got about twenty catalogues every month, and she read all of them cover to cover. She had since gotten them forwarded to our house so our oak front table where we kept the mail was now stacked with glossy pages.) “and I found *this*.” She handed me a copy of *Rustic Pathways*, a catalogue that had an Adirondack chair on the cover, with a fake rock sculpture sitting next to it and a dog sleeping beside that in a green plaid dog bed.

“Page nineteen,” she said, as she got back into bed. I turned to page nineteen, and sure enough, there was a faceless Amish doll in the bottom corner. It was made of stuffed white canvas, and it was dressed in a grey dress with a black apron and a black bonnet. Its hair was made of yarn and pulled into pigtails. The yarn was also black. The caption underneath the doll said, “*The Roots of Childhood*: Meet Samantha, a doll straight from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where the Amish live and work. Samantha is a seventeen-year-old Amish girl, and she is courting a young man named Jonathon. She loves making

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bonnets and butter, and she is looking forward to wedding Jonathon and opening up a dairy with him.”

Grandma rolled over in bed and fluffed a pillow. “They name them.”

“And give them occupations?”

“Isn’t it precious?”

“Absolutely.”

“I want it for your mother. I think she would just die.”

“You’re right, Grandma, she would love it.” She wouldn’t love it. There was no possible way that my mother would love a little Amish doll with no face that dragged up old memories of how dysfunctional her family was even when she was a little kid. “Do you want me to order it for you?” I asked.

“That’s the problem, Darling.”

“What’s the problem?”

“They take a week to ship, even if I ordered it express. If I wanted it in time for Christmas, I’d have to actually go to Amish country to get one.”

“Oh.” I said.

And the next day, Christmas Eve, I was in my Ford Taurus, driving to Lancaster to buy a faceless doll for my mother on behalf of my grandmother for Christmas. It was the perfect waste of gas and eight hours, and it was the perfect thing for me to do for my mother. I got on the road at seven in the morning because it was a four-hour drive, and I had to be home by nine for Christmas Eve dinner before midnight mass. I did it mostly out of spite. I did it to one-up my mother in the 2003 passive aggressive Olympics, and I did it to wound my grandmother, who was snoring while I tried to sleep and talking in

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these marathon breaths of poetry and flattery that made any complement totally lose its significance. I did it because it was going to at the very least make no impact on anybody, and it was a good excuse for me to drive Route 76, which was gorgeous in the winter. It had snowed recently and everything was white and black, in the same stark shades of Samantha the courting Amish doll.

Despite the fact that my trip was motivated by almost pure bitterness, I felt very centered and quiet as I drove. It was the first time since I'd left school that I had some sort of mission. It kept getting lighter, and I stopped at a Kangaroo Gas Station to get a cup of coffee and treated myself to the little containers of Irish Crème flavored half and half. The road was almost empty, and my breath and the Irish Crème steam from my coffee intermingled while I stood outside holding the gas pump. My hands were freezing, so I bought some gloves. They had camouflage ones and NASCAR ones. The NASCAR ones were black and white and matched my black pea coat so I bought them. The plastic hopping Kangaroo on the gas station sign looked pretty against the growing light grey of the sky, and I felt like I had been hiking in the forest for a couple of days and I had finally found somewhere to get provisions.

I moved on, passing a couple of tractor trailers, a couple of mini-vans with Christmas trees strapped to the top, a couple of rented airport cars with people coming home from their first jobs in their first cities to different tiny towns at exits 181A, 181B, 180, 179. I started humming the song, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas," because it was beginning to look like Christmas. Something about the two lane highway, dabbled with the muted beige, blue, turquoise, white cars reminded me of a Christmas

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tree, a moving Christmas tree where the ornaments didn't just adorn but they took you somewhere you wanted to be.

I took the exit toward Lancaster, and I followed my Mapquest directions to "Dutch Haven," the self-proclaimed "original Amish crafts store." It was shaped vaguely like a windmill and had red and yellow wood paneling on the sides of it. It looked more like a McDonalds than what I had envisioned an Amish shop would look like. But I suppose a shop is a shop and it doesn't matter what it looks like on the outside. It matters what you sell on the inside, and if you don't use electricity and cars, you can paint the outside of your store however you want.

This store was covered in faceless dolls of all shapes and sizes- there were two entire walls covered with them. They had tiny ones on key chains. They had ones were the size of an infant. There were boy dolls in overalls, and the more dapper ones were in pants and collared shirts. (Not button-down of course, because the Amish can't use buttons for some reason.) They varied widely within the brackets of white to navy blue and tiny to large. None of them had faces, and they all had the same shape: puffy with rounded nubs for hands and feet. I located the medium sized ones, because they seemed to be pretty standard.

I found one that was beautifully made, with thick hair that was actually woven into braids. Her dress was made out of something that felt almost like tweed- it was richly-textured and double-stitched at the hems. I could imagine what she would look like if she were a real girl. Next to her was an overstuffed doll, where the extra stuffing had made an unsightly bulge coming from the right of her forehead. Her pigtails were made with sparing yarn, giving her a comb-over effect, and her clothes, like Samantha's clothes

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in the catalogue, were black. She was white. She looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. I bought her.

A younger woman with her hair parted down the middle and soft looking skin sold me the doll and gift wrapped it for me with paper that was forest green with black pictures of horses and buggies rolling around on it. When the doll was wrapped up, it looked like a lumpy mound of bad wallpaper. The woman who wrapped it seemed to realize that, and she tried to redeem it by tying a bow around the package. It looked like a lumpy mound of green wallpaper with a bow wrapped around it. I paid her, she wished me a Merry Christmas, and I got back in the car and got back on the highway.

I called home on my cell phone and spoke to Grandma. "I got the doll," I said.

"Oh, wonderful, Darling. I thank you so much. You really are wonderful."

"How's Mom?"

"She's good, Darling. She's cooking a lovely meal for us tonight. Hurry home so she won't worry. I told her you're volunteering at the soup kitchen today until seven."

