WORDS OF MOUTH

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The Minors

The triple-A Buffalo Bisons work every play as if someone important is watching. Fifteen rows behind the third-base line you and David Rzepka, corn-blond son of a friend of your mother's, are watching. That friend, Judy, and your mother are on the inside of the row, leaning in to one another, talking intently, ignoring the field. David is curled over a scorecard, recording with a golf pencil data on every bit of inaction—balls, strikes, pop-outs. David knows everything about baseball although you're fairly sure he doesn't actually play. He attends a private school where the motto is "Living Jewishly" and there are no sports teams. You go to public school, but are also Jewish, also play no sports. You, David, and your mothers have been going on day trips to baseball games up and down the south shore of Lake Erie, minor and major league, since you and David were little. It is early April, the first such trip of the season, and both of you are twelve.

Your mother catches your roving eyes and waves, but continues talking to Judy and doesn't ask if anything is the matter.

You have worries. At home, your mother freely divulges to the whole family private things, gleaned from Judy: David takes Adderall; David has insomnia; David still sometimes makes believe that his father is alive. And so you worry: If you know these things about David, what does David know about you? He might know, for instance, that you had to quit the middle-school swim team because you could not figure out how to put in a tampon. He might know that *you* have insomnia. He might know that on tests at school you cheat.

Whatever it is you know about each other, however, neither of you lets on. By the end of the third inning you've hardly exchanged ten words between you. That's when women in Buster T. Bison t-shirts skip onto the field. You both stand up, transfixed. Surely they have always been

at these games, these women, but never before have they mattered to you. The women have white, tubular guns and are shooting souvenir shirts into the crowd, but what is of interest is, instead, their gigantic, buoyant breasts, which line up right behind the eyes of Buster T. Bison's angry face printed on their t-shirts. Alone in the bathroom at home you put clementines, Koosh balls, dinner rolls, anything inside your shirt to simulate the fulfillment of your wish for yourself. Alone in his bathroom at home, it is possible that David does what you have recently learned in sex ed that all boys do. The ladies run out of souvenir shirts, bounce their breasts a few more times, then bound off the field. David pushes past you, up the stairs and out of sight. For a minute you wonder whether merely seeing the women makes him have to go do the thing you've recently learned about, the thing you can't visualize but that nonetheless engrosses you. But then he reappears in the section over, his red-and-blue Spider-Man yarmulke a dark circle on his blond head as he makes his way to the front of the row. He leans his torso over the partition separating the crowd from the field, and the gray-bearded foul line official sitting on a metal folding chair turns to talk to him. David has done this at every game for several years and so you're familiar with the scene, the look of annoyance on the official's face that melts into interest, the way David's legs kick up off the ground as he chats, the whole manner in which he reads, wheedles, and flirts with other people compared to the dismal, disappointing behavior he exhibits toward you.

When he shows up back in the row, David waves in your face the game ball he's successfully coaxed from the official. He is an amateur collector of baseball memorabilia and is convinced there is future value in these small souvenirs. You stare straight ahead and keep your legs stuck out so he can't get back in.

“A little boy with his little ball,” you say.

He makes his way over your legs and, mid-straddle, pummels you once in the shoulder with the ball in his fist.

“Hey!” you say. “What is your major malfunction?”

“I am not little,” David says.

He’s right. There is a thick vertical blue vein illuminated under the skin in his neck and, under his eyes, dark arcs.

“Children!” Judy says. She has recently lost one hundred pounds after a stomach stapling and has a deflated look about her. She yanks the ball from David and pulls him out of the row and up the steps, holding his hand as if it is a used tissue she is about to dump in the trash.

You pull at the collar of your blue, fitted top to see if there is a bruise forming, but it’s just a red splotch in the crook where a bra strap would meet a cup, if your mother would let you wear one. Through this shirt and almost every other one you own your nipples show—fat, immobile buttons; you examine them now, underneath the fabric.

“A watched pot,” your mother says—it is one of her refrains. You show her the splotch. You are the last of her four children and she has a special look that conveys when she has seen worse.

“I think you’ll survive,” she says.

“Unless he goes after me again,” you say.

“You’ll survive that, too,” she says.

David and Judy return at the end of the fifth inning.

“Have we got a surprise for you,” Judy says.

You realize the “you” is you.

“We signed you up for Kids Versus Condiments,” David says. The game ball is back in his hand. “After the next inning you race the bases against Buster, the ketchup, the mustard, and the relish. And they put your name on the Jumbotron.”

The gigantic screen over the outfield plays a cartoon of the pitcher’s arm going round and round like a windmill. BALK, it says.

“I’m not good at running,” you say. You are not good at anything besides puzzles and clarinet. You are not even sure you have a personality, let alone talents.

“It’ll be exciting, noodle,” your mother says. She jostles your shoulder a little harder than seems necessary.

“Am I the only one who remembers that I was attacked twenty minutes ago?” you say.

But no one likes a victim, especially not your mother, who gave birth to you by emergency Caesarean at age thirty-nine and thinks that nothing that has yet happened to you equals the pain she endured to bring you into this life. The three of them decide they will escort you to the Kids Versus Condiments checkpoint. David walks in front, tossing the game ball higher and higher, catching it in his palm with a slap every time.

“They asked David whether he wanted to do it, but he suggested we let her,” Judy says to your mother. “I think the boy is finally learning a lesson in the existence of other humans.”

“But what if I don’t want to?” you say, but nobody hears, or else they ignore you.

At the checkpoint, four Bison Fun Club staff members in teal polo shirts take you away.

“Just don’t trip,” David calls as they lead you down a cinderblock tunnel, toward the field.

An angry-looking, big-headed Buster T. Bison is waiting for you, along with the Heinz ketchup bottle, the French's mustard, and the Vlasik relish jar. In their costumes they are each over six feet tall and emanate an odor of detergent. None of them says a word but as an announcer calls them out onto the field one by one, each touches you on the head as if you are an amulet, and it occurs to you that you are probably too old, or just about too old, to be playing this game. But it is too late; a teal polo shirt pushes you into the sunlight and there it is on the Jumbotron: *Michele Age Twelve*. Then you notice the crowd in the stands—it's a minor-league game but there are still thousands of people, the same ones who've surrounded you benignly for the past two hours but who are now all staring at you. The bile in your stomach churns, your veins constrict, and you search, agog, for the one face you will always search for, even in places where there is no hope of finding her: Your mother. Whom you locate, instead, is David. He is surprisingly close, just behind the first-base line, leaning in to another foul line official—a young man, with blond hair even lighter than David's, arms crossed, about to be wooed. Who knows, you wonder, what kind of prize he'll willingly hand over, if David just says the right words?

A teal shirt takes you by the shoulder to home plate and situates you between Buster and the mustard. Your heart is beating in your neck. A voice over the loudspeaker huffs *go* and you scamper forward. You're not athletic; your sprint is wimpy. Buster easily gains the lead and the condiments are comfortably yards ahead of you. But then, abruptly, you pass the relish on the right and your body flushes with pleasure, believing it has dug into a newfound strength. But as you approach the ketchup you see that it—man or woman, you can't tell—is slowing down to let you pass. Around second base the mustard takes a deliberate spill and you hop over its yellow legs. Before reaching third, Buster does the same thing, barrel-rolling over the foul line. It is their job, whoever they are, to make you feel good. The kids always win; all you have to do is finish.

And now you're closing in on the last ninety feet, and your eyes come to rest on David's face, and in your chest a new feeling sloughs its husk: a pleasure, it turns out, because his eyes are fixed with unmistakable fascination on you—your whole body, alone, approaching.

The New Year

To retrieve her sister Eileen, Lil Aronoff skips a day of school and drives the six hours west to the University of Chicago with her parents. It's early December, before finals, but when the Aronoffs arrive students are walking through alleys of snow looking like they've already failed.

The only person waiting at the dorm to say goodbye to Eileen is Marsha, a Chinese girl truly from China, whom Lil and her parents had met during Family Weekend in the fall. Without visitors of her own, Marsha had walked around the campus with them as Eileen orated on the role of the Gothic buildings in her life, seeming fine.

But she was in decline then and she is still declining now.

As Lil squeezes the last trash bag full of her sister's pillows into the only crevice left in the minivan, she promises herself that, in three years, when it's her turn to go to college, she won't screw it up.

Marsha embraces Eileen, but Eileen only returns the gesture with a couple fingerpads on Marsha's back. Lil is embarrassed by her sister's inability to reciprocate a kindness, even at this juncture. When Marsha comes around the van, Lil tries to hug her in a way that makes up for Eileen's deficit.

Nobody tells Lil much, but she gets the story. Her parents run a screen-printing business out of their basement, and Lil sits at the top of the steps, listening. Unseen, she learns that Eileen had to be taken out of school because college security caught her banging her head on the wall of her dorm room. Before that, she'd stopped going to her classes, and before that, in jumbled order, she began sleeping with different people every weekend (Lil hears "more than twenty" but

cannot assimilate it); took a pill that gave her an abortion, and got some infection that Lil has only been able to determine isn't HIV. Before that, there's no clear trail, no way to say for sure.

This horrifying, otherworldly inventory, which Lil's parents refer to under the blanket title of "the recklessness," Lil mostly can't believe. She tries to imagine more than twenty people and keeps arriving at an image of her entire AP Government class, at which point her mind shorts out. This is not the Eileen she knows. In high school, Eileen was in charge of everything—Spanish Club president, head of the Soprano IIs in choir, and a top-seed Foreign Extemporaneous speaker in Forensics.

The light of victory is now gone from Eileen's eyes. The first few days back in Ohio, their father shuttles her to doctors' appointments and counselors, and orange prescription bottles appear in the medicine cabinet in their bathroom. After that, she won't leave the house; it is rare even to see her go from one room to another, hunchbacked like an animal in search of a place to die. Mostly she lies prostrate on the couch, her wide hips and lean body—so familiar to Lil as a figure to aspire to, along with everything else about her—shrouded in the same scarlet UChicago sweatshirt and billowy black stretch pants, day and night. Despite her parents' protests Eileen keeps the TV on CNN, which is 24/7 Lewinsky scandal.

One night, when Lil's finished her homework and is watching the news anchors sternly insinuating as Eileen sleeps beside her, their father comes to the door of the TV room. His hands are piebald with ink and he holds them upright.

"A nice Jewish girl," he says to himself, looking past his daughters and onto the screen. Monica Lewinsky smiles from her photo, that same intern shot the TV can't get enough of, her bangs unapologetically long. Lil's family is Jewish pretty much in name only, which they have in common with the Lewinskys and which is perhaps what is so bothersome to their father.

He leaves the room, and Lil hears the sound of the bathroom faucet as he washes and washes and washes his hands.

"Distasteful," people say on TV. "Unseemly." "Improper." Lil reaches for the television remote—their father calls it the "zapper"; he's climbing back down to the basement now—and changes the channel to the public access station. They're playing the segment on the Taxidermy Club that Lil's the president of at her high school. It's not a coincidence that it's on; it's on all the time, all that footage of Lil and her friends at work on their animal pelts in Mr. Barrow's science classroom, trying to act as if they don't know the camera's there. The station came in to do the piece on the club in the fall, citing its unusual nature, and is still airing it almost daily, since they're not exactly flush with content. The other thing they still play all the time is the recording of the most recent local high school graduation—Eileen's, which for obvious reasons Lil and her parents now sedulously avoid turning on.

After a minute Eileen rolls over and snarls awake.

"What did you do with the TV?" she says.

"I'm tired of Monica Lewinsky," Lil says.

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Eileen says.

Her use of that word is startling and frequent; she picked it up in Chicago, and every time she spits it at her sister, tears leap into Lil's eyes.

Even before Eileen went to college, they never had a hang of the sister thing. They don't even look anything alike—Lil is short, with a little belly and thin, brown hair; sometimes she pulls out a strand and eats it. Eileen is several inches taller, with black hair that used to undulate beautifully out of her head. But in the days since she's been home she hasn't washed it, and it hangs in a tie at the base of her neck like a dead crow.

Eileen grabs the remote and hits Lil in the arm with it. Pained, Lil yanks at Eileen's ponytail. Eileen slips off the couch, poising the remote at the TV. But then Mr. Barrow, Lil's teacher and the founder of Taxidermy Club, appears on the screen. He's young and blonde, not even thirty years old; it's the part where he discusses his own childhood picking out glazed eyes for buck heads, how he wanted to bring that joy to the next generation.

He had been Eileen's teacher, too, and the coach of the Forensics Team; it's a small high school and most teachers are on double duty of one sort or another. Eileen stops and watches with renewed, fixed attention. She used to have a crush on Mr. Barrow, Lil knows. There was even a photo of the two of them Eileen kept on her bureau, taken just after she won second-place at States: they're jointly holding her trophy aloft—Eileen blushing and smiling, Mr. Barrow holding up his index and middle fingers: "We're No. 2" or, perhaps, "Peace." But it wasn't a crush that lasted, and when she went off to college the photo was left behind in the dust of the bureau, beside her necklaces with broken clasps and partnerless earrings.

Mr. Barrow disappears from the screen and now it's a close-up of Lil's hands, which are small and sort of chubby, Lil thinks, but deft as she removes dried blood from the inside of an owl hide. She got to be president of Taxidermy Club because she's the only one, besides Mr. Barrow, who can do a whole owl.

The camera pans to a wide shot of Lil's friend Abe Farb bent over his first buck head. His long legs wrap around the laboratory stool, and his black curly hair falls in his face. It is Lil's favorite part of the segment, watching Abe work.

Lil rubs her arm where Eileen whacked her with the remote.

"You know Mr. Barrow got married," she says.

Eileen turns, like an owl herself. Carnivorous.

“Obviously I fucking know,” she says.

“How do you know?” Lil says.

“Because you got that fucking cake made for him,” Eileen says.

“Oh yeah,” Lil says. Lil’s first act as club president this year was the pooling of funds to buy Mr. Barrow a sheet cake with an edible photo decal of his best deer mount, to celebrate his marriage. He had loved it. But she can’t remember telling Eileen about it, can’t remember once speaking to her over the phone in the three months she was away.

Eileen throws herself back on the couch. “He and I could’ve been something,” she says.

“What are you talking about?” Lil says. She feels disgust form on her face, and she sees Eileen see it. Lil has met Mrs. Barrow, an unnaturally tan lady who had the hiccups the one time she came to Taxidermy Club to drop off Mr. Barrow’s dinner. “Don’t you know what married means?”

On the screen, TV Lil displays her clean owl hide to the camera, and it flaps once, like a wing.

Eileen starts laughing. “You know nothing, you know that?” she says. “You’re such a sheltered little bitch who knows nothing.”

“I’m smart,” Lil says. “As smart as you.”

“And look just how far that will fucking get you,” Eileen says, gesturing to her prone body on the couch.

“Eileen,” Lil says.

“ ‘Eileen!’ ” Eileen shrieks back with her powerful Soprano II lungs. She starts crying, but there’s no sense of release in it. It’s just a fact, a faucet, which no one knows how to turn off.

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After school the next week, Lil stares at the blonde hairs under Mr. Barrow's lower lip, where he hasn't shaved attentively—or maybe he's growing something there, a soul patch.

"Am I your next animal or something?" he says. "You're studying me."

As usual Lil is the first to arrive to Taxidermy Club, which they hold in Mr. Barrow's science lab. He crouches on the floor at the club's cabinet and stacks plastic trays of scalpels on the floor.

Lil blinks. "Eileen's back home," she says.

"Already?" Mr. Barrow says. "Isn't it a little early for winter break?" He stands up and faces her. His Snoopy & Woodstock Christmas tie swings. "Lil?"

"She's taking time off," Lil says. "She hasn't been feeling well."

He smoothes his thumb over the hair underneath his chin. It is a soul patch.

"Should I ask what's wrong?" he says.

Lil glances at the people who are starting to come into the classroom, then looks back at Mr. Barrow. She taps her temple with her index finger. Mr. Barrow's eyes, nose, and mouth flare open simultaneously, as if to make room to accept this information. His face scares Lil more than anything she's seen yet—more than the university with its gargoyles bearing down on everything, more than the colorlessness of Eileen's face, more than the red, red rouge on Monica Lewinsky's cheeks.

"She always pushed herself pretty hard, didn't she," Mr. Barrow says, partly to himself. "Tell her I'm rooting for her. Or, maybe, don't tell her. Whichever's best."

Lil gives a thumbs-up because if she speaks she'll cry.

Her friend Abe walks in the classroom and, seeing her face, leaps over to her. He is tall and concavely chested, and when he wraps an arm around her shoulder she fits perfectly.

Club members who've come in with snacks and pops from the vending machines start to gather around Lil, looking concerned.

"People, give her some air," Abe says.

"Did something happen to Mr. Fritz?" says one of the freshmen.

Lil has been working on a gopher to put in her owl's talons, and the younger kids nicknamed it, even though she's told them not to personify the animals.

"The gopher's fine," Lil says.

She inhales and her snot burbles. Don't think of Eileen, she says to herself as they all head down to the freezer to get their projects. But the high school is full of her. They pass the front office and there's her smiling photo, the newest on the wall of valedictorians.

Abe drapes his arm over her again as they walk. "What's goin' on, Madame Presidente?" he whispers.

Lil looks up at him, and from this angle his nose is like a generous wedge of cheese, large and oily.

"Stuff with my sister," she whispers.

"I thought we were rid of that wench for good," Abe says. Abe hates Eileen—on Lil's behalf, he has said, but also because Abe is on Forensics in Domestic Extemp, and Eileen used to yell at him in practice.

Lil whaps him lightly on the stomach, but his comment works. She feels a small smile form on her face.

"She dropped out for the semester," she says. "She kinda went crazy."

"Can't say I'm surprised," Abe says. "There was always something about her."

“Was there?” Lil says. She’s about to lose it again. She grabs a piece of her hair and starts sucking on it.

Abe pulls her aside at the bottom of the stairs and lets the rest of the club pass.

“Were you serious?” he says.

Her friendship with Abe has always been easy. Now, as she nods, and he envelops her totally in his stringy arms, she can smell his soap and sweat and whatever is his essence underneath those things, and she sees that he is someone with whom she can still be easy, even now.

Lil’s owl’s wings open menacingly, talons flexed to grab. It hangs in her bedroom, which, now that she’s home again, is Eileen’s bedroom, too.

One night she wakes Lil with a shove.

“Take that thing down,” she says.

Lil likes to sleep pig-in-a-blanket style. She wriggles her head out and sees her sister, braless breasts low and quavering in her sleep top.

“Go away,” Lil says.

“Your fucking owl is giving me fucking nightmares,” Eileen says. “I can barely sleep, and then when I sleep I dream of being pecked to death.” She yanks, hard, on the exposed fringe of the blanket, pulling Lil to the floor.

Lil struggles out of the tight roll and starts kicking Eileen’s legs. Once she gets herself upright she pushes her sister onto the opposite bed and climbs on top of her.

“Why are you so mean?” Lil says, pressing Eileen’s shoulders into the mattress.

“You’re the mean one,” Eileen says, slapping the sides of Lil’s thighs.

But they're both weak; they can't hurt each other. Instead, Lil sneezes—a big one that, she can feel, gets spit all over Eileen.

"You're disgusting!" Eileen says, and Lil rolls off. She picks her blanket up off the floor and curls herself back into it on her bed.

Growing up in this room together, it was never stay up late, talk in the dark. But it was also never like this.

Lil chews on the ends of her hair and considers ingesting them. Eileen under the covers radiates an awful, decaying heat.

"The reason I did the owl like that is because he's a predator," Lil whispers. "Didn't you do the owl poop thing in middle school? There's bones it, remember?"

Eileen turns and Lil sees the wet whites of her sister's eyes.

"The problem isn't that I don't get it," Eileen says.

Winter break, there's no escaping Eileen's roosting misery.

A rush order comes in: Two-hundred and fifty t-shirts for a winter Bible camp in two days. Their parents disappear into the basement for hours at a time and emerge with shirts draped over their shoulders that say "Operation God" on the front, and on the back: "Christmas 1998: HE Never Goes on Vacation." Even the Mr. Coffee has been removed from its usual spot on the kitchen counter, leaving a shapely brown stain.

Lil uses the kitchen table to work on the gopher, and Eileen trudges in wearing her bathrobe over her scarlet college sweatshirt, which has begun to accumulate stains. Lil has finished braining the gopher and removed all the other decomposable parts. Now it's just a cape she needs to shape back into an animal.

“Maybe when I’m dead you’ll stuff me,” Eileen says. The purple-brown fans under her eyes are combative.

“Don’t say that,” Lil says. “We don’t even use stuffing. We use mammal fill.”

“Even better,” Eileen says.

Eileen digs into her bathrobe’s pocket and removes three pill bottles, which she shakes like maracas.

“Cha cha cha,” she says. She simpers but her eyes are dark.

“You know Mr. Barrow asked about you before break,” Lil says.

Eileen raises her eyebrows. Actually, Lil sees, her sister’s eyebrows are gone, the big, black caterpillarishness replaced by a brown-pencil line.

“What’d you say?” Eileen says.

“I said you were home, that you weren’t feeling well,” Lil says.

“Thank you so much,” Eileen says. “Shout it from the rooftops, please.”

Eileen’s anger gives Lil vertigo.

“What should I have said?” Lil says.

“That Eileen is a fucked-up freak,” Eileen says.

“I don’t use that word,” Lil says.

“Fine. A freaked-up freak,” Eileen says. She smiles, sarcastic and sad.

Lil strokes the cape of the gopher. Mr. Fritz.

“He says you were one of his best students,” Lil says.

“Oh, does he,” Eileen says. “I’m so flattered. I’m so utterly flattered I could die.”

“Eileen,” Lil says. “Just stop. I’m trying to be nice to you.”

Lil braces for the shriek or blow, but Eileen remains lucid. She bends her index finger onto the kitchen counter. “Haven’t you been watching what I’ve been watching?” she says. “Smart little girls like you, me, Monica? We get chewed up. Chomp, chomp, chomp. Do you not see what I mean? Am I the only one who sees it?”

Lil has begun to notice that no one else is willing to put any blame on Eileen, for all she’s done. “You chewed yourself up,” she says.

“I am sick,” Eileen says. “I am sick on so many levels you can’t even imagine for one moment what it’s like to be me.”

“Thank God for that,” Lil says.

But when Eileen stomps out of the kitchen and Lil is left with her own words playing back in her head, she tries to envision what God she might have been invoking and can’t.

Abe calls Lil, saying he has a question about scalpel-sharpening, but by the end of the conversation they have made a plan for him to come over, since he’s the one with the license.

He’s never been inside Lil’s house before but intuits to enter through the garage, so they don’t run into Eileen splayed on the living-room couch on their way to Lil’s bedroom.

Abe shuts the door and sits down on Eileen’s bed, since he doesn’t know whose is whose. He takes Lil’s hand and strokes her index finger. For Lil, the seating arrangement contributes to the overall touristic experience of being touched in new ways, because she now has a fresh angle on her own bed, which looks just like Eileen’s except it’s hers, and she recognizes every dimple in the fabric.

Abe kisses her, and for one nanosecond Lil registers his saliva as slimy before a new feeling overrides her disgust, and she kisses him back, instinctively opening her mouth so she can feel it more.

It is Lil's first kiss but she isn't thinking of it that way. She's only thinking how good she feels, how her pulse is palpable between her legs. Abe unbuttons the top of her blouse and slides his hand in over her bra, and Lil leans into it.

The door opens just as Lil buries her nose into Abe's neck.

Eileen shrieks and slams the door, but they get a good look at her—still braless though it's nearly four o'clock, a red line running down her face where she'd fallen asleep on the couch.

"Lillian, get out here," Eileen says through the door.

Lil does as she is told; this is one of her qualities. She feels each smooth button on her fingers as she slides it back into its hole. In the mirror over Eileen's bureau she sees two patches of red stamped on her cheeks and, behind her, slouched on the bed, Abe, his hands tented under his nose. She tells him she'll be right back and he meets her eyes in the reflection.

"I've tried to tell you a million times," he says. "She doesn't own you."

Lil hears without listening; Abe is an only child and she is sure he doesn't understand. She goes into the hall and Eileen brings her face close to hers. It's hard not to notice that her breath smells.

"You are so stupid," Eileen says.

Lil can feel her body burning red all over.

"You're stupid," Lil says.

"What do you even know about him?" Eileen says.

"He's my friend," Lil says. "You're the one who doesn't know anything about it."

“You’re too trusting,” Eileen says. She brings forward her bottom teeth, which are tiny, like a baby’s. “Men,” she says. “Avoid them.”

“Why?” Lil says.

“Because it’s almost 1999,” Eileen says, “and they think they can get away with anything.”

Eileen almost never doles out advice, and Lil, who still has plenty of admiration left for her sister in spite of everything, does not know how to turn down the opportunity to take it. She goes back into the bedroom. Abe is standing up, back to the door, his forehead up against the wallpaper. Horse wallpaper. A long time ago Lil and Eileen agreed on horses.

“I think you have to go home,” Lil says.

Abe makes a fist at his side but doesn’t do anything with it. When he walks away, his forehead leaves a dot of oil on the wallpaper.

He passes Eileen in the narrow hallway and mumbles under his breath.

“What did you say to me, Farb?” she says.

“I said, ‘You are walking the line here,’ ” Abe says.

“Just stay away from my sister,” Eileen says.

“You don’t know anything about your sister,” Abe says.

They don’t do Christmas and don’t know how to do Hanukkah. Still, they have the New Year. As the ball drops on the TV screen, even Eileen cracks a smile. Their father peels the foil off a bottle of champagne and pops the cork off into the sink. Both girls are allowed to have some, but when Lil takes a sip she discovers it’s disgusting.

What happens next is no one's fault, exactly, but they all pay for it. Their father bounces the remote in his hand, and when the channel changes it's Eileen on the screen, at a dais in a white mortarboard, speaking over a sea of white hats about the blinding brightness of the future.

"…and before I die," they hear her say before their father manages to shut it off.

But it's enough. Lil is sitting on the floor and feels Eileen tense up on the couch above her.

"Has that thing been on TV this whole year?" she says. She whips her head back and forth, and her hair, in its tie at the base of her neck, flops with it, wafting her pungent, unwashed scent Lil's way. "Will somebody please fucking respond to me? Poppy? Mom?"

Lil plugs her nose by sticking it in between her knees. Eileen's anger sublimates into sobs.

"What happened to me?" she says.

Their parents sit on either side of her and lay their hands on her shoulders.

"You're sick," they say. "That's all."

Eileen is calm for a moment, but then she inhales and releases her breath in a scream, shoving away her parents' hands and landing her eyes for one venomous second on Lil before tearing from the room.

This is how they now live. They'd have to unplug the TV to be shielded from hours like this one, but then, instead, there'd be the silence, which would only amplify, as it does tonight, the reverberations of Eileen throwing her head against the bedroom wall—six times before their father reaches her and makes her stop.

Their parents decide to take Eileen to the ER, and Lil balks: She does not want to go with them, but she does not want to stay home alone.

Because it is New Year's Eve, the Farbs are still awake, or at least they pretend to have been, when Lil calls their house past one-thirty a.m. and explains the situation to Abe. His parents love Lil; he says she is welcome at their house, that he'll come get her right now. Lil is on the phone in the kitchen and watches her father help Eileen into her winter boots—she's practically catatonic, barely managing to stand on her own as he tightens the laces. In the background of the call Lil can hear Dr. and Mrs. Farb cheerfully imploring her to accept Abe's offer, as if it is a Sunday afternoon in August and they've made too much lemonade, not the earliest, frigid hours of the New Year, when the civilized world is on its way to bed, making resolutions. Lil's mother shuffles into the kitchen with two grocery bags of Eileen's clothing and toiletries; they are hoping the hospital will check her in. "My mom's gonna make up the guest bed for you," Abe says, and finally Lil agrees, because that is why she called him in the first place: She needed his help.

Ann in Stitches

One Friday late in October Jay Fast got a call from his mother telling him that his little sister had "news." Ann was seventeen, living in the same house in the Berkshires where Jay and his brother had grown up. It was uncertain whether she would ever be able to live independently. Jay lived an hour away in Hartford, working at a Michael's craft store, and by keeping in frequent phone contact he felt he successfully maintained an illusion of family closeness. Really, he had his own life, which neither woman nor his brother knew much about.

"I have to tell you in person," Ann said when their mother passed her the phone. "Come up tomorrow please."

For all of her limitations Ann was in fact a master manipulator.

She was waiting on the front steps in her puffy, sky-blue coat when Jay pulled in on Saturday, just as the sun was coming down. On the drive up, the leaves in the mountains were in their fiercest oranges, but here they were already past their peak, dulled into brown and mostly fallen, covering the driveway like a wet rug.

"You're here you're here you're here!" Ann said. She jumped up and down as Jay rose from his car, the same he'd driven since high school, his father's old Toyota, now even older. Ann's ears, which stuck out too far from her head, were almost purple in the cold. She hopped down the porch steps and Jay took her hand, twirling her under his arm. Her long, brown hair was back in its usual ponytail, which their mother did so that it stayed out of her face, though every once in a while she'd still get it in something at school—soup or glue or caramel sauce—and wouldn't realize till she was home. Then their mother would wash her hair for her, which Ann loved.

The ponytail tickled Jay's face as he spun her.

"*Ann* Frank," he said. She was tall and lovely and her hand was soft. "*Ann*imal House, *Ann*derson Cooper, *Ann*astasia, *Ann*d I'm done."

She laughed, showing her big, scrambled teeth. It had not made sense to do orthodontia on her, as they'd done for Jay and Oren, because she couldn't be relied upon to manage the extra maintenance of braces.

Jay's mother, Mrs. Frances Fast although she'd been divorced ten years, was waiting for him in the kitchen. She was short and hefty and wore frameless glasses that magnified the size of her eyes.

"My boy," she said as he hugged her.

Jay always felt, coming home, that his female familial entourage treated him as if he was returning from some war. He sat down at the kitchen table and felt the two of them watching him. Ann opened the fridge and pulled out three cans of Diet Pepsi. She separated them from their plastic loops and handed them out, attempting mightily to affect nonchalance.

"Girls drink regular, *women* drink diet, so Ann tells me," his mother said. "Go on and tell him about it, Ann."

Ann started giggling nervously. A person only needed to have grown up watching their brother Oren tickle Ann to her breaking point to know that double-edged laugh. Oren, who had always been the high achiever in the family, lived in Boston now, a computer engineer, a success.

"I'm going to Homecoming," Ann finally said. "Zane asked me, and I said yes."

Jay smiled, surprised. Usually what Ann called news would not, out of someone else's mouth, qualify for the title, but in fact she'd done it. He squinted and imagined a regular sort of sister delivering the same news, and wondered what a regular sort of brother would say.

“Who’s Zane?” he said.

Ann’s ears and nose blushed. “A friend,” she said.

“Anna bonanza,” Jay said. “What does our mother say about all this?”

“She said I could go,” Ann said.

“I did say that,” their mother said. She looked distressed. “Practically their whole class is going. The aides encouraged it. I don’t know.”

If Ann understood what their mother’s candid speech meant, she didn’t seem to care.

“So is he good enough for you, Annie?” Jay said. “Do you like him?”

That laugh again. She stood up. “I think I’ll be going to my room for a minute,” she said. She ducked out from the kitchen and thumped up the stairs.

“You see what I’ve been dealing with,” his mother said. “Zane Reyes. We have him over. Some sort of shaking when he was a baby. Not that people tell you these things but I might figure it out from ‘early traumatic brain injury,’ which is what his aide told me, and his mother’s not in his life?”

The ceiling squeaked with Ann’s footsteps.

“At least it’s not prom,” Jay said.

“Not til the spring,” his mother said.

They looked up at one another. His mother’s magnified eyes—sea-green—blinked resolutely.

“There’s one more thing,” she said. “She wants you to make her a dress.”

Jay pressed a hand over his heart. Any reluctance he had been sharing with his mother about sending Ann out with a boy evaporated instantaneously. It had been a long time since he’d

had an assignment—a commission. He could return to his drawing pad. He could make something beautiful.

His mother did not seem so pleased, though. Jay tried to temper his face, to rein in his joy. He took his hand off his heart and shrugged.

"It'll save you some money," he said.

"I'm fine with money," she said. "Oren sends money."

Jay had never had a date to Homecoming. He'd danced with all the girls on the school-cafeteria dance floor, but it wasn't till senior year that a boy from his CAD class unzipped Jay's jeans in the school's basement bathroom and put what felt like Jay's whole body inside his mouth.

Jay was glad to figure that out—glad, finally, to understand the bright line delineating his attraction to a dress and the absolute absence of desire he felt for the woman inside.

But figuring that out didn't get him into college, and it didn't make him successful. Connecticut was supposed to have been a temporary solution—community college, a course in fashion design—but years had gone by and all he had to show for himself was a managerial position at Michael's and a line of yellow shorts that he'd sold, one summer, to a boutique in West Hartford. He'd named the line after Ann, although his mother hadn't let her wear them. They were too short, she said, which made sense back then, when Ann was twelve. Jay had hung a pair in a frame on her wall so that she could see the eponymous label from her bed: *Ann in Stitches*.

Jay went upstairs to find her. Her door was open—it was always open. Everything in her room was sky blue: the comforter, a circular area rug, even the swiveling desk chair's cushions.

Jay had even helped her paint the walls sky blue a few years ago—Jay and not Oren, but beside the shorts on the wall, eight-by-tens of both boys' high school senior portraits were given equal prominence—their shoe-polish-brown hair in smooth waves; fiercely straight teeth; freckles and acne scars dotting their cheeks.

Ann was sitting on her bed, lightly bouncing. She had recovered from her earlier bout of shyness—or 100 percent forgotten it. You could never quite tell with Ann.

"I can tell you guys apart," she said, seeing Jay eye the portraits.

Here was something Jay did not like to think about: He and Oren were identical twins.

"Oren's balding faster than me," Jay said.

"No he's not," Ann said.

Jay sat down next to her on the bed and checked his hairline in the vanity mirror across the room. Perfectly fine. He was perfectly attractive.

"Mom told me you want a dress," Jay said.

"An *Ann in Stitches* please," Ann said.

They were talking to each other's reflections in the mirror, which clearly delighted Ann. The littlest thing, to her, was a game.

"I was thinking sky blue," Jay said.

She started giggling, and bouncing harder on the mattress. When she turned to look at Jay directly he could see her eyes, also sea-green, glistening with pleasure.

"That's my favorite color," she said through the hands she'd cupped over her mouth, as if she hadn't realized anyone else knew.

+ + +

The fashion design course Jay had taken at community college was actually called costume design. Fair enough, Jay believed, because for a beginner it was an importantly moot distinction: You either had or did not have the ability to create a dress that was not a costume, and if people found this out too early the world would miss out on some life-affirming garments.

Jay had circumstantial, inconclusive evidence that he could make dresses that were not costumes. Circumstantial because anyone could make something for a class. Inconclusive because the professor, an advocate of his work, had been interested in the rest of him, too.

On Sunday evening, after returning to Hartford, Jay sat down to his drawing pad. Page after page of the same yellow shorts, his only success, a pocket button moved a centimeter up, down, left, right. He turned to a blank piece of paper and selected the cerulean colored pencil.

He had convinced their mother to help with taking Ann's measurements, a process Ann had treated with the solemnity of a coronation. Jay could hardly stand the way she looked at that moment, taking herself so seriously with the measuring tape around her bust. Just to get her laughing again he'd measured her ankle and her wingspan and declared her "a fine specimen."

The dress would have thick straps, he'd promised their mother, so that Ann wouldn't need a new bra; if this was going to be a free dress it needed not to have ancillary costs. The rest, he discovered for himself: Intricate beading like a star exploding across the chest. Empire waist. Simple zip up the back for their mother. Hem below the knee.

At home every night after work, Jay sat at his sewing machine, slowly feeding the cerulean crepe-back satin under its silvery foot. By hand, he sewed the sparkling beads across the bodice. The effort of making something new worked on him; he could smell the Christmas wreath scent of Michael's on his skin but also something else, an unrelated sweat.

A week later, he finished. He opened his box of labels and affixed one beside the zipper on the inside of the dress, *Ann in Stitches.*

Either an accomplishment or a farce, boys, Jay thought. The words seeped into his mind. Their mother was forty and newly pregnant, with no idea what was ahead, and that was what their father'd had to say to Oren and Jay, then nine. It was one of Jay's most crystalline memories: Some Saturday morning breakfast, he and Oren in their polyester soccer jerseys although Jay hated the sport, hated every sport; in between their father's front teeth, a disgusting, wet poppy seed.

Jay called Evan Simcha, his old professor, who was not really so old. Evan was now involved in a recycled-jeans venture downtown and had time on his hands to come over whenever Jay needed, which was all the time.

Evan arrived in the evening and put a hand on Jay's hip as he assessed the dress.

"It's unsubtle, unafraid of its beauty," Evan said. "Except for that bottom hem. There, I can smell fear. Take it up."

"But it's for Ann," Jay reminded him.

Evan had never met Ann but had been told all about her.

"I don't see what that's got to do with hemlines," Evan said.

Jay was falling in love with Evan. They'd circled around one another for years, first as friends and then as lovers and now this. They knew everything about one another. They knew just what to say. Evan knew just what Jay needed to hear.

Jay embraced him, and ran his hand fondly over the recycled jeans.

Life is not a farce, their mother had said. *It is a gift.*

+ + +

"Hmm," his mother said.

It was the day of the dance, and to Jay's relief the dress captured—or maybe released—Ann's body. She had wanted it to be a surprise—had not wanted a fitting, had wanted Jay to feel how entirely she trusted him to deliver her a perfect garment. In return, she was beautiful. It was hard not to notice. Skinny arms with small, feisty muscles. Clavicles you could hang a coat on. Good breasts for a dress.

"It's a little short," his mother said.

"No don't, Mom, *don't*," Ann said. "It's perfect."

Oren had agreed to drive in from Boston for pictures and stood in Ann's bedroom door in his tan leather coat, surveying her.

"Ann, you look hot," he said. "As long as Jay didn't screw it up and the whole thing doesn't fall off midway through 'Baby Got Back.' "

"How would I have screwed it up?" Jay said. He was sitting on Ann's bed, glancing peripherally in the vanity mirror, seeing his face darken with anger. "I went to school for this. I know what I'm doing."

"You went to class, singular," Oren said.

Jay looked at himself squarely in the mirror to calm himself down, but that didn't help because his own face was Oren's face—the same practically down to the acne scars on their cheeks, and yet it was as if they were from warring solar systems.

Jay rose and wedged his index fingers under the dress's two thick shoulder straps. Ann's skin was warm and soft. He yanked hard and Ann teetered on her heels, but the dress, as Jay knew it would, held strong.

"Hey," Ann said.

“I’m just showing Oren, Annie,” Jay said, “that I do quality work.”

“No need to shove her around,” Oren said.

Jay let go of Ann and approached his brother.

“I did not make a ‘hot’ dress, I made a beautiful dress,” Jay said, folding his arms.

“Boys,” their mother said. “Out.” She put a hand on each of them and lightly shoved them into the hall. “Yell when the Reyeses are here,” she said, then closed the door on them.

They were almost never alone anymore. Oren folded his arms, and Jay realized he was mimicking him.

“Don’t start,” Jay said. He walked downstairs and Oren followed.

“Didn’t I say she looked good?” Oren said. “Don’t you know that when I say something’s ‘hot’ it obviously means I like it?”

“If that’s what you really think of our sister, keep it to yourself,” Jay said, immediately regretting the lame comment.

“You’re the one who made a fucking prom dress for her,” Oren said.

They’d gotten into so many fights in this one spot throughout their lives: the foyer, right by the front door, the place of coming and going, where once there had been a pile of shoes of all types but now it was just women’s—boots and flats and mules and sneakers, all the same size whether they were Ann’s or their mother’s.

Through the narrow glass pane on the front door, a man was peering in—big, with dark hair oiled back and hands nervously folded over the expanse of his belly. Oren opened the door. It was Zane. He was Latino and about a head taller than Jay and Oren, and he resolutely shook their hands without looking up off the doormat.

Jay and Oren exchanged a quick flicker of a look which, despite its brevity, conveyed their identical surprise: The boy from Ann's class was in fact a man.

Following behind, Zane's father and stepmother introduced themselves.

"Twins!" said the stepmother, a small woman with graying blond hair made to look even smaller by a gigantic red pea coat. She reached up and put her hands on Zane's shoulders. "Do you see, Munch? That Ann's brothers are twins?"

Zane looked up. His face was damp with sweat and his eyes, assessing Oren and Jay, were bright jade. Finally, he gave a nod. "Cool," he said.

His stepmother explained that they'd had to talk him down from a tuxedo into his current outfit, a corduroy blazer with checkered bowtie that Jay actually found very stylish.

"The Czar of Routine is suddenly Mr. Special Occasion," said his father, who was short but also stout, Latino. "I said, I must meet whoever this girl is."

They could hear through the walls the sound of the faucet gushing on and clamping off. Then their mother appeared on the landing and came down, a grin on her face as if stapled there. "Go on Ann," she said behind her.

"Wooph," Zane said. He put his hands on the banister and stretched as if he'd just completed a long run. "Am I nervous, Dad."

They saw her hand first, gripping the rail, then the blue of the bottom, then all of her. She caught Zane's eye and an unrestrained smile spread over her made-up face.

Zane put two dramatic hands on his head. "Wooph," he said.

"Hi," Ann squeaked.

The families surrounded the couple with cameras. Ann and Zane didn't touch but leaned in closer together, politely, when asked.

"My cheeks hurt from smiling," Ann said after a while.

"Mine, too," Zane said.

Jay put his hand on his heart. They were sweet together.

They all shuffled outside to see the couple off in Zane's parents' car, and Zane's stepmother caught Jay's arm. "*Teen Vogue* is calling," she said, glancing over to Ann, who was having trouble gathering the slippery fabric of the dress's skirt into the back seat of the car. The woman pinched Jay's wrist and smiled with her red lips pressed together. "What fun for both of them," she added.

"Thanks," Jay said, uncertain of whether he was being complimented.

Ann finally made it all the way into the car, and Zane ran around the other side to join her in the back. Jay, Oren, and their mother stood at the end of the driveway to wave them off.

"He is a giant," Oren said as the car backed out.

As the car became smaller down the street, the three of them could see Zane land his arm decisively around Ann's bare back.

Together, they waited for Ann to return. They sat in the living room off the foyer and watched a few episodes of a reality television show featuring professional nannies who came into people's homes and critiqued their parenting. Their mother finally accused the show of being "too real" and then fell asleep on the recliner.

"Homecoming when I was seventeen," Oren said, "I got completely blitzed and fingered Elissa Beal on the dance floor."

"I was seventeen, too," Jay said.

"Her dress was so short," Oren said. "I could smell her on my hand for days after."

Jay knew this already; he had been at this dance and he had been subjected to this story before. But never, after previous tellings, had he thought to counter it with his own.

"You know Brady once gave me a blow job in the bathroom by the art studio," Jay said. "Not at Homecoming. But, still."

Oren turned to him. Brady Iverson had been Oren's soccer teammate, another Advanced Placement juggernaut. He'd been in the same design class as Jay only because there was no accelerated version, no AP CAD. Neither Jay nor Oren had talked to Brady in years or knew where he'd ended up.

"My Brady?" Oren said.

"Yours," Jay said. He started to laugh. It was very hard to catch Oren unawares and the sight of it—the shock on his face, less at the fact of Brady and Jay together than of Jay, for once, possessing prior knowledge—filled Jay with peculiar pleasure.

Lights fractured off the windows, and the pitch of a car motor rose and fell. Oren bit on his fist, clearly still finishing the puzzle of Brady.

Ann's dress shoes clacked on the porch steps.

"Welcome home, Queen Ann," Jay said when she came through the front door. He felt jubilant. He poked their mother, who snorted and woke up. She felt for her glasses at her chest and slowly propelled herself out of the recliner.

"Did you have fun?" she said, groping toward Ann and pulling her into a hug. But then their mother backed away and picked up a large clump of Ann's long hair, down for the evening, stuck together by something dry.

"What did you get yourself into now?" their mother said.

"I don't know," Ann said.

Oren took his fist out of his mouth, and he and Jay shared a look. They smirked, guiltily, at the exact same moment.

Their mother was now fully awake. “Go upstairs for a shower,” she said to Ann.

Ann kicked her nice shoes off and let them knock against the wall.

“I want you to wash it,” she said.

“I think you’d better,” their mother said.

It was dark where Ann was standing by the front door, but the beads on her bust shimmered from the living room light. Somehow, Jay thought, she and Zane had managed to conceal themselves long enough to complete the act, at least on his end—the school bathroom was a fine place, as Jay knew, for five minutes of privacy. But had she wanted to give Zane pleasure? Did she seek pleasure herself? A regular sort of sister and he would have known the answer but wouldn’t have had to see the evidence. A regular sort of sister and she would have known how to hide her desire.

Ann leaned back against the front door. Jay knew she was truly upset but the stance, the way she brought her palms to her face, looked like a pose.

“Everybody is ruining everything,” she said through her hands.

“Tell me what it is,” their mother said.

Ann’s fists clenched, and she began thrashing them against the door.

“It’s just stuff,” she screamed.

Their mother expertly gripped Ann’s forearms to stop her flapping.

“You’re leaving me,” Ann said.

“I’m not,” their mother said. “You’re growing up. That’s all.”

Ann ran up the stairs, making each step squeal. They could hear her bouncing on one foot, then a sky-blue blur sailed over the stairs. The beaded bodice of the dress scratched to a rest on the hardwood.

They could hear it through the walls: The shower gushed on, clamped off, gushed on.

"It begins," Oren said, the usual snickering quality of his voice for once glazed with real feeling.

Jay walked past him. He picked up the dress off the floor, his dress, and the crepe-back satin crinkled encouragingly—fearless of its beauty, as Evan had said.

This I Do For Countless People

Rivka was crying in her room. When I walked into the apartment, her voice briefly rose to a shriek, then settled back into breathy stabs from behind her door. She was on the phone with someone, possibly Eisner, although not likely because Eisner lived in the next building over and if they wanted to get into a fight they would cross the lawn and do it in person, which I knew because I had seen them do it before.

I dropped my bag and felt the weight of all my textbooks float off my shoulder. I'd been studying at the med school library in my usual spot three levels below ground. My fiancé used to say that it was a strange place for a woman who loved the sun to hole up, but it was truly the only place I found I could focus. Now that he was no longer my fiancé, I needed especially to focus.

Rivka and I, not friends but not strangers at the time we'd moved in together after graduation, had inherited our place from two girls a few years ahead of us at the U who'd moved out to marry. It was a custom in our community to pass down apartments so that nobody needed to kasher the kitchen, which required boiling, burning, blow-torching every surface. People cared to different degrees, but even the most basic, ceremonial procedure was complicated and time-consuming, also a fire hazard.

The location was good, halfway between the shul and Dupont Circle, but the space was small. From every room the sounds of every other room could be heard.

"But I *can't*," Rivka said to the person on the other end of the line.

In the bathroom, Rivka's washed bras hung over the shower rod, oozing water down the curtain. I'd asked her numerous times not to leave them there to dry. Something about them

grossed me out—the way the cups curved out even when empty, the colored eyelets on the clasps smiling squarely.

The shrieking got more frequent until Rivka abruptly hung up on whomever she was talking to.

I stood outside her bedroom door, considering whether to intervene. A few months before, when my engagement to Menachem ended, Rivka took me out to the kosher restaurant that had the boba she liked and let me say what I needed to say. On Shabbos, she took me to dinners hosted by her friends, girls who'd only ever vaguely known Menachem and me and didn't have an opinion on the matter, like other people did. "I am a great roommate," Rivka'd said. "Look how I take care of you when everyone is saying all those things. I don't believe any of them."

I tapped on her door. "Bubbeleh?" I said.

"I am not your granny," she whined through the door. "Why do you always call me that?"

She never understood my jokes, so I took her response as a sign of health.

"Never mind," I said. I was relieved. "Forget I was here."

The last class of the semester was a lecture on throats. The professor projected footage of vocal cords onto the wall, and when they spoke or sang they quivered open and closed, looking like a cervix that couldn't make up its mind. Across the room, Menachem pulled at the red hairs on his face, apparently noticing neither the similarity between the otolaryngology and gynecology images nor me.

At the U, girls I'd studied with from the premed society had either come out and said ix-nay on the ildren-chay or indefinitely deferred the question. These were women who wanted to

cut people open; future surgeons. They felt very strongly what was and wasn't going to happen for them. And they thought my "religiosity"—their word—was cool, another form of intensity.

By the time I realized that I agreed with them on the matter of child-bearing and medicine, we'd all gone our own ways. Nobody in my circle in D.C. was having kids yet, but the disinterest in planning to do so on my part was seen as a kind of attempted putsch. Within a few days of my talking to Menachem about it, people we knew were circulating grotesque offshoots of the truth, like that I'd had a pregnancy already but aborted it—which was not even possible since Menachem and I had abided by the technicality that prevented such a thing from occurring.

At the end of the lecture I allowed myself one last look at Menachem. Bent over his satchel, a narrow window of his back peeked out below his blue sweater. His white tzitzit fringe snaked out from underneath the knit and pooled in his chair. In his skullcap, he stuck out among the other med school students, as in my skirts and sleeves did I.

Menachem never studied in the library and lived in the other direction from our shul, where we were separated by a partition. I knew I probably wouldn't see him until finals, then another two weeks would pass for break before we were back in class. Not that, even then, we would speak. I was like a schoolgirl with a crush, with all of the yearning and none of the hope.

I left the auditorium in the duck-out posture I'd refined since the break a few months before. I scurried up the opposite aisle and out the door by the water fountains, which emptied me out onto the grated metal walkway off the school's gargantuan heating unit. A backhoe and a portable dumpster had recently appeared, the claws of the hoe's bucket resting on the cement sidewalk a floor below as if about to go in for a good scratch. I pulled my usual imaginary cigarette from the air and imaginarily inhaled on it. I imaginarily let the tobacco linger in my lungs, then let it out. For some reason it made me feel better.

I was alone. The rabbis tell the story of the Jewish family that lives miles away from the shtetl, isolated at the top of a hill. The father asks the rabbi of the village occasionally to send him holiday accoutrements—candles for Hanukkah, the shank bone for Passover. But is the family Jewish, the rabbis ask, if they have no one to share with?

And that was a whole family. I was one measly woman.

The HVAC unit sighed steam. It was barely after five and the light was already being vacuumed out of the sky.

On my walk home, sleigh bells shivered and ivory lights pulsed. A holiday street fair on Dupont Circle constricted the sidewalk to a thin opening between women wrapped in sleeping-bag length coats nodding at tall bottles of off-brand lotions and thick knit gloves.

At the edge of the tables of wares, a hand thrust a flyer into my stomach.

10% off — Tantalizing Spa. Cure you're Winter blues! Silver Spring, Close to metro. Walk-ins welcome!!

I smoothed the paper between my fingers. The future Dr. Greenberg knew it wasn't a prudent solution, but Dina, me, now, wanted it. I'd never been to a tanning salon before but I loved the sun. That, at least, Menachem had accepted about me. The previous summer we'd driven a Zipcar out to Sandy Point and trudged barefoot in the clumpy, hot beach in the shadow of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

G-d, not in vain but the real deal, seemed present in the neon orange paper. *Silver Spring*, where the only people from shul who ever visited were those with cars seeking a different kosher restaurant. Even then, as quickly as they ate they were gone.

I'd stopped on a narrow plateau of sidewalk between lanes of traffic on Dupont. I turned behind me to get a look at the person passing out the flyers, but the street fair wasn't there. I

stared in disbelief as a pack of women in tight running pants and earmuffs jogged through the space that just before had contained the knot of tables. Only when the white man glowed and I stepped into the road did I remember that I'd already gone halfway around the circle and therefore was not the witness to anything divine.

At home, Eisner was at our stove. When he heard me come in, he raised his hands as if they were guns and starting shooting me.

"Pew pew, pew pew," he said.

I took a bullet in the heart and collapsed on the doormat. Eisner extinguished his two index fingers with a whuff of his breath and holstered the imaginary guns at his hips, where the tzitzit fringe hung.

Rivka's bedroom door was closed.

"Where's our friend?" I said as I got up.

Eisner leaned in conspiratorially.

"She's mad at me," he said. "I'm making conciliatory soup. Although don't ask me 'Conciliation for what?' because I don't know."

I picked up the empty can.

"That's my soup," I said.

"She said it was hers," Eisner said.

Eisner was extremely tall and knobby, but his shoulders were broad and the overall effect wasn't bad, if you liked that sort of thing. Still, even on good days he had a malarial look to him, Tonight, he seemed truly wrung out.

"Forget it," I said. "I'm always getting into fights with her, too."

“Those aren’t really fights,” he said. “She loves you.”

The door to Rivka’s room opened and she huffed into the kitchen, scratching at her hands underneath winter gloves. She was always wearing gloves, which some people in our community took as a hare-brained tenet of her modesty, others as a way to hide her ringless finger. It was generally acknowledged that Rivka was capable of this kind of ridiculous reasoning; only a few people knew it was actually because of the eczema. From my room at all hours I could hear her scratching, the back-and-forth schiff and schaff of her nails roving across her skin.

“Were you OK the other night?” I said.

She turned to me, her face sour but blushing.

“What happened the other night?” Eisner said.

“Can everyone please get off my back?” Rivka said. “Do I look right now like I want to answer the kamikaze brigade of inquisition?”

If we’d been alone I would have laughed right at her. But Eisner’s jaw thickened so that chinks of muscle became visible through his skin.

“What was happening,” he said slowly, “the other night?”

My soup began to burble in the pot.

“Who knows?” I said, attempting levity. “It’s Rivka, right? Always up to something crazy.”

“What are you talking about?” she said. “I was on the phone with my parents, if you must know.”

“Parents, shmarents,” I said to Eisner.

But the chink in his jaw deepened into a ravine.

“Can you leave us alone now, please?” he said.

The only thing sadder than being around Rivka and Eisner was being excluded by them.

The next morning, I loaded my bag with organs textbooks as if as an alibi and got on the Metro for Silver Spring.

Tantalizing was at a strip mall, two turns from the station as advertised. Green tropical plants pressed up against the panes of glass, and, inside, the air was oven-hot. A woman sat at a white-painted wood desk, lithe and middle-aged, black hair dipped with blonde curling over her brown freckled shoulders. I told her I was looking more for the anti-depressive benefits than the color.

"I want that beach feeling," I said.

She had a heavy Russian accent and painted lips that didn't smile.

"This I do for countless people," she said.

The room she gave me had a long line of clothes hooks and more green plants pouring out of pots at staggered heights. The bed lurked in the corner. The woman bent over to shove in the plug, and the top of a white thong dawned over her jeans as the long azure lamps illuminated. She opened the machine, now a gigantic, iridescent mollusk.

"Easy-use handle," she said, gesturing how to close it from within, then leaving me alone.

I rolled off my tights, skirt, shirt, bra and underwear and hung each on its own hook. From underneath the textbooks in my bag, I fished out a bottle of sunscreen and glutted my face and neck with it. I pulled on a pair of gloves and of knee-length socks whose feet I'd cut off so that I could cover my forearms. They were old Hanukkah socks, and the dreidels bulged at my elbow. Otherwise, glimpsing myself in a mirror on the wall as I stepped in, I was naked.

There's hearth warm, sauna warm, dishwash warm, but there's nothing like UV warm. In the blue light, I felt G-d close to me, like I was nesting in the grooves of His fingerprints.

No one had blinked at my ambitions when I was attached to Menachem, but when we were over I learned that people in our community believed med school was something I was doing in the uncomfortable interim before the duties of marriage. I thought of Abbie, the girl who lived in my room before me. The scrunched page of a draft of her master's thesis I'd found, forgotten in the back of the closet, the scrunched, alien-red face of the child she'd birthed last year.

When I walked back out, the woman nodded. She told me her name was Nadeen, and I bought a membership.

"No regrets, live a little, good for you," she said.

It had been weeks since I'd heard the hiccupy sounds of Rivka orgasming under Eisner's finger, and there'd been the crying and the conciliatory soup and the secrets, but when I came home one day and learned that their relationship was over, a cool air hit the inside of my open mouth.

"He didn't understand my pottery," Rivka wailed. She was under the covers of her bed, struggling to pull a tissue out of the box with her gloved fingers.

"*You* broke up with *him*?" I said.

"Yes, dummy, what do you think?" she said.

Her sister, Beth, had come in from Baltimore, and she nudged me aside with a hip, then dabbed at Rivka's sweaty face with a damp washcloth.

Beth was moving to Jerusalem and wanted people to call her Basha so she'd seem more Israeli, but I kept forgetting. She was only twenty and I didn't think it was right for her to be changing her name so unceremoniously.

"Why?" I said to Rivka. "Because you were tired of waiting? What? What could it be?"

Beth put a hand up. "Nobody was waiting for anything," she said.

"He proposed," Rivka said. "Twice."

I suddenly didn't recognize Rivka. Whatever I'd known about her did not include this kind of information.

"Stop looking at me like that," she said. She wasn't crying anymore. "Would you marry him?"

"Was this you?" Eisner said when I called him a few days later. He did not sound happy to hear from me, even though we'd been friends at the U long before there ever was a Rivka. "First you and your asshole, now me and—." He swallowed into the phone. "Did you plant some idea in her head?"

"I planted no ideas in no heads," I said. "I am as shocked as you are."

"Don't do that," he said. "Don't pretend she didn't tell you all of it."

I was trundling on the Metro through the outskirts of Silver Spring. Nobody else in the car was on the phone but I knew none of them and felt I could say anything.

"Why did you even call?" Eisner said. "Shouldn't 'the girls' stick together?"

"I wanted to see if you were okay," I said. "I know what it's like to be broken up with."

"I thought you were the one," Eisner said. "Women's rights, yadda yadda."

Everybody had their theory. "You were wrong," I said.

I pushed my sleeve high up on my arm so that I could see where my tan began, just above the elbow. It was like where the sky met the ocean.

"Whatever," Eisner said. "My mom's murderous right now. People expect things of me. And she knows things. I can feel her knowing things through the phone."

When we were freshmen, Eisner had worn borrowed spandex for the Hillel talent show and danced to the song everyone was singing that year. It had been a harmless scandal, the way his body moved inside the fabric.

"Such as?" I said.

"Such as none of your business," he said. Sounding ill and distant, he got off the line.

Since the break-up Rivka had been lying on her bed and then on the couch, whining that she couldn't find the remote control when it was just between the cushions, moaning when the soup I heated up in the microwave wasn't hot enough.

"*She* broke up with *him*," I told Nadeen when I got to Tantalizing and had to wait for a room to open up.

"This is sounding very unbecoming," Nadeen said.

When Menachem left me, I cried until my lips looked like skinned oranges, but I put on chapstick and went on with it. Me, myself and I were making our plans to be alone with G-d, even if it meant we had to invent our own version of a nunnery, first.

A woman in stilted heels with oil-black hair emerged from one of the rooms and took both of Nadeen's hands into hers. They whispered to one another, then touched noses.

When the woman left, Nadeen turned to me.

"Let me disinfect this, then all yours."

In the bed, I was the pearl. It was a beginning.

+ + +

A decent snow came. Walking through the campus to the library in my long coat over a longer skirt and turtleneck, I felt a sudden superiority, observing the girls in thin, vacuum-sealed black tights. Who is appropriately dressed today? I thought.

Three floors below ground, I spent the hours with my organs textbooks, laptop and flashcards. Someday, it was promised, all this information about ventricles and rectums and alveoli would take root. I came home every night drained, like someone'd pulled the plug on me.

Rivka, whose semester studying how to teach emotionally disturbed children had ended without any kind of culminating challenge, had been mooning around the apartment. One night, she announced her plans to host a girls-only Shabbos dinner—to make herself feel better, she said. I winced at the thought of all of Rivka's friends tra-la-laing around when I needed to study. But when Friday afternoon came and the snow had coagulated everywhere into ice, I got that old party feeling. I decided to help Rivka cook.

We opened a bottle of red wine, and Rivka decided to use the ceramic mugs she'd thrown on the wheel. Everything she'd made at her pottery class was stacked on our mantel or clustered in cardboard boxes that partially obstructed the route to the bathroom. She started rooting through the collection, cooing at each new discovery until all the plates and platters were teetering around the kitchen.

By the time Rivka's friends from her program showed up, she and I had made it back to the bottom of the dark cups, which I had to admit were very nicely shaped.

"I see we're getting fun Dina, tonight," said one of the girls I knew.

"Fun fun fun," I said.

Beth, in again from Baltimore, introduced herself to everyone as Basha, and brought with her two girthy friends whose bellies hung like sand bags over their jean skirts.

At sunset, we lit the candles together. Everyone, even the Indian girl from Rivka's program who had purple eyes and had never been to a Shabbos before, put a hand over her face as we said the prayers, over the light and the bread and the wine, *ha'gafen*, we had more.

Over dinner there was a lot of talk about the ceramics. Each one had a story and an attendant, disappointing comment from the now cast-out Eisner. The three serving platters each had different slimy animals for handles: snakes, frogs, salamanders, an homage to the creatures Rivka used to encounter in her back yard growing up, she told us: the salamanders orange and dastardly on the underside of rocks, the frogs bulbous on the wet asphalt, the snakes jetting between blades of grass. Eisner had barely surveyed them when they came home from the kiln, couldn't remember what held them together thematically, couldn't appreciate Rivka's childhood as the crucible of her self.

Rivka was gorging on the attention, downing wine, smiling and laughing like she was the princess of something.

"The only thing I miss about Simon, I think," Rivka said, "is the sex."

It was as if someone had pressed mute on the room. Beth—Basha—smiled. She was waiting for it to be a joke—a borderline unacceptable joke, her face said, but she was still willing to forgive it so long as it wasn't true. Nobody else was under any pretense. We all knew Rivka didn't know how to make a joke.

Rivka's frummy friends from school turned to me probingly.

“I didn’t know,” I said. I’d assumed Rivka abided by the same technicalities that I did. But even if she hadn’t, everything—pseudo-cohabitation and now this—could have been managed if it preceded marriage.

The Indian girl’s purple eyes moved between all of us.

“What are you going to do now?” Beth said, sudden and loud. “Abba—”

“What Abba doesn’t know,” Rivka said. She took a defiant drink of wine from the mug between her gloved hands.

Beth pushed her metal folding chair away from the table. She grabbed her coat from the couch and huffed out the door, slamming it behind her.

“Anybody else got any questions?” Rivka said.

The silence changed hue. The lips of Aviva and Karen, Beth’s large friends, began to extend outward.

“I have a question,” Aviva said. “What’s it like?”

Rivka nodded, suddenly sage.

“It’s the satisfaction of a need,” she said. “I know *I* didn’t wait, but if you *are* waiting, I’ll tell you that it’s worth it.”

Now everybody at the table was smiling. Even the chicken carcass on the salamander platter was smiling.

“I’m going to call my boyfriend,” the Indian girl said.

“I’m fucking you,” Menachem used to say. It got us both excited, even though he wasn’t.

Aviva and Karen unfoiled a dairyless pudding and served it on ceramic dessert plates, of which there were, remarkably, more than two dozen, all in different, dark shades of shiny.

Everybody ate and giggled, and I had enough wine in me that I had no trouble eating and giggling, too, until Beth, red-cheeked, banged back into the apartment.

"I fell on the ice," she said. "And Eisner is outside. He's standing under the window."

All our mouths were covered in cracked chocolate and nobody said anything. Beth stalked into my bedroom and banged that door, too.

"Pain in my ass," Rivka said. She got up and shoved open the kitchen window next to the sink. A slab of cold air enveloped us all as we gathered behind her.

"What do you want?" Rivka shouted.

My eyes adjusted and over Rivka's shoulder I could see Eisner standing outside a floor below, the furry outline of his hood framing his mournful face.

"Please," he said. He was crying. "I need you."

"Oh my gawd," she said. "Go away."

"The snake!" he yelled. "That's my favorite. The way you got its back to arch like that on both sides, so you could hold it."

"Too late," Rivka said, then jammed the window down again.

Later, I was on the couch with Aviva and Karen. They were in front of the TV—probably the Indian girl had, before she left, been persuaded to be the Shabbos goy and turn it on—and were in thrall to a nearly pornographic show on a women's channel. I was also watching it. There was a woman trying to get a man to sleep with her in an empty courtroom. But the trial was going to start any minute. *You're in contempt of court*, the man said, and then his hand was up her skirt.

I was drunk and tired but also turned on, and headed to my room. Then I remembered that Beth had barricaded herself in.

Rivka, in her pajamas, yanked me away from the door. “The only way to handle Miss Drama is to ignore her,” she said. “You can sleep with me.”

“Shhh,” said Aviva and Karen.

Reluctantly, drunkenly, I fell into Rivka’s double bed next to her. She smelled like a saltine. She reached over and put a hand on my arm, and I felt the wool of the winter mittens she wore at night to keep herself from involuntarily scratching.

In a few seconds her voice sounded syrupy and distant. “Snuggle me,” she mumbled. She turned away and jutted her butt at me. “C’mon.” She wore a long-sleeve shirt and matching bottoms whose light blue stripes curved at me.

I imagined being Eisner, having this body and then losing it. He’d stayed outside for another ten minutes while Rivka tugged corks out of wine bottles with her butt pressed against the window, ignoring and goading him at once. The whole lawn was covered in iced-over snow, but when I saw Eisner finally retreat to his building, he moved as if gliding, not slipping once.

Rivka inhaled a soft snore, and I sidled up to the long line of her back, tucking my legs so her butt pressed into my lap. In Menachem’s bed I’d been the little spoon, always cupped. *Objection, objection,* the woman on the TV had gasped, I could still hear it on the other side of the door. I brought my hips closer to her with one push. The rub was titillating and then shameful, and after another sniff of Rivka’s pretzely smell I turned around and held my own arms, praying to G-d just to fall asleep.

I woke up and reached for my other pillow, which rested against the window and was always comfortingly cold. But my hand scratched against a windowless wall instead.

“Hi, funny lady,” Rivka said, and I remembered where I was.

I kicked off the covers. She was at her closet, holding one of the cardboard boxes that had stored her ceramics but was now partially full of men's clothing.

"Have fun last night?" she said.

"No," I said.

She disappeared into her closet and came back with a stack of boxers.

"OK, weirdo," she said. "Well, I did. And, this cute guy from my Spanish class has been texting me, and when Shabs is over tonight I might see him."

"Did you ever even like Eisner?" I said.

She hefted the box under one arm and grabbed her chin in actual contemplation.

"At the beginning," she said.

In the living room a deep voice growled.

"Is the television going to stay on all day?" I said.

"I like it," Rivka said. "Besides, who's gonna turn it off?"

I'd just gone a few days before, but by Sunday morning I was in need of rays again. Nadeen was surprised to see me but plugged in my machine and turned it up higher at my request.

When I got home, Rivka was out, and I made for the shower. The water's heat mingled with the raised temperature of my skin, and when I squeaked off the faucets and wrapped a towel under my armpits I was once again at ease.

At the bathroom door came two quick knocks, but before I could answer Rivka barged in.

"Hey," I said, trying to close her out.

“We shared a bed and I can’t pee when you’re in here?” she said. “I just drank like a gallon of boba.”

She pushed in and started jimmying down her skirt, then stopped.

“What happened to you?” she said.

“Nothing,” I said.

She picked up one of my arms with a gloved hand.

“You look like a black and white cookie,” she said.

I yanked the arm back from her. “No, I don’t,” I said.

She pulled down her skirt and started to pee. Her hands hung between her knees.

“Don’t look if it weirds you out,” she said. Then, “Is it a disease?”

“No,” I said. “It’s just some sun.”

“Some?” she said. “It looks like the weirdest tan I’ve ever seen. Isn’t that bad for you? Aren’t you supposed to be a doctor?”

“Not yet,” I said.

Rivka pulled her skirt back up and flushed.

“Actually, jeez, your skin looks amazing,” she said. “Look at your legs.”

I hadn’t looked at my legs. They were brown, smooth and fashionable below the towel.

“You have nice legs,” Rivka said. “Somebody, some day, is going to appreciate those legs.”

Her hand fidgeted with her phone inside her skirt pocket.

“Please don’t tell people about this,” I said.

“But it’s so weird,” she said. “Can I at least tell Jaime?”

“Who is Jaime?” I said.

"The guy from my Spanish class. Do you ever even listen to me?"

"Rivka," I said. "This is not public information. I have enough problems."

"What problems do you have?" she said. "Except that you have nice skin and you don't even appreciate it. You're burning it."

"You just said it looked good," I said.

"Same difference. I changed my mind," she said. She started scratching inside one of her gloves with her teeth.

"What can I do to make you seriously promise you won't tell?" I said.

"Stop doing it," she said.

Water from my hair seeped down my back.

"What's my second choice?" I said.

"Take me to your secret tanning lair."

"Why?" I said.

"Because 'secrets, secrets are no fun. Secrets, secrets *hurt someone*,' " she chanted. "And who else is clamoring to be your friend but me?"

I disappeared into the library for the rest of the week in a last pre-finals push, but agreed to accompany Rivka to my salon before sundown on Friday.

"This is the longest Metro ride I've ever been on," she said. Her head was bowed over her phone, sending a text to Jaime that I saw was a direct transcription of what she'd just said.

On the strip mall overhang the word Tantalizing glowed in script red light boxes. In the hot interior, Nadeen gazed at the pair of us without curiosity.

"I'm just here to check it out," Rivka said.

“That is what your friend said when she first come,” Nadeen said. “Take off this coat, stay a while.”

Rivka wiggled out of her zip-up. Sweat was already collecting above her lip. Nadeen held a palm open for her gloves, too, and when Rivka hesitated, Nadeen said, “I have seen everything.”

Rivka peeled back one glove then the other, revealing her blistered hands. I’d never seen them before. The backs were covered in raised red bumps, some shiny and some calloused, atop a sea of snow-white scales. I tried not to react.

Nadeen took Rivka’s hands into hers and ran her thumbs over the lesions, then grunted clinically.

“People think you are a leper, like Miriam in the Bible,” she said.

Rivka nodded, entranced. “Nothing works,” she said.

“Twenty minutes in a good UV bed couple times and we will see who is a fish anymore,” Nadeen said. “Twenty percent off first time because I know I am right.”

“You’re serious?” Rivka said.

Nadeen’s mouth didn’t smile but it did frown.

“No jokes,” she said. “This I do for countless people.”

I hobbled out of my last final, drained but done. They had started doing construction at the medical school, so our tests were held in the university’s magnet elementary. The kids were already on winter break, and as I shuffled down the hall of cubbies I stopped at one of the display tables of popsicle-stick log cabins. Some of them had roofs that opened up, revealing a hearth or bed or, in one ambitious house, a bookshelf of licorice-square tomes.

Glancing up, I saw Menachem sauntering up the hall with a pencil behind his ear. Unfortunately I still found him very good-looking. It had been my strategy all semester to ignore him, to ignore the rattling of my organs in their cage.

He stopped and, without any greeting, said, "You know what an honest guy I am."

We hadn't spoken a word to one another in months.

"Where is this going?" I said.

"I just thought you should know I've been hearing some crazy stuff about you."

"That is the last thing I want to know," I said.

He pulled on the red strands of his beard. "The weirdest I hear," he said, "is that people are going around saying you've got some skin condition where parts of you are a weird color, see? And that's the only reason you dress *frum*, to hide it. And I tell everyone: 'People, people, if that were true I think I would know.' "

Other people started coming down the hall. Someone whooped.

"I need you to shut up," I said.

"Dr. Greenberg," Menachem cloyed, like we were old friends and this was a joke we'd been sharing.

But I was not above him. I could not avoid his bait.

"Should I take this as an attempt to demonstrate care for me on your part?" I said. I wished so hard that it was. "Or is it, as usual, another example of your assholery?"

I said this at full volume, and people walking by turned their necks. As if my clothes and Menachem's kippah weren't enough of a spectacle.

Menachem pulled me into an empty room by the elbow.

“Hey,” he said, his voice freezing. “Listen, I don’t care. I was trying to give you a heads-up that I think you’ve got image issues. For your own good.”

It was a kindergarten classroom.

“I don’t want to be in here,” I said.

“I am not the asshole here,” Menachem said. The pencil fell out from behind his ear and bounced on the rubbery tile. “I made my expectations clear. It’s you who couldn’t commit to what needed committing to, or do you forget that?”

There were tiny chairs everywhere and I was ready to roar.

“I’ll never understand why it wasn’t good enough that we just be together,” I said.

“You’re right,” he said. “You won’t.”

A strange, sweet smell was hanging in the air of the apartment when I got back.

“Who did you tell?” I yelled.

“Only Jaime,” Rivka said, running out of her room. “I swear it was only him. Only because it’s working. See?”

She thrust her hands at me and pointed with the tip of a fingernail to the small patches she said were improved. “Here and here and here.”

I still saw a lot of scales.

“Menachem heard,” I said.

“I’m so over him,” Rivka said.

“That makes one of us,” I said.

I went into the kitchen and found a pineapple gored and bleeding yellow juice onto the counter.

“We made smoothies,” Rivka said.

I was about to cry. I put my hands around the blender and upended it, coaxing the warm remains that had settled by the blade into my mouth.

“Tastes tropical,” I said, then choked out a sob.

Rivka put her arms on me, and I understood I was being hugged. Up close, I could smell her salty scent—my only friend, my fish out of water.

Later that night, Rivka fell asleep on the couch and started running her fingernails across the tops of her bare hands, opening sores. I found her there, the television shooting blue lights at her face, and jiggled her shoulder until she smiled at me familiarly. She seemed glad to be led to bed, where she allowed me to ease the knitted wool mittens over her hands and then tuck her in, as if she were my own.

A Lexicography

Together

One of my hairs has gotten wrapped around the collar button of Spouse's blue shirt, possibly from hugging.

One of Spouse's mustache hairs is wedged in the bristles of my toothbrush.

And our hairs do things together. They make a ring around the base of the bubble-domed bathtub drain catch. They poke through the fibers of the pillow covers and sheets. They congregate on the carpet and mingle with our shed skin cells, our dust. A person might think, because it's gray, this grime's not our skin. But I know that it's gray because it's dead, not because it isn't us.

I like to be right. I like to know. Once upon a time I thought I would be the next Claude Lévi-Strauss. I would describe the people of the world to the people of the world.

For example: Have you noticed that there are pubic hairs on your carpet? And not just the bedroom, where you might expect them. Get on your hands and knees if you don't believe me. They're practically exuberant, reaching up out of the fibers like spires.

Spouse uses the mirror less than I do, but on the bathroom floor below you'll find both our hairs. His, ground up into a fine sand by his electric razor, and a few of my eyebrow pluckings. My other plucked hairs—those on the stomach south of the bellybutton, plus the ones around the nipple—can be found on or around the bedroom comforter, because I prefer to do this sort of tweezing alone, right after a shower, damp towel underneath me, door closed.

Spouse also has rituals he keeps hidden from me. Not nose hair—those he'll tug out anyplace, anytime. But the ones that grow, ivy-like, up the outer ridge of his ear—these he says he deals with and won't explain how.

The vacuum

An assay of the carpet in 21st-century United States begins with the vacuum, and vacuuming is on my half of the chore list. Spouse doesn't like to be made to do things that are loud; he's sensitive about his ears.

As I move the vacuum across the carpet, a dusty cyclone shaped by my longer hairs grows inside its plastic cavity. With each use, I have the same thought: These cones, these vortices, are a way of marking time, helping me to see something that otherwise passes by invisibly—evidence of our togetherness, of our good and precious life that is always in the process of turning itself to dust.

My sister would find this sentiment sentimental, if she were around to read it. On this point, she would ultimately be the victor. The cyclone of dust and hair cannot be kept. It is too filmy, too sneeze-inducing, too dense and disgusting. As soon as I confront what we have accumulated together, I have to throw it away.

But my sister is not here, never will be here, to claim her subjunctive spoils.

When I lived alone I did an anthropological study of myself

Spouse and I are a couple going on five years. Before then (B.S.), I was my sole specimen.

Back then, a single strand of hair falling from my head and landing on my shoulder was sufficient invitation to contemplation. I'd look down my nose, struggling with the third dimension to find it and pluck it up and toss it at my feet. Sometimes hours later I'd discover that it had clung on to the length of my calf.

When one strand fell out like that, of its own volition, I wanted the rest of the defectors out with it. I combed my fingers through my hair, then examined the hand. The first few times, the dragnet would jackpot—two or three hairs in every round. After that, if I wasn't overzealous, I could manage one in every five or six.

And if I didn't immediately toss off the hair, I'd examine it: The remains of a white follicle at the tip, for instance, suggesting the terrain of my scalp. I'd tug and observe that the tensile strength was impressive, as was the color: Even as thin a strand as that was identifiably brown. It was naturally straight, but sometimes an offender broke off with a tight corkscrew in its middle.

When I ran my thumb and forefinger over the hair, it gave a protesting, dolphin squeak.

In a certain mood, I might mourn these hairs. I might wonder what things each strand had seen. How long had it been on my head? For instance (I thought back then): Had that strand been around that night on Lake Champlain when I thought I was falling in love, when I felt I understood how fully I understood nothing? Or had it been there on the day of my college graduation, when I got sunburn on my nose and cheeks and made myself cry by thinking: *My parents have each other and I have no one*—? When really what I meant was: *How will I go on without my sister?*

Dinner

Now, Spouse and I share our house's special, his *lasagna con chest hair*. What is so dirty about hair in food, anyway? When I first met Spouse five years ago, his name was Sean and his chest hair emerged, thickly, out from the collar of his t-shirt, curling to a stop at the base of his

throat, suggesting a world I wanted to know everything about, after such a long time of wanting to know nothing more than the geology of my own scalp.

Androgyny

Spouse has become fond of using my disposable razor in the shower to shave the hair on his toes. He hates shaving his face but is tender about this new habit—he keeps to it as if the Pope might drop in at any time to wash his feet, as if the Pope were concerned with depilation.

Dark, simian hairs sprout near the knob of my ankle. The lighter wisps on my arms make a processional up to the top of my hand, suggesting a knuckle takeover.

I bleach the hairs above my lip with a mustache of white cream. I like to do this when Spouse is around, so he'll know what will be required if I ever go brain-dead and they decide to keep my body hooked up and growing all its problematic gardens.

Five years together, and what was once intractable physiological difference between us now looks like the bias of a blind angle, because look what hairs we have in common. A partial inventory: Head, leg, armpit, pubic, arm, toe, finger, bellybutton-metro, mole, facial, nose, areola, ear, butt, nape.

Shorn

Snippety clip clip chop: a bloodless procedure. I listen to the hairdresser's problems. Her son, her boyfriend's son, her daughter; a foolhardy wedding, a motorcycle dripping fluids in her condominium parking garage, forty dollars stolen from her wallet. In this chair, I feel democratic (lower-case). I could be anyone. Except for the voice that comes out of my mouth when asked

about myself, what's on my mind. "Lexicography," I say. "Socks of real sheep's wool. Amenable. Fa la la la la, la la la laparoscopy."

In the house where I grew up, where my mother cut our hair onto newspaper spread over the kitchen tile, my sister taught me her motto: "Beware the lollipop of mediocrity: Lick once and you'll suck forever."

My sister's hair

We were squatting together in a North Carolina tide pool. I was making shapes in the wet, silty sand with my beach toys and she was filtering it between her fingers. Then I spotted it: A peek of the dark land of hair folded and squished by the seam of her swimsuit bottom. A vision, I thought then, of the ocean of distance I had to make up between us.

An old friend

AJ used to pull out the hairs at the crown of her head. I watched her do it—in class, on the band bus, waiting for our rides home on the bench outside the school. Her face, already white and smooth as a Great Northern Bean, would go blank with private pain.

She used to be happy—when we were young the two of us actually used to fly kites together and sing the song from Mary Poppins.

It wasn't because her dad died that she pulled it out; she started well before then. But his dying offered a belated kind of context, a convenient lie.

"I like the way it hurts," she said to us, her friends, when we came over to sit with her in the bed of his old pickup truck, still parked in the driveway as if he might walk out of the garage door anytime and drive her out to their farm. "I was a bad daughter to him."

By the time we graduated from high school there was a shiny pale half-moon of skin there, as if she'd had brain surgery on that one spot.

Years later the word arrives, fully formed, oily from previous use: trichotillomania, hair-tear-desire, meaning she was only one of many who made herself suffer this way.

A girl I used to babysit for

She was too young for an eating disorder, and anyway the severe digestive pain and intestinal blockage didn't present like one. Finally they did a scan, which is how they found out that inside her stomach was a mass of swallowed hair—"the size of a kitten," the radiologist said in his report.

Once at trichotillomania, it's a quick, vertiginous leap to trichophagia—hair-eat—and then one small, aching step more to trichobezoar—hair-mass-in-gut.

Do

In Baltimore, of interest:

A hairdresser named Janet Stephens was meandering through the Walters Art Museum one afternoon, waiting for her daughter to get out of a music lesson. She made her way toward the bust of the Roman empress Julia Domna because of her elaborate braided bun—Stephens thought it could work as a hairstyle for her bridal clients. But when she tried to recreate the hairdo at home with bobby pins and clips, the mass of braids as large as a loaf of bread wouldn't hold to the head. Stephens turned to the history books for clues how to get it right, and found that scholars believed gravity-defying styles like Julia Domna's were just wigs. Stephens wasn't so sure. The big, loaf-like bun reminded her of the braided rugs her grandmothers used to sew, and

on a whim she tried stitching the hair together. Behold: The hair held to the head. And, it turned out that there was historical evidence to back up her idea: The Latin word typically translated as "hairpin" had another meaning that scholars had overlooked: "needle-and-thread."

Stephens published her findings in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. The journal's editor observed in one newspaper article that the discovery could only have been unearthed by a scholar who was a hairdresser—i.e., he said, "no scholar."

B.S.

I grew my own bikini line but it did not draw down the ocean between us.

Dolphins

Animal : hair = dolphin : fetal whiskers that fall out soon after birth, leaving gray, freckle-like follicles along the snout for life—their expirationless passport into Class Mammalia, domain of self-inflicted pain.

The girl I used to babysit for

The mother was the one who folded the money into my hand at the end of the night—before, during, and after the surgery to have the kitten removed from her daughter's stomach. "Thank you for looking after my hellions," she said, that last word referring, I knew, strictly to her elder child, the adopted son. Sometime later, he would be caught with a hammer poised over his little sister, about to crack her skull open. Her head was as blond as sunlight, just like her mother's. It must have driven him crazy—how clearly she fit in, how easily she got along.

An old friend and my sister's hair

AJ played the trombone, same as my sister, who liked AJ better than she liked me. Underneath AJ's Great Northern Bean of a face was suffering, whereas underneath mine there was, my sister said, "nothing."

"Her dad is dead," is one tactic I tried. "You act as if ours was, too. But you're the same as me. You have everything you need." Which is how the fight began in which I tore a patch of her limp, squirrely hair out of her head, which is all she ever wanted to begin with: Something to hang her hate on.

Dinner

When I swallow Spouse's hair, do I break it down? Will this keratinous protein enter my blood and become a part of me, replace what I've lost?

The vacuum

During those long, mountain-land winters before I met Spouse, I didn't shave anything, which was somehow sufficient to make me think I was experimenting with new identities. I am a separatist, I told myself. I am a gay man in a woman's body. But really I was an animal in hibernation, cold, with hardly a heartbeat.

Another vacuum

I wonder what it means to have been nearly the opposite of the one person in the world with whom you had everything in common.

When I lived alone I did an anthropological study of myself

My mother learned to cut hair from a book, to save money when she and dad were both still in school.

Absent the financial necessity, my sister and I still liked for my mother to cut our hair. We worshipped our parents' former life, the romance (I imagined) of a distance existing between what was needed and what was received.

We were both preemies, four weeks early four years apart, and both stayed briefly at a hospital called Rainbow Babies and Children's. To me there is not a friendlier, more optimistic, more life-affirming-sounding medical institution in the United States. I incubated; I survived. To her, however, it was the place that wrenched her from the kismet she felt was intended for her: a quick return to dust—quiet, wordless dust.

Did you know some people are born with a death wish?

And if they are born with it, can you still call it a mental illness and then stem the questions that bud? Can you close the book?

In Pittsfield

When the firefighters pulled their truck up across the street from Sandy Carter's apartment, every one of their last names, printed in day-glo tape on their jackets, was familiar to her. If she wasn't acquainted with them personally, she knew their mothers or sisters or children. Her whole life was in Pittsfield. She'd raised her children here. It was a historic place, had recently celebrated its two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary with a parade around the square.

It was the house across the way that was on fire. Sandy watched from her apartment's front lawn, cradling the last inch of her coffee in the mug she'd bought for herself—*Grandma Knows Best, But No One Ever Listens*. Smoke was churning out of the house's four front windows, creating a haze over the street. It was early March, still winter, but Sandy didn't need the green zip-up she'd pulled on out of habit.

Sandy was a tall woman, low-breasted, with gray-inflected brown hair she'd last updated around the time of her children's births twenty-some years ago—feathery at the top, stick straight down to the shoulder. She compiled the obituaries for the local newspaper, so she didn't have to go into work until three, an hour and a half from now. She had not been introduced to the family across the street, but she recognized the six of them standing on the sidewalk. She compulsively counted the babies: One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. The three oldest children clung to the woman's jeans. The youngest, only a couple months, bounced in the man's arms—unaware, just like a baby would be. Sandy smiled to herself. At least it was warm, since the kids didn't even have their coats. Then a cold block of air swept across her and she realized it was the fire, not the weather, that was making her sweat.

Sandy's cell phone rang.

"Mackie!" she said.

"Mom, don't shout."

Sandy paused to take a breath of gratitude. Each day she was astonished by the fact of having made for herself a daughter who, now age twenty-four, still called, still lived in town, still occasionally came around for dinner, and now, in ten weeks' time, was going to deliver her first grandchild, a little boy.

"Doodle," Sandy said—she tried to affect nonchalance; it had never seemed a good habit to let them know how viciously you loved them absolutely every second—"right at this moment I am standing outside the apartment watching a fire, which naturally makes me think of the time when I was pregnant with *you*, and I started to make dinner but then fell asleep on the couch and when I woke up—"

"—the stove was on fire and you put it out with flour and saved both our lives," Mackie said.

"That's right!" Sandy said. "*Flour*, doodle, not water, if it's a grease fire. Then smother it."

"I know," Mackie said.

"You nearly died," Sandy said.

"No, I didn't," Mackie said.

Tracks of smoke wrapped around either side of the house horizontally, like the ribbon of a gift, and now orange was stirring at the front windows. Sandy was surrounded by gawkers—strange people, right there on her apartment house's lawn. It was past one in the afternoon, but these people were in their pajamas and slippers, or else in pants that revealed half their butts. The only woman remotely near to Sandy's age was wearing a flowery tank-top dress of the sort Mackie used to covet in catalogs. On this woman the low neckline displayed a canvas of

wrinkles and spots. Sandy stared at her and wondered if it might even be the very same dress she once bought for Mackie, long since donated to the Salvation Army.

Mackie was going on about Jason, the guy who got her pregnant, her boyfriend. She tried to present him to Sandy like he was someone they should both be proud to have around, but Sandy didn't buy it. She knew his type, didn't trust his money.

"He wants his tattoo to say, 'Mackenzie Rose Blevin Plus Jason Franklin Simonetti Equals Jason Franklin Simonetti Jr., all inside a big purple heart," Mackie said.

"Did I miss the part where he's a wounded soldier?" Sandy said.

"Not like that," Mackie said. She sounded deflated. "Just a heart that's purple. It's his favorite color."

The woman with the children clutching her jeans passed by, the infant now in her arms, and Sandy counted the babies again: One, two, three, four. Up close all four were very pale and soft-looking.

"You and your brother used to hold onto me like that," Sandy said.

"What are you talking about?" Mackie said.

Sandy blinked, and felt the cell phone in her hand. She was standing alone.

"Are you still coming for dinner tomorrow?" Sandy said.

"Of course, Mommy," Mackie said.

They hung up. Sandy wiped her hand, sweaty from the phone, on her pants.

Across the street, the firefighters wrestled with the hoses, ignoring the crowd of people that had assembled—hooligan-types, whom Sandy did not know. Only one face, behind a pair of tinted glasses and inside the hoodie of a sweatshirt, was familiar. It took Sandy a minute to place him. He was the one who made Sandy's burritos at the eatery a couple blocks down. Sandy

waved, and he waved back. She'd never seen him without his white apron. It occurred to her for the first time that he might be about the same age as her son.

Dillin was Mackie's little half brother—although the "half" part never seemed to come between them; they were Sandy's children: one, two. Now Dillin was all the way across the country in Seattle. He was twenty-one; she hadn't celebrated a birthday with him since his eighteenth. Why he had to hurt her like this, she did not know. When he called, she could barely listen to what he had to say; the mere cadence of his voice ripped through the thin tissue of her composure and exposed, again and again, that loss.

At least Mackie seemed sympathetic to Sandy's pain. They were both women; they were both still here.

When Sandy got home from the newspaper office after ten that night, the grass in front of her apartment was dotted with empty soda bottles and chip bags that glinted, silvery, under the sodium streetlamp, the same one that filtered orange light into Sandy's bedroom every night. The firefighters and crowds were gone; if you didn't notice that the house across the street was a busted, blackened husk, you might think there had been a block party here, not a fire. At the office Sandy had heard snippets of the reporters' conversation about it—it would be an item in the next day's paper—but she'd been so backlogged with obituaries herself that she'd tuned them out.

Sandy didn't have the paper delivered to her apartment and so the next day, her day off, she didn't read whatever had been written about it. By the time Mackie texted Sandy in the afternoon to say she'd be over for dinner before eight, Sandy had put it out of her mind.

Because Mackie had taught her how, Sandy was able to text back, *Dear Mackie OKK how about burritos I have a punchcard to Hot Harrys I love you Love Mom.*

At eight, Sandy was peering out the window over her kitchen sink. A floor below, Mackie emerged from the passenger side of a car Sandy didn't recognize—a shiny blue Acura with its trunk snootily turned upward like a dog with its butt in the air.

"Who was that?" Sandy said when she unlocked the door downstairs.

"Who do you think?" Mackie said.

Sandy squinted across the lawn and saw Jason through the windshield, squinting back at her.

"Where does he get the money for a new car?" Sandy said.

"I don't want to hear this again," Mackie said.

Every time Sandy saw Mackie she was bigger. They turned up the stairs to Sandy's apartment, and with each step, she moved with dramatic slowness—as if to make some kind of argument, Sandy felt.

Inside the kitchen, Sandy peered through her sink window again and saw him still idling there.

"Is he coming in or something?" Sandy said.

Mackie pressed on the miniscule buttons of her cell phone and looked up. "Did you invite him?"

The darkness outside was liquidy and transparent. Through the window Sandy could see Jason's face in the car briefly glow in the blue light of whatever message he'd just received from Mackie. He drove off.

It was getting to the point where you could really feel the baby in the room, even though he was still under Mackie's skin. They stood silently underneath the kitchen fluorescent and Sandy thought she could hear him juicing around.

"You don't listen to me," Sandy finally said. "You want to remake every mistake I made."

"Mommy, it's fine," Mackie said. "He hasn't had any trouble in two years. Almost three."

"If your brother were in town he'd have put a stop to this," Sandy said.

Mackie lowered herself onto one of Sandy's kitchen chairs and lifted her arms behind her head to redo her ponytail. She had two oval sweat stains around the underarm seams of her dark purple cardigan.

"He's not in town, Mommy."

"Did I say he was in town?" Sandy said. She paused, watching Mackie smooth the bumps out of the hair over her scalp and retie the whole thing in an elastic. "I'm sorry. You'll be a good mom."

"That's what Jason says."

"Is that gonna be his excuse when he leaves you?" Sandy said. "That *you'll* be the good parent?"

Mackie put her index fingers in the inside corners of her eyes. Her nails were eggplant.

"You do that yourself?" Sandy said.

"I went to the place," Mackie said.

"Shouldn't you be saving that money?" Sandy said.

"Jason paid," Mackie said.

Sandy looked at her. Right underneath Mackie's skin was the shape of Sandy's own face.

Mackie shook her ponytail. "Are we gonna go get dinner or not?" she said.

They argued, briefly, about whether or not to walk to the burrito place.

"You've got to keep a good blood pressure," Sandy said once they were outside on the street. "Sometimes you act like I don't know what you're going through when you yourself are evidence to the contrary."

"I'd just rather not get mugged in my state, thank you," Mackie said. She crossed the lawn, toward Sandy's car on the street. "Ma. There's garbage all over the grass."

The refuse from the day before did seem to have multiplied. Among the plastic bottles and wrappers there was now an empty cardboard box of cat litter, *Clump & Seal.*

Sandy waved her hand dismissively. "It's just because of the fire," she said. "This is a wonderful city."

Mackie squinted at the house across the way. There weren't boards up yet, and by the light of the orange streetlamp scorch marks were visible around the windows. "There are better cities," she said. She crossed the road and trooped up the house's front step. The front door was gone, and she peered into the dark.

"Get away from there!" Sandy called. "It's practically still on fire."

Mackie shrugged placidly and put her hands on her stomach, as if checking to make sure the pregnancy was still there. Sandy remembered how it was.

In the end they drove the six blocks to the burrito place in Sandy's LeSabre. Besides the twenty-four-hour Laundromat across the street and the gas station down the block, it was the only business with its light still on.

Behind the counter, it was the guy.

"Hey, neighbor," he said. His eyes were obscured by the tinted lenses of his glasses, but the way he raked through the vat of tomato salsa with his gloved hands was friendly.

"Can you believe it?" Sandy said.

"I don't know who would do that to a nice family like that," he said.

"Do what?" Sandy said.

"They think it was one of those arsons," the boy said. "Maybe because of something the father-guy was involved in."

Sandy followed him down the counter as he assembled her usual.

"I thought maybe it was a grease fire," Sandy said. "And they didn't know you can't douse it—that you've got to smother it."

The boy was rolling the tortilla into its burrito shape: a captive audience. Sandy pointed at Mackie. "One time when I was pregnant with her, the house would've burned down if I didn't know you had to use flour, if it's a grease fire."

"And now you're pregnant," the boy said, turning to Mackie, pleased to have made the connection. She was at the end of the counter, squinting at the tubs of meat behind the glass.

"But you're saying it was an arson," Mackie said. "Across the street from where my mother lives somebody purposefully burnt down a house."

"Yeah, I didn't believe it when I read it in the paper either, since usually it's all half made-up-type stuff," the boy said. "But my cousin's girlfriend's brother is a fire captain and he said it wasn't made-up. Even the thing about the milk jugs filled with gas."

"Are you hearing this, Mommy?" Mackie said.

"I happen to work at the *Eagle* and know for a fact that they do not make things up," Sandy said. She handed the boy her punch card. Two more and she'd get a free basket of chips.

"No offense," the boy said. "I've just had some buddies that got burned. Maybe it's just that one guy, writes about the courts, that screws stuff up."

"She works there, but she doesn't read it," Mackie said. "She has no idea what's going on."

"I think it's about time to eat these delicious-looking burritos," Sandy said. She didn't want bad blood between her and the boy. She liked that he was always here when she was here.

It was late; they were the only ones in the restaurant. Mackie chose the booth against the window, and Sandy slid in next to her rather than sit in the chair opposite.

"It's more comfortable on this side," she said when Mackie gave her a look.

"I notice you don't tell him that your grease fire heroine-ism was your fault to begin with," Mackie said.

"Who cares how it started, if you're him?" Sandy said. "It's nice to see a mother and her child together, like us. To hear their stories. He likes it."

Mackie looked over at the boy and Sandy followed her gaze. He was wiping the space between the vats of food with a rag.

"I know him," Sandy said. "He's my neighbor."

"I know him, too," Mackie said. "He was in Dillin's class at PHS."

The air switched on and blew coldly onto their table. Mackie buttoned her cardigan down from her neck, stopping where her belly began.

"If Dillin came back, maybe he could help get him a job here," Sandy said quietly.

Mackie chewed on the straw of her soda. "Are you making a joke?" she said.

“No,” Sandy said.

“Mom, come on,” Mackie said. “Haven’t you read his poems?”

“Those aren’t for me to read,” Sandy said.

“Why else would he send them to you?” Mackie said.

Sandy put her fingers inside the burrito to separate two layers of onion, then wiped her hand on her pants.

“I doubt there’s anything in them that would make me feel better,” Sandy said.

Mackie dropped her head and stared at her belly. Always with that belly, Sandy thought.

“You’re probably right,” Mackie finally said.

“You know what I remember?” Sandy said. “How he used to tickle you until you’d scream. I always thought it was so amusing, three years younger and he was the one tickling you.”

“I hated it,” Mackie said. She shook the ice cubes in her soda, and Sandy for a moment thought it was a sound the baby was making, sloshing around inside her.

“Your tummy,” Sandy said, “that was always the place.”

Sandy reached out and danced the tips of her fingers across Mackie’s shirt. Mackie flinched.

“Ma, quit it,” she said. “You’ve got burrito juice on your hands.”

“Just,” Sandy said, dancing her fingers once more, “testing.”

Mackie scooched away.

“Ticklish?” Sandy said.

“Yes,” Mackie said.

Sandy went at her again. It was an old trick with a familiar result: Mackie started to laugh, gaspingly. Sandy liked the way Mackie's belly felt—firm, full of her grandson.

"Mom, stop," Mackie said. "Mother. Quit it."

"I gotcha gotcha gotcha," Sandy said. "Doodle-oodle-oodle."

Mackie flailed and Sandy managed to tickle around her. But then Mackie got hold of Sandy's wrists and cuffed them with her eggplant fingernails. One of their elbows knocked over her cup of soda, sending ice cubes across the table and onto the floor.

"Sandra," Mackie said. Her bottom teeth, the crookeder ones, were exposed.

"We were just having fun," Sandy said. She was out of breath.

"No, we weren't," Mackie said. "I told you to stop."

"That's just what people say when they're being tickled," Sandy said.

"Yes," Mackie said. "Exactly."

Mackie turned and Sandy saw her seeing the boy. He had a tub of sour cream the size of his head open on the counter and was gaping at them.

"We need some paper towels over here," Sandy called.

The boy shook his head, separating himself from some reverie. "Are you talking to me?" he said.

"We've made a mess," Sandy said.

Mackie stood up from the booth. Her shirt was scrunched up and the top of her pants was visible: Sandy had thought they were regular jeans, but in fact they were fitted with a fancy blue elastic fabric. They'd done a lot to prettify pregnancy since Sandy had been through it, but the truth was, she thought, that the whole process turned you into an alien, and maybe when it was over you didn't turn back.

Mackie was tapping into her phone with one finger. “You know I’m not gonna have time for you pretty soon,” she said.

“I’m the grandma,” Sandy said.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Mackie said. She was pointing her finger at herself. “There’s a baby coming. We might not stay forever. They’re burning down houses on your street, Ma. What’re you gonna do?”

The boy brought over a broom and began to sweep the ice cubes around their feet into a dustpan, leaving narrow tracks of water on the floor.

Mackie turned her head to the window and Sandy followed her gaze. Outside, the Acura drove up to the curb, reflecting the neon red lights of the burrito place’s sign in its windows. It was as quick as if he’d been waiting around the corner.

“You’re just gonna let him take you where he takes you?” Sandy said.

“I am,” Mackie said.

The Acura honked. Sandy tried to locate Jason’s face at the wheel, but all she saw were the reflected red lights.

“You’ll be stuck there,” Sandy said. “Wherever he takes you, you’ll never be able to leave, even when he does.”

“He’s not leaving me,” Mackie said.

“That’s just what people say when their girlfriends are having a baby,” Sandy said.

Mackie’s mouth opened—surprised, as Sandy had surprised herself. Neither of them were agile fighters.

“If he does stay, then he’s one in a million, and I’m wrong, and all right,” Sandy said. She understood that she had earned herself the floor, that Mackie was listening. “But the

precedent of your own life is not on your side. You think that boy outside is gonna like slotting out half his money from whatever his shady business is for diapers? You think he's gonna like watching you breastfeed your child? They get *jealous*, Mackie. I know it sounds unbelievable but I've been there so I know."

The ice cubes rattled in the boy's dustpan. Sandy and Mackie turned to him. He mumbled something—*sorry* or *golly* or *God*—and shuffled back to the counter.

"I'm not you," Mackie said. She said it like she was deciding it that very moment. "Jason is here. Jason is right here, right on the other side of that glass, if you would only go out there and talk to him."

Sandy looked down at the black basket that held the rest of her burrito. All the flavor resided in the bottom; the best part was still left.

"I'm not finished eating," she said.

"Mommy," Mackie said. Her little bottom teeth were so crowded down there. She placed her palms flat on the glass of the front door and pushed it with the full weight of her torso. Here was Mackie's strength. The door flew open as she stepped into the red-lit dark, and remained open, as if holding its breath, long enough for her to get to the other side.

Sandy kneeled on the booth and pressed her face to the glass. The dark blue Acura slipped down the street and Sandy followed it until she could no longer see its red brake lights.

Nobody else was out, but through the plate-glass windows of the Laundromat across the street there was a woman—hugely pregnant and young, too, younger than Mackie; the city was full of these girls. Under the fluorescent lights, she reached into the mouth of an industrial dryer and separated out a bright pink blouse. Then she folded it across her own belly, sleeve over sleeve, no idea she was being watched.

The Fathoms

Underwater, I opened my eyes. Bubbles moved like abacus beads across the hairs between my legs.

"You stay down there longer than the other women," said the girl watching me from the tile when I emerged. She held out a towel.

"It's warm," I said. I dried the abacus hairs first with a slight plié. "Someday you'll see."

The girl's eyes flitted at me blankly—Penina Sussman, one of the daughters of the woman who owned the mikvah.

"Hopefully someday soon," she said. She wasn't actually a girl anymore. There were breasts underneath that turtleneck.

Our voices bounced over the surface of the sauna-sized pool, echoing. I dressed and she saw me out to the waiting room.

"May we not see you for nine months, Marisa," she said.

It was the same stock farewell every month and yet I had no idea how to respond; she didn't want to hear that I was on birth control and I didn't want to tell her. I was fairly sure that I needed at least to affect a desire to get pregnant at all times in order to be allowed to come to the Sussman mikvah, which was private—word of mouth only. Amit and I wanted children but not now, not until he was out of school and I could quit my job.

"Should've happened by now, shouldn't it?" I said to Penina. I sighed for effect. "A year and a half of marriage."

"Maybe this will be the month," she said. She held the front door open for me and stared, slump-backed, into the darkness of the basement-level stairwell outside. I walked past her and tried to discern from her last look whether my performance had come off or not.

I had taken to dressing modestly, covering up my knees and elbows and clavicles, but I tried to do so stylishly, unlike Penina, who wore permanently out-of-season long jean skirts and must have brushed out her long brown curls into a triangle of frizz, rather than manage them, as I did. Never brush a curl, I might have told her, if she and every other young, traditionally Orthodox girl like her did not give me the heebie-jeebies with their blank expressions. Their male counterparts were normal and well socialized—Penina's brothers, for instance, were gregarious and loud when I ran into them around the city—but the girls were socially impenetrable, almost autistic in manner. And I never just ran into them anywhere.

Outside, my hair started to ice over. When it got this cold I usually dried my hair before leaving, but in order not to end up looking like Penina I needed my diffuser and hadn't thought to bring it; it was still only November in Washington, D.C., too early to anticipate a freeze.

I saw the woman with the pink leather purse almost as soon as I was street-level, but by the time I registered where I knew her from, she had seen me.

"Marisa?"

It was a woman from general counsel at my office—Lacy or Tracy or Stacy, I couldn't remember. She was tall and zaftig in a way she wore well, as if it were a beautiful coat. She was also wearing an actual, beautiful coat—brown leather, down to her knees; I recognized it from last month's *Vogue*.

"Greetings," I said, trying to shield the fact that I did not know her name.

"You don't live around here, do you?" she said.

"Me?" I said. I quickly surveyed the new, taupe apartments around us. It was a street that had recently been renovated, another conquest of the same trend that would price us all out of the city someday. It was a wonder the Sussman mikvah was still here. "No."

"Your hair is wet," she said. She hoisted her leather bag high up on her shoulder, possibly so I could see it better. I immediately recognized it: Fendi, a seventeen-hundred-dollar purse. My head was full of this stuff.

I grabbed at a cold, hardened curl, as if I wasn't sure what she was talking about. "My gym's around here," I said, since it seemed easier to lie.

"What gym?" she said. "In the basement of my building?"

She turned and we looked, together, at the stairs I'd just come up. The Sussman mikvah was behind an unmarked door one floor below ground, but above it five floors of luxury apartments perched, their curtained windows rimmed in gold plate. The woman had her key ring looped around her index finger. My husband barely knew what happened at the mikvah, and he was the one who wanted me to go in the first place. It was holy and it was private and I preferred to lie rather than explain.

"It's a private gym," I said.

She was big, but had a regularly sized head—the head of a beautiful, thin woman, which she cocked at me. I started walking away. When I turned around to give her a conciliatory wave, I saw her frozen in a pose of ire. It was clear she was unaccustomed to being denied.

I met my husband, Amit Karp, at a Shabbos dinner of a mutual friend. He was well over six feet tall, all legs, with narrow, floppy movements like a fish on a line but a face like a painting of a face—smooth, with high, inquisitive cheek bones and two small moles on his left jaw. He would not shake my hand because he was shomer negiyah—no touching until marriage, a few rungs more religious than I was or ever wanted to be—but we had an easy time together. He thought I was funny and said so, and neither of us was interested in staying single any longer.

Plus, he was in optometry school; he could promise me some comfort. We were married within the year.

My parents had put me in a Jewish day school so that I would be "literate" (their word) in my religion, but they were essentially agnostic capitalists and never expected I would have a taste for the lifestyle implied by the school's teachings. Under the marriage chuppah I could feel in each of their grips on my arm a trembling hesitation, but there was nothing they could do: In real Jewish weddings no one says *speak now or forever hold your peace* because by the time everyone is assembled the contract has already been signed; it is too late.

But as I felt then and still feel today, despite the signs that I may be a liability to myself: What did they know?—more than me? Put your daughter in Jewish day school but then tell her, once she's grown, that it was all balderdash? There was no wisdom in that, and against their hypocrisy I went with my gut: This tall, sturdy fish from Northern Virginia who believed in every holiday, every ritual, the solidity of whose conviction was to me a bulwark against anomie.

Back at our apartment—which was emphatically not luxury: one bedroom, a small living room, and a tiny pocket kitchen—I told Amit what had happened outside the mikvah, because I told Amit everything.

"My sneaky lady," he said. "But why do you need to hide it from her?"

He was not upset at my evasion; no, he was elated to find out I'd been at the mikvah. By the laws of family purity we kept, we went almost two weeks every month without sleeping together, and mikvah night was the end of our "sex Sabbath," a phrase we used privately, possibly blasphemously.

Family purity had been Amit's idea and request—seven days after the end of my period each month, I submerged myself in the specialized waters of the Sussman mikvah; Penina made sure my head went all the way under. In school growing up, I'd learned that it was more important that a town had a mikvah than a temple, although at the time that fact didn't persuade me to view the practice of monthly cleansing for women as any less degrading and voyeuristic. Only after I grew up and found Amit did I come to see it in another way. The edict about mikvah attendance is considered one of the "unfathomables" of Judaism—we obey because G-d says so; it is beyond the narrow ventricle of our human reason to understand why. I had a vague, gnawing feeling that there was some One, some god-like Thing more expansive than the cloistered realm of Earth, but what I believed in more strongly was the presence, like a second self, of all I did not know. So I could adhere to a religion, broadly, that admitted to the unfathomableness of the universe, and to a ritual, specifically, whose enactment was a gesture toward that vastly deficient comprehension.

"Can't I keep one thing to myself?" I said to Amit. We were sitting on the couch, facing the window that looked out onto a brick wall. The run-in with the woman from work had put me in a bad mood, on top of which I had accidentally used cottage cheese in the lasagna instead of ricotta—again—and we'd eaten it anyway. "I should have to explain this, too?"

"Seems to me you cause yourself more angst trying to hide than just saying a little something that's true, that's all I mean," Amit said.

He was in his ratty gray George Washington University sweatshirt, with the hood up since we kept the heat low and he got cold easily. His schoolbooks were spread over the dining room table across the room in a way that might have convinced someone who didn't know better that he had actually gotten some studying done.

He lifted up my right breast with the palm of his hand, and the weight of it disappeared.

"So heavy," he said. "I can't believe you carry these around with you every day."

"That feels nice," I said.

Amit smiled, and the two moles on his jaw rose. We stared at each other, like we sometimes did.

"When can I quit my job so I don't have to deal with stuff like this anymore?" I said, breaking eye contact. "The Lacy Tracy Stacys of the world?"

Amit put down my breast and picked up my hands, kissing them. "So soon," he said. "Two years. One and a half."

It was an optimistic statement—reckless, even, and it upset me, although no answer to the question I had asked would have pleased me. Amit was in his first semester at teachers' college, and he knew what I was really referring to: Optometry school had not panned out. We were going even further into debt. He walked across the room and sat down at the dining room table, as if he could shrink the amount of school he had left by putting in another ten minutes of studying now. He balanced one of his expensive textbooks on the table, *Teaching Real Life Math Skills in Middle School*, and began to read. He immediately looked up again at the sound of me ripping off the plastic wrapping of the *Glamour* magazine that had come in the mail for me that day, and gave me his *Marisa, I'm working* face. Not because he was Mr. Studious, but because he wasn't, because it was such a fragile state, because he was eager to blame his general failure at all things school-related on anything but some inherent fact about himself, and I was always right there, right across the width of our tiny apartment.

I held up my hands in mock surrender and got comfortable on the couch. Each page of the magazine was its own variety of torture—the clothes, shoes, and jewelry all stunning eye-

feasts, brassy metals and saturated colors, an aggravation of the one gigantic, pulsing fact that I did not have any money. My parents had money, and growing up I might have had any of these sweaters or earrings or pumps if my mother saw how cute they made me look—but I did not want to look cute for my parents anymore, and more than anything I did not want to ask them for help.

In less than five minutes Amit scraped his chair back and came over to the edge of the couch.

"Has anyone ever told you you have ADD?" I said.

He put his hands on the back of my neck—my spot, a confirmation that we'd be having sex any minute.

"You're my little abuser, you know that?" he said, beginning to stroke the tiny hairs there, making me tingle. "You think I thought we'd be in this position when I promised to provide for you?"

He nodded toward our marriage contract, a huge ornate document framed on the wall above the television, the most beautiful thing in the apartment.

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li, it read. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

We were twenty-five.

The reason I wasn't sure of the woman's name was that I only ever saw her in the bathroom nearest my cubicle. She brought her bag of makeup and camped out at the sink for a quarter of an hour or more sometimes; the lawyers had their own bathroom and my colleagues in the fundraising bullpen and I suspected she used ours because it made her look un-attorney-like, all that primping. But she didn't seem to mind looking vain in front of us plebeians.

The next week, I walked out of the bathroom stall and there she was at the sink, an unmistakable tray of Smashbox Santigolden Shadow Collage in Frankly Flirty open in her hand—thirty-dollar eye shadow, according to my most recent copy of *Elle*.

"If it isn't Lil Miss Secret Keeper," she said, playfully haughty as if we were still on her turf.

I had already spent the day feeling harassed. My boss had posted our October numbers on the sticker chart he used because he thought it improved morale, but of course a sticker chart is no fun when yours is the column with the fewest sparkly dinosaurs and turkey legs and snowflakes. None of my potential donors had gotten back to me and it was past lunch, past the time when people with money were open-minded and pliable.

"If you really want to know," I said. Nobody else was in the bathroom. I started to smile but then yanked it back. "But I don't think you'd know him."

Her mouth opened and her eyebrows went up, showing off the orange-pink eye shadow and lengthening her small face considerably. "You aren't," she said.

I let us both sit with what I'd said for a few beats longer, trying to feel its contours.

"His name is Mick," I said in a whisper. Now I was just having fun. "Although that's not what his wife calls him, or really anybody. It's kind of a private name."

"He's married!" she said.

"Come on," I whispered. "*I'm* married."

I showed her the front of my left hand, my plain gold band.

She was giddy. "Do you think your husband has any idea?"

"Not a clue," I said. "He's not that smart. He flunked out of optometry school."

She nodded, as if she knew that part already. I couldn't remember if I had told this to people at the office.

"You could lead a double life," she said.

Our eyes met in the mirror. "I already do," I said.

The afternoon before Thanksgiving, Amit and I took the train up to New Jersey and got off in Secaucus just as the last, bruised light was leaving the sky. Outside the station my father was waiting.

"If it isn't Abraham and Sarah themselves," he said, wringing Amit's hand. "Get in, get in." He waved his hand at the car, a new one I didn't recognize. "Give me those bags. What do you have in here Marisa, a torah? I'm kidding, honey, I know it's just your wigs. Aha! There I got you."

It was the same every time, and Amit was becoming inured; I saw him smile up at the dark purple sky, as if G-d were up there, playing jokes on him.

I sat behind Amit so I wouldn't have to meet my father's eyes in the rearview. I was not so unstable as to feel actively insulted by him, but the shtick made me tired. We got onto the highway and he turned on the CD player so that world music seeped through every pore in the car; it felt as if the didgeridoo and pan flute were coming up through my seat, into my butt. Amit gamely inquired about my father's work—he owned a meatpacking business that I wasn't allowed to criticize because it had "sent me to college"—and my father launched into a monologue about a protest outside his warehouse of a certain kind of chicken-cage technology I couldn't quite make out over the music. He laughed at his own story while Amit dutifully nodded.

The meat palace—as I referred to it around Amit so he would see I was separate from it, that I didn't think of it as mine anymore—was in the blind spot of a cul-de-sac, only visible once you'd gone three-quarters of the way around, and even then it was set back down a lengthy driveway. The house was fronted by five pillars, and the foyer was tiled in black and white, like a chess board.

"You smell the same," my mother said when I walked in. She was tall and had her nose in my scalp. My father joked about wigs because they were actually terrified I was going to show up in one someday. In spite of myself I understood where they were coming from. Penina Sussman was probably around fifteen, still a high schooler working nights at her mother's mikvah, but each month when I saw her I imagined the long brown clumps of her hair falling to the floor when she got married, and it made me shudder.

We went upstairs to my old room, and on the wall over my old desk was a framed photo that hadn't been there before. I knew the photo, had once loved the photo. It was me on the beach, my curly brown hair blown horizontal by the wind, my arm wrapped around the barrel chest of Octavio Mastromiano, my college boyfriend. He had come with our family on a vacation to the Outer Banks one summer.

My father hoisted our bags onto the bed and I turned to him, indignant.

"What is that photo doing there?" I said.

"Your mother put that up," he said. "She does her tai chi in here sometimes and says it calms her down."

Amit was staring at the ceiling, his face inscrutable. He always tried not to act or say anything around my parents that might support their supposition of his freakishness, but

sometimes this meant that in situations where his response might be of use to us both he opted, instead, for silence.

I lifted the frame from its nail and stomped downstairs to my mother. She had the small television in the kitchen tuned to a professional male psychic who was claiming to channel the dead.

"Of all the pictures in the world you chose this one?" I said. "What about the five million pictures of me and Amit from our wedding? Where are those?"

"Oh, it was so cold that day," my mother said. "I just like this one because of the sand, and the sky, and the ocean—and you look so lovely in that swimsuit. I never get to see your figure anymore, in all these long skirts you're always wearing."

"But it's Octavio," I said. I tapped on his round, smooth face in the frame. "He broke up with me." It still upset me to think about it—we had been together two years at Rutgers. But then I remembered myself. "And I'm married to Amit."

"Come to the beach with us this year and I'll take a photo of the two of you and put it up," my mother said.

This was a different, more entrenched conversation.

"You know he doesn't like the beach," I said. This was the best I could explain it. Amit's family hadn't vacationed when he was growing up. He wasn't great at focusing on work but he also didn't have the temperament for extended relaxation. He hated being barefoot. The wind irritated his eyes.

"We had such a great time that year with Octavio," my mother said.

"Mom, quit it," I said. "You're being delusional. I'm married." I said the last word as if it were two separate words.

+ + +

When I went back upstairs, Amit was taking a shower in my private bathroom, as he always liked to do after we got off the train. I looked at the wall where the picture had been. Octavio had been a bulky, dusky theater major, a self-involved, temperamental Catholic perfectly happy to be worshipped by me until, one day, my novelty evaporated. By my insistence we never slept together, but we did absolutely everything else. Earlier on the morning the picture on the beach was taken, I had given him a blow job that brought me closer than ever to my dream of budding a second clitoris in my mouth.

The showerhead squeaked off and Amit opened the bathroom door into the bedroom, releasing whorls of steam, a dark blue towel knotted high on his hips. He had a long, narrow chest with a ridge of brown curly hair right over his heart, which I loved.

"Your parents are obsessed with him, I don't understand it," he said.

Always "him," never "Octavio," which made total sense except that, at the time, it hurt.

"Amit, darling, *dodi*, they like things their way, I can't explain it," I said. "My mother has a fantasy about moving us all to the beach one day and she doesn't like that it's not your thing."

"I just have very sensitive eyes," he said. "All that sunlight, the sand, the wind—"

"I know," I said. I stood up and put my arms around him.

He shrunk away. "Your hands are freezing," he said. He sighed. "I see that picture and I can't help it, I imagine you with him."

We had that in common. It was making me horny, the combination of the memory and its effect on Amit, his anger.

"Octavio never had me, though," I said.

I pulled my long-sleeve shirt over my head. I had a little chubbiness in my stomach but you would never notice because I had large breasts and I kept myself in nice bras. Some women think they are irresistible, but I knew I actually was to Amit. His eyes flickered, moving into the gray zone between ire and lust. That was my favorite zone. In another six seconds I was out of my skirt and tights and straddling him across the bed, his mouth on one breast and both hands moving between me, angry and intrepid. I opened the dark blue towel and, seeing him, I saw Octavio, too, and also Daniel Kelso, Kevin Bergeron, and Michael Baer—all the men I'd taken into my mouth because I was saving the rest of me for marriage. And when, in this marriage, on the big bed in my childhood room, Amit replaced his fingers with himself, it was like they were all inside me, like I could hold my whole life between my hips.

There was no more talk of Octavio or beaches or anything of any actual substance for the rest of the trip. On Thanksgiving itself there was the usual trouble surrounding Amit eating only the undressed salad and refusing the turkey my father had hand-picked from his favorite distributor, but this was an old injury, and each time something like it happened I could see my father understanding slightly better that on this point he would never get his way with his son-in-law. I foolishly considered this progress. Me, I ate what my parents served and Amit, as ever, did not harass me about it. He understood I was managing divided loyalties and went out of his way to show me it did not bother him by giving me a peck on my unkosher-turkey-touched lips. This, my husband's beneficence, his flexibility, his attempt to show me that he loved me for who I was.

"Home," Amit said with relief once we were back in our apartment. He headed straight for the shower, and I knew he wanted to wash off not only the train but the meat palace itself.

"My parents try, you know," I said as he undressed in our bedroom.

"Was that what that was?" he said. "That was them trying?"

I knew Amit was right. I knew he was the one who was trying, not them. But part of his trying was to arrange in his mind my parents as the aggressors and me as the victim. Perhaps this was the story I had told him. Nonetheless it angered me. And when he'd kissed my lips at Thanksgiving, it was a dry peck. I was a deep, wet, living well. I was my mother's daughter: I wanted the wind in my hair.

December came, the days shortening to ungenerous, narrow windows of daylight. It was Amit's favorite time of year and my least, this darkness. I did not want to see Penina. I did not want to see her hair and imagine it shorn. I did not want to surrender to the unfathomable anymore, when there was so much here on Earth, in my own mind and body, in my own bedroom, to know. Seven days after the end of my menstruation, I walked out of the office into the cold, wet night and turned left, away from the Sussman mikvah. Every step in the wrong direction, toward home, salved my frustration with Amit a little more. I was a victim of nothing. I made my own choices. I went where I wanted.

It also felt good, the pretending I had gone, the pushing Amit into our bedroom when I walked in the door, the doing to him what I had imagined doing all day. I was hungry for my life, my husband.

"Sex Sabbath over?" he said into my ear, rough, as he popped off the eyelets of my bra.

I rolled my stockings and underwear into a hoop on the floor. "Yes," I said.

By the time I got cleaned up and Amit woke from one of his thin naps, it was seven-thirty and we were starving.

There was only one kosher restaurant in D.C. and when you went there you were making a compromise: In exchange for someone else cooking your food, you opened yourself up to the scrutiny of every religious Jew in the district.

Amit put his arm around my shoulder while he ordered our burgers, and I grasped his dangling fingers. For the first time since our return from New Jersey we searched for ways to touch each other in public.

"Even if you become so fat from all this food, I will still want to split you open," he whispered to me as we ate at the counter against the window. I leaned my face toward his torso and sniffed—it was the smell of his body, floury and oily and mine.

As we finished, I heard someone call my name. We turned around and there was Eli Sussman, oldest child of the Sussman clan, holding a tray of food for two. I smiled. I liked him infinitely more than Penina. Across the room was a nervous-looking girl with her sweater buttoned up to her neck, another one of those children of the corn, looking at us.

"On a date, Eliahu?" Amit said.

"If I don't keel over with nerves first," Eli said, although this was an affectation: He clearly had all his faculties. He accepted Amit's hand.

"Just don't say anything stupid," Amit said. Amit thought that because he was becoming a teacher he had to act like he was sixty years old to boys not so much younger than him.

We had decided to get chocolate soy shakes to go—a decadence, we agreed, fitting to the spirit of the evening. Amit excused himself to order them, and I thought Eli would walk away too, but he continued to stand before me, looking expectant.

"Your friend is waiting, isn't she?" I said.

"Marisa," he said. He looked around surreptitiously and then leaned in, whispering. "I'm sorry. I know I should be discreet, but I cannot pretend not to know about your little absence this evening. Is it too early to say mazel tov?"

I kept smiling, surprised I hadn't anticipated it myself. Eli was a very good-looking boy—eighteen now, I estimated. In search of a wife of his own.

"It is definitely too early to say mazel tov," I said finally. His face fell. "These things are delicate, Eli. Women, the whole business: We're delicate."

He nodded, eyes wide, as if this were truly wisdom. It was true they didn't teach these sorts of things in the day schools. These sorts of mores you had to learn for yourself.

Across the restaurant Amit bounced on his heels, next in line at the counter. Eli walked away and Amit caught my eye and winked.

It was a freezing night, totally unreasonable to be drinking shakes, and we walked quickly. To get home, we cut through Embassy Row. The countries were jammed in randomly. Romania, Ireland, Greece, Sudan, Togo—places that could not possibly have anything to say to one another. What an amazing, unlikely place we lived in.

Back at the apartment we didn't even flip on the light, we pulled each other into our dark bedroom and undressed one another. Amit tasted like chocolate and soy. In his regular life he moved floppily, awkwardly, but as a lover he was not a fish at all: He was a ram. He pressed himself inside me all the way, as if I were still someone he could trust.

Land of Never

Casey, you're having those feelings again.

You're all dressed up for the end-of-season varsity field hockey dinner, making a final assessment in the bathroom mirror before you go downstairs for the big reveal. Your brother's room next door is vacant—you are the child that remains; there is no one else for your parents to look at but you. Your mother, whose own father long ago only agreed to pay her college tuition on the condition that she be either a teacher or a nurse, is working late again at the hospital: a nurse, so it is only your father who will be downstairs to look. And without your mother's mediating influence you know your father will look extra hard.

Why? You have guesses. Because he is solo he may feel it is incumbent upon him not to send his sixteen-year-old daughter out into the world without memorizing her first, checking for some sign of something awry, some unknown thing or problem a teenager would not articulate on her own but would want, badly, to have noticed nonetheless. Or, perhaps, he wants to anticipate how the rest of the men of the world will view you, comforting himself with the false logic that by noticing your womanliness he can somehow prevent it from being seen by others. Or maybe it is because although he is only an optometrist he likes to think he has a "science brain" and is curious about the world generally, you specifically, and likes to see you in different outfits as a way of understanding you better.

The problem is that he has another kind of curiosity, too, one about the red-headed women whose passage always precipitates a swivel of his head at whatever restaurant, movie theater, sporting event, or public place you're situated, as if you and your mother cannot see him seeing. Thank God on High, you think almost daily now, because these thoughts are like worms that have infested your brain, that you are not red-headed. Or, thank God the square-shouldered,

long-limbed, sloth-haired girls of the world who look like you do not make him turn his head. Living inside a mature female body of any kind is already difficult enough as a father's daughter, let alone living inside one that a long-range, informal study of rubbernecking confirms is categorically of interest to him.

It was easy when you were a flat-chested, rectangular kid. Dad, back then, was the unproblematic sun in your solar system. Dad signed you up for field hockey camp at age eight and took you on runs and showed you how eyeglasses worked and on the weekends you helped him rake the leaves in the yard onto huge blue tarps then drag them deep into the woods. And it seems like every fall Saturday in your memory is one never-ending, crepuscular afternoon spent gathering piles of dead orange leaves from a never-ending yard, never making a dent, your arms never tiring.

But this fall Saturday evening is the present, and all the kid-times are prologue, and your hips are wide and your breasts are small interesting fruits in your teal strapless peplum dress, and you think your teammates will find you lovely as you accept the award you're sure to get for most shots on goal and most points for the season. In a private room at the Olive Garden, the nineteen of you will cry, as a unit, in thanks to Coach, a leathery, trim-headed horse of a woman who has given her life to teaching you, who once went to India to learn more about the sport because everyone there takes it seriously, especially men.

Field hockey is written all over your body: On your arms and your collar are the stark tan lines denoting your uniform's sleeves and neckline. On your knees and lower thighs are four bruises as asymmetrical and colorful as dying galaxies. Your feet are bruised, blistered, and calloused by years of cleats. But tonight, for once, even the signs of your athleticism are outdone by your efforts at female beauty.

You need only to survive the moments when your father and your beauty are in one room together. One strategy you're trying is to go wild with your eyes in a way you hope will grab most of his attention. You've applied mascara and liner dangerously close to your eyeballs, one of his pet peeves because at his office he sees cosmetics-related corneal abrasions weekly, or so he claims. To further contain his examination, you consider trying to put on a coat before he hears you shuffling around in the foyer, but even then he will see your knees, your legs, your teal-painted toes, and will have some comment, some flick in the eyes that says: I see your body and I know what it means.

He is forty-four. Of late you have met some new people his age—Indian men, friends of Coach's from her travels who came to the school to do a clinic for the team. Although you never thought you were attractive in your shin pads and kilt and mouth guard, they looked at you with interest, desire, and an unverifiable but still thrilling aura of tumescence. Only later did you make the connection between their age and your father's, leading to a sickly conjecture about the presentations he does for young, aspiring optometrists—how he might look at the girls in the room as the Indian men looked at you, how he might not think, They are the same age as my daughter, just as you did not think, They are the same age as my father. You feel you are a horror to nature.

Your mother has hang-ups about her own father, but she married your father as an antidote, so she does not see your discomfort at all. She thinks you are lucky to have a father who pays you such attentions, when in her case her father heard the obstetrician utter *girl* and thereafter tuned her out. In fact this is something about Grandpa that you like: When you are in the room with him his mind is always on something else—on stocks, on an episode of *How I Met*

Your Mother, on the man he's begrudgingly hired to mow his lawn; to Grandpa you are not interesting, and this comforts you.

Because you interest your father too much. He wants to know every story, wants to be in on every joke, wants to understand what girls these days are up to. And you see your mother's point of view, you see you are lucky. Your father checks off all the boxes a daughter could ever reasonably wish for. But there is no box for your peculiar wish: That, around him, you could be as Tinker Bell was in her original form—a hovering spot of disembodied, reflected light, instead of as you are now, Tinker Bell in the Disney movies, unmistakably womanly with your curves and your legs and your hair. You will love your father far better when you are able to leave this house for good—when Ohio State or Denison or Miami-Ohio takes you onto their field hockey team and envelops you in a scarlet scrum on a wet, green field, far from here, when you can best approximate Tink's wavering disc of light by becoming a voice on the phone whose knee cannot be reached out and touched so readily, so thoughtlessly, so uncomfortably—innocent, yes; fatherly, of course, but it's like he has no idea how old you are, how old he is, how the time for such love has passed.

You cannot be the only one who has noticed: Something is gone forever. On the other side of your frustration is the sadness; these feelings are codependent, like space and time, and if you move fast enough, at the speed of light, they bend toward one another and merge into space-time: sad-mad, the condition of adolescence that everyone knows derives from hormones but that maybe only you know should not be reduced, disrespected, sidelined because of that origin. Hormones are the sharpest knowledge. Hormones are the depth charge. Hormones explode the human secret: At some point it is impossible for a family to live together anymore.

But you're not there yet. You will go downstairs, you will let him see you, let him wrinkle his nose at the dip of your neckline, let him hug you tightly. You will try to buckle down the hatred of yourself, which is the strongest feeling, second only to the fear of losing him completely. You will hug him tightly back. You will still let him think he's the one letting you go.

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