

You Are Merely Part of This

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“You have everything I have.”

“No. I have never had confidence and I am not young.”

“Come on. Stop talking nonsense and lock up.”

“I am of those who like to stay late at the café,” the older waiter said. “With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night.”

—Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

It's early afternoon on your third day here. The news is on, has been on. You've memorized the reporter's face. His lips move mutely while on the wall you hear the clock tick. There are clips of bridges entombed in ice, long lines of trucks at a border, a stranded boat in the frozen Danube. The truckers are waiting to hear about the roads reopening. You're waiting for one of them to leave and take you with him to Istanbul. Each morning, it's the same. They'll stand in front of the TV, un-mute the sound, and listen. You can't understand what's being said. At some point, one will light a cigarette. The rest will light their cigarettes. After twenty or so minutes one trucker will break off and take his seat. Slowly, inevitably, the rest follow. The news will be muted again. Once seated, they don't get up till night. There is something devotional, monastic about men at loose ends.

In the afternoons, like now, the windows go incandescent. Outside, the snow has risen up to their sills. It heliographs the light up into the rafters, up into the trucker's faces, porous, careworn, heavy-cheeked, silent, shadowed by the same five o' clock shadow. They sit at the tables around the wood paneled room, their sounds incidental, occasional: a murmured comment, the chink of glasses on a tray, the chime of a spoon folding sugar into tea until saturation, a lighter rasping. Smoke from fifty lit cigarettes hovers in a renewing script on the air.

It's the evenings that make you nervous. When the sun sinks behind the dense slab of pine across the empty field to the West, the truckers become boisterous. Dishes rattle. Vodka sloshes into glasses. There is laughter, great gales of it, as if to cover the sound of the wind beneath it, constant, searching. You know that within the truck trailers the wealth of an entire

region—fish, wine, medicine, carpets, computers, Play Stations, knock-off Play Stations, light up helicopter souvenirs, CAT scan machines, graphic T shirts, spices, steel, opium, packages of green plastic squirt guns wrapped in cellophane, Byzantine paintings by Romanian monks, bread, radishes, beer, and blood, among other products—is crated up, dry rotting in the cold. The sun sinks and the temperature drops, negative thirty, forty, fifty, cold enough to fissure an engine block the size of an oven. As if they didn't care, the truckers get drunk, linger in the evenings, eventually stumble back to their truck cabins. But all night you hear the engines turning over, the truckers waking every three or four hours, running their engines for five minutes at a time. No longer. If they don't run their engines, or if they run them for too long, their engines will freeze, crack, their cargo will rot.

At night, when all the men leave, you sleep alone in the truck stop. You've been living like this, in stranger's cars, on their couches, for two months now, since your money ran out in Prague, where you got a ride to Vienna, then Bratislava, Košice, Miskolc, Debrecen, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Brasov, then Bucharest. You came here from Bucharest, where you took the subway to its last stop. As you walked out to the street, you watched a dog turn in circles, barking at the snow falling out of the sky. The streets you walked through were empty of cars, ice white, the only things moving the dogs, cowering in the lee of buildings, and the wind, always moving, bellowing down the wide desolate avenues. When the sidewalk ended, you waded through the meter high drifts to the highway that belts the city. You knew from a hitchhiking wiki that beside the on-ramp was a truck-stop for all the drivers going to Turkey.

You had hoped to catch a ride without even stepping inside the truck stop, to step right onto an outbound rig. There is something you find safe about a stranger's car, the needle floating

at a hundred, a landscape you've never imagined—never heard about—rolling by too fast to expect yourself to remember. “Ah,” said your last driver regretfully, the one who drove you over the mountains to Bucharest. “It is too bad I could not take you down the Transfăgărășan. But it is closed, yes?”

“What's that?” you asked.

“The most beautiful road in the world,” he said. “It's in all the Nissan commercials. You must see it one day.”

You agreed, knowing you never would. Behind you mountains diminished. You watched them drain like sand from the hourglass of the rearview. You were headed into lowlands, long snow-covered frictionless fields, mile wide scythes of light sweeping across them. You are comforted by the speed in which the world can pass, how wonders may be forgotten, how you leave the people you meet behind.