Even that didn't faze me. I was doing a sort of service anyway. I was following my dear Grandmother's wishes to the tee- I, the obedient, the more-than-obedient, the going-way-out-of-her-way granddaughter was driving to a different state to get an Amish doll for her mother. I could serve soup to the hungry any day. Today, I was serving my family, and as the Bible itself says, honor thy father and mother. It's a commandment.

I got home in time, and I snuck the ugly gift-wrapped doll under the tree and slapped a gift label on it. "To: Laurie. From: Mom." We all ate dinner, and we went to midnight mass, and we went to bed, and in the morning, we opened our gifts. I got some jeans, a sweater, a couple of CD's that I'd asked for, a necklace from my Grandma. My

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mother, who was still taking an art class, had painted the gift wrap herself with impressionistic portraits of whoever was receiving the gift. She seemed to get annoyed when we complimented her on them, so instead we just silently looked at our faces in watercolor and pretended like they'd come from the Hallmark store. The hit of the morning was a Playstation II, and two-thirds into the gift-opening, Jordan and Steve went to play that rather than hang around for the rest of the morning.

Grandma was sitting with the doll beside her, and every time we tried to find a new gift to open, she placed her hand on the doll, to protect it until the very last minute, when my father said, "Well, looks like that's about it, isn't it?" He'd been waiting to say that since we woke up. My father was affectionate, perhaps the most genuinely affectionate person in my family, but gifts made him uncomfortable.

When she was sure that nobody else had anything left to give, Grandma finally jumped in and said, "Wait, wait, there's one more." She pointed to my mother, "For you, my love," she said. Grandma picked up the doll in its wrapping and motioned toward me to bring it over to my mother, who looked a little perplexed. "Oh! Thank you, Mom," she said. I sat next to my mother on the couch and put my arm around her.

"This really should be from me and Mary Brigit," Grandma said, "I'd love to take the credit but I simply can't." My mother was struggling to untie the hardy Amish knot in the bow. When she finally got it open and uncovered the lumpy Amish girl, she didn't say anything.

"Well Darling, it's been a long time, but have I redeemed myself?" Grandma was looking at my mother with dimly lit eyes, and I saw her hands were gripping and ungripping the edge of the fleece blanket that we'd laid over her lap to open presents on.

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My mother sat on the couch, turning the doll over and over on her lap, taking her bonnet off and examining her strands of mangy hair. I saw Grandma look less and less lit up, and the understanding that my mom was *not* understanding started to creep and seep into the seams and wrinkles of her face, which fell slowly.

“I drove all the way to Amish country to get it.” I said, “Because I knew all about that time when Grandma wouldn’t let you get the doll. It’s like that time when you wanted the doll in Amish country and Grandma said no but you almost got it and-- Grandma, tell that story. You always tell that story so well.”

But Grandma, contrary to popular belief or at least my belief sometimes, was not stupid, and she knew what was going on. No matter how much of an optimist you are, you can spot a not-rememberer from a mile away.

I jumped in at her defense. “Don’t you remember, Mom, when you were a little girl and all of you were in Amish country, and you wanted this doll and Grandma was like ‘No,’ and you threw a tantrum and there was this fat Amish lady who said she’d give you the doll like a gift but Grandma still said no and after all these years you still hate her for it?”

Grandma put a hand on my arm to silence me. Then she smiled, not without love, and said to my mother, “You can use it as a throw pillow, Darling.”

My mother looked at me, and must have read my look of spite and looked at my grandmother, who was getting up to have a cigarette, and looked at my father, who had taken the doll and was trying to consolidate the stringy pigtailed into a ponytail to make them look a little less spare, and she clapped her hands together, exhaled loudly and said,

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“I don’t ask to be appreciated, really. But it would be nice, once in awhile, to be respected.”

Christmas dinner was strained. My father’s parents came over though, so we had to make pleasant small talk with them. They commented on my mother’s interesting throw pillow, and she said, “Thanks so much, my mother and my daughter gave it to me. Isn’t that thoughtful?” They were the kind of people to overstay their welcome, and they didn’t leave until well into the night, when my father had already gone upstairs to bed and my mother was just doing the last of the Christmas dishes, which she insisted on washing herself because they were fine china.

I was lying in my cot, and Grandma was reading *War and Peace*, and we weren’t talking because what do you say when you’ve been silenced by someone who thinks that every move you make in the world means you’re out to get her?

“Was she always like that?” I finally asked. Grandma didn’t say anything.

“Grandma?”

“I’m thinking,” she said. “About what exactly you mean, because you’re asking a loaded question, Darling.”

“Was she always so self-important and passive aggressive and unsentimental?”

“No,” Grandma says, “She was very nice when she was a girl.”

“And then what happened?” I said, but in my mind I answered my own question with: she turned into the extreme opposite of her mother, so instead of being a floozy who drank too much and emoted too much, she became a terrible person. Period.

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Grandma said, “Oh, I don’t know, the world got to her. Lord knows I was never a good influence on her. But Darling, we were not put on the earth to psychoanalyze each other and decide that we’ve saved or ruined each other’s lives.”

“Grandma, if she hasn’t ruined my life, she’s at least ruined my vacation, and you know what? I knew she’d hate your doll. But I got it anyway, because I hoped it would at least make her upset when she remembered.”

“Well my Darling, you got what you wanted.” Grandma rolled over, turned the light off, and began snoring in minutes.

So I’d gotten what I wanted. My mother had been upset by a stupid stuffed canvas doll that I had driven eight hours to get on Christmas Eve. And the whole thing was another one of those life lessons because I learned that hurting people doesn’t come in these flashy scenes of yelling and crying or laughing or fighting. It usually comes in the muted moments where we don’t say or do much, because you don’t have to say or do much when you’re actually feeling something.

After Grandma had been snoring for ten minutes, I walked downstairs into the kitchen. My mother was standing at the sink, drying the last of the china. I stood in the doorway, hoping she wouldn’t turn around. She did, and she looked much less severe in the yellow light. Her hair looked really shiny and healthy, and it was flatter than usual because of the cold. She looked relaxed. She said, “You crossed a line today, Mary Brigit.”

