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All Begins to Bloom: Stories

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All Begins to Bloom

Stories

by

Daniel Drew Schlegel

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

A collection of short stories, *All Begins to Bloom* follows a range of young protagonists living in the greater Los Angeles area. In a time when even the most underground lifestyles are commodified, when Independent media is just another genre, when every mode of living has seemingly been exhausted, these characters struggle to forge an identity in the face of adulthood.

From a group of surfers reeling from a careless death (“The Pier”) to a young artistic couple brought together by the will to overcome an eating disorder (“All Begins to Bloom”), these stories explore the hollow promises among various subcultures. Instead of finding solace in the possibilities of the future, the narrators often gaze into the past, searching for a lost lesson inside the machinery of an old camera, or a neighbor’s memory of the riots of 1992 (“Daydreamers”).

Within the confining age of relentless digitization, the fight for human connection is waged. Two brothers, in a string of emails, attempt to make sense of their father’s surprising infidelities, exposing the smothered confusions of childhood (“Things Emails Should Not Contain”). In the throes of withdrawal, a young pill-popper is forced to comfort his mother’s best friend, a recent widow (“Pharm Boy”). These stories attempt to find an answer to apathy, the unwillingness to care, and to break apart all the defenses one uses to shelter oneself. Whether failing or succeeding, the striving to connect with one another proves to be invigorating.

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Pharm Boy

Sonja, whom I'd met in my toddler days and had no recollection of, was an old college friend of my mom's, and a widow. Even though I was eighteen, she was called upon to be my temporary mother figure after I sold my little brother's Wii to a buyer I'd found on Craigslist. The ad had been up for months, waiting for the right offer.

I'd jumped out my bedroom window and met the guy on the front lawn. He was standing beside his car in the glow of a streetlight like an idiot. In the dark, I sat on the knee-high wall between my yard and the neighbor's and made him come to me. He didn't sit. I asked him to show me the payment first. Uncurling his fist, he held out a baggy, twist-tied, loaded with those little white pellets. I was getting a slamming deal. He'd stolen those pills from a relative, I imagined, so he didn't know the worth of what he had. I handed over the Wii, two controllers, and all the cables wound in nice circles. As he drove away, headlights flicking on, I crunched one between my teeth into that chalky bitter paste.

When I climbed back in the window, my brother was still lying in his twin bed along the wall. He always twirled around in his sleep, and the sheets, twisted like braided rope, no longer covered his legs. I pulled a spare blanket from my bed and laid it over his feet. Face-first in the pillow, mouth agape, he didn't move.

I was shipped off to Albuquerque, the place of impossible *qs*. Walking into Sonja's house for the first time, she hugged me like we were related. Staring up at me, creases carved around a big smile, she squeezed my shoulders. Even in spike-heeled boots, she was a small woman. "I told your mother," she said, "if you walked in this door, you wouldn't go home."

"I bet she wouldn't mind."

"She'd die if she heard you say that." Sonja sat on the couch. I left my luggage at the door and followed. As I sat down, the cushions formed to every curve of my body like a mound of the feathers. Two small matted dogs ran in and jumped onto Sonja's lap. Another, the white one, curled between my legs. There were rugs hanging on the walls, threaded geometric shapes of reds and mustard yellows. One had a foot-long slit in the center, for a head, I assumed, to be worn as a poncho.

"My mom said you'd be at work when I got here."

"I'm home early because I did my job well," she said. "Next year, the Navajo Nation will get a hundred thousand more in their infrastructure budget. Capital renewal."

The white dog slunk around the room then hopped into a laundry basket full of clothes. "I heard I might get to meet some Indians," I said.

"Not if you call them that."

"Native Americans."

Sonja cradled each dog, one per forearm, as they licked her chin. "They're just people," she said.

My mom had explained what Sonja did for a living, but I couldn't say what it was. Some kind representative to the government, though she wasn't part of any tribe. My experience with careers was that they all sounded the same: So you're an Executive for a company that manufactures the rubber used in airplane tires? My dad's job description went something like that, and Sonja's was only a fraction more understandable.

In the laundry basket, the dog burrowed, making a bed, and now a bra cup sat on its head like a priestly hat, one ear poked in the air. "Your first chore," Sonja said, pointing to the basket. She had lost her husband, Grant, six months before to a plane crash—yeah, how often do you hear that actually happening? So, I was there for labor and that was it. She said the washing machine was down the hall, last door.

"I've never had much to do with laundry," I said.

"Make sure it's on the warm setting. Not hot." Sonja smiled, one eyebrow twitched up like the opposite of a wink. I stood. Standing from that couch was like a jump into cold water, shocking at first, refreshing in the end.

The house was covered in trinkets. Wiry sculptures of horses and praying women and cowboys in mid-wrangle lined the mantle. Down the hall, brimmed hats of all different variations hung in a line. Somehow, despite me traveling east to be there, this place was more western than anything I'd seen. And everything looked like it was hand made, one of a kind, worth something.

I got stuck on a painting of a round-faced creature standing in a smeared teal background. No nose, black rectangles for eyes, and a puckered trumpet-like

mouth extending forward like it might break through the flat second dimension. It wore a holy hat like pearled sunrays beaming about its head, each ray tipped rust-red, and I realized they were supposed to be feathers, a headdress. Holding the laundry basket, I thought I might get sucked into that mouth as if by a UFO, awed by a seeming apparition, wandering to glimpse what's inside, then rendered motionless in a cone of light, but my nose touched the oiled canvas and I averted the abduction.

Tossing Sonja's dirty garments into the washer, a skimpy lace thing fell on the hardwood. Before picking it up, I turned to make sure the door was closed. The only times I'd seen my own mom's underwear were when I'd snoop in her top drawer to skim a few coins from her dusty collection of silver dollars, a girlhood hobby she didn't have any use for anymore. I held up Sonja's faded panties, pinching where the hips would go. Nothing in the way of butt coverage but a thin strip that curved and widened as it reached the waistband. I looped it around my finger and twirled. A little gust fanned my face with each revolution. The sight of a thong, even without the young legs flowing beneath, or a soft stomach and the perfect crimped circle of a belly button above, got my crotch tingling. But I knew it was the hollow promise of a half-erection. The impulse was there, but the blood wouldn't flow, and that's when I realized the last 30mg oxy I'd ever have, at least for a long time, was beginning to wear off.

The first morning, Sonja shook me awake. I was feeling pretty good in the fluffed up bed, in the warm room, spine buzzing like a live wire. All dressed up in a blue

business suit, Sonja told me to stand in the corner, and while I rubbed the laziness from my eyes, she searched the desk, nightstand, and drawers. Turning socks inside out, she glanced at me, lips tight as if sucking on a sour candy. I leaned against the wall, yawning a massive one that shook down my legs. I didn't have anything to hide. When Sonja slid the pillows out of their cases, I knew my mom must've warned her of my secret spots. After the Wii incident, the final straw after the missing checkbook three months before, my parents never found the portion of my stash inside the pen casings on my desk, which lasted me right up to departure.

Sonja heaved up a corner of the mattress, asking me to help. I lifted the other corner to show off a clean box spring. She sat on the bed. "Thank God," she said. She lay back, staring at the ceiling, arms lazily crossed on her chest as if someone else had placed them there. "Jacob, I think I've turned into a zombie."

"Don't bite me," I said.

She turned, short hair fanned along her face. "You're a dry kid."

The heater clicked on, spewing a thickened breeze. From the vent, high up on the wall, a piece of thread tied to a slit thrashed in the stream of air.

"Get ready," Sonja said. "We're going on a field trip." I grabbed some clothes and left Sonja halfway asleep, torso on the bed, feet hanging to the ground.

The inside of Sonja's car was a constant flow of scattered papers, water bottles and apple cores. The freshest ones rotted brown in the cup holders. We were

headed west, a long drive, she said. My mouth was sour, infected with some aftertaste like cleaning products. I searched at my feet for a full bottle and found two with a gulp left. “Does toothpaste ever go bad?” I asked.

Sonja laughed, a dry hawking, and, even though we were on the freeway, she beat the steering wheel.

“What?”

“Too good,” she said. “Don’t you know?” Sonja thrummed the leather wheel with her thumbs as if playing along to a song. “I love your mom for this very reason. She never warned your dad, and she lets me get you, too.” Both of her eyebrows danced. “Vinegar in the toothbrush. I soaked it overnight.”

“You planned it that far ahead of time?”

Reaching in the backseat, Sonja foraged around then handed me an uneaten apple. “The only prank I ever felt bad about was the last one I did to Grant. You know he died of a heart attack?”

“I thought it was a plane crash.”

“If it was a plane crash I wouldn’t feel so bad.”

“I swore my mom said it was a plane crash.”

“He was on a plane when he had the attack.”

“Oh. I guess I invented it. Plane crash sounds more adventurous.” I bit the sour apple, leaving a cavernous white scar in the lime green. The tartness sprung alive my taste buds, but after swallowing I still smelled vinegar. “What’d you do to your husband?”

“I don’t answer that question,” she said.

“Come on.”

She lifted her butt from the seat, jerking on the gas, off and on, while inching down her scrunched up business skirt.

“You’re supposed to treat me like a son, aren’t you? Now tell me what you did to Dad.”

She glared at me. When she wasn’t smiling, those creases around her mouth became crevices, as if etched in stone. “There’s no privacy when you have kids, is there,” she said. “Grant was going on a last minute business trip and asked me to pack a bag for him, which he should have known not to do, so I coiled up a garden hose, stuffed it in his luggage, and handed it off to him in the driveway. He was running so late that he never got out of the car.”

“Wow. So he gets to business meetings with nothing but rubber?”

“He called me from the plane saying I’d finally crossed the line. Two hours later I got a call from the airline. He’d had a heart attack.”

I tore another bite from the apple. “Not your fault, Sonja.” And I didn’t think it was. Things like heart attacks take a lifetime to happen.

Sonja stared into the glared windshield. The buildings rushing by were thinning out along the freeway, just big planks of cracked ground ahead.

“Blocked artery,” she said. She closed her eyes. We wandered in the left lane, passing up cars to the right, and the wheel slid in her hands, tipping right and fading left with the grooves of the road. We stammered over three divider dots and her lids broke open.

We kicked up dust through the desert like a posse on the run, or that's what I wanted us to be like. In the side mirror, tan clouds did billow from the wheel well. And the rolling land, pocked with spiked bushes and banzai-like pines, sprawled to a chiseled mesa on the horizon. My spine was tensing up and I had a wrung-out stomach. The air in the car was going stale, so I cracked a window and let the wind rush straight up my nostrils.

We'd been off the highway for a half-hour when flat-roofed buildings appeared. Mobile homes lined up in rows, stacks of sun-baked tires in the dirt yards. Between two homes, a man and some boys chopped wood, piling the logs up as tall as themselves. Sonja said that tonight was their biggest celebration of the year, one of the only traditions *everyone* on the rez still took seriously. Fires would likely burn till dawn, but we weren't invited. Slowing down over the cracking gravel, she said, "If your parents wanted to teach you something, this is where they should've sent you. See that?" She pointed to a small wooden structure with a slatted door propped open. "Do you know what that is?"

"Firewood storage?"

"Well house. Most of this neighborhood is without plumbing."

We pulled around the back of a home with a wraparound deck that seemed like it might splinter into the dirt after a step or two. Following Sonja through the door, steam moistened my cheeks. Four large pots crowded the stove and the one window in the cramped room was fogged over. Sonja nodded at the kitchen table. I sat down. A slender woman with short black hair emerged carrying a box, wearing jeans and a teal top. "Mrs. Ortiz," she said. "Come to survey us yet

again for government handouts?”

“Alex,” Sonja said. “When did you get cynical?” The woman laid down her box on the chair next to me and smiled, flashing a stack of gray teeth.

“Sit,” Alex said. “I’ll fix a few bowls.”

Sonja introduced me as her nephew and said, “I doubt he’s ever had Posole. And he’s never been on a reservation.”

“I’ve been,” I said, “but it was one with a casino.”

Ladling the steaming soup, Alex said, “The commodification of Native land.”

“Creating degenerates,” Sonja added.

“I heard the whole tribe shares the profits, though,” I said. Alex placed a paper bowl in front of me topped with cilantro, spreading a biting scent, then earthy, but sweet. That got my stomach retreating into my back, so I breathed through my mouth instead.

“Aren’t you smart?” she said, and sat without a bowl.

Spooning the red broth, spotted with oil, I avoided the little yellow balls for now. Sonja tipped the bowl to her mouth and slurped. Swallowing the one bite was a chore. My throat felt shrunken down like plastic in fire. “You know what I’m here for,” Sonja said to Alex. “Yet another legislative session begins after the new year.”

“You want to do something productive? Fix the procurement process.”

“We need a rally on the first day. Let these round-bellied congressmen hear the shouts from the senate floor.” Sonja’s job was starting to come into

focus. Minus all the fluff of description, she organized people, and the simplicity of it made it seem worthwhile.

A feather was poking out of the box, so I opened a flap. Quills of all colors fluffed together, except green, there wasn't any green or black. Sonja was still talking work, but Alex pushed the box closer to me and flicked her head like, *Go on*. Rummaging through the headdress, I saw a thin tube and pulled the whole thing out. The same trumpeted mouth, the alien tractor beam, painted rust red. No eyes were cut into the wood, but the inside was lined with white linen worn brown at the forehead, as if soaked in sweat. Sonja cut herself off and said, "Jacob, don't put that on."

"That dress is used in our oldest dance," Alex said. "He can put it on." I pushed my bowl away then placed the feathered mask on top of my head. Standing, Alex scrunched it over my face, knocking my head backwards. I wobbled my head upright, stiffening my neck and attempting stillness like I was balancing a water jug. I could only see through the tunnel of the mouth, Sonja's hands, or the four boiling pots. I jostled my head around and slapped my thighs in a steady rhythm.

"Put a headdress on him and he thinks he's a Native," Sonja said.

"Imagine performing in that all night long," Alex said.

"I think my head would fall off." The words vibrated in my ears like two people whispering the same thing on either side of me. My hot breaths, reverberating off the wood, went loud and raspy. Through the tunnel view, I saw the bowl of soup, steaming. My stomach flopped. I stood and ripped off the

headress and ran out the door. Off the deck, I jumped into the dirt onto all fours. My body wrenched. I blurted burning chunks, and heaved again. I spat, sticky spit bending in the breeze, flinging onto my cheeks. On the caked ground, a splatter of green apple skins sat glistening with bile.

I rolled onto my back. Sweat cooled me into shivers, and the quick slicing thuds of wood being chopped blasted over my head like distant bombs. Footsteps creaked on the deck, then crunched in the dirt. Sonja knelt beside me, eyebrows slanted low. “Jacob,” she said.

Over the dry dirt, the cooling earth beneath, the sharp pinch of pebbles, I grazed my arm. Sonja ran her splayed fingers into my hair, stroking my scalp. The warm tug of her hands led me into a jittered trance, my body oozing into a blob. Alex stood on the deck, watching us like a perched hawk. Sonja sat cross-legged. “You’ll get your suit dirty,” I said.

She laughed. “I guess Posole’s not your thing.” She wrapped my hands in both of hers. Like munchkin hands, small and thick and warm.

On the drive home, I felt like a shell, a scraped out lobster. I tried to sleep, but the seatbelt sawed at my neck. I stared out the window, craving something natural, like a sunset, but the desert flying by stunned me dizzy. I started to speak, but my throat felt like a clamped pipe, my tongue like a field of cotton, and the syllables went mute upon leaving my lips.

When the sun fell, I was groaning, wincing at the headlights shooting like lasers, reflecting off the windshield, Sonja’s moping eyes, piercing my pupils like

a led pencil. I saw red figures in the lights, then balls floating like soap bubbles, flashing rainbows. A flash of my brother in the backseat, bed sheets tied around him like a toga, then Sonja draped her jacket over me and I curled in a ball.

In bed, the heater wouldn't shut off and my room was a sea of syrup. Even without covers, sweat crawled from my thighs. I closed the vent then walked around where the air wasn't so stuffy. A cowboy, stuck inside the wall, stared me down, and I heard clopping gallops down the hallway. On the couch, my skin stuck to the leather and burned like dry ice. Crawling around, in coals, in glue, in sand paper and ash, I never moved.

A hand palmed my forehead. "You're still hot," Sonja said. She rubbed my ear between her fingers, and for some reason it eased my throat like honey. "You need to eat." A tray of juice and fruit and eggs sat on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry, Sonja."

"This is what you came here to do, wasn't it?" She kissed me on the forehead, then brushed my skin to wipe away the moisture she left behind. "Keep yourself busy if you can. There's a list of chores on the counter."

The dogs sprawled over the floor while I tried to eat, and the stillness of the house shuddered up my vertebrae. The only swallowing I could manage was the orange juice. Every scrape of my fork on the plate was unexpected, a screech. Roto, the white dog, perked up, and the house erupted into static like a disconnected TV had switched on. Heads cocked, all three dogs had their ears twitching around in search of an unknown noise. Like someone with bottomless

lungs shushing the room, the sound stunted my thoughts. I swallowed then it was gone, and I thought, okay, I can do silence.

Before taking on the chores, I wandered around the house staring at all the decorations, lingering on an odd display. An outfit, for a rodeo maybe, tacked to the wall. A cream hat with a flat brim hung atop a sequined vest paired over a long sleeve flannel, then scratched leather chaps with ties down the sides drooped to the baseboard where golden reptile-skin boots sat right on the floor like they might be worn tomorrow. The ghost cowboy, I deemed him. Sonja didn't need all this shit, probably didn't want it, so I swiped his boots and put them in my closet.

I found my way into Sonja's room. As if I'd been there before, I stepped between strewn clothing and mismatched boots and a pile of belts straight to the bathroom door, but when I grabbed the knob, I felt a warm, oily substance smear my palm. I sniffed it. Like burnt rubber. Vaseline. The knob was goopy with it. I stepped inside and opened the drawers, assuming Sonja was not so careless to leave anything in the medicine cabinet. Beneath the sink were piles of picture frames and ties and sneakers. As I pulled out one silver frame, a dozen scattered to the floor. All of Grant, Grant and Sonja, Grant and other men. In a glittering ball gown, hair much longer, Sonja stood just an inch taller than Grant, who, in a tux with a loosened bowtie, patches of gray in his beard, stood laughing on his knees. I bet I would've liked him.

Last, I opened the mirrored cabinet. Among a few lotions, an index card sat creased into a mini tent. A note:

Jacob,

Don't ever come in here again.