*

Every hour on the hour, Volga moves through the room in her bright flowered babushka, bearing her nickel tray of tea, as wide and flashing as a spotlight, fifty tin spoons chiming against fifty tulip-shaped glasses. Every time she passes, she hands you a glass. You crave the bird-sized warmth of the tea, the sugar. “You - are - beaut - iful,” she says to you today. You want to tell her that's a word for a woman, but she's too busy for you to explain.

That first day, she was the only person who would look at you. When you walked in, the men were all standing beneath the television, smoking. When they heard the door open and felt the cold air blow in they turned and understood what you wanted and looked away quickly. You

stood in the doorway, unsure if you should be here, and it was Volga who made her way around the room and ushered you inside.

Volga sat you down at an empty table. When you asked her whether anybody was going to Istanbul, it was clear that she both couldn't understand your English and that she did understand what you wanted. She warned you with a look not to disturb the truckers. The men spent the afternoon watching the news, standing, talking in low voices. Occasionally, another truck would pull into the lot and someone new would walk in. The new man would stare at you, ask the men around him a question and after they replied, he wouldn't look at you again. As she tended to them, Volga would smuggle you secret glances, cups of tea, as if to say, *You look at me, at least. I'll look at you.* Like your mother, she made her affection known in quiet ways. You understood the two of you were in a conspiracy of some kind against the men, that they didn't look at her either. Their eyes passed over her as if she was of the same material as the wood paneling, the loud floral curtains, the scuffed floor. You, on the other hand, were trying not to be noticed, waiting for just the right moment to approach one of the men for a ride. There is a way to make yourself small, and you are good at it. You visit rooms like autumn light and flicker like a sparrow through people's memories. This is key to the life you've found to live, to always be light enough to be removed.

You waited all day until one of the truckers broke off from the group watching the news, moving toward the door. "Istanbul?" you asked him. He shrugged and shook his head. When he went outside, you decided to try the other men then because it was night and you sense your chance to leave that day slipping away. Each time you approached one of the men, he would turn away from his friends and look at you only out of the corner of his eye. Around him, his

friends would wait forgivingly for him to rejoin them from the public privacy you'd drawn him into with your question, that privacy in which beggars beg. He shrugged. They shrugged. A shrug followed you through the crowd. There is something shameful, you sensed, about your presence, your vulnerability, your need.

Eventually a man in a long blue smock emerged from the kitchen and waved at you. He put a wide hand on the flat of your back like men do to women and explained.

“Roads,” he said, making a gesture like a conductor hushing a symphony. “Closed.”

“All the roads?” you asked, because you had known that snow had closed the mountains to the north, but not the plains to the south. “I’m trying to get to Istanbul. I’ll take anything.”

“Bütün yollar kapalı,” he said, chopping one hand into the other. He shook his head and then lead you to your seat, the gentle hand at the small of your back reminding you that you are not a man, but like a child or a woman, must wait quietly for whatever comes. It was while you were sitting there that you watched a man to whom Volga was serving tea reach up and hand her a twenty lei note. About five dollars you were calculating as the trucker caught you looking. He winked as he got up and put his hands in his pockets. Setting down the tea tray, donning her coat slowly to follow him out to his truck, Volga had reminded you of your mother, the way, after your father left, the smallest motions seemed deliberate. You watched her fingers fumble on a button.

Sometimes you watch Volga in the afternoons. When she isn't carrying around the tea tray, she'll sit completely still in a chair on the side of the room. Sometimes a truck will pull in and everyone, all the men and the women, will look up except Volga, who stares at her hands, the floor, which she sweeps. It makes you think of how your mother no longer looks up when a car

pulls into the driveway. What she's waiting for, she's been waiting for so long she knows it doesn't arrive by car, nor by a certain hour, that it can be reached only by a stillness, the way one listens to an ocean in a sea shell.