I didn’t say anything, because I thought she might be right, but I didn’t want to concede so quickly. She gently nudged me out of the way so she could reach the china cabinet. She started putting the plates away with repetitive clinking, one on top of the

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other. "I know you resent me, and that's fine. But when you channel that sentiment into the realm of my personal history and my relationship with my own mother, that's a violation. And that makes me resent you right back."

"You've always resented me," I said.

"No, I haven't. I've disciplined you, I've supervised you, but I have not been malicious."

"What about not letting me go to Michigan?"

"I didn't want you to go there."

"You could have compromised."

"I'm not having this discussion right now."

"Then when are we going to have it? Am I going to have to get you another shitty Christmas gift and strike another nerve so you get angry enough to tell me a single thing that you're actually thinking, Mom?"

"You may not swear in my household, Mary Brigit."

"May I communicate?"

"I know what I stand for, and I will not have it pushed around, whether you're my daughter or not." She closed and locked the China cabinet, very calmly and quietly. Then she started walking up the stairs.

"Mom," I said, realizing that she was ending the conversation before it had a chance to start, and she was ending it because she was threatened and her threat tactic was not running away but walking away with calm conviction.

"Mom!" I shouted it this time and stamped my foot on the linoleum and rattled all the china in the cabinet. I did it one more time, so hard that the cabinet actually rocked

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back and forth and for a moment I thought that it would come crashing face down onto the floor, shattering in tiny pieces of finished wood and glass and cups and plates. It settled back into place though, and I heard my mother's bedroom door click shut and her sink running water so she could brush her teeth and go to bed.

A week and a half later, New Year's had come and gone, the dorms had opened at Michigan, and it was time for me to go. I left when my mother was at the grocery store because I didn't want to cap this break with a goodbye that feigned resolution. I went out to breakfast with my father, and he slipped me another check while he hugged me goodbye. He and I were kindred minds in a lot of ways- we had similar educations, we had similar senses of humor, but there was always a spiritual distance from him that I think allowed us to get along as well as we did. At the same time, it always felt like I was getting off easy because there was something that told me we would never be close in the real sense of the word. Steve was back at his house, but I was supposed to stop by and see him on my way out. I hugged Jordan goodbye. He'd mellowed out a bit since I was in high school, and he'd developed some sense of appreciation for me in my absence. He asked me when I was coming back.

"I don't know," I said, and that was the truth.

### **The Embalmer**

A man was driving down the highway in a black Oldsmobile. He looked to be in his mid-forties, even though he had a full head of black hair, brushed backward. It looked like there might be hairspray or styling gel in it, but he could have been wearing his hair like that for so long that it just stuck. He appeared almost healthy, almost well-off, but if you looked at his Banana Republic sweatshirt, you would see that it was threadbare around the collar, and if you looked at his shoulders, you would see that they were wilting.

He was driving with an old woman in the backseat, a woman who was wearing a shoe-polish red dress on an overweight, round frame. Her eyes matched his; a striking blue, and the way that they traveled without talking showed that she was his mother. She sat up, with conspicuously good posture, reading a book, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and

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looking out the window. At about eight PM, she leaned her head on a travel pillow propped against the window and went to sleep.

At eight fifteen, the man's shoulder tensed, and he snapped his head around to the back seat and looked at his mother. "Mom?" he said, too loud for inside a car. She didn't respond. He pulled the car over, got out, opened the backseat, and took her pulse. He laid her hand back down next to her, and then blew in her ear. Nothing happened. He laid her out flat on the back seat of the car and drove to the next exit, which was a welcome center for the state of Kentucky. He went inside and asked the girl at the front desk where the closest funeral home was. She gave him the number for Keane's Funeral Home, he called, and twenty minutes later, a white van streaked with dust pulled into the parking lot. A man walked out of the van. He was lanky with greasy long hair that matched a black baseball cap. He was smoking a cigarette inside of the van, but he put it out before approaching the Oldsmobile.

"You Derrick?" he said.

"Yes." They shook hands.

"Lanford Keane."

"Nice to meet you, Lanford."

"Where's she at?"

"In the back of the car." Lanford ambled over to the car and opened the door.

"She die just like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Laid out flat like that?"

"No," Derrick said, "I did that. I mean, I straightened her out like that."

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“Oh, okay,” Lanford started laughing and slapping his leg. “I thought,” he paused to catch his breath. “I thought that she’d died all flat like that, and I was thinking, ‘How’d she die all laid out like that? Like she meant to or something.’” He laughed at himself again. “Damn. Thought she’d planned it or something.”

“Mm.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He started to laugh again. “I can’t believe I thought that. Damn.”

“Well,” Derrick said.

“Yeah.”

“Well.”

“New York,” Lanford said.

“Yes. That’s where we’re from.”

“The city or the suburbs?”

“Long Island. The suburbs.”

“She your mother?”

“Yes.”

“You two on a trip?”

“Yes. Sort of. A business trip. A house-hunting trip. My mother was interested in moving to Lexington, so I was driving her to look at some houses.”

“I see.” Lanford sat down on the edge of the car seat, so he was actually sitting next to Derrick’s mother’s feet.

“Can you please take her away now? I mean, can we start, can you take care of--I didn’t mean for it to sound like--”

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“Yeah. Hold on just a sec.” Lanford looked again at the body, whispered to himself like he was making calculations, and wrote something on the palm of his hand with a sharpie marker in his pocket. Then he walked back to his van and climbed into the back. Metal clunked in the back and things dragging against the floor of the van. While he was watching, the girl from the front desk came up beside Derrick.

“You okay?” she asked. Her purple-rimmed glasses matched her patent-leather knee-high boots, and her black eyeliner was ominous. She looked about sixteen.

“Yes. I’m fine. Thank you.”

“That your mother?”

“Yes.”

“You still waiting on Lanford?”

“I think he’s getting the...thing right now.”

The girl sat down on the hood of the car. “Sometimes I imagine my mother dies, and I don’t know what I’d do. Even thinking it makes me cry, almost.”

