

What Icarus Did

Senior Thesis

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by

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“Against Deep Blue”

Already eccentric before she started experimenting with religion, by the middle of July, Nina’s roommate started taping pictures of the same red-eyed frog to the bathroom mirror. In the morning, Nina unstuck the frog from the mirror, put it on the sink, and stare at her reflection as she brushed her teeth. The tape left sticky residue on the edges of the mirror, which made her look like she was wearing a very tiny hat with a chin strap.

In recent days her face was taking on a melting wax model effect, with a constant dull sheen of residual anger from her morning routine of rolling around in bed and engaging in self-flagellation for at least an hour. Self-reproach didn’t make her feel any better, but it gave her something to do between waking up and going to the lab for work. Her roommate, Polly, had suggested that Nina take a morning run if she was up so early, and the good advice depressed her. She didn’t mean it rudely, but it felt offensive that someone who had joined a frog cult would have better ideas than her. She wouldn’t run, she told herself as she put the frog back on the mirror. She’d put on twenty pounds, spend the rest of the year shucking it off, and in the springtime emerge as herself again, Nina Cheung, only with longer hair. She had cut her hair right after Jen had left her, maybe as an attempt to make a statement, but it wasn’t growing out well. When her mother saw it on video chat, her mother had told her to just shave the whole thing off.

She splashed her face with water, squinted to check if she needed to tweeze her eyebrows back into shape, and found them satisfactory. No, she couldn’t let herself be complacent. She did her best to resummon the vitriol from the great pool sloshing in her head, but now that she was out of bed, gravity was working against her. Maybe for the better. No point in starting off her day worrying about her eyebrows. Waterproof mascara, eyebrow pencil, and that was it. It was

too hot to bother putting anything else on, and the muggy Chicago heat meant she'd sweat anything more straight off; for the first weeks after she moved to Chicago from San Marino, she had looked like she was crying all the time. She put the frog back in its place, and went to the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Polly had already changed and was moving like a slow glacier between the stove and the fridge while holding a large, black bucket in her arms. When she saw Nina, she yawned and said, Aren't you supposed to be on a camping trip?

That was last weekend, Nina said. Today's Thursday. Are you high?

No? I don't think so. I couldn't sleep. That doesn't make me high.

Nina believed her. They had been living together since the summer of their sophomore year at Northwestern. Polly was disillusioned by the church, distrustful of the liberals, disappointed by her early life in a small city in Montana and 'experimenting with a life without labels, if you'd respect that, please,' everything she had fallen into was a little kooky, but undeniably harmless. No alcohol, no drugs, and no hands wandering south of the Mason Dixie line. A Puritan with a frog god.

What are you doing, Nina said.

Hatching eggs, Polly said. Do you want to see them?

She peered into the bucket. The eggs inside were clear and gelatinous and black at the center, some six inches in diameter, and far too large to be from a frog. The thin skin rippled in the light in a way that reminded her of bugs scurrying from the sun. She said, What is this?

Salamander eggs. I don't know what I'm doing. They keep telling me, Oh, Polly, now that you've officially sworn yourself in, go take these eggs and walk in circles and hatch them, but I think they're pulling my leg. When I asked them what it was, they were like, Oh, it's from

the aether, but what does that even mean? Aether's like a knock out gas, right? Don't answer that, I know what it is. I think this is some kind of hazing ritual. I feel so stupid, you have no idea.

I thought this was a frog cult, Nina said. She'd never say it aloud, but Polly had a bit of the froggy look to her: small and rounded with stout limbs and eyes so large that her irises seemed like pale spots floating in a sphere of milk. When Polly had joined them in the spring, Nina had deemed it a perfect fit. Jen had said, My God, you really are ruthless, aren't you? and Nina had said, Does it count as ruthless if it's true? By that point they were fighting over everything, a year of easy going faded out to four months of frosty silence interspersed with cool remarks. When Jen finally left her, just a week before she went to Florida for a marine biology internship, she had said, Whenever I ask you about how your day is, you always say, It was awful, I killed a bunch of mice in the lab, the research is pointless, I'm never going to get a job anywhere, and my back hurts, which means I'm going to get cancer before I turn thirty. Nina, embarrassed and angry, replied sharply, I never loved you anyway, which she meant to be a lie, but hadn't sounded or felt like one.

It's not a cult. It's a window into the other world. That's what I thought, at least, before they gave me a bucket of eggs. This has to be a hazing ritual.

Sure sounds like it to me, Nina said.

I'm not allowed to eat or drink anything, said Polly. For eighteen hours. I've been doing this since five in the morning, just walking around like this. They must think I'm such an idiot. The new Neo-Buddhists didn't make me do anything like this.

The new Neo-Buddhists thought Buddha arrived on a meteor, Nina said. She stood on a milk crate and peered at the shelves. No. They were out of bread again. Maybe she could eat peanut butter straight from the jar, if they still had any. She had cooked lunch for herself the day

before, since Polly worked at a bakery and got to eat free sandwiches there, and the entire apartment, even in the bedroom though they had left the windows open as much as they could, smelled of limp broccoli.

Maybe he did come on a meteor. We weren't there. How can we really know?

I think you can take that one on faith.

It wasn't the meteor thing that was important, anyway, Polly said. It was the astrophysics. It was an updated Buddhism, that made sense of all the science around us.

And yet you aren't a Neo-New Buddhist now, are you?

Why aren't I a cat? Polly said. That's all I want from my life: to be a cat. I don't know. I never believed in that weird eastern mystic stuff. The Family came up to me and said that they could help me, and I said yes. It all made sense until you started talking to me. I wish you hadn't. I don't know anything.

I'm pretty sure that these are just big silicone spheres, Nina said. They aren't going to hatch.

You don't know that, Polly said sharply. She hugged the bucket close to her chest, as though it were a person or a pet.

They aren't, Nina said, irritated now. Look—Jen's a marine biologist or whatever. Go call her.

Oh, good idea, she said. Not sure why I didn't think of that. Good old Jen.

Good old Jen.

This summer, like the summer before, she was working at a neuroscience lab on campus. Her half of her work was normal lab rat scuttling: willing bacterial cultures to grow, labeling little tubes of mouse blood, and blankly staring at slices of mouse brains under the microscope, but the other half of her work was giving schizophrenic mice anti-anxiety meds in the mornings, and after two weeks, cutting their heads off with a little mouse guillotine to collect the blood leaking from their brains. Because the work was sometimes gory, the professor running the lab and the principal investigator tried to encourage everyone to be like family, but the grad students were distant and neurotic, and after the other undergrads tried to designate her as grad student translator in her first year there, Nina alienated nearly all of them by keeping to a policy of hostile isolation—she regretted it now, but what could she do? The last lab bonding exercise had been bowling, and she and the other lab rats locked themselves into a deathly quiet competition, while the grad students got drunk and high-five one another two lanes over while the PI and the professor sipped, inexplicably, martinis. Anil was the only one she had managed to not piss off, but she was working off former good will: they moved in the same circle of friends and had lived in the same dorm as freshmen.

She got off the bus across the street from the main gates. She found the campus obscurely unpleasant. It was, maybe, too spacious, too well-moneyed, too professional. The lawn had no bald spots, old trees were chopped down when they grew too unruly, and replaced by newer and neater ones, and buildings did their best to make themselves available to invasive vines. She had the impression that the campus had a strange, fixed smile, constantly showing up to a job interview, and dying to impress. What she liked best was the view of Chicago, glittering distantly across the Lake; but these days seeing the tall, spindly buildings reminded her of an overturned

silver millipede, unable to turn itself over. After almost three years of being surrounded by pre-laws and pre-business and pre-meds she was thinking that maybe she should have majored in something like statistics, or computer science, or marathon yodeling. But today was Tuesday, and Tuesdays were for group meetings, and Professor Heller had just come back from vacationing in Maine with his family. It'd be a long one.

She got to the lab just a bit after eight thirty, went to her group meeting at nine, and was still there when her phone began vibrating in her bag.

Let's break for lunch, said Heller, and Nina immediately ducked outside, sans lunch, to take the call.

The call was from Jen. She hit the call back button, pressed the phone between the side of her skull and her shoulder, and tried to not look too eager., even though there was no one around, not even the usually omnipotent seagulls and squirrels. She didn't want to talk to Jen. They had only texted one another, briefly and coolly, until now, and even as she listened to the dial tone, she could feel her temper readying itself, like a small dog yapping at a stranger from behind a door.

What, Jen said when she picked up, as to which Nina replied, just as shortly but with greater anger, What.

Oh, don't do this, Jen said, and Nina felt the heat prickling at her cheeks and eyes. I got a call from Polly saying you wanted to talk. Something about Salazar? Eastern European history?

No, *she's* the one who needs to talk to you about salamanders, Nina said. Are you busy?

I'm in the middle of my lunch break, Jen said. We're working on the beach right now. Everyone's super distracted, so I have some time.

Yeah, I'm sure you're on some *real* beaches in Florida, she said. Oh, what was wrong with her! She said, Polly's walking around our kitchen carrying a bucket of what she says are salamander eggs.

Are you making fun of her again?

Absolutely. Telling my roommates to call you and ask you about salamander is where I derive all of my ill-gotten chuckles these days. She shut her mouth and sucked the air in her mouth out, so her cheeks stuck to her teeth. Sorry, she said.

Sure, Jen said, retreating into condescending coolness. Nina, at first, was tempted to follow her into a remote and distant calmness, but now her temper had woken up. She yearned to be small and petty—why not, she thought, bitterly, when that was who she was? Jen said, I'm not really an amphibian person. I'm out here studying algae. How am I supposed to identify species of salamanders by staring into their eggs? They didn't exactly cover that in cell biology.

Never mind what kind of lizard it was—

Salamander! Oh my god, Nina, do you even know if it's a lizard or a frog?

Well, excuse me for trying to avoid the pratfalls of obsessive delineation via nomenclature for once. I just need to know how big the eggs can get.

Not that big. They're r-selected. Like mice, except with a lot of tiny, low-cost eggs. They should be tiny. No more than two centimeters in diameter.

Refresh my memory: two centimeters, not six inches?

Two centimeters, like—you have to know this, you can't possibly not know it—an inch. Are you trying to be a bitch?

A little, Nina said. She knew she ought to apologize, but couldn't feel assed enough to do so. Distantly, she knew she was being petty, and obstinate, and rude, but it came so naturally—and of course Jen had called her, knowing that Nina was the one with no capital to work with in the conversation. Look, I have to go. Thanks for the help. I guess.

What is *wrong* with you! Jen said, with gratifying fury, and hung up.

The phone call bothered her for the rest of the day, through the meetings and what time she managed to scrounge up in the lab. She shouldn't have gotten so worked up, she thought, now feeling self-conscious and embarrassed for her past self, for behaving badly, and her present self, for now having to deal with the consequences. She didn't think of herself as a bad tempered person, but she did have a talent for pissing people off. Her parents, if they had noticed this, never mentioned it—but they prided themselves on being modern and forward-thinking and Hong Kongnese, which for them seemed to mean getting three divorces between the two of them in the last ten years, and had reacted to Jen by sneering about the northern twang she had when she spoke Mandarin. Maybe after going to college her circle of acquaintances had become looser and her circle of friends smaller as her comments became sharper, but that didn't mean that she had become repellent or a bad person. No.

On the bus ride home, she began to brood, and by the time she was home, she was on the road to self-detestation. It was a string of moody upsets—I'm a social failure, I'm never going to have a functional romantic relationship, I'm going to become one of those crazy scientists in a tiny lab on a tiny, off-campus building and have no funding or heat, how does anyone stand me, I

hate all of them, what am I even going to research, ways to kill mice—that burrowed into her body, tunneling through her chest, burrowing parallel along her ribs, in small, perpendicular lines to her intestines, worming little holes in the bloody walls between fat and skin; and somewhere in there was a waspish voice in her head saying, Oh, shut up in there!

She took a few breaths before reentering her apartment. She had a feeling that when she opened the door, there would be a situation, some horrible thing like Polly sitting in a circle of candles trying to summon some Lovecraftian horror from the twelfth dimension, or Polly holding a cultist book club, or a dead squirrel trapped between the walls. The key rested light and nearly nonexistent between her fingers. She slid the key home, and turned. Polly was still in the kitchen, still walking around in little circles. That by itself could be a disaster, but Nina didn't think herself to be a girl of hyperbole. The apartment was small and designed so you could see from the kitchen the living room, the door to the bathroom in the hall, and even the blushing shadow where the hall kinked before leading to the single bedroom they shared, and it was empty of all but suggestive draping of light, visible like silk screens tossed about the apartment.

Still at it? Nina said. Didn't you have to go to work?

I called in sick, Polly said. I can't believe I'm doing all this. I bet these aren't even real. Did you talk to Jen for me? I'm sorry I made you do it, but every time I tried to talk to her for longer than a minute, my wrist would start cramping up. How is she doing?

She's doing fine, Nina said. She's having a real party down in Florida, collecting all that algae and swimming with the manatees or whatever. Experiencing oceanic bliss in the warm eddies of the Atlantic. She says that they're probably not real.

Oh, Polly said. She paused in her pacing, and then kept going. I don't know why, she said. I keep thinking, what if this is a trial, I must remain strong.

People had done worse things for weaker reasons, yet this reason struck Nina as deeply unreasonable and worthy of momentary contempt. Nina let herself say nothing. It was a good thing to practice, the art of restraint. She scratched her ear.

I'm going to make dinner, she said. You want anything?

Can't, said Polly. Can't eat for another five hours. Can you leave me something in the fridge to eat?

I have leftovers. And we have jam.

But no bread, Polly said with a wistful sigh. Do you know what I want? Sausages, eggs, and French toast. That's what I keep telling myself as I spin around here: sausage, eggs, and French toast.

Yeah, Nina said. She went to the living room, knowing that she had left Polly in the kitchen without telling her that she wasn't going to stick around to talk, but couldn't feel guilty about it, either: lab work was hard, she was tired, and sitting for a while to flip through the catalogue Nina had unscrupulously stolen from an open mailbox in the mailroom sounded pleasing. She flipped through the catalogue. In the glossy pages, she could see a blurry, darkened shadow of herself reflected back to her.

It happened when she was sleeping, after Polly had stopped stomping around with the bucket and ate leftovers of broccoli and rice. Nina went to bed, and it came to her in her dreams. She must have been dreaming: she dreamed that she went to bed, and she dreamed that she woke in the middle of the night from a dream that she had sunk into the bottom of the ocean yet was

being eaten by worms, little tiny things hatching from her and escaping her as the albino flies she had bred in her second semester at Northwestern, red eyes refracting her own stunned expression over and over again, in small and tiny pieces, and she was fading, fading, gone—she dreamed she dreamed that, and then after waking, went to the kitchen for a glass of water. The darkness of the dream was more true and more untouchable than the one in real life. Light pollution. The skies never darkened past a suggestive purple, like a piece of velvet worn of its fuzz, and the whole edge of sky towards Chicago, hazy from industry and smoke, glowed like a painted sun. The inside of the apartment should have borrowed light from the moon and the streetlight through the windows, from the hallway by smuggling it beneath the crack of the doors to suggest planes; but her dream self walked in a soft and quiet world, the only illumination were the cold edges of things.

She stepped into the kitchen, her hand outstretched before her to hold onto the walls and the chairs, as her toes slid across the false wood of their floor. She dreamed, or thought she dreamed, of the bucket on the table, and floating above it, a white, blunt-faced lizard, four or five times as thick as her arm and long as her torso, or a little longer. Wispy gills swirled around its head, a pale shadow of a mane. It had webbed feet and legs, and a tail that beat the air like a fan. She thought, No way this is real, and tried to will herself awake, but it said, No, and the darkness rippled and bubbled, then became steady again.

The lizard—Jen said, *Salamander*—swam towards her. Its eyes were large and pink. She felt repelled by it, as though it were a smaller and more disgusting bug.

What, Nina said to it.

What indeed, said the salamander.

I need to wake up, she thought, and the salamander said, Don't run.

I'm not running.

You're not running. All right, honey.

'Honey?' she said.

It flicked its tail at her. It looked like how she imagined a priest in the other side of the confession booth might look on Christmas Eve, impatient and waiting for the line of sinners to end. She had gone to a Catholic high school since the public school in her hometown hadn't been so hot, and what she remembered most were the nuns in their dresses of black and gray with the occasional white accent, their braided and bunned hair, the rosaries and crosses that shifted soundlessly around their necks as they walked up and down the stairs, ascending and descending and ascending again. She remembered once one of the younger sisters, in her twenties or just over thirty, bending down to help her pick up some things she dropped, and realizing with horror as she saw one of the sister's slim, stockinged legs, bared all the way to the knee, that she probably had sexy legs. She remembered the sharp pain of her curiosity as it froze into ice; that was the only time she had ever felt compelled to make use of the confession booth in the campus' chapel. She didn't go. What could a priest do for someone who didn't believe in his God? Tell her to say a hail Mary—for a moment she imagined herself in the booth, or what she imagined the booth must be like, dim but warmly lit, the covered lattice dividing her from the priest casting floral-patterned shadows onto her face. When she breathed in, she smelled azaleas.

... And then she was back in her apartment kitchen, sitting in the chair instead of standing by the door, the salamander staring out to the moon. I come from the belly of the universe, said the salamander ponderously. It belched, a noise so small that it sounded like a bubble popping.

What do you want? she said. A confession?

All right, it said to her. Whatever makes you feel better.

This isn't making anything, she said. Anything that'll make me feel better. Don't you have other people to see tonight? A long line of dreams to occupy and call 'honey'?

Dearie, it said, blandly as anything else it had said, I don't come to just anyone. If you want to take things slow, then we can do that. If you want a little more speed, we can do that.

It floated closer to her. Its gills expanded, stretching towards her—she tried to pull away, but the gills tangled with her hair. It stared into her with its pale, pink eyes, bored with her—or disgusted with her, or merely indifferent. The darkness around her grew more intimate and complex, shifting like the edge of a river moving across pebbles in the dark. Her hair was floating away from her as the gills drew closer to her skin, and even the skin was sliding away, soft like rotten fruit. Something cold touched her skull.