*

Sometime in the afternoon on the third day, Volga disappears with one of the truckers. The other women sit at their own table, talking loudly, aware of being watched, but unapproached. The truckers don't have much money, you know. Every day, they use a little more gas to keep their engines from freezing. You have theories that Volga is cheaper than the other women, that she serves the tea and cleans the tables to make up for this.

When Volga is gone Yiddi takes up the tea tray. You're used to his dislike of you, how he'll hand the man next to you a glass of tea and then walk past, like your seat is empty. He knows that you have no money left, that the last ATM is kilometers back down the highway. But today you're sitting by a trucker who yesterday pushed his unfinished soup and bread to you. "Chorba," he said, pointing to the soup. "Necdet," he said pointing to himself. You tried to push the soup back, feeling guilty about the enormity of your hunger, but Necdet shook his head and this was all the permission you needed. Over the soup, you burst the lemon with which it was garnished, drank it all, then scoured the bowl with bread. When you finished, Necdet took the ruptured lemon wedge from your plate and dipped it in the sugar bowl, then handed it to you. When you were done, the only things left were the seeds.

When Yiddi hands Necdet his glass and tries to walk past your seat today, Necdet reaches up to his tray and plucks a second glass from it, for you, which causes Yiddi to stop and complain. The truckers around you, hearing Yiddi's protests, turn to watch. You want to shake

your head at Necdet so that Yiddi can move on, but you've learned, in moments like these, that it's not about what you want but what they do. They want to humiliate Yiddi. They don't consider him a real man. Yesterday, you watched some men tipping him with cigarette butts. Now, when Necdet, ignoring Yiddi, hands you the glass, several of them begin to clap at Necdet and to curse at Yiddi. A man at the table across from you catches your eye and says, slowly, in a way that bears repeating, "*Amina koyim.*" He says it again so that you mouth the words. Then he shouts to gather the room's attention. He looks at you, waiting. Everyone is looking at you, waiting.

"Amina koyim," you say to Yiddi. The room erupts in laughter. They have you repeat this several times. Other words. Other permutations. You're like a child or a parrot speaking words you don't understand. Yiddi remains standing at the head of the room, laughing with everyone at himself so that he doesn't appear offended. Even as you laugh too, you're reminded of the way that when people smile at you, even when you're uncertain as to the smile's meaning, even when you suspect you're being mocked, you smile back. As soon as the trucker's attention shifts away from Yiddi, he retreats with the half full tray of tea behind his counter.

"Aç?" Necdet asks you, miming hunger by rubbing his stomach.

"Teşekkür ederim," you say, stumbling on the jumbled consonants. Necdet gets up and you're made to understand that you'll follow him out to his truck. You don't find the offer strange. You have a feeling that this man will be your ride when the roads reopen, and you've noticed something about the men who pick you up. The particulars are unimportant. Married or unmarried, wearing a leather jacket or a sheepskin or an anavalos, driving a Trabant or an eighteen wheel Mercedes Actros, it's the same man and this man likes to give you things. They

like to watch you eat their food, smoke their cigarettes, listen to their advice. As you follow Necdet past the counter, Yiddi, who's on the other side of it staring at two receipts, glances up. He catches your eye as you follow Necdet out the door and what you see in them is pure hatred.

The cold outside is a vacuum. When you walk into it, it takes everything, the smoke, the warmth, your breath, your thoughts. The wind is roaring, a white noise in your ears, a buffeting that numbs your face. You've lost weight. Cold enters you like a familiar house, moving through casually, quickly, snuffing out nerves. You lost feeling in your feet as soon as you stepped outside. Necdet waits in front of you. You laugh, surprised, say something untranslatable that the wind steals. When you turn your head you can feel the wind but you can't hear it; the world goes suddenly mute. You could be the last person on earth, watching streetlights soundlessly illuminate falling snow. It's dark for kilometers before the tangled glow of Bucharest. When you turn your head, the wind is once more at your ear. Ahead it rocks the trucks that Necdet leads you into.

There is a woman sitting in the cabin of Necdet's truck. She looks up from a stew into which she's stirring paprika.

"It's not done yet," she tells you. "Almost."