“Mm.” Derrick said.

Lanford loped out of the back of his van, rolling a stretcher toward the Oldsmobile. The girl got up and walked back toward the welcome center, saying, “Lanford, get something real to drag those corpses out with or ain’t anybody going to use you anymore.”

Lanford made a motion toward her that looked like a soldier’s salute and whispered to Derrick, “Used to go out with my brother. He dumped her. Takes it out on me.” He shook his head and laughed again.

“Hey,” Derrick said. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom. You okay out here?”

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“Yeah. Take a piss, I’ll be here when you’re done.”

On his way back from the bathroom, Derrick looked at the rest-stop map. He was in the corner of Southeastern Kentucky, right across the border of Virginia, in a county called Letcher County.

“Hey Derrick.” Lanford had the stretcher lined up next to the back seat of the car, and he was pushing Derrick’s mother’s body toward the stretcher. Every time he pushed her by the shoulders, her feet would push the stretcher away from the car. “Can you give me a hand?”

They got the body in the back of Lanford’s van and drove into Whitesburg, a town that was about fifteen minutes off the interstate. The downtown area was about two blocks long and stretched downhill until Main Street veered to the left and turned into a residential neighborhood. Keane’s funeral home was across the street from Melvin’s Funeral Home. “You’d think that lots of people die around here,” Lanford said. “But that’s not true. It’s just that people demand different styles for their funerals. Melvin’s a little more flashy. He’s got a disco ball in the funeral parlor.”

“Oh,” Derrick said. He was carrying the other end of his mother’s stretcher up the front stairs of the funeral home, and he seemed distracted.

“Just joking.” Lanford said. They put the body downstairs in the basement, where Lanford prepared bodies for burial. As they were going back up the stairs, Lanford said, “You got somewhere to stay?”

“No,” Derrick said. “I figured I could stay at a hotel in the area.”

“Well,” Lanford said, “There’s a Motel 8 a ways down the road, but you can stay here if you want. My dad recently passed, so we got an extra bed.” Derrick agreed.

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Lanford said, “Right this way,” and led him upstairs.

They ate soupbeans and cornbread in Lanford’s kitchen. It was small, and the lighting was yellow. The refrigerator was brown and looked like an old-fashioned ice box. The linoleum was also brown, but lighter shades. The dishes were all clean and drying in the dish rack, and Lanford had unplugged the slow cooker on the kitchen counter, coiled the cord, and bound it up with a twist-tie from the supermarket.

“I live by myself,” he said. “My mom left when I was a baby, my dad died last year of a heart attack, and my younger brother is at Berea College, studying economics.” He set a steaming bowl of pinto beans in front of Derrick. “Works out good though, because I can take over the business for my dad, and I have the whole place to myself. Dip the bread in the beans. It’s too dry by itself.” Derrick dipped the bread in the beans and took a bite.

“This is delicious,” he said.

After they finished eating, Lanford said, “Let me show you your room.” They walked down the single hallway to the second door on the right. Derrick sat down on the bed. It was a single bed, with a plain blue, thin comforter on it. There was only one pillow. There was nothing else in the room, except for a folding chair set up against the white walls, which were textured like stucco. The lighting was fluorescent yellow, like in the kitchen.

Lanford said, “This used to be my Dad’s room. Sorry it’s not more decorated. Used to be a nice big armoire in the corner, and some framed pictures of fish that he’d caught. We sold the armoire though, and even the pictures with the fish. Figured if he’s not going to use his stuff, might as well make some good money off it, right?”

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Derrick said, "I'm ready to do that with my mother."

"Sell her stuff?"

"Well, yes. No. I mean, let her go."

Lanford didn't say anything, but he leaned against the doorframe. He'd taken off his black baseball cap, and there was a ring around his head where it had been sitting on his hair.

"You know, let her be dead and get it over with. I don't want to have to go through all the ceremony of death. Transporting her back home so she can be buried in a neighborhood that she never liked very much anyway and we can all ceremoniously cry when we probably don't feel much of anything."

Lanford scratched his matted hair. "Don't you have any family that might care?"

"Yes-- my sister. She'll want to make a big fuss over it, but she won't even want to come to Long Island to the funeral. She'll come, but it'll be a big fuss. It's always a big fuss for her. Things are always some kind of burden for her, but she'll never decide *not* to do something. She'll do everything while silently inflicting you with guilt."

"Should call her at least."

"I don't know."

"You want to give me her number, I'll call her? Let you off the hook?"

"No."

"I'll just tell her I found your mom in front of the funeral home. She tripped and fell. Won't mention you at all."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Lanford."

"Okay then. I'm gonna go downstairs and start working on her."

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Derrick sat at the kitchen table by himself and then got up to use the phone. It was an old phone, beige like an ace-bandage, with tight square buttons that clicked when he pressed them. He dialed a number and said, “Hey. Laurie?”

Laurie apparently hadn’t picked up the phone, and he waited several seconds for someone else to go get Laurie. While he waited, he traced the crevice between the counter tiles with his fingernail. He ended up with a layer of black dirt under his nail. He tried to get it out with a toothpick that he had in his pocket and ended up stabbing himself in that tender, under-nail area of unexposed skin. “Dammit,” he said. The fluorescent lights were buzzing.

“Hey, it’s Derrick,” he said when Laurie got on the phone. “Yeah. We’re okay....Uh huh...No, no trouble with the car. I told you it runs perfectly. I test drove it several times before she bought it. You know that....Yes, yes, it runs like a bull. Or, I don’t know. You know what I mean. It runs, well. Very well....No, it’s not fine....Okay hold on, let me talk...Mom died today....in the car, we were driving, and she just died, quietly, in her sleep.”

Shouting audibly leaked out of the earpiece. Derrick started running the toothpick through the counter-tile crevice, looking like he was somewhere else in his mind while Laurie yelled at him. When there was a lull, he said, “I’m in Kentucky. I’m going to have her buried here.”

