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Dance Lessons

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Dance Lessons

by

Kaitlyn Burch

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Abstract

August Diamond is left lost after the sudden death of her father. The stories in *Dance Lessons* explore the themes of loss and grief, retreat and return, and finding your true self. The collection is a novel in stories, each story exposing another layer of August's past, her family, and their complicated relationships.

Table of Contents

Abstract
i

Dance Lessons
1

Notes of a Teenage Runaway
22

The Blood in Him
39

What We Know
55

Don't Let the City Destroy Our Love
74

The Land and the Water
92

Dance Lessons

When I was sixteen I met the only woman I ever loved, my dance teacher, Miss August. Clark asks me to tell him about her, again, on quiet Sunday evenings when we've finished our third bottle of Pinot Gris, and dinner has ended an hour ago. We usually have guests over, Lionel and James or David and Mike. Clark thinks the story is entertaining but also meaningful, so I indulge him. These are our slow Sunday evenings when we sit on our patio and feel like we are helping the sun set, think we are pushing it along, that our life has motion, and we trick ourselves into believing that what we've done has mattered for something.

I was summoned to dance class by my closest friends at the time, a blonde waif named Sophie Claire, with pointed elbows and shoulders, and her unlikely counter-part, Emily, the near opposite of Sophie Claire in every way: more round, more quiet, more

headed for obscurity. I can remember Miss August on that first day of class, chestnut hair piled on her head, a healthy body bouncing to the music. I couldn't take my eyes from her. I liked to watch her body as she demonstrated the moves, the muscles of her thighs apparent with every bend of her knee, even through her tight Lycra pants. She had such vast knowledge and authority that so clearly came from some place outside of where I was at the time, little Masonville, with its one main street and over-abundance of drive-thru coffee stands. Miss August had been living in Los Angeles or New York, and appeared in our little town, a strange and wondrous thing, a beacon of the possible, a treasure from a foreign land.

After I'd been taking her class for a month, I found myself standing on a curb in the February rain, watching Miss August smoke. Our intermediate jazz class started in a half an hour and I had been up to my usual afternoon wander in that dead space between the magic hour of school getting out and five pm, when dance class began. I shared a beat-up Camry with my brother Zeke, which meant I never got a chance to use it. When I get to this part, and I speak Zeke's name, Clark sighs a bit, a little whimper escapes from him, as if Zeke were a teen heartthrob, then he puts an arm around me, or pushes the hair from my forehead and says, "I would have walked with you."

By this point I had developed quite a serious crush on Miss August, the sort that left me thinking of her while I showered and considering her while I chose what to wear. Her car was parked in the large lot of the strip mall that held the dance studio, along with a Hallmark store, a Subway, and a vet's office. Her window was rolled down just a crack and smoke billowed out like some sort of release. I was only wearing a hoodie that day, though my mother had asked me to wear the winter coat she'd bought me last year, a large and

bulky thing that no longer fit my style. I had already started to think of these things, crafting an ensemble, the importance of a tailored fit.

I felt like I was spying on Miss August, catching an adult doing something that we teenagers weren't supposed to do. I had no interest in cigarettes, but I would probably smoke one if the right person asked me. Sophie Claire sucked on them all day long in a way that was sad. She so desperately wanted them to make her Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and while she was able to adopt a small sense of glamour she could never fully cover up the small town stain. I knew in that moment that if Miss August asked me, I would. I would smoke cigarette after cigarette if she wanted me to, and the possibility of this drew me toward her. I was intrigued, completely smitten. I stepped closer to her car, out from under the cover of the strip mall walkway, into the rain.

"Eli," she called as soon as I did this, as though I had truly been hiding and was now exposed. She tossed her cigarette on the asphalt and rolled the window all the way down, so her small face was visible and radiant. "You're getting all wet."

She was beautiful. Her neck, long and graceful as a swan's, swooping to hold up her head, her hair sat atop it as if it were a bird's nest. She had the small features of a chipmunk or squirrel, all cheeks and eyes. I stepped toward her door and she said I could come sit in her car with her. The idea quickened my heart.

"It's messy," she said, as I climbed in. She didn't apologize, which I admired. "Just push it aside. You can sit on it."

The mess, pieces of paper mostly, wasn't just a few scraps scattered along the floorboard and seat; the collection was deep. It was like the padding one would put in a gerbil's cage. "Are you sure I can sit on them?" I placed myself down gently.

“Yeah. It’s fine. They’re old.”

I put my backpack on the floor, my hands on my legs, like I needed to keep them where she could see them. I had been in so few cars beside those belonging to my family members. Her car smelled like cigarettes and vanilla air-freshener, and a large plastic diamond hung from the rear view mirror. I thought it must be so nice, to have something of one’s own to decorate with such things.

Miss August didn’t look at me, but out at the rain blurring the windshield. She seemed nervous now, with me sitting in her car. I wanted to make her feel better and I think I probably wanted to seem cool, so I said, “You can smoke if you want.”

Her cheeks reddened, adding another layer of depth to her beauty. “I don’t think I should,” she said.

“I just saw you smoking.”

“Were you watching me?”

I looked away, caught in my crime. After a moment I said, “It’s okay. Everyone I know smokes.”

“Like who?” She was so good at talking to me, so affable in conversation.

“Sophie Claire smokes.” I would rat out a friend. I was so in love.

“Really?”

“All the time.”

“You don’t?” She addressed me like a man grown, capable of my own decisions.

“I don’t. I don’t think it’s wrong or anything. It’s just a preference.” I liked the way I said that. I sounded like I had thought about the issue, like I was deeper than she could know.

“That’s mature of you,” she said and turned to me then, ever so slightly. I could tell she was relaxing a bit. She gave more of her weight to the seat, squared her shoulders toward me.

“It’s really okay,” I said, turning the same way, wanting her to feel more comfortable. “I won’t tell.”

“I won’t feel right.”

“Class starts soon anyway and you don’t want to smell like cigarettes.” I could hear my matter-of-fact tone. Zeke would have told me to mind my own business if I said that to him. Miss August always smelled like cigarettes. Cigarettes and some powdery deodorant.

It was Sophie Claire who had convinced me to take jazz class. One day during lunch, my fingers greasy from the cheese pizza I’d eaten (I was not convinced that it was the cause of my acne, as my mother had told me), she taught me the ballet positions. Sophie Claire had just finished a small bag of popcorn she brought from home, and a Diet Coke. “Stand with your heels together, toes out, that’s first,” she said, swiping her blonde hair from her face as she brought her feet together. I did as she said and placed my feet heel to heel. It wasn’t easy. I felt as if I was contorting my body, twisting my legs and sticking out by butt. “Your turn out is amazing,” Sophie Claire said. She turned to tap Emily on the shoulder—poor, sweet, mousy Emily. “Em—look at his turnout.” Emily smiled and nodded in her own dumb way. “You’re coming to dance class with us,” Sophie Claire announced. And dance class was really exactly what I wanted. I was just beginning to watch things like *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Cabaret*. I was fascinated with the waists of Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, so trim, and Gene Kelly’s ass was something I frequently thought of, the shape of it. I wondered how one got an ass like that. I never considered I would be the only boy in

class or that asking my parents would add to the long list of things that made them worry, made my mom sit me down every few months to pry about girls and feelings while my dad flipped through the channels.

Now, I felt like I could tell my parents not to worry, that there was a girl, a woman, who I thought I might be able to love. I was afraid that she was regretting inviting me into her car and I wanted to make sure I was invited back so I thought that I should comment on the music or the weather or something deeper so we could realize our common bond, realize that we were the kindred spirits I thought we were. So I said, “Why do you sit out here?”

She was quiet a moment, then she reached into her purse and pulled her cigarettes out, lit one and shrugged.

“I really won’t tell that you’re smoking, but you know people might see you sitting outside the studio.” My mom always said that I was going to end up in a profession where the goal was to make sure people knew they weren’t doing things the right way, a critic of some sort.

She shrugged again, which warmed me to her all the more. This indifferent dancer. “I like being in this car.”

I looked around, picked up a couple of the notes on the dash. Phone numbers and addresses, possible invoices of a sort. “I could help you clean it sometime.”

She turned her little face to me then. “I’m not allowed to clean it. This is my dad’s car,” she said.

“It’s nice of him to let you borrow it.”

“He’s dead,” she said, smoke coming out of her nose and mouth.

“Oh.” And immediately it seemed as though some hole had formed, vast and cavernous, between us. I didn’t know what to say. “My dad’s alive.” I shrugged as if it were no big deal.

She laughed a little then and it was like music. “That’s good.”

“My mom is too.”

“Even better,” she said, putting out her cigarette.

We sat in silence for a moment. There had been music playing the entire time but now the song seemed to take over and fill the car, demanding to be noticed. I didn’t know it then but we were listening to “Landslide,” by Fleetwood Mac. I’ve heard it so many more times since then, in dance classes and on soft-rock radio and every time I am transported back there, to her car, watching the shape of her shoulder as it exerted its force to extinguish her cigarette.

“Are you liking class?” she asked.

How could I tell her? How could I tell her that I loved every second of it? That I loved it more than anything I’d ever done? That I was so, so sad that it had taken me until now, sixteen long years into my life, to try this wonderful thing? “I never want to stop,” I said.

She smiled again, almost as if she was relieved. “You should take more. Ballet, tap, hip-hop. Take it all.”

“I’d have to ask my mom,” I said and then regretted it because it made me sound like a child. “Hey, I’m really sorry about your dad,” I quickly added, trying to make up for sounding young, wanting to show her I was capable of mature compassion.

Then it happened: She reached over, across the middle seat, covered in junk, put her small hand atop my own and said, “Thanks, Eli.” Yes, she had touched me before this, but only in a teaching capacity, when I held my arms above my head in high fifth, and she would appear behind me and touch that spot where your neck turns into your shoulders. “Relax,” she’d say. “Shoulders down.” Her hand on mine was something different, something more. This was the beginning of something.

Miss August and I shared a secret now. She had let me in on her grief. I knew something about her that no one else did, not anyone in our jazz class anyway, and I felt like this bound us together in some special way. She had turned to me, placed part of her burden on me, lightened her load, leaned on me, and I would be there for her.

That night when I got home my mom pulled leftover spaghetti from the fridge and heated it in the microwave and poured me a glass of milk. Our kitchen was small. We lived way outside of town, on a piece of land with a pond. We raised ducks and ate their eggs for breakfast. None of this seemed small town or provincial to me until I was much older, until I lived in New York and the boy who stood next to me at the *barre* every day asked me if I liked fucking goats.

“How was class?” my mom asked. She had been pretty at some point in her life, but by the time I was sixteen and Zeke was seventeen we’d stolen all the pretty from her. She was a smoker, always trying to quit with jars of thick brown liquid placed around the house labeled with: *This is what your insides look like*. The smoking had aged her too quickly. She’d kept her figure but hid it under large housedresses or flannel shirts. Zeke

walked in then, shirt off. He was on this exercise kick where he did one hundred push-ups every night and would walk around the house bare-chested and sweaty.

“Yeah, how was dance class?” he asked, spinning across the kitchen.

“You’re so predictable,” I said. He and I were in the phase where we mostly ignored each other. He gave his jabs, and I jabbed back, never as hard, only enough to make sure he knew there was still a bit of fight in me, but for the most part we left each other alone.

“Are you going to have a recital?” he asked. “Will we get to see you in a pair of tights? I’ll be sure to bring my barf bag.”

“Will you?” my mom asked me. “Will there be a recital?”

“I don’t know? Maybe.”

“Well, your father and I would love to come,” she said.

“Yeah. I’d love it,” Zeke said, taking my glass of milk and drinking it down.

“Zeke, really,” my mom said. This was the extent of my mother’s reprimands. A “Zeke, really,” or an “Is that necessary?” She really never stood up for me. It must have been hard for her. She was so in love with Zeke. She looked at him like he was her high school crush. I think she was amazed that something so beautiful could have come from her and my dad. Dark hair and a square jaw. Old movie good looks. Montgomery Clift.

Six months earlier his friend Josh had kissed me in our hallway while Zeke was on the phone in his room with some girl. Josh stopped me outside the bathroom and pushed me against the wall. I thought I was going to get punched but instead I felt his lips on mine. I’d thought about this, being kissed by a man, but it had never occurred to me that it would ever happen, that I would be able to go through with it. The kiss seemed to last forever yet

at the same time be far too short. I could hear Zeke laughing in the other room. My mom was in the kitchen making dinner, pots and pans banging together. I thought myself to be very lucky and also very dangerous, a risk-taker. And when it was over Josh didn't smile at me but stared at me squarely and held his finger to my lips so hard I tasted blood.

At lunch I said to Sophie Claire, "What do you think of Miss August?" Emily was quietly pulling the crusts off her peanut butter sandwich and Sophie Claire was eating her usual bag of microwave popcorn. She'd brought a straw from home and placed it in her Diet Coke.

"What do you mean?" Sophie Claire asked.

"She's a good dancer," Emily said, judiciously. She was the fair one, the understanding one, the one no one really cared about.

"Do you think she's..." I wasn't sure what I wanted to know, what I wanted Sophie Claire to say. I think I wanted to go over the details of Miss August with them. Talk about her face, her skin, her hair down to the tiniest follicle, the smallest cell. I wanted to deconstruct her and build her back up. I understand now that I never really thought that Miss August was beautiful in a desirous way. It wasn't sexual. I regarded her as I would a landscape, the way one can marvel at a cresting wave or the colors of a sunset.

"She'll be here until June and then she'll leave, go back to LA or her cruise ship or whatever."

"But she's cool?" I said.

"I think it'd be cool to work on a cruise ship," Emily said.

Sophie Claire looked slack-jawed at her. “That’s not real dancing, Em. Plus you have to show your boobs.”

Emily was thoughtful.

“You don’t have any boobs to show,” Sophie Claire said.

Emily looked down to her sandwich and I felt for her, but I was thinking of Miss August’s breasts and the jeweled outfits she might have worn dancing on those ships.

“Sounds glamorous,” I said.

“Miss August doesn’t have big boobs,” Emily said.

“Why have you been looking at her boobs?” Sophie Claire asked.

“I haven’t,” Emily said. “Do you ever think it’s weird that we have to call her Miss August? It sounds like she’s a calendar model or something.”

“Miss August is fine,” Sophie Claire said. “But what has she ever done?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m not going to worship the lady just because she lived in New York or wherever.”

“I don’t worship her,” I said.

“She danced on a cruise ship and she was in some razorblade commercial. Those things don’t impress me.”

“I’m impressed,” I said.

Sophie Claire shrugged. “I don’t want to be a dancer.”

“What are you going to be?” Emily asked.

“A doctor or a lawyer or something that makes money.”

“So why are you taking dance class?” I asked.

And Sophie Claire, in all her beauty and blondeness, the wonder of those blue eyes, that pointed nose, shrugged and said, “Because I’m good at it.”

Sophie Claire was one of those graceful people who didn’t have to try for anything and as a result never really appreciated anything. I have met other people like this. People who seem to float through the world on a cloud and have the niceties of life gently tossed to them. Looking back I should have known Sophie Claire was not worth being friends with, and I wonder to this day why she surrounded herself with the likes of myself and Emily—two outcasts. I know we were both drawn to her for many reasons: her beauty, her ease, her talent. She didn’t care what others thought of her and for that I guess I have to offer my admiration, but she never did anything for our friendship that didn’t directly benefit her. When you are sixteen the beautiful things of life shine so much bigger and brighter than the dull, reliable ones. Their consistency and loyalty is seen more as a deformity, a thing to mock, while the wild wonderings of the Sophie Claires are just that: wild. I wanted to stand up for Miss August then, to tell Sophie Claire that Miss August had depth that I’m sure we didn’t understand, that her father was dead, and that she was more mysterious than we could know.

Emily said something idiotic like, “But you’re so good, Sophie.”

I wanted to beat my chest against her wild beauty, prove to her that passion existed, that I felt it. “I want to be a dancer,” I said. “I don’t care if they don’t make any money.”

Emily’s sweet, dumb eyes widened. “You’re not that good,” she said.

“I’m sure you’d love being a dancer,” Sophie Claire said. “You’d finally be in the right dating pool.”

I remember her saying that. I really do, and it's at this point in the story when Clark always clicks his tongue and says, "What a bitch." He likes to hear the story up to this point. The story of how I became a dancer, the story of the only woman I loved. He thinks it's funny and sweet. When I begin the next part he usually says, "Stop. We don't need to hear it," as if when he'd asked in the first place he'd forgotten how it ended. So we say goodbye to our guests and agree that the dishes can be saved for tomorrow, but later, when we are lying next to each other in bed, he'll put his head on my chest and ask me to finish.

A few days later I stood on the same curb and watched Miss August smoke. It had stopped raining, at least for a few days. I didn't wait for her to ask me to join her. I walked to the passenger door and knocked. I had been waiting all day for this, the night before I had done a special load of laundry just so my jeans would be clean, and I'd snuck a shirt from Zeke's closet, a purple Van Heusen button down my mom had gotten him at the outlet mall.

"My brother is throwing a party," I said as I slid into the front seat. My parents were taking the annual trip to Depoe Bay to go whale watching, a journey they made every year on their anniversary, and a sojourn they used to burden my brother and myself with until last year when Zeke smooth-talked them into letting us stay alone for the four days they would be away.