As you wait, you wonder if other truckers have a wife like this, waiting in their cabin, cooking meals while they sit inside smoking. You look out the window, but the windows of other trucks are dark. Around the woman, the cabin reminds you of a circus tent. Marigold yellow sheets draped about the walls, the cabin full of fragrance. The paprika has turned the stew the unlikely orange of sports teams. The gas valve beneath the pot whispers. A small flame, dense, like the bulb of a tulip, illuminates the woman's bare ankles as she translates for Necdet,

makes introductions. Carmen is her name. You envision the ride down to Istanbul, the three of you, her in the middle, recasting each word in Turkish, in English.

Nejdet begins to speak and you can tell how well she knows him by how she listens without appearing to.

“He wants to know why you’re here,” she says, crumbling bay leaf.

“In Romania?” you ask.

“No, no,” she says, swiping the clinging pieces off her palm. “Why you’re not home.”

You’ve been asked this question many times and you still have trouble answering. Most of the time you say it’s because you want to see the world. While it’s true, it’s not the whole reason. You can’t quite trace the exact course of the desire that’s brought you here. You think of coming home after college, the bare walls, the house silent, your mother floating through rooms like light, no sound at all. You think of the women in college, the poem of movements you wrote through a series of dorm rooms and car seats and football fields, and one woman, who you exhausted your love on, who picked you up and set you back down like a glass of water.

Your mind comes to rest instead on the man who drove you across Hungary. He didn’t drop you off on the side of the road. He drove you to a hotel outside of Debrecen, where he paid for a room. You had been surprised to learn then you were the type of person people could buy things for without asking permission. It was this you wanted. It had something to do with how, when you were unfolding the sheet from your bed, you felt something on your back and turned and he was on his knees in front of you. *Let me suck your cock*, he said. You stepped back, then you laughed, not out of surprise, but because you had sensed it about to happen and you’d let it.

You let him take you into his mouth, believing that at the end of inexplicable actions is something that will explain you.

You tell Carmen you wanted to see the world and she repeats this to Necdet. They start arguing. She turns back to you.

“He doesn’t understand,” she says, sounding exasperated.

“He doesn’t understand what?”

“To leave home. For the Turks family is everything,” she says. You realize her hair is blonde and you understand that you have misunderstood.

“Are you not Turkish?” you ask.

She laughs, a kind of laugh you’re familiar with. One of mistranslations.

“No, no,” she says. “I’m Romanian.”

“But you live in Turkey?”

“I live in Bucharest,” she corrects. “With my mother. I do English translations.”

She waggles her fingers like she’s typing. You’re about to ask how she met Necdet but Necdet begins to speak and she turns away to listen to him. Outside the tarps lashed to the sides of the trailers snap and crack in the wind. As the trucks rock on their springs, there is a faint creaking noise, the kind that runs through the hulls of massive ships. When you look back at Carmen, she’s staring at you as if Necdet had been talking about you. Her eyes move around your face. Then she nods at him.

When the soup is ready Carmen serves Necdet first, you next, herself last, of course. You begin eating. The soup is hot, delicious. The food in the east lays heavy on the tongue. The sweetness is slower. It dawns in brightening shades. Cardamom, saffron, cinnamon, chili, curry

and cumin, there are layers of spice like a hallway of curtains. When you finish, you put your bowl between your knees. Necdet gestures at it, says something to Carmen.

“Here,” she says, holding out her hand. “I’ll get you more.”

“I don’t want to eat all your soup,” you say, feeling guilty because you do want more. She takes the bowl anyways.

“He wants you to have some,” she says, beginning to ladle the soup. Her hair falls in front of her face. “He says you remind him of his son.”

She hands the bowl back. You take it. ‘His son,’ you noticed. You don’t ask—you begin eating the soup. The world you live in is one of mistranslations and near truths. You’ve learned to smile, assume the best translation when you can.