The buzzing from the receiver stopped. The lights buzzed. Derrick rubbed the bridge of his nose, and he said, “Unless you want to come to Kentucky and take her body back to Long Island, I’m having her buried here. I just want to get it over with.” The buzzing stopped and a dial tone cut in. Derrick hung the phone up. He walked outside to

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his car to get his suitcase. Then, he brushed his teeth, washed his face, and changed into plaid pajamas that were very neat and together looking, but had a couple of bleach spots on the leg. He got into Lanford's late father's bed.

After he'd been lying in the dark for twenty minutes, trying to shut his eyes, the phone rang. He let it ring until it had been ringing for ten minutes straight. Then he shouted, still lying in bed, "Lanford? Lanford!" Finally, he got up and answered it. He said, "How did you get this number? Come on, Laurie. Stop being so sensational."

The same shouting buzzed through the receiver, and he held the phone away from his ear and closed his eyes until eventually, he slammed it down on the kitchen counter, and a small piece of the receiver chipped off and plinked to the floor. He put it back to his face and said, "You can do whatever you want. I know what I'm doing, and I'm here right now." Then, he left the phone off the hook and shouting from the receiver eventually turned into a dial tone, which eventually turned into the pulsing, piercing signal of a phone that's been off the hook too long.

After ten minutes, he hung up the phone and went downstairs into the lobby of the funeral home. It was dark and there was a mirror in the hallway, hanging over a plastic lily in a gilded pot. The perfume of plastic lily leaked up from the old wooden floors and into the meticulously white-washed walls. Derrick's reflection in the mirror looked incongruous. His collared plaid pajamas made him look like a lounge-lizard, schmoozing around a dark funeral home. He pretended to hold a martini.

He found the door to the basement, pushed it open, and walked down the stairs, which were dark, wooden, narrow and slouching under the weight of any feet, even Derrick's bare, thin ones. A light was coming from the left, so Derrick followed it and

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found Lanford bent over what looked like an operating table with a large floodlight hanging overhead. He looked like he was kneading a large mound of dough. Without turning around, he said “You still up?”

“Yes,” Derrick said, looking for pockets to put his hands in, but not finding any, instead just sliding his hands up and down his legs.

“Just massaging the body,” Lanford said. “Rigor Mortis set in a bit. Just kind of kinked her right arm out of place.”

“Oh.” Derrick said.

“Massages out real easy though. Always been my strong point, massaging out the rigors. Lot of people’ll tell you they’re afraid of it. See? All better.” Lanford stepped to the side and put his arm out. “Vanna White,” he said, referring to himself. Derrick shut his eyes. “Come on, it’s no big deal. Take a look.”

“No thank you,” Derrick said.

“No, come on.” Lanford’s voice softened, and he walked over to Derrick and grabbed his hand, very delicately guiding him to the table and placing the hand back down at his side. Derrick opened his eyes.

He looked at his mother’s body, laid out on the table. She was naked, with a small blue cloth placed over her crotch. Her breasts lay deflated on her round stomach, creased and stretched with wear and years. Her gray hair had been taken down, and the ponytail of false gray hair that she had clipped onto her shorter, thinning hair had been taken out. It wisped wildly around outside of her head and her eyes were frozen open, blue, white, yellow where they should be white, cataracted, red rimmed, staring into the ceiling of rotting wooden floorboards.

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Derrick exhaled loudly. Lanford put a hand on his shoulder. “Not a pretty sight, is it? Now- just wait until I’m done with her. You’re gonna think she’s living, breathing, and just taking a nap. I can even make her look ten years younger.”

“No.” Derrick said. “I’d like you to make her look like she does now. But with clothes. And make-up, probably.”

“Fair enough.” Lanford said. He bent over and pulled out a shoebox from Payless Shoesource from a shelf under the table. “Look through this if you’re not going to go to sleep,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Personal items. Rings, bracelets, stuff. Pick which of em’ you’d like to keep on her.”

“Well, can you just put them all back?”

“Yeah- but I need your consent. Rules is rules- you gotta sign this form too.” Lanford handed him a clipboard and then turned back to the table. “Sure had a lot of rings.” He said.

“Mm.” Derrick opened the shoebox. There were a lot of rings. He looked at a large gold one with a cluster of small diamonds inset in the band. He put that one in his pocket. He found his mother’s hairpiece and said, “Please put her hair back on, Lanford.”

“You betcha. I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Hey--do you mind if I stay down here for a bit?” Derrick asked.

“No problem.” Lanford had a large needle and he was piercing Derrick’s mother right at the corner of her mouth. “Feature setting,” he said. “This comes before I put all the stiffening chemicals in her, cause once she’s stuffed up with drugs, there’s no moving

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her. The needle goes in through her mouth, up into the left nostril, through the septum, out the right nostril, and into the other corner of the mouth. A little tug, and you got a Mona Lisa smile for all of eternity.”

“Thank you, Lanford,” Derrick said.

“Got a weak stomach?” Lanford asked, still turned toward the body. He continued to work, and Derrick kept sifting through the box of rings, bangle bracelets and necklaces that belonged on his mother’s body. Lanford was placing clear plastic caps over her eyes and then closing them, one by one, stretching wrinkled eyelids into creased coverings.

“Could you hand me the glue? Over on the shelf, to your right.”

Derrick picked up a bottle that said, “Setting Glue.” It had a navy blue label and looked like an auto-care product. He handed it to Lanford, who put some around the rim of each eyelid at the crease. “There you go,” Lanford said to himself once the eyelids had been glued.

Derrick sat back down. “I sort of hate her,” he said.

“Everybody hates his mother, right?”

“Do they?” Derrick asked.

“Comes a time in your life when you hate everyone you love,” Lanford said.

“No--it’s different than that.”

“Is it?”

“I mean, I can think of moments when I was okay with her. I can think of a couple-- four, five times when I could sit with her in a room and say, ‘I am content to be here.’ I can count those times on my hand. I mean the rest of it though? Miserable.”

“You live with her?”

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“I mean, I did. Yes. But only because she needed someone to take care of her. She never took care of herself, ran her body to the ground with smoking and not exercising, and eating everything with bacon grease, things like that. I mean, what was there I could do?”