Miss August smiled as I situated my backpack by my feet. It was as if she'd been waiting for me. She was smoking, which I took as a sign that she was comfortable with me and I drank in the sight of it. "You have a brother?"

"Just one. Do you have any siblings?"

She turned her head for a moment and looked out the driver's side window. I was worried that she was going to tell me that her siblings were dead, and my heart started to ache for this lonely creature. "No. I used to pretend I did, though," she said.

"Like an imaginary brother?" I asked.

She pulled her foot underneath her and put out her cigarette. "I guess," she said. "I named him Dimitri Diamond."

"Sounds fancy," I said.

"He wasn't. He liked to play in the mud and get dirty."

"You talk about him like he's real," I said.

"I know." And then she looked out the window for a longer time than before and I worried that I'd said something wrong. I went over our conversation in my head, analyzing each word. "Sounds fancy." It must have sounded as if I was mocking her. I must have sounded gay.

"Are your parents out of town?" she asked, suddenly breaking her stare.

It took me a moment to remember what we had been talking about. "Yeah," I said and thought I might impress her. "Should be a rager." The words felt strange in my mouth, like I was using someone else's toothbrush. Then I imagined it: Miss August at my house, as my guest. "You should come."

She lit another cigarette. "I don't think that'd be a good idea."

"Why?"

"I'm old."

"You're a few years older than me, so what?"

"Eli—I'm more than a few years older than you."

I looked at her: that small face, those big eyes, not a line, not a crease. “You look so youthful,” I said.

“But I’m not.”

“Thirty isn’t that old.”

“Who said anything about thirty?” she said, her voice pushed the edge of irritation.

I could tell I was wearing on her, that I’d upset her. I can laugh about it now—the last thing a woman in her twenties wants to be accused of is being thirty. But I’d severed the cord that attached us, as thin and brittle as it’d been, and we were silent. She fidgeted in her seat and I looked down to my backpack like I was searching for something. “Do you have a boyfriend?” I asked finally.

Her face softened with the question and she looked over at me like she was seeing me for the first time, just noticing my crisp purple shirt and clean jeans. She said, “I’m too old for you.” I could tell that while this was one of her reasons, it was not her only reason. I’ve often wished I could thank her for that. Thank her for not simply blurting out: *You’re gay*.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” I said. I was trying to keep her close, remind her that we shared something.

“It was a long time ago.” She put out her cigarette.

“Oh,” I said. “I thought it was recent. Isn’t that why you moved here?”

“It was why I left here,” she said.

I looked at the clock on her dashboard, the numbers green and glowing. “It’s almost time for class.”

“We better head in.”

I started to climb from the truck and turned. “I still think you should come to the party.”

She just shook her head at me and smiled. “You’re relentless.” I could tell I had gotten to her, had pulled her in, though I didn’t know how I’d done it. That night in class I remember feeling like I was really dancing, not just trying to keep up. In the beginning, dancing is like trying to fit something in your body that wasn’t meant to be there, an object large and unwieldy, and your body will fight you to keep it out. You are attempting to conquer the elements, like a surfer or a mountain climber, trying to control something that is grand and mysterious. That night I felt like I finally stood up on the surfboard. I was in the pocket of the music, on top of it, in it, part of it. I was filled the most wonderful warm feeling that I never wanted to end.

Sophie Claire was drunk. Her long legs stuck out from her short skirt and seemed to barely hold her up, the skinny angle of her thighs buckled under the weight of her inebriated body. But she was joyful. Her hair was pulled from her face and her cheeks glowed. She grabbed my face with her hands, pushed on my cheeks so my lips parted and I was rendered speechless. “You’re so good,” she said to me. “You’re a good faggot.”

I had been sitting on the couch in the living room all night, since seven o’ clock. I wanted a clear view of the front door in case Miss August came in so I could jump up and offer her my elbow. I really thought I would do this. I didn’t seem anything out of the ordinary about it.

Sophie Claire was on the couch next to me and Emily sat at her feet, practically holding onto Sophie Claire’s ankles as if she were a scared child.

“Where’s your brother?” Sophie Claire asked.

The party was loud. It had been growing exponentially, people multiplying before my eyes. I never had any illusions about what I was to these people. I was Zeke Larchmont’s strange younger brother, and that was all. But I grew up in a place where being different is the same as being dangerous and most of his friends steered clear of the couch that night. I had heard Zeke earlier, his voice bouncing off the kitchen cupboards— “I couldn’t kick him out.” But he could have, really. What hold did I have on the house? It belonged to Zeke, even when my mother and father were there. The place bent to his charm. Though by the time Sophie Claire was sitting next to me on the couch the party was all around us, spilling over the cushy arms, sprawled out on the floor in front of us.

“Where’s your brother?” Sophie Claire said again, louder this time as if I hadn’t heard her.

“Probably in the kitchen,” I said.

“You know she’s not going to come,” Sophie Claire said, lighting a cigarette.

“You can’t smoke inside,” I said to Sophie Claire, but looking at Emily. I hadn’t told Sophie Claire that I’d invited Miss August, only Emily, who looked down. Her eyes were collared with liner, black and thick. “Did Sophie do your makeup?” I asked her.

She put on her sweet smile and nodded. In that moment I hated her so much. I hated them both more than I’d ever hated anyone, or possibly ever would. Zeke walked into the living room and said to me, “There you are. I was just telling someone how you want to be a dancer.” And he began to do his stupid imitation of ballet, standing on his toes and twirling his arms over his head. Sophie Claire roared with laughter, so Emily did too. I laughed as well, pretending I was drunk, like I was in on the joke.

I lost track of Sophie Claire at some point. She got up to get another drink and never came back. Emily fell asleep on the floor, turning over periodically to reveal marks from the tiny fibers of carpet pressed into her skin. I watched her sleeping for a while, making sure no one drew on her face or stepped on her or made lewd gestures with her limp body. I imagined what Miss August might be doing tonight instead of coming to my party, something glamorous and interesting, I was sure. She was somewhere holding a glass of wine and laughing with sincerity and depth.

As the party died down, I got up and went to my room. I shut the door and turned on the light to find Sophie Claire, her skirt up around her hips, her hair falling over her shoulders, on the bed with Josh, Zeke's friend who'd kissed me so many months earlier.

Sophie laughed when she saw me, so obliterated by alcohol that she let her legs flop open, her chest convulsing with giggles. She didn't try to cover herself up.

"Eli," she said. "Look, Eli!" Though she didn't point me in a direction to look, and I assumed for me to look at her, or maybe she was telling Josh to look at me.

Josh pulled away from her and this was the first time I ever saw a penis. One that wasn't my own, or my brother's, or my dad's, or in a movie.

"Get out," Josh said barely turning toward me. I saw the full roundness of his ass, that gentle indentation.

Sophie laughed again and said, "Let him stay."

Josh looked from Sophie Claire to me, and for a moment he looked sweet, like he liked us. A wave of hope crashed over me. We were going to have a time. I would remember this for the rest of my life. Bonds were going to be formed right here, right now.

“Eli,” he said, like a memory, and his face changed. He sat on my bed, pants around his ankles, penis erect. “You ever sucked a cock, Eli?”

Sophie Claire lost it at this. She laughed and laughed and laughed. I wanted to turn and run. I wanted so much for Miss August to be out in the living room waiting for me to sit on the couch and talk to her, but I wanted to stay too. I walked toward him and Sophie Claire stopped laughing.

Josh stood to put it in my mouth and when all of him was in me I heard Sophie Claire gasp and then fall backwards giggling again. After a moment she was quiet and Josh put his hand gently on the back of my head and moved his hips so the tip was hitting my throat. I tried not to gag. I tried to relax my jaw, so aware of my teeth and their sharpness. It didn't taste like I thought it would, like maybe a finger in your mouth. Like skin, but spongy. It tasted like a girl, because he'd been inside of Sophie Claire. I thought I would feel for the first time what I really was with this action, connected to someone in a way I'd always wanted to be. I could hear Sophie Claire talking, saying, “You guys, come on, stop.” I think Josh pushed her away from him and she stayed quiet until he came, which felt like a small eternity. Unsure of what to do next, spit or swallow, I choked the semen down, almost gagging again. It tasted clean, almost chemical. Josh pulled me to my feet by the collar of my shirt and pinned me up against the wall. His face was so close to mine, his forearm applying a constant pressure to my Adam's apple. Sophie Claire stared at me, frozen and exposed on the bed. His words came out with so much hatred, guttural and wet. “If you tell anyone,” he said, not able to put into words the terrible things that would happen to me. He released me, stepped back and sat back on the bed, shaking his head. “Faggot,” he said, then he turned to Sophie Claire and didn't say anything, pulling up his

pants, a moment when it seemed like he should have been vulnerable, should have been so obviously culpable, but he wasn't. I felt as if all this was somehow my fault.

I told my first boyfriend this story when we were drunk and walking down 14th Street in New York, passing a bottle of white wine between us. He stopped on the sidewalk and hugged me. The longest hug I've ever had in my life. And I've told Clark this story more than once, because he says he likes to hear how I got started. He says he means in dance but I know he means other things as well. He thinks this story is important for who I have become. I don't know if he's right. I wonder how important it is to remember moments like these. If we can forget them, why not just do that?

Zeke has heard it too, but not until we were older. His wife had kicked him out of their house and he was sad and dejected. In his self-reflective state he called me and apologized for how terrible he'd been. Perhaps I saw it as an opportunity, responding to my brother's vulnerability, so I spoke the story into the phone, and it traversed the country through telephone wire. When I was done telling it there was silence on the line and then Zeke said, "Sophie Claire. Whatever happened to that girl?" And I asked about Josh. Whatever happened to him? And Zeke said, "How should I know?"

But the first person I ever told was Miss August, sitting in her car, three weeks after it happened. The spring was warming up and we had our windows rolled down. I told her and her face went soft. I was angry with her. "Why didn't you come?" I asked.

"Did you really expect me to?"

I sat for a while, wondering what I really expected from her. "I don't know," I said.

She reached over and grabbed my hand, then scooted across the bench seat and pulled me to her, held my head to her chest, warm and soft. I didn't cry but she did, my

head moving up and down with her heaved sobs. I don't know if I really knew then, or only figured it out as I got older, but she wasn't crying for me. When she was done she pushed me away from her, wiped her nose with the back of her hand and smiled.

Each time I tell the story my remembrance of Miss August is like a glacier—a piece of her breaks off and she is different than she was before. Then, she was everything; she had knowledge I had yet to gain. This is the Miss August that Clark likes; it is this Miss August that makes him ask to hear the story again and again, that promise of the foreign dazzle. But she has changed for me. I can now see her as she probably saw herself then. Lost and searching. Disappointed and alone.

Notes of a Teenage Runaway

The decision happens sitting in the balcony of a double feature of *North by Northwest* and *To Catch a Thief*. Your feet are up on the chair in front of you, and Sam has placed his hand on your crotch. Cary Grant is chasing Grace Kelly around the French Riviera, or maybe she is chasing him, either way Sam's hand is touching you where it's never touched you before. Running away seems to be your only option.

Your reasons are two-fold. First: A few months ago, while making out in his car after he'd cooked you Valentine's Day spaghetti (and had dusted Parmesan cheese on top in the shape of a heart—you're pretty sure a stencil was used), Sam suggested that it was time for you two to have sex. He presented these reasons:

1. You are both almost eighteen.
2. You'd been together for nearly six months.
3. You are both curious, safe, and responsible teenagers.

You can get romantic about many things. You are getting romantic about running away, about the open road, about living off Taco Bell, taking up smoking, and meeting other teenage runaways named Lacy, or Tammy, or Tonya. You are not romantic about sex. It seems like the least romantic thing to do. The stuff leading up to it seems romantic, the kissing and the touching, even the crotch rubbing, maybe, but the actual physical act, boiled down and looked at on its own—it's not romantic. Even if it is with someone like Sam, someone you really love, you think, and who bought you ruby earrings for Christmas.

Your second reason for running away: your dad died. They said it was sudden cardiac arrest, which basically means a heart attack. It was March 12th and he was in the middle of the woods, while on a fishing trip with his best friend and number one salesman,

Ernie Bordeaux. Your mom is a useless lump of salty, wet flesh. This event that should have pushed any normal teenage daughter closer to her mother has only made you find her repulsive. Not that you aren't grieving, not that you feel the need to prove your grief to anyone. You feel the opposite, the need to flee, to hide it, to get as far away from everything that has ever had to do with you. This post-father-dying world is different, yet annoyingly the same. It infuriates you, the whole time-marches-on idea. So you sit, Sam's hand on your crotch, Cary Grant and Grace Kelly pushing their faces together, talking about cold chicken and beer and you begin to scheme, to devise exits in the middle of the night, cataloguing the few things you will take with you.

Don't tell Sam about your idea because he will tell you that you're crazy, that you need to finish high school, that going to college is *important*. That, yes, shit is all fucked up right now, but it *will* get better. He'll tell you these things after he's taken his hand from your crotch, after the movie is over, in his car on the way back to Masonville. It will be raining, even though it's May already and it should have stopped raining. You'll stare out the window a lot as he says things like: "August you don't have to do this." He'll ask you what Judy says about the idea and you'll tell him you don't give a fuck what Judy thinks and you'll look at him then and he'll look more lost than you've ever seen him look. You'll think he might cry and you don't want him to so you'll put your head in his shoulder and tell him you won't leave, not soon anyway. So tell him nothing. Nothing about running away, and certainly nothing about hands on crotches. *OK Computer* is playing. Thom Yorke's whine leans on you from the speakers. Just stare out the window.

In the morning when you get up your mom is still sleeping. You stand in her doorway and tell her that you aren't going to school that day. She is lost in her bed, a fort of blankets.

The cats, all three of them, sit at the foot of the bed and meow.

“Okay,” she says. “What are you going to do instead?”

“I don't know.”

She raises her hand, calling you to her. It pops up over her fort, like a flag. “Come lay down,” she says.

“I'm up,” you say as you walk away. “You should get up.”

Before you shut the bathroom door you hear her say, “Why?”

Steam fogs the bathroom mirror while you sit on the edge of the tub, shower turned to full blast. You imagine your mom's face shoved into her pillow, eyes half shut. What does she think about? Your father all done up at his funeral? Or is it other moments, the good ones. You don't know what these are for her, but for you there is one that plays over and over, like a song on repeat: When you were six and he dropped you off at a sleepover he walked you to the door with your pillow shoved under his shirt like he was pregnant. You thought it was hilarious.

You walk to Safeway because it is full of people and fluorescent lights and you like being places that seem alive. Outside is warm, warmer than it's been all spring and your shirt sticks to your back as you wait for the traffic light to turn and you wipe your upper lip, and while you are glad to feel the sun on your face you also resent it, miss the rain from the day before, are upset that soon the Oregon summer will present itself in all its beauty.

Everywhere you look people dance: At the stop light the man in a suit and who must be too warm in her stockings do step touches, giving their shoulder a gentle dig with each repetition. People do *piqué* turns and *jetés* acrossing the street. You are seeing a grief counselor named Judy. You don't tell her about the dancing. You don't tell your mom either, or Sam. You tell no one.

At Safeway you get one of those cookies with M&M's in it instead of chocolate chips. You sit in the deli area and watch shoppers filling their carts, mothers wrestling with young children, old ladies being selective at the deli counter. You make a plan with your cookie, pull out a green M&M for Masonville, put it on the Formica tabletop. Pull out a red one and place it a few inches south of Masonville. It is Los Angeles. Pull out a yellow and place it far across the table, across a wide sea of plastic. You don't know where this is. In the fall you are supposed to go to the University of Washington in Seattle. Sam will go to Evergreen in Olympia. You'll be just an hour away from each other. You've heard from your dorm mate. Her name is Sienna and she's from Santa Rosa, California. That's wine country, she writes to you. Her handwriting is sloppy, like a boy's. She likes U2. Her favorite movie is *Sleepless in Seattle*. She has a cat that she wishes she could bring with her. Its name is Sheriff. She doesn't smoke but likes to drink white wine spritzers. A drink she learned to make from her gay brother who goes to art school in San Francisco. It's just Sprite and white wine mixed together. You don't put down an M&M for Seattle. You eat Masonville, then you eat the M&M at the edge of the world and Los Angeles too.

The heat radiates off the asphalt of the Masonville High parking lot. Sam sits on the small set of bleachers that face the tennis courts. He wears flip-flops and shorts. Groups of girls

gather on the lawn, roll up their t-shirts to expose their midsections, roll up their sleeves to expose their shoulders, attempt to toast their skin to a beautiful brown.

“Is your mom home?” Sam asks.

Before your dad died you and Sam used to go home for lunch to make out and watch reruns of *The Cosby Show* on WGN. Your mom doesn't have a job, never has, but she usually had lunch dates, or volunteer dates, or a watercolor class. *The busiest unemployed person I know*—that's what your dad called her. Not that she needed to work. Your family owns Diamond's Furniture, opened by your great grandpa, George Diamond. He started it as a small upholstery shop. Now they sell bedroom sets and living room sets and end tables and dining room tables with price stickers hiding in plastic. When you were in middle school you liked to help arrange the store, one small living room after another. You would spend the afternoon sitting on couch after couch and imagine the family that would own it, the dad who would put his feet up on the coffee table, the kid who would hang over the armrest.

“Of course she's home,” you say. You squint in the sunlight. You think about that book you read in English last year. The one about the guy who kills another guy because the sun was in his eyes. You understand how something like that might happen.