*

You wake alone in the truck stop with the sky grey out the window. The room is cold. It smells like old smoke and cooked food. You can hear the clock on the wall, or rather the soundless thing it gives a footstep to. You are sure this morning, as you have been sure every preceding morning, that this will be the day the roads reopen and you leave. It’s the same thing you feel standing on the side of the road. *This car. This one. It’s going to stop. This one.* Eventually, you’re always right.

When the sky turns a bright white, first one, and then a whole salvo of engines turn over. You hear the men out in the parking lot, calling to each other, moving the trucks. You know that they’re only reshuffling them, ordering the lot so that if the roads are open, the trucks can pour out in one long steady stream, but you can’t help getting up and going outside to watch them, irrationally afraid of them all leaving before you knew it.

It takes a line of five men to move each truck in such close crowded quarters. They pass hand symbols down the line the way people used to pass buckets of water to put out a fire. *Go, Stop, Slow*. When the lot's been restructured, the truckers strut back to the building, jaunty, satisfied. They see you watching them from the truck stop and laugh like you're a familiar dog waiting on a doorstep. You smile back, in case one of them might be the one to give you a ride.

Inside, they take up a position beneath the television. First one man lights his cigarette. Then the rest light their cigarettes. You're sitting in the back, awaiting the first sign that people are going to leave when Necdet and Carmen walk in. When Necdet sees you sitting at a table by yourself they come and join you. Necdet gives you a nod. Beside him, Carmen seems dazed. She's clutching her hands for warmth. With the harsh morning light streaming through the windows, you notice her age in her fingers: careful fingers, ringless, the kind that count money twice. She sits without speaking while Necdet talks in a business like way to the other truckers.

"Are the roads closed?" you ask Carmen. You're watching men walk in and out.

"Oh yes," she says, without bothering to listen to the news. "Yes they will be closed for some time."

"Do they know when they're going to open them again?"

On her face, Carmen displays a kind of patience that you feel is demonstrative, almost hostile, as if you'd been presumptuous.

"They might be closed for another week."

"Good god," you say, partly because you feel she's exaggerating.

"Hundreds of people," Carmen says slowly. "Have died."

For a long time, neither of you say anything after that. Carmen appears to be staring off into space, with an expression that professes to know nothing. If Necdet senses something between you two, he doesn't acknowledge it. Like Carmen, he sits staring off, occasionally lighting another cigarette. Out the windows, the sunlight pulses on the snow. The news has been muted again. Fresh smoke rolls through the air. Volga brings out tea.

Around lunch time, Necdet takes out three oranges from his pocket and places them in front of Carmen. She asks him a question. He doesn't reply. She begins to say something when he interrupts her sharply. "Sessiz." When he says this, you realize it's the first thing he's said to Carmen in front of the other truckers. She picks up an orange and turns to you.

"Do you know Turkish men want their wives to be like?" she asks.

You see Necdet staring at you out of the corner of his eye. You don't quite know what's going on, what sides there are. You shake your head vaguely. She points at him. Her voice gets louder.

"He tells me this often: when he comes home his wife takes his shoes off his feet and bathes them. Then she serves him dinner. Then after dinner, she asks if he wants some fruit. And you know what she does then?" she says. "She peels it."

Carmen begins peeling the orange. Around you, truckers are watching.

"My mother tells me every day that what I'm doing is stupid," she says. "She says he gets everything for free without paying for it. It all goes to his wife, in Istanbul. But then, what else can I do? She wants me to get married. I tell her there's no point. Men don't know what they want nor how to keep it. If I were someone's wife, he would leave me. He'd be looking for the woman I used to be like."

She stares at you as she peels. You don't know what to say. The wind blows and the snow hits the windows like sand. Outside, you can hear the trucks rocking back and forth. There have been other times. There was the German who gave you a ride across Slovakia, who once you crossed the border started telling you everything. He had lived in Berlin once. He'd been a guard on the Berlin Wall. He'd shot at people trying to climb it. He'd shot them. A boy. Afterwards, he wouldn't look at you and you wondered what he'd thought you could do for him. But as you stepped out of his car and he drove away, you wondered if it was just that, that he could reveal himself to a stranger. Tell everything. Leave.