She woke up before her alarm went off, sweating through her shirt. I will not make a show of myself, she told herself. There will be no bolting upright, like some character in a television show. It's morning. You will open your eyes and find things the same as always.

She checked her clock. It was just past four thirty. Polly, who slept on a bed near the door, was already up. Nina's legs moved towards the floor, but she stopped them. She'd spend her designated hour subsumed in the acid bath of self-reflection. Only then would she get out of bed. She forced herself into it, and when the hour was up, found herself calmer. Whatever she had dreamed about during the night had melted away, or at least the emotion of it. The substance remained in her mind, but voided of immediacy, it was as far away as something on the screen.

She let herself get out of bed and went to the bathroom. The frog picture was gone, and she was faced with the cold, indefinite image of herself in the glass. She touched the front of the mirror, to check if her hand might fall through it. God. She still looked like she was wearing a tiny fedora. She brushed her teeth, washed her face, and went to the kitchen.

The bucket was gone. Good. It had been an eyesore, and the “eggs” were probably full of carcinogens. She found a bag of open flour under the sink. It didn’t smell bad or look as though anything was in it. She made pancakes for herself, and then one for Polly, too.

Polly returned just after Nina finished eating her second pancake. She was wearing a black cardigan and black tights under black shorts.

Oh my gosh, you’re up early, Polly said.

Sure am, Nina said. You look like you’ve rolled out of Hot Topic, circa two thousand two. What did you do with the eggs?

I took it back to the Family. I guess it’s not for me. After all that and they told me I was just not the kind of person they were looking for. They were all kind of weird, anyway. They tended to walk around looking at the ground all gloomy. I’m thinking about joining one of those feminist groups I saw out on Navy Pier a little while ago. I’m not a feminist, but I think it might be good for me?

What were you doing on Navy Pier? Nina said. I thought there was nothing there but the children’s museum.

She had gone there twice on dates, once with Jen and one other time with a white girl who couldn’t stop clacking her teeth. The Ferris wheel had been nice, but now she couldn’t remember what she had seen, if she had seen only the tiny coast line, infinitely measurable, or if she had seen the color of the water in the glass buildings, or if she only remembered the sweet

scented, black warmth of Jen's hair.

I don't know. I was having a bit of fun there. I was going through an atheist phase. Polly sniffed at the pancake, and wrinkled her nose. Do you have to call feminists Sister, or are those nuns?

In the lab, she cut off the heads of four mice in the morning, injected others with the medicine, and then ran a column for her grad student. There was not much else for her to do beside the column; there were only so many mice she could drug, or kill. She sat in front of a computer under the pretense of looking for some articles, but half an hour later her head kept dropping forward; she told herself, Stay awake, stay awake. The next time she woke up, her cheek was pressed onto the edge of the keyboard, and Anil had put his hand on her shoulder. His fingers were knobby knuckled, and his dense, curly hair extended around his head in a dark halo. For a moment he looked the picture of a Byzantine saint, long-faced and grave.

Long night? he said.

She opened her mouth, searching for the right words, but even trying to perceive them was enough to make them break away from conscious thought. Had she been dreaming? She didn't think so. What did it matter, anyway. She said, It was way too hot.

Yeah, he said. Gets muggy as hell around here. Listen, Rob's back from his internship in New York next week. Gail and I were thinking about celebrating by heading into the city. Want to come with?

Sure, she said. She rubbed at her eyes, checked the clock. It had only been fifteen minutes

since she last saw it. Maybe she should go home early and sleep the rest of the evening off. God, everyone's coming back soon, she said.

Yeah, Anil said. You know when Jen's back?

Why would I? My God. Nina nearly said more, but held back. Anil didn't deserve it, anyway. She said, She left around the same time as everyone else. Guess she'll be back around the same time, too.

Cool, said Anil. He didn't seem fazed by her, but he never was. Most often it was like he was a little disapproving of her curmudgeonliness, like he thought she could step past it. Must be nice to be able to pull back like that, so far into himself that it didn't matter if he felt one thing or another, he could pull everything back into the center. That didn't mean anything, though—or at least, she didn't want to know what it'd mean if that was something people could do and still be considered normal. If she couldn't do it, then what? Then nothing, that was what.

I'm glad you two are friends again, Anil said.

Yeah, she said.

Things were getting kind of tense before.

God, I hate her.

Okay. Why do you hate her? He talked like a robot, or he talked like someone used to dealing with the problems of others. No surprise that people turned to him. He was so skinny that his face looked older than it was. In a way it was easy to talk to him about all kinds of things, but the salamander-lizard had left a vinegary aversion any conversation beyond the topical.

I'm just joking, she said. We got into a fight about salamanders. Newts or something.

Oh, she hates it when you ask her to play identify the marine animals game.

Really? She didn't seem too mad when I asked.

Well, I guess by the time she snapped at us it wasn't funny anymore, Anil said. That was a little before you two started going out. Learned a lot about oceanic life, though. Were you fighting about the difference between salamanders and frogs?

Lizards. Nina turned back to the computer screen. Hey, do you know anything about salamanders that live in the water? Kind of freaky looking, with prominent gills?

Axolotls, Anil said. Those are pretty cool guys.

I can't even figure out how to spell it, she complained.

They're found in Mexico, from what I remember. They never go through metamorphosis, so they're aquatic and gilled for all their lives. I think they can regenerate, too. Cut off a leg and it grows back.

Seems inconvenient using them for experiments, Nina said. Maintaining clean water and always amputating stuff?

Mice are pretty inconvenient, too, Anil pointed out.

Yeah. I always wish they had a narrower neck. It'd make guillotining them easier.

I feel bad for them, Anil said. Man. We infect them, trap them, and then kill them. I don't think I can do animal research after this. Human trials for me all the way.

It had never troubled her before. But now that he had said it, she remembered cleaning the blade of the guillotine, the nervous wavering whiskers, the mouse's twitching nose. It was important to keep the mice calm before killing them; if they were stressed out, then the blood samples would be invalid. So it was important, even when you pressed the button to activate the guillotine, to stay calm.

She didn't like it when people forced her into bouts of sudden empathy. It made it difficult to live without being overwhelmed by a sense that she had done wrong.

She dreamed: she dreamed that she hadn't stopped dreaming, and instead was transfixed in her chair, white gills attached to white bones. But she had most certainly stopped dreaming. Her joints were weighed with exhaustion from last night's poor sleep, and the axolotl's eyes seemed subtly redder to her now than they had before.

With a little slurp, the axolotl tucked its gills back into itself, and swam a little further away from her. The dream must be underwater, or else how could it move? But she was undoubtedly in her apartment—or else how could she live?

Don't think about it so much, it advised her.

Where am I?

All right. I can tell you. You're in the bottom of Lake Michigan. You're asleep in your bed. You're down in Lake Xochimilco. If you ask me, I can even take you to San Marino again. I only chose here because I've been here, too.

She touched her temple, and found it solid and flesh. She stood up, walked over to the sink, braced herself on the counter, locked her elbows. The axolotl floated lazily to her, and said, Now I will tell you a secret.

You can't be serious, she said, turning to face it, but couldn't. She herself transfixed and immobile, eyes watching the water lapping at the windows, the moon now a submarine's light.

At the moment, it said, and yawned, *Oooggghh*, I'm sorry about that. Ever since the Big Bang, the universe has been expanding, relentlessly, like a hungry infant. It's very beautiful; I love to watch it growing. If you could see infrared and radio waves, you would be able to hear it

as it rips through the boundary of not-space and turns it into itself. But even in its infinitely alive protoplasm are spots of—

I don't think you should anthropomorphize the universe and then start talking about protoplasm.

Okay, it said. Maybe you are right.

What's the point of this? Nina said, tired. So strange, to be tired in one's own sleep. She didn't like this dream. There was far too much thinking in it for her liking. Did you think I wanted you to walk in and do—do a brain meld on me or something? Is your secret more platitudes about the inner workings of the universe and human nature? You're really laying it on thick, aren't you? Give me a break. You're just trying to screw around with me—no, you just want someone to listen to you talk. Theater of the mind. Bullshit—I'm so tired of, I'm so tired—I bet you feel good about yourself right now, but ...

She pressed her fingers into her temple. She was standing in front of a confession booth, she was in a lecture hall, she was in the lab—she was in her father's apartment in San Francisco, she was in her apartment, she was doing her homework near a window by the library at night, watching a glowing ember bob up and down from a shadow's mouth—who was that, and how young had she been then? She was here, now, in the bottom of Lake Michigan at night, staring at the open space of her hands, deep, deep in the water with no way out.

Those were very hard things you said, said the axolotl. But it goes all right.

She had to collect herself together, precipitate herself out of the dream, get on and over herself, get up.

But I forgive you, it said, and the darkness grew papery and weak, water blinked away, nothing but her and a salamander talking at the back of her head. That's the secret to the future,

honey: learning to forgive everything.

And then she was awake in bed again, alone with the day creeping along the eastern horizon. Wretched creature, why bother getting out of bed—not knowing if she was talking to the sun or herself, she sat up to get a clearer view at the edge of the world so she could be more sure.

“Mermaid Hair”

James paid for the cab fare and had her wait on the side while he checked in. The lobby was carpeted with the same, deathly green as the lake, and the walls were painted egg-white. People wrapped in towels and with wet hair cut across from the lobby to the water park. The smaller of the children moved with quick, scrambling feet, the older ones with eagerness disguised with sulkiness—and then the straggling parents, herding the kids together and wearing Hawaiian print shirts. It was those parents she was most fascinated by. She and James had been engaged since winter break, and aimed to be married right after graduation in June, but everyone, it seemed, had planned the same thing. And then James’ aunt had won a free, four-day vacation to the Atlantis, but was going to visit relatives in China that week. So she gave the pass to James. And he looked at Lauren and said, “Why don’t we get married over spring break?” Before they went to the airport, they went to town hall. And here she was, married at twenty-one without a ring. Nothing to show for it, it seemed, except a document, a rainy honeymoon in Wisconsin, and a new fascination with people’s parents.

James returned from the desk with two cards. “We got a good room,” said James. “Fourth floor.”

“I hope so,” she said. “You didn’t spend money for an upgrade, did you?” It was a free vacation. Might as well splurge a little.

“Well, it was free,” he said. “Blowing our wad on extras kind of misses the point. Anyway, the whole point of a fancy room is a good view. What are we going to see out here?”

“Maybe we’ll see a mermaid,” she said.

“Maybe if we get you in the water.”

“I forgot my swimming suit.”

“We can use the money we didn’t spend on the room to buy one,” he said. They went to the elevator, carrying their bags with them. On the way there, he laid a careful, nervous kiss to her hair.

The windows faced a brick wall, the lights were dim, and the TV was an old CRT model. The walls were the color of mold or moss, with faux wood accents. There was a single bed with ferns printed on the sheets. They felt damp. Lauren felt as though they had stepped into a fishbowl.

“I really want you to have a nice swimming suit,” he said. “I mean it. We could buy towels and swimsuits. We’ll go on waterslides. It’ll be like we’re kids again.” He was straightening out the sheets, not looking at Lauren. She knew he was afraid of disappointing her; he said this to her all the time. He was more emotionally honest than she would have liked. They had lived on the same dorm as freshmen, though on different floors, and met at the ballroom dancing club. They were hooking up by the second semester. He had been cool then: an astrophysicist who knew Icelandic epic poetry, a good, steady partner, and even played intramural lacrosse. Three weeks into their fling, he began to talk about things that worried him. Med school, law school, grad school. Parents, aunts, the specter of China. Whether he should live off-campus or live on-campus. What his parents would say if they knew he had a white, Jewish wife majoring in—God forbid!—European studies. Well, they didn’t know. And neither did her parents—a good thing, too, because they would have tried to talk her out of it. So it was

a moot point, on both of their ends.

This wasn't to say that she didn't like him. Sometimes when he confided in her, her heart would speed up and she'd feel something that, troublingly, reminded her of arousal. She wanted to kiss him, then, to kiss his mouth and then his throat. It made her want to swallow him up, to devour him first from the mouth, then to take his cock into her mouth until he became not destroyed or decimated, but better and more content. And other times, she felt as though she felt as though she was slowly becoming submerged in him; a faint, panicked sensation that someday he would kill her and all she'd be able to see was the shape of his lips as he talked about his parents. She felt as though she had known him for years, but she lived for the moments when he became unfamiliar and strange to her, like going out to the countryside and staring up at the sky late at night and seeing a whole new set of stars and, among those stars, old ones, barely visible against the shock.

“Did I ever tell you about that one time I went to a water park and got my toenail sliced off? Three of them. Straight across three of my toes. I nearly bled out.”

His brow furrowed. “There wouldn't have been that much blood unless you cut off a toe, though,” he said.

“No,” she said, feeling a little foolish. She had been hoping he'd laugh. “I just thought I'd bring it up.”

“Did it leave a scar?”

She rolled her socks down her legs, raised her skirt to her knees, and pointed her foot. She had done ballet until she became the tallest girl in the company at five six. So she moved to jazz and modern. Ballet, though—there was something sexy about it. Boys scorned it, but men were entranced by it. That was what she thought, anyway.

He regarded her legs, with a scientific curiosity. Then he said to her, a little roughly, “Come here.”

He spun her around, as though they were doing ballroom, and then on the dip, suddenly dropped her onto the bed. She shrieked and giggled when she fell. She extended her arms, reaching for his neck; he hovered just beyond her and said, “Are you okay? My knee bumped against the bed frame.”

“Look,” she said, and ran her foot against his side. He grabbed her leg, and pulled her in until her lower back lifted off of the sheets. In the half-light, he looked like a statue or a painting, done by some lesser Titian Vecelli.

It was past dinner by the time they finished arranging their room. The indoor water park was open until ten. They went down to the gift shop. James was waiting for his taxi. He didn't want to spend money on room service.

“You pick out a pair of trunks for me while I get takeout from somewhere,” he said.

“Trunks?” she said. “A Speedo.”

He looked down at his pants, then, quickly, nodded to a family with small children on their way back to their rooms. “There are children here.”

“I think that as newlyweds, we should try to be as offensive as possible.”

“You're embarrassing me,” he said, but he sounded proud about it. He gave her a long kiss with tongue in the middle of the gift shop. They were both pleased when a little boy walked past them, then ran back to his mother. He kissed her again, aiming for her cheek but ending up

on her brow, and then got the call from the cab company. She watched him leave the gift shop with a strange, hollow feeling in her throat.

The thing was, he had proposed so suddenly. They had been in his room. He got off the phone with his aunt, set his cell phone face down on the desk—she remembered that part especially clearly—and told her about the vacation. How nice, she had said. And then he said it, laid it flat out without saying anything more than that. It was so unlike him that she had said yes without thinking. At town hall, she had signed the papers in a burst of exhilaration, full of expectations for a future. But on the plane from Boston, she became nervous, and then they had sex and he had risen up right afterwards without saying a word. So they were going to break up after tonight. She knew him well enough to know that he'd be too ashamed to ask her for this, so it'd be up to her to tell him that they had gone into this too fast. A terrible, formless dread had formed in her chest. When she watched him come, she had been filled with a sudden urge to tell him that she couldn't do this and that they should just stop and go back to Boston; but she thought the feeling might go away. It hadn't.

In front of the bikini section, she mulled on how to go about doing this. She could try to have an affair. Or she could tell him that she thought he was gay. Or maybe she could stay quiet and they could prattle on for another few months and break up once his med school hours began to stack up. All of the options were deeply unpleasant to her. She selected a purple bikini with questionably placed stars for her, and a matching pair of trunks for James. Before she went back to her room, she ordered a glass of red wine from the hotel bar. But since she hadn't eaten since the plane, she felt the buzz before she finished.

She was certain it was just the nerves working with the wine to make her this tipsy, but her face was bright pink when she got back to her room. She made a cup of coffee while she

watched the Wisconsin local news, and her heart started racing. She was full of bad, bad decisions.

He called her just as the local news switched to a new episode of Law and Order.

“The driver’s rear-ended someone,” James said.

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. The cab’s going to smell like KFC for the next month.”

“I’m so hungry right now,” she said. “How long will you be?”

“I don’t know. They’re pretty mad. You should go check out the park. Tell me what cool things are there.”

She felt her face. It was still warm. “Ask me what I’m wearing right now.”

“I already know what you’re wearing, Thelm.”

“Oh my god,” she said. “You’re missing the whole point.”

“What?”

“I’m going to go to the park,” she said. “And I’m not going to tell you what kind of bikini I picked.”

“Are you drunk?” he said. When they were freshmen, he used to sound scandalized when he asked people that. Are you drunk? he’d say, as though they had slapped his ass. He had only started drinking in college, and getting him to drink before he turned twenty-one had been like asking a baby to eat spinach: done so with great reluctance, and sometimes resentment.

“When are you coming back?”

“Sleep it off. I’ll wake you up with the chicken.”

“Don’t eat all the biscuits.”

“Too much starch and carbs in them. Need to stay in shape for lacrosse. Remember?”

Well, she did now. It was a minor slip of the tongue. That was what she thought, anyway.

They talked a while more, and when they hung up, Lauren changed into her bikini and went down to the water park.

The fliers and posters all claimed, “Atlantis Resort: Biggest Indoor Water Park In The Midwest!” It seemed to be true; there were was a rollercoaster that arched along the domed glass ceiling and then plunged people into a twenty-foot deep pool. There were splash pools and a love tunnel and a watery jungle gym and god knew what else. During the summer, the park was probably like a greenhouse, with the enormous glass windows and ceiling. The view was probably better during the day. The humidity had fogged up the glass, but she could make out the shadowy impressions of the outdoor water park.

There was a spot between the jungle gym and the splash pool with reclining plastic chairs. Lauren rolled out a towel on an empty chair. The people around her were parents and preteens and teenagers. Some people had even brought books and were reading them, occasionally fanning themselves with it. Parents! Parents and more parents. Some of them had surely divorced. Maybe she was, right now, surrounded by legions of the unmarried and the single. The longer Lauren watched people, the more annoyed she felt with James for getting stuck in traffic, the more annoyed she felt with him for proposing, for marrying her, the more she wished they could be somewhere else. They could be in Argentina or something. She would have even preferred to go to his house in Houston and spend the vacation with his family.