“Mr. Rivers asked about you again,” Sam says. He is wearing a ratty t-shirt that used to belong to his dad. It is thin and soft, advertising a play from the seventies about nuclear proliferation, *Alice in Blunderland*. This idea, the mushroom cloud, scared you when you were a kid, but now you know it was all a bluff. On the back it says: *We have not inherited the Earth from our parents we are borrowing it from our children*. Sam believes stuff like this.

“He would,” you say. The girls on the lawn lie in a line, propped on their elbows, synchronized, they extend their right leg to the sky, fan it to the grass. Repeat on the left.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sam asks.

You don’t know. Only that Mr. Rivers is nice and that he does seem to actually care about things. Not just you, but about life in general. You shrug. The girls roll over to their tummies, chin shelf with hands. They kick their feet as if they are swimming.

“He’s worried,” Sam says.

Sam is blotted out by brightness. “Aren’t we all,” you say.

“You’re being really cryptic.”

You’re not sure what cryptic means. Sam’s smarter than you. You apologize, and Sam scoots closer, puts his arm around you, face close. “It’ll be fine,” he says. “Maybe we should watch *Casablanca* tonight?” The girls roll and get up from the ground now. Their t-shirts tied up, their shorts short. They do *chassé tours* in a circle. What will be fine? Kids walk by and wave. They say: Hey, August. Quiet. It’s like you are underwater, in a fish tank and they wave tepidly from the outside, hesitant to tap on the glass, but they want to.

At home your mom is on the couch watching *One Life to Live*. Grandma Diamond is in the kitchen cutting up carrots and onions. “So you just don’t go to school anymore?” she asks, not looking up from her work.

You lean against the counter. “What are you making?”

“Split pea soup.”

“Gross,” you say opening the fridge.

“School?” she asks again.

“It’s fine, Grandma. It’s almost the end of the year.” You take out your mom’s bottle of white wine and a bottle of Sprite, pour them in equal parts into a glass.

“Now you’re drinking in the middle of the day?” She puts her knife down. Folds her arms across her chest. “Dorie—“ she calls into the living room. “Your daughter’s in here drinking white wine something or others.”

You take a sip. It’s light and refreshing.

“Make me one,” your mom yells back.

Your mom grew up in Colorado, in a small town called Golden that smells like wet dog food because it’s home to the Coors Brewing factory. Your parents met while your dad was driving around the country, avoiding working for his father at the furniture store, that’s how Grandma Diamond tells it. You’ve seen pictures of them then. Your mom, a tiny thing, sitting on top of his shoulder, arms up in a V. Your dad holds her there, like a prize, looking up at her with a beard so full and thick birds could nest in it. Your dad was a fourth generation Oregonian. He told you stories that his dad told him, about how the Diamonds didn’t come here from anywhere, but fell from trees one day, full-bodied adults holding hands, and they built a house overlooking the valley. Your grandfather Kellam Diamond died of a heart attack at a Lynnwood College baseball game. Your grandma Astoria was sitting next to him when he keeled over. She shoved aspirin in his mouth, massaged his throat to get him to swallow, punched his chest with her fist, then was pulled off him, cussing and kicking.

Your counselor, Judy, used to work as a secretary for the sanitation office but in a moment of inspiration she went back to school. She told you all this the first day you met like it was some great feat. Her office is a small room tucked away on the second story of a building in downtown Masonville. There is a bar beneath it and sometimes you can hear country music coming up through the floorboards. On the walls are the most harmless paintings of landscapes you've ever seen. You sit across from her on a small couch and pull your feet under yourself, leaning on the armrest. You tell her you are thinking of running away.

"How would your mom feel about that?" she asks.

"I don't know. She might not even notice."

She tells you this is a normal feeling.

"What's normal? Wanting to run away or my mom not noticing me running away?"

"August, I'm sure your mom would notice your absence. Let's explore these feeling though." Her voice is so soft, barely breaking the air. You want to shake her. As she talks, Judy uses her big over stuffed chair in a dance, fanning her legs, using her arms to push off into a *tour jété*. "Maybe you should make a pro and con list. The benefits of running away versus the benefits of staying."

"I know what a pro and con list is," you say.

"But August, I must tell you." She stops dancing and looks at you. "You can't run from grief. It will be with you always."

You count the moles on your arms.

"What does Sam say?"

Judy is on the list of women you don't want to end up like. Other women on that list are your mom, Madame Terri, Sam's mom, and really all women who live in Masonville.

In ballet class you grip the *barre* and watch the muscle move in the back of the girl in front of you. Madame Terri tells you to lift your chin, tells you to delicately touch the *barre*. You are strangling it, she says. It is a guide, not a crutch. She is old and fat and sits in the corner of the room calling out the combinations of *pliés* and *tendus*. You think about rotation and tension, pulling your muscles long and taut, like rubber bands. Move your arm through the air, against some invisible force, Madame Terri says. Dance is about tension, give and take, opposition. The invisible force gives you tension in your arms, gives you something to reach for. You feel that want to grab the *barre*, to hold on tight. Your center is off. You pull in your stomach, try to strengthen yourself from the inside. The mirror is always there. You check your lines. You look at the lines of the other girls. The grace from the top of their heads to the tips of their fingers. Loneliness settles in and you allow yourself to really feel it, don't fight against it. As you move to the music you are alone, anonymous, singular.

In your room that night you and Sam watch *Taxi Driver*, not *Casablanca*, with the door closed because your mom doesn't really care any more. Sam lies behind you and before the opening credits are over he has his hand on your boob. You turn over and kiss him more as an act of rebellion than because you want it. He grabs again, harder this time, and you are really pushing your faces together. Your hands feel his back, the slope to his ass,

his ass—you grab it. He goes for your pants. You are just wearing sweats so he easily pushes past the elastic and then his hand is there, on your crotch again, but this time it's on the actual thing, under the underwear, fingers exploring. You like the pressure down there so you push harder into his hand. The kisses are getting sloppier, wetter, and you listen to the sound of them, and you are thinking this might really be happening and you're sort of okay with it, because it has to happen sometime, right? An image of dancers pops in your head, all lined up, doing *soutés*, but also moving their hips sexually, rotating, gyrating. Madame Terri is one of them, so are your mom and your dad. It's gross.

Sam pulls his hands from your body. "Should we stop?" he says, nodding to the wall shared with your mom.

"Why?" You kiss him on his neck.

"Your mom's home."

"Not really," you say.

He props himself up on his elbows. "I don't think we should."

You hate that you've never done this stuff before and you hate that there has to be a first time for everything and that that first time has to be a big deal. You just don't want things to be such a big deal. "Really?" you say. "I thought you said we should have sex."

"Now I'm saying that we shouldn't. Not now anyway."

"Make up your fucking mind." You say it without looking at him so you can't see his hurt.

A knock at your door. "August," your mom says.

"Yeah."

Sam scabbles off the bed and you hate the goodness of him.

“Can Sam go check the backyard? I thought I heard something,” she says through the door.

“It’s fine, Mom,” you say, but Sam is jumping up, smoothing his hair, tucking his boner into his waistband. He opens the door and there stands your mom in jeans and a sweatshirt.

“Where are you going?” you ask.

“Nowhere.” She shrugs.

Sam slips past her, disappearing downstairs to open the back door and stand there for a moment looking out on the dark grass so he can tell her everything is fine. “Why are you dressed like that?” Her hair looks freshly washed.

“It just seemed like it’d been awhile since I wore jeans,” she says.

“So you’re wearing them to bed?”

“I’m not tired.” She tucks her hair behind her ear. “I was thinking you should go to school tomorrow.”

You narrow your eyes at her. “Did Grandma Diamond put you up to this?”

She shakes her head. “I just think it’s time we had some order around here. Move on.”

“Move on?” you say. It’s practically a laugh.

“Yes.”

“Good,” you say. “That is exactly what we should do. Move on.”

Sam flies up the stairs. You can tell by the rhythm of his footsteps he’s taking them two at a time. “All clear, Mrs. Diamond.”

Your mom looks at him like she doesn't know who he is, then she looks at you. "I have to go," she says. "I have to get something."

"Fine," you say. Sam stands dumbly in the middle of the room while you listen to your mom's light frame on the stairs. The door shuts. A car starts.

"When was the last time your mom went somewhere?" Sam asks.

You shrug. "The funeral?"

"Maybe we should follow her."

"No. We should leave," you say. And it swells in you—this is it. This is running away. You are doing it. You grab a back pack, throw in three pairs of underwear, your favorite hoodie, some tennis shoes, your tap shoes. You're not really thinking, but moving on instinct.

"What are you doing?" Sam asks.

When you were seven you had an imaginary brother, same brown hair as you, same blue eyes. One day he convinced you to run away. You filled your backpack with similar items, including the tap shoes. You don't need tap shoes, your brother told you. He was all about survival and necessity. You put them in your bag anyway, along with a box of fruit roll-ups and three chocolate chip cookies. You and your brother walked from your house to Wortman Park, seven blocks away. You played on the swing set then climbed a tree. Your brother told you that only losers go home after running away. Losers and babies. You wondered how long you'd been gone. You were starting to get bored. A family spread out a blanket underneath the tree and had a picnic. The girl tripped over a root and scraped her knee, bloody and full of dirt. Her tears were coarse, each wail grating against the home you'd made for yourself, scraping away its invisible doors and windows. You got

home at dusk. Your dad was mowing the lawn and waved as you climbed the front steps. Your mom pulled out the empty box of fruit roll-ups out of your backpack. You'd been gone four hours.

"Are we escaping to a musical?" Sam asks. "Why do you need tap shoes? Why do you need any of it?" He follows you down the stairs, out the door. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

Your mom has taken your dad's car, a Lincoln Town Car he said impressed the customers. Sometimes you worry that your dad was just a small town furniture salesman and that your mom was just his wife and you are just their daughter.

Sam drives. He takes Highway 18 west, out toward the coast. This isn't the way you want to go but you don't know where to direct him so you just let him drive. He doesn't say anything and after a half hour he pulls into the parking lot of the Spirit Mountain Casino in Grand Ronde. The lot is full, the building lit up with lights in blue, yellow, and green. You think they are beautiful in their own way, so full of life.

"Want to gamble?" you ask.

"Where we going?" Sam says. The car is still running.

"The beach?" you say. "The casino? We could sleep here. Get a room."

"Then what?"

"What do you think?"

"We need to be eighteen."

"We go to the beach and claim a cove of our own. Hope the tide doesn't get us?"

Sam is quiet, as though he is really considering this option. “I’m not sure that will make anything better.”

“What if it will?” you say.

You end up back in Masonville, at Safeway because it’s the only thing open. You put on your tap shoes before going inside and revel in their cold clicks as you and Sam walk the aisles. A woman in the bread aisle does a head roll as she squeezes the loaf, checking its softness, and in produce a couple does kick ball changes as they juggle apples. A man dances with a head of cabbage, holding it in his arms and twirling, and down each aisle someone leaps, doing huge *jetés* and you do them too. You leap so high you could grab those fluorescent lights. Sam cheers for you. The men in the meat department dance with raw chickens, their flesh bumpy and cold. The lights buzz.

Sam says, “Let’s grill some meat.”

You tap your toe, not wanting the dance to be over. “Now?”

“Sure, BBQ for breakfast.”

So you stand in front of the meat case poking at bloody steaks wrapped in plastic. “This was an animal’s muscle,” you say and imagine your thigh muscle, leaned out from dancing, plopped on a Styrofoam tray. You push your finger into the flesh. “What’s the best part of me to eat?”

“Don’t be morbid,” Sam says.

At home your mom sleeps in the front seat of your dad’s car, mouth open slightly, eyes closed. She looks dead. Sam goes to start the BBQ and you open the passenger door,

slide in. The bench seat is covered with your dad's notes, addresses of sellers, notes on customers, repair shop receipts. They seem important now, small pieces of him strewn across the bench seat of his Lincoln Town Car.

You give her a gentle push on the shoulder. "Mom," you whisper.

She opens her eyes quickly. You watch as she figures out who she is, why she is here. Her whole world crashes back on her as she remembers her life. It happens fast. "August," she says. She blinks heavy now. "I must have fallen asleep."

"Where did you go?"

"Nowhere. I drove around the block a couple times then parked in the driveway."

"And you fell asleep?"

"I was reading your father's notes. I must have nodded off."

You know that when you leave you won't be running away—you'll be abandoning her. Out through the windshield smoke rises up from the backyard.

"Is something on fire?" she asks.

"Sam's barbecuing."

"At this hour?"

"I wore my tap shoes to the store."

She looks over at you, reaches across the seat and puts her hand on yours. "Was it fun?" she asks.

"It was," you say.

"Do you think you can go to school tomorrow?" she asks.

"I don't want to."

She is quiet a long time, then nods her head slowly. "What do you want to do?"

You pick up one of the pieces of paper. There is an address on it, some place you've never heard of called Sweet Home. "Go away," you say.

"Where?"

"I don't know."

She leans her head back on to the seat. "You can go anywhere you want to, in the entire world, right now. Where do you go?" She smiles, pleased with this game.

"I don't know," you say again.

"I can't help you get there if you don't know where you want to go."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You'll be all alone."

She just looks at you and says, "I know."

In the end it's all made very easy for you. Your mom calls your Aunt Ellie in Los Angeles and asks if you can stay with her for a while. She doesn't cry or anything. She is calm and exact, like she is asking Ellie to take her plants while she's away. Sam drives to the airport and your mom rides in the backseat. She hasn't been out of Masonville in so long that the drive is like a safari tour, the world new and wondrous to her. She points out the most inane things along the road: Kramer's has a new sign, the river looks high, they've painted the post office, there are already strawberry stands up. You would give anything to turn around and tell her to shut up, but as the metal tube lifts you into the air and you stare out the window at the shapes of concrete and blobs of green you wonder: what are your mom

and Sam talking about on that car ride back to Masonville? You wish you could listen, just for a moment, and you miss her. Already, you miss her.

The Blood in Him

In 1975 Doug Diamond killed a girl. The girl was Janie Bassmen, turning her yellow VW Bug onto Wallace Road, the sun in her eyes. She ran right into the twenty-two foot long delivery truck Doug was driving. Janie was killed on impact. A pint of strawberries that had been given to Doug by the woman whose loveseat he'd just delivered fell to the floor of the cab and Doug sat stunned for a few minutes before looking out the window and seeing the VW bug, flattened, windshield covered in Janie Bassman's blood. Unsure of what to do he climbed from the truck, over Janie's car. He looked into the broken window at her body and threw up. From the house he'd just delivered the loveseat to he called the police. The woman sat on her new piece of furniture, hands covering her mouth, as Doug described the accident into the phone.

In Golden, Colorado he ran out of money. The Coors Brewery filled the air with the scent of wet wheat. Hills, brown and stiff with dried grass, surrounded the small town. The elevation was 5,675 feet. On this July day the sun made the leather seats of his truck burn. He stopped to sit in the shade of a tree and eat the hamburger he'd bought from the local Dairy Queen with his last sixty-five cents.

He watched two girls playing tennis, each in white, their breasts moving on their chests, wonderful mounds of flesh. Since leaving Masonville Doug had been with one girl, that made three for his lifetime. The girl was a barmaid in a tiny Montana town. She lived

in a trailer on an empty plot of land with nothing around but the sky. She had told Doug he could stay as long as he wanted and cooked eggs for him in the morning in a way that made Doug feel guilty, making sure the yolks weren't too runny or too hard.

He'd had a girlfriend back in Masonville, Patty, and they'd been serious. They'd started dating his senior year of high school. Patty was smart and was attending Lynnwood College, majoring in education. Doug's mother thought she was perfect and frequently asked Doug, "What are you waiting for?" But he hadn't spoken to Patty since the accident, even though she'd tried to talk to him, and it wasn't Patty that Doug felt like he'd betrayed by letting this woman cook eggs for him. It was Janie. He thought of her constantly and had grown used to it by now, almost comforted by it. Though he had never known her not covered in blood, it was an image of her doing something like that—standing over the stove of a small, light-filled kitchen cooking eggs—that floated through his mind at night before he fell asleep.

The girls Doug was watching weren't very good at tennis, but he enjoyed the sound of the racquet hitting the ball, and the sun on his face. The girls grumbled when they missed, hooted when they made contact. He thought of Janie and tried not to enjoy the breeze too much.

The trickle started then, way back by his brain, like something tickling him, and then came the gush. Blood ran from his nose, as free flowing as water from a faucet. He brought his forearm to cover it, bleeding on his flannel shirt. He watched the blood spread across the fabric, the green of the cloth changing to purple. Hopping to his feet, he pulled his arm away and felt the warm liquid cover his upper lip, and looked down to see his

blood on the grass. He pinched his nostrils and opened his mouth, tilted his head back, gagging when he tasted metal in his throat.

“Hold your nose like this,” one of the girls called to him from the tennis court. It was the smaller one, with the smaller breasts. She pinched her nose between her eyes, racquet hanging by her side.

Doug followed her advice, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

“Don’t tilt your head up,” she called.

Doug leveled his head to look at her and wiped the blood from his face. The skin of his hand contracted, the blood already dried and stiffened in the summer heat.

She exited the courts and came to stand a few feet from him. Her partner lingered behind, chasing down their tennis balls. “Bend your head forward and pinch your nose,” she said, showing with her body what she meant.

Her tennis partner walked toward them like she was bored. “Is that your truck?” she asked.

Doug was dizzy, the sun in his eyes.

“Don’t faint,” the little one said.

“Why would he faint?” the big one said.

“He looks like he’s going to faint.”

“Cuz of the blood?” the big one said.

Doug felt the everything of him drain out and he reached his hand out instinctively, grabbing the big one’s arm. “Dorie,” she said to the little one. “He’s going down.” His knees collapsed out from under him. All he did was blink and the world went dark and noiseless. It was as though all of blood in him evaporated, suddenly, and he withered to the

ground, no longer held up by anything. When he opened his eyes the two girls stood over him. The wind fluttered under their tennis skirts. He could see the fleshy upper thigh of the big one.

“You passed out,” she said.

The Colorado sky looked like the Masonville sky, just like home.

“Your truck is rad,” the big one added, offering her hand to pull him up.

“Stop talking about his truck,” said the little one.

Doug felt confused, light headed.

“You need a ride somewhere?” the little one asked. “Do you live around here?”

“We could drive your truck,” said the big one. “Give you a ride home.”

The little one’s eyes widened. “Stop talking about his truck, Ellie!” She gave her a shove.

If he were in Masonville Doug would have gone home, asked his mom to wash his shirt. She would have given him a warm cloth to clean his face with, but he wasn’t home. The day before he’d driven through Rocky Mountain National Park without paying the entry fee and had seen elk carrying around racks of velvety antlers on their heads. The sky had seemed closer to him there. Doug felt like he had to say something. The women crouched near him, staring, waiting for him to collapse again, or bleed again.

“Your face is all bloody,” said the big one.

“I’m fine,” he said. What are you going to do out there on your own? his father had asked him before Doug left. How will you work? Doug knew nothing except that he couldn’t be in Masonville anymore, couldn’t drive a delivery truck, couldn’t sit at a desk, couldn’t sell furniture. On the road every time he saw a VW Bug he saw Janie, metal

crushed in on her, her blood on the windshield, saturating her hair, covering her face, and he'd get this feeling, like he knew that everything his parents had ever told him was important wasn't.

The tennis players were Ellie and Dorie Saint John, Eleanor and Dorene. Both home from college for the summer. Dorie, the little one, was older, twenty-two, and enrolled in the state university in Fort Collins. Ellie was nineteen and studying modern dance in California somewhere north of LA. Ellie told him all this from the middle of the bench seat of his truck as they wound their way up toward Table Mountain. Doug wasn't sure where they were going. Their house? Their parents' house? He'd been on the road for a month and a half. He stopped for a week in Montana and worked on a painting crew. Somewhere in Ohio he picked green beans for a day. There had been entire days on end when Doug spoke to no one, drove for twelve hours then pulled over to sleep in the cab of the truck, or the bed if the weather was right. He liked that quiet, the narrowing effect it had. The silence was like pulling focus. Doug felt as though it were some grand experiment: how many days could he go with out talking to anyone? When he'd said, "I'm fine," to the Saint John girls he hadn't spoken to anyone in four days. And now, sitting in the truck with these two girls, woozy from the nosebleed and the fainting, he had entered the world again and felt timid and new. Doug watched their hair whip around their faces in the wind. "Killing Me Softly" came on the radio and Ellie turned it up.

"You on a vision quest?" she asked. "The Native Americans, they go out into the wild and find themselves."

"I'm just driving," Doug said.

Dorie snorted. “Just drivin’?”

Doug knew she was mocking him, but he didn’t care. He’d heard it before, and he simply couldn’t figure out what else to do besides drive. So he just smiled a little and nodded.

“But where are you going?” Ellie asked.

Dorie squinted at him. “Are you a fugitive?”

Doug raised his head from the window. “Not really,” he said.

Ellie began singing along with her eyes closed. “*Strumming my pain with his fingers...*”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dorie said.

“Is it drugs?” Ellie asked. “I smoke pot.”

Dorie turned up a long gravel drive that led to an A-frame style house. “You shouldn’t just be offering up that information,” she said to her sister.

“Doug won’t tell anyone,” Ellie said. “He’s a fugitive.”

The truck rocked as Dorie pressed the brake and put it in park. “So what are you a fugitive from?” she asked.

The two girls looked at him. “I’m not a fugitive. I’m just driving,” he said.

“So where are you going?” Ellie asked again.

“I don’t know,” Doug said.

The house was all windows with a garden down the sloping hill. The front yard was full of plants long forgotten in large ceramic pots, gardening gloves, and birdbaths. The sloppiness relieved Doug, put him more at ease. Doug’s mother would have clicked her tongue at the sight of it.

“You must have a lot of money. Think of all the things you have to buy on the road. Snacks and gas and hotel rooms,” Ellie said.

Dorie stared hard at her sister. “You don’t ask people about money,” she said.

“Oh please,” said Ellie. “Doug doesn’t care. Do you?”

Doug looked to Dorie, then to Ellie. Ellie pressed her bare knee against his thigh, a gentle yet constant pressure. “I don’t mind, not really, I guess,” he said. Dorie and Ellie had the unmistakable marks of relation: similar hair color, eye color, face shape. Two different models made by the same maker. Dorie seemed contracted and pulled in on herself, where Ellie’s personality oozed from her, and grabbed a hold of Doug. He wondered if Janie had a sister. What did she look like?

In the bathroom at the Saint Johns’ the towels were arranged on the rack, stacked on top of one another. The opposite of the outside of the house, things had their place in this bathroom. A basket of fake daisies lay on the back of the toilet. The toothbrushes and creams were all hidden away in drawers and medicine cabinets. It felt as though the room was never used or maybe cleaned often, like a hotel bathroom.

He ran the water in the shower, watched it run pink as he scrubbed his nose. Janie’d had a husband. They lived in Dayton, a small town south of Masonville that really only had one main street and a large park, one blinking traffic light, one bank. There wasn’t even a gas station. The night before Doug left town he parked his truck down the street from the Bassmen’s house and watched Janie’s husband mow the lawn, then sit on the porch with a yellow lab and drink beer. Doug wanted that house in that little town, with a lawn to mow and a beer to drink. A wife like Janie.

The day had been bright. Everyone told Doug he had done nothing wrong. There was nothing he could have possibly done. This small, tiny thing driving a VW Beetle. Janie Bassmen. She'd probably been listening to the radio. She probably loved singing Carole King at the top of her lungs. She probably planned on planting a garden for the summer, planned on having babies and making their beds with tight hospital corners the way Doug's mom had made his.

The accident got a write-up in the paper. Doug's name wasn't mentioned and Diamond's Furniture wasn't named explicitly, only referred to as a local furniture store delivery truck. "Local furniture store," Kellam Diamond said. "We're the only show in town. It was her fault. This makes us look like the bad guys." The paper didn't mention Janie's husband, the house in Dayton, Carole King, or the garden and the kids, only the sun and the delivery truck.

Dorie was in the kitchen making lemonade when Doug came out of the bathroom. Her back was to him and Doug noticed what a strange little body she had. She was all muscle, with narrow hips and broad shoulders, but with her hair pulled up off her neck Doug saw its delicate line, and her strong jaw. Her beauty was not delicate, but she was something to look at.

"You getting back on the road?" she asked, not turning around.

Doug touched the counter. It was sticky. There were dishes piled in the sink.

"I guess," Doug said. Then asked, "Where are your parents?"

Dorie turned to Doug, pointing a wooden spoon at him, spraying him with lemonade. "Why? Is this the part where you murder me and Ellie?"

Doug put his hands up. "I have no plans to murder you or Ellie."

Dorie leaned into the counter and smiled. "You're too serious."

Ellie came turning into the kitchen then, her ponytail swatting her face with every revolution. She'd changed into a bikini top and cut-off shorts, her pudgy roundness moving along with her. She stopped in front of Doug. "You'll stay for dinner," she said, taking his hand and curtsying. "We're making beef and bean burgers."

During dinner the girls took frequent trips to the fridge to get beers, which they mixed with lemonade, calling the concoction Sunshine Soda. They served a salad with chopped up tomatoes and cucumber on it, from the garden, Dorie told him. They were the first vegetables Doug had eaten in weeks.

"So where have you been?" Dorie asked, leaning back in her chair. They were seated outside on the back deck, the yard just a few steps away, cluttered with bags of potting soil and shovels, grass ankle deep.

"Everywhere," Doug said, though it wasn't exactly true.

"Did you go to LA?" Ellie asked.

"I drove through it. I stopped in Malibu for a little bit."

"Did you go surfing?" Ellie asked. "Surfing is monstrously amazing."

"No. I didn't surf," Doug said, feeling as though he should apologize.

"What's been your favorite place?" Dorie asked.

Doug didn't answer immediately, pretending like he had to think.

"If you say Golden I'll make your nose bleed again," Dorie said.

“I liked seeing the Atlantic Ocean,” he said. “But really it’s kinda cool to see how alike every place is.”

“Sounds depressing,” Dorie said.

“Sounds really depressing,” said Ellie.

“I guess I find it comforting,” Doug said. “Reliable.”

After dinner they cleared the table and Dorie did the dishes while Ellie dried. Doug offered to help but they told him to sit and relax. Ellie walked across the kitchen with a plate on her head. Doug sat at a bar stool next to the phone on the wall, a message board hung next to it where someone had written: *Give Peas a Chance*.

After dinner Ellie wanted to put on a talent show but both Dorie and Doug claimed to have no talents. They sat in lawn chairs on the back deck, the sun swooping in low, and watched Ellie dance. Doug didn’t get most of it, certainly didn’t recognize it as any sort of dancing he’d ever seen. She rolled around on the grass, limbs pulled in. She was funny about it, calling out things like, “The Dance of the Potato Bug.” Doug tried to figure out how he’d got to this point, on this lawn chair, in this backyard, with these strange girls, and he drew a heavy line connecting Janie and Dorie and Ellie and the sun. Continuing in her dance Ellie walked all around the yard, placing her feet on the grass with such intense deliberateness that the intentions of her movements were palpable, even to Doug. Ellie did this from one side of the yard to the other, stepping over lawn art—a bowling ball covered in pennies, a garden gnome.

“She’s just walking,” Doug whispered to Dorie.

Dorie kept looking straight ahead, watching her sister. “I know,” she said.

Then Ellie stopped, looked at them and screamed so violently that Doug jumped up from his seat. Dorie laughed, nearly falling out of her chair and Ellie just walked calmly back to the deck. “Your turn,” she said to Dorie.

Dorie folded her arms across her chest. “I can’t do anything.”

“Do a back flip,” Ellie said.

“I’ll hurt myself.”

“We’ll take you to the emergency room. It’ll be fun,” Ellie said.

Dorie looked to her sister, then to Doug. Doug started to feel the trickle again, back at his brain, the blood was coming, but Dorie was already out on the lawn. She turned sideways, held her arms up, and then in one quick motion she bent her knees and brought her arms down. For a moment she was upside down, legs above her head, then she was on the ground again, feet planted. She raised her arms about her head again, this time with flourish. Doug clapped, the blood was already coming from his nose.

“He’s bleeding again!” Ellie called. She was fast to grab a towel from kitchen, which she held to Doug’s face, practically smothering him.

Dorie took her time walking back up to the deck. Doug felt a slight twinge of disappointment, that she wasn’t in more of a rush to save him. He tried to look at her while Ellie held the towel to his face. “Pinch here,” Dorie said, pinching her own nose between the eyes. She leaned against the railing of the deck. “You need to get out of the Rockies. You’ll bleed to death.”

Ellie looked to her sister and said, “He has a talent for nose bleeds.”

All night Doug kept waiting for Mr. and Mrs. Saint John to come through the back door and find their daughters on the porch with a stranger, but they never showed up. He, Dorie, and Ellie sat around the deck talking and drinking late into the night, until Table Mountain rose up from the backyard, a giant black rock. The night was punctuated by moments that pulled Doug back into the world. He shared a Virginia Slim with Ellie while she tried to explain modern dance to him, pulling and contorting her body as she spoke and smoked. Dorie beat them both at Spit, though Ellie complained the whole time that it was a child's game. And the one thing, the best thing: Dorie holding his face while she cleaned the blood from it with a perfectly warm washcloth. Doug closed his eyes as she worked on him, taking confident swipes around his nose and mouth.

When it got too cold they moved inside where Ellie quickly fell asleep, her body heavy against her sister on the couch. Dorie squirmed out from under her, sliding from the couch and coming to sit next to Doug on the floor, their backs against the furniture. Ellie's head flopped onto the armrest with a soft thud.

Dorie turned so she was sitting in front of Doug, cross-legged, facing him. "I have psychic abilities," she said.

"No, you don't." Doug had been raised in a family of pragmatists. Everything that needed to be understood in the world could be seen with your own two eyes. His parents never made him go to church. There were no such things as psychics or ghosts. You lived, and when it was your turn, you died. Don't try to make sense of the stuff that happens in between. Don't try to make sense of Janie Bassmen slamming her car in to your delivery truck.

Dorie took his hands in hers. “Ellie and I both do,” she said. Her hands were small and cold. “Close your eyes.”

Dorie’s knees touched Doug just below his own. He looked down into her lap before he closed his eyes, and noted the way her thigh sloped, followed the line into her shorts.

“What’s your last name?” Dorie asked.

“Diamond.”

“Sparkly,” Dorie said.

Doug opened his eyes. Dorie’s were closed. He stared at her face, so close he could count her eyelashes. He had never met Janie Bassmen, had never spoken with her, held her hand, or watched her cross a street. He had only seen her dead body, leaning across her steering wheel, eyes open. He wanted to lean in and kiss Dorie. He wanted to never let go of her hands.

“I see you driving. By yourself,” Dorie said.

“That’s what I’ve been doing,” Doug said.

“Looks like that’s what you’re going to keep doing.”

“When do I stop?” Doug asked.

Dorie squeezed her eyes tighter, like she was really trying to see something, some future happening behind her eyelids. “When your nose stops bleeding.” She laughed, opening her eyes and letting go of his hands.

“Where are your parents?” Doug asked.

“What do you mean?”

“They never came home.”

“They’re in the Peace Corps.”

“What’s that?”

“Where are you from?”

“Masonville.”

“Is Masonville part of the world? How have you never heard of the Peace Corps?”

“I’m not very smart,” Doug said.

“This has nothing to do with intelligence.”

Doug shrugged. “I’m not really part of the world.”

“Sure you are,” said Dorie, taking his hands again. “They are in Tonga. Have been for the last six months.”

“Tonga?”

“It’s a bunch of islands in the South Pacific.”

Doug liked that she was holding his hands again. “When will they be back?”

“Next month. Mom’s a nurse and my dad’s an engineer and they help people somehow. Build houses or something. They said they’d been wanting to do it since Ellie and I were little and since we are both safely in college they figured it was time. Pretty wild, huh? Parents have so many secrets.” She said the last part in a whisper.

Doug couldn’t imagine his parents having any secrets. “I’d like to go there.”

“Why?”

“It’s far away,” Doug said.

“Seems like you just can’t get far enough away,” Dorie said and leaned in and squinted, like she was examining his face for some mark, some lesion, something that

explained him to her. Staying in close she said, “So Ellie and I have been alone all summer.”

“That’s not so mysterious. When they never came home for dinner I thought something mysterious was happening.”

She pulled her face away from his. “Like what?”

“Like they were dead.”

“You’re morbid.”

Doug looked down. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t apologize. I’m glad they’re gone. Not because Ellie and I get to be alone but it seems like parents always have these secret lives they wish they’d lived if only they didn’t have kids.”

“You think?”

“For sure.”

“I don’t think my parents do.”

“All parents do. And when you’re a parent you will too. So will I.”

Doug thought of Janie, of the secret life she might have wished she lived. “I hit a girl,” he said.

“What?”

“With my delivery truck. I hit a girl. She died.”

“So?” Dorie said, almost defiant.

“So she was alive and now she’s not because of me.”

“And this is why you roam the country?” she asked.

Doug nodded. "The sun was in her eyes," he said. "You know how it gets really dark when the sun is really bright. She just didn't see me."

"So it's not your fault."

"That's what everyone says."

That night Dorie and Doug pulled sleeping bags onto the living room floor and fell asleep holding hands. This was when Doug started to forgive himself. By the time the Saint Johns came home from Tonga, tan and full of questions, Doug and Dorie had driven to the courthouse in Denver and gotten married. Ellie was the maid of honor. After the ceremony the three of them ate donuts and drank coffee in Civic Center Park. Their honeymoon was a road trip back to Masonville. The Diamonds wired them money to stay at the fancy lodge at Yellowstone, where they snuggled in white terry cloth bathrobes, swam, and watched TV all day. As they drove into Masonville Doug took her down Wallace Road, pointed to the spot where he'd hit Janie, and said this is where it happened.

What We Know

Dorie waits until ten to call August. She makes coffee and reads the paper, smoothing it out flat across the kitchen counter. Her examination of the obituaries is thorough, the details pored over. She notes the cause of death, the survivors, when the service is, where to send money. Then she reads the front page a second time, hanging on each word of how the Masonville police arrested a man who'd been robbing the elderly. His basement apartment was on Davis Street, not four blocks from Dorie's house. She wonders if she could be classified as elderly. She feeds the cat her wet food, breaking it up with a fork, watching the beige mush push through the tines, then stands and listens to the cat eating. She puts a small load of clothes in the wash, brews another pot of coffee, and when the clock turns to ten she picks up her cell phone and dials her daughter.

"Aloha," she says.

August sounds sleepy. "It's too early, Mom."

"I thought you said call at seven."

"Call at seven *your* time because that's four my time and there's always dead time in the afternoon."

Dorie sighs. "I thought you meant your time in the morning."

August is quiet too long, then she says, "Obviously."

Dorie hears the blankets being thrown back, the whoosh of static over the phone, August's morning moan of getting out of bed. "How are you?" Dorie asks.

"Sleepy."

"Are you dancing tonight?"

"Yep." A toilet flushes in the background.

“And sunning yourself?”

“I’m working a shift in the computer lab.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to.”

“Don’t they have deck boys or something to do that?”

“Deck boys get you towels and stuff.”

“I thought you were dancing.”

“I am.”

“And working in the computer lab.”

“Lots of contracts include extra jobs.”

Neither Dorie nor August says anything for a moment. Dorie hears water running.

“Well, I wanted to tell you I’m going to have a garage sale,” she says, pushing the speaker phone button on her phone and setting it on the counter. “I’m putting you on speaker phone,” she tells August. “I’m folding laundry.” She steps back from the counter, half-yelling, aiming her voice as though she were tossing it in a barrel.

Her daughter’s voice comes out, sounding further away than before. “Are you selling my stuff?”

“Not all your stuff. I just think it’s time to clean up.”

“Which stuff?”

“Why don’t you tell me what *not* to sell?”

August’s sigh crackles. Dorie knows that her daughter probably doesn’t even know what’s hanging in her closet anymore. Doesn’t remember all those clothes she held up to

Dorie at the mall and simply had to have. She wouldn't know the sight of her own things if Dorie sent them to her wrapped up with a bow.

"Sell whatever you want," August says after a while.

"I won't sell all of it. Not your prom dresses. Or any of it. Tell me what you want me to sell."

"I don't care about my prom dresses. Sell whatever you want."

Dorie can tell from the tone of August's voice this conversation is about to end, that August has stopped caring, or at least is going to pretend she has. Dorie tries to hear the sound of the ocean outside her daughter's window.

"Are you selling his stuff?" August asks.

"Whose stuff?" Dorie asks.

"Dad's stuff."

Dorie stands in the middle of the kitchen. The refrigerator hums. "Some of it."

"What if I want it?"

"Do you want it?"

"I don't know."

"Can you see the ocean from your window?" Dorie asks across the kitchen.

"There are no windows. I'm in the slave quarters."

"August," Dorie says.

August's roommate, Dorie knew, was a girl August had attached herself to soon after arriving in LA and whom she now did everything with. Her friend had a funny name, Paisley, like a piece of fabric. August had told her this on the one and only postcard she'd

sent her. On the front of it was a picture of the ship, like a skyscraper on its side. Dorie tells August she loves her and that next time she'll call at seven at night.

"Seven your time," August says, then informs Dorie that she'll be busy for the next couple of days and advises not to call until the weekend.

Dorie is the costume designer for the Masonville Players, the community theater company. They are putting up *Annie* for the spring musical. Dorie used to make dance costumes each year for August. She sewed ribbons and elastic on to ballet shoes, worked with shiny Lycra, covered leotards in sequins. Originally, Dorie wanted an actual role in the musical. At the audition the director, a man who also worked as a cashier at the Thriftway, asked Dorie what shows she'd been in. None. Could she sing? She could try. Dorie stood on the big, empty stage and felt like she was at the mercy of the man who bagged her groceries, who knew that every week she bought plain yogurt and half a pound of bacon.

She wanted the roll of Miss Hannigan but knew she wasn't sloppy enough, wouldn't be able to pull off the drunken stumbles. She told them she could still do a cartwheel if that made a difference, but gave silent thanks when they weren't interested in seeing it. She wound up with a part as an extra in crowd scenes and in charge of costumes.

At rehearsal she measures everyone. The young girl playing Annie stands in front of Dorie with her arms out as Dorie runs the measuring tape along her wingspan, fingertip to fingertip.

"I don't think you need to measure that," the little girl says. She has brown hair. Dorie would need to find a wig. "I just wear a red dress the whole time."

"You have different clothes for the orphanage scenes."

“Just rags,” she says.

Dorie pulls the measuring tape away from her. “I suppose you’re right. I’ll just measure you for the dress.” She wraps the tape around her little waist.

“Will you make my dress?”

“I will.”

“Don’t use any fabric that’s too cheap. My skin is very sensitive.”

Dorie is crouched next to the girl. She looks up at her over her reading glasses.

“I’m sure it is,” she says.

Children started to scare Dorie at some point when August was still a child. She would watch her daughter playing with other kids on the playground, or listen to them as they talked nonsense in August’s room, dressing their dolls up and pretending they were mothers.

“Sometimes the never-ending cycle of it all overwhelms me,” she told her husband.

He looked at her and pulled her into his chest, wrapped his arms around her.

“Birth. Death. Birth. Death,” she said.

“We’re stuck.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I feel like she’s already smarter than me.”

“Isn’t that what parents want?” he asked.

“Not when she’s eight.”

Doug had loved August in a complete way, a way that Dorie tried to but was incapable of. There were conditions to her love. She couldn’t help it. It wasn’t that Dorie didn’t love her daughter; she just knew she was capable of loving her more.

The man playing FDR stands in front of her with his arms out to the side. He is so tall Dorie has to get the stepladder to measure him across his shoulders. He looks like an almond with legs. She thinks he might be some type of half-giant. They tried to use him in the crowd scenes but he stood out too much. He can sing though, captivating Dorie on the first day of rehearsal when his deep voice as he joined in singing “Tomorrow” with the little brat.

“You won’t be making me a whole new suit, will you?” he asks.

“I suppose not,” she says. “If you have one that will work—it’s got to be from the right time though.”

“I have my father’s suit.”

“You and your father were the same size.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

Dorie hates being called ma’am. Nothing makes her feel older. “Well, you could probably use that. Bring it to rehearsal when you can,” she says, stepping from the ladder.

He holds out his hand to help her step down. He towers over her. “I have a practice of getting pancakes after practice. Would you like to join me?” he asks her.

Dorie is surprised. He continues to hold her hand. “What place is open so late?” she asks. Rehearsal sometimes goes until ten o’ clock. After which Dorie usually goes home and watch a program she’d recorded from the television, a singing show or a nature show, and fall asleep on the couch with a cat in her lap.

“I usually go to Shari’s,” he says.

“I already had dinner,” she tells him.

“They have pie.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” she says.

“Tomorrow,” he repeats, walking away, singing the word.

Dorie has been on dates since Doug died, though it took years. First it was Albert, a lawyer about to retire and then it was John, who was quiet and deliberate in his speech and manners. But both wanted too much from Dorie: trips to the coast, dancing at the Elk’s club, all the small town fineries. After the newness of their first few dates Dorie found their conversations boring. She frequently ended up arguing with Albert about politics, or television, or whether or not to brine a Thanksgiving turkey, which of course you should do. And John was just too quiet, too agreeable. It was Doug’s own mother who told her not to be so picky.

“Deal with the disappointment. Enjoy the company,” she said.

“It’s just not worth it,” Dorie said. “Maybe I’ll get a dog.”

“Get a dog, start taking yoga, make your own jewelry. I’m just telling you that after Kelly died I didn’t let another man take me out to dinner and it is a regret I will take to my grave.”

“Don’t worry. You’ve missed nothing.” When Dorie had dinner by herself, in her home, sitting on her couch in absolute silence—she liked it.

In preparation for the garage sale Dorie pulls each article of clothing from August’s closet. Her daughter’s room feels small and cluttered. Dorie rarely goes in, though she did at first. After August first moved, Dorie would go in, sit on August’s bed for a while and just stare at the wall. She used to do a lot of that, stare at the walls. The immovability of them

became a sort of comfort. The very permanence of the house, its resolute sameness, became the thing she clung to.

She places August's shirts, shoes, dresses, pants, all of it, into two piles: sell or keep. The keep pile she'll ship to August when she's returned to dry land. The sell will end up on a costume rack in the garage with a price sticker on each article of clothing. She runs a hand over the nicer dresses, the thick fabric. A pair of satin gloves are pinned together and hanging from the hanger. Dorie remembers August in them, her thin arms, the black leading up to her toned shoulders, standing next to Sam in their front yard. Doug snapped the picture. Dorie takes the gloves and guides her hand into the tunnel of fabric. The glove comes to life. She rubs her opposite hand along the satin, smoothes the wrinkles, pulls the top up higher on her arm. The one hand, the one arm, feels showy, wrapped in the shiny, smooth fabric, and she gives her wrists a twirl, extends her arm out in front of her as if she's presenting herself to an invisible suitor.

His name is Clete, Cletus Holloway, which Dorie already knew from the cast phone list. He eats his pancakes dry and with his hands, after mashing up his egg yolks and eating them with a spoon. He seems to know the all the waitresses at Shari's by name, a familiarity that bothers Dorie. He is divorced and has two kids.

"Both in college. I'm near broke," he says.

"Well, let me advise you that it's cheaper to make eggs and pancakes at home," Dorie says, taking a sip from her coffee. A slice of cherry pie sits in front of her.

"Are you a food snob?" Clete asks.

"Not at all," she says. "Just frugal."

“Do you work?”

“No.” She cuts into her pie, the crust flakes apart.

“So it’s important to be frugal.”

Dorie has money. She doesn’t have to worry. Doug made sure of that. She wonders sometimes if maybe this is the problem, if she needs a little worry in her life. “I’m doing okay,” she says.

Clete puts up his hands in mock relent. “Okay—I will pry no more.”

Dorie learns he is back in Masonville after living in the Seattle area for most of his adult life. He quit his job and moved home after his divorce. “I’m in retreat,” he says.

“You’re a runaway,” Dorie says

“I suppose, but I’ve run home.”

“My husband grew up here too.” Dorie hears some spark in her voice, as if Doug were still alive. To extinguish it she says, “He’s dead.”

Clete offers his apologies. “Recently?” he asks.

“About five years ago.”

He nods and looks into his plate. Between bites he holds his pancake as if it were a playing card, with two hands, close to his chest. “What was his name?”

“Douglas Diamond. Did you know him?”

Clete looks at her blankly but then says, “Of course.” The warmth of his voice could light a lamp. “Not well though. But Masonville is small.”

“Did you go to high school together?” Dorie has finished her pie and is pushing her fork into the crust crumbs.

“And junior high,” Clete says. “If I can recall I think he came to my thirteenth birthday party.”

“And what did boys do at thirteenth birthday parties back then?”

“I think we took turns shooting my dad’s pistol into a hillside.”

“I didn’t know Doug had ever shot a gun.”

“Maybe that was the only time,” Clete says, taking another bite.

“Maybe.”

Dorie has already gone through Doug’s things. Though his shirts hung in the closet for two years before she touched them. One Christmas when August was home, Dorie let her underage daughter drink vodka tonics as they went through the closet and drawers together. Dorie felt as though she was invading Doug’s privacy, worried they would find something he had hidden from her or August: love letters, dirty magazines, some proof of a life beyond them. She found herself murmuring into every shirt as she folded and placed in a box.

“What are you saying?” August said.

“I’m saying sorry, to your dad.”

August looked at her for a moment then rolled her eyes. She claimed his worn-in white under-shirts, his gold wristwatch, and all of his ties for her own. When Dorie asked what she would do with them August said she didn’t know but that she wanted them. Then Dorie made the mistake of telling August to never pawn the watch and August didn’t speak to her for the rest of the night.

Dorie pulls out the boxes containing Doug's clothes and begins to sift through them. Doug owned and worked at Diamond Furniture and he owned shirt after shirt in whites and creams and pale yellows, all with pearly plastic buttons down the front. Brown leather shoes with skinny laces. Cuff links. Tie clips.

There is a box back the corner of the closet that Dorie has to stretch to reach. Inside it she finds the things Doug would leave cluttered on the bathroom counter: his deodorant, razors, tooth brush. Some of August's things were in there too. They both exited her life so suddenly that these simple artifacts of their everyday existence were left behind. One night not long after August left Dorie couldn't stand to look at all of it anymore. Doug was dead and August was gone to Los Angeles, but their toiletries sat there like they were going to use them the next day. So Dorie threw all of it in a box, and the box sat in the back of the linen closet for five years. She pulls out Doug's Old Spice and holds the bright blue stick to her nose, inhales. She is leaning against Doug with eyes closed, face buried in his armpit. She pulls out a big hairbrush containing the long brown hairs of her daughter. When August left Astoria came over and said, "She couldn't take her things with her? Where's the fire?" Dorie understood though. Dorie helped her daughter leave. It wasn't until the first wave of grief had receded that she realized what she'd done, realized how much she wanted to leave too, in spirit anyway.

Dorie throws away the box of bathroom products without ceremony, only pausing to pull out the deodorant and take another sniff.

On Monday, she calls August. She is at rehearsal so she sneaks out to the lobby and locks herself in a bathroom stall.

“How was your weekend?” she asks.

“Good. Busy. We’re docking tomorrow,” August says.

She sounds tan and beautiful, a voice as full as her life. She seems genuinely glad to talk to her mother. Dorie wishes she could see her. “I miss you,” she says.

“I miss you, too.”

“I’m at the theater,” Dorie says.

“What theater?”

“The Masonville Theater.”

“The movies?”

“No, the stage theater. I’m making costumes for *Annie*. I told you that. I’m in a crowd scene.”

August laughs. “That’s so cute,” she says, as if Dorie’s life is something that takes place behind glass, a show for August’s amusement.

“What do you mean? Cute?” Dorie says.

August is silent. Then says, “How’s the garage sale?”

“It’s fine.”

“What are you selling?”

Everything, Dorie wants to say. All of it. “Some of your clothes and books. The posters on your wall.”

“Have you been to Hawaii?” August asks.

“I went with your father and your grandparents.”

“Before I was born?”

“Before you. It was a few years after we were married. Your Grandpa Kellam played golf the entire time and Grandma tagged along with your dad and me, complaining.”

“How’s Grandma Diamond?”

Before Dorie answers there is the squeak of the bathroom door opening. She whispers, “I’ve got to go, sweetie.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“I’m in the bathroom at the theater. Someone just came in.”

Her daughter laughs again. “Mom, you are hilarious.”

Suddenly Dorie doesn’t care that there is someone else in the bathroom. “Is my life a joke to you?” she asks, without a tone of defense, because she truly, genuinely wants to know.

“What? Don’t be so defensive. Geez.”

“I’m not—”

“I have to go.” And August is gone, as fast as pushing a button the warm world of her daughter escapes Dorie.

When she walks out of the stall Miriam, the woman who play Mrs. Hannigan, smiles at her in the mirror.

Clete and Dorie spend the rest of rehearsal sitting in the front row while the little brat playing Annie sings “Maybe.” Their bodies hunch low like teenagers at a movie. They whisper to each other. The stage has been transformed to the Hudson Street Home for Girls.

“Want to come up to the property and shoot some guns on Saturday?” Clete asks.

“I’m having a garage sale,” Dorie says.

“What are you selling?”

“Clothes, books, video tapes.”

“Just a lot of shit?”

Dorie has noticed this about Clete: The more time she spends with him the filthier his language gets. She doesn’t mind, isn’t a prude in any sense of language or actions, but she has never been one to swear. Mostly she finds Clete’s language funny, and different, and she likes both of those things.

“I guess,” Dorie says.

“So don’t do it,” Clete says.

“If it’s just a lot of crap why shouldn’t I sell it?” Dorie asks.

“Just put in boxes and give it to the Goodwill.”

Dorie looks straight ahead. If she takes all of it Goodwill she has to drive it all there and hand it over to some stranger, and her husband’s and daughters things become anonymous objects to be picked through. She realizes this will happen at the garage sale as well, but taking the thing to Goodwill seems too easy. “I don’t know,” she says. The little brat leans on her bed post, fist to chin, looking off into the empty theater seats, striving to hit the higher note of *CAAAAH-fee*. “Come to your house and shoot guns instead?”

“Sure. Have you ever shot?”

“No.”

“Doug never took you hunting?”

“Doug never hunted.”

“I’m sure Doug hunted. Everyone who grew up in Masonville has hunted.”

Dorie adjusts herself in the seat. “Maybe not everyone.”

“Fucking everyone,” Clete says.

Dorie goes to Shari’s with Clete again that night and again the night after. He tells her more things about Doug. “He started a band once. He sang. It was terrible.”

“He never had a great voice,” Dorie says. “You have a much better voice.” It was true, but Dorie feels a twinge when she says it, some sort of betrayal.

“Yours is good too. You should sing louder in the chorus parts.”

Dorie blushes. “August always said my voice is like an animal in misery.”

Clete is quiet, looks into his coffee cup for an answer. “I worry that August has been too mean to you,” he says. “She sounds kind of like a bitch.”

At some earlier point in her life Dorie probably would have been upset by this, but she’s gotten used to people bad-mouthing her daughter, telling her that they were so sorry August abandoned her, how someday she’ll regret leaving. “She sings better than me,” Dorie says, shrugging.

“Sissy is up at U Dub sitting in her freshman fifteen.” Clete takes a sip of his coffee. His eyes are small and tired. “August seems glamorous.”

“I suppose,” Dorie says. “She’s been dancing on a cruise ship for the last few months.”

“I saw one of those revues on a cruise ship. It was a topless thing. The girls wore these pasties that really sparkled.”

“I don’t think August would do that type of show,” Dorie says, but she realizes that she doesn’t know whether or not her daughter would do a show like that, or if Dorie would care if she did.

“Of course not. I was just saying.”

“Were you in many musicals before this?” Dorie decides to change the subject. Clete was willing with the details of his children. Dorie already heard their stats: Sissy, 20, student at the University of Washington, and Markus, 22, college drop out, living with his mother in Bitter Lake. But Dorie has held information about August close, shielding her from Clete, keeping her for herself.

“First one, with my ‘try new things attitude.’”

“You fit the role well,” she said.

“There aren’t many roles for aging baritones.”

Dorie thinks, then says, “Professor Henry Higgins.”

“Maybe. He has an air of importance I don’t think I could pull off.”

“You’re playing FDR. He’s pretty important.”

“Self-importance,” Clete says, with a bright smear of egg yolk on his cheek. “I remembered something else about Doug.”

Dorie looks into her coffee cup. The brew is weak and see-through.

Clete starts the story with a laugh. “Senior year he got this great truck. We all envied him. He did it up in lights for prom. Made all us other guys look like a bunch of heels.”

Dorie just smiles and nods, trying not to picture Doug in some pastel tuxedo with a boutonniere pinned to his breast, climbing out of that stupid truck they drove from Golden to Masonville.

The waitress comes over and touches Clete's shoulder as she refills his coffee. Clete pays the check and when he walks Dorie to her door she lets him kiss her and it's just like the other kisses from Albert and John. She is a marked woman, can't kiss a man without thinking about Doug. And it isn't some heart-warming image like him smiling, telling her to enjoy herself, or even the fear that he's upset with her. He is nothing but a thought in her head, like the worry she left the burner on.

Clete lives out of town, out past the quarry on fifteen acres that belonged to his family. The day is warm for March and Dorie is glad to be outdoors. She even sees a deer while driving out to Clete's house. She slows as she passes and it raises its head with the grace of a dancer, its big black eyes watching her drive by.

"My parents live at Hillside, watching TV they hate all day and complaining about the shit they serve in the cafeteria," says Clete as they walk. He is leading her up a hill, an apple orchard slopes away from them, leading to the pasture. He wears overalls and a flannel shirt, looks positively pastoral. "I think they are glad I am looking over the land though."

"It's what we have to look forward to," Dorie says.

"If you still know me in thirty years please hold a pillow over my face before I am so old I don't remember how to swallow." He stops for a moment and looks out over his land, like a conqueror. "Your parents alive?"

“They live abroad,” Dorie says.

“Fancy.”

“They devoted their lives to the Peace Corps.”

“Damn do-gooders, huh?”

“They try,” Dorie shrugs.

Turning onto an old logging road, shaded by forest, they both lean into each step. Clete breathes heavy. “I’m glad you came up today,” he says and puts his arm across her shoulders. She feels it, heavy and there.

“I guess I’ll have to sell my stuff some other time.”

“You should have brought it. We could have had a cleansing fire.”

“Or used it for target practice,” Dorie says.

He squeezes her shoulder. “Now you’re getting the idea.”

The night before, Dorie sat with all the things in the garage, the contents of lives no longer lived. Doug’s shirts all hanging from a rack, and August’s hair accessories sat pretty on display, the books lined up, the shoes at attention. Each item had a little orange sticker naming its price. All of it waiting to be chosen, to be part of someone else’s life.

“I don’t think I could do that,” Dorie says. “Not really.” She sat in the garage far into the night, looking over each thing again and again. And after a while she pulled out the boxes and put everything back in them. She decided to shuttle them off to others’ lives more cleanly, more succinctly. She dropped the boxes at Goodwill on her way to Clete’s.

“There’s something else I remembered about Doug,” he says.

“What is it?” she asks, and looks up at him, but a part of her wishes that they could just walk, like this, with his arm on her shoulder, a man and a woman, talking about

anything other than her dead husband, because doing so just reminds her of how she knew Doug, and how Doug knew her, and how it takes so long to create such a thing.

Don't Let the City Destroy Our Love

Los Angeles was to the south, nearly sixteen hours away. 945 miles. I'd looked it up on Mapquest a million times. It was a late summer Saturday in Masonville. My mom was in the front yard, pulling weeds and listening to NPR on her little radio. My dad was on the couch half-heartedly watching a baseball game while doing a crossword puzzle. He asked me if I planned on mowing the lawn today. I didn't answer, but took my keys from the kitchen counter and mumbled a goodbye. I was out the door while he was asking where I was going. I honked as I pulled from the driveway and waved at my mom. She didn't look up. They had no idea. The clock in the car said ten am. I had gotten in my car so many times over the summer and pulled out with every intention of driving to LA. I wanted to make some great romantic gesture, as large as the west coast, but each time, I ended up back home. The excuses: no money, no gas, no time. But really it was August, and fear. Fear that she would see me and shrug, that in the end I would be no big deal to her. But I had called the night before and told her this was it. I was coming. Her breath was audible into the phone. Come, she'd said.

By four in the afternoon I was driving over Mt. Ashland. I'd considered stopping in Ashland and walking around for a while, seeing the town, but there was some supernatural force in me compelling me to keep driving. By the time it was getting dark Sacramento was upon me. Interstate Five stretched straight and long from there on, with nothing on either side of the freeway but darkness. The word nothing doesn't really describe it. Its absolute emptiness unnerved me, and I drove as though I was trying to get out of something, rather than get to something. At one am the flatness stopped and I drove through winding hills at feverish speeds, then I dropped down into it, some shitty suburb of a shitty suburb, the

removal of the removed, all lights and strip malls, Jack-in-the-Box followed by Carl's Jr. followed by Wendy's.

It was near two am when I pulled off the 101 at the Coldwater Canyon exit, following the directions August had told me over the phone. I don't live in LA proper, she'd said. I live in the Valley. I memorized the directions rather than wrote them down. The street was wide and I followed it for a mile or more. Just past Oxnard, if I got to Victory I'd gone too far. I pulled over at a grocery store and used the pay phone in the parking lot. "Sam?" she answered with my name and the drive felt worth it immediately. I put my forehead against the glass booth. She was blocks away, I realized with a feeling that can only be described as relief.

"I'm close," I said.

"I'll wait for you downstairs."

I was stopped at the light at Oxnard and Coldwater and could see a figure, mostly dark, moving on the sidewalk on the left side of the street. I took the first parking spot I could find. As I got out of the car the miles of the day hit me and I felt tired, and strange, like when I've played video games for too long, like my eyes aren't really mine, and neither are my hands. They are things I've been borrowing that no longer fit me.

I walked across the street and there she was. Her hair was down and blowing across her face. She didn't move immediately to hug me, so I didn't move to hug her, even though I wanted to. I wish I would have. I wish I would've set the tone right then, when I first saw her.

"Where's your stuff?" she asked.

“I don’t have any,” I told her. “I sort of just got in the car and drove.” She was wearing too much makeup, black smudged under her eyes and fake eyelashes. “You didn’t have to get dolled up for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“All the makeup.”

“I was at work,” she said, coolly. “I meant what do you mean you don’t have any stuff?”

The tension was building between us and I knew that if I didn’t break it down it would just continue until we were nothing. “Can I hug you?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes but stepped into me, practically fell into me. I told myself that she had been waiting for me to say that. She wrapped her arms around my torso, leaned her head on my chest. “Of course,” she said. So we hugged for a while. She kept her face buried. If she looked up I would have kissed her, but she didn’t look up. I don’t know how long we hugged for. Cars whipped past us. Behind us the LA River was a concrete aqueduct, dry as bone.

The gate of the apartment was broken so we just walked in without a key or a code. From the knob hung orange menus for a Thai delivery place. The door let out a long, high squeak as August opened it.

“Did you find it okay?” she asked. We were in the elevator. She slipped into the corner like she could disappear. She looked tiny, tinier than I remembered.

“Yeah, just took I-5 to the 101,” I said. I wanted to step close to her, put my mouth on her hair, touch her cheek with my finger, just have contact in some way.

“You should have taken the 170.”

She would say something like that, like she was trying to prove how well she knew this place. “You said the 101.”

She had no response to this. The elevator doors opened and we walked into a hall that looked like the hall we’d come from downstairs. I watched her move as she walked in front of me, her sweatpants pulled up on one leg, the thin straps of her tank top almost falling off her tan shoulders. She seemed to be amplified in some way, more August than August had ever been, but the amplification caused a distortion. I don’t think she was wearing a bra.

We came to a fire door, which she opened and we walked some more. There was the odor of water being boiled, or pasta being cooked, the scent of a burner turned on. Behind each of these metal doors was a little life being lived. We passed so many metal doors. Each corner looked the same, as if we’d passed it before, like we were walking in circles. The walls were stucco and the carpet thin and water-stained. We passed another elevator lobby, walked through a breezeway, another fire door.

“Are you lost?” I asked.

August laughed. “It took me a while to figure it out. You just have to memorize the route. How many fire doors, how many turns.”

We finally stopped in front of number 211, the plastic numbers screwed to the door. I’d written them on countless envelopes. August Diamond, 6131 Coldwater Canyon Ave. #211 North Hollywood, CA 91607. The door was the same color as all the other doors, as the fire doors, a mix of blue and green. It was propped open with a shoe that

August kicked out of the way as she opened it and reached her hand back toward me. I grabbed it and held on as she led me into the dark apartment.

“Aunt Ellie’s asleep,” she said. “I think.”

She didn’t turn the lights on in the living room, and the only light came from a small lamp, but even in the dark the room felt cluttered. “You work late,” I said, mostly because I didn’t know what else to say.

“I actually got off early tonight. It was slow.”

“What do you do again? Serve chicken wings in a skimpy outfit?”

She laughed again and I was glad I could do that still, make her laugh. She sat on the couch. “It’s a dance job actually. A go-go gig.”

“A go-go gig?” I laughed.

“I dance at this bar.” She was serious.

I looked at her, all hair and soft skin, relaxed on the couch. Maybe it was the dark that emboldened me. If she was sitting in the full light, looking at me I wouldn’t have asked, “And you like that?”

She shrugged. “I’m tired,” she said. “I’m going to bed. You can come with me if you want.”

This part was happening how I imagined it would, hoped it would. She didn’t run to meet me and throw her arms around me on the street like I thought she would. I really imagined that, the running and the hugging, more than once, more than twice. In my imagination it was raining. I wanted her to be overcome with joy at the sight of me. I wanted this visit to end with us driving off together into some unknown and beautiful place. In my head she was never like this—all dolled up and tired like some sad back-up dancer.

But at least this part was happening how I hoped. I wasn't going to be sleeping on the couch.

I followed her to her room where she then disappeared to brush her teeth and wipe the fakeness from her face and left me sitting on the bed. She returned looking more beautiful than before, but not as beautiful as she used to be. I don't know what it was—her essential essence had shifted, if that's even possible, and I could see it in her face.

"Aren't you going to brush your teeth?" she asked after we'd lain down, both our bodies under the same cover.

I was so excited and nervous to be lying next to her that I didn't want to leave the room, like if I did she'd be gone when I got back, or she'd decide it was best I slept on the couch. "I'm okay," I said.

Her eyes narrowed, like she was trying to really see me, scrutinizing me. "Have you gotten weirder?" she asked.

I didn't say anything and she laughed, tried to make it into some kind of joke.

Then she said, "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too."

Even though I'd just driven sixteen hours I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep. August curled up, pulled the pillow down and hugged it. She looked like she was falling asleep. I lay there for a while with my eyes open, staring up at the ceiling, arms under the covers stiff by my sides. It felt stupid and disappointing, traveling all that way to lie there like a dead body. I tried to enjoy just being close to her.

After a while she said, her eyes still closed, "Are you asleep?"

"No."

She opened her eyes and scooted over to me, collapsed those two inches between us and put her head on my chest. “Me either. I’m not sure that’s going to happen tonight.”

I breathed easy. Strands of her hair brushed against my lips. We lay like that for a while, not talking. I didn’t drive to LA to have sex with August, which we never did while we were together, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I was interested in something like that happening. In the moments like this one it seemed as though it could happen so easily. Eventually she moved though, put her head back on her own pillow, looking straight up at the ceiling. I rolled over to my side, so I faced her and I went for it. I reached my hand out and cupped one of her breasts. Even though I’d done this before I felt as though I was crossing some barrier all over again. She didn’t react, just kept looking up, and there was absolutely nothing sexual about it. It became like some contest: her trying not to react and me trying to get her to react. But her body stayed still, there was no soft movement of pleasure. I relented first. I took my hand away and then she turned to look at me.

“We should really try to sleep,” she said.

I guess I fell asleep, though I don’t know when. I lay there for a long time thinking about her breast and how it felt under my hand, maybe I went too far too fast, expected us to pick up where we’d left off over a year ago. August turned over so her back was to me and after a while her breathing slowed and I could tell she was asleep.

My friends had told me not to come. They’d called August every name imaginable. They created scenarios of August in LA, meeting some douche in a sports car who worked in the “biz.” They always said the biz with air quotes. These were the guys I met in college—the ones who never knew August. She was just a letter I put in the mail to them. *You*

holding out for a piece of paper? They'd ask. *You're turning down beautiful women.* I wasn't though. There were two girls, maybe three if you count the one in my Intro to Critical Inquiry class that always smiled at me. Three girls I might have had a chance with, and they weren't beautiful. They all had the usual girl things: shiny hair, nice smiles, small hands, breasts in tight-fitting t-shirts—sometimes you could make out their nipples.

You don't think that life will swoop you up and move you forward as forcefully as it does. I guess I thought that August moving away wouldn't really change me, or us. A month after she was gone she stopped calling every day, and then I started school, and met all these new people, and I figured August was meeting new people too, and I would comfort myself with thoughts of us growing and changing at the same time, like some vines on the opposite sides of a building, growing to meet each other in the middle. So I couldn't let my vine go and get tangled with some other vines.

When I woke up she wasn't in the room. Sunlight poured in and for a moment I didn't know where I was. I couldn't remember if I was home, or in my dorm room, and then it came back to me—the drive, August's smeared makeup, her breast under my hand. I wanted to go back to sleep. I heard the television coming from the living room like a group of people having a hushed conversation. I got up and staggered out to find the room empty and the television squawking out a rerun of *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Out on the balcony August was smoking a cigarette. I watched her through the sliding glass door, through glass, as she stared off and dragged on her cigarette. She was an exotic animal in the zoo. When she noticed me she waved me to come out.

“Want one?” she asked.

I shrugged her off.

“You didn’t pick up smoking in college?”

“I avoided it.” I knew I looked disgusted but I couldn’t help it.

She put her cigarette out. “So what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You live here.”

“We could go get some coffee, and then maybe go swimming.”

The balcony overlooked the apartment complex pool, beyond the pool was a fence and behind the fence was the Los Angeles River. “In the river?” I said. The pool was surrounded by concrete, the riverbed was concrete. I’d never seen so much hard, formed, grey rock in my life.

“Gross,” said August. “I don’t think there’s ever been water in there. I don’t know where they get off calling it a river.”

It was already hot and even though the surroundings of the pool were less than desirable the water in it looked blue and clean. “Let’s go swimming.”

August smiled. “Good. I’m already wearing my suit.”

I know people grow up and do a lot of stupid things. I know that. I know I’ve done a lot of stupid things, but when I saw August smoking I couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t the old line of it being bad for you and all that bullshit. It was that she was affected; she didn’t know who she was.

In the pool I grabbed her waist and she let me. Her wet hair fell over her shoulders in ropes. She swam around me and then hopped on my back. She was weightless in the water. I swam with her there, carrying her around the pool like a queen surveying her kingdom. When we were tired we sat on our towels we’d laid on the concrete. August lit a

cigarette and I breathed in the second-hand smoke and listened to the sound of the cars buzzing past on Coldwater Canyon. Even with all that I thought I was maybe having a good time.

“Are you going back to school?” she asked.

“I guess so.” Why did I act like I might not? Not going back had never been an idea, but for some reason, with her, I didn’t want to be so sure of myself.

“I thought you liked it,” she said.

I lay back on the concrete, even though it was hard and uncomfortable. “It’s okay.”

“What else would you do?”

“I could move down here.”

“You’d hate it here,” she said, rubbing her cigarette into the ground.

“You like it?” I wanted it to be a statement, but it came out as a question.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Why?”

She looked up at the sky. She couldn’t tell me. She was trying to convince herself, but couldn’t convince me.

That night we went to a movie at some art house theater, that is what August called it, an “art house” theater. I guess she figured I’d be interested because we used to watch movies together. I can’t remember the name of the movie we went to but it was about this group of friends having a party, maybe for a couple that was married. Everyone in the movie was a terrible person. The couple didn’t really love each other. They all did ecstasy and ended

up having sex with someone they were supposed to, but they ran around with their clothes off like they were free and wild. I didn't believe any of it.

Afterwards I asked August if she liked it.

"Sure," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's about love being complicated," she said.

"I think that's a cop out."

"You don't think love is complicated?"

"No," I said. "I think it's simple."

We'd gotten frozen yogurt at some place that was supposed to be healthy. You could put like berries on your plain, gross yogurt. August thought it was so good. We walked for a while down a crowded street. There were shops all along it and people everywhere. All the women in LA wore the smallest jeans I'd ever seen. It seemed impossible to feel important here.

"I have to work tonight," she said.

Work. I thought of her makeup, her dancing. "Can I come?" I asked.

She smiled a little, like she didn't believe me. "You won't like it," she said.

"How do you know?"

"It's at a bar."

"I like bars."

She shrugged. "Fine. But when you're there, hating it, remember that I said you wouldn't like it." She shoved my shoulder a little bit. I could have let this moment be nice, given her a gentle shove back, put my arm around her shoulder, but instead I said:

“Why do you think I hate everything?”

“Don’t you?” she asked.

I felt misunderstood. August and I had always been honest with each other. That was our thing—honesty. We wore it like a shield to protect us, but we didn’t really know what we needed to be protected from. While we were apart, and unsure of what we were, we were fine as long as we told each other everything that happened. So when I kissed someone else I told her, and she wasn’t mad. But she never told me anything. There hasn’t been anyone else. Not that she has told me about anyway, and how could she not tell me?

The bar she danced at was packed, the type of place that had a line out the door and around the corner. Not that I had ever been to a place like that, or even near a place like that. All the girls had on shirts they were barely wearing, cut low in front and tied on them with nothing more than a string, their backs fully exposed. August pulled me past the bouncer, holding my hand but not in a girlfriend type way, in a way that mothers drag children across a busy street. I heard her say, “He’s with me.” The bouncer just nodded, not even looking at us.

“Do they have robots guarding this place?” I asked. “Have we stepped into the future?” She was leading me down a hallway in an *Employees Only* area. She ignored me. There were a few doors off the hallway and August stopped at one, and turned to face me. “Don’t be all judgey,” she said. “And remember I told you you were going to hate this.”

I wished that after that she would have stood on her tiptoes and kissed me, something to make me feel like it wasn’t me against her, something to show me were still

united. But she just turned, opened the door and slipped in. It was a dressing room and as I followed August in a girl with bright red hair, in only a bra and panties said, “Who’s this?”

“Sam,” August said.

The girl smiled and put her hands on her hips. Every line of her abs was visible, her skin milky white. She held long black gloves in her hand. As she spoke she began pulling them on. “So this is Sam.”

I looked to August. She’d talked about me. I’d been mentioned, of course I had. I felt as though I was levitating—I was so happy. But August wouldn’t look at me now. She busied herself with her make-up, leaning close to one of the mirrors. The redhead put out a gloved hand for me to shake, told me her name was Paisley.

“I’m going to change,” August said. “Pais—will you take him out to the bar?” She looked at me then, there was something pathetic about the look, but I couldn’t tell if she thought I was pathetic or if she looked pathetic. “I dance in twenty minutes. I’ll come find you on my break.”

Paisley held out her gloved hand to me again. “Follow,” she said.

She led me out of the secret hallway and into the bar area. It was crowded but she pushed her way up to the bar and made some guy give up his seat for me. It was dark and the music was loud and overall I did hate it. August was right. The bartender asked me if I wanted to drink anything and I didn’t so I said no. Then he told me that if I was going to sit at the bar I should order a drink so I ordered a gin and tonic because that’s what my parents make at home sometimes. Behind the bar there were two large windows into small rooms. The windows were big enough for someone to stand in and eventually Paisley appeared in one and a male dancer appeared in the other. The room had dark wallpaper

and one of those couches ladies would faint on in the olden days. Paisley positioned herself on the couch, and as the music changed she began dancing. Her movements were slow. I guess they were supposed to be seductive. She lifted a leg, extending to her knee, then her ankle, then she rubbed the inside of that leg from upper thigh to ankle. She did moves on the couch for a song, each move tumbling into the next. She didn't seem to be thinking of what came next. She arched her back over the edge of the chair, then she was on all fours rotating her hips. I guess it was sexy, most of the time. Sometimes it was a little over the top for me.

I watched the male dancer for a while. He was short, but in good shape. He wore dress slacks and no shirt—he seemed to be hairless. I don't know how long they danced for, at one point they switched windows, at one point were both in one window dancing together. A song ended and they were gone and that's when August climbed into the booth.

I took a drink of my gin and tonic. All the ice had melted. August took a pose a lot like Paisley's. She wore sexy lingerie: a ruffled bra, lacy underwear, and gloves (why did they all wear gloves?). Her hair fell over her shoulders, eyes ringed with black, red stained her lips. She smiled a small smile, a sexy smile, out from the booth. I looked behind me to see who was watching and most of the faces, men and women, were tuned to her. Her hips moved in time with the music, in perfect time, in tight circles. Where did she learn this? How to be this sexy girl? I wanted her then, but I was also repulsed. She wasn't stripping, but it felt the same to me. I wanted the people at the bar to stop watching. Some were shouting conversations over the music, others were dancing, but a lot, most, were watching August.

She moved from the chair to stand in front of the window. She looked out on the crowd then leaned on the glass with her forearms, moving her hips in a figure eight. It looked so easy for her. She almost looked bored. Releasing a hand, she rubbed down her body, over her breasts, down her stomach, to her inner thigh. When it got there she bent her knees, dropping her weight into her heels, hands back on the window, hips still moving. I remembered the night before, my hand cupping her breast, her unmoving body attached to that perfectly round mound of flesh. And here she was, gyrating in underwear in front of a bunch of strangers. I felt sick. The music got louder, the shouting conversations seemed to be happening in my ear. The man next to me was wearing too much cologne. I looked at him. He watched August flip her hair. I knew he was thinking about fucking her on that stupid fainting couch for the entire club to see.

I left my drink on the bar, almost running as I squeezed through the front door, the line of girls in backless tops and guys in creased pants was still there, longer than before. I hit the bouncer's shoulder and nearly fell as I escaped out onto Hollywood Boulevard. The sidewalk sparkled. I shoved my hands in the pockets of my hoodie, pulled the hood over my head and followed the stars. There were a lot of names I didn't know, most of them actually. Bud Abbott, Lucia Albanese. August probably knew them. She liked old movies, the Hepburns, Cary Grants, people like that.

I didn't know if I was walking east or west. After a while the sidewalk was concrete again, no more stars and sparkles. I looked up. The street was lined with stores with signs in Spanish. Up the block a short Mexican woman cooked hot dogs wrapped in bacon, and peppers and onions on a little cart. The smell was intoxicating. I couldn't remember the last time I ate. I bought one and ate it in three bites. I bought another.

I walked, following the same street, trying to see where it ended. I let the city push me along, tell me where to go, and if I didn't end up back at the doorway of that club then who cared? I was sure I could find my way back to Coldwater Canyon and my car and then back up I-5 to Masonville and then what? And even if I couldn't, I could just walk. I could walk back to Masonville.

I guess I turned around at some point because the stars showed up on the sidewalk again and they led me back to the club. The line outside had thinned. When the bouncer saw me he said, "Hey, yo' girl was lookin' for ya."

I shrugged and walked to the end of the line and sat on the ledge of the window of the building next to the club, a music shop. The sidewalk was lit up like it was day, but on the street the cars became fewer and fewer as the night got later. I wondered what I thought was going to happen, tried to figure out what I was mad about. It wasn't the dancing in her underwear, not really. It was more like she had chosen them, all those strangers, this whole stupid city, over me.

August came out eventually. She wore sweatpants and a tank top, hair piled on top of her head. She'd taken off her makeup.

"Hi," she said and sat next to me. "Where'd you go?"

"I just walked."

"I told you you'd hate it."

I didn't say anything.

"Let's go home. I'm tired," she said. She reached out for me to take her hand. She wanted me to feel like it was all okay. So we held hands as we walked to her car and she

smoked a cigarette on the drive back to the Valley and I just stared out the window at all of the lights.

At the apartment I refused to go inside and sat in the small front lawn made up of crab grass. August didn't look surprised, but sat down next to me like she was expecting this reaction.

"I told you you would hate it," she said again.

"Do you hate it?" I asked.

"It's a job," she said. "It's a dancing job. I don't want to do it forever."

"This place is terrible."

"You've been here twenty-four hours. Less than twenty-four hours."

"I *know* it's terrible," I said. "I didn't even need to come here to know that. You should come home."

"Why would I do that?" Her reaction was quick and sure.

We were quiet for a long time. I always liked that about August. She could be silent with me. It was one of those things that I thought bound us together--our ability to not talk to each other, which sounds so stupid now.

"I'm going to go," I said.

"Where?"

"Home."

"You're going to drive home? Now?"

"I don't want to be here anymore." I stood up then and started to the car.

August laughed in her confusion. “Sam—it’s almost three in the morning! You can’t drive now. Come up and sleep some.”

You see, I wanted her to do that. I wanted her to call out to me, and she did. I felt that pull to her, some pull that I didn’t understand that was probably tied to the moon and the tides or something. Or probably it was the chemicals in my body reacting to the chemicals in hers. That was how I got into this mess, thinking that we were more important than we really were. I turned back to face her. “It’s just not the same,” I said. She walked closer to me and hugged me, a long hug, and when I pushed her off my resolve was strong. “I’m going. I don’t think we should be in contact for a while.”

She set her jaw and said, “Did you really think it would be the same?”

I couldn’t think of anything to do but shrug and I swear she smiled then, some sad knowing smile, the most authentic smile I’d seen since I got there, like she knew this was going to happen, had known it all along. I knew I would see her again, that she’d be back in Masonville for some holiday or something, but in my mind in that moment I imagined never seeing her again for the rest of my life and I had to be okay with it.

She stood on the sidewalk as I turned on my car. The gas gage was on empty. I’d have to fill up before I got on the freeway. She stood there as I pulled away from the curb. I wish she wouldn’t have done that. I wish she would have just turned and walked into her little apartment, through her maze of doors and water-stained carpet, but I know her eyes probably followed me up the street until I was gone.

The Land and the Water

There is a deck on the *Fiesta Ecstasy* called the Serenity Deck. It's at the stern of the ship and only accessible by going through the Comet Lounge. Music from the lounge tumbles out each time a drunken seal comes out to smoke a cigarette, but for the most part, it is just as it was named: serene. Watching the ship cut through the water, leaving a tail of white, it's easy to forget the monstrosity of light and carpet and plastic that I have my back to. It's just the ocean and the sky. This is where Paisley and I found Patricia Sibly of Newton Falls, Ohio dead on one of the loungers.

After the last show of the night we'd wandered to the Serenity Deck to smoke cigarettes and drink white wine from plastic glasses. We liked to pretend we were Doris Day or Deborah Kerr or any mid-century Hollywood actress who'd made a movie that had taken place on a huge boat.

"I missed my cue on 'I Ain't Gonna Take it'," Paisley said, lighting a cigarette. "That stupid entrance." She stood, cigarette poised in her lips, and performed: ball, change; ball, change; turn; hit; snap.

"I can't take that song," I said. We had done the same show so many times that our bodies were rejecting it. "I messed up at least four times. And every time I do it's like Damien can feel it or something. He could be across the stage is a full lay-out and he can tell I've missed something."

"He's so Johnny Castle." Paisley flicked her ash overboard and turned again, dancing to the other side of the deck.

"I don't think he's going to practice our lifts in the water with us."

Paisley's red hair disappeared onto the other side of the deck. I listened to the hum of the engines.

Paisley found her. "August," she said in a weak voice, a voice that meant something was wrong, and there lay Patricia—head flopped to the side, eyes open and staring straight ahead.

"Her purse is right there," Paisley said.

"Are we going to rob her?" I asked.

"No. Just look to see who she is."

"You do it."

"You do it," Paisley said. She sucked the last bit of her cigarette and threw the butt overboard.

"There's an ashtray right there," I said, pointing at the squat metal canister.

Paisley's eyes went wide and pointed at Patricia. "Someone's dead," she said.

"If death was a license to litter the Earth would be a bigger shit hole than it already is."

"I can't believe you are arguing with me when there is a dead lady staring at us."

Paisley could be lazy when she wanted to be. I reached for Patricia's purse, resolute that I was the only one who could get things done. The wallet was purple leather, stained from use, I pulled her license and Patricia stared back at me, smiling, shiny and plasticky.

"Patricia Sibly." I said. "She's pretty old. Seventy-seven." There was little else in the wallet: an AARP card, a few receipts, and small scraps of paper with swirling cursive on them.

"She doesn't look that old." Paisley sat in the lounge next to Patricia.

I looked at the dead women. Her face had wrinkles but her hair was a solid, deep brown. “She dyes her hair. I hate it when old ladies do that. It’s so phony.”

“Don’t call her phony,” Paisley said.

“Why?”

“Because she’s dead.” Paisley could be too sensitive. If it wasn’t for her looks she probably would have been faded into the background a long time ago. She was tall and was just on the other side of beautiful, at that precipice before it turns back around and becomes ugly. “We should get someone,” she said.

“Who?” I ask still rifling through Patricia’s purse.

“I don’t know just go tell Salazar. Stop going through her stuff.”

“I still don’t think that is his real name. And you told me to,” I said.

“Why aren’t you freaking out?” Paisley’s voice had become shrill but curt.

“Why aren’t you?” I said putting Patricia’s purse down.

“I am.”

Paisley was staring at Patricia.

“I want to close her eyes,” she said.

“Don’t touch her,” I said. “It’s weird that she has her purse with her. Seems like seals usually leave their purses in their cabins.” I found a plastic lighter with a picture of a kitten on it and a pack of Virginia Slims. “Pais,” I said, holding the cigarettes in front of her.

Paisley looked from Patricia to the cigarettes. “We better keep those.”

I sat with Patricia while Paisley went to get help. She didn’t want to be alone with the body she said, adding: “You have more experience with dead people.”

I just stared at her.

“I’m sorry.” She gave me a quick hug before disappearing into the noise of the Comet Lounge.

When I first told Paisley that my dad was dead she’d said, “You’re lucky.”

“Why?” I’d asked. Lucky was the furthest thing from what I felt, which most of the time was okay, but a lot of the time was also an overwhelming loss that made me need to stop whatever it was I was doing and acknowledge the hole in my center, like I’d misplaced my insides. After the moment of acknowledgement I could continue driving or brushing my teeth or whatever it was I’d been doing, but I had to stop and recognize it for what it was. It helped keep it from taking over.

“My dad hardly talks to me anymore,” Paisley said.

“My dad wouldn’t have been like that.” I was sure of this. I was sure I was missing out on something.

“Probably not,” she said. This was when we first met, when we were still on land. I would sleep over at her house after our shift at Deep, eye makeup smudged, drunk on vodka tonics, slumped against her futon at four am.

On the Serenity Deck I watched Patricia’s chest, thought I could see it moving. My dad had died on a camping trip, out in the middle of nowhere, alone in his tent. His friend Ernie Bordeaux found him in the morning and had to float the rest of the way downstream to get help, leaving my dad’s body alone. Why hadn’t he put it in his boat with him? I’d wondered. But sitting and looking at Patricia I knew then that disturbing a dead body was

against the laws of nature. I was afraid I would knock something loose, that her head would fall off, that her soul would escape before it was supposed to.

Paisley came bursting back out on the patio alone.

“I thought you were getting someone,” I said.

“They’re coming. I didn’t want to leave you out here alone,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

She apologized again and sat next to me, putting her arm around my shoulders.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Are you sure?” She squinted her eyes at me. “This could stir up stuff.”

“I wonder how she died,” I said, allowing myself to lean into Paisley. We still had on our stage make-up. I’m sure Paisley looked ridiculous trying to explain the situation to the people inside. It’s hard to take someone with that much make-up on seriously. It’s hard to take anyone on a cruise ship seriously.

Eventually paramedics came with a stretcher.

“You told them she was dead, right?” I whispered to Paisley as they wheeled the stretcher through the door. By now the seals still drinking in the Comet Lounge had gotten wind that something was going on out on the Serenity Deck and they peeked their tiny heads on fat bodies out through the door. One of the paramedics told them to stay inside. While the other one said, “Aw, fuck,” when he saw Patricia.

“She’s dead,” Paisley said. It sounded so stupid, so obvious. She might as well have said: We are on a ship; it’s floating on water.

The paramedic looked from Paisley to me. “Are you responsible for this?” he asked.

My mouth was dry. “No,” I said, confused.

The paramedic smiled. “I’m just kidding,” he said and laughed. “I don’t think you ladies need to stay out here. We’ve got it from here.”

“What will happen to her?” Paisley asked.

The paramedic who’d made the joke looked us over. He spent longer on Paisley, taking in the length of her legs. “You guys aren’t seals?”

“We dance in the show,” I said, as though it were obvious.

“Okay. Then I can tell you the secret.”

“What secret?” Paisley said.

“There’s a morgue on the ship,” the other paramedic said, not looking up from his clipboard. He seemed more no nonsense—I imagined they were some pair, bred together to serve this purpose. The other paramedic gave him a shove on the shoulder for stealing his glory.

“A morgue?” Paisley said. “For, like, multiple dead people?”

“It can hold several dead bodies,” he said, still looking down at his clipboard.

“And live ones too,” the other, more comical paramedic said.

“Gross,” Paisley said.

“This is our second dead seal this trip.”

“Where was the other one?” I asked.

“Not as exciting. Just in his cabin.”

They made the lounge flat and Patricia’s body flopped back. Her hand had been lying across a swollen stomach; it fell to her side. Paisley and I watched as they heaved her onto the stretcher. As the no-nonsense paramedic covered her with a white sheet the other

one turned to Paisley and I. “You ladies want to meet up in the Chinatown Lounge after we drop her off?” he asked.

The cruise ship was my floating prison. My cell was 160 square feet in the bowels of the *Fiesta Ecstasy* that I shared with Paisley. We had bunk beds, a European shower (not as fancy as it sounds), and a small counter space that we filled with items we had found on the ship: keys, watches, rings. The counter would soon include Patricia’s lighter with the kitten on it. Our days were mostly routine: rehearsal at noon, then some task where we had to actually interact with the seals. We called the paying passengers seals because they were so loud and fat and spent their days sunning themselves. Our daily goal was to keep our interaction with them as limited as possible, but sometimes we had to stand in the grand lobby and hand out brochures for shore excursions, or teach ballroom dance lessons. In our minds, we dazzled the seals. We were part of the glamour and gaudiness of the ship. During my years working on the cruise ships, I had dozen of different costumes, wore no less than seven different types of feathers and twenty-eight different shades of sparkle. On a two week cruise I performed two shows a night for four days, then had two days off, two shows a night for four days, two days off, two shows a night four days, two days off. So my rut was run. Much of my time was my own and much of my time was spent talking myself out of flinging my body overboard.

The ship was a time warp, hours went by so slow, yet the next day those same hours seemed to not exist, were mere snaps of the fingers. There were times when it was lazy mornings in our cabin, not seeing the daylight until two in the afternoon, and other were so full of sun, it seemed as though the sky could tear open from the brightness. The seals were

here because they wanted this, to make time slow and speed up, to place their lives on hold for a couple of weeks. I had been working on ship since I was twenty. I puked into the Caribbean Sea on my twenty-first birthday. Each time I touched the land I felt it with my entire body. Each time I touched the land I wanted to get down on my knees and lie belly down against the earth.

The crowd was thin at the Chinatown Lounge. I didn't really want to go out but Paisley demanded it. She said that if I didn't come out I'd just sit in our cabin and think about death. She knew me. The paramedics, whose names we learned were Walter and Cody, showed up in their uniforms.

“You guys aren't still on duty,” Paisley said.

Cody shrugged. “What if we were?”

Walter, more serious, sat next to me. Both of them were close to our age; like most cruise ship employees, they were in their early twenties. I wondered what brought them here. What crimes they were serving for.

“Let's dance,” Cody said and he and Paisley got up. Paisley had the long arms and legs that most dancers envy. Her limbs were perfect for the graceful, nuanced motions of ballet or jazz or whatever terrible choreography they had us performing on the ship, but her extremities made the simple moves of a casual layperson awkward. She was a strange bird, moving with pointy elbows and knees to the music.

“You're not dancing,” Walter said.

“Neither are you.” I pointed out.

“Aren't you guys dancers?”

“When you get off work and someone needs you to save their life isn’t it the last thing you want to do?” I asked.

He searched the ice in his drink, hiding a smile. “Fair enough.”

We watched Cody and Paisley dance. He had his hands on her waist. She was good at that stuff, owning her body, no matter how much it tried to thwart her.

“How long have you been a paramedic?” I asked.

“A few years.”

“How long have you been working cruises?”

“This is my first contract.”

“Fresh meat,” I said, biting the straw of my drink between my teeth.

“How about you?”

“I’m an old timer,” I said.

“And this was your first dead seal?”

He didn’t sleep in my cabin. Neither did Paisley. She can let the physical be just the physical, let the kiss only mean what it was in that moment, a small spark, the pushing together of lips that leads to the pushing together of other things. I hold on for too long she always told me. I fell asleep that night thinking of Patricia dead in the morgue, my dad dead in his tent, and Walter waving as I shut my door.

Paisley snuck into our cabin at five am and woke me.

“Where’s Walter?” she asked.

“He didn’t stay.”

She was disappointed in me. “August. You need to relax,” she said climbing into bed.

I turned away from her. “I’m super relaxed,” I said. “I’m so relaxed that I’m going back to sleep.”

It is easy to lose people on the ship. At full capacity the *Fiesta Ecstasy* can carry nearly 4,000 people. There are stories of people disappearing, always young girls. I knew that I probably wouldn’t see Walter again. We had two months left on the ship, but he could disappear into the many floors, into the bowels. There were just too many people on board to try and find just one. When we docked in Los Angeles I would be allowed to get off the ship, once it was empty of all its seals, and the cleaning crew would get rid of any trace that the seals were there. To the families boarding the *Fiesta Ecstasy* would seem like it was made just for them, clean and new, ready for the next round of barking fatsos. I would get off and walk around the harbor, buy as many packs of cigarettes as I could, find a patch of grass and lie on the earth. It would be ugly and gray out, but I would revel in how wonderfully solid the ground was.

The first time I was on a cruise ship was as a seal. It was a mourning cruise. My mother had given birth to my brother David, who lived for six days before giving up. I saw him only once in his short life—a tiny pink thing that hardly seemed human to me. He is fragile, I was told. He breathed into tubes and was kept in an incubator. We had recently had baby chickens in our second grade class so I knew what an incubator was. And then he was dead. I wasn’t as sad for losing my brother as I was to be leaving the hospital. I’d grown to like walking the halls with my dad and eating in the cafeteria, where pieces of cake

sat on their own plate, already cut, just beyond the clean, cold glass like they had been put there just for me. My dad told me that David was too precious for this earth and that had made me feel dirty in some way—so obviously less precious. It was his idea to go on a cruise, a trip so full of fun and sunshine we would have to forget about that shriveled ball of flesh that would have been my brother. I lived in the pool for those five days, doing somersaults and handstands until my fingers and toes were wrinkled and my teeth chattered. My dad made a soft cradle with his hands for my foot, to launch me through the air, wild and free. Before the release I would look for my mom and yell, “Look at me, Mom!” I never knew which lounge chair she was on, but I hoped she saw me, her child that was alive.

It was so dark in our windowless cabin we could have slept all day. I woke up to my phone ringing but was too slow to answer.

“Who was it?” Paisley asked.

“I missed it,” I said.

“Probably your mom.”

“Ugh.” My mom didn’t mind the high price of phone conversations while I was in international waters. I’d stopped trying to get her to come on a cruise and answered my phone half the time she called.

In the European bathroom I felt larger than I really was—everything seemed to be in miniature. I made sure to close the toilet seat before I started to shower. We were late for rehearsal and that night I completely forgot to go on stage for one of the numbers. I stood in the wings waiting for my entrance and watching. All those dancers with smiles

plastered on their faces, cheeks red with rouge. We were supposed to be portraying something bigger than life. We were fancy. We sparkled. We had strength and poise, flexibility and power. I don't know why I didn't go on stage. Damien chewed me out after the show, putting his face so close to mine that I could see the pores of his face full of foundation and smell his starvation breath. I'd watched the entire number from the wings and they pulled it off without me. What was he so upset about? It didn't really matter whether I danced or not. Damien asked if I was having a stroke, said that I better have been having a stroke because that is the only reason for me to forget something like that. He told me I was pathetic, that I needed to take the show more seriously.

"He'll be fine tomorrow," Paisley said. "I forgot that entrance again." We were in our bunks, talking into the darkness. Paisley couldn't convince me to go out so she'd stayed in with me.

"We've been doing it too long," I said.

"But we're only halfway through."

"This one," I said.

"So don't take another contract," she said.

"Will you?"

She was silent. "I don't know what else I'd do."

"What did we do before?" The question filled our little cell as I tried to remember what we did before our prison sentences. I lived with my Aunt Ellie on Coldwater. Paisley lived with her sister in Burbank. We danced at a night club called Deep on Hollywood Boulevard. We smoked cigarettes on the patios of our apartments. We talked about taking classes at Valley College, or starting our own business. Sometimes we drove to Westwood

to get cookies at Dee Dee Reese, or went to Santa Monica, or hiked Runyon on busy Saturday mornings with Aunt Ellie.

“I don’t want to dance at Deep again,” she said. “Or any club.”

“There are other dance jobs in the world,” I said.

“I know.” She was quiet again. “We don’t have to decide now.”

At the time I couldn’t imagine what it would be like, to do something without her. I realized that I had made every decision since I left home based on what Paisley was doing. I wondered if I ever really saw her as a person or just some strange, leggy extension of me, someone who made the decisions, the girl who stayed in the boy’s cabin. I’d let this take over for my own agency, mistook following Paisley for living my own life.

Out on the decks the next morning you could tell it was the seals’ last day at sea. All the loungers were full and kids screeched from the pools. Damien volunteered me for lobby duty as punishment for messing up the night before. I had to stand in my show costume and hand out comment cards and brochures for other cruises. I wore a lime green, high cut leotard with silver and green sequins cascading down the low cut front of it, silver heels, tan tights that made my legs look like they shimmered. I was forced to wear one of the headdresses too. Tall and heavy, it extended from my head like some alien that had taken hold of my body. “Did you enjoy your cruise?” I was supposed to ask as I held out a brochure. Most of the seals shrugged me off, dressed in their swimsuits, hurrying to get to the sun. Some, kids usually, came squeaking through the lobby sopping wet, running. But there were some that wanted to talk, tell me about what a great time they had, life-changing, too many called it, and there were others who wanted to complain that the

shrimp we served were too small or that the ship was too big or too small or there weren't enough pools or bars or places to get a slice of pizza.

I was on my feet for two hours; standing in heels is somehow much harder than dancing in them. My assigned tagline got shorter and shorter. I first dropped the "did," then the "you." The other two words fell as well until all I was saying, through clenched teeth, lips stretched to a smile was, "Cruise?" like an offering. As I watched the seals run around me that morning I felt envious of them. They were getting off the ship, and what was more, once they got off the ship they had stupid little lives to get back to.

I managed to make it through the shows without messing up. Damien called it a small miracle. The seals were in a bittersweet mood, this being their last night on the ship and the applause was the loudest it'd been all voyage. They think they will remember this for the rest of their lives, the *Fiesta Ecstasy*. The applause jazzed up the cast too and after the last show everyone gave each other hugs like this is the end, even though we'd have the opening night show for the new seals the next night. It's was like this on every cruise. Tomorrow the seals would get off the boat and we'd stay on and a new group of seals would be clapping loudly for us in two weeks. Even Paisley seemed extra affectionate, hugging me for a long time once the final curtain was drawn, hooking her arm in mine as we walked to the dressing room.

Back on the Serenity Deck the sea expanded before us in a way that made the enormity of the earth clear, but no more understandable. We smoked Patricia's Virginia Slims, in a sort of farewell gesture to her.

"She would have really liked this," Paisley said.

“The old gal,” I said. “We should go see her.”

“How?”

“Go to the morgue.”

Paisley doesn't even smile at the absurdity of it. “We don't know where it is.”

“We just have to find Walter or Cody or ask anyone. I bet a lot of the crew knows where the morgue is.”

“Really? We worked on ships for years before we knew it even existed.” She was upset because I wouldn't go out with her, but wanted to “return to the scene of the crime,” as she called it. She rolled the skinny cigarette between her lips. “If we find Cody and Walter we'll have to go to the lounges.”

“Maybe.”

“That's where everyone is,” she said, sitting forward.

“Not us.”

“Not us,” she said, sitting back against the lounge.

I looked out at the ocean, ribbons of water tailed the ship, like some grand parade. “Okay, we can go to clubs, but only to look. We stay five minutes. If they aren't there we look some place else.”

We surveyed the Comet Lounge. Seals crowded the dance floor. The bar was packed.

“I don't see them,” I yelled over the music. I grabbed Paisley's wrist and pulled her through.

We stayed at the Chinatown Lounge longer. I slumped over the bar while Paisley did tours of the dance floor.

“They aren’t here,” she said, dancing past me.

The lights spun in colors and swirls, frantic. That’s what the entire ship was: frantic and unsustainable. I slid off the bar stool to look for Paisley, pushing my way past seals. She was there, in the exact middle of the dance floor, doing her awkward version of a step touch. A male seal was transfixed on her, fascinated by her.

I left the club by myself, convinced of my contentment to find Patricia on my own. I walked the decks, starting at the top of the ship and going down. The Sky, the Sun, the Spa, the Panorama, the Lido, the Verandah, the Riviera. Each deck, its own little world. On the Riviera Deck I found the First Aid booth and Walter sitting at a desk doing a crossword puzzle.

I knew we were underwater really. Walter had led me down below the Riviera Deck, which was the lowest deck known to me, the same deck our cell was on, but he’d opened a door to a metal staircase and we descended lower. The temperature was different and the ship creaked and yawned with the ocean.

Finally, we stood in front of what looked like a large, walk-in refrigerator and I wished I wouldn’t have left Paisley on the dance floor. Our final arrival rendered the journey silly and pointless. Why were we here? Walter was a stranger to me. I looked at him. He looked so young, just a boy, face clean and smooth. He pulled the lever and the door released. The cold was immediate and palpable.

“I don’t want to see her,” I said, backing away from the door as though someone was going to push me in.

Walter looked at me confused, but apathetic. “Okay,” he said, and went to shut the door.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll go.”

“You don’t have to,” he said.

“I want to.” I felt like I had to go in. I had to know this thing about my ship. The room was small with what looked like the world’s largest metal three door filing cabinet.

“There’s only room for three,” I said. “What happens if more than three die?”

Walter shrugged. “I guess they’d have to keep them with the meat up in the kitchen.” He grabbed the middle drawer and opened it. Out slid not Patricia’s body but the other one, the man. His eyes were closed and he was naked. He had a full head of white hair.

“You can touch him,” Walter said.

“I don’t want to.” In that moment I forgot I was on a ship. I was standing in any morgue, in any city or town, firmly built of concrete and steel, on dry land. Those moments happened sometimes, and I found them to be a relief, a respite from my constant awareness of the ship’s movement, of the fact that I wasn’t on something fixed. “I just forgot,” I said.

“Forgot what?” Walter asked.

“That we were on a boat.”

He closed the drawer.

“Who was he?” I asked.

Walter shrugged. "Some old guy." He opened the bottom drawer and there was Patricia. She was naked too. She looked bigger than she had the night she died, shoulders heavy and breasts massive. Her face was small and tranquil though.

"You know what's weird about her," Walter said. "She was alone."

"What do you mean?"

"There was no next of kin on the ship, no friends. She took the cruise by herself."

I imagined Patricia Sibly packing her bag in her small house in Newton Falls, Ohio, feeding her cat, taking a cab to the airport, and I couldn't help but think of my own mother, whom I had left all alone in Masonville. That would be her trip to visit me on this ship, alone. "Would you ever do that?" I asked. "Go on a cruise alone?"

"Maybe, but not to Hawaii. I'd cruise to like, Borneo or Bali or Indonesia."

"My dad died," I said, blurring it out like some swallowed up confession.

Walter didn't say anything, but I could tell he was searching for something to say.

"You don't have to say anything," I said after a moment.

Walter relaxed and put his arm around me. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"How'd he die?"

I knew he was just trying to be nice. He thought that this is what I wanted to talk about. Why else would I have told him? "He had a heart attack."

Walter kept his arm around me. It felt good. I folded into him and he brought his other arm around, so I was enveloped, tight. I hadn't had a boyfriend since high school. There were boys, but mostly they were guys Paisley and I met while we were out, who were really more like men, and I never liked the smell of their cologne or the way they wanted to

buy me drinks. I wanted to buy my own drinks. Since I'd been working on the ships I'd made out with two gay guys and one seal, and Walter. I made out with Walter in the morgue of the ship. I didn't mean for it to happen like that, to say, "My dad died," and then end up making out. I would like to say that we were knocking things off tables in some passionate urgency, but in reality there were no tables to knock things off of. The morgue was a simple room and unless we were going to lie down on the cold floor there was little choice but to stay vertical. We stumbled around the cold room and eventually we ran into Patricia's open drawer. I looked down to see her body give a jolt at the impact of our legs with her drawer. For a moment we both watched her like we might have stirred her and she would wake up.

The rest of the night we walked all over the ship. Walter was from Carson City, Nevada. He'd ended up an EMT because of a girl. They were going to become EMTs and move to New York together. I laughed out loud at that and said, "Why New York?"

He shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

He was a prisoner too, but like most people on the ship he didn't know it. We were sitting on the floor of the ship, our feet dangling through the rails. By that time the sun was coming up a horizon of beautiful land was creeping over the water. I could see it there, a bold swipe. I could tell it was solid.

I'm not sure when I decided to leave, to walk off that ship like I was a seal. It might have been while I stared at Patricia Sibly's body, or when Paisley hugged me after the show, or maybe it was when I forgot to go on stage and watched the number from the wings. By the

time I got back to our cell and stood over Paisley, watching her sleep heavy with alcohol, I knew I wouldn't be performing that night, or the next. I gathered just a few things, my civilian clothes, Patricia's kitty lighter. I didn't wake Paisley to say goodbye.

On deck the seals shuffled out of their cabins to meet the day, backpacks thrown over their shoulders, ready to transform back to their regular selves, whatever boring thing they were on land. There was always such fanfare when the voyage began. They waved as the ship became unmoored and pulled away from the dock. The excitement of the separation, of floating on water, of existing in a place you hadn't before. With the return the fanfare is less, and as the ship gets closer and closer to the land we wave not at someone waiting for us to return, but at the land itself.