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Carmen leaves sometime after lunch, saying that she has to get back so she can go to work tomorrow. You and Necdet continue sitting at the same table. It's dark by then, that slow time of night that you've come to dread, when the evening bleeds the room slowly of men. All the men have run out of things to say to each other, but they don't get up and go back to their trucks. You feel it too, that dumb animal reluctance to be alone in the dark. You're trying to think of other things, how tomorrow the road will probably reopen, when the door opens, and all the men look up. The women come in, the lines of their make-up sharp, their hair cold.

Usually they sit at their own table, talking until one by one, the men pick them off, but tonight, as soon as they walk in Necdet raises his hand and wags a finger. A girl walks over.

"Hello American," she says to you.

You've talked to her before, Anca, a girl with baby fat still on her cheeks, probably no older than sixteen. When you asked her where she learned English, she told you about movies, *Transformers 2*, *Hitch*, *Love Actually*. You told her about where you've been and when you said

you'd been to London, she sighed rapturously, saying, "I have a friend in London. She says all the girls there get to work in apartments. You don't even stand outside. You can just lay in your bed all day, watching movies and eating ice cream."

"If you got to London, what would you do?" you asked.

"What do you mean?" she said. Then she said, "My friend tells me Romanian girls make the most."

You turn to Necdet, ask even though he can't understand, "What are you doing?"

The way he ignores Carmen in public, he now ignores you. He pulls Anca giggling into his lap. He leans up close to her ear and whispers something. She stares at you. All the men in the room are looking, suddenly interested, trading glances.

Necdet pushes Anca off his lap and she comes and sits down by you. When you look at Necdet he just winks. You shake your head, pretend not to understand.

"Hello," Anca says, beside you.

"Hi," you say, getting up, about to walk off to the bathroom, but Necdet gets in your way and motions for you to sit. Most of the men in the room have gotten out of their seats to watch.

"No thank you," you say, "I'm very tired."

Necdet shakes his head and motions for you to sit again.

"Take a seat my friend, take a seat," one of the truckers calls out and as you look to see who says it, Necdet grips your arm suddenly and pulls you close. "Bunun için ödedim. Sorun yok," he says, and his voice is different beside your ear, no longer amiable and casual, but quick and warm and smelling of body.

He leans back, rubs his fingers together in the gesture of money, then points to himself. He looks at your face to see if you understand. You do. Then he guides back to your seat, beside Anca. She smiles. The men are standing in a circle around you.

The men around you are laughing, talking. You make eye contact with one and he makes a diamond vacancy with palm and thumb, then flutters his tongue through it. Other men are kissing tight anuses of curled fingers, smacking their lips. You're shaking your head at the men, wanting to go to bed, craving your usual obscurity, when a noise comes from the back of the room, an argument, behind the laughter and bargaining. You can't quite see it, only the top of Volga's babushka. Some men near the edge of the circle turn and look at her for a moment but by how soon they look away, you can tell they're not looking at anything important. They're looking at Anca, leaning down around her, their lips at her ear, whispering, coaxing her to coax you. You can almost translate what they're saying by the expression on her face. You know it could happen. That it would be as easy as closing your fingers around the keys that Necdet is pushing into your hand so you can take Anca out to his truck. You keep your hands limp, indecisive. But you smile anyways, because you know with this, the truckers mean to seal your friendship, to show their favor for a stranger that they could recall for the rest of their lives. This is what they want out of you; themselves.

Necdet's thick hand lowers from some trajectory to your shoulder to reassure you and then presses the keys into your fingers. When his hand leaves yours the keys are in them. But then you hear a sharp noise, and you tilt your chair, look over Anca's head. Yiddi has Volga sitting down and is talking to her in a quick, low voice. Even though you can't understand what she's saying, you can tell by her responses that she's drunk. She's holding out a handful of bills

to Yiddi, trying to explain something about them, maybe why there are so few. The explanations only make Yiddi angry, as if he'd heard them too many times. When Volga begins to cry, several men near them give her dirty looks. They move closer into the circle toward you.