By the kiddie pool, she heard a scream, and a splash, then a hush. At the kiddie pool, an

employee with long red hair was face-up and spread eagled in the water. Someone said, “What happened,” and then suddenly everyone was talking over one another. Lauren stood, wrapped the towel around her waist, and went to take a look at the scene. Two men, one with black hair and the other gray, moved the woman from the pool and to the tiles.

“A doctor,” said the gray haired man. “We need a doctor.”

“Do we?” said the black haired man. He was in his thirties and wore khaki slacks and a buttoned up shirt, and had an orchid in his breast pocket. “I don’t know, I’m not getting a pulse.”

“She’s still breathing, you dimwit,” said gray. “If I got that kind of care from you in a hospital, I’d sue the living shit out of you.”

“Her hair is coming off,” Lauren said, a little dazed. And indeed it was: the long red hair turned out to be a wig, detaching from her head. Beneath the covering of hair was dark brown fuzz, wet and bloody.

“So it is,” said gray. He reached for the wig, then stopped. His hand hovered right over her forehead. “Is anyone here a doctor? I met at least three plastic surgeons in my hall alone. I know they’re hacks, but fuck, someone do something.”

She left the pool, went into the lobby, and instead of taking the elevator, went up the stairs. She had the impression of a great, quiet emptiness in her. She knew how these things were supposed to go. The great, grand death, the sudden understanding of accident and chance. She felt none of that. She could feel herself reworking the events at the pool. She was trying to think of a punch line. Maybe something about med school or the use of medical professionals.

By the time she reached the landing on the fifth floor, she had decided to not tell James about the incident at the pool. He was a sensitive person, she reasoned. She couldn't imagine him as a doctor. He'd cry too much over it. Yes, she would have to leave him. It was a good thing no one had known they were marrying today. Get an annulment, the end. She felt this with a remarkable clarity, as though the grind of the elevators in the long empty, shafts, as though the rain breaking across the glass and concrete and stones, the sound of the air conditioning, had all faded, as though the carpet had fallen away and the walls—who had need for confinement these days...?

When she reached her room, she had forgotten all about the woman with the detachable hair. She swiped her card, and stepped into the fishbowl.

“Surprise,” James said. He was sitting on the bed with a bucket of fried chicken and tons of paper towels on the sheets. “I got hungry. Did you buy me anything?”

“You don't think this counts?” she said, gesturing at her bikini. She had left her towel in the water park—well, she thought, too late for that now. The paramedics must have arrived at the pool by now. And as for what they'd find—who knew, anyway?

“There was an incident at the pool, wasn't there?” he said. “I heard some kid knocked out an employee.”

“Oh,” Lauren said. “It was nothing, really.”

As she said that, she knew that it was over, that she should have either said the truth or nothing or dodged the question. The strangest part was that she felt no sorrow over this, or sadness. If anything, she felt a little irritated with herself, for letting this happen.

“Everyone was talking about it,” he said.

“They're just upset the water park had to be closed. It wasn't a big deal.” Lauren slipped

out of the bikini and changed into a tank top and a pair of his boxers. She sat next to him. He didn't meet her eyes. Maybe, she thought, he had sensed the same thing she had: dead-end, doomed, hopeless. When she reached for his wrist, he stood and went to the bathroom.

Well, she thought. No big deal. A week from now, she'd be single and, thank god!—unmarried. So many people wasted their lives on this man or that man.

James emerged from the bathroom. He had washed his face. Guilt and water blanched his skin, reddened his eyes and mouth and nose.

“Are you going to bed?” Lauren said. “I'm still eating. Should I move the chicken to the desk?”

“I lied to you,” he said. “The taxi didn't really break down.”

“You said rear-end.”

“I'm bad at lies,” he said, half defensive and half joking.

The peaceful stillness in her shivered, and then broke. Watching him stand there in a t-shirt and his boxers, ready to do what she wanted to do, ready to casually go and ruin everything, everything—she felt capable, suddenly, of immense fury.

He reached into her pocket. She coiled, ready to jump on him, then forced herself still. He pulled out a box. She had been expecting a knife.

“It's not much,” he said. “I asked the driver to take me to a jeweler and he was busy with something else—do you know how many people get married in spring? Amazing.”

“What is this?” she said.

“What is what?” he said.

She was afraid of him, for no reason she could discern. She shut her eyes, and forced herself to be calm. James took two steps forward, then got on the bed on his hands and knees and

crawled to her, careful to avoid the chicken. She took the box, and opened it. Inside was a plain gold ring.

“You’re going to have to buy me one, too, by the way,” he said.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“I thought about buying you a foot binder,” he said. “But that would’ve been worrying.” She stared at the ring in the box again, and then shut it. He grabbed her wrist. “Please put it on,” he said. “I can’t stand it. I can’t stand not knowing. I need to know. You said yes, but I have to see it.”

“You put it on,” she said. She opened the box, and took the ring out. “If you’re so worried, then you put it on. Go on.”

He spread his fingers out. He looked at the back of his hand, and she did, too. There were no secrets or truth in it. While she was staring, he rotated his wrist. His green veins were barely visible against his wrist; slowly, he fit the ring onto the very last finger of his hand.

“The Hanging Garden”

They were halfway to Alpine from New Brunswick when the silence finally got to Tom. He couldn't stand it anymore; they had tried making small talk as they pulled out of the Rutgers parking lot, and thirty miles in Crane's refrigerator white BMW SUV, nada.

This wasn't the kind of ride he normally took. He drove his sister's hand-me-down Volkswagen, a Jetta with a tranny that, in the three years since he had left home for Rutgers, had been replaced twice, and brakes that blew out every February like clockwork. He hated that car, but he couldn't afford the insurance for a new one, and he still owed the shop money for the last repair. So he applied for jobs on campus, off campus, taking crapshoots on the Internet, even. The month before, he had answered a flyer taped to the glass on the door to his dorm: “Man seeking man for assistance with moving. I'll provide transportation. Must be capable of moving 50+ pounds. Must be discreet. Solid pay.” The e-mail provided had been a rutgers.edu address. Two weeks later, he got a terse e-mail from Alan Crane requesting an interview at the campus coffee shop. Crane was a PhD candidate in the classics, but TA'd a course in nineteenth century Russian literature and another course on existentialism in post-Revolution French literature; according to course evals, he was a shit teacher. Tom had been hired on the spot. Everyone else, Crane had said at the interview with an arched brow irony, read the flyer as a personal ad. Their loss; he'd pay twenty an hour. They set up an appointment, and here he was.

He had been expecting a Subaru, though, not a BMW. And he had been expecting worse weather, so he had come in his uncle's cast off duffel coat, which, next to Crane's new, dead

black leather jacket with rabbit fur on the collar, looked as though Tom had picked it off the back of a caveman.

“They play opera on the radio?” Tom said. He reached for the knob.

“The radio’s been broken for weeks,” said Crane. “German cars. I’d fix it, but I only use the CD player these days. And my cell connects just fine.” Crane’s smile was red-lipped against the sallow tint of his skin, the black lenses of his sunglasses. His thumb stroked the steering wheel, a long and slow sweep along the leather curve. There was a heavy, generous masculinity in that sweep; it stank of power and a cool effortlessness that Tom felt would always hover just beyond him. He was filled with both a deep admiration and a newer, powdery jealousy. “My phone’s there,” he said. “Pick a song. I promise you my tastes aren’t as esoteric as you might think.”

Tom flicked through the phone’s music listing. “Christ,” Tom said. “Don’t you have anything where people sing in English?”

“There are some. You have to look harder.” There was a little pause. “There’s no shame in going to a public school at Rutgers.”

“I’m just going to install Pandora on this thing, all right? All right.”

They arrived at Alpine in the early afternoon. It was a well-groomed town with maples and oaks growing between the smooth, black asphalt and the calm gray sidewalk. There were as many golf courses as there were houses in this place. All the houses were gated or else isolated by unforgiving, lumpy hills and imposing, stony walls.

It took them another four miles off the highway to reach a set of iron gates. The whole winding side road was lined with white birches crowned yellow in autumn. Inside the gates, the white birches continued right up to a fountain carved in soft, off-white stone. A grinning cherub wielding an arrow stood at the very top of the fountain, water pouring out of its mouth and stubby penis. Surrounding the house was a densely flowered garden. From the fountain, it looked like someone had painted stripes of pale blues and white on the house. Up close, they were just flowers.

Crane pulled up to the front door, shut off the engine, and before entering, regarded the flowers coolly. He bent at the waist, and took a hold of some sedum blooms between his index and middle fingers. He brought it to his nose, breathed in, and then straightened up again. “What a waste.”

“Calamintha, aster, toad lily, and anemone,” Tom said. Crane, for a moment, flashed some teeth at him, nervousness visible between his lips. “You got chrysanthemums and Russian sage on the side wall.” He felt proud, for knowing this, and prouder still when Crane could do nothing but look away. Tom’s mother loved to garden. When she wasn’t working as a dental receptionist, she was plugging away at the flowers and herbs, both in the house and in the yard. She collected flower seeds and issues of *Home & Garden* compulsively, though they never had a garden to plant them in. “You have a good landscaping team.”

Crane let his sunglasses drop down the length of his long nose. At last, he said, “This whole thing was Carly’s idea. My father’s second wife—my mother died when I was in high school. They’re to marry in March.”

“Sounds exciting,” Tom said. He had meant it as a joke, but Crane’s smile turned white and thin.

“Weddings bring out the worst of the guests.” Crane rang the doorbell. In the thirty seconds it took for it to open, he checked his watch four times.

It was Crane’s stepmother who answered the door, a woman with towering, brown hair. She wore a strapless blue dress that matched her eyes. She was, maybe, Crane’s age. A couple of years older—it was hard to tell. By Tom’s own estimation, she didn’t look like the kind of woman who would marry a man like Crane’s father. She looked sprightly and virginal, like a cross between a prom queen, sorority president, and snazzy receptionist.

“Alan, honey,” Carly said, embracing him with a straight-armed hug. The woman—Carly—stared at Tom for just a moment, then said, “You must be Alan’s friend.”

There was an inflection in the sentence that Tom didn’t like, like Alan and Carly were playing a joke on him. “Tom Marion,” he said. He offered his hand.

She stared at it, and then said, “What a nice name.” Her hands were tastefully bare except for the engagement ring, blue and white diamonds set against a band of platinum.

“That’s the idea behind names, Carly. That they sound nice. It’s different if you’re superstitious. I dated an anthropology major. He said that there are children in China literally called ‘shit.’”

“*He*’?” Tom said. He felt, rather suddenly, as though the men who had answered Crane’s ad as a personel hadn’t been incorrect, and the clawing feeling that Crane was pranking him. He

was about to open his mouth to protest some more when Crane caught his gaze. The shades were so far down his nose that they might as well be dangling straight off them.

“I’ve told you about him,” Crane said. “Jack in the mountains of Mongolia.”

“I thought Mongolia was a plain,” Tom said. Wasn’t that the point of the whole country?

“You two,” Carly said, “are adorable.” She kissed Crane’s cheeks. She left behind a faint scattering of pink on his colorless face. Then, with a glintzy, diamond-studded smile, she turned to Tom and kissed him, too, wet on the cheek. “I’m Carly Stout-Gibbons,” she said. “Soon to be Carly Stout-Gibbons Crane.”

“They get new names,” said Crane, “once they’ve made it past infancy.”

“That sounds awful,” Tom said, without meaning to. Carly’s smile transmuted itself into rhinestones. “I mean no offense,” he said. “It’s a little unwieldy.”

“A bit young, aren’t you?” she said.

“I’m legal,” Tom said.

“Good for you,” she said. She reached over and squeezed his arm.

He wished, badly, that he had never come here, that he had stayed in his dorm this weekend watching television or even doing homework.

They went through an antechamber and to a tall-ceilinged foyer. A straight, white-wood staircase led to the second floor. “Have you put away the boxes, or are they all upstairs?” Crane said.

“We put them in the display room,” Carly said. “Let me get the dolly.”

“We won’t need it,” Crane said.

“Why don’t I get the dog for you, then? Something to play with for when you’re all tired and sweaty. We’re keeping her outside.” She patted Tom’s arm, and then squeezed the bicep again. Tom, immediately, crossed his arms. “I guess you keep your guns somewhere else,” she said, and strolled out of the foyer. Her hips didn’t so much sway as they swerved, like a car slipping on ice, as she left.

Once she was gone, Tom massaged his arm and looked over Crane one more time. The color had settled back to their normal places on his face: red lips, sallow face, black hair parted as though someone had cleaved a line there with an axe.

“You couldn’t have asked one of the theater guys to play your boyfriend for Carly Stouty?”

“I never said you were my anything,” Crane said. He folded his sunglasses and tucked them into his pocket. “Someone has to move the boxes.”

“That’s what I’m planning on doing. Moving the boxes. That’s all. You don’t have any friends?”

“You’re being paid to lift stuff, not talk.” He nodded to a small, dark room to the right of the staircase. The curtains were drawn, and everything was covered with heavy, lightless cloth save for stacks of plastic containers. There were four boxes. Tom continued to massage his arms until Crane crouched next a box. Then he and Crane moved them from the display room, to the

foyer, down to the antechamber, and then back outside into the back of the SUV. Tom's fingers were cool and numb from the lifting. But strangely enough, his arms felt fine.

By the time they finished, Carly had returned with a greyhound. The dog was spindly and narrow, black with white on the muzzle and chest. She sat when Carly brought her to them, and didn't move, even when Crane called, "Leda, Leda," to her.

"Well, it's not surprising," Carly said. "You were already in SUNY when your father got her. Where did Amber go again?"

"Stanford."

"She's your father's little girl. Leda, I mean. So is Amber. This can get confusing. For me, I mean. I've never had stepchildren before."

"She's a pretty dog," said Tom. He clapped his hands, and Leda padded up to him, long tail slowly floating side to side the closer she got. She had a surprisingly cat-like response to his touch, rubbing the whole top of her head against his palm. He liked her, he decided. She seemed straightforward and true, and not the trickster type.

"There's a greyhound track over in New York," Carly said. "Leda here was never very lucky, so they retired her early. Mark adopted her thinking he'd get a guard dog. But she's such a sweetheart."

"Greyhounds are notoriously clingy," said Crane. "I don't know what Father was thinking."

"Maybe he just wanted a friend," Tom said.

“Everyone always needs more of them,” Carly said. “Are you sure you won’t stay for dinner? The maid’s cooked something nice. I think it’s ethnic. Tom?”

“I think we should head out soon,” he said.

“Well, not if it’s ethnic,” Crane said. “The mystery chills my poor Unitarian heart. I daresay we should stay and find out. Are you worried about the cost of gas? I can cover it.”

“You’re making him pay for gas?” Carly said.

Crane wiped his sunglasses on the hem of his shirt. Tom felt, surreally, like taking those sunglasses and snapping them. Everything felt cold to him. The marble fountain with its cherub might as well have been made from glass.

“Yeah,” said Crane. “Why don’t we go. No point in staying if you don’t want to.”

“How did you two meet, anyway?” Carly said.

There was a long moment. Crane said, “I volunteer at the writing center. Tom needed help with a paper.”

Tom said nothing. Leda’s tongue flicked across his fingers. He wasn’t going to play around with Crane like this. He didn’t know why he had gone with Crane at all.

“What are you in school for, Tom?” Carly said.

“Not sure yet, I guess.”

“I was the same,” Carly said. “It’s only now that I’ve figured out how to want what I want.”

“That’s nice,” Tom said. “That’s great. I’ll see you again sometime, I bet.” He got up and went to the passenger’s side of the car. Leda whined when Tom stood, and trailed after him. Tom gave her a quick scratch around the ear, and then boarded the car. Crane talked with Carly for a few minutes, then got in the car himself. He slid on his gloves slowly. In his riding clothes, he looked like a picture, or an oil painting.

“Ready?” Crane said.

Tom settled deep into his seat, and said nothing back. Crane started the car. His breathing seemed to get stuck in his throat.

The dog raced them down to the gates. She was beautiful in motion, springing across the green and through the flowers and trees. She overtook them at the fountain, and sprinted onward. Crane shifted, suddenly, from third to fourth gear, but by then the dog was at the gate. The wide, iron mouth pried itself open. The dog shot through, ears pinned back from her sheer speed and her black fur a blurry, dark streak against the regular, white line of birches.

The engine of the SUV snarled, and made pace. He was going to run the car through the trees—he was, Tom realized, aiming for the dog. Tom grabbed the parking brake, and yanked it up. The car seemed to rear up and then tremble enormously, swinging sharply to the side and nearly colliding with a tree. The heel of Crane’s hand slammed against the back of Tom’s. Tom released the parking brake, and Crane steered the car back onto the road. The dog was now only a skinny, long-legged figure in the mirror, tail pulled up to the sky as she headed back into the house.

Crane drove a little while more, before stopping the car.

“What’s that dog to you?” he said. “Christ!” He looked, for a moment, as though he wanted to hit something. Tom’s fist clenched, instinctively, in warning. He hadn’t been in a fistfight since elementary school, but he was sure he could take out a skinny guy like Alan Crane. Crane smoothed out the collar of his coat and said, calmer, “I’ll drop you off at your dorm. I’ll bring the boxes up myself.” He moved back onto the road.

“Yeah,” Tom said. “Not like you needed me to help you move stuff, anyway.”

“You were useful.”

“Well, thank God for that. Up the mountains in Mongolia and all that shit.”

“Yeah,” Crane said. “And all that shit.”

Crane’s whole face was pink, from the temples down to his mouth. The color remained in his cheeks by the time they returned to the dorms. Tom felt a cooling in him, as though the day was settling down again and he’d be able to forget about this as soon as he fell asleep. He opened the car door, and was about to step onto the sidewalk, but Crane said, “Wait.”

Wait, Tom wondered. Wait for what?

Crane’s sunglasses were in his pocket. The sunlight was dim and had fallen behind the dining hall. The shadows, instead of making him look stern, gave him the impression of nearly softness.

“I’m sorry for how the day turned out,” Crane said. “It wasn’t my intention.”

“Me too,” Tom said. It was evening, calm and yellow. It had to be a trick of the light. He felt almost like laughing off the whole afternoon right here instead of storming up the stairs and back to his room.

“Carly Stouty,” Crane said. “That was a good one.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, and grinned. “I know.”