It was November, colder than I'd expected, and each morning when I'd let the chickens out of the miniature barn in the huge backyard, I'd watch the half-bare cottonwoods flick yellowed spearheads into the air. Everywhere I walked over the mottle of decaying leaves, the cottonwoods arched overhead, branches of one tree twining with the next like vines against the sharp blue. Nights dipped below freezing and, under the fresh sun, the frosted hillocks of leaves glinted a thousand bright specks. Behind a picket fence, the six chickens scrabbled. Two of them, the alphas, always secured first dibs on the cupful of scratch I threw on the hard ground. I'd thought I'd outsmart them by slyly throwing out a handful at the end of the chicken run for the runts to get their share, but after a week that didn't work, and the alphas would shoo the others away with brisk flapping wings.

Tending to the dogs and the chickens and raking leaves, I felt like a hired farmhand those mornings in the stiff cold. I performed other tasks that required a bit more skill, too, like mending the chicken house with rusted tools from the tin shed, replacing the door hinges and the rotted out wooden locking mechanism. In my first semester at community college, the semester that was still going on now, the only class I'd bothered to go to was woodworking. Power saws shot a needling sting through my fingertips, so I wouldn't touch them, but I did enjoy sticking a fresh nail or screw into the gripping wood. Even though the saws kinda scared me, it was wonderful to hear that sound, a searing pitch like a

chorus of screaming babies.

A week into my banishment, opening a 50-pound bag of chicken scratch, the morning was already slogging along, one of those days when the present is an unbearable task that never ends, always looming around you like smog on a windless afternoon back home. It was 9:11 AM on a Tuesday, and in a perfect world where no one lives, I would be sitting in College Algebra watching x s and y s being scribbled on the board by classmates suggesting solutions to the homework. So I guess feeding chickens in the open air wasn't bad. At least the purpose of it, unlike equations, didn't boggle my mind.

In one of the cottonwoods, where the trunk split into its limbs, I found a relaxing spot like a bucket seat. I hovered like a watchman over the yard as the dogs ran along the picket fence, barking at the chickens who didn't bother to startle. All they did was scratch the ground. Roto sat wagging his tail on the twisted roots of the tree. I shook a branch. He rose to his hind legs, tracking the fluttering leaves, then staggered around, not knowing which leaf to follow into his clamping jaw.

My mood swam and dove like a duck. I tried to distract myself with the surroundings, like the far-off thunderhead. The bottom of the cloud curled, forming and reforming, into a brain-like lumpiness.

In a neglected corner of the yard, behind the row of trees looking like it hadn't held a swimmer in years, was the pool. Clumps of leaves and grass clogged the drains, and the tiles along the sides, lapped by the cloudy green water, grew a white crust. It was more like a pond than a pool. Just needed some

lily pads and a few frogs. Roto watched me skim leaves off the surface, even small branches. Ripples fanned out in the green murk, sun infusing the concentric waves with full-color diamonds until they broke at the tiles. This world, to show me such a brilliant sight, shot me full of something like interest, but that lasted two seconds. I called to Roto and sat down on the grass. He stepped onto me, circling in place until he deemed my lap a suitable space to lie down when my phone buzzed. It was as good a time as any, so I picked up.

“Jacob,” Mom said. “You’re sure taking your time to call us.” I could picture the spiral phone cord bouncing and tightening as Mom moved around the kitchen. I’d taught my brother to stretch it across the room so one of us could pluck it like a giant bass string just to listen to the buzz.

“I’m a slow mover,” I said.

“Not without your drugs. Sonja tells me you’re a hard worker.” Through the woven tree branches, the dropping sun cast oranges and reds, and the cloud, now a floppy chef’s hat, massed above the yard collecting all the graying wisps.

“She’s talking me up,” I said. Roto squealed in my grasp, trying to run away, but I held him.

“Are you able to eat?” Mom asked. The chickens squawked, wings thundering, and the other dogs barked at the cloud. “I read it can be difficult to get anything down.”

Cold beads pecked my head, slinking down the back of my scalp. I angled my face to the sky and let the rain spatter me. The drops turned to pricks. Tiny white balls speckled the ground and plopped in the pool. “Whoa. It’s hailing,

Mom. Actual hail.”

“Are you sure?” she said. “Tell me how you are and I’ll let you go.”

I stretched out my hands. The ice melted as soon as it hit my skin, pooling in the creased bowl of my palm. Then a sheet roared down pelting my shoulders. I sheltered Roto. “You should see this! Ice balls thumping all around us!”

“Jacob, go inside.” A constant blasting hail bounced up a foot on impact, and thrashed behind us on the shed, the chicken barn, the roof of the house, thudding like hammered nails. “What are you listening to?” Barks and clucks rose and died and I felt it all stinging my back, I felt the shredding of the air, the carving of the tamed yard, Roto whimpering, then, like a car ticking after a long drive, the storm settled, and the last bits of hail floated down, melting mid-plummet to soak into the ground.

I was resting on the couch when Sonja came home earlier than usual. She carried a bulging trash bag that swung with her strides like a clock’s pendulum. “If that list isn’t long enough,” Sonja said, “you know I’ve got a million things I can add to keep this burden of a house looking halfway respectable.” A charred flavor rose in the room, spicy.

“Have you seen the backyard?” I said. “Without me you’d be wading in leaves and all your chickens would be dead.”

“Sometimes I don’t remember I have chickens.”

“Yet you eat the eggs.”

In the kitchen, Sonja and I sat with a trash bucket and the steaming trash

bag of roasted green chile between us. She explained the process: peel them and put them in a plastic baggy to later be frozen so she can have chile through the winter. The first pepper I picked up was a long one, charred in black streaks, but still floppy and juicy. I first watched Sonja twist the tip of a chile, separating the skin from the flesh, then she ripped it apart along the length of it. “The smell gets me salivating,” she said, holding up a green crescent, tinged red at the tip. “I can eat this goodness plain.”

“But you’d regret it,” I said.

Her eyebrow jerked up as if to ask for a dare. I shook my head. She leaned back and dangled the chile over her open mouth. A drop of juice hung at the red tip, dripping once on her tongue, then she folded the entire thing between her lips. “God,” I said, “that’s how you spit fire.”

“If you know me when I die,” she said, “don’t bother with a casket and dirt. Bury me in chile.”

My hands were covered in glop, and the tips of my fingers were prickling, dark green residue stuck beneath the nails. “This was one of Grant’s favorite things to do,” Sonja said. “He’d leave that green flesh under his nails all day long, occasionally sucking at them.”

Hunched over the trash, spine curved like a banana, I sat up straight. Every time I heard Grant’s name I became aware of my body in a strange way.

“I knew him for nineteen years and that’s the stuff I remember,” Sonja said. “I think I like that.” With the back of her wrist, she itched her forehead, keeping her palm and fingers from smearing chile remnants on her face. “Eh, I

don't know *what* I like. This is what happens in grief. I'm everywhere at once."

"I know what you mean. Not the grief, but—I feel lots of things and then they're gone."

Sonja smiled. I realized I'd never said something like that to her, to anyone, in a long time, about what happens in my head. "I'm glad you're here, Jake," she said. "This house has done better with you around."

"I guess so." I compressed the discarded skins piling above the bucket. "So I've got a question for you," I said. "Why do you keep this house? It's so much maintenance."

"I'll never give it up. I've got so much stuff and I won't let it just rot in some storage unit. All of it." She pointed to the leather whip hanging in coils on the wall above the sink. I thought it might've belonged to the ghost. "Even that. These are family heirlooms. This house is an Ortiz-Aguilar museum."

I licked the juice from my finger then ran my nail over a tooth to remove the green.

"That's not true. Isn't it obvious?" she said. "I keep it for Grant."

I didn't want to do anything but dangle my legs off a branch and listen to Roto squeal because I couldn't take him up there with me. So still, the air hovered like a touchable mass. Steam plumed from my lips, dissipating among the twigs. I straddled the limb like a horse and let myself think about how much I missed it, and how I couldn't imagine not missing it, that pulsing elation when every movement, every sensation, is, not feels, but is, sublime.

I kicked the drooping bough in front of me, waiting for leaves to sprinkle down. A quick rumble ran through the wood, but nothing fell. Roto jolted out from the roots, so I shook a smaller bough. I searched the tree to find it almost bare, just gray bark gnarled black at each split of a branch. I lay back, sunk into the giant hand of the Cottonwood, and listened.

“Inspection time,” Sonja said, waking me. All clad in her suit, she scoured my room, though she only checked half the socks. “I’ll be glad to never do this again,” she said.

“I thought these were over,” I said.

“Your mother happens to be one of my favorite women.” She swiped a hand down a pillowcase. “I don’t intend to let her down.”

I helped her lift the mattress again. We let it slam with a gust of wind. She moved on the closet, fisting my shoes, then shook out my empty luggage.

“There’s nothing in here,” I said.

The heater shut off and forgotten sounds of the old house arose. The settling walls, the dogs’ untrimmed claws clicking in the hallway. In her tall heels, Sonja tried to reach the top shelf of the closet where my black duffel bag sat. “Little help for a short woman?” Sonja said.

“That’s not mine.” Mouth puckered in a frown, crevices deepening, she tugged my arm. “Been practicing your mom face, Sonja?”

“Get it,” she said. “Now.” Hoping, in some desperate delusion, that in my nights of withdrawal I’d only dreamed of those golden reptile boots, I pulled

down the duffel. Sonja unzipped it. She pulled out a picture frame. She dropped it back in and sat on the bed.

In the bag were the ghost's boots, the mid-wrangle cowboy, and, I couldn't tell you why, a photo that was stuffed in the hallway closet of Grant on a horse. Roaming around one night, sweating, I saw things I wanted. "Sonja," I said, "I promise I never would have sold these."

"You know how much you could have gotten for this, Jake?" She grabbed the frame. "A full buck, maybe. And that's without the photo." With Grant staring at her from her lap, Sonja shut her eyes. I sat down. She thumbed Grant's face, smearing a fingerprint across his chest. "Before we'd go to brunch, every Sunday, he rode that horse at seven thirty. We'd drive to the stables, he'd ride while I did work on my laptop." In fluttered bursts, a long breath escaped her, head falling forward. Voice held back, as if in a yawn, she said, "I don't know why I did that. Why would I work while he rode?"

She glanced at me, eyebrows sagging, cheeks gone soft as putty. I patted Sonja's thigh and she grasped my arm, plunging her face into my shoulder. "I'll have to tell your mom," she muttered. The heater grumbled on, throwing the thread into a maniacal wriggling, and I could barely hear Sonja's sniffing over the hum.

Photo # 23:

Sun Never Hid

The sky won't give you what you want.

Clouds hinder the sun's final hour of suffused light—the hour of golden opportunity for shutters to release, for imprinting the world on the miniscule metal and wire of microchips.

The lakeshore harbors vestiges of lost owners: a rudderless boat half-filled with water; rusted pylons of shattered docks; a beer can eddied among the reeds: and you won't bother thinking in each artifact something beautiful waits to be seen, if only the right light shines, if only the sun never hid—horizons and hills and clouds and rain and gloom and scattered ash and windowless rooms.

Lying on sand, you wait, but drops trickle on your cheeks, and you never think to guard the camera.

Clouds grumble gray wetting your lens: sprinkled glass, fractured light, blurs—streak, flare, a gold patch parts the cumbered sky, angled light spins off streaming droplets.

Stretch, stretch blue bend blur red yellow arch over lake... full prism.

Shutter release.

The Pier

I break the surface in a rush of sea and hair and searing light. Beyond the pier's stark shadow, I tread in sun-shimmered blue. Sand bakes ashore, speckled with oranges and reds, umbrellas and towels, while at the water's edge a group of surfings practice a life of paddling.

I duck-dive under the breakers. Beneath the pier, the damp hangs; black muscles multiply up the pylons. Floating on my back, I crest and trough—swell. My hair fans like seaweed and globs over my open eyes, salt burning the edges. The cement above is a voided black, the peripheral light beams. I hug myself, sink until buoyed, then curl into a fetal egg. Everything awash is the sound I seek—a cacophonous silence—and for the vast seconds my breath remains, I am soothed.

On the walk home, Cloud waves from the surf lessons booth. Seeing him, a regular of the old group, makes me want to crumble in the wind to join the sand. Cloud leans farther out of the service window, but I keep walking until only his head and waving hand are visible. "Julie," he calls, "Yo, Jules." My name dies in the clutter of passersby, all those beachers who barely brave the shore, let alone the water, and shop and dine on Main in two-piece suits.

At the crosswalk on PCH, the cars drown the dull fizzing of waves. A hand grabs my elbow. "It does no good to avoid me," Cloud says, his hair stuck fluffed to one side like a ripped up cotton ball.

"It does no good to talk to me," I say, and steal back my arm. Three kids carrying mini shortboards run between us, ankle leashes dragging behind them. I can't cross the street before an onslaught of memories unreels: a friend smashing a pint glass into her boyfriend's face; wine bottles piling and stinking in the corner of my room; moonlight drives to Red's for more, always more. And now, for the moment, Brendan's fate makes sense. Someone had to be the one who died.

A sticky note rests cockeyed on my door. The yellow square is half-curved off the wood. Maybe another hour and I could have blamed coastal humidity for not getting the message:

requesting neighborly assistance!

if you're around this evening

can you check on gunner?

none of your sugary dog treats!

Gina is going on a date, I assume, with a man some website's logarithm determined is a good match. She's yet to find any of them worthy of a second outing, or, maybe, vice versa. I say it's too soon for her as a thirty-three year old to resort to fellow desperate strangers.

Gina isn't really my neighbor; she's my landlord. I live in the *casita*, as she insists on calling it, in her backyard—a little studio. The casita has one place to sit: the chair at my jeweler's counter, not counting the twin bed. Above my workspace is a holed-board reaching the ceiling. Chisels and hammers hang alongside unused tools from jewelry starter-kits bought long ago. My kitchen

table is a piano bench I move around the ten by twelve room, depending on which corner of my world I feel like eating in: by the one window near the jewelry most days; at the sink and hotplate on rainy days; in the squared bathroom these days.

Four orders have come in today and now I'm out of product, not having made a new batch of jewelry in two months, no earrings (my best-seller) in three, except for the lighthouse pendants no one is buying. I admit, I spent almost zero time assembling them, and my client-base saw the attempt for what it was: cheap, unoriginal, an idea when you're out of ideas. I splay the new feathers, hooks and wire over my desk and stare dumbly at my materials. Fuzzy ambers, blacks and whites, some striped, some solid, gold hooks, gold coil of wire. My new motif will be marketed as Gaudy Native, I've decided. I hang a few feathers from a hook, modeling the design. It lacks a pendant to disguise the attachment of hook, coil and feather—more materials, more cost, more time.

Cloud is the only one I still speak to, but today on the boardwalk, knowing my work sat in disarray, I couldn't do it. The reason I'd been bearing his presence was to hear about the breakthroughs in his surfboard garage studio. His craftsman impulse has only intensified these past months, and I've found an aversion to the thought of anything getting better.

I hide dog biscuits in a canvas bag full of jewelry materials, but Gina's already gone when I walk through her back slider. She never treats her dog. She tries, but Gunner hates the organic cardboard-of-a-biscuit she buys. That's why he's such a bitch, I used to tell her. He wouldn't learn the simplest commands when

his incentive had no taste. Gunner scratches at my jeans, sniffs at the surprise he's learned to expect from me. He jaws at the bag, rummages, then tongues at a white feather in his teeth. I pull out a treat. He barks and I throw my hand behind me. He stops, barks again, then sits, wags, stays—silent. I reward him and rub his gluey muzzle.

The plastic-covered sofa screeches when I lie down. Gunner jumps, sprawls over my stomach. To scratch at my zipper, I nudge him aside. Tiny rocks twist into my salt-matted pubic hair, an itch I've come to expect when I go to the beach most days since one shower between each swim doesn't undo the ocean. Brendan was the one who encouraged me to stop shaving. "Keep it natural," he'd say. "I have no desire to make it with a preteen." It was romantic, somehow, that he embraced my pubic hair. "Even if it gets as bushy as a grizzly on Rogaine."

Gina wakes me. My chest expands in a rush like I'd failed to breathe while sleeping. "This isn't prison watch," she says. "I just asked you to check on him." I breathe again and feel more hollow, like a pitless plum.

Gina smiles, a toothy grin that only appears when wine is involved. She wraps Gunner around her shoulders like a boa and sways, gripping her dog's paws and tugging on them like a puppeteer. Gunner blinks, unsure of his role in this dance number, while Gina hums a tune I don't know. She is made-up for a date that didn't go well, since she's home already. Maroon lipstick, rose-lifted cheekbones, hair straightened so dry each brittle strand verges on snapping. And—at least she is supportive of me—one of my necklaces dangles from her neck, a comb of bronze chains settling at the curve of her breasts. That piece was

in the product line, Metal Reclaimed. "Did the internet find your dream man?" I ask.

Gunner tries to wriggle off Gina's shoulders, so she sets him down and walks to the kitchen. "Shut it, Jules. The internet screwed me again."

"You mean you wish it did."

"Ha ha," she shouts. Ice clinks from the kitchen and Gina's humming turns to singing. With two glasses of brown liquor, she sits in the armchair. Dull sunlight seeping through the back slider glows the liquid amber. "For nights when I'm over it all." She sips. Air thrusts out her nose as if to throw out the rough taste.

"You should stick to your white wine," I say.

"I've already stuck. Three glasses at dinner. All I could do was drink when I saw him eating a mound of tuna. Of all fish to eat raw. The mercury!" She began working at a co-op grocery store a few months ago.

I set my glass on the coffee table and pretend to see the harsh smell emanating in smoky signals of warning. "You know I'm not drinking," I say. My words pause in the air waiting to be retorted, by me, or Gina, I'm not sure.

"Grief has an expiration date," Gina says. She sips. "Jules, look at me." I look and see nothing but soft blurs. "Alcohol was never *your* problem. Besides, Brendan died two months ago. Almost as long as you dated."

A small sip, woody and singed, dissolves on my tongue. "Yes!" Gina says. "The curse is broken." I stand and breathe the burn, then pour out the liquor in a steady stream onto the couch. The liquid thuds and beads on the plastic cover

before rolling in rivulets waterfalling into the carpet. Gina is standing, palms stiff and open, shocked into silence. Gunner sniffs at the amber pool soaking into carpet, but shies away. I shoulder my dog biscuits when Gina finally yells. None of it makes sense until the last word before I close the slider and seal off the frenzy: "...clean."

On the pier, I stare down the coastline at kites buoyed by the breeze, and the smokestacks beyond heaving steam into the muted blue. It's the first truly hot Saturday of the summer and the parking lots are clogged, the beaches crowded with families, so no surfers ride these parts. Further down the pier I find the repaired concrete railing, darker and rougher against the weathered white. Brendan crashed here.

The ocean spans in tiered waves—white-lace foam riding wax blue—like seams on stretched crumpled cloth. If only Brendan's Jeep was still down there. The sea should have buried it, rusted it away, and let the shellfish devour it. I'd steal the bounty of beaded rosaries wrapping the rearview mirror whose warnings and blessings my areligious brain never understood. I'd palm the gear shifter I never learned to use and ease the accelerator, revving a dead engine.

A crowd massed on the pier the day they craned it out. A giant machine was wheeled in. Its metal arm reached over the water like a massive fishing pole and dangled a net of hooks. The crowd hovered like seagulls as the crane reeled, anticipating, what? They didn't know. It was a spectacle for them, feeding time for the flock, and as the black Jeep rushed out of the water in fizzing foam, slack-

jawed whoas and damns harmonized in the air and I wanted everyone to leave. Just leave, let me be alone to witness this oceanic volcano vomit my hunk of metal. Let me bask in the moment his Jeep suspends heavy over the sea. I need to see it all, and the sight to be mine.

But the crowd cheered when the tires touched the pier. A worker opened the passenger door and water smacked the concrete, spilling beads of kelp and leafy weeds and an empty bottle. A fifth of whiskey. Now everyone knew how a car had ended up at the bottom of the ocean.

He'd broken open the pier's after-hours gate by wrapping the chain around a hook on the bumper and easing into reverse, something I'd done with him to off-road on forbidden trails scaling inland hills. It frightened me every time. Not the breaking in, but the final gnawing instant before the chain snapped, like the moment a gun hammer meets a bullet. The Jeep's grill had dozens of white scuffs and dents from whipping locks and chains. I never anticipated him trespassing onto a non-road, though, joyriding, alone, screeching around a restaurant at the end of a pedestrian pier and crashing into railing, exploding into ocean. Due to the gash on his forehead, they said he'd likely gone unconscious colliding with the thin surface of the sea. No one could or would tell me how alcoholic his blood was. I imagine that fifth rising with the filling water, forever afloat, a last insult to his inability to keep air in his lungs; and I wonder how I can feel so damn sorry for him.

It's been three days since I saw Gina. I'm almost hoping for an eviction notice,

probably in the form of a sticky note. A firm disruption in my life might be a good thing. Escape this room, leave these people, flee this coast, but to what end? Solitude in some mountain town? My thoughts would spin there like worn tires on ice.

Yesterday I cut brass. Made circles out of 24-gauge sheet metal by slamming the one-inch punch through the disc cutter with a one-pound hammer. Today I'm stamping, a more meticulous job than yesterday's stress-releaser. Stamping requires a solid but restrained stroke. You can hit as hard as you want when cutting. I lay the first gold disc on the bench block. From the rows of metal rods in my top drawer, I grab a seven-eighths inch punch with a coil stamp then center it on the brass, holding it up like a giant nail. I choke the hammer, set it on the punch, *tink*, raise and hammer down, *dunk*. The fresh coiling groove runs toward the rounded edges into a blooming flower that looks more like a muddled star. Next one: place brass, level stamp, choke hammer, tap, raise, slam. Place, level, tap, slam. Place level tap slam *bark!* Gunner scratches at my door. No one knocks. I wait for something to slide under the crack, an envelope stamped with urgent eviction red, but nothing comes. I decide to punch five more before checking the door, enough time for Gina to leave.

Across the back lawn, Gunner stands wagging behind the sliding door. I hunch over, a hand on a knee, and blow a kiss. A bark escapes through the glass.

When I turn back, a sticky note:

grieve as long as you want
everyone knows i did

Like all of her messages, never a capital letter, never a period. She didn't grieve; hers was heartbreak, distress, dejection, shame, husband, cheating, ultimately, leaving.

Today I don't float. I want to scar red in the sun; dig heels in the sand; find water in the sea-swamp four feet down and burrow like a sand crab.

I find an open spot next to a fire pit. Cans and bottles pile the concrete ring like a coffee table after a house party. Nearby, a trash barrel overflows. By order of posted signs, littering and alcohol are prohibited on the beach with threats of thousand-dollar fines. But with lifeguards cooped in their towers, heads fixed on inlanders flailing in the tides, no one seems to care what happens on the shore.

My hands sting as I brush away the hot loose sand to find cool. I dig a makeshift chaise lounge, deepest where my butt will sit, and smooth it into an inward half-dome. I lie down, but the hole is more like a bucket seat, so I dig a slanted back. Tiny rocks stub the flesh beneath my fingernails.

A scrawny woman in a bikini clatters through the trash barrel. Gone dry brown, her back wrinkles as she picks through the heap to find anything worth a recycling deposit. Her bikini bottom, once black I assume, has faded gray folding into drooping ass cheeks. Living example of a beach bum. I lie back and drape my shirt over my face to guard against facial burns. "Turn it to broil," I say to the sky, muffled. The heat warps me into a blob; I've lost my sense of body and feel like eyes in a sea of sand.

"Don't run away again," I hear. Sun circles flare in the ruffles of my shirt. I jut my head forward, surely squishing my neck into folds, before removing the face-guarder. It's Cloud, clutching a board, smirk cut across his face.

"How—why did you know it was me?" I say, forearm hovering over my eyes.

He stabs the nose in the sand and the board towers like a monolith. One of his handmade boards with his signature extra wide nose, fish-style, which he prefers to ride. "You're the only girl I've seen sunbathe in a grandma suit." I stopped wearing bikinis years ago. Not because I'm ashamed of my body, but, well, somehow I feel I'm making a statement of sorts by wearing a one-piece. But that statement has lost any meaning it ever had. I just haven't bought a new suit in a while.

Cloud sits and I prop up on my elbows. "I dig your legs," he says, leaning into me. "All natural." My pocked shins shine with black stubble. "Soon," he says grazing his calf, sun-bleached fuzz on sun-leathered skin, "you'll be like this. Curly-cued."

"If my experiment turns to that I'll have to shave." Trash bag dragging behind her, the woman finds the treasure chest of recyclables on the fire pit. She holds a bottle to the sun, rattles it, then empties bottom slosh into her gaping mouth.

"You've fallen off the earth," Cloud says. "Everyone is scared of you."

"Scared?" I said, as if it were an emotion I never expected to arouse in people.

"That you might go ape-shit if they try to talk to you," he says. "Seeing you boardless on the beach freaks them out."

I hunch forward and rub my needling leg hair. The last time I saw the whole group was at Brendan's funeral, a ritual held at the beach—hardly somber, never sad, ending in a night surf and swim. I fantasized a mass drowning in the half-moon.

Cloud scrunches his knees, bobbing in a perpetual nod; then leans back on his elbows; then stands. "Need another instructor," he says. "If slanging earrings ain't doing it for you anymore. Everyone knows we artists need help."

"I sold my board," I say.

"Nah. If you hawked your board we couldn't be friends. And I mean that. Tell me you ever rode a board with a better combo of speed and stability." It's been lying beneath my bed, next to Brendan's.

Cloud says he's doing group lessons at the north fire pits. Noon Tuesday through Friday. "All the little surflings," he adds, smiling, giant teeth rimmed red. "Come by. See if you like it."

"Sad to see all those kids following in our footsteps." Visions of babies seep into my head: miniature wetsuits ragdolled in the whitewater. "You see that?" I say, nodding to the woman rummaging through another barrel down the beach. "Scraping together trash. That's where we're headed."

"Dolores?"

"I'm sure she doesn't have a name."

"She collects bottles behind Red's, too," Cloud says. "Yells at us when we

piss near the dumpsters.”

“That's the kind of idiot shit I'm talking about,” I say. “The way we run around this town, doing whatever we want, wherever, 'cause hey, fuck it, we're surfers, we're supposed to be drunken idiots.”

Cloud kneels in the sand, wagging a finger. “You haven't been working,” he says. “I can tell. All that grief, all that energy going to waste. What if we collaborated sometime? Lay jewelry in the gloss? That'd be an experiment.”

“It'd screw up the whole ride.”

“Since when were you an idea killer?” Cloud shoots to his feet then tucks the board beneath his arm. “Think about the instructor job. Seeing those kids eat foam reminds you why you became a surfer in the place.” He turns, stumbling in the soft ground. “North fire pits,” he shouts.

I melt into my sand chaise. *grieve as long as you want*

I've been making excuses not to work on the new earrings: I should have 20g wire instead of 22; I need blue-tinged feathers to complicate the color scheme; it's about time I hire an assistant; I could never afford an assistant; look where you live, it's microscopic; I blame the beach for high rent; so move inland. These dialogues spiral while I stare under lamplight at a box of hooks and an array of feathers whose quills are waiting to be trimmed, wired and fastened. This is my paycheck, I coach myself, and begin cutting quills down to a finger-length nub. This is my paycheck, *snip*. This is how I live, *snip*. This used to be exciting, *snip*. I used to be creative—

Water sizzles across the room. On the hotplate, rice is boiling over, spit-white foam burning to crust. I lift the pan and turn the dial.

The one dinner Brendan and I cooked in this culinary hell was spaghetti Bolognese. I told him the hotplate might explode if forced to cook actual meals. It took an hour to boil the four quarts of water needed for the pasta, and another thirty minutes to cook the noodles to an edible texture. As usual, he tried to do too much: too big of a pot, too much water, too much pasta. Half a package would have been enough.

We ate over the piano bench set longways, him in the chair, me on the bed. Purple lips chewed and smiled; empty wine bottles clustered at his feet. He typically failed to speak much of any real future or past, content with the present and immediate futures—the swell coming in, and which surfboard he would ride; the unexpected tip left by a lone old man at the steak house; which day the terribly brilliant 80s cover band would play this week; a friend's plan to blow a hundred dollars worth of fireworks off the pier—so when he asked if I'd ever lived with someone before, I thought it might be a proposition. "With a boyfriend?" I suggested.

"Anyone. Besides family, you know."

"Roommates in college."

"I'd be a good roommate," he said. "Even in this dollhouse. A jeweler's muse. I could be as silent as a wingless fly or as chatty as a..." He grinned, wine crusting over his lips, the only signal I ever learned of his inebriation. He denied himself the pleasure of acting the drunk. "I've got nothing for that one."

"That's a first," I said, and ground a stiff noodle between molars.

That night, I taught him to make a pendant earring; he taught me to relax after sex, easing my violent post-coital shivers by holding me squished on the twin bed. My twisted hair gathered his exhaled warmth. Teeth chattering, I couldn't say anything. After minutes of deep breaths, my skin stopped sweating. The open window howled as Santa Ana winds sucked at the casita; crumpled leaves blew onto our bare twining legs. I wanted the world to root us like trees in this moment, and I would've been happily soaking groundwater forever.

Now I drag the piano bench into the bathroom and close the lid over the toilet to sit down. The rolling memories need to stop. I eat a bowl of rice and black beans in the half-light. Smaller is more comforting, I rationalize, as if I'm feeding back in the womb of some cold and tired mother. I don't see my jewelry waiting to be finished. I don't see my bed where I've spent nights beyond these. All I feel is the cold white of the drywall, of porcelain, of water in the pipes, and the streak of warmth from the rectangular window. But I swish around my tongue trying to remove a bean skin, knowing I can't quell the surge much longer.

From beneath my bed, I slide out his board, a narrow, pointed slab he called his "six-shooter"—the style was called a Gun, but nobody else rode them here because the waves were rarely big or steep enough. As I run my palm along the board, the pink globs of wax, gone gray with dust, are still sticky. I lay his gun on my bed. Lying beside it, I slide my leg onto the cold tail, and our last evening together rises like a bubble, popping on the surface.

The evening he died, we floated beyond the breakers, short swells bobbing

us. In the drowning sun, the ocean glistened like flipping coins, while his silhouette in the last light—tuft of hair in shadow, shoulders glowing in the soft orange—lured me like a rip tide. The noses of our boards knocked. Brendan splashed into the water. "If we can make this work," he said, treading, "anything could work." Slow and easy, Brendan shimmied onto the nose while I scooted back, stabling the wobble. We straddled either end of the board and inched closer, water lapping our waists, then we drifted, kissing, sucking at salty necks, teething each other's shoulders, nipples, until we slipped into a stream of bubbles, sealed, deafened, embraced, boards tugging our ankles—the only reminder of the surface, the air we needed to breathe.

Now, lying on his board like a mummy staring at the slanted ceiling, I'm just an onlooker, peering into memories whose other maker is dead, and I can't know if they're true, if he ever said these things, if we were ever promised a future. How could I have earned this gloom? I just live with it, awaiting the next bowl of rice and beans, another shipment of brass, a new idea to keep my hands occupied.

A piece of paper swishes under my door.

stop eating in your bathroom like a loon

dinner tonight

gunner misses you

To be missed, even by a dog, even by Gina, is enough. I grab a roll of tape and a pen and make for Gina's back slider.

G,

You're a spying maniacal psycho landlord,
but free food is my siren song.
I'll be there.

"Tell me something new," she says, her hair in natural curls like springs above her shoulders, "you need new. Find newness."

"You sound like a yoga instructor," I say, stroking Gunner's warm belly.

"Plan a future," she advises. "That's what I discovered." I nod, wishing Gina had run out of her token wisdoms by now. "Not that we share the same story," she continues, "but I know I felt just as helpless as you. When Justin left. Cheated. Whatever. I forget which came first. His eyes went vacant long before." She swirls her white wine. A metal charm ringed around the stem tings the crystal. She stands. "Hindsight, right?"

"One day, I'm kidnapping this dog. Right, Gunner? You're living with me. Keep my bed warm, shed your stinking hair, model my jewelry."

"He doesn't sleep with strangers," Gina says, walking to the kitchen.

Gunner leaps as I stand, then pounces on his doggy bed by the slider. Frizzed, the clean carpet shows where the whiskey soaked in. She must have scrubbed so frantically she frayed the fabric. I feel a tinge of apology growing, thinking of that girl, me, resorting to something like a tantrum.

At the kitchen table, Gina serves me a bowl of lentil soup and explains to me the difference between insoluble and soluble fiber and how lentils are high in both. Insoluble creates healthy stool, a sought-after commodity, and soluble aids

digestion while reducing cholesterol. I wonder if the benefits still apply when you add a bottle of wine. I spoon broth and a carrot and let it dissolve before swallowing. Gina's learned to cook since she began at the co-op.

"He would have hated this soup," Gina says.

I don't want to hear Gina recount her story again, so I join in with my own. "The worst is knowing he had a problem all along," I say, but know it's untrue. The worst is knowing how little I knew about him, how miniscule our number of memories, laughs, inside jokes, intimate explorations—the fact that when I close my eyes and picture his face two peach splotches blur the shape of his nose, the curve of his smiling mouth.

"As if you could have prevented it, huh?" she offers, eyes staring, beaded, like these thoughts are new to me. "Past is past is shit is past. What can we do?"

I smile then slurp the last of my soup. Finally a bit of wisdom I understand.

While she clears the table, I scan the bits of her life magnetized to the fridge. Surrounded by a picture of Gunner, a small whiteboard with Gina's weekly work hours, and a few scrap papers with men's phone numbers, hangs my business card from way back when I made my first line of bracelets and anklets, Bonfire Beads. That fridge shows Gina's planned future: dog, online dating, job at the co-op. Me. And however hesitant I am to acknowledge it, she's a part of mine.

Face drawn bloodless, teeth gritting rubber, I float peering down at wavy wave-

made grooves on the ocean floor, huffing air through a snorkel tube. The pier hovers behind me, but casts no shadow today; clouds patrol the shoreline.

The floating bottom haze, scattered gray rock, wreckage: the only something settling this underwater desert. I breathe deep and dive, legs swishing against the buoying salt. Eight feet down my ears deaden, dolphin kick to twelve, fifteen, ears hammer. A small chunk of rock, a piece of the pier's concrete pillar, squared, but smashed, rusted wire jutting through its middle, keeps me from floating. I plug my nostrils and blow and my head accepts the new pressure.

Nothing lives here. The sand whirls with the swell along the slow grade of illuminated murk out to the black. Above, muted chop churns the sky beyond the surface. This bit of pier, this last reminder, will be gone, washed and scattered into pebble and sand like ashes in a blustering wind.

When I get to the north fire pits, Cloud has started his spiel, getting a laugh out of the two rows of surfings by explaining his namesake: "People think I'm high all the time, so, you know, *Cloud*. Truth is I'm just naturally laid back. I'm thinking my mom puffed away while she breastfed me." Most of them are teens. Old enough for the joke, I guess, in Cloud's eyes.

He defines the beginner lingo he plans to use during the lesson, *pop-up*, *drop-in*, *pump*, before sending everyone to the shoreline and ambling up to me. The wind throws gusts of sand, pelting my legs. "I knew today would be exciting," he says, scrunching up his orange nose. "The universe aligns when the swell is good." He leads me through the maze of people sunning on towels, kids

digging holes, moms chasing umbrellas. "Offshore winds and it's supposed to peak at eight feet."

"Competition conditions."

"Right? Too bad the Open isn't this week."

"Just came to watch," I say. "No board."

"You're using mine." Another gust blows and I shield my eyes. "Ah Jules," he says, elbowing me like he's told a joke I didn't laugh at. "Glad you came. I thought you hated me."

"Hate is bit strong," I say.

"Bren will be stoked to see you back on a board." Cloud starts running to greet his group at the shoreline. "And shit," he turns and yells, jogging backward, "granny suits are not allowed in my lessons!" If I ever do these lessons, I'll teach the kids that surfing isn't about showing off skin. I'll break down all those surfing ads on Main that show off little bikini babes who've never experienced board rash.

On the dark wet sand sloping into the breakers, Cloud gathers everyone. "You're a surfling today," he says, lying out his longboard in front of me. I feel like I'm starting over, out of shape, out of sync with the waves, which have a disturbingly large barrel today. He instructs us to lie on our stomachs, chin up, arms paddling free-style. "This is how it all starts," he shouts, walking between the lanes of motionless boards. "Head up, looking for that perfect swell." Crawling in place, my fingers scrape sand, while ebbing waves pop and fizz. The surf wax tugs on my leg hair, which has gone thin; might be an experiment to give

up on. The boy next to me yells, "I'm already tired!" My lower back burns, too, but I keep breathing steady, following Cloud's commands.

The boy rests his chin on the board, bent arms flopping at his side. "You're like a dead seal," I say. "Arch your back." He stiffens up off the board, but doesn't extend his strokes. Ahead, the wind throws mist off the crested waves spangling in the sun like flakes of gold. I'm no longer paddling my arms, just watching the miracle rhythm, when thick rumbling foam charges us. Amid screams and yelps the water launches off the nose of my board, shocks my arms, legs, back, then I'm floating, drifting in and swiftly out until the fins bite. I spit sand and salt, rushed, and know I'll be atop the water again soon, riding over the rippled ocean floor, the swaying kelp, the unseeable fish, carving that curling foam into shore just to do it a thousand times over.

Photos # 635-702:

Lightbox

This is how you get paid.

Startup company asks for product photos. You buy a lightbox, a junky cube of synthetic materials and lights to shine and diffuse over the cube walls. They want the product to float in a white atmosphere, ready to be presented, or, easily manipulated in graphic design applications.

What you don't know is every imported product, made in China, is metalized: a terminator head for the newest dvd boxset; tin canisters, again for boxsets; action figures with the same silver gloss.

The flash of your camera reflects in colossal flares off the head of terminator. Try no flash: the background composition turns piss yellow due to the low quality of your lights. And at closer inspection, a warped blackness smears across the forehead, metal reflecting your black lens.

This is a problem you don't care to solve.

This is a startup company who hired an amateur.

These are people who embrace ass-backwards globalization.

These people are friends, a father and son, and they give you work.

This enables your hours spent on personal photos, attempting art.

This is why one should be grateful.

Which of these is a bad reason for shoddy work?

This is how you get paid.

Things Emails Should Not Contain

On Sep 23, 2010, at 8:46 PM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:

Graham,

Where to begin, O Brother? Remember our summer days conversing purely in church hymns? *O Lamb of God, take away the boredom of the world! Let us rejoice on this wretched day, for Mother has made egg salad for lunch, again!*
Aaaaaameeeeeennn.

I miss our childish banter, when humor arose from every impulse. Now, I can hardly chuckle unless I have prepared for a night of laughter, typically through inebriation. *Blessed be the man who fumbles.* This summer, at least, has shown me the glories of heat and swims in cold rivers staring at the yellow-washed blue sky, the only spiritual events in my week. When I plan to see no one, I go without showers. And, to my helplessness, I indulge in bouts of excessive alcohol consumption with acquaintances I assume call friends. All of this has been at the expense of self-discipline; I have yet to write anything of substance during my so-planned post-graduation months set aside to work. I'm still interning three days a week at the magazine that pays almost nothing—no promotions for this degree holder—so I'm living off of leftover financial aid. *Glory to government in the highest, in excelsis deo!* My off days are spent musing over the change in weather—brisk mornings and voluptuous clouds then melting sun spitting heat—or staring blind into shows on Netflix. (The option to click "next episode" forty-five times in a row will be the end of my ambition).

And, as a result, I've been writing in my sleep, finding in the striated morning light half-brained character ideas previously scribbled into my bedside notebook at 2, 3, 4 in the morning. Here is a recent one:

A man with two alarm clocks.

I found this wildly amusing in my partial consciousness. I believe I even laughed aloud at my own cleverness before laying my head back down. So, who is this man with two alarm clocks? A heavy sleeper? A neurotic insomniac afraid he may actually doze off into the heaviest sleep of the past month and not wake up for his boring office job? A bland character created by a dimmed writers mind? Of course, the answer is the latter. I have no confidence in this detail.

I realize this email turned into a lengthy rant on my writing woes. Don't feel bad if you skimmed most of it. Really, I just want a digital ear to listen to my typing, and, most eagerly, I want to here from you. How is the non-profit? Still managing to spread organic veggies to the masses? I don't have to remind you that we haven't corresponded since the divorce announcement, the so-called Boden Family Identity Crisis, as it's come to be known in my own head. Really, let's say it out loud: Dad is gay, and apparently has acted on it for some time.

Please, tell me what you're thinking.

Love,

Cameron

On Sep 25, 2010, at 12:33 PM, Graham Boden <gboden@milemarker.org> wrote:
Cam,

Don't do that. Don't send off your coping mechanisms to me. If you want to talk about something then talk directly, not in that literary tone. I'm sorry your work isn't going well, but please don't hide behind your usual jolliness. I won't accept it anymore. It's time this family stopped hiding.

Mom is devastated, of course. She's heeded my advice and taken off work, but has been doing strange things with the empty hours. I stopped by the house a few days ago, but she wasn't inside. The walls were bare due to Dad taking down all his photos, his years of prided work, and my voice echoed down the halls like I was in a concrete maze. I stepped out on the back porch and called again. She yelled out, "Up here," and my first instinct was that she was on the damn roof ready to swan dive. I ran out into the lawn to see up onto the roof, but nothing. She called again and I saw her peeking out the window of our old tree house nestled in the oak. She was eating dinner in there. Microwave meal atop a placemat spread over her thighs. A candle sat on the floor tossing up thin smoke, hardly giving off light. This wasn't depression, Cam. She sat and smiled at me with limp eyes, asked how my day was like a greeting by a dull housewife. I'm worried. The one word that kept coming to mind while I tried to talk her out of the tree house was loony. She'd gone loony.

Anyway, not for you to worry. Not much you can do from a thousand miles away. And I'm not attacking you, just saying.

Best,

Graham

On Sep 25, 2010, at 1:37 PM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:

Dear Graham Gene Boden,

I'm not insulted, just saying.

Love,

Cameron Marcus Boden

On Oct 2, 2010, at 6:42 PM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:

Ham,

Did Dad take the Ansel Adams original, too? That's family-owned; it isn't his to steal. I re-framed it myself, I set up the track lighting for optimal viewing. Even Dad removing all of his own work is bogus. Leaving Mom with bland walls, the house blank as a toilet seat. God, I can imagine bleach-white rectangles worn into the drywall where the frames used to be. I can scarcely picture the house without all those prints. What else is there, the over-polished living room furniture no one ever sat on? The kitchen linoleum curling at the edges? No wonder Mom retreated to the tree house. As dilapidated as it must be by now, at least there's something interesting to look at, something rustic. Remember the fire you started? Never a good idea to light fireworks in an enclosed area. I almost puked out the window from the smoke. And you took off your jeans to smack out the dead leaves that had caught fire. I never understood how you just laughed once the last flame suffocated. And then how it was infectious, me laughing only because you did. I guess you cracked up in astonishment, at the danger we had fended off yet again; I laughed at your ability to find humor

anywhere.

So, would you say Mom is particularly lugubrious these days? Are you? I haven't decided if I am. I think I'm just confused. Don't relay this to Mom, but I've been researching the genetics of homosexuality. I know you're aware that it's partially hereditary, or can be. What if? Not that I'm scared of it, exactly, I just hate identity crises. They take so much energy.

Sorry to leave you with that.

-Cam

On Oct 7, 2010, at 6:31 PM, Graham Boden <gboden@milemarker.org> wrote:
Things Emails Should Not Contain*:

-semi-colons

-words like "lugubrious" (I'm not even gonna look it up. Who would?)

*This is a running list which will likely grow with every email my brother sends.

To answer your what if... I already assumed you'd experimented before all this happened. You've always been adventurous, always had a lot of girls that adored you, but were always just friends. I don't care if you bone some dudes. It's not like you've been the head of a family for that past 30 years and will rain down psychological damage as a result of your sexual ambiguities. Go. Explore.

Apparently you haven't spoken to any of us in a while. They remodeled the house four months ago. Sleek stainless steel appliances, tile throughout, new carpet, a grand piano! It's a behemoth choking the life out of that small living

room. I think Mom was sensing the end, and subconsciously decided to buy a bunch of shit while she still had two incomes to pull from. But I think I'm just extrapolating on nothing but a hunch.

I don't know about the Ansel. I didn't make it into Dad's studio. He probably took it. It's his anyway. Just because you loved it more than he did doesn't make it yours. I caught you sitting cross-legged, asleep in front of that photo once. I couldn't comprehend your obsession. Only you and Dad felt something when you saw photos of people or places you didn't recognize. Mom could give a shit about the actual prints being taken down, just wants something to take their place.

She is doing better, if you wanted to know. She's back at work, pouring her confusion, depression, anger into fifty-, sixty-hour workweeks, as she's trained herself to do with family stress over the years. Remember when grandpa died? We only saw glimpses of her for weeks. I found out why she'd been acting strange. It isn't just shock. One of Mom's colleagues prompted her to seek out Xanax or something similar. She's been chemically numbed, and I'm not so sure it's a good thing to be zonked out like she was in the tree house. Her prayer room is still covered in candles, pictures of the Virgin, and such. But it's all dusty in there, unused. About time she let go of Church, in my opinion, though both Mom and Dad still go as far as I know. It's become more of a habit than a real life choice.

By the way, I don't remember you laughing after the near burning down of the tree house. I recall tears and screams to Mom and Dad. But, I could be

mashing together all those other childhood memories ending in your wails.

Love,

Older Brother

On Oct 10, 2010, at 6:43 PM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:
I see you found your sense of humor. What a thought for it to be lost, gone—all reason for the positive side of life to feign existence. Graham, seriously, I'm glad to see it's still there, even if it's only to make fun of me. Yeah, this situation is fucked, but we're going to stumble through it. All of us, even Dad (the guilt he must feel).

How could you not love the Ansel? The strange composition of the sand dunes, the thick shadows cast by each groove, and blackest black against the silvery glare. The first time Dad let me watch him work the dark room is when I fell in love with photos. To drop a piece of paper in a bin of liquids and watch a scene flower before your eyes. It's like watching the world be created.

But forget all this reminiscing. What I want to know is your current life. What's going on outside all of this? Spiritual life? No church, I gather? Still feeling guilty when you watch porn? Dad must be having a hell of a crisis with the church. The congregational judgment that would rain over his head with every kneeling at a pew. There are no secrets there, despite the staging, the private confessionals whispered through a screen. Our real confessions are gossiped to lame confidantes of the congregation. Oh, how it spreads. The only time I've stepped into a church the past two years was for a choral concert, the

single aspect of mass I miss. What is it about hymns? The soothing consistency? The chanting hypnotism? The tradition? At least Catholicism has been late to the trend of pop bands leading mass. Have you seen those outrageous protestant services? The ones where young hipsters indoctrinate pop tunes with Bible verses, attempting to keep up with the changing times? And the crowd sways with arms raised as if at a country music festival? There is no damn way the "message" is being received.

I know, I rant.

Aaaaaaaaaammeeeeeeeeennn

On Oct 10, 2010, at 8:49 PM, Graham Boden <gboden@milemarker.org> wrote:
How can you defend Dad? He should feel guilty. He should be confused. I hope he's pouring himself out to a shrink trying to discover which end of this new kind of fucking he's supposed to be on. He deceived himself, he deceived us. Now let him suffer. You're too far away. You're not seeing what this does to a family. Everything we thought was normal is now undermined. Mom, god, Mom. She won't stop doing, she's constantly doing. I went to see her last night only to watch her move between scrubbing the stovetop to the piano to slap a few chords then to her computer to sift through work emails. She won't look at me, unless asking some pointless question about my "day at the office". And even then she's looking beyond me, staring at my hairline like I've been disfigured in a horrific accident. To Mom, every pleasure she had in that bedroom, that ghastly excuse for a marital bed, must feel cheated, disgusting, wrong. Even us, she sees her

motherly creations as some fluke, an accident, an abomination. I won't ever feel sorry for him. He's shattered this family.

I can't believe I didn't notice the signs. Last night I was remembering that man Dad used to have over for dinner from the photo class he taught. You were too young, but I knew. I knew that guy was different. Maybe I'm a judgmental prick, but, just the way he looked at me, his eyes so inviting, shoulders so lax, and the way he wouldn't look at Mom, but thanked her every other minute for having him over. He and Dad always retreated to his studio after dinner. In our own house.

Please, don't come home if you're gonna side with Dad, if you're gonna spout off all this bullshit about gay oppression, the social blockades, the psychosexual identity crisis, the DNA, the research. The man lost his privileges the moment he allowed his semen to penetrate an egg.

-Graham

PS: Have you ever thought about the fact that we, his sons, have never seen him naked? Not even in childhood, as far as I can remember? If you want something to research, there it is. I've done mine.

On Oct 10, 2010, at 10:01 PM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:
I'm sorry, but he's still our father. I'll defend him because no one else will.

On Oct 15, 2010, at 2:43 AM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:
I did something Graham. I just puked outside my door and I dont know if it's

because I drank too much or if I am absolutely disgusted with myself because I did something stupid. I went to a bar by myself to this all night happy hour but I knew what it was. I knew what I was doing Graham. I told you. Fuck I told you I was questioning everything. My dick for christsakes. I don't even know what its supposed to like. I went to this gay bar and got uber drunk and I let him rub me, Graham I let this guy I've never seen before in my life rub me down and kiss me and I was so drunk and I'm still so drunk I swear he rufied me. He kissed me and I just stood pressed against the wall like a puppet and he kept rubbing me and I responded on accident. A fucking erection. Next thing happened I'm locked in a stall and his hand goes down my jeans. I pushed him then I don't know. I escaped and ran. I ran all the way home. Im bleeding from my forehead. I must have fallen and my glasses are all bent. Graham please tell me you're not angry with me I know I pissed you off but goddamnit I'm drowning.

On Oct 15, 2010, at 2:12 PM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:

Graham,

Please disregard the previous email. I just got a little drunk and tested myself last night. (After I pushed the guy away I vaguely remember crawling under the stall door to flee. My mind was so blown I didn't think to simply unlock it haha.) I should not have sent you a drunken message. Please, don't worry.

-Cam

On Oct 19, 2010, at 10:02 PM, Graham Boden <gboden@milemarker.org> wrote:

Things Emails Should Not Contain:

-semi-colons

-words like "lugubrious"

-those long dashes I don't even know how to do

Cameron,

Forget about the gay encounter, you shouldn't be getting that drunk. Hitting your head while running home, are you serious? Face first? Bent your glasses? Everyone knows I've done dumb shit, but that's pretty low on the scale of drunken idiocy. Just watch it, keep it in line. A couple drinks never stops at a couple.

I'm sorry for launching that onslaught about Dad onto you. We're all dealing with this differently, and I'm having trouble getting outside of my own head, which seems to be all of our problems. Mom has been spending her evenings in the tree house again. She set up some kind of vigil, lining the walls with candles. No laminated placard of the Virgin. No Cross. I found her sitting cross-legged in her pantsuit, humming and slowly rocking to her own chant. I knelt down and shook her. She looked me in the eye for the first time since the news broke and told me to sit. I tried to lift her by the elbow, but she told me again to sit with a conviction that had been lost since she started the pills. I hated, no, I despised seeing her when she was so dulled, so vacant. She's off her meds, now. She told me this vigil-like meditation has been the only soothing thing in this "time of family dilapidation". I sat next to her, listened to her throaty hum and watched the flames flicker in unison with every breeze, and I

didn't get it. I didn't understand what was so relaxing. Fire, silence, open air, yeah, I get it, but I didn't feel anything. I glanced at Mom every minute to find a break in the meditation, get her back inside.

When I decided to let Mom have her moment, take as long as she wanted, I lay down on the dust and dead leaves, waiting. Once my eyes closed I sunk into that tree house. The lavenders and vanillas and cinnamons of the candles ballooned over me. I breathed a few times and felt nothing, a good nothing, and maybe I understood.

I'm still angry, confused, but it was a repairing experience, the acknowledgement of nothingness. Really, though, I was just happy to see Mom have some peace.

-Graham

On Oct 20, 2010, at 8:32 AM, Cameron Boden <cmboden@opmag.com> wrote:
Look at you—a meditator, one with the body, the mind, the soul—and who would of thought you'd reach Nirvana before me?

I'm gonna buy a ticket home soon, I promise (oh how the credit card racks up). A visit to the Boden Abode is overdue. Maybe you can get Mom to help me out with the cost, whisper in her ear. Or you, you're a breadwinner now. Help out a helpless little brother? Either way, it will be soon.

Do you think the tree house can support three people? And maybe it can serve as a peaceful writing studio. Zero distractions is what I need.

See you Graham,

Cameron

Photo # 1,013-4:

Chicken Sutures

Practice extensive depth of field with your grandpa's camera.

Your brother sits framed in the kitchen window, sun splashing the glass; silhouetted, he hunches over a plate, hands to mouth.

You plan to mimic the Welles masterpiece, the technique for deep focus: super-XX film stock, highly sensitive; highest aperture, pinprick light-hole.

Your translation: f/20, specialty b&w film 3200 ISO, adjusting the shutter speed upwards and downwards until the light meter finds the center. With deep focus, you'll have the foreground, background and middleground all appearing with clarity, with minimal gradation.

The old box clicks, shakes, shocked, as if never before seen light.

You notice your brother isn't eating, but, what? Hands in raw chicken? Fingers twirling a hook and needle, he twines black thread over the pink breast like a gash closure.

Practice, he says, for the new job. Surgeon's assistant needs muscle memory.

Reset settings. You want shallow focus, precise focus on chicken suture. Frame the grotesque pink-white goop going soft in its own juice and sopped sagging skin. Brother, you say, keep working. I want the background blur of your skilled hands.

Dead meat: a surprising find for your camera's eye.

Daydreamers

Sprawled out on the picnic table, I woke up. The sun was on full blast, shining through the patio cover in strips—band of shade, beam of heat. I pulled out my pocket notebook with a short pencil, no eraser, in the spiral binding. I sketched a telephone pole, an old wooden one. From the crossbeams, thick wires sparked and flailed like unmanned fire hoses. Atop the sawed-off pole, three birds perched unfazed, bodies angled to one another, but all three heads faced left, staring beyond my page. I couldn't remember what kind I'd seen, so I let my imagination go, drawing feathered Mohawks and beaks like skewers.

Slouched on the table, I tossed a BB in my mouth because I was curious. The bitter metallic gnawed at the one filling I had, so I spit it out. It bounced, smaller and smaller, until hitting a pebble and launching into the lawn.

Shay should've been here by now—it was her turn to make the sandwiches. My stomach was grumbling, and in the heat, my body went sluggish and droopy like softened cheese. And the hollers of kids playing hockey down the street were annoying me, rollerblades slapping the asphalt rather than skating atop it. That game never ended because someone always got hurt and cried before a winner could be declared, then wails echoed like a song on repeat. Our cul-de-sac was only a few years old, the first string of houses in a field of leveled dirt, so it was full of young parents, of kids still at Chavez elementary, and wails were what you got. Shay was the only one around about to start high school with me.

I turned on the hose and let the sun-heated water splatter the cement.

Once the stream grew cold, I guzzled until I bloated up. Then I splashed my face and neck, chills trickling down my back. Like an imbued necklace, the wet collar of my shirt now warded off the heat.

I was on to hosing down my forearms when the wooden gate swung open. “Enjoying your ghetto shower?” Shay said. Tall, hair newly braided, each strand cinched with a white bead, Shay took the hose and sipped. The entire front half of her left shoe was gray with duct tape, which she rewrapped every couple days at the skate park.

“I thought I might die of hunger in this desert,” I said.

“Deserts don’t have water.”

“Spray my legs,” I said, and kicked off my sandals. Shay pressed a thumb over the mouth of the hose, blasting the cement and my feet until I said I was good.

Inside the tool shed, we sat across from each other, a small tray-table between us. She crushed a package of ramen in her hands, the plastic crinkling like white noise, then poured the hardened squiggles into the water boiling on a hot plate. We ate our lunches in the shed because it was the only semi-outdoor place that was shaded, and with a fan blowing, the tin creaked and cooled a little. We’d organized the space, puzzled things around to create enough room, but still, whenever I tried to lean back, the handle of the lawnmower stopped me. I cut the crusts off my sandwich—pb&j for me, peanut butter and honey for Shay—while she stirred the noodles. The steam mushroomed off the pot before escaping out the sheet metal doors.

"The crusts are the best part," Shay said. She grabbed the strips of bread from my plate. Squishing one in her fist, knuckles stretching white, she rolled it into ball like Play-Doh. She held it out in her palm. Cracks ran along the ball of dough like the continental outlines of a globe. "It practically melts." She plopped it in her mouth. "Dissolves on your tongue."

"Looks like already digested food." I poured the noodles into two paper bowls, going back and forth between them, adding a little more each time to keep things equal. "I saw more of the same today," I said.

"Busted cars?"

"Broken things." In my notebook, I flipped to the bird drawing and handed it to her.

Shay only glanced at it before erupting into her open-mouthed cackle, sharp and rhythmic, which always startled me. "When will you learn to draw?" she said.

I reached for the notebook, but Shay held it away with her long arms out among the broom handles huddled in the corner. "Not as cool as your dreams, I know," I said. "Not everyone can talk to the dead."

Nostrils flaring, Shay sprouted her thick tongue at me. She often saw her brother, Derrick, who was in the military. He didn't die in a war. Last year, he'd gotten jumped by some people outside some base in Texas and never woke up. I didn't have any siblings, so I never knew what to say to Shay except *I'm sorry* or *That sucks*.

Headed backward in my timeline of sketches, Shay swiped through each

page. She shook her head, braids swaying at her eyebrows, beads clinking.

“Damn, boy, you’ve got issues.”

I began breathing in a slow rhythm. In through the nose and out through the mouth, counting out the breaths. Shay threw the notebook at my chest. I smiled, exhaling. On the eighth breath, my head went loose as if on a slinky. I inhaled one last time then squeezed my hands around my neck, pushing until my face bulged. The gray walls fuzzed into blotched blacks then red metallic bulbs. Broken glass flashed, a giant splintered window. A small woman slinked through a hole in the webbed glare as if to hide. Soaring sirens echoed each other’s tune. In the street, a couch fell on a parked car. Strewn cushions smoldered at a stop sign, spewing wiry black smoke to a domed ceiling painted sky blue and fleecy with cotton.

I awoke to a warmth in my lap. Noodles jiggled over my legs, and broth stained my shorts like I’d pissed myself.

“I should never have shown you how,” Shay said.

I picked my notebook off the ground.

In my backpack, I had a hat and my BB gun, a CO₂ hand pistol. Shay threw in practical things like water bottles and duct tape. The wind was blowing dust. Walking through the leveled field, where houses were supposed to be built two years ago, we choked on a tan layer of dirt suspended over the ground like a gaseous booby trap. We crossed the ditch, whose concrete was so dry and white it hurt your eyes to look at, to the old neighborhood. On the corner house, a group

of kids ran through sprinklers. The lawn was weeded over and muddied up, but the kids were having a blast, barefoot in the mud, asking a mom to help them fill water balloons. An older kid, maybe a year younger than Shay and me, banged two big sticks like a drummer on the big iron grates over the windows. The rhythm rang out like a bell.

“This neighborhood’s where it’s at,” Shay said. “The kids are always laughing.”

“Have you ever known someone who had their house broken into?”

“Those bars are weird, huh?”

“It’s like jail, except they want to keep people out.”

In Jax Forest, we found relief from the sun. It wasn’t a forest, but a park with tall trees planted by a man named Something Jax, or Jax Something. At the edge of the forest, bordered by trees and a two-way road, was the skate park, where mostly high-schoolers hung out, but Shay was good enough to roll with them. A lot of skaters were out today, nobody wearing helmets or pads, even though there was a sign at each entrance promising a fine if you broke penal code # whatever.

From a trash barrel, I scavenged an armful of soda cans. Shay sat on the bench, scoping out the day’s riders, which she always did before dropping in. I set up my targets against a plywood backstop that’d been leaning against a trunk forever. The wood must have had a thousand BBs lodged in it by now. Lying on my stomach just beyond the concrete skate park, I loaded up. “I’ll hit the lower-case *p*,” I said, to myself. I shot, the gun hawking air like a whip. The bullet

clanked the rim of the can. “Almost.”

From the bench, some of the skaters clapped and yelled, cheering someone who’d landed a difficult trick. Shay was speeding through the park, arms pushing up against the air as if raising the sky. She shredded to a stop. A redheaded guy in a tank top, whom I’d overheard called Goof, because he rode goofy-stance, right foot forward, was clanking his board on the ground like he was pounding in a spike, the loud noise a sign of props to Shay’s skill. He slapped her hand.

I shot my line of cans in succession, never missing. It was moments of accuracy like this that I wish I had a holster. I could twirl it to my hip as if in a western, watch smoke rise out of a jacket. I stood to get more targets, but Goof was by the trash barrel, dancing around it like a grasshopper. Flames shot up like spears. From a squat, Goof rose with arms stretched out as if he was the god of this can of fire. Most everyone stopped skating, except Shay, who was hitting the pyramid over and over. Some chanted in quick *ohms* and *ahms*, watching Goof do what he always did, fuck around. With the help of friends, he lifted the barrel onto his board. They rolled it out of the park onto the sidewalk. In tipping it onto its side, the guys leapt back as it crashed to the sground in a great gong. With one foot on the fallen flaming barrel, as if he’d conquered something, Goof yelled. He looked both ways down the street like a five-year-old kid, then shoved it off. As it gathered speed, flaming debris spit from its mouth, leaving behind a trail of ash. Cars from each direction slowed, but didn’t honk, as if they expected a rolling barrel one of these days. After it clanged into the curb, coming to rest in the gutter, the cars moved on, and everyone got back on their boards. I watched

the trail of smoldering trash, asking myself why—why did Goof do that? Why was I watching? Why did the world go back to normal?

My parents and I ate dinner in the living room. It was a homemade meal, no frozen dinner, but we ate on trays watching a sitcom. During the commercials, my dad clicked over to national news. Summertime got me through the rest of the year, but man, I always got bored by now, the first week of August. The routine I'd built over two months—sleep in, eat with Shay, roll down to Jax, shoot my BB gun, maybe cool off seeing a movie, then call it a day—grew as stale as school.

After dinner, I was trapped between the TV, where my dad talked to newscasters, and the office, where my mom hogged the computer, so I ended up in my room, as usual. I lay awake listening to the printer running, page after page inked and stacked. To fall asleep, I popped in an old VHS of the 1991-92 season of basketball. I'd given up on playing sports, but the video was like some lullaby, if only through its familiarity, and it usually knocked me right out. In the blue glow of my tiny TV, I rolled to the edge of my bed and listened to the narration I knew by heart. '92 was a memorable year for LA because Magic retired from the Lakers due to AIDS. *And all playoff games were suddenly relocated for the Los Angeles teams*, the commentator explained, *when riots consumed one of the largest cities in the world*. I sat up. Flashing on the screen were news shots of flaming cars, and shouting mobs and—this is when it became clear—a smashed storefront window through which people ran in and out, arms loaded with milk

and canned food and six packs, then, the slinking woman appeared, though she was much younger than in my dream.

Shay and I lounged on the black L-shaped couch in her living room. From the kitchen, the deep fryer crackled, sending a sweet scent around the house. Shay flipped channels, never settling on one thing for too long.

The coffee table was dedicated to Shay's brother Derrick. A framed photo of him in his military outfit, black beret and all, sat behind a rectangular tray of small multi-colored candles. In a subdued smile, his big white teeth shone whiter than the whites of his eyes. One candle was burning, like always.

Shay's mom, Lydia, brought me a donut on a paper plate along with a knife and fork. She told me not to pick it up cause it was too hot. Covered in cinnamon and drenched in oil, it bled grease into the plate.

Shay was stretched over the couch, long legs hanging off the armrest. She kept messing with the remote, but often went back to a forensics show on how they caught a child murderer. Lydia came back with two more donuts and sat down. Shay waved off her donut. Lydia slid it onto my plate. "That's what I love about boys," she said. "Always willing to eat." Derrick watched me chew his mother's homemade specialty, the perfect cinnamon crunch melting into doughy warmth.

"Lydia, you lived around here during the riots, right?" I said.

With both arms spanned along the tops of the cushions, Lydia eyed me over thin reading glasses. She laughed. "You didn't just ask me about the Watts

riots, did you?" she said. "Don't make me admit my age."

"No, ninety-two."

"You know you're asking a black woman."

"I remember it, sort of," I said. "My dad wouldn't let my mom leave the house. And she wouldn't let him watch the news in front of me."

Shay sat upright, crossed her legs beneath her. Finishing the first donut, I lifted the paper plate to see grease splotching the coffee table. I ate from my lap instead.

"You know the market over by Jax? We lived near there at the time," Lydia said. "That was looted, and we're fifteen miles from downtown." She nodded at Shay. "This was all just before your father left. And not long after that, Derrick began his journey to become our nation's hero."

"Mom, why you gotta mock him?" Shay said.

"Your right, Shaylene. I won't say anything next time you're about to make a dumb decision. Just like I sat by and watched him." Lydia wet her fingers then pinched the candle's flame. It sizzled. Dark and wavering, a thin thread of smoke rose, and, upon hitting to the ceiling, mushroomed.

"What about all the fires? Any of that around here?" I asked.

"Look at this young man. All intrigued." She laughed. "It woke us all up. Reminded us what it meant to be angry about our city, which happened to mean you were ethnic."

Shay turned off the TV and tossed the remote to her mom. "Let's go, Devun."

“What a title, ethnic,” Lydia continued. She took off her glasses. “You’ll never know what it means, but don’t feel bad about that.”

As Shay opened the front door, the sharp light rose up her legs, stopping at a precise slice across her stomach.

“Thanks for the donuts,” I said, then followed Shay into the heat.

In my front yard, Shay and I lay in the shade of the giant willow. The branches, like wrinkled fingers, groped the ground in the afternoon breeze, and we were all but hidden behind the untrimmed wall of moss-green leaves. The only sounds were the yelps from down the street. Hockey again. Shay propped on her elbows. “Why do you like my mom?”

“She says it like it is,” I said. “If I asked my mom about the riots, she’d think I was a disturbed little boy. She’d probably send me to therapy.”

“She’s so opinionated, like she’s got the answer.”

“My mom? Not really.”

“Lydia.”

“Oh.”

The breeze died down. Through the settling branches, bits of sky appeared and reappeared. A few shouts erupted, maybe a goal was scored. “Devun,” Shay said, “send me to dreamland.”

Shay lay down, stiff as a log. I crawled behind her, knees imprinting the damp sod. Our faces opposite, she began the breathing, her small breasts heaving up then down like measures of oxygen. I placed my hands on the tight

ords of her neck.

“Stop watching my chest,” she said. “It’s not like they’re anything new.” She exhaled. “Ready.” She inhaled the deepest yet and locked her lips. I pressed down, leaning a bit of my weight onto her hardened throat. A bit of air fizzed out her mouth then her neck loosened. I sat back on my heels. Her head swayed side to side as if watching a ball being thrown back and forth among the limbs. Her jaw dropped open. An eye twitched. Then, in a gasp as if rising out of water, she sucked in air and her eyes bulged open. She sat up, a blade of grass tangled in her braids. “He was swaying,” she whispered.

“Were you in water again?” I said.

She stood. Her own feet were tangled, and she stumbled before grabbing a branch. Her hand slid down it, leaving behind a leafless twig, then she broke through the green curtain of branches, disappearing. Running footsteps smacked the asphalt.

After another lunch in the Shed—with real sandwiches, salami and cheese and lettuce and mayo and red pepper flakes—we headed to the skate park.

I lined up the cans. Lounging beneath a tree, Shay ripped off the torn duct tape from her shoe. “The lower-case c,” I said. “First try.”

“I’ll give you twenty bucks,” Shay said.

“You’ll be sorry this time.”

Shay wound fresh duct tape around the toe, securing a detached sole. I shot, thwacking the wood. I missed the can completely.

“What did you see yesterday, Shay?”

“Why do you make me relive that shit?”

I shot again, sticking the logo. A jumbled harmony of boos rumbled from the skaters. Two young bladers wearing full pads—helmets, elbow pads, kneepads and even wrist guards—were standing at the bench. “Shoot this,” Shay said. She gulped down the rest of her water bottle and tossed it to me.

“Plastic’s no good.”

She nodded and sat back along the roots. From her back pocket, Shay pulled out her notebook. She flipped to a page and handed it to me. It was a ship, an old-time pirate ship, sketched in pen. Each line was thick, drawn over so many times the pen’s point had left grooves on the page. The deck was crowded with people. Above the water, a man was strung upside down by his boots in a contorted arc like a writhing fish. “He swung back and forth, like on a swing set.”

More cheers erupted from the bench, then shouts and laughs. Goof gripped one of the bladers by the collar, stripping off the kid’s wrist guard.

“Sorry, Shay. We’re both only children now.”

“I feel gypped.” Someone launched the kid’s helmet straight up. After nipping the canopy of branches overhead, it plummeted back down and smacked the concrete. “Give me your gun,” Shay said.

“I’ll get some more cans.” Bent over in the barrel, I heard the whip of the gun, then a yelp. The kid was blading away to the street, arms working like a sprinter’s. Shay was lying down, both hands on the gun grip. She shot again, a hollow clack. It was out of Bbs now, just shooting air. “Son of a bitch,” Goof said.

He lifted his tank top. On his side, a rosy-red welt shone like a piece of hard candy. The guys on the bench laughed.

Shay walked toward us. Stepping onto the concrete, her frizzing braids caught the sun. Goof stood there dumbly, shirt still bunched in his hand. Shay set the pistol on the ground. With two fingers, Goof pushed her back on her heels. He picked up my pistol. “Let’s go, Shay,” I said.

Goof aimed at her chest. As if offering herself to the pain, Shay spread her arms, head angling up to the canopy. He shot. Shay flinched at the noise. Looking at her feet, as if to make sure they were still there, she said, “Devun, give him more BBs.”

“Why?”

“What the hell, Shay?” Goof said. “Have you gone bat shit?”

She grabbed the gun from him and set the nozzle to her hand. She pulled the trigger, a muffled snap. I ran for my backpack, looped it on my shoulder. A guy fell off the pyramid, board shooting across the park. In the blaring heat, blurred squiggles rose from the street in waves, as if bending the world two feet above the ground, then vanished as a car drove past. Shay, golden in the dappled sun beneath the canopy, had the gun to her stomach. Quick shots rattled off like a string of firecrackers, each one duller than the next—the CO₂ was dwindling.

Photo # --:

Inflammatory

Firepeople wind down the streets, electrified voice announces over intercom speakers: evacuate the neighborhood.

We sit on your tiled rooftop, passing fire between us, inhaling smoke, while the arcing hilltops blaze orange and metallic red and gray remnants of charred weeds float lighter than snow, dusting our shoulders.

We speak of swings and forts and hikes and holes dug, games played in these hometown hills with plastic guns and plastic bullets. Ancient it all feels, especially the promise of spring; the grasses failed to liven green for the first time in memory.

The orange glow grows into hilltop halos and you fidget for your camera that, for once, isn't hanging off your neck.

Hell unleashed, I say, the fall winds gust and the flames consume it.

Everyone suspects arson, you say, blaming nature is overbearing.

Black sky can't stay black; a million suns lasso the nighttime. To record the moment, that's all you want, as if without a lens you never saw brown weeds sear black.

I mold your fingers into rigid square. Hold it up, I say. Take my picture.

All Begins to Bloom

1: Rooftop

My senior year of college became a series of rooftops. On the humanities hall, or the student center, or one of the newer buildings named for donors, I often sat against a humming air conditioning unit flipping through film theory texts I couldn't quite understand—or perhaps I'd lost the motivation to grapple with anything dense.

By the spring, I found the psychology building to be the one place on campus I enjoyed. From there, hills rolled out to the coast, and in the middle of the campus park, skateboarders swerved between students walking along the asphalt paths. Just climbing up the ladder was an adventure. With a backpack on, reaching for the next metal rung was a duel against gravity, all my weight on an inch-wide strip. As a test of my own courage, as I approached the roof latch, I always looked down to the darkness below, a void like outer space. I'd quiver then feel a lightness surge through my legs, some craving to freefall into the atmosphere, as if there wasn't a concrete stairwell waiting to break my fall, or my bones. My nape would tingle, sweat seeping to the surface of my skin, then I'd make the final upward lunge to fling the latch open onto a vaporous blue sky.

Now, the hills were morphing from winter-green to spring-gold, and the sun hovered just above the endless arcing hilltops. I was planning a photo, tracking time until the horizon eclipsed the sun to mark the final bit of daylight. I'd heard about this golden hour of photo opportunity, and intended to shoot the

elongated shadows and soft-lit brick buildings with the newest camera I had—an old Pentax I'd scavenged from my parents' garage. The lens was a bit fogged, but the mechanical advance lever still functioned smooth. This is what I wanted to do: to capture what I saw, not be dimmed by over-studied texts. I'd read some of the novels about scouring the roads of America, those young men rebelling against the common trajectory of career and family to satisfy the dreadful thirst of transience, and, as much as I knew it had become fashionable to be like them, a commodity, even, that's what I wanted—to go on the run with a camera, discover insanities in places and people I'd never seen before. But I still had two months until graduation, so in the meantime, there was a girl I'd gotten to know.

Cross-legged on the front porch, Melanie played her mandolin. Framed by white beads of light trailing up the columns, it appeared she was hovering inside a constellation.

Hunched over the eight-stringer—small, but loud and twangy—she picked out something I'd yet to hear then broke into an ooo-and-ahh melody, not yet put to words. I offered a clap.

"I like when you're late," she said. She wore a baggy sweatshirt, which hung off one bare shoulder. "More time to play."

"That'll be in your liner notes," I said. "Special thanks to Allen and his inability to be on time." We didn't have anywhere to be, except here, or parked in an empty warehouse lot in the backseat of my Buick.

I sat on the stoop and she nestled her legs into my lap. Illuminated in the

speckled glow, she lay back against the railing, auburn hair shining red at the crown of her head, cheekbones casting dim shadows, and eyes like glass globes, each pricked with a white flare. "Your dad need help with the lights?" I asked. The holidays had long passed.

"You take down the lights and I'll never play music for you again."

"Such a festive girl," I said.

"I have a present for you."

"Presents? I've had five birthdays since I met you."

"Call this an early graduation gift." She unstrapped the mandolin. "Meet me in back of the house."

When she stepped inside, I walked around their cottage-like place. Flowerbeds lined the gravel walkway, and at the bottom of each window, little shelves held miniature potted plants like a storefront at Disneyland. In the corner of the backyard, a cone of light spread from the ground, washing over a bench facing the slatted fence. Two small statues stood there. Carved from stone, one was a cloaked Jesus stepping forward with a hand raised, two fingers uncurled. The other was a wooden, Zen-looking skinny man, one hand twisted at the center of his chest. Two gods are better than one, I supposed.

Mel came out the back door, the screen squeaking shut. Barefooted, she walked across the lawn holding what I thought was a large book, like a volume of encyclopedia. But when she handed it to me, there was a hammer atop it, and the book flashed red numbers. "It's a promise," she said.

It was a bathroom scale.

“I’m done measuring myself.”

On the gravel walkway, Mel set down the scale. She sat on her heels with both hands gripping the hammer. I said, “So is this like a form of therapy?”

“Ouch,” she said. Dropping to her knees, she readjusted her legs to sit cross-legged. She squeezed her foot, pinching a toe, then settled into the gravel. Raising the hammer above her head, she smiled at me, an expanse of her lips almost too big for her face, then she swung. In smacking the scale, the hammer loosed from her grasp, hopping away into the stucco siding of the house. She covered her mouth with both hands.

“Glad I wasn’t standing there,” I said.

She laughed. “Your turn.”

From behind a small hedge, I found the hammer. I knelt down at the scale. Squaring the hammerhead on the screen, I decided I'd hit only once. I let fly with a strike. The crack echoed on the other side of the neighborhood, then was answered by a dog’s bark. “Feels good, right?” Mel said.

“Does it still work?” I pressed the cracked screen. Digital innards flashed in an array of faint colors like motor oil in the sun. Mel placed a foot on the scale, lightly, as if to test how sensitive it could be, then stepped on with both feet. The display sputtered, red jumbled hashes flashing, a puzzle of the pounds.

“That would have made me angry,” she said.

“If it still worked?”

“If you saw my weight.”

She didn't want her parents to find the evidence, so I tossed the scale in

my trunk. I thought they'd be happy to see it, maybe not the destructiveness, but the rebellion against her own habits. On our drive to the warehouse lot, the broken thing clanked with every bump.

Mel first got my attention as a small figure in my viewfinder, bangs curled just above the eyebrows, red-painted lips to the microphone, a trill of a laugh over the speakers. I didn't care for all that first-sight business, but she'd tested my conviction.

Our second time out, a month ago, we'd gone to a Mexican take-out known for its halibut tacos. We ate in a hilltop park, on the grass, while headlights looped and crossed along the freeways below. Legs stretched out in front of her, toes touching in a point, Mel sucked on a popsicle stick as if it were candy. "Mind if I tell you something?" she said.

"Have a bite." Juice was dripping from the foil-wrapped taco. I sucked it away before holding it out to her. She put her hands together like a plate, ready to accept an offering. I placed it there. With two hands, she brought the lump of foil and tortilla to her mouth sideways, like a hamburger. She bit then handed it off. Shaking her hands of the juice, she chewed a while, lumping the food in her cheek. I watched her head dip forward, nodding twice as if to nudge down the food. "Delicious," she said.

"The sauce is what they're known for."

She put the wooden stick back in her mouth, chewing on it. "Seeing as this is what people do on dates," she began, "I should tell you. I should tell you that I

don't like to eat very much."

"I know."

"Yeah, I guess it isn't hard to notice." Mel rubbed down her thighs, staring at her cocked feet. The view was growing more spectacular with the darkening sky. Across the valley, houselights were a glimmering mass. Gazing at the freeway, I squinted my eyes, transforming the red and white lights of individual cars into blurred lines. It was like a trick of a camera, mangling time. "But really," Mel said, "I don't like food."

I licked the juice from my palms then wiped them dry on my jeans.

"Okay," I said. "I like your honesty."

Mel pulled her knees to her chest and bobbed into me. "Okay."

She burrowed her nose into her own shoulder, eyes peeking out. I smiled and tugged her arm aside. Raising her chin, I pressed my forehead to hers, then pecked the tip of her nose. We kissed, but when I moved to lay her on the grass, she turned on all fours like she was about to crawl away. She breathed in quick bursts, shoulders flapping like wings. I rubbed her neck, expecting to watch her vomit up melted popsicle and the one bite she'd eaten. She rolled onto her back, clutching her arms, then curled into a ball. "What can I do?" I said. Wincing, she fluttered a hand in the air as if to rattle away the confusion. "What can I do?"

She grunted, breathing deep and rhythmic. "Take me home," she said. "I just need to go home."

In the backseat, Mel lay on top of me, my neck angled against the door panel. I'd

parked us near the loading docks of a warehouse in the strip of shadow between two streetlights. Straddling me, Mel bunched her shirt up to her chin then slipped it over her head. Pale and gleaming, even in the dim light, her stomach was pristine, like a marble statue. I ran my knuckles along her navel. Mel smiled, the faint curve of her lips I only ever saw in the back of my car. She tossed her head, throwing all her wavy hair to one side, then leaned down to kiss me. Roving my hands over her back, the rounded rib bones fanning out down her sides felt like ripples in a pond. This body was so subtle, as light as a subliminal thought, until my thumbs caught her sharpened hips. “Hold on,” she said. She sat back, scrunching up her jeans at the ankles. “These need to come off.”

I laced my fingers behind my head. The windows were fogged over, and in the semi-dark, it felt like we were in the hold of a ship, peering through portholes out to a hazy sea. Mel slid a fat round anklet off her foot and tossed in to the floor. It landed with a thump. Then she did the same with the other ankle before lying down. “I thought you were gonna unbutton your jeans,” I said.

“I wouldn’t do that yet,” she whispered. She teathed my ear.

“What were those?”

“Ankle weights.”

“Been exercising?”

She leaned back, sitting on my thighs. “I had a doctor’s appointment today. They hassle me less with those few extra pounds.”

“Never took you for a trickster,” I said. I ran a finger beneath her bra strip. “Sleight of leg.”

“What?”

“You know, like sleight of hand?”

“It’s a joke?” Eyes squinting shut, she began massaging the bicep of her left arm. “Oh no.” She huddled against the door, breathing shallow. I held her shoulders, trying to keep her from collapsing into a fetal hunch. Mel breathed in like she’d just surfaced from a deep dive. She elbowed my hands away, and flailed her left arm. “Allen, this is a heart attack.”

“Did you eat today? I’ll take you home.”

“No.” In sporadic huffs, her cheeks bloated then sucked in to the bone. “St. Jude’s.”

I rubbed down her thighs. Out the steamed windshield, blotches of light glowed far-off in the night. Mel moaned. As if to a muttering whale, I listened, waiting for the reverberating response. She whimpered. I crawled across the center console, kneeling the gear shifter, and smeared a hole in the fog.

I cut through shopping centers, skirting by traffic lights. The defroster was up all the way, a rising clarity in the cloudy windshield. On the freeway, I glanced between distant pairs of red taillights and Mel, on the phone with her doctor, repeating, “Okay, okay,” in the rearview mirror. Calming, then breaking into tears, then sniffing, she kept her left arm bent away like a disease.

“Should I keep going?” I asked. She thrust her legs into the back of my seat. I’d never been to an emergency room, so I kept driving.

At St. Jude’s, in the parking lot, I slipped Mel’s baggy sweatshirt back over

her head. No more tears, but she was shivering, face locked in a daze. The Emergency sign buzzed overhead as we walked in, an insistent red drone like a bug zapper.

At the front desk, arms around my neck, Mel began another bout of constricted breathing. The receptionist handed me a clipboard. “Can’t that wait?” I said. “She’s having heart palpitations.” The diagnosis rose from some corner of my brain, a required biology course. A nurse broke through swinging double doors and called a name. She glanced at us, then assisted an elderly man who was guiding a hunched woman into the hall.

We sat in the padded chairs and I started filling out the paperwork. “I don’t even know your birthday,” I said.

She sat with her chin on her bundled knees. “February,” she muttered. I left the day blank and wrote in ‘90 for the year. I at least knew she was two years younger than myself. “We can go, Mel. We don’t have to stay.” Arms wrapped around her shins, she was swaying like a metronome.

The nurse walked up to us. She wore white stockings stretched almost transparent; black squiggles of hair were flattened beneath them. Bent over, she placed a hand on Mel’s head. “Melanie,” she said. The woman looked at me, lowered her head in a slight bow, then nudged Mel’s shoulder. “Follow me.” Like a schoolgirl called in by the principal, Mel stood and walked behind the nurse.

While I waited, I asked the receptionist for information on eating disorders. She handed me a folder filled with pamphlets. If severe enough, I read, there were immediate physical symptoms: hypotension, hypovolemia,

hypo-everything—you simply did not have enough of anything—and finally, heart atrophy, which could lead to infarction. And one of the pamphlets focused on inpatient facilities, showcasing a before and after sequence: two girls arriving with translucent skin and balding heads, leaving with overly made-up faces like gaunt clowns. No wonder Mel was scared.

Out of the double doors, the elderly man emerged. He walked out of the waiting room and hung in the red radiance of the Emergency sign. He sparked a cigarette. The only times I'd ever smoked were when I was drunk, but I walked out there, if only to get air and a whiff of second-hand.

The night had cooled a bit and the sign was buzzing like a swarm of locusts. Through the swirling smoke, I could see the man was bearded, silver at the chin, not as old as I'd thought. His cigarette was almost to the filter, about to burn his fingers. "What a place to be at midnight," I said.

"We don't sleep anymore anyways," he said. He stubbed out the smoldering butt on the wall, leaving an ashy stamp in the stucco. He lit another. "You're too young to be here. Especially that girlfriend of yours."

"I suppose that's what she is."

He coughed. "If you're here with her, that decision has been made." From his jacket pocket, he pulled out his pack and shook it. I nodded. Holding up the lighter to me, he trembled a bit and the flame flashed out. He spun the wheel again and lit me up. "I quit smoking," he said. "But I plan to suck this whole pack down before the night is through. Don't tell my wife."

I blew smoke out my nose and watched the streams tinge red as they

wisped up into the light. "Can you imagine not liking food?" I said.

"What's that?"

"My girl, she doesn't eat."

"I don't wanna know," he said. He flicked his butt, a spray of orange beads bloomed like a mini firework. "I don't have enough worry left."

In an all-night diner, at a corner booth, Melanie leaned against the window walls. I followed her gaze, squinting into the empty parking lot doused in piss-colored lamplight. She fingered the white bracelet on her wrist. "To eat is to live," she said. Her auburn hair was up in a bun, a rarity. I seldom saw the paleness of her neck, the suppleness, as if never exposed to the outside world, always hidden beneath a curtain of curls.

"Profound and true," I said.

"The nurse wouldn't stop saying that. What kind of life revolves around the dinner table?"

"One without emergency rooms."

She smirked, a limp bounce of her lips. Oldies crackled from the speakers overhead, songs I knew the words to, but couldn't attach a name. In the open kitchen across the diner, a lone cook in his white apron, not yet blotted with grease, danced at the griddle, lips moving, singing along.

"How do you know that nurse?" I asked.

"She's given me electrolytes before," Mel said. "Like rotten goop."

"How many times?"

She tugged at the flap of her hospital bracelet, the excess strip of holed plastic. “These,” she said. “I have two others, one in my room, one in my car, supposedly a reminder to not panic. But I’m never in those places when it happens.”

“Need help getting that off?” I asked.

She twisted it up her forearm. “I think I’ll keep it on.”

The server brought our meals. Grilled cheese and fries for Mel, and for me, a standard breakfast of hash browns, eggs and sausage. The scrambled eggs weren’t right, though; I’d asked for over easy. Mel picked through her fries, picking up a burned one. She tossed it on the table and sipped her coffee. “Your order’s wrong,” she said.

“I’ll deal with it.” In the kitchen, the cook made a dance step out of pouring pancake batter. I wondered where some people found the energy. “The cook’s having too much fun anyway.”

Slouched in the giant booth, Mel stared at the two grilled triangles on her plate. She picked one up, lashes flicking at me, and bit off the pointed edge. She didn’t chew, but gnashed in methodic hesitance, working bread and cheese into some kind of thin paste. Only then did she urge it down her throat. I nodded her along with each bite, but quit once she stopped meeting my eyes. She washed down each swallow with more coffee.

“You won’t be able to sleep,” I said.

“It isn’t caffeine that keeps me awake.”

“What does?”

Mel stared out the window. At the nearest intersection, malfunctioning traffic lights flashed yellow in unison. "I like this song," she said. "Now this was a fun decade."

It was a cheeky upbeat tune, a trio of girls telling a man that they accidentally threw all his clothes out of the apartment window. "One day," I said, "you'll be singing over these speakers."

"I just want to be good. The fame will follow." Mel recoiled into a lounging position, feet up and head against the window. The second half of the sandwich, untouched, sat along with several fries and a torn napkin. I accepted the signal: this meal was over.

"That might be the most I've ever seen you eat," I said, extending my arm across the table. "Good job, Mel." Hand open, I waited for hers to find mine in some acknowledgment of her accomplishment. As if I'd been searching for a high-five, she banged my knuckles into the wood.

I scooted into her side of the booth. "That nurse is wrong," I said. "Eating is only necessary. It's not a reason to live."

Hands on her stomach, guarding the new bulge, she tilted onto my shoulder, digesting. In raspy ta-das and la-las, Mel whispered along to the melody. She looked up at me, eyes opening slowly, as if awaking from a dream. She said, "Let's do something fun."

We hung in the stairwell of the psych building, eyes at a rectangle of glass in the door, watching a janitor walk through the hall beside a trashcan on wheels. It

was nearing five in the morning, and I'd slogged across campus, camera swaying on my back. Just to put one foot forward, I had to follow my body's memorized movements, like a robot low on batteries. Mel whispered, "School isn't fun."

The roll of the wheels grew low, resonating off the walls in a dull bass. "You first," I said. I pointed to the metal ladder.

She studied the rising rungs, head nodding back, stopping at the darkened square above. "If I die it's all your fault," she said.

"If you fall I'm dead, too." Mel's lips pursed, shrinking like a dried apricot. But she couldn't hold the face, and a smile broke. "You asked for excitement," I said.

She kissed me then started up the ladder. I adjusted my shoulder strap, securing the cinch so the camera wouldn't swing. Five steps above me, Mel was ascending without stopping. She said, "Why am I doing this?"

"Blame it on lack of sleep."

"I do feel delirious."

I was halfway up when I lost Mel to the shadowed top. My head felt loose, detached from my grasping arms and balancing legs. A boom echoed down the zigzag of stairs and up again. Mel had pounded on the metal latch. I climbed up behind her, one rung below. Gripping the sides of the ladder, our bodies tight against each other's, I avoided my usual test of courage to look down. We both pushed open the latch.

As if emerging from a cave, we paused, in awe of the existence of such openness, the sprawl. Mel ran, a bird-like freedom in her bouncy strides, slowing

at a corner, then jolting to the next. The air was softer here, a few miles closer to the ocean, in every breath a taste of brine. I had my camera ready, though I knew there wasn't enough light for this digital pupil to see much of anything. And a flash would ruin any attempt to capture what I wanted.

Mel strolled the edge of the rooftop. I set my lens to her. Above the black bowl of the campus, among the flecks of lights spanning the valley floor, along the moonlit arcs of the metallic hills, Mel posed, a silver silhouette to the backlighting moon. She raised her arms in the shifting breeze, as if preparing to take flight, to disappear beyond the rounded fringe of the world.

2: Flushed

We found an apartment in a refurbished building downtown. All morning, I was bounding down the stairs to the parking garage, clearing three steps per stride, then carrying boxes back up. It was the second day of my life that I could say I was living on my own, so I guess I was a bit giddy, a word I usually used to describe Melanie, not myself.

Before helping Mel unpack, I went out to pick up some film prints for my new boss, who wanted to see what I already knew. Any portrait shot was of Mel. To plaster herself on all the music media websites, she used my free labor. I didn't mind. Some of my best work appeared while she was in the frame.

Walking back through the lobby, whose walls were stripped of old paint, shining bland like a lackluster photo, the only color in the room nicked me. Our new maroon armchair, in terms of being new to us—it was vintage. We had hoped to get it to our place before Mel's parents showed up that night, but there was no way I could lug it up three more flights.

I had yet to test out the chair, so I sat down, rubbing the soft velvet stubble. The armrests had faded, worn to the white thread beneath by someone's elbows. I shuffled through the film prints over my lap, searching for a favorite of mine. Rain blurred the backing green landscape of an open field. A red umbrella hovered above Mel's glistening face. Her eyes were enormous, gazing in effortless happiness, as if admiring you, the viewer. An allure straight out of a fifties movie, an allure whose sincerity was only for the camera.

Upstairs, I opened our door onto a square of linoleum, the entryway, which led to the kitchen off to the right. In the center of living room, surrounded by pillars of boxes, Mel played her Wurlitzer piano in the glare of the wide window. CDs stacked atop the piano, her new 5-song EP. She began singing, the warm jazz-timbre voice booming out of her small body. Her fingers moved stiff, forceful, over the white keys. Mel winked at me, deliberate and slow, like I was a lonely man at a bar that might give the attractive piano player a tip. She'd have me join her if I agreed, sing in harmony, twirl her around and play a spontaneous role as if we lived in a musical. I smirked. Backstage is more comfortable. I'd rather peek through a crack in the curtains.

I set my film prints on the CDs, and in the built-in music holder, I placed a job application. She stopped playing. "You need a tip jar," I said.

"Yeah? I should have concerts out of our apartment." She glanced at the application, flipped it over once. "Nope," she said. "Not gonna smell like stale coffee again. That stink wouldn't come off for a week."

Lifting my open palms up and down like an invisible scale, I said, "Smell like coffee? Or, be homeless?"

She stood and shuffled through the film prints. "I haven't seen this one," she said.

"Just think about it."

"Except my cheeks look like a chipmunk's."

"Seriously, Mel."

"I heard you." She set the prints down, sending CDs over the keyboard

onto the charcoal carpet. I picked a few up and restacked them.

Elbows on the kitchen counter, Mel ate a leftover sandwich. She ripped off a piece of chicken breast then wrapped it in a paper towel. With her fist, she smashed it, squishing out the grease. She didn't bite the bun either, but picked at it like a pecking bird, leaving behind mush soaked in mayonnaise.

After the emergency room, which now seemed a story we'd simply overheard, the details lost to happier ones, Mel began a new habit. When friends were around, she would eat, then, in classic disorder form, purge in the confines of a bathroom stall. Afterwards, she wasn't discomfited—no sullen eyes, no thin layer of sweat shining off her brow—as she'd learned to finger her throat with care. And, if she didn't already have some, she'd always ask me for gum. But that only went on for a few months. It'd been, well, good, since that ended. She ate, digested, maintained a decent a weight, played music for me on abandoned lifeguard towers while the moon cast jittery white on the waves, and that's when I decided I wouldn't resist any longer, that I'd listen to Mel's hints and help find us an apartment in the city.

Mel rolled up the lettuce and tomato into a sort of taco. "Please stop looking for jobs," she said. "I'll look for something I somewhat like."

That's all I wanted, her to recognize the need to supplement her music.

Beneath the starkness of the kitchen lights, Mel raised her right arm, bent at the elbow, away from her body. Posing like that, she studied herself. With a twitch of her thumb, a pit formed between the tendons of her wrist, deep enough for a bead to hide.

“Have you passed your skinny test?” I said.

“Yes, sir.”

“You look better than ever, and don’t tell me I’m lying.”

“You sound like my mom,” she said. “Except she doesn’t mean it.”

Chewing a last bite of squished chicken, Mel crushed the to-go box. I walked behind her. As I squeezed the fleshy parts of her shoulders, she nodded forward, relaxing into my quick massage. “All we have to do is clear the boxes,” I said. “They can’t expect anything more.”

“We should have bought that coffee table,” she said. She described it like I hadn’t seen it: the inlaid birds hand-carved around the edge, the legs like lion paws, old wood tarnished and elegant.

I said it wouldn’t have fit in the car, anyway, along with the armchair.

“I wanted to have something cool for my dad to see,” she said.

“The apartment itself is enough.” As I inched up her neck, her head lolled backward. “Hold on,” I said. “Don’t move.”

“Allen, not right now.”

I ran upstairs to the bedroom and grabbed my gear. “Hold your spot,” I hollered.

Standing the tripod against the fridge, as far behind us as possible, I set up the shot. As the timer beeped, we mimicked our positions, then, faster beeping, *snap*: us in a fuzzy foreground, my chin on the crown of her head, backed by a befuddled living room of scattered boxes, blank walls, Wurlitzer, all motionless in a block of window light—the scattered beginnings of a home.

Around a card table, Mel's parents, Margaret and Julian, sat in the two folding chairs. Mel had stuffed cream candlesticks into brass holders and placed them along a maroon strip of cloth. Julian, an ex-Evangelical minister, wearing a pleased smirk, ogled his daughter. Margaret's eyes twitched around, glancing at the boxes lining the apartment or out the window onto the cityscape, or even to the ceiling. She was wearing a wig I hadn't seen before, so deep red it drained the color from her cheeks. It sat a bit too forward, denying a full forehead. All the leukemia was gone for now; she'd beaten cancer. I lit the tall candlesticks. "Either of you care for wine?" I said.

Julian asked for water. Margaret shook her head. "The dullest man I ever knew was a wino," she said. She patted Julian's arm. "Your brother Earl." She laughed, clucked. "He would talk about grapes until he passed out and snored."

Julian smiled in his practiced way, a smile that left his eyes sagging. With glasses and a pitcher, I squeezed next to Mel on the piano bench. "Sorry we don't have any furniture yet," Mel said.

"This is more stuff than I had throughout my twenties," Julian said.

"We bought a nice chair," I said, "but couldn't get it up the stairs."

Julian stood. "I'll help. Let's do it, Allen."

Through the hallway, Julian followed behind me with inaudible steps. Just visible beneath the new plaster, the walls held old cracks, gray jagged lines like the faded evidence of earthquakes. As a part of the urban renewal projects to lure people downtown, the building had its history, proved its endurance, and I liked

the idea of renewal. Of all the apartments we toured, most of which were along the meandering hills of Silverlake and Los Feliz, it was the only one I'd agreed to move to. For money reasons, and that is to say, for peace of mind.

I led Julian down to the empty lobby. Paint thinner still clung to the air, irritating, like a man wearing too much cologne. I stood at the back of the armchair. He lingered at the bottom of the stairs, eyes running up the high walls. He slid his hand up the stripped concrete. "Thanks for helping, Julian," I said.

He slapped the wall then walked over. "What do you think of Margaret's new wig?" he said. He sat in the chair and a cloud of dust burst like thrown glitter. Facing away from me, he was like a therapy patient.

"How many does she have?"

"There are three dummy heads in our bedroom," he said.

"She's done with chemo, right? That must be a relief."

"It's been over for months." He stood and faced me, the armchair between us. "She likes the wigs better." He bent down, gripping the bottom of the chair. He was more talkative when alone, candid even. When he was in Margaret's presence, he was a worn out man.

"I've been wanting to ask you, Julian," I said, "about that Buddhist-looking statue in your yard."

He laughed. In a wobbly lunge, we heaved up the chair between us and we couldn't see each other anymore. "Margaret hates it," he yelled, walking backwards. "Where Western religions have failed, I feel Eastern ones have succeeded. I get a relaxing clarity just looking at that statue, don't you?" We

stutter-stepped to the bottom of the staircase. "The opposite happens to me when I see those dummies."

With the girth stretched across my chest, I stumbled up the stairs, while Julian tugged from the top end. To support a bit of the balancing act, I stiffened my head as we maneuvered, the dry velvet chafing my face.

We rested at the top of the second flight. Julian was huffing. "You know I disapprove of you two living together." He stared, eyes focused but wide open, haunting and forgiving at once, a minister's glance. "But at least she's with someone like you. Mel needs support." I nodded.

Inside, the two women were upstairs in the loft bedroom. Sitting on the bed, just a mattress on the floor, Margaret held Mel's hands in her lap. When I came in, they stopped talking. With a napkin, Margaret dabbed the corner of her eye, breaths gone wheezy. The thought of her shedding tears had never occurred to me, and only encouraged me to trust her even less. She pressed a fist into the bed. "Allen, you need a new mattress," she said. "Or at least get a box spring."

"We're comfortable," I said.

"Oh, you're not comfortable." She clawed her fingers into the scalp of her wig, and with a slight jerk, adjusted it back off her forehead. "Mel, at least, needs a big feathery bed."

"Mom," Mel said. She squeezed Margaret's shoulders. "We just moved in. Let us get settled."

In the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of wine. Mel showed her father the

view, pointing out where famous musicians and actresses have lived, districts you couldn't actually see from our window. Opening drawers and cupboards, Margaret seemed to be studying the layout of the kitchen. "Are you hungry?" I asked. I sipped. My glass of wine was dwindling. "We haven't gone shopping yet."

She opened the fridge. Her head disappeared behind the swinging door, then she emerged with a round box. She eyed me, tightening her lips. "Brie?" she said. "Do you know what would happen to Melanie?"

The cleansing of our fridge surfaced some stories I'd heard, like Margaret weighing out her only daughter's breakfast cereal on a kitchen scale. Never more than 25 grams, if I remember correctly. I gulped down the last of my wine. "Good thing she doesn't live with you."

Over the trash, she popped off the lid and shook it out. The wheel of cheese smacked the empty bucket. She turned. "Julian, we better get to dinner if we want to get home at a decent hour."

Among the mirrored skyscrapers, whose color morphed as you walked past, I was leading us to an Italian restaurant I'd heard about, low key and traditional. Julian strolled beside his daughter, arm in arm like a happy couple.

Just outside of our apartment, we passed a large square of dirt and scorched weeds—mostly wild dandelions—some of which stood taller than me. Their little spores swirled in small clouds with the slight breeze, white fluffs glinting in the sun. I thought it amazing that the downtown of one of the largest

cities in the country still had land to offer. And though it was ugly—the overgrown, arid patch of land disturbing the rows of pristine skyscrapers—it spurred on a strange optimism, a reminder that this place was always reworking itself and offered a future to Mel and me.

I walked alone, the leader a few steps ahead of everyone else. Coming off the coast, the eastward breeze was sweeping away most of the smog hanging below the cloud line just above the high-rises. It was no doubt repulsive, the thick gray and brown and yellow, depending on the day, but that wicked haze could produce astonishing sunsets of neon glows ravishing the sky. The occasional sight might've been worth the threat of blackened lungs. That's how I was, optimistic about everything. I saw a future beyond the past Mel and I shared, the past summer when I was rendered useless in the bout against her affliction. No matter how much I tried, even with what I thought was very patient tactfulness, it wasn't me that got her to quit. I was only a nag, a reason to be thinner. Mel stopped the fingering when she'd read online about how stomach acid can destroy your teeth, or cause chronic sore throat and hoarseness. She couldn't have that. She needed healthy vocal chords.

Music grew from down the street, blaring droned layers of sounds over the wind of passing cars. A van inched past, speakers tacked onto the roof, holding up traffic. Margaret watched it roll by with a contorted look of confusion. On the side-panel, faces drooped into lava-like masses of swirling colors, all the expressions horrified, eyes bulging, mouths screaming and puking, exploding, except for the last face that reeled by with long green hair twining into unsmiling

lips. I appreciated the spectacle, a sight that couldn't be seen just anywhere. It aroused a deep urge, though, an old urge, to be inside that van, not here with a family, but on the uninhibited road I knew nothing about.

Arriving on the early side of dinner, we were the only people in the dining area. At a small, square table, Mel and Julian sat on either side of me, Margaret straight ahead. In the low light—there were no windows and each table had an electric faux-candle placed in the middle—Margaret's dark wig with the too-straight bangs and long, heavy curls disappeared into the dim background. Her pale, chubby face seemed to be floating above her shoulders. "The apartment itself isn't so bad," Margaret said, "but that pile of dirt next door with all the weeds is God-awful."

"I've hardly noticed since we've moved in," Mel said. She read the leather-bound menu. "But it is kinda ugly."

"The weeds are as tall as trees." Margaret let out a hiccup of a laugh. "It's a fire hazard even more than it's unpleasant to look at."

Mel extended her arm in an awkward gesture of reaching out, and posed like a mannequin, testing her thinness. Tonight would be difficult for her: pressure to eat in a public place, pressure to uphold a month of recovery, pressure from the scrutiny only parents can give. I was trying to not add to it.

The server came around for drinks and everyone ordered water, so I did the same. "How's the music, Mel?" Julian said.

"Going well, Daddy-o. The album is selling."

"Really? Going beyond just family and friends then, huh?"

"Oh yeah," I added. "Online sales. She had a guy buy it in—where was he from?—Malaysia, right? Somewhere random."

"Let's have a toast," Julian said. "To the new apartment and Mel's music."

"And to Allen's new job," Mel added. Lifting my glass, I grinned. We all clanked and sipped the plain drink, except Margaret, who tilted her glass too high, dripping water down her front. Laughing in that quick hiccup, she wiped herself with a napkin.

Julian leaned over, tapped my elbow for a huddle at the corner of the table, and asked if Mel had been actively looking for a job. I said I'd picked up a few applications.

"Keep trying," he said. "She's always preoccupied with her creative stuff." I nodded. "This is why we're here—well, why I'm here. I figured you two could use a free meal."

I thanked him. While her Mom gabbed, Mel was half-turned towards me, a small smile, happy to see Julian and I talking. That was the smile I craved, the one I knew was sincere, and the sole gesture that made me feel wanted. She stroked my knee. Warming her cold hands, I locked my fingers in hers, rubbing the crevices between her knuckles.

The entrées came on steaming plates, all mounds of various pastas besides Margaret's hefty square of lasagna. The dinner crowd was gradually growing, and occasional wine-filled chatter and laughter erupted from surrounding tables.

"That's a heaping plate of pasta, there, Mel," Margaret's floating head said. As my

eyes adjusted to the light, though, her stiff wig and broad shoulders were taking visible shape. "Good job." Margaret slid a bite of lasagna into her mouth. Her bare neck and green, frilly blouse momentarily flashed in the candlelight. "But don't eat it all," she said. "Julian, pass the bread please. You and Allen are hoarding it over there." I took another piece before Julian grabbed the breadbasket.

"And why is that, Mom?" Mel asked.

"You need to maintain your look for acting and all that."

"I don't act anymore, remember?" Mel forked a miniscule bite of pasta.

"Oh, entertainment is entertainment."

Julian, twisting noodles, said nothing. After all the years of watching his only daughter eat next to nothing, or gorge then purge, or eat nothing and still puke. The problem is still here in Margaret's nonchalant viciousness, plainer than I'd witnessed before. I nudged my leg against Julian's, prompting him to challenge his wife, to break the spell she had cast over him. He did nothing but chew.

Mel scooped a bite and chomped the whole thing, eyes darting around like she was doing something illegal. Red sauce smeared at the corners of her mouth. "Let her eat," I said.

Margaret's laughing hiccup erupted again, but with more surprise, almost jubilation. "Oh Allen, you should be on my side."

Never taking much of a pause between bites, Mel ate. Her chewing mouth couldn't keep up with her fork, so she shoveled it in. The mound shrunk, and

shrunk, and shrunk to a few squiggly lumps. There was only one place this rebellion could lead, and that was to the plumbing pipes. I didn't stop her. "Hey, mom," she said.

"You're gonna regret that," Margaret said.

With her head fixed on her mother, eyes unblinking, Mel scraped the last of her noddles into her palm. Hands shiny with sauce, she shoved the pasta into her mouth, like a bride eating cake on her wedding day.

"Melanie, please," Julian said. He glanced at the table next to us, where a younger man wearing a fedora, bottle of wine in hand, gestured in large strokes of his arms. His amused friends casually listened, chewing.

Mel licked up the length of her hand and sucked and slurped over each finger.

"Oh God," Margaret said. She pushed her own plate into the faux-candle. She looked at me. "Are you going to let her do that?"

Looping fettuccine in my hand, I stared at Margaret. I hung my food above my mouth, dropping it on my tongue. Mel and I shared a grin. She dug her nails into my leg so hard I jerked away.

"That's enough," Julian said.

When Mel began scrubbing her mouth, wearing the calmed face of self-disgust, I squeezed her thigh. She glared then made to scoot her chair backwards. I grabbed a fistful of her skirt. She wrestled it away, knee thudding the table, rattling plates. She walked off. I had to try, but for the first time, I felt sympathy for Mel's struggles. Sitting across from this cancer survivor, her face

sliced with creases, I felt judged myself. For what, I didn't know.

Julian knocked his knuckles on the table. "I'm sorry, Allen," he said. He stood. "Margaret, you amaze me." He bent down and kissed her. "Here," he said. Julian pinched a curled strand of her hair. He tugged. "There," he said. The wig sat cockeyed, bangs slanting across her forehead, covering her right eye. Julian walked to the away.

Hands interlocked on the table, as if posing for a portrait, Margaret sat. Like a monk in the face of humiliation, she let the wig remain slumping off her skull. The nearby table passed around a fresh bottle of wine. Clinking his glass with a fork, the fedora-hatted man quieted his friends for a mock-dramatic speech about good times and inebriation.

The table began to shake. Face stained yellow in the cheap candlelight like a fevered kid, Margaret shivered, green shoulders shuddering. She pulled a knotted napkin from her pocket. She lost control of her breaths, spurts of yelps jabbing the chatter around us. She blew her nose. Hugging herself, a bobbing lump, she fell little by little into the tabletop. I reached across and tapped her shoulder. She nodded up at me, one glassy eye blinking, lashes clumped in spikes, the other veiled behind a drape of fake hair.

3: Rabbit Food

“Proofreader,” Mel said. She was propped against a pillow, washed in the pale blue of her laptop screen. “I need to borrow you’re education.”

“Mmm. Brain don’t work yet.” Creeping from beneath the covers, my hand found her stomach, warm, swelling with a breath, then I roamed to a braless breast.

“It’s too early to grab my boob.” With my nose squished in a crumple of sheet, I caught the lingering chemical scent of our bed. We hadn’t done much in this room since last week’s batch of laundry, and I was accepting the notion of inevitability; couples endure dry spells. I rubbed a thumb over the soft roundness of her nipple, then let go.

Leaving the laptop, Mel shimmied out of bed then slipped off pajama bottoms. The cursor blinked on the screen; it was another draft of her bio:

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Melanie Mills is the reincarnation of old Hollywood charm. She has been onstage since she was a toddler, singing and acting for crowds cheering her classically trained voice and fun-loving presence. Through relentless gigs, she has spread a buzz across the L.A. basin, and a growing fan base awaits her forthcoming album. Melanie is now hard at work in the studio, filling notebooks with all manner of words and experimenting with sounds like crystal glasses and toy xylophones in the grand echo of tiled bathrooms. Make no mistake, this girl

can put on a show, belting out soaring melodies, and jamming on the keys of her vintage Wurlitzer, all the while throwing a wink your way. And get this, she can tap dance. She's been known to call off her supporting band mid-song, toss aside her mandolin, and launch into a percussive breakdown, all with the tips of her toes.

Deleting a comma, moving a comma, breaking up a sentence with too many *ands*, bolding words and phrases that could use fresh manipulating, I did what I could without suggesting changes to the content. I'd offered to write the whole thing, but she'd wanted to "maintain the integrity" of her own life, a saying I'm sure she borrowed from me, though I couldn't quite remember when I would've said that.

Mel disappeared into the bathroom. Out of habit, I opened her browser, clicked on the History tab, searching for URLs that might spark a day of bottled anger, but, I only located lists of record companies and music media websites. She'd been working on press kits the past two weeks, planning to drop a manila envelope in every A&R mailbox to lure some suit with a good eye, dead ear and a penchant for selling.

Mel emerged with a giant clip in her hair. "Carrie," I said, her middle name, which was only ever shouted in the confines of our bedroom to signal an oncoming climax, as in: Carrie me home! "With my skills," I continued, "the photography and the grammar, I think I'm getting swindled."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Mel dipped her foot into a rumpled mesh of black then stretched it over a knee, tight as skin. She said, "No one's making money."

Laptop balanced on her thighs, Mel worked in the armchair silhouetted by the wide window, which opened onto a rare sky of stuck gray. “Out of computer paper,” she announced, like I was a digital assistant, programmed to take note of pressing needs.

“I’ll grab some later,” I said. I opened the kitchen cupboard. A bag of almonds sat on the shelf, and below, a pack of rice cakes. There weren’t any left, just crumbs like at the bottom of a bag of popcorn. Since she found work at the health food store on Pico, Mel had been perfecting a rabbit-like diet of salads and supplements, and the cupboard suffered. I hunted through the trash, pulling out the box of cheerios I’d thrown away the day before. I lifted out the plastic casing and shook the remnants into my mouth. Mostly crushed cereal, like dust; there was nothing to chew. I hunted through the cupboard again. Behind the cluster of zero-calorie dressings, I spotted pancake mix. The torn blue package was rubber-banded shut into a hardened oval like a football.

“Get some nice card stock, too,” Mel said. “Cream.”

“Anything else, miss future-indie-icon-who-has-forgotten-how-to-say-please?”

“Please, baby? Best-boyfriend-in-all-the-land-who-forgives-all-my-shortcomings?” She peeked over a coffee mug, smile hidden, only apparent by her scrunched up cheeks. I’d scanned a picture onto that mug. The photo, worn from soap and scrubbing, wasn’t an especially good one, but it was the first exposure I’d spent on her. On an outdoor stage, Mel sat behind the Wurlitzer, shoulders sloped, head cocked at the microphone. A pair of corduroyed legs hung

at the top left, the old guitarist of her band, an ex. Now he was a guy on a mug in another dude's house.

I cracked two eggs over the clumped pancake powder. "I didn't know you were working with Aaron today," I said. She was already dressed, and she didn't work on Sundays.

"We're christening the new studio. And new equipment. You should see the mixer. It's bigger than our kitchen table." Mel stretched her arms, fingers splayed, reaching to grasp a space more expansive than her.

Whisking batter, I lingered between the kitchen and living room. "I'd rather not have to piece together your Sunday plans."

She stopped typing, stopped fingering the track pad. "I know what you're worried about." Setting her computer on the carpet, she stood, smoothing her dress over deceptively long limbs—she hemmed up the skirts two or three inches. Smiling, she shook my face.

I set the batter on the table then sat in the armchair. The window was blotted with rain, the sky a massive cloud. Mel lay onto my lap, legs dangling off the armrest. Her calves were unnaturally smooth gripped in those nylon tights. I picked at the black mesh, snapping it back. "I'll call and cancel," she said.

"No. You should hit the studio. I think you're finding your sound with Aaron at the helm."

"I am," she said. "And thank you for saying that."

Pinching her tights, I caught a bit of skin. She flinched, leg jerking as if to unhinge at the knee. I said, "Just keep me in the loop, okay?"

"You're such a worrier." She pressed her lips to my cheek, pecking until she found my mouth. I kissed once then stared out the streaked window. A sliding raindrop, reflecting high-rises as blurred miniatures, eased down the glass. It vanished at the sill.

Candles, all halfway melted in a mess of their own wax, pooled at the center of our dining table in globs of pinks and dusty creams. I squeezed syrup over my pancakes. "Do you want a bite," I asked. "No butter. And I cooked them in that spray oil you bought."

"My stomach is full of coffee," she said. She was back to work in the armchair. "And don't ask me while you empty the entire syrup bottle."

"One bite." I cut off a sliver of the driest part. "Here's a plain piece."

"Going for pure veggies today," she said. I held the plate beneath her chin, pancake hovering at her lips. "Allen, I really don't want any."

I took a bite. "Mmm. Maple syrup."

"Bleh." She jutted out her tongue, mouth twisted in a mimic of old habits.

"Mel, are you serious?" I forked another piece.

"Don't."

I shook it under her nose. Like a picky child in a high chair, Mel turned away. The fork caught her lip. Pancake flung and syrup smeared over her cheek.

"Allen!" She cupped her mouth.

I plucked the fallen piece from the keyboard.

"You cut me." Mel dabbed the corner of her mouth then examined her

hand, checking for blood.

"Sorry. Wanted you to splurge with me."

"I don't gorge," she said. She ran to the kitchen.

Mel had suffered the relapse after her parent's visit, but that only lasted a week until she found the shop on Pico, which offered a somewhat healthy way to maintain control. And everything slackened then, my role as monitor, watching for signs—gum wrappers and the guzzling of water and the way her hips filled then drained like tide pools—or gleaner of computer history to discover a blip in the ordinary through a compulsive list of searches, articles or forums, in which the non-eaters shared their tricks and glorified the swallowing of cotton balls dipped in fruit juice as a "lifestyle choice"—all of that diminished. And yet, while Mel would be off at Aaron's practice space, I still did it, tracking on her laptop a history I didn't recognize.

At the table, while I licked syrup from the fork tines, the window sparked white, catching a glimpse of sun. Each velvet thread of the armchair shone in the warmth, and dust hung in the air in constant slow motion until the new light, in a wipe of the room like a curtain closing, faded away. I heard a quick jingle, then a sustained pitch like tapped crystal. A thud blasted my ear. The impact burst like a thousand popped balloons. I tucked my head beneath a cage of my own arms, anticipating a second blow, as the jangle crashed on the wood and slid into the candle wax. A ball of keys.

I gripped my ear and shook, hunched in my chair, the pain singeing. I stood.

Mel posed, fists balled at her cheeks. “You know I have bad aim,” she said. “I thought it would just land by you somewhere.” She rose to the tips of her bare toes, and I expected her to wink.

She watched me as I walked by, her shoulders turning, tracking my movement to the sink. I stuffed uneaten pancake into the drain and flicked on the garbage disposal. Churning the cake into soggy bits, the drain sucked it down. My ear throbbed and thumped. In that frilled dress, propped against the counter, she was like a girl in a costume, finding in her mother’s closet something that finally fit. I walked up, standing above her. She smiled, then loosened into an expression I hadn’t seen, a sneer. I turned as if to leave, then I inched closer, leaning my shoulder towards her. She pinched her eyes, lips parting. I lunged forward and nipped her nose. “Bad aim,” I said.

She placed her knee between my legs, nudging. As I shuffled forward, she arced backward. I exhaled into her eyes, watching them flicker. She tightened her face into a brisk grin, and put her forearm to my chest. I walked out.

On the corner of Broadway and a numbered street, I leapt off the sidewalk to avoid the brown stream brimming at the curb. The rain was flooding the roads with an unending assault of heavy drops. In seconds, my sweatshirt went leaden, then my jeans, and I was slushing around, ducking beneath umbrellas.

On the other side of the street, against the marble base of a high-rise, the old Asian man sat staring between his legs, two stuffed trash bags on either side of him like sentinels. He rummaged through one of them. An umbrella, opening

as he tore it out, bloomed into a shiny red half-dome. Face lowered, the man was shrouded in rain beading off the nylon. A thin, graying goatee flared out, matted and dripping between his upright knees. That's a good portrait. No face to be seen.

I stopped at Peet's Sack Lunch to get a cup of coffee or tea or something and get out of the rain. The menu was an old green chalkboard, selections written in multi-colored cursive. Fitting because they specialized in deli sandwiches sold in brown paper sacks with your name written in marker like moms do for their kids. I scanned the beverages, settling on hot chocolate. The storefront window, surrounded by green walls and a red sill, drew me into the display of dull, gray action. Cars drove by in a rushing mist of splattering rain; businessmen ran with newspapers creased over their heads.

I could have been working, if I had my camera. This month's assignment was motion. As a form of training, my boss would give me topics like street art or churches or skyscraper views. Last month was portraits, but I didn't send him one shot of Mel, suspecting he might've grown tired of this girl in faded vintage reds and bow-tipped heels, a visual that now slumped in my stomach like a piece of rotting fruit. I couldn't hold grudges.

The Asian man was still on the same corner, but now standing crimped under his umbrella, which rested directly on top of his head. He had a cane, too. Or a stick, really. The tips of his holed sneakers hung off of the curb, hovering above the flowing rainwater. He stepped off, but couldn't stride far enough to clear the stream. He walked straight in, soaking his feet, and for a moment I

thought he'd be dragged away, as frail as he was, riding the murk into the intersection. At a sluggish stroll, I hung behind him, sensing that he'd swivel his head around for help, but he didn't. He took tiny steps, holding out his cane as if to maintain balance crossing the weak stream. I hooked his arm, grabbed the umbrella and held it over both of us. Flinching, he didn't look at me, but continued trekking.

Once out of the puddle, he set his cane to the asphalt. Several cars, lining up in a slow left-turn, blocked the middle of the intersection, until we took the last steps into the next curbed stream. "I make it on my own," he said. The pointed end of his goatee, like stringy moss clinging to a tree, perpetually held a drop of water waiting to drip.

I handed over his umbrella, which he propped back on his head. Sacks of skin moped under his eyes. "Just wanted your shelter from the rain," I said. I held out my half-drunk cup of hot chocolate. The man grinned, curved wrinkles like pen strokes on his stiff skin. "Take it."

"I say before. You are good to offer, but please." He huddled into me. I sunk beneath the umbrella. White foam was crusted at the corners of his mouth. He said, "No help." Spittle sprayed my chin. I backed away into the rain.

Lifting his cane, he turned around, achingly slow, like he could only stand going in one direction at a time, then he sloshed away in his soaked shoes.

I ambled up the stairs with two reams of paper and a bag of groceries. I was planning a healthy meal, a rabbity salad chock full of crisp multi-colored veggies

and shaved almonds and avocado, but, as I approached the door, the fuzzed notes of the Wurlitzer grew louder, joined by a lilting voice I hadn't heard before. I pressed my ear to the cold wood. Only the lowness of sounds rumbled inside the door. The song ended with a run up the keyboard and Mel spoke phrases I couldn't hear: "Play...new one...triplets." She laughed. "Come on." I crouched. No song began. I put my cheek to the carpet, shut one eye, and dialed the other like a focus ring to see a slivered view of flickering movement: legs of kitchen chairs behind heeled shoes.

When I clicked open the door, Mel was at the sink wearing a different dress, flower-patterned, trimmed above the knees, fresh, I knew, from the tailor. Vegetables stacked the counter. Against the fridge, Aaron slouched in his black slacks, white collared shirt, and thin, maroon suspenders. The shirt draped over him, his chest appearing hollow. I pasted a smile on my face and shook his hand, asking about the new studio.

"We ran into some electrical issues today," he said.

"That huge soundboard shorted everything out," Mel said. She shook droplets off a wet batch of lettuce.

Thumbing his suspenders, Aaron explained how combinations of grounded and ungrounded cables can screw up the voltage. "How's the photography?" he asked. "You should do an exhibit. There's art walks all over the place, every weekend at least."

"Sure. I need to find a place that does high quality blow-ups." My boss had any photo connection I needed, but I thought it was a good excuse for not

showing off my work just yet.

“I’ve got a friend that can help. He works at a spot off Fairfax. I’ll put you in touch.” The two other times we’d met he’d made suggestions like this. And I always nodded, without speaking, as I did now. He was a few years older than Mel and me, maybe twenty-six, and I felt he used those years to pin me down, flaunt his knowledge of the area.

Clopping a knife on the cutting board, Mel said, “This is gonna be the salad of all salads.”

“A monster salad,” Aaron said.

Mel laughed. “Didn’t know if you’d be home yet, Allen, but there’s more than enough for three.”

“More than that,” I said. I lifted up my bags. “We’re doubled-up on veggies.” Mel placed a chopped carrot in my mouth then kissed me. While she searched through my groceries, I put my face into her long waves of hair and breathed. Air blew back, warming my cheeks. I rubbed my hips into her, and ran my hand down her tights, hoping Aaron would be too embarrassed to watch, barred from sharing this moment, but Mel turned. “Check this out.” She held a bottle up to my face. “A new flavor.” Dressing, the same brand of unopened bottles in the cupboard.

“I don’t understand that no-calorie stuff,” I said. “Trading fat for odd chemicals.”

“You’re always so skeptical. It’s a health food store.”

“I guess.” I scanned the display of vegetables, grabbed a handful of grassy

stalks. “What are these?”

“Alfalfa,” Aaron said.

“You're interrupting my salad,” Mel said. She pulled me away from the cutting board then put a few forceful fingers into my back.

“There's quite a bit of nutrition in sprouts,” Aaron said. “High in protein and fiber for what they are.”

“Aaron's a health expert,” Mel added.

“So you're on a special diet?”

“Just don't eat shit, you know. Fast food. Lousy meats. Most meats.”

Aaron adjusted the cinch on each maroon elastic band like they actually held up his slacks. Maybe they did; standing there, skinny, tall, a lone dimple appearing while watching Mel scoop veggies into a mixing bowl, he struck me as a guy who would buy oversized pants for his slight waist just so he could justify wearing suspenders. He continued, “I've discovered the value in raw food.”

“He's teaching me all sorts of good tricks,” Mel said.

“Next is the chia seeds,” he said. “Great substitute for fish oils.”

I filled plates with veggies generously coated in the chemical Honey Mustard. The candles were already lit, and I cleared away the makings of press kits—stacks of 8-by-10 photos, unopened package of manila envelopes, a sheet of glittery star stickers, whose function as an eye-catcher, to me, whispered of juvenile dreams. On the window, steam was forming along the squared edges.

Over salad, the two discussed an instrument I'd never heard of, and how it would be a perfect high-register sound on one of Mel's songs, the mandolin jam

about driving the grand hallways of city streets. “Al over here wrote a few of those lyrics with me,” Mel said.

“Of all your songs,” Aaron said, “that one has the most precision in the lyrics.” He flicked his head, and smiled in such a complimenting way it annoyed me.

“Carrie,” I said, “when’s the big release of the album?”

Mel puffed her cheeks with chewed-up salad in her mouth. Closing her eyes, she stuck out a tongue specked with green bits. Aaron laughed.

“What do you think, Aaron?” I said. “Is her career on the verge of exploding?”

“No one can tell these things,” he said. “But I do know she has a flair. You know it, too. It’s rare to find girls like Miss Mills here, who actually write their own songs.”

“That’s true,” I said, and it was. The steam on the window was gone, turned to blotted condensation as if the rain had seeped through the pane.

Aaron and Mel were back to the piano, roles now switched with Mel at the keys. Aaron leaned over the body of the Wurlitzer. I was washing the dishes, the salad bowls and Mel’s coffee cups. The mug I’d made—that pair of disembodied legs—it was the wrong picture and I wanted it gone. Mel was singing a wailing melody, a descending line, then on the ascent, Aaron joined her, harmonizing with his light voice, reaching notes higher than Mel’s. I scrubbed the mug with the rough side of the sponge until a white smear erased the Wurlitzer. They repeated the line, then came to a steady build-up, voices echoing one another’s,

and Mel hit a strained chord louder and louder into a last bang—the piano cut, but the harmony sustained, two notes mingling with the other, before trailing off in a shivering vibrato.

The piano began again. Aaron slid his arms into a pea coat, and the sight of him preparing to leave calmed me. Mel and I had things to say to each other. We both knew that.

“We’re heading to the studio,” Mel said. She rose from the bench. “Giving it one more shot.”

Near the door, I lifted her keys off the hook of our little key plaque. “Stay,” I said. I walked to the kitchen, leading her away from the door. Aaron, skinny in his fluffed coat, stopped. I rattled the keys.

“Holding me hostage?” she said.

“Aaron doesn’t have a car?”

“Public trans for me,” he said.

“Allen, no jokes.” I held them over the sink. Mel peered down at her pointed toes, then back at me with a new smile, eyes soft and open in the practiced gaze of a face often stared at through a lens. I dropped the keys down the drain and hit the switch. Gargled metal gnashing and sputtering slurped rushed air. Mel squinted, as if staring at a glaring sun. Aaron covered his ears. The clogged sink shook like a thrashing jackhammer. Stuttering, clanking, the spitting drain hole choked—a resounding wall of guttural discord. Aaron and Mel crouched, craning their heads away. I shut it off.

Aaron stood. He faced his shoes while his eyes dared to peek at me. I

grinned. He said something, a stunted mumble. Mel looked into the sink, eyes broad and wary, as if the drain might churn again. Clearing his throat with an odd grunt, Aaron left.

Mel went wrist-deep in the drain. After several yanks, her hand emerged with the keys. She turned, dangling the metal bunch between her thumb and forefinger like a found secret. The metal was unmarred, a chewed leather strap the only sign of struggle.

I slid down the wooden cupboard and sat on the floor. Bent over the counter, Mel shook in gusts the way a leafless branch quivers in the wind. Her dress fluttered, the minuscule red and yellow flowers vibrant above the lunar blue of her pale thighs. I tugged on the hem of her dress. She looked down, a few curled strands of hair stuck to her wet cheek, some clasped in her mouth. Raising my hand, I closed my eyes. Her clammy fingers found mine and I pulled. She shrunk onto the floor. I buried my nose in the musty cloth of her sweatshirt, inhaling a taste of rain. As I cinched my limbs around her, a breath punctured the hollow room. Footsteps thudded by in the hallway, trembling the thin walls before petering away, and only the patter of rain remained. A kind of static, maddening in its slightness, the thrum subdued everything, and I could no longer locate the sound, as if it meant to go unheard.