You can hear Volga sobbing now. Neither Anca nor the truckers seem to hear, or maybe its that the sound is something everyone is used to, like the clock ticking or the trucks coming and going, or the vast hush of the snowfall descending over you all. Like you, they know that tomorrow, or the next day, they'll be gone, that this allows them to do anything. But for a moment, you're here listening to Volga. You're thinking of the time you heard your mother sobbing in her room. You had told her you were going to leave, about the wonders you were off to see and afterwards, she left you in the kitchen without a word. You stood at the base of the stairs, listening to her, unable to walk up and open her door, as if to say, *I'm here*.

It's all of us second shifters at the bar for New Years and as usual it's not even midnight when John Walker, who solders rubber on line five, gets into another fight. This time it's with a woman in a white dress, who came in an hour to midnight, alone, her lipstick smeared, her moussed hair wilted, as if she'd squeezed through all the bars in Marion to get to this one, the last one going north. Outside the window it's dark, corn and cold all the way to the county line, except, across the road, the lights of the Marion Airfield, set into the field as if to advertise its emptiness, a whole square mile of illuminated nothing. Every twenty seconds or so, a bright wedge sweeps across the tarmac as if a colossal door were opening, and then the windows of the bar go opaque, brushed by the turning beam of the tower that stands like a lighthouse where the tarmac runs out. Walking to our cars when we get out from work three miles down the road at the rubber plant, we can look up and see the tower's swiveling beam, faster, fainter. Even further away, on the county line you can see it, but just barely detectable, as a brief negation of the stars.

"This town's too small," we'd heard the woman in the white dress, sitting down at the bar, say to Monica, the bartender. "You know one or two men and suddenly everybody's bumping elbows. I swear I'm giving them up this year."

And yet, every couple minutes she'd toss the pouf of her hair to look back and check who was looking at her. We all were. She was the only woman in the bar and such a big woman in such a little white dress, she was hard to look away from. So we looked at her.

"I wonder how she even got into it," John Walker said, far too loud. "Looks like she ran naked into a cobweb."

All night, John Walker had been telling us about how he'd invested in his friend's knife company. It was the first time we'd ever heard him use the word 'invest' and not long after, he was telling us it would be a good idea if we did it too. He was going to be the VP of a company, the way he told it. When he was VP he'd take us out for drinks, he'd said. But now all he could talk about was the woman in the white dress.

"She wants it," he kept saying when she'd look back at us to see if we were still looking. We were. We were thinking about what she must have looked like without that dress on, and then what she'd look like on her bed, and somehow that got us to thinking about what she must have looked like in the rest of her life, in her house, which, like the dress, was too small, probably. We imagined three sons watching television, the kitchen smelling of Hamburger Helper, the wooden snowmen bearing apple shaped plaques that read *Home is where the Heart is*, the mailbox painted with birds and bees, the alimony inside it. We were imagining how the dress must have whispered as it slid out of the box she hid it in, how she probably held her breath to touch it, when a roar filled the sky that set the glasses in the bar to chiming and the tables to shaking and our drinks to rippling. The airfield belonged to the rubber company we worked for and we knew the sound meant that one of our bosses was returning home, probably from New York, for New Years. Out the window, a G6 dropped out of the night and landed on the runway just as John Walker got out of his seat and sauntered down the bar to the woman in the white dress.

"Already saved you the trouble," she told him, holding up her own drink when he offered to buy her one.

"What if I told you," John Walker said. "That I'm a famous man?"

She didn't answer, so he just pointed over to the section of bar mirror behind the tequila, reserved for town legends. Beneath the photo of a Nascar driver and an NFL quarterback indicted for rape charges, hung his own picture, cut out from the paper and already beginning to fade. At that point, John Walker was the only one of us to have made the paper. A picture from the crime section on one of the nights he got into a fight: his face pale, his smile bloody, his eye black, his full name on a black card. His mugshot.

"Being famous here doesn't count for much," the woman said, and we could see John Walker's face go dark and squally, but the door opened then, and everyone looked up because none of us had heard a car pull in. We knew as soon as we saw him—bald as a hammer, grey as respect—that he was the pilot who'd just landed the G6, its jets still warping the air over the runway with their heat.