He let go of the door. Crane leaned in, across the divider, the gear shift. Tom pulled back; not repulsed, only puzzled. Crane’s seatbelt had left a diagonal indent across his neck. His eyes were half-lidded, in consideration.

“What is it?” Tom said, but in truth he could feel an excited weight in his chest, moving around like a live mouse.

“Here,” Crane said, reaching for his wallet. The wallet had a beautiful, walnut color. Crane pressed a few bills into Tom’s hand. “As promised.”

Tom’s hand closed around the money. The stirring that had started in him had vanished and was replaced by that same deadened calm he had felt when the car was in motion, a feeling like the moon emerging through the fog, or a sudden silence in the night.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Too bad about the dog,” Crane said.

Well, what was he supposed to say to that? Too bad about the aborted dog murder. Sure. That sounded swell.

Tom shut the car door. He patted it along the stern arc of metal between the rubbery window seal and the roof.

“See you around,” he said. Crane nodded to him, and drove off, against the sun.

“Wasted on the Young”

Louise was standing in front of the mirror above the bathroom sink, holding her shirt just up to her breasts, while Penny held up a hand mirror angled down at the tattoo on her back. At least it was simple: an outline of a clover with an uncertain number of leaves. It looked a little cancerous.

“It’s not as bad as I thought it’d be,” Louise said. She didn’t remember getting this, although if she tried hard enough, she could trace two or three probable time points when she might have. Somewhere between the Hegel and the vodka.

“Are you planning on *keeping* it?”

“No.” She had been plotting how to get it off of her ever since Penny had interrupted her nightly disrobing with, ‘Hey, wait! What you do to yourself?’ Penny had come to California when she was sixteen from mostly Chinese city of Malaysia. As a roommate, Penny was great at reminding her about rent, dish duty, and to keep those common spaces clean! Their apartment was the cleanest student-occupied one bedroom in the city of San Francisco. But Penny, bless her copper-zinc heart, mistook tactlessness for honesty, and discretion as proof of maliciousness. She wanted to be a surgeon, and only trusted in what she could touch. “Maybe I could cut it off?”

“You’re going to need a laser. I’m so sorry for you.” Penny put a hot hand on Louise’s shoulder. “But you have to admit, you wouldn’t be in this situation if you studied harder. No drugs, no mistake.”

Louise stared monstrosly at the window. She was a philosophy major. It was the political science and econ girls who got piss-on-the-floor, accidental-back-tattoo drunk. Socrates was supposed to be her backbone, her guide to worldly conduct.

“Why don’t you go after that one guy who did this to you?” said Penny. “The drunk one?”

“That’s all of them. That was all of them.”

“I’m sorry,” Penny said, but with clear schadenfreude.

If only her roommate were a person she liked, instead of a prissy fuss-bucket. Then at least she could have a good laugh over this. If you couldn’t laugh at your own life, then you might as well give up right there. Yes, if she were living with a friend, then they could have started this off with a laugh and sailed on, good humored and relaxed. And if someone else said that this was sad and pathetic, then she’d be able to say, *Ha! Ha, ha, ha!* Humor not as a coping mechanism, but instead a blunt hammer, to pound things into a more satisfactory shape. *Ha!*

“So what will you do?” Penny said. She was sitting on the edge of the bathtub now. She wiggled her toes.

“Drink myself to death.”

“No. That will make your skin worse.”

“I’ll cut it off,” she said to the mirror, to watch herself say it. “I’ll peel it right off my back.”

Penny patted her on the back again, and left Louise alone with the mirror.

It turned out that there were hundreds of tattoo removal places in San Francisco. Louise, lost and inexperienced, decided to go to three places, then only two: one place that posted unpromising before and after pictures on their website, and a plastic surgery place that advertised liposuction, facelifts, nasal adjustments, hair removal, and in small type, tattoo removals. The third place, when she reread the website, had promised removal by prayer.

She set aside a Wednesday to zip around the city. It was spring, chilly and misty. She arrived at the first place with her hair damp and either sweat or rain on her forehead. She was ushered straight into the office of a man with three eyebrow piercings, who instructed her to switch out of her clothes and into a paper gown. He stared at her back long enough that Louise felt the tattoo heat up, as though it was embarrassed for itself.

“Very doable,” he said. “Four treatments over the next six months. Are you Irish?”

“No.” Technically she was Scottish, or German, or some mix of both. She had a running list of jumbled percentages and countries in her head, but she was sure that this list was inaccurate, and likely added up to her being one and seven sixty-fourths of something.

“What about your boyfriend?”

She couldn’t tell if he was joking. Deciding that he wasn’t, she said, “What about cancer? I’m really scared of dying. That’s why I got this, you know? Carpe diem.”

“It’s very safe. Very affordable. Practically no pain!”

“Carpe laserum,” she tried. “Carpe cancer-us.”

He let her go after that.

Then it was off to the plastic surgery clinic. The doctor there was in his forties, and would have been good looking if it weren’t for his smile. It opened at the edges of the mouth, as though a straw had been stuck through there.

“You could remove it,” he said, after a brief peek at her back. “But it’s also small enough that you might want to keep it there if you’re looking to get a larger back piece. Is that a

possibility in your life?”

“No?” she said. “I don’t know. This one’s at such a weird angle and place.”

“Minor cosmetic flaws can be frustrating, but any skilled artist should be able to incorporate it in as part of a larger design.”

“I don’t want it to be part of a larger design.” She had once told her high school guidance counselor that she thought it’d be nice to get a tattoo, in lieu of discussing actual college plans. Something tasteful and artistic, she said. Something mysterious and beautiful. An androgynous figure in a stained glass style, a bird perched on her collarbone. He had given her a long look and said, “Want to meet Bob?” Then he yanked back the sleeve of his polo and angled himself away so she could see the smudged Marley on his shoulder.

“You don’t want to compound one mistake with another.”

“Are you a real doctor?” she said, angry.

“I think you’re uncertain about your decision to remove it. You may even become attached to it in time.”

“I’m not Irish,” she snapped.

“Even if I use the cheapest laser and minimal anesthesia,” he said, “it’ll be between five to eight treatments, spaced over the course of several months. You’re looking at six hundred dollars minimum before taxes.”

“What if I do it without anesthesia?”

“We’ll be sued.” He was searching her chart for something. “If I understand it correctly... Your current occupation that you listed, cashier...”

She worked at the on-campus mini-mart three days a week. Her spine stiffened. “I’m a student,” she said.

“Oh, really! What major?”

“Philosophy,” she said, and flushed, but only along the rim of her face. Along her jaw, at the top of her hairline, the far edges of her cheeks.

When she came back home, Penny was sitting on the couch, studying.

“No luck?” she said, pointlessly triumphant.

“I’ve made my peace with it,” Louise said. She set her bag on the floor. “I’m okay with it.”

“But are you really?”

“Ha, ha!” Louise said, only a little wildly.

“You are sure it is permanent? What if it’s not really actual? Sometimes you see warts and then you eat the garlic and whoosh, off it goes.”

“Eight hundred dollars. Nine hundred, he said. And it’s so small. I figure that it’ll go away by itself if I think about it hard enough. It’s not like I remember it getting there, so if I pretend it’s not there, then it won’t be there.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said, and went to fall into the beanbag chair in front of the couch. She wouldn’t cry, she told herself. She’d be calm and reasonable about this. If she took an extra shift a week at the mini-mart and saved all of it, then it’d take her half a year to get it off. And it was on her back—she couldn’t see it there. She’d wear one-piece swimming suits. She’d only have sex from the front.

She got up and went to the kitchen for wine. “You want some?” she called.

“No,” said Penny. She waited until Louise was back in the beanbag with her glass and bottle to say, “I’ve been thinking. If you really want it off, maybe you should really cut it from you.”

There was a moment. Louise swirled the red wine around in the cup. “What?”

“Okay, only an idiot would want it. But it’s just skin. Get scalpel and cut less than an eighth of an inch in a square.” She demonstrated it, in the air. “If you don’t remember getting tattoo, maybe you won’t remember getting it off.”

Louise reached behind her, searching her back self-consciously. “I don’t know,” she said.

“It was just joke, okay.”

“I mean, if I could do it to myself, I would. Just go cut it off of me, like that.”

“Haha!” Penny said. Louise, half-done with her glass of wine, stared at her, dumb. “It’s funny because I said you would have to be an idiot to want it,” she said, a little awkward. “I don’t understand. You laugh at everything.”

“I don’t know,” Louise said. “I don’t know.” She refilled her glass. “Okay. Go ahead.”

“No, I won’t do it.”

But Louise was determined. An eighth of an inch was barely more than a chapbook of poetry, and if it was just skin, then she had nothing to be scared of. It’d be like a really large paper cut, she figured. She pushed her glass of wine to Penny, and went to the kitchen for something stronger.

Then it had been an hour and a half and they were in the bathroom, Louise shirtless and

braced against the sink, Penny behind her, face red. She was sterilizing a box cutter with a match.

“It’s getting hot,” Penny said. “Ow!” She shook the match to kill the flames, and blew on her fingers. “You ready? I’m going to sterilize the field.” At this Penny held up the bottle of vodka and poured it on Louise’s back. Louise yelp and did her best to not flinch. The vodka was cold against her skin, and it splashed over her sides, down the slope of her back, into the elastic of her underwear. “Haha!” Penny said, and then, “Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Louise said, a little breathless. Penny put a steadying hand on her back. She pressed the tip of the box cutter against Louise’s spine. The blade pushed, cold and wet as a tongue. Suddenly Louise felt a freezing dread. “Wait!”

The box cutter drew away. Louise took a steadying breath. She let go of the sink, shook out her arms and legs. Then she got back in position.

“Okay,” she said. “Now go.”

“The Rabbit Bag”

This all happened today, or yesterday by now. I went to the movies with a friend, and it wasn't until I was halfway home that I realized I had left my keys in their apartment. So I went back, and called, and knocked on the door, but I didn't get an answer from either her or her roommate. It was nearly ten by this point, and dark. They were either asleep or had gone out for drinks—on a Sunday night in May, at that. They'd be all right. They worked for a big tech company right in Fremont, and they were very lax. I, too, was trying to be a little more lax, although people keep telling me I'm try too hard. In response, I developed a checklist:

- * Are your shoulders tense? Loosen them!

- * Smile!

- * Smile harder!

- * Stop thinking about smiling!

When I called my roommate to tell her I needed to be let in, she said sheepishly, “I've locked my keys in the car.”

“So go ask Mrs. Liu next door.”

“She's out playing bridge. Her husband told me.” Her husband was Mr. Min, who pretended to not be able to speak English whenever Esther came. He didn't like Esther for being Korean and Polish, and he had liked me until I told him I didn't think of myself as being Chinese at all. He still talked to me though, because his daughter was going to be applying to college soon, and did I have any advice on how she could get a job like mine? Why would she want my job, I said. I worked as an MRI image analyst and modeler at a hospital in San Francisco, which meant sitting in a dark room and staring at pictures of brains all day. He disapproved of me

constantly after that. Talking to him was like talking to my old high school principal who, after finding me skipping the mandatory Christmas mass before winter break, made me sit in his office when I should have been in class to talk about my problems. It was a private school and a Catholic one at that, and all I could do then was think, “I’m not a sinner, I’m not a sinner, I’m not a sinner.”

“Well,” I said. “I’ll walk fast.”

Our apartment was fifteen minutes from the local elementary school, so there were a lot of families in our complex. When it rained, I’d come home from the office and see elementary school kids biking down the halls and throwing balls off the wall. It was quiet now, though, now that it was nearly ten-thirty. Esther was sitting in the hall with her hair done up and in a nice dress with red flowers blooming on the skirt. She was wearing heels, too, which made her tower over me even more. I wasn’t tiny-sized, but times like these made me envy her genes.

“I thought you were going on a date,” I said. She worked as a tech blogger for some lady magazine, and spent most of her time loafing on our couch wearing her old University of Virginia sweatpants.

“He took me for dinner.”

“That’s why I’m confused,” I said, joking. She hit my arm. “Was the food good at least?”

“You know something? I think it was.” She sounded surprised at that, but still, I didn’t think she looked very satisfied. I didn’t blame her. Her boyfriend was six years older than us, and a computer programmer. But what could you really like in a guy who inspired, at best, the

feeling of, “Well, him?”

We went up to Mr. Min’s door and knocked. I was hoping Mrs. Liu would be there, maybe somehow having snuck in past Esther, but it was just Mr. Min, clean-shaven but now with a strong shadow on his upper lip and chin. His lips were thin, bright, and taut. He was dressed down in khaki shorts and a shirt with his company logo on the left breast. Some small biotech startup. They were in the news recently for being bought out by moustache-twirling Chinese overlords. Under his arm, he had a copy of the latest issue of *Cell*. His wife, Mrs. Liu, was actually pretty famous in the San Francisco Bay Area Chinese community for running the Chinese culture center in the center of town, so it always puzzled me that they lived in the same apartment complex as me and Esther. Not that it’s a bad place, just that most of the people here have kids in elementary school, and move into a condo or one of the bigger complexes when they get older. Later I found out that it was because they were sending their daughter to one of those private high school that taught kids Hegel and Greek and kicked them out if they didn’t win national science competitions. That was just what I heard from Esther, at least. The family was saving money up to bring Mr. Min’s parents out to the States, too, and to buy a big house for them.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Hi,” I said. “I was wondering if we could get our key from you?”

“I don’t know where it is,” he said, swift and cool. But he let us inside and had us take off our shoes. He didn’t offer us slippers, but the floor was clean and carpeted, if a little furry. They had a tortoiseshell cat that they let outdoors during the day. Our balconies were just inches apart and close to a big tree; sometimes the cat would sit on the railing, its orange and black tail swishing behind the iron bars, and then it’d step across the six inches separating our balcony

railing and meow at the screen door until someone let it back in. I think Mrs. Liu called it Chuckie, like in Chuck E. Cheese. The cat wasn't in the living room or the kitchen now. Maybe it was sleeping with the daughter.

Their apartment was built on nearly identical lines as ours: the door opened straight into the kitchen, which was separated from the living room by the counter and a transition from carpet to false wood flooring. The glass door leading out to the balcony was covered by not the vertical vinyls we had, but a floral curtain, presently drawn shut. From the kitchen, I could see the hallway with two bedrooms and single bathroom and a built-in closet with a washer and dryer inside, as long as I twisted my torso a bit.

Mr. Min set a tea kettle for us, and said, "Help yourself," and left to read in his room. I thought it might be best to not disturb anything, especially since Mr. Min didn't like us much, but Esther said that we should make ourselves comfortable, since who knew when Mrs. Liu would be back. Okay, I said, because I thought it'd be a while. I didn't expect her to go rooting through all the cabinets and drawers, cataloguing everything with one of those scary looks writers get when they're committing something to memory. She even took a chair and stood on her tiptoes to feel around the top-most shelves. I told myself, Just leave her alone, mostly because if Mr. Min came back, I'd be able to claim ignorance. I turned the TV on. It was set to play ESPN3, and was showing an old Wimbledon game from 2009, Federer v. Roddick. Recently an ex-boyfriend of mine from college, the one who taught me to play tennis, called me in tears because Andy Roddick was retiring. The exact words were, "Oh, oh, my heart!"—he had been a theater major, you know. I couldn't even remember what I had replied. Probably something like, "What?"

I drifted back to the kitchen, where my roommate was now standing on the counter and

popping open the cabinets on top of the fridge. I guess there was a vicarious thrill in watching her root around their kitchen. It was suggestive without being too revealing—besides, I thought, who kept important bits of themselves in the kitchen? I was pleased, too, to see that Mr. Min’s insistence that he never let his daughter eat any Western food was total crap. She had turned out three different bags of Doritos already, among other things: an ancient, filmy bag of candy corn, five different types of instant coffee, wet cat food, and a lot of tea from China.

I picked up one of the packages of cat treats and gave it a shake—the corresponding ‘meow’ nearly scared the daylights out of me. The cat came up to me from the hall, tail straight and whiskers forward. It meowed at me again, and I bent down to give him a treat. I was about to give him a second when Min’s daughter came in and scooped up the cat. She was spindly, with flat hair that stretched down her back and a long, boneless face, and was wearing a pastel camisole with a cartoon weasel’s face printed across the chest. The camisole, I judged, had been a gift from a relative. I had gotten a lot of those when I was a kid, too, and just looking at it filled me with a warm kind of anti-nostalgia. Like, ‘Boy, am I glad that’ll never be me again.’

“What are you doing?” she said. She spoke in a comfortingly blunt and coarse manner, and without a single melodious quality. “It’s kind of rude.”

“Hey, your dad told us to help ourselves,” Esther said. “I’m just looking for something to eat.”

“There’s stuff in the fridge.” When Esther moved onto the next drawer, she said, “Come on! Or I’ll get my dad.” She gripped the cat a little too hard, and it yowled, and jumped out of her grasp. Esther looked down at her, and then came down from the counter. “And next time don’t get up on a counter unless you’re wearing pants,” said the Min’s daughter. She grabbed the cat and went back to her room, this time shutting the door with an audible, but small, slam. A

second later, Mr. Min told her to quit making so much noise. She yelled back, *Don't let our guests ruin the kitchen then*, and he said, *No, you don't bother the neighbors, you want them to think you're crazy*, and on it went. I remembered having these kinds of conversations with my own parents, and knew it'd be going on for a while. So did Esther, because she was back on the counter.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Oh, you know,” she said. “Putting things back. Seeing what she’s hiding. Probably a PlayStation or something.”

“Up there?” I said, nodding to the small cabinets above the fridge. It seemed impossible for anything to be in there.

“You didn’t notice the way her eyes were moving? I thought it was weird how one side was shallower than the next.” She put her arm up there, and then said, “See, there’s a false panel.”

A moment later, she pulled out a flat brown bag and tossed it to me. I caught it, and then dropped it straight on my feet.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” she said to me as I ducked down. She lowered herself back down to the floor.

“Are you crazy?” I said, holding the bag out in front of me as though I was presenting bad meat to a butcher. “Do you even know what it is?”

“Drugs, I bet,” she said.

“No way.” I opened the bag and peered inside. Little plastic bags full of off-white powder. Scentless. They didn’t look like anything special to me. “Maybe it’s herbal.”

“Yeah, and maybe tomorrow I’m going to fly to Hawaii.”

“Well, it’s not like we really know,” I said, but I could tell that there’d be no convincing

her. This could definitely just be some ground up herbal stuff. I wasn't very familiar with it—my parents didn't care for such things, and my knowledge of 'herbal stuff' began and ended at the tiger balm patches my mother used to put on my ankle when I rolled it or accidentally slammed the car door on it. When I heard that it was made with real tigers I cried and tossed it all into the recycling bin. "We should put this back."

"You kidding me? No way. Look at all this. You want to let some fifteen year old kid have it? We're taking this."

"Oh, come on," I said, beginning to sweat. "What if it's actually hebral Viagra? You want to steal his boner powder?"

"They're almost done arguing. I think their daughter's going to come back in any second. I'm not jumping back up, she'll know right away that we've found it," she said. "Put it in my bag. Do you want the dad to make a scene? Put it away."

I did, although more conscious of the sudden sweat on my nose than my desire to know what was in these things. I stuck the bag in the bottom of the zipper-lined maw and put her purse on top of it. Not satisfied, I tore out some pages from her notebook and stuck it on top of the purse. Esther made some popcorn. She came back with the bowl, turned up the volume on ESPN3, and settled down. By the time we had watched Roddick and Federer lock themselves into their hellishly long tiebreaker, I had settled into a post-modernist jackknife position, and Esther had moved the popcorn bowl into her lap. At one point the Min girl plodded into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, and then drank it slowly, and watched us watch Roddick lose.

By the time Mrs. Liu returned, Esther had swung into a wide-eyed, pink gaiety. I, meanwhile, had moved onto trying to fuse my teeth together by force of jaw power; I nearly flung myself out of the couch when Mrs. Liu opened the door.

By then it was nearly midnight. We talked a while with Mrs. Liu. She pulled the key from underneath the flower vase on the kitchen table, and then took us to our apartment. Her cheeks were spotted a drunken red, and her hand floated in front of our lock, as though it suddenly presented an obscure kind of problem to her. Come on, I willed her, just get it open! She slotted the key into the lock and twisted it open easy enough. I let out a little breath. “Good night, girls,” she said to us. Her tone was either knowing, or my mind was wormed through by conspiracies.

When we stepped in the apartment, the Min’s daughter was on our balcony—I nearly jumped, and was just able to contain myself. Esther started when she saw the girl there, but then said to me, “I’m telling you, D-R-U-G-S. She’s not here because we stole her dad’s stash of Chinese Viagra. I’ll be in my room. Don’t pay any attention to her. She can’t make too much noise or break the glass—how’s she going to explain this to her parents?”

I knew she was right, but still I had to shut the curtains. The Min’s girl, it turned out, had brought a permanent marker with which to write on the glass. She wrote, as I fumbled with the chain that would roll the vinyl shutters across the glass: *“I just want to talk*

“Don’t piss me off.

“Misunderstanding.

“Meet me here at midnight!”

As a collection of statements, I didn’t find it very impressive, and she couldn’t write this very fast or neatly because she had to write it backwards, but the felt tip of her pen as it glided

across bug splatter and water stains seemed as accusatory and damning as a priest's gaze. I shut the curtains. The girl's flat face, a flash of white against the shadowed blinds scissoring across one another in the air, pressed against the glass—but soon the curtains stopped swaying, and I was left alone in the living room, though I could still feel her looking at me. I shut off the lights and tried sitting again in the darkness, but I itched all over.

Esther had left her bedroom door ajar. She was on the phone with her boyfriend, and had opened the paperbag and laid out everything in front of her. Fifteen different tied off bags, ten larger ones with fine white powder, and five tiny ones, crumbly and off-white. One of the small ones had been used, and the bag rested limply on the counter. I realized, a little stupidly, that she had called her boyfriend over for sex. I had known it before, but just unconsciously—I didn't know what to think by now.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Just testing it,” she said. “Still waiting for it to kick in.”

“Seriously? Stealing drugs from a sixteen year old girl and then snorting it?”

“Lighten up,” she said. “It's just Adderall. Or Ritalin.” Didn't look like it to me. The residue on her desk reminded me more of baking soda. I must have looked troubled, because she turned to me and said, “She shouldn't have it, either. You know that, right?” I nodded, slowly. “I just wanted to see what this was,” she said. “I used to do this all the time with my Adderall prescription back in high school. Crush up the tablets, snort it up, keep on studying. I stopped once I got into UVA.”

“But what if she calls the police on us?” I said.

“My God,” she said at first. She shut her eyes for an instant, and a wave washed across her face. Her mouth flattened, became slack and opened, and then her cheeks loosened and then

became tight again on her teeth, and finally her brow clenched, and then relaxed. “No kid’s going to call the police for her illegal Adderall stash! She’d get thrown out of high school! Anyway, I’m flushing the rest of this. I’m not even going to tell my boyfriend. Once he’s gone, all this goes, too. Okay?”

High school kids and their vast quantities of illicit amphetamines. Had I missed something while I was in high school? I had gone to a Catholic high school, true, but my parents sent me there because they had the highest test scores in a ten mile radius of our house. Our classes were taught by normal teachers, except for religion and philosophy and health ed. The health ed teacher did a lot of work with inner city girls and prisoners. Some people said she was the most approachable person in school, but the one time I tried going to her—boyfriend problems, or stress, or something—she had sat right next to me and cupped my hand with both of hers and said, “Honey, whatever’s wrong, just tell me.”

I don’t know, what do you end up telling someone who offered to forgive you for anything, knowing the kind of things they must have seen? In that light all the things you did seemed sinless and silly. The worst thing that had ever happened to me was breaking my high school boyfriend’s dog’s leg after I almost backed out on her with my car in the middle of the night. I mean, I had done pot as a freshman a few times, smoked through college and quit almost right after, but that was it. Nothing like bottles full of crushed Adderall. Why not just keep them in their tablet form, I wondered. When I was sixteen, I was hiding candy bars in my pillowcase because my mother was on a diet and so everyone was a diet—but as I was rapidly finding out, I had apparently grown up in the land of naivete and delusions.

I nodded my head.

“Great,” Esther said.

Yeah. Great. “Mind if I borrow a cigarette?”

“Go ahead,” she said, tossing me her bag. I fished for the pack of Camels, and Esther colored in her lips. Her wrist got a little loose, and streaked a line of red onto her chin. While she was in the bathroom searching for a tissue, I filched two of the big bags and stuck them in my pocket. When she came back, I was stuffing all the twist-offs into the paperbag. “What’s with you?” she said.

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Not that I wasn’t going to do it anyway, but geeze,” she said, and took the bag from me. “Chill out.”

I went back to the living room with my twin bounties. The bags were sweating through my pockets, or I was sweating in my pockets, or my pockets themselves were now sweat-crustled, it had to be one of those things. I was going to talk to the Min’s daughter, I decided, to give her these back. And then I’d tell her she couldn’t do this anymore. It’d all work out pretty well: she had less of whatever she wasn’t supposed to have, and we had less of what we weren’t to have. Mutual loss for mutual gain. That was also my mother’s mantra whenever she was on a new diet.

It was ten past midnight now. I parted the shades, and saw only the shape of our two empty pots, where we normally tossed our cigarette butts. I guess she had waited and then went home. I went back to the kitchen and put the two big bags on the counter. I lit a cigarette on the stove and turned on the stove.

I was on my second cigarette when someone rapped on the door; Esther came into the

room wearing a new dress and these crazy lace-up stilettos. She seemed to be bristling with barely contained electricity, her head stretched up to the ceiling and lips pushed out into a pucker and hair like ink dripping off a brush.

“My god, I feel like someone just stuck a wad of spikes up my nose and then ripped them out,” she said. “Damn, do I look good. Do I? Say yes. Why don’t you turn on the lights? This place is creepy in the dark.”

“You look great,” I said. She really did. A little scary, too, like she had a list of things she was going to get done, damn anyone who got in her way.

“My boyfriend’s in the lobby. I’m going to let him in.”

She left, shutting the door behind her. I was ready to relax then, when I noticed a shadow moving along the line of light projected onto the carpet. When I parted it, the Min’s girl was there. Since the last time I saw her on the balcony, she had changed into a pair of white and a ruffled red sleeveless top. She didn’t look much older than she had in her pajamas. She tapped the glass, impatient, and I opened the door. She brought a shoebox—I noticed that when she was closer.

She stood in front of the door, box tucked under one arm, and said, “Where is it?”

“I left it in the kitchen,” I said.

“Okay. Go get it.”

“You shouldn’t have it anyway,” I said. “I mean, you’re lucky I’m even giving this back to you.”

“Oooh,” she said. “Scary.”

“Just promise me you’ll flush it when you go home.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I might just say I’ll flush it and then not?” she said. “I mean,

I'm going to. But geeze. Not like you can tell."

I went back inside, and lit another cigarette on the stove—I grabbed the cigarette box, too, along with the bags. Esther came back in, hip close to her boyfriend's. He was wearing jeans and a tartan button up shirt. Esther leaned over to me and whispered, "Score," a remark I felt obligated to respond to with a thumbs up and a grin made unfortunate by the presence of the burning stick in my mouth. Her boyfriend smiled at me, mostly with his gums, and Esther buried her face into his shoulder. He escorted her to her room. There was giggling, and then laughter. I went back out to the balcony.

When I came back, she was sitting on the railing with the shoebox in her lap. Her legs were bent at the knees, and sloped through the thigh. When she saw me, she hopped back onto the ground. Behind her, the tree blocked out the light from the street and the moon, though her shoulders and hair were still outlined by fragmented lines of pale light.

There was enough ambient light for me to make out her face, her clenched intensity. Strangely enough seeing her without anything between us calmed me down. I had thought she had some secret, diabolical power, but it turned out Esther was right. What had I really been afraid of? I didn't want her to tell Mr. Min, that was all, and I knew she didn't want me to tell him, either. In the green-tinged hallway lights, she seemed younger than ever with her bare face, skin tone uneven and spotty, her white hands with their violin callouses. Even her intensity seemed youthful and misplaced. Who really cared, I thought to myself, about a bag of crushed up Adderall pills?

"I thought you said you'd get it," she said.

"I did," I said, and held out my contraband. She took the bags from me carefully, and deposited it inside her shoebox.

“Where’s the rest of it?” she said. “I know you have it. I keep it all back behind the panel.”

“I don’t have it.”

“What, you threw it all out?”

“Well, no—”

“So you’re keeping it somewhere?” she said. “Then why are you giving me this back? I need it more than you, anyway.”

“Well, maybe it’s best if you stop using it,” I said.

She giggled at that, and rubbed her thumb over the vertex of the box. Her smile struck me as strangely adroit. What was in there? More bags, maybe?

“I don’t need to use that stuff,” she said.

“So you sell it?”

At that, she curled her upper lip against her teeth, and smiled again. This time it took on the blunt push of a sneer. For a moment I was ready to turn back and go, but I saw her do a strange thing with her face: she took a breath, her face smoothed away back. “Okay,” she said. “Yeah. Just for money, though. It’s worth a lot, you know? You took like three hundred bucks worth of stuff from me. I really need it back.”

“To what, pay your rent?” I said. She had to be kidding me! Three hundred dollars worth of crushed up pills—who carried that much on them besides dealers? No way she was serious. The going price of that paperbag couldn’t be three hundred dollars, not if she was crushing up Adderall or Ritalin or whatever. I lit another cigarette and drew in as long of a drag as I could. What was this, number three tonight? Four? Oh hell.

“Well, I had to pay for it,” she said. “From my boyfriend’s frat. So I really only would’ve made like, seventy if I had the full bag. Did you use some of it? That’s okay. I won’t get mad.

Just as long as you give me back the rest of what you haven't used."

"Or I could go and flush it all down now."

"You don't even know what it is."

"Sure I do," I said. "Ecstasy, right? Amphetamines? Just tell me. Vicodin?"

"How about this," she said. "You give everything you haven't used back to me, and then I'll tell you."

"Then I'm not giving it back until you tell me," I said.

She ran her thumb over the vertex of the box, thinking, and I felt my pulse do a little hop in my neck. The weird thing was, she was such an obvious thinker. Her whole face seemed to shut off, eyelids lowering and lips parting a little as she thought. But watching her made me hot all over again. "Then I'm calling the police," she said. "I'll tell them that you're doing drugs."

"Your fingerprints are all over that bag! Don't be stupid."

"Yeah, 'don't be stupid,'" she said, a mean, sneering mime of me. "I'm not stupid. I always wear gloves when I'm handling the stuff. Sometimes I even wear a mask, just to make sure no trace amounts are going to end up in my hair. Come on, just go get it."

"I could flush it all and throw all the bottles away before you even make the call."

"Yeah, I guess," she said. "But you or your roommate's already used some of it, right? They take drug accusations here real seriously, because of all the little kids living around here."

"Oh, come on!" I said. 'Real seriously.' Who even said that, besides middle schoolers? She was either bullshitting me, or I had no idea what I was in. I blew a cloud of smoke again, hoping that it'd obscure my face from her, but all I could think of was her very straight, very white teeth.

She was getting loose now, leaning against the railing and looking at me with bright eyes.

She had put the box on the railing, too, and put her forearm over it to keep it from toppling backwards. What was in there? She was just a kid—sixteen, seventeen at most. No way it could be a gun. Who even had guns in the suburbs of San Francisco? Crazy people, that was who.

Her wrist bent over the edge of the box, hand splayed across the narrow width. Christ. The worst part was, she wasn't smooth, she was barely subtle—but I could feel her steadily encroaching. I lit another cigarette, regretting it almost immediately. The nicotine wasn't calming me down at all. It had been so long since I had smoked more than one or two cigarettes at a time; my heart was going fast, and it felt like someone had stuck a bar into my temple and was trying to pry it off my skull. Had to keep smoking, had to stop—it was easier to keep going.

“What is it?” I said. “All I want to know what it is.”

“Give it to me and I'll tell you,” she said, and I threw the box of cigarettes onto the ground. I picked them up carefully. One of them had slipped out. Not all the way. Just the filter. I picked it up and tossed it off the balcony. I took a deep breath, sans cigarette, but that just made my throat raw and dry. Min wasn't looking at me anymore. She was smiling at something—I looked over, and saw her regarding her reflection in the mirror with her chin up and moonlight shining on the wet seam of her lips. When she saw me looking at her reflection, she said, “Can I have a cigarette?”

“No way.”

“I've smoked before, though,” she said. “I've even used a hookah.”

“I'm telling you, no.” I shook the pack. Half-full. “These aren't even mine.”

“Ah! A history of theft!” she said. Well, it'd be worth giving her a laugh. But she was already moving on. “I'll really do it, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Bet you will.”

I went back inside, and turned on the lights. The glass door showed me now a clear reflection of my own living room: Esther's magazines piled up on the coffee table, some of them free print-outs from work, a few of them her from her own subscriptions. But when I focused on the kitchen, further back in the reflection, I could see Min's bright red top showing stubbornly through the trick of light. She must have thrown her shoebox at the glass, because there was a thump, and all the blinds leapt off the glass, then settled back down in crooked slants.

I waited. We lived pretty close to the police station. They'd be here fast if she actually called. When ten minutes went by, I relaxed. Maybe a little stupidly, I lit another cigarette.

I could hear Esther and her boyfriend in their room all the way from the kitchen, and decided to wait before going back to my room. I flipped open one of the magazines on the table; I felt good, for sticking it to the Min girl. I guess that was a petty thing to think, but I couldn't help it. I went to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water. My throat was tight and papery, and drinking water made every breath feel like swallowing frost; I exhaled a few times, sucked in another drag from my cigarette, and stuck the stub beneath the still-running tap. The hiss startled me, as did the hot scattering of paper—a confused stab of pricks of bright red against my hand, and then the fast cooling right after. My brain tapped out, in a headache's Morse code, *idiot!* *Getting all worked up over nothing!* It hurt a little.

It was maybe ten minutes later when the door opened. It wasn't my roommate, it wasn't me—the only other person who had the key was Mrs. Liu, or anyone who might know where it was. I leapt up and rushed to the door, but by then the Min's girl was already inside. She held

both hands up when I approached, and then shrugged and tried to back out. I grabbed her arm and yanked her in. She held tight onto her box.

“Give me back the key.”

“All I want to do is get this done without any trouble,” she said. “After this, I really am going to call the police.”

“And I’m the Queen of Spain!”

“I’ll trade it for the bag,” she said. “It’s in your apartment, right? Where is it?”

“I’m not giving you anything,” I said, and this time stepped close enough that she took a step back on instinct.

“Is the reason why you can’t get the bag because your roommate and her boyfriend are getting high off of it?” she said. “It’s okay if they are. People are weak.”

“What?” I said. “No. Why would they do that?”

“I’m only speculating,” she said, her face flushed and mouth twisting into another set of words—something about it pissed me off, and I struck her shoulder with her palm. Not hard. Not like I had much in the way of upper body strength. But she fell back with wild exaggeration, then popped open the lid of the box and threw something heavy and wet onto my stomach. My hands moved to catch it by instinct, and then she was gone, bolting down the hall while laughing at me. Christ! That kid had issues. I felt sorry for her parents. All that time spent on raising her for that? The thing in my hand squelched. I looked down at it, and yelled. In my hands was a dead, wormy rabbit. When I dropped it, it bounced off my feet and squirted a dark green ooze onto my slippers—maybe out of panic or disgust, I kicked it into a wall, where it left a dark, brown mark.

My roommate was in a second later. She was half-naked, wearing nothing but her boyfriend’s shirt. When she saw I had the door open, she ducked back into the hallway. I shut the

door, and gripped my hair with my hands—a mistake, when I remembered the worms.

“Whoa!” she said. “What’s going on here?”

“I don’t know. Hit the lights.” I went back to the sink. My roommate flipped on the lights. I pointed her to the corner, where the rabbit was rotting, and washed my hands, soaping all the way up to my forearms. Then I washed the handles and the dishes still inside, and threw away the sponge. I could still feel the thing rotting on top of my fingers, flesh falling through the gaps. Normally I would have covered my mouth and nose with my hands, but it’d probably be best if I didn’t touch anything for the next few minutes.

“You’re such a wuss,” she said. “It’s just a rabbit. A tiny one, too.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll keep that in mind the next time throws a dead animal at me.”

She went to the kitchen, holding the shirt closed with one hand, and grabbed a plastic bag. She covered her free hand in the bag, grabbed the rabbit, inverted the bag, and tied it off.

“Who’d do this, anyway?” she said, tossing the bag on the table. I picked it up, careful to hold it away from my body.

“The Min’s daughter,” I said. “She wants her drugs back.”

“You actually talked to her? You moron. First rule of hostage negotiations: don’t talk to the suspects.”

“I told you. I told you this was going to happen.”

“Hey,” she said. “Calm down. Okay, chill. Deep breaths.” I dropped the rabbit corpse onto the floor. She did a few buttons on her shirt, and held my forearms in her hands. I let my chin curl down to my collarbone and shut my eyes. I had a trembling fantasy of grabbing the Min girl and hitting her, really hitting her. I had the image of the police coming to take me away for being a child abuser, or a drug addict, or whatever it was Min wanted to catch me doing. Oh,

they all said she was smart—I guess she was, in a way. Not sly, not canny, not more than a brute. But a brute who was driving me crazy. When I opened my eyes again, she looked at me steady. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s give it back. I’ll get the bag.”

“Let me do it,” I said. “You should get back to, you know, your room. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make a fuss.”

“Hey,” she said. “Whatever keeps you from blowing your head off.”

She gave me the bag, and shut the door again. I flipped the lights back off. I ran the faucet again, and washed my hands and splashed my face. When I shut off the faucet, my reflection, emerging in the millimeters-deep pools of water in the brushed steel basin, looked as though someone had stretched my skin tight across the bone. This was crazy. All this over three hundred dollars. Not just three hundred dollars, I reminded myself. Jail time, if Min actually did call the police. Esther, I had told her—I had told her, hadn’t I? Min was a loon. The whole family was loony.

Maybe it was the word ‘loony’ that did me in. People my age hear ‘loony’ and think of cartoons. I wasn’t calm, but I didn’t feel like hitting anything. Instead I felt a heavy stone of spite sitting in my chest. I had to get rid of the bag. Burn it up, or give it back but with all of the drugs replaced with sugar and baking powder, or flush it all away now, or what. Burn it, I decided. It’d be easy enough to do. I’d need a good reason to keep myself from lighting up again, too.

I lit another cigarette, and left the door open. I sat with the rabbit bag between my feet, and the paper bag in my lap between my legs. My head hurt all over again. Well, it’d be all right, I’d catch her soon. Leave her with a flaming bag of what she came for. See how she felt about that. I sat there through a cigarette and a half before the Min’s girl came by again. She knocked this time, at least. By that time my pulse and my headache were out of sync, and my fingers

weren't so much shaking as they were stuttering, caught in one pose when I needed it to get to another.

"Just come in," I said.

"Thank you, thank you," she said. She took a seat across from me on the table, and folded her hands. This, I thought, must be how she sat in class.

"Where did you get that rabbit?" I said.

"That?" she said. "The cat brought it in. My boyfriend said I should have a gun, but you know, I only deal to schmucks. He goes to Berkeley."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Econ major," she said. She leaned in across the table, sliding her hands forward as she went, and said, "We met when I was taking summer classes at Berkeley. It's kind of funny. He can do all kinds of non-linear regressions, but if you ask him to calculate the mass of a sliced up sphere, he'll throw a fit." She withdrew, and now the key was in the place where her hands had been.

I took the key, and put the bag on the table. The cigarette was burning away between my fingers, half-used up and tempting. Burning the bag wouldn't be enough, not even if it burned up all the plastic and the drugs. It wouldn't show *her*. I didn't know. Why push so hard against a girl who was six or eight years younger than you? But she thought she was smart, and that she was better than me; and my stone of spite was heating in my chest. I moved the bag closer to the center of the table and said, "It's all yours."

She moved her hand to the bag. I shot my hand out, too, and slapped her hand back down to the table, and stabbed at the spot right next next to her thumb and index finger with the still-burning butt. I let it sizzle there for a few seconds, then pulled the end back up. I picked up the

rabbit bag and tossed it back at her. We stood at the same time.

“Wow,” she said, and went to the doorway. “Real wound up, aren’t you?”

“Next time put that stuff somewhere where people can’t find it.”

“Why don’t you next time not stick your hand up the top cabinet and go looking for a fake panel?” she said. She spread her arms out, paper bag in one hand and rabbit bag in the other, and said, “Thanks a lot for tonight. You were real helpful.”

She didn’t even have a reason for doing it, just dumb teenage rebellion. All of that to ‘get even’ with some kid. I should have stuck it in her hand—or maybe I wouldn’t have been able to. Esther and her boyfriend had stopped, or slowed down, or something. I rubbed my finger over the little burn on the table, still warm with slowly stilling fire. When I took my thumb away, it came back black, sooty, and dark. I rubbed the soot between my fingers, spreading it across the bulbuous pads, then down the length of each finger. I imagined myself raising up my arm and bringing that glowing ring onto her hand, and was amazed by how natural it felt in my mind, easy and sure. I imagined this as I spread more of the soot across my fingers, going back to the now-cool hole on the table when I needed to darken my hand, imagined and imagined some more. I was no sinner, I knew, and never had been, though this left plenty of room for the future. Finally I went to wash my hand in the sink, the blackness from my hand darkening my reflection in the little metal pool, though soon the water ran clear again.

“2004’s Best Under 18 Pianists”

After the first time they slept together, Sarah asked to see her drawing pad.

“How’d you know I draw?” Pia said. They were lounging in Sarah’s studio apartment, Sarah on the floor to prod at the settings for the tall floor fan, Pia still on the bed, stupefied by the heat. Pia had put a shirt back on; she felt shy, lounging around bare-chested in a stranger’s bedroom, especially one with a face-like, Edvard Munch-esque stain on the ceiling.

They had met only a few hours before in Jason’s apartment. Poor Jason, who had decided the last week of summer vacation before his senior year was a good time to reinvent himself as a serious auteur, and throw a party where he played a black and white German film on the television, gave everyone plastic cups of coffee, and demanded that they have a discussion session afterwards. He had started seeing Jeff, who was thirty-seven and a quasi-prominent local photographer, over the summer, and according to one of Jason’s exes, Jeff was responsible for this recent turn into pomposity.

Through the whole movie, Pia had been squinting at some good-looking Asian girl with her hair bleached the color of wet terra cotta. Viewed from the front, Sarah had a fishy quality to her face, face sweeping backwards as though pushed by water, long eyes and a long mouth. The left side of her upper lip was larger and flatter than the other, giving her a near hare-lipped sneer. But Pia’s enchantment had been with the familiarity, not the strangeness or the tension. She had been convinced that she had been looking at the mouth of Angelina Jolie herself. Half an hour, Sarah had put her fingers against Pia’s forearm, near the elbow, and then slid them down with purpose. They were gone before the movie shambled into its tragic end.

Sarah was still tweaking the fan’s settings, resting on her stomach. “I do some figure

modeling, for the money. I subbed in once for one of your painting classes.”

“That explains it.”

“And you were at Jason’s party with green hair. It’s not like you were going to be a finance major.”

The green hair had been a mistake, and she wished it’d wash out already. She fingered her hair self-consciously, then chose to focus instead on the room. There was an open violin case next to Sarah’s bed, with annotated sheet music scattered around it. The violin had an ageless, ancient look to it. Different from the rentals she had seen on the shoulders of her early middle school orchestra adventures, glossy as though they had been laminated. “The pad’s at my place,” she said. “You go to school at Berklee? The Conservatory?”

“No. I wish. I do engineering and music at BU.” Sarah sat up. Her bare breasts had pebbled indentations from the carpet, her thighs were still creased from the bed sheets. Even here she looked like she was posing, inviting the eye. “I am part of a few student orchestras, though.”

“I used to do piano. Six years of it. I quit because it made my wrists swell up and because I didn’t want to take my levels. My teacher was like, ‘here’s Haydn!’ and I freaked out.”

“Me too.”

Pia felt suddenly annoyed. No one played violin without the piano. No one played anything without the piano or so it seemed. For years she felt like she should have moved on from the black and white training wheels and onto a Real instrument. The cello. The piccolo. The recorder. “Everyone’s done piano.”

“No, I used to really do it. I was a real pianist. Played at competitions in Tokyo, Vienna, New York.” Sarah’s hands settled open and limp against both thighs in a preemptive shrug. “I managed third prize at the Tchaikovsky juniors when I was fourteen. This one website put me in

the honorable mentions of 2004's best under-eighteen pianists. That was me. Sarah Fong.”

“And now you're in engineering and modeling,” Pia said, to pull herself away from this conversation without injuring either of them too badly. She didn't want this to get personal. Sarah's fevered intensity reminded her already of her freshman roommate, Agnes. Poor Agnes, who spent every night between ten and two crying in her pillow or desk. Pia wore earplugs and earphones, learned the best ways to stay late at the Cintiq labs, learned how to best get into inconvenient hook ups, all the way until March, when Agnes dropped out of school—probably trailing tears as she went.

“It's not the life for everyone.” At last, she seemed willing to forget Pia had ever mentioned music. “I still want to see your drawing pad.”

“You want to see my drawings of you?”

“No. How vain do you think I am? I want to see how good you are.”

Good lord. She kicked off the covers, hopped back into her clothes, and said, “I have to go.”

“The next time I'm on your campus, I'll let you know,” Sarah said. “We can get lunch.”

“Sure thing,” she said, and left Sarah sitting there on the floor with the violin, sheet music, and fan.

Her ex-boyfriend, Dan, was trying to be friends with her. He had won an award: five thousand dollars to go off to paint a mural in Providence, at a community center. Every few days he'd send her photos of his progress. *How am I doing? Any suggestions?*

Needs more contrast.

It's supposed to be flat. It's supposed to show the anonymity of the metropolis. Pay more attention.

Wow. The anonymous metropolis. Never seen that one before.

At least I make my own art instead of just drawing other people's stories. You make nice lines sometimes, but that's about all. jsyk.

She wasn't pissed off with him, or his terrible paintings. No, she had resigned herself already to doing illustrations. There was happiness in job security and bold color choices.

An hour later, aimless and agitated, she sent an invitation for lunch to Sarah. They met at a cafe near Pia's small art college, just off the green line, the next day.

"Ah, exes," Sarah said, nodding in a vague way.

"Right," Pia said. "Most of the painting guys I know are all right. Trust me to land one of the jerks. Never trust a guy who introduces himself to you by bragging about his horse." When they were dating, he'd tried to get her to go horseback riding with him in the western part of the state. "What do you think you are, a cowboy?" she had said. He had been on the equestrian team back in high school. He had the breeches and everything.

"Good advice for everyone," Sarah said. "So do you live around here?"

"Not that far. Anyway, it turns out that he's from some suburb in upstate New York where everyone owns a horse. Can you imagine that?" She was about to go on when she looked a little closer at Sarah. Sarah was prodding at her salad in a plaintive, hopeful way. "Want to tell me about your exes now?"

"God, no. No offense or anything, but why would I want to torture someone like that? The only ex I ever talk about is the piano. Are you still hungry?"

“Yes,” she said, annoyed. She had barely touched her sandwich, so of course she was hungry. “So you used to be a ‘real pianist.’ Did you leave or did the piano?”

“My hands were too small. So we drifted apart, I guess... Look, I have rehearsal in the evening. Do you want to go to your place, or should we reschedule?”

“No, now’s fine,” she said, but she could tell Sarah was already writing her off. “I don’t get it, though. If you were good enough to win some award, it wouldn’t matter if you had small hands. If you had the talent for it. It’s like those blind cooks. It doesn’t matter if they can’t see the pot. Their souls are in it.”

“Well, there you go. I didn’t have the soul for it. My soul and my fingers were nowhere connected at any point. It’s cute when an eight year old plays Schubert, but a fourteen year old has to put the soul in it or whatever,” she said, and this time let her fork drop into her plate. “Are we going to your place now? You can show me a bit of whatever it is you do. Animation?”

“Illustration,” she said, trying to not feel stung. It was occurring to her that Sarah had never cared very much about her work to begin with; but in the days since she had last seen Sarah, she had been debating, idly in her own mind, whether or not to show Sarah it next time. Before she knew it, she was wondering about how to show Pia, whether she should e-mail Sarah a .jpeg of her class assignments, whether she should bring her drawing pad, whether she should instead just show Sarah the smaller sketchpad she kept in her bag and only used occasionally. Showing it to her classmates was one thing, but she found herself becoming shy. She smiled and said, “Close enough.”

Sarah, it turned out, loved paintings. Oil paintings with Classical motifs. She loved Bouguereau, who, Pia had to admit, was a fine painter; but the nineteenth century had enough paintings of Venus and satyrs. Surely the world grew tired of seeing all of those thighs emerging from the water.

Sarah liked Pia's figure drawings best. The actual illustrations were deemed to be cartoony.

"Have you never seen anything made in the twenty-first century?" Pia said. "What about that Hirst guy who bedazzles skulls?"

"I know he exists," Sarah said. "Geeze." After that they spent the rest of the afternoon showing each other clips from reality TV shows and kissing on the couch. What Pia liked best about Sarah were the hard, strong edges of her fingers, the blade of her palms, and her terrible taste in reality TV contestants.

She saw Sarah a few times between then and October, sometimes at parties and other times on dates. Sarah invited her to a small mini-concert in one of the student centers at BU. A quartet of quartets, each playing from a different century, Sarah said. It would have been the first time Pia heard Sarah play for longer than a few minutes. Would have been because, on a whim, Pia went to buy some flowers, and then got lost, chasing down one side street after another; by the time she arrived, the twentieth century was already starting, and Sarah was making her way towards the back of the room. Pia pushed through the students to get to her.

"Flowers?" Sarah said. "You shouldn't have." She held them to her the way someone might shoulder a rifle. The flower heads dangled and spun on her shoulder.

Depressed, Pia said, "They were on sale."

"Well, thanks."

“Is there anything that I do right?”

“You play a mean game of Scrabble. And Apples to Apples.”

“I play to win,” Pia said. But it was more that Sarah had no sense of the rhythm of the game, or its spirit. She’d sit there for five minutes, mulling over her mental dictionary. Archaic words were hauled, kicking and screaming, onto the playing field. *Pall. Wyrd.* Sarah seemed incapable of scoring above a hundred and four. The twentieth century quartet was playing a Russian. Pia turned her head, only a little interested. “Stravinsky?”

“Shostakovich.” Pia looked at Sarah. A dull, frustrated feeling bumped up against her gut, like one of those wind-up toys walking into a wall. She wanted to skip to the part where they were watching TV together on the floor, the parts where they were playing games and having fun. Neither of them were much good at the other parts of getting together. It was Sarah, she decided. Sarah wore her failed ambitions around her shoulders like a ragged cape. It bent her shoulders, made her jagged. It was inconvenient, and tended to make Pia feel pity. On the list of things that ruined a relationship, even a casual one, pity was pretty high on the list. Probably up there with infidelity and crying into one’s pillows at all hours of the night. “It was on the program,” Sarah said.

“There’s too much art in the world,” Pia said. “It’d be better if we all went back to the Russian model. Only these people get to be real artists of whatever. All the rest of you guys don’t get to exist. Go and become laborers for the revolution. Or make copies of official art for Big Brother. We accept no amateurs.”

“Ah, funny,” she said. They were heading out now, almost on the street. It had hailed a little earlier, tiny falls of ice that melted onto the bare branches and drooping, dry plant stalks. “I can never tell if you mean to be funny or not.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Pia said. She held open the door. “I try.”

They barely saw each other through November. Pia sent e-mails and texts; Sarah sent apologies. She was busy with school, she'd say. Engineering, music, rehearsals. Pia had other things, too: drawings, projects, doing her best, looking smart. There were only a few stops on the green line from one another; but time strolled fast to winter, and into December.

The week before finals, Sarah sent her a message to come see her at a concert on a Friday night. It'll be fun, Sarah said. Pia, out of guilt and curiosity, went. The concert was in the auditorium of a narrow pre-War building made of brick and iron, just off the main street.

The foyer and stairs pushed in on her as she went through them, but the auditorium opened up in front of her like a mouth with missing teeth. Parts of the molding had fallen, some of the lights were dimmer than the others. The seats were splotchy and made of cloth, and felt wet, even though her hand kept coming away dry whenever she patted it. There was a cluster of ancient men and women sitting next to her, with loose, bumpy lips and black coats. They were a fussy, silent group, glaring at her constantly as she turned over the program in her hands, trying to remember which one was Sarah's. She made the mistake of rustling the program as the first orchestra came on, and the wing of wrinkly faces turned to her, like moving rocks.

Sarah wasn't in the first orchestra, or the second. Pia was just thinking to herself, “Those old guys sure have nice faces,” wishing that she had thought to bring her sketchbook, when she fell asleep. She woke up suddenly, to the very end of Sarah, drawing her bow across the strings, shining in the light like she had been dipped in silver. Her back strained, the tip of the bow

pointed up to the heavens. Then she lowered her arm, slipped her violin off her shoulder, and breathed. Pia raised her hands to begin clapping, only for Sarah to draw the bow again. There was another movement to the concerto.

The line of ancient heads turned to her, boggled by her ignorance; but though their faces wrinkled and pinched, Pia ignored them. How to describe it? On the stage, sawing through the concerto, Sarah was devoted, constant, and true. What did the music matter to anyone?

At the real end, as the front rows stood and the back rows refused to get up, Pia gathered up her coat and bag, and exited the auditorium. She needed to get backstage. The music had put her in a good mood. She went to the usher, a guy with sallow skin except around the eyes, where the skin was luminescent and white.

“Yeah,” he said. “Exit’s that way.”

“No, I need to get backstage.”

“That way,” he said, pointing to the left.

“I need more detail here,” she said, but she could tell he was already shifting his attentions to a lost old man. “Well, what did you think of the music?”

“I’m a little deaf, yeah?” he said. And then: “The clapping was nice.”

She jiggled three doors before she found the room with the orchestra. What she walked into was a party: a bunch of college kids hugging their instrument cases to their bodies or sitting on the dressing room tables or just sitting on folding chairs, all of them holding cups of wine. They were all in formalwear, though no one matched the other. Skirts at the knee, skirts falling

on the floor, some in full suits, and others who seemed to have rented their suit jackets from someone's funeral parlor.

Pia scanned the room for Sarah, but couldn't find her. She spied three bottles of open wine on the desks.

"Hey," Pia said, going up to a cluster of violinists by the door. They seemed better dressed than the others in the room. "Have you guys seen Sarah?"

She got a round of shrugs until a girl sitting on the corner of a table said, "Some guy from the audience took her to another room. Are you the photographer from the school paper?"

"If I were a photographer, I'd have a camera," Pia said. She edged closer to this stranger. She was dressed in black velvet and had a plain-faced, though she also had the bloodless look of a sleepless student on the verge of academic mania. She had a keen, cutthroat look Pia recognized from Sarah, and some of her more frightening classmates.

"Sorry. You looked the type." She sipped from her plastic cup. She had that dazed, content look on her face. The look of a dog after a good, long walk. "I'm Cathy."

"Pia." Cathy nodded her head, and offered Pia a cup of wine, abandoned on the side of a table. Hell. Why not. The concert had been good. She ought to join in on the festivities. She took the cup. "That was a good performance. Really great for all of you."

"Oh, it sucked balls. We were all out of sync. The violas were zoning out and our whole back row of violins must've forgotten to tune, they were so bad. It came together in the second half, but that was just because Julian—that's our conductor—finally got really pissed with all of us. Anyway, it was better than I thought it'd be. Sarah was amazing on the solo, but why does she always forget that we're also players, too? We're an okay student orchestra, I guess."

"I can't tell if you really thought it was bad or if it was actually really good," Pia said,

frowning. Sarah loved competition, the one hundred percents, the A plus plus plus. She loved knowing what was the best, too: the best episodes of this TV series, the best books published, ever, in the whole world, the dumbest schmuck in the year. But Sarah was good on the violin, and the program had said, 'BU's best student orchestras' on the front. Even when Pia thought Sarah was talking up a whole lot of shit steam, it was still alluring to think of her as some kind of trapped goddess, demanding to let back into heaven. The allure, of course, was knowing that she wasn't. But she came pretty close.

"We have real music schools around here, so we're not the *best* best. We're just one best. Or maybe only two *almost great*s."

"Ah," Pia said, and nodded as though she understood.

"To BU's Finest Classical Orchestra!" Cathy said, and knocked back the rest of her wine.

The door to the back room opened. Sarah was half-in the room. She was talking with a man with a plump face and stick body. They embraced, and Sarah walked in. She went straight for her violin. Pia, after a moment's hesitation, followed her.

"Hey," she said.

"Oh, wow," Sarah said, her head jerking back in surprise. Her eyes were alarmingly pink, either with illness or as though she might begin to cry. "You're here! Wow."

"Great concert," Pia said. "Should've brought those flowers from last time. Never mind. Who was that guy?"

"Cal. He was a friend of my piano teacher back in the day. He has a niece with the Mozarmonics. We were catching up." Sarah twisted her hair around her hand before saying, "Listen, the others were planning on going to a karaoke place in Dorchester, but I'm planning on heading back a little early. I heard Jason's holding something at his place."

“Jason? That Jason?” Pia said. “Those parties suck.”

“I know. I mean, I don’t care.” She put a hand to her forehead, still in her black dress.

“Sometimes the movies he shows aren’t bad.”

“Wow.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do know what you mean,” she said. “I think. I may know.”

It was snowing in small, chilly gusts when they got off the T stop, little white flecks barely visible under the sodium yellow streetlights. Sarah’s dress shifted and swirled around her feet, and the violin case a black lump on the straight line of her back. Pia, by that time, was almost completely convinced that the performance had been a good one. “So what’s the problem?” she said. “If it’s good, then enjoy it. Fame is transient. You need to make the most out of the opportunities you get. Never refuse a job from your agent. Actually, refuse it if they’re trying to undercharge you. In fact, refuse to work for free.”

“I know the performance was okay,” Sarah said at last, just in front of Jason’s door. “It means a lot to me that you enjoyed it. Not enough young people like the classical stuff these days.”

“You’re going to love it in here,” Pia said, and knocked on Jason’s door.

There were only a few people inside, a motley crew of Jason’s ex-boyfriends and Jason’s regular friends and his roommate. The party was divided in two, most people in the dining room, sitting in a cloud of pot and playing cards, and Jason at the kitchen table, sorting through a script

printed in Courier.

“Jason,” Pia said, trying to greet him with a smile. “What are you working on?”

“End of the year film.”

“Movie?”

“Film,” he said, curtly.

Sarah was by the card players, sharing a blunt with Brandon. She’d be easier to talk with after she eased up, Pia figured. She sat at the kitchen table with Jason.

“You missed the movie,” Jason said.

“Sarah had a concert.”

“She’s pretty good.”

“Did everyone know that but me? Was there a secret memo that went around? ‘She’s actually really great at the violin, but don’t tell Pia?’”

“She tells everyone she used to be an international pianist,” Jason said. “And you didn’t notice?”

“I don’t know. I thought it was a blowhard thing. If she’s so good,” she said, and then dropped her voice, “then why’d she stop?”

Jason gave her a flat, screwed up look. Judgmental ass. She and Jason had bonded over vodka shots and a computer animation class, and a few mutual friends. He had been serious even then, but at least he had been funny. Or kind of funny. She was having trouble remembering. She was having one of those moments, when someone you knew opened up in new ways, and she didn’t appreciate the way Jason was harshing her. He had a way of making everything gloomier and dimmer just by stepping into the room. He had once ruined a dinner by talking about prices they should charge while freelancing over the summers, and then, why, why, God, talking about

taxes.

“It’s not for lack of talent,” she said. “Maybe she killed someone with her music and she’s too traumatized to go on.”

“Do you know what happened to Jeff once he graduated from art school?”

“Please, don’t get into this,” Pia said. She had heard this story twice already.

“He won that internship at Xerox as a designer,” Jason said. “He got that gig working as an illustrator for that old children’s magazine, *Cricket*. He had a good portfolio, a serious one, and was about to sign a contract with some children’s book author when his Dad got sick. He spent two years taking care of him, and when he came back to the market, nothing. He spent the next fifteen years just taking pictures of stuff people wanted him to. No one even wants to look at his portfolio anymore. So he had to start doing photography, and now look what he’s known as. So I figured, well, if my dad was going to die anyway—”

“Jason, let’s be real here,” she said. “Jeff was never that good, anyway.”

“Well, he could have been! He’s a pro now, but he could’ve been the cover of Nat Geo, or have galleries at MOMA, all of that! But he wasn’t serious enough about it. That’s the big thing. You have to be serious. You can’t let anything stop you. If you kill someone with the pure, twinkling keys of your music, then so what? You have to keep going. You can’t stop for anything or anyone. Look at Dan. He never let anything stop him.”

“*Dan?*” she said. She could hear the poker players laughing over something. Probably wasn’t even very funny. “Dan went to New York so he could get high four days a week, not to get a collection in the MOMA.”

“Well, there’s a process. He’s sent me pictures of what he’s done this semester. It’s good.”

“It’s tacky and same-y.”

“It’s poignant and eye-catching. When was the last time you got noticed by anything? You work at a pizza place over the summer. Hiram got a scholarship at Apple, Carol’s spent the summer at Nickelodeon, Kyle’s working with that guy at the MOMA. What kind of creds are you going to have?”

“Creds? No, I’m doing a trade. Craft. I’m a blacksmith in a Wacom Cintiq lab. And what are you doing again? Haute-couture YouTube?” She yanked the script from Jason’s hands, flipped it open, and read, “*In the exquisite evening, JOHN DOE and NATHALIE HART step closer to each other... The camera focuses on JOHN’s face... JOHN looks anxious, shy... Pearls of sweat form a beaded blanket on his forehead...*”

“Stop it,” Jason said, lunging over to the script. But she sprung up and away, holding the script like a trophy.

“*What,*” she said, backing over to the dark cluster of stoned poker players, “*is really Real? What if the universe is just one egg laid by a cosmic hen of infinite possibilities? In this life we, two, together are man and woman, but in another universe, if we could just crack the shell of the egg, we could be something else. We could be the dinosaur kings of Earth. Oh, John!*” John, John!”

She dropped the script in the pile of coins and petty cash, and stood there in the middle of the circle of card players, standing high above the weed smoke, in the middle of everything. Jessica, Brandon, Angelo and Sarah each looked at her, with varying levels of confusion.

“Ha!” Sarah said. “Wait, what?”

“We’re in the middle of a game,” Brandon said. He had both a joint and a cigarette in his mouth, and the smoke poured two-toned around his face. “Geeze, Pia. Get it together.”

“Yeah, get it together,” Jessica said. “Want some?”

“No,” she said. “No, I shouldn’t.” She bent down to pick up the script. Then she walked back to Jason and offered it to him. She wasn’t surprised when he nearly yanked it out of her hands, nor was she surprised by his anger. She understood perfectly what she had done, and yes, it hadn’t been good. Petty, mean, unpleasant. It had been a whole host of things. But honestly, who cared?

“Sorry,” she said. “Shouldn’t have done that. Are we cool?”

“You know what?” he said, his voice rising, like someone sprinting uphill. “Forget it. You’ll never get it. Jeff always told me that other art students are a bunch of crazy, sabotaging bitches, but you’re the only one I’ve met who’s actually all three of them!”

“Thanks,” Pia said. It seemed like the right thing to say at the time, one of those things people might say in a movie just before they dashed off stage left, but she could sense Jason poofing into a furious foam.

“Thanks?” he said. “Thanks? You’re thanking me for this?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” she said. She got her coat and slung it back on, and hiked her bag up to her shoulder. “You know, I’m going to come back some other time. Great party. Sarah? You coming with me?”

“Sure.” She rose up, her posture bent, hip thrust out and shoulders canted at a toppling angle. She straightened back out as she collected her coat and violin. She had brought a half-used joint with her. Pia held onto it while she waited for Sarah to figure out how to get into her heels.

“Get out!” Jason said. “Why are you still there? I hate you. I hate all of you. You’re all full of shit!”

“Sssh, Jason,” said Jessica. “Just calm down. Brandon, go calm him.”

“Hmm?” Brandon said, and began to laugh.

The last thing Pia saw before she left with Sarah was Jason storming in the middle of the poker game and pulling at people's arms, demanding that they go. Poor Jason, she thought, so serious. She helped Sarah walk down the street, steering her by the elbow. She felt self-assured, calm, and content. Her body buzzed, light even in the dust and snow.

"You know something?" Sarah said. "You smell like air freshener."

"I did clean up recently."

They were back at Pia's place. Pia lived in a sectioned off living room of a one-bedroom apartment with two other girls, and as consequence, their refrigerator was always well-stocked with snacks of all kinds. But now it was late, and they were done eating, and had exhausted their repertoire of quiet, mellow activities. Pia's laptop rested at the foot of the bed, drained of battery. Sarah was borrowing a shirt from the bottom of Pia's drawers; her face was still pink, but faded and splotchy around the jaw.

"Where's my violin?"

"Desk." Pia reached over to the case, and set it on the bed. "Want to play it for me?"

"Noooo. No. I'm thinking about giving it up, anyway."

"What?" Pia said. "Oh, don't. You sound good on it. You sounded great on it tonight."

"Right. That's the problem." She sat up in the bed, legs twisting around in the sheets in odd triangles as she tried to find a position. "People always tell me that. I sound 'good' on it. Actually—you know, that guy, Cal? Who knew my piano instructor? The one who I was with before you came backstage. He does work with the Young Concert Artists. It's this program.

Gives young hotshots a jumping off point. They sniff around competitions, old contacts, looking for anyone under the age of, twenty-five or something. They sniff and sniff and then they find you and help you out. Try to set you up. And you know what the Cal guy says to me? ‘If you had started on the violin earlier, you might’ve had a chance for a real career.’”

“Ah,” Pia said. “Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“How is it a good thing? Every time I touch this thing, I’m going to hear that. ‘Oh, you could’ve been good if you had started this ten years ago.’ Like I’m not already good? Or good enough?”

“You’re plenty good enough,” Pia said, helpless. She had sensed that ‘good enough’ before; most people, she figured, had a second sense for it when they were around performers. That ‘good enough!’ which twisted the way people walked and the way their throats pushed out words, which messed up hands and shoulders. It all depended on how you took it. The enough bar was always a crooked one, set on one side by others, and one side by yourself. Good, good, people said. Good enough!

A part of her was still mad about Dan, so she understood Sarah a little. But Sarah’s anger gave off steam.

“I’ll take up the cello,” she said. “I’ll do anything but the violin. I’ll even go back to the piano.”

Her knees were drawn in close to her, and her legs folded beneath her. The shape it made was like a single wing.

“So that’s why you quit the piano? You weren’t good enough?”

“Ugh. You sound like a self-help book.”

“Think of me as an other-help person.”

“No, no, those books are all bad. Like if you keep saying to yourself, ‘I can do it! I’m going to *optimism* at the universe until it bends to my will. If I want something hard enough, it’ll just, bam, hey! Into my lap.” Her arms swung up at that and remained up there, like she was posing for Pia’s pen. Then she sighed and let her arms down. “I should’ve just become a ballerina.”

“You’re too tall for it,” Pia said.

“I would’ve made myself shorter if I had wanted it,” she said. She extended her arm and arched her back. She held the pose like she had been frozen there as punishment, cursed to be reaching, and reaching. But whether she was miming a ballerina or was soliciting affection, Pia didn’t know.

“What Icarus Did”

After their late lunch, their uncle Ted showed them their room upstairs. Ted tossed both of their suitcases onto a mustard-yellow, unfolded futon. The futon was by a window, and the glass was cloudy and hazy, as though someone had smeared Vaseline over it. The futon was right under the AC vent and the only pieces of furniture besides the futon was a coffee table, recently cleaned and smelling strongly of pine despite its rough, chipped appearance, and some boxes, each labeled with their father’s name.

“Those are just some momentos your Dad left when he moved out,” Ted said. He was a slim man with a voice that sounded as though he was pushing it through a thin pipe. His hair was curly, and sprang around his head in messy clumps. It made him look, Michael thought, immature. The freckles didn’t help.

“Mementos,” said Michael, unable to help himself—he was in a mood. Corinne bumped against him as she went to sit down on the futon. There was a weird smell in Ted’s house, heavy and sour, and unpleasant to the extreme, but it wasn’t so bad up here. A little dusty. The AC was high enough that his sinuses felt cavernous and dry, and the machine looked new, modern and low-emissions. He wondered if Ted had put it in special for them, or if someone else normally stayed here, with all the boxes.

“Huh,” Ted said. He went straight to one of the boxes and flicked the top of it open. He lifted a tiny trophy out of it and held it in front of him with his fingers splayed out like rays of meaty surprise. “Look at that!” he said. “Your dad won a computer programming contest back in high school. Amazing thing. I always mean to send it to him but he won’t tell me where he lives.”

“No way,” Corinne said flatly, in the kind of tone that would have made their mother tell

her she was being unladylike, and would never find a boyfriend. She flicked some sweat off of her forehead. Her hair, a black bob, had flattened out and become lanky. “For real?”

“I know it isn’t much,” Ted said. He gave the trophy to Michael. It was made of tin, splotchy and discolored on the swell of the cup, the rim, the handles. ‘Award for Scientific Innovation. Madisonville High School. Madison, KY.’ “But I remember the day your dad got it. Last day of his junior year, at a ceremony in the gym, when I was still a freshman. The principal made a speech, then the computer science guy teacher. Then they called up your dad. He went up to the podium, shook the computer science teacher’s hands, and then sat back down.”

“He hates programming,” Michael said.

“Well, it got him money and it got him to New York. Me, I say, there’s more to life than numbers. You guys settle in. I’ll come up to get you at seven. I’m taking you two out hunting for bullfrogs. Easy-peasy. You’ll love it, the both of you. I’ll be working on the truck if you need anything. Dessert? Ice cream? Cookies?”

“We’re fine up here,” Corinne said. Ted lingered for a moment by the door. Michael felt his neck stiffening and getting tight; then Ted’s brow and mouth lifted up, as though he was surprised instead of trying to smile. Then he left.

Michael waited for the footsteps to get downstairs before sitting next to Corinne on the futon. “Frog hunting. I didn’t even know that was a thing.”

She was checking her e-mail on her phone. “It might be fun.”

“Sure, if either of us had ever killed anything bigger than a mouse. Hunting!”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Michael,” Corinne said. She had switched to Googling ‘bullfrog hunting how to,’ and wasn’t looking at him. He knew she wasn’t going to like hunting any more than he was. They were both New Yorkers, residents of Flushing in Queens, and born so close

together that they were in the same year in college, her in LA and him in the backass of nowhere in western Massachusetts. “We’re in the country. That’s just what they do around here.”

“We’re not in inner Mongolia.” Their mother had grown up in a Chinese fishing village. It was a real town now, almost a city, but according to their grandfather, people used to get excited over bicycles and radios. “I’d be okay with seeing a movie. I’d even be okay with horse races.”

“Just suck it up and make him happy. Why is that so hard for you?”

“It’s not hard,” he said, but he was getting angry now. She was the one who wanted this, not him. There was no point in going to see their uncle and grandfather when neither of them had regular contact with their father, and hadn’t for the last twelve years. And their grandfather had been too sick to make it to lunch, anyway—so the rest of this trip would be just them and their duck-footed uncle. “I don’t want to make him happy.”

“Well,” she said, and snapped her fingers under his nose, “not like you have a choice.”

“Yeah,” he said. It was true. It was her car, since she was older. A Honda Fit the color of a giant rust stain. If he went home without her, their mother would make him turn back.

“Whatever. I’m going down for ice cream.”

She didn’t look up. “Neat-o.”

He went back downstairs, bothered by his anger, by Corinne being angry that he was angry, by Ted, who should have been nastier and more savage. There had to be something wrong with Ted—otherwise their father had abandoned all of them for no other reason besides forgetfulness, and their mother hated Ted for no other reason beyond something small and insignificant, his choice of socks, maybe, or a scuffed shoe—all this, which added to some frogs, a car trip to Kentucky, and his own petty temper.

Partway to the kitchen now. That stink—the worst part was that it was pungent and sour, like what an uncleaned hamster cage. He wanted to see his grandfather; it seemed a shame to not see him when they were staying in the same house, even if his grandfather was sick. He saw his other one every other year, long summer vacations spent flat on the floor of his grandparents' apartment panting in the sticky, subtropical heat. Grandfather Lean—Grandpa Lean, maybe—was supposed to be an engineer of some kind. Subways or highways. Their uncle was a car mechanic. It seemed like a step down.

Michael turned back and peered into the room right next to the staircase. There was a curtain near the back, hiding another room. That smell soured the closer he got. He tried to peer through the gap between the doorway and the curtain, but saw nothing but a window with the light blocked by a tall, narrow cardboard box, and a small chair. He took a hold of the edge of the curtain, and pulled it to the side. It was bright enough in the rest of the house that the rest of the room, even purposefully darkened, opened up to him: well-furnished with an old-fashioned flare. The full complement of furniture including a four-poster bed, with a little man in the middle. The whites of his eyes blended with his creased skin.

“Hello?” Michael said. The room stank, horribly, a mix of perfume and sickness. The man in the middle said nothing, probably couldn't have said anything. He was a withered stick with sagging skin, in a bed that smelled like shit. He stepped closer into the room, breathing shallowly through the nose. The man took no notice of him. Michael couldn't even tell if he was breathing.

Then the man jerked up, nearly sitting. Then he began to cry, a sound like someone choking on a piece of candy.

“Are you all right?” Michael said, feeling foolish, and then panicked. He couldn't tell if

the man, his grandfather, was crying because he was sad, or because he was dying. If he was dying, then Michael didn't want to be here. He had never seen anyone die, not in his life. It was childish of him to want to run, sure, but all he could think was, if he did have to see someone kick the bucket, he'd rather see his father. "Hey, sir?"

"Aaahh," he said. His hands swept back and forth along the blankets. They bumped against Michael a few times, but he cried even more when Michael tried to hold onto them. Then the man snatched a small remote resting between the blanket folds in his lap and pressed down on the button. His legs jerked beneath the blankets. Michael stood there, looking at the door. He took a step towards the bed; but the smell was so bad that he backed off right away.

Someone was coming down the hall. There was nowhere in the room to hide, except in the dark, ugly corners—out of the corner of his eye was a rolling cabinet of some kind. The man continued to thrash and jerk. Michael let go and stood up, trying to make it look like he had just come in, then like he was taking care of his grandfather, moving in and then stepping back, until at last Ted entered.

Ted's step was too light for this. Michael was so relieved to see Ted that he slid straight into annoyance. "Where were you?" he said.

"Sorry, sorry," Ted said. He held up his hands. They were black, both with shadow and grease, and wiped clean roughly across the pads of his fingers. "Like I said, truck." He went to the moving cabinet and opened one of the drawers. From it he drew a syringe and a little bottle. "Want to help me?"

"I wouldn't know what to do."

"Fine, fine." There was some kind of ugly device, like a catheter, strapped onto a white forearm. Ted fit the syringe into the catheter cap and depressed it. The man continued to jerk and

spasm in the bed. Michael was ready to stay until the jerks stopped, but Ted put a hand on Michael's shoulder and nodded to the door.

"That was rough, buddy," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"How am I—what about that guy?" Michael said. "Who takes care of him?"

"I got a nurse. Friday's her day off, though." He scratched his head, fingers vanishing in his gray curls. "Well," he said, "I thought you'd appreciate me taking care of him, with your traditional values and all."

"What was that?" Michael said, his anger rising in place of his self-consciousness.

"Values?"

"Hey, hey," Ted said. "Didn't mean nothing by it."

* **

In the evening their uncle drove them down in a truck to a lake he owned. Ted owned a lot of land around here, a whole lot of nothing bought by their grandfather back in the day. There was some coal in the hills and valleys, Ted said as he drove between their shadows. Corinne watched through the window, a suppressed smile making her cheeks seem to vibrate. Well, it had been her idea, Michael thought. Last month their father contacted them to invite them to his wedding in Hawaii. Corinne had squeezed nearly a thousand bucks out of him to pay for plane tickets, and then refused to go, and called their father's relatives to visit them instead, or all that was left of them: their uncle Ted and their grandfather, and no one else.

Michael tried to imagine the old man in the bed buying anything. There were no pictures of their grandfather in Ted's house, just as there were no pictures of their father or any signs of

women, or friends. There were pictures of Ted, of course, some of him alone, but many of him with animal carcasses. There was even a deer head mounted above the television in the living room.

It was one of their mother's annoying habits to find fault over nothing, and when he was at home he made a point to overlook things that might otherwise piss him off. But every time he left home, whether it was for overnight camp or summer courses when he was a kid, or an actual college now, it was like someone waved a wand and turned him into an unyielding asshole. Here in Kentucky, he was positive: the lack of other people in the pictures could only be narcissism.

The lake was about an hour from the house, far away from any towns or roads, and smelled gassy, like the frogs were belching bubbles of methane into the air with every bum, croaked note. The ground gave way beneath his feet unlike the hard, dirt trails he was used to; already Corinne had fallen into him twice, covering both of them from toe to waist in weedy water. She giggled and held onto his shoulder.

“Get off me,” he said.

“What crawled up your ass?”

He slapped a mosquito on his arm instead of answering. They were leaving their grandfather alone in the house. It didn't seem right. It was dim now, too, the sky mostly dark with red and green a bare glimpse past some trees. Anything past ten feet vanished into a mass of undifferentiated darkness.

Ted gave both of them flashlights, and a long-handled, five-tined fork, which he kept calling a 'gig.'

“How long do we have to do this?” Michael said.

“Fifteen's the limit right now,” Ted said. “You'll like it a lot by fifteen. We can even

have a little competition. I'll hold the lights for both of you."

Ted demonstrated: scan the water with the flashlight, searching for the dim, slanted reflected in the retinas, then stab. He got the frog speared through the hip, but when he was trying to stick it into the onion sack it kept squirming and twisting, until he let it go with a shake of his head. It sprang to freedom, leaking bloody fluid onto the sack and down Ted's pants.

"First round, I'll hold the flashlight," said Ted. "You two stick 'em with the gig."

Corinne gripped the long shaft of the gig, her face setting into a serious kind of glee. Of course she was happy. She always liked bloodletting. Still, she nudged him and mouthed, *What is it?*

"I saw grandpa," he said, trying to keep his voice low. He couldn't tell if Corinne had heard him. Ted whistled them over, and pointed to the edge of the lake.

Later, she mouthed, and readied her trident.

The frogs were bigger when he was looking down the length of the trident, and incoherent. Their eyes popped out of the water in impossible ways, one with the eyes of a goat, another with six pairs of eyes instead of one. They found four frogs in the next half hour, two which he totally missed, one which he tore off a bit of foot, and one Corinne skewered with stiff shoulders. He had been two feet from the frog, and had the incredibly gross privilege of watching the steel teeth of the gig punch through the skin, heard her giggling when the tines hit flesh, then scream when it went all the way in.

"One down," Ted said, speaking low, to keep the bullfrogs from hearing him and scrambling. The bullfrogs were so loud already—Michael couldn't see how the frogs were supposed to hear them. "Fourteen more to go."

What a goddamned joke. They'd be here until morning. "I can't believe you're just

leaving grandfather there alone,” Michael said, louder.

“He’s fine. Pipe down.”

“What about our grandfather?” Corinne said, looking up.

“He’s already in bed. You won’t get to see him tonight, anyway.” Ted swung the flashlight over to a frog. It froze in midstep, eyes shining like thumbtacks. “One of you get that.” Michael took a wild jab at the shadow, and did nothing but graze it. It gave a low, frightened rumble, and then sprang off. “Careful!” Ted said. “These are weapons, you know.”

Corinne got the next one straight through the eyeballs, and fifteen minutes later, pierced the spine of another. Michael was zero for at least six now. He didn’t feel murderous enough to do this. In his hands the gig was a slightly more sinister, person-sized version of a Barbie prop.

“You guys gotta really thrust into it,” Ted said, jabbing at the air with his flashlight. They had moved into watery lakeside now, and Michael’s shoes squished and squeaked no matter how quiet he tried to move. “Put your back into it. Light won’t keep all of them still.”

“I’m trying,” Michael said, through grit teeth. “I’m a little distracted.”

“Are you homesick?” Ted said, but he sounded confused. “Don’t think so much. Just do it.” Ted’s flashlight skipped across lean, tall grass half-submerged in water, through tangled clumps of plant matter and algae, then stopped suddenly on a quivering, eyeballed lump in the water, only a foot away from his shin, the rest of his leg in the lake. Michael gestured to Corinne—you do it—but she shrugged at him.

“It is a lot of fun,” she said. “Hurry up.”

“If I get it and don’t like it, can we go?”

“Michael!” she said.

He tossed his gig and flashlight into the water. “This is a crock of shit,” he said, and

turned to go. But without a light in front of him, he couldn't tell where he was going or if there was anything to see. The grass came up to his chest, long blades swaying like drunk snakes to block his path. When he looked back, Ted and Corinne were standing behind him, both of their flashlights pointing down at the surface of the lake. The reflected light made Corinne look surprised, and Ted like one of the Lost Boys from *Peter Pan*.

“Come back here,” Ted said. “We can't go until we get fifteen of them in the sack.”

“The sack!” he said, and charged on through the grass. He was soaked through the thigh with mud and water, and the total darkness wiggled him out. For a moment he could only extend his hand through the grass, as though he was searching for a mysterious current of air that would take him home.

The night buzzed on. He stood in the middle of marshy swamp without anything, not even his phone, which was sitting in the truck. One of Corinne's frog-killing giggles burst out through the wall of swamp noise. He wished for a shack or a house. Something where he could hide. Then he tried to turn back, listening for Corinne's giggles and the squish of the tines going through frog flesh. He didn't know how long he searched like this—if he were to ever get lost on a hiking trail, he'd probably be dead. Soon he saw the water shimmering, and heard wet footsteps. He went straight to it, emerging through the lower grass with sweat or dew on his nose and cheeks. Corinne and Ted were still there, frogging gear and all.

“Hey,” Corinne said, nodding. But Ted only looked at him with deep confusion, as though he had forgotten Michael had existed at all.

“I'm sorry,” he said. He was unused to having to apologize. His mother was content to make him crazy with guilt, and he knew Corinne would never let this go, even if he did say sorry. Ted, holding onto Michael's gig and sopping flashlight, only examined Michael not as though he

had been secretly hoping Michael had vanished, but as though Michael had come back half-man, half-frog.

He eventually caught two frogs, bringing the total to ten. After that Ted called it a night.

“You’re such a shit,” Corinne said, as they made their way back. They were walking behind Ted. Corinne was holding onto his arm, not for support, but to keep him close. She was angrier than he initially expected, and when he tried being sorry with her, she did just what he thought she’d do, which was get even madder. “I can’t believe you actually, right then. You’re crazy. You’ve totally lost your mind. Stomping into the swamp—who *does* that? Who does that?”

“Christ!” he said, and yanked himself away.

When he woke up, it was the middle of the day. A blunt rectangle of afternoon sunlight had fallen on top of his legs, and though the AC was on, his legs were red and hot in stripes, going all the way up to his shins.

Corinne had left him a text. Ted was taking her to a shooting range. *I tried to wake you up, but you kept snoring on. Mom called, by the way. Make sure to call her before noon if you’re up then. I told her to expect you.*

It was already past one. He let his finger hover over first his mother’s number, then Corinne’s, and tossed his phone onto his pillow. Michael went downstairs for breakfast. Ted had tossed the frog sack into the crisper compartment, an ominous brown lump that seemed in danger of suddenly coming to life, on top of golden apples. Michael stared down at it uneasily, and opted for toast and milk.

Once he was done with that, he went back to his grandfather's room. It was nearly the same as he left it: the old man in the sheets, the blocked off sunlight. The dust swirled in tiny eddies in the light, the eddies moving with lazy ease, though the smell was so bad that he sometimes held his breaths. Someone had brought a chair into the room and put a woman's bag on top of it. He peered in, curious, and immediately someone said, "Who's there?"

A woman stepped out from the corner of the room. She was wearing a teal nurse's uniform, stiff cloth with the creases that made ridges across the line of her mushy breasts, and a vertical line along the middle. She was wearing gloves. Under the uniform she wore a long-sleeved shirt, pastel green with faded roses blooming in a straight line starting at the wrist. For a moment he only stared at her. "I'm Bethy," the woman said. "You must be Mike. Ted's son."

"Nephew," Michael said.

Bethy's face was like a bowl of oatmeal, weirdly flat and smooth. She didn't even seem to react to the correction. "You should step out," she said. "I'm working."

"I'm not going to do anything to him."

The nurse's expression fuzzed up, like a TV with a bad signal. "I told you, I'm working," she said.

"I won't bother you. I'll stand in a corner. I can stand here. I just want to be nearby." The nurse was already turning away from him. In the dark cradle of her arms, he could see a strange, padded lump with two wings that swooped up. "So I can stay?"

"Just go over there," said the nurse, her voice like the snap of a rubber band. She pointed to a far corner with a dusty chair, by the window, and he went straight there. "Open that. It's stuck again."

"Thank God," he said. The nurse's expression became suddenly cold, and she bent over

the man again. The bundle in her arms was a diaper. When she opened up the old one, the stench, fecal and hot, made him gag. He worked the window, fumbling with the latches and pushing up harder. The curtain bumped against his face and the side of his body, the sun baked his cheeks and arms. He couldn't get it up higher than three or four inches, and by the time he finished he had sweat on his neck and hands. He yanked the curtains apart so the air could circulate, and the light sliced through the room, so white that he pulled them back together.

“What are you doing?” the nurse said. She was tying a plastic bag shut.

“Sorry,” he said. He took a careful breath through his nose, and shuddered. “It's, you know. I thought if I got the curtain out of the way, it'd help with the stuffiness.”

The nurse squinted against Michael. Then she put a hand on the man's shoulder and said, “Well, Donald? Do you want the curtains open?” Then she said, “Close them. The light agitates him.”

He shut them. The bottom edge swayed in the wind. A long rectangle of light floated, wavering between the dark green floor and the water-stained walls. That half of the room was brighter than the half with the bed, sitting in a dark pool. He took a step to the border, and the smell punched up through his nose, into his head. “You can talk to him?” he said

“You can guess at it.” She was wiping down his grandfather's ass with a wet towel. “People have ways of telling you what they want.” She swabbed at his thighs, then rubbed some oil on him. “Did Ted tell you when he's back? He's normally here on Saturdays, unless it's deer season.”

“He went out with my sister. Taking her out for some shooting.”

“Ted loves his guns.” She put the new diaper back on. “A few months ago he invited me to shoot some turkeys for the first time. He took me a little way east. Didn't let me leave until I

bagged one.”

“That’s him all right.” He tried smiling. Bethy gave him a black-eyed look. “So you’ve been here for a while? Since, whenever turkeys are... Ted took me out to... A marsh...” He broke off, upset. He didn’t know where he was going with this. The Bethy nurse was smiling, the whole topography of her face changing.

“I had brothers who used to bring frogs back to the house. They used to come back at night and dump them in my bed.” The nurse was moving over to his grandfather’s feet. She raised one of his legs so it bent at the knee, then straightened it again. She did it again a few more times. He took a step forward, to the man in the bed, the man with the pale skin and steel-colored hair on his hands. “I hate frogs,” she said. “I hate things that hop. Crickets, rabbits, those cats with the long back legs.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. How was the nurse so close to this stink? Was it something that one got used to? Ted had gotten used to it well enough. And family was always strange and ugly, he knew that if he thought about it. Once in college, drunk and surrounded by people he had only known for a few weeks, he had told everything about his father, expecting release or confessional shame; but there was only the hard, hot edge of indignation when his friends turned their heads to the wall, like they were all thinking that he should’ve gotten over it, with grace and dignity. Him, a guy with grace and dignity! The heat flared, lit up like burning magnesium, and then submerged itself in him again painlessly.

“And turkeys. The fat ones.” She moved around to the other side of the bed, the same side he was now nearly at, and did the same thing with his grandfather’s other leg. Up and down. Reps of ten or fifteen? He hadn’t been counting. She looked at him over her shoulder and said, “That’s what’s so nice about hunting. Getting to take down all the things that creep you out.”

“Yeah,” he said, strafing to the right around the nurse and closer to his grandfather. The smell by now felt like a spear, stuck through his forehead. He put a hand on his grandfather’s shoulder.

“Don’t do that. He doesn’t like being touched.”

“Can you really tell?” His grandfather’s tongue was flat over his lower teeth, and hung open as though he was sleeping, and his eyes were puffy and small. Two blinks for yes, one blink for no. Was that it? His grandfather’s eyes were so swollen that he couldn’t tell if his grandfather was blinking. “Look, I’m just saying hi. He likes me.”

“Honey, if he liked you, you’d know.”

“I do know,” he said. He tried to squeeze his grandfather’s shoulder, but his fingers gripped only the loosest skin, and his palm slipped down to a knotted muscle. He tried again, but now there was sweat on the palm of his hand, and his grandfather was watching him. His mouth was a rot-smelling hole, and his eyes two bullets, ringed in pale blue.

“When do you think Ted will be back?” said Bethy. Michael looked over at Bethy, who was now flexing his grandfather’s ankle.

Michael let go of his grandfather’s skin. “Before dinner,” he said. He watched as she blushed, then recomposed herself. Her whole face was a pool of silent delight, and quivered with its waves. And that was it, his time all used up. There was nothing he could think of to do or to say. If he left now, it wasn’t running away, it was getting away. He was gaining something by leaving this place—wasn’t that why it was called getting away, like a thief? He just didn’t understand yet what he was getting from this, he told himself as he exited the room, and then the house, into the clear sunned fields of his father’s hometown. But he would know what it was soon.

He walked away from the house, heading straight back to a bunching of straggly trees. Around here it probably constituted as a 'forest,' or a 'woods.' He walked until he reached a small stream. There he splashed his face and drew himself up. In the water he recognized himself to be himself, for what that meant, if it meant anything. He stayed there for a while, and then went back up the hill to the house.