“Well, you were there, Man. Some say that’s good enough....So now, I’m piercing her jugular vein with a little toolie called an arterial canula. We stick it right into the jugular with a careful incision and hold the artery open. Then, we connect this light-saber-looking thing to the canula and drain the blood out. You don’t have to watch if you don’t want, but it’ll be draining for awhile if you want to take a peek later.”

Derrick looked up through the basement window. It was getting mildly light, gradually and navy blue with trees in the background. He went back to rummaging through the box, and then he said, “Okay. I also lived with her because I had to.”

“I’m sure she found it helpful.”

“I don’t know- she always told me how much she loved having me around, and she made me run errands for her all the time. I mean, she’d make me bring her cigarettes if she was sitting in bed, or make me go out to the store if she needed things for dinner.”

“Sounds useful,” Lanford said. He tied his hair back with a strip of fabric that looked like it was torn from a tee-shirt.

“But what if it wasn’t?” Derrick asked. “I mean, she never told me. She never told me whether I could or couldn’t stay with her. I just came in the door with a suitcase like I was coming to visit, and I never left. Seven years ago. And I wasn’t even collecting unemployment checks. I don’t know why-- it’s just not the kind of thing you think of to do when you’re not used to that kind of lifestyle, I guess.”

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“Well- that can be tough. Paperwork’s difficult.” Lanford was draining the blood from the jugular into a machine that made a low ruminating sound.

“I mean, everything’s going to be better now. I’ll get her house. I’ll have it all to myself. I’ll be able to live with a little independence, you know?”

“Mm Hm.”

“And, I mean, that’s half the battle, right? It’ll be no problem to get a job after that. No problem. I’ll feel like an adult, you know?”

Lanford closed the valve of the jugular tube and attached a rubber hose to the end of it. The hose led toward a plastic container that was shaped like a blender, but was twice as large. “This machine fills the body with formaldehyde,” he said. “Well--we don’t use formaldehyde anymore. We’ve upgraded to Glutaraldehyde. More modern, leaves the body with little more flexibility, a little more give.”

He set the machine working, and it started pumping a clear liquid in through the tubes attached to Derrick’s mother’s jugular vein. A oscillating bass hum filled the basement, and Lanford turned around and faced Derrick.

“Now we wait,” he said. “You want a beer?” The phone rang. “Hold on,” Lanford said, and he bounded up the broken stairs, taking them two by two. Derrick sat down in the basement by himself, picking at his dry fingernails. One of them was bleeding. Then, he got up and stood tentatively next to the table, looking at his mother, naked and hooked up to a whirring machine. The veins in her neck were bulging slightly with the repetitive pumping. He looked more closely, and then he touched one of the pulsing veins with his finger. He closed his eyes.

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“That was the police station.” Lanford was at the top of the stairs and Derrick quickly went to the bottom of the stairs to talk to him.

“What?”

“Police called. Want to come take the body. Said a woman called-- named Laurie. Says the body’s under her custody.”

“Oh, she would say that, wouldn’t she?”

“You know her?”

“She’s my younger sister. She’s always acted like she was my caretaker though. Can’t speak to me civilly because I’m not a homemaker with two and a half kids.”

Lanford went over to the body. “Well, they can’t do anything until this is done—take about another hour. Then, they’ll have to ship the body out. She’s got custody.”

Derrick laughed. “I’m sure she’s just saying that. There’s no way my mother would have given her any custody, anything in the will-- she never did a thing for my mother.”

“Police station’s got a fax copy of the will. Everything was left to her.”

Derrick walked over to Lanford and put his hands on his shoulders.

“Can you say that again?”

Lanford turned around and said, “Let’s sit down and have a beer, okay?” He started walking toward Derrick, and Derrick put his hand out to stop him.

“I want you to say that again.”

“Life’s a bitch, I’ll tell you. That’s why I’m in the funeral business. Don’t’ have to deal with a single living thing...”

“I want you to tell me what you just told me,” Derrick said.

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“I might have misheard on the phone, Man. Got a little water in my ear these past few days. Can’t get it out.”

“Everything was left to my sister. Everything.”

“Look, man--“

“Can you leave me alone for a moment, Lanford?”

“You betcha.” Lanford silently slinked up the stairs and Derrick was alone, in the slowly brightening basement with the floodlight in the left-hand corner and his mother being pumped dry.

He walked over to her, hovered over her for a moment. Then, he reached to Lanford’s supply shelf and took the large needle he’d used to sew and position her mouth. He stabbed her in both of her closed eyes. The needle cracked through the plastic eye caps, and when he took the needle out of each eye, it leaked a white fluid, that coursed out when the Glutaraldehyde machine pumped. Then, he took the keys to the Oldsmobile out of her the shoebox, walked out the front door, and drove away.

The next day, Lanford delivered the body to the police station. A police officer dressed in a white sweat-stained shirt came out to help him with the casket. “You give her this casket, Lanford?” he asked.

“Gotta put her in something, right?”

“Guess so, can I see your work?” The police officer started opening the casket, right in the van. He popped it open, and Derrick’s mother looked restful, clean, lovely. “Jesus, Lan. Your work gets better every day. Following in your Daddy’s footsteps.”

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“Yeah. Thanks.” Lanford said. He started lifting one end of the casket and the policeman followed suit. The brought the casket into the policeman’s office and set it down on a table that had been cleared off.

The policeman sat down, out of breath and sweat beading. “Where’s the guy?” he asked.

“Left this morning early. Had somewhere to go.”

“Well, he paid you, I hope.”

“Mm,” Lanford said.

“Shoot- should’ve paid *me*. Made arrangements to ship the body out--over to Ohio. Now let me tell you, it is a bitch and a half to send a dead body interstate. A bitch and a half. Some son that guy is. But the lady on the phone, she was real on top of it. As a matter of fact, she’ll probably pay you if you--”

“Daymon. I don’t want to hear it,” Lanford said. “A guy’s gotta have some dignity, alright?” Lanford left the police station. He went back home to his kitchen, and heated the leftover soupbeans for lunch.

**There are Things That I Remember**

There are things I remember, like the orange bowl. You came to my door with an orange bowl covered in wrinkled tinfoil that looked like you'd reused it. You smelled like curry and coconut milk, and I didn't like the way that it mingled with the fresh dry-wall scent of my new, blank apartment. "Welcome to Jersey City," you said. "I'm Priya, and I live in the dump next door." The bowl was filled with chick pea masala, and it made my eyes water because it was too spicy for my Ohio-born-and-bred palate.

"I'm Mary," I said. You asked me if I knew what that meant. I told you that I had an aunt named Mary. You said that in Hebrew, it also meant, "The perfect one." You decided you had the liberty to size me up, you had the ability to tell me who I was, you had the power to stand in my doorway and overtly flirt with me while my husband was in the kitchen unpacking our Pyrex dishes. I dropped Indian food on our new white

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tablecloth, tried to clean it by wiping instead of blotting, and told you I had to go and put it in the washing machine.

The next day came into my windows harshly because we hadn't put the blinds up. I remember waking up in a sweat and hearing from your apartment yelling, a breaking glass, and a pot or a pan hitting the wall that we shared. Then, you rang my doorbell and said, "If you leave in the next ten minutes, you can sit with me on the train." I only said yes because you knew where the station was and I didn't want to have to ask for directions. You were wearing a red linen dress and no bra. I was embarrassed, but I was also surprised at how artistic your body was. You always wore comfortable shoes, and I appreciated that. It reminded me in a way of my mother.

Talking on the PATH train, you asked me things-- you asked me about my husband Adam, about Ohio, about the riveting time I was having copy editing textbooks at Houghton Mifflin. I remember trying to be spiritual about it, and I believe I said, "I feel like copy editing is an exercise in cosmic justice...if I pick up enough of other people's mistakes, then the universe will eventually pick up my mistakes. I do it for the karma." You laughed, too kind to tell me how full of shit I was. I've always meant to thank you for that.

I visited the city last week. I have a granddaughter who lives there. She's learning to walk, and we took her to Central Park. My daughter decided to bring us to Belvedere Castle, so naturally I could only think of you. I sat on that stone staircase where we used to talk and looked through the wrought iron gate that protects people from falling off the edge of the stairs into nothing. I remembered that evening after work, before going back to Jersey City, when we talked about our parents. I lied to you and told you that my

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parents were divorced, because I was trying to match your exotic stories of your mother and father coming here from India. “How was it to be there, through all of that?” you asked me.

“Oh, it was fine,” I said. “Look at the turtle pond. It’s so green.”

“Did they ever love each other?” you asked.

“I think so,” I said.

“How did you know?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Sometimes you just don’t know about things. I mean, you just can’t tell. You’re not supposed to know everything.”

“But you can if you want to,” you said, and you didn’t push the issue any more.

At twenty-six, you still lived with your parents and your two younger brothers.

The shouts and the pots hitting walls were usually your father and your nineteen-year-old brother fighting about drugs or girls or his not wanting to go to college. I remember one time, you had me and Adam over for dinner and I was struck by the closeness of your walls, the food smells that made me nauseous, the people asking us questions about how long we’d been married, how we’d met in graduate school at Northwestern, how we both found the commute from Jersey City easy, and how no, we’d never had a *real* Indian dinner before, but we’d eaten at an Indian restaurant once.

I couldn’t believe that you maintained any autonomy in the midst of your family, but you managed to behave like an adult, like graceful hired help, or like a visiting friend. You offered us more wine when we ran out and you smiled at me when your mother did something we could laugh about later. I always liked our dinners together more than dinners with your family. On Thursday nights, Adam would have production meetings at

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his company, stay late to cement script changes, do readings, prep for the next week's shoots, and you would come over and we would cook and drink red wine.

One night we were sitting over my dining room table and you asked me what I cared about. I rattled off a list of things like Adam, my family, our apartment, and my job. You laughed, and I was offended. You amended your laugh with a hand on my knee and said, "That's so boring."

"Oh. Thanks," I said, still sarcastic and defensive (at twenty-seven!) from being a teenager and learning abrasion as a social shield.

"Don't be so defensive," you said. "Look. I love acting. I even love auditioning. I love the daily process of trying to succeed, of asking people to evaluate me and then challenging them." I thought about how infrequently you were cast. I think I missed the point of your statement.

"Well," I said. "I work in editing."

"Yes," you said. "You do."

"Maybe it's just harder to be passionate about textbooks."

"You want to write," you told me, narrowing your eyes in accusation.

"Everybody wants to write," I said.

"Okay," you said, seeing that you had planted something and deciding to give it space to grow. When you went home that night, I was agitated and I burned the journals that I'd kept since I was in high school. I dismantled the smoke detectors in the apartment, put them in the bathtub, and lit them on fire until they were pieces of charred paper and the covers were thick and black. I wanted to put the ashes in an urn, present them to you and then hold your hand while I scattered them from the top of the empire

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state building and gave a eulogy to the illusion of myself as a written voice. Three weeks later, since all of my writing was gone, I felt like I should fill the gap with something new.

I remember giving you the first story I wrote. It was about a husband and a wife burying their dead dog. You thanked me, and told me that you were glad that I was writing again. I went home disappointed that you hadn't read it on the spot and praised my lyricism. I continued to write for you, writing my next story about a divorce between two very wealthy people and the next story about a boy who played a yellow guitar on the streets of Mexico, until it got stolen and he was murdered. One night at dinner I asked you, "Do you ever read the stories I give you?"

You cleared my plate, kissed me on the cheek, and said, "What else would I do with them?"

"I don't know," I said. "Wallpaper?"

"There's not enough for wallpaper," you said. "Keep writing and maybe we can make a border for the bathroom." That night I stayed awake in my bed and thought of all of the things that I could write to move you. I don't know that I ever did.

Once, sitting on the front steps of our building, I even asked you what makes good writing, hoping you would accidentally throw me a complement. You told me, "Honesty." I didn't say anything but I held your hand and interlaced our fingers tightly. I wanted somehow to make sure you knew how brave it was for me to weave my hand into yours because I was learning like you to match up the outlines of my impulses and my actions.

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The next Thursday, when you cooked me a meal with three courses and then looked at me over desert to ask me whether you could kiss me, I had known it was coming. You got up from your seat at one end of my dining room table, kneeled down next to my chair, and we kissed once. I hesitated, and you squeezed my hand and got up to make coffee. I followed you to the coffee maker and put my hands on your waist. You turned around, told me not to worry, and started putting forks in the dishwasher.

I remember that you smelled like shampoo that night because you'd just washed your hair, came over with it wet. I remember that you left a pie tin on my kitchen table, and I tiptoed next door to place it outside of your apartment. I remember listening to you moving things around in your kitchen through the too-thin walls, while I drank too much coffee to be able to sleep until deep into the night.

You still came over the next morning to go to work on the PATH train. You rang my doorbell and said, "We're going to be late," and I said, "I know." On the train that day, you asked me if I'd written anything, and I said no. You asked me what time Adam got home last night, and I said midnight. You asked me whether you had misread the situation last night, and I said, "What situation?" You laughed and said, "Okay. Well, I guess I did."

On Thursday, I made plans to go out for drinks in the city with some friends from work. I didn't tell you. I got back for the night and there was a small bouquet of gerbera daisies by my front door with a note in calligraphy that said, "Grow up."

I threw the note in the garbage and gave the daisies to Adam. I started going into work on the earlier train. I found out that you were moving to Los Angeles when Adam told me at our dinner table on a spaghetti night.

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“I saw Priya today,” he said.

“Oh?” I looked out our window at children playing in the street, rolling balls of dust around the fire-hydrants and sewer openings. It was a dry summer and there seemed to be dust and pollen on everything.

“At the supermarket.” Adam scooped a new spoonful of spaghetti on his plate and took his glasses off. I imagined you going up and down the aisles at the grocery store, buying too much fruit because you loved to have it sitting on your table at home. “She said she was moving to LA. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Yeah. She said that she was going because there was much better acting work there, easier to get cast and stuff.”

“Do you think she’s right?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s hard to get work-- and Hollywood especially, they’re looking for beauty. It’s hard to sell Priya on her looks.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think she’s pretty.”

Adam thought about it-- he was always open-minded-- but he ended up shaking his head, shaking his nice curly hair and saying, “I guess, but not in any marketable way-- and she probably needs to lose weight.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “Who decides that?”

“Business standards. Look, I’m not saying what I necessarily believe, I’m just telling you how things work in the industry, Mares.”

“Well, if you don’t necessarily believe in the rules, maybe you should try to change them.” I got up from the table and left our apartment. I took a walk around the

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neighborhood. Tire screeches and car horns leaked through the wet August air, and it was still light out. I walked to the playground two blocks away from our building and sat on a green bench, with graffiti mushrooms drawn all over it. I saw you walking your family's dog. I shouted for you.

"Hey," I said.

You came into the playground and stood in front of me, sweating along your hairline. "Mary," you said.

"You're moving?"

"Yes- I'm flying to LA next weekend."

"Why?"

"Because I want to be in films."

"Oh. Are you sure you can?"

"I'm flying out next weekend."

"I mean, do you think you can make it?" I asked.

"Maybe," you said.

I wanted to hold your hand, but I couldn't reach so instead I petted your dog. "I think you can," I said.

"I know."

You sat beside me on the bench, you sighed, and you put your head on my shoulder. I put my hand on your knee and I also breathed. It got dark, and then you said, "Do you want to come over later?"

"Sure," I said, and I squeezed your hand and I left. Later that night, after I'd apologized to Adam and he'd gone to sleep, I went next door and rang your doorbell.

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You came to the door, and I remember you wearing a blue sweatshirt and a skirt with bells on the bottom. You told me to be quiet, your parents were sleeping. I followed you to your tiny back bedroom and you told me to wait because you had something for me. I sat on your bed and looked at your walls, covered in fabric and calendar pages from years past. You came back, humming a song I had heard on the radio and carrying a book with a thick manila cover. You handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Your writing,” you said. “I was afraid you wouldn’t keep it, so I kept it for you.

I smiled. “So you liked it.”

“I liked some of it. That’s not the point though. I wanted to give you a going away gift and I thought that this was the best I could do.”

“Well,” I said, flipping through the book, “It’s really pretty.”

I wanted to apologize to you. I wanted to say something to you that mirrored or somehow grazed what I was feeling, but you always did have to pull teeth to get an honest statement from me. I left your apartment, and in a way, I’ve been practicing talking to you ever since.

Since you moved, I finally left Houghton Mifflin and wrote freelance for awhile. I had something published in Vanity Fair, a tiny piece about an obscure relative of Princess Diana. They never contracted me out again, and I never got much other work. Since having children, I took a few years off, and then I started teaching English at a shi-shi private school in New Jersey. (We’ve moved to Princeton.) I thought of you often because I always thought you’d make a wonderful teacher, but I was afraid to advise you on anything. I’ve been retired for seven years now, and it’s been lovely.

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My bedroom gets a lot of sun and doesn't block out the noise of the garbage collectors, who always manage to wake me up. So I've been getting up with the sun and the garbage, making breakfast while Adam sleeps for another hour, calling my daughter before she drops her own daughter off at school, and spending the rest of my days writing mediocre stories in our overly-spacious dining room.

Sounds unremarkable, doesn't it? No, it doesn't, not to you. It doesn't sound unremarkable if you know how much I feel like a living, breathing version of myself. For such a long time, we walk next to ourselves, companions to our own souls, but never quite inside of them. It takes some of us longer than others to climb into ourselves and become one person rather than a pair. You were one person when I met you. It's taken me much longer. But I know that the unspoken rule between us, and perhaps the only thing that I ever owed you, is word from the front when I finally became one. I hope that I've fulfilled my promise.