We all watched as the pilot took up a post at the end of the bar, and ordered the best scotch in the house, which, we could tell, by the expression of his face, wasn't as good as he was used to. Right then, Monica forgot all about us, doing her best to make small talk with him, to which he kept nodding *Mhmm, Mhmm*, with that sheen of inattention that shines on people in rooms they soon expect to leave and forget. From where we sat we could smell the ozone and instant coffee and cabin pressure on his uniform as if, among us, he was still traveling in a different atmosphere, was instead actually miles above the bar, and we were just looking up at him as he passed overhead.

John Walker had been trying to get the attention of the woman in the white dress again, but she, like us, was staring down the bar at the pilot. So John Walker suddenly turned and yelled at him. "Hey," he said. "You just flew that plane?"

The pilot, who was busy ignoring Monica's small talk, staring up at the television over the bar where in New York they were waiting for the ball to drop, turned and stared at John Walker as if he hadn't understood what John Walker said, or as if he understood all too well what John Walker meant. He seemed to be waiting for John Walker to go on. We too were waiting, but whether for the same thing the pilot was, we didn't know. Most nights, we were happy if John Walker got into a fight. We'd take sides, make bets, maybe even film the whole thing on our phones like we did the time John Walker got arrested for fighting in the parking lot with a trucker who pointed to his cowboy boots and said "You look like a college girl in those things." And two days after he was discharged, in the break room—John Walker sitting by himself with one-self-given black eye and one cheese sandwich and one foolish smile on his face—we watched it again on the screens of our phones: John Walker and the trucker throwing wide punches and bellowing in the neon light of the Bud Light sign, until John Walker—in the pair of hand-stitched buckskin Ariat cowboy boots he ordered especially shipped from Texas, the special pair for which he paid two weeks salary and every time you said, "Are those new boots?" he would stand at the end of your line for five minutes, showing you the custom stitched Hell-flames running up the sides—slipped in the gravel and dented the bumper of the trucker's car with his eye socket, which he later had to pay for, both the dented bumper and the cracked socket.

John Walker knew that this man wasn't a trucker, but a pilot, that the pilot had just flown our boss home for New Years. He also knew that he himself is type of man who needs two names to be remembered, there being four other John's on second shift with us, us knowing that he's the one named after the drink. And maybe it was because John Walker knew this that he got into so many fights, despite losing them. We've talked about it, how he'll throw himself at

people as if he had a lot less to lose than anyone else. And maybe, we've talked about this too, he's right about that.

"Did you hear me?" John Walker asked when the pilot, not answering, took a long drink. The ice clinked. He finished his scotch. "What's our town look like from twenty thousand feet?" John Walker went on.

"Like a lot of other places," the pilot said and before John Walker could say anything else, the woman in the white dress interrupted.

"Where are you from?" she asked him.

And this time, the pilot, as if he were even less interested in the woman in the white dress than John Walker, just shook his head and turned without a word toward the television. Of course, we too had made the same decision as the Pilot, that none of us would try to sleep with the woman in the white dress. It was for a different reason than him though. On any other night, one of us would have been trying to bring her home. But tonight she was crowned like an empress in her near nudity. It gave her a majesty she wouldn't normally have, a majesty none of us would dare unclothe her of. That for a night she could pretend she's too good for us, and that for a night, we could pretend we'd been around someone like that.

*

On screen, in New York, they're counting down till the ball drops, and we're getting ready to clink the long necks of our beers together, when a glass shatters on the floor.

"You bitch," John Walker roars. His face is red and he's not holding a drink anymore. The woman in the white dress is standing up, ready to slap him again.

"Touch me again, I'll kick your ass."

John Walker's anger is sometimes indistinguishable from his happiness. He starts laughing at her.

"It was just a kiss," he says. "It's New Years. You kiss at New Years!"

"I don't want a kiss from you," she says, quietly.

"It looks like you want a kiss from anyone," he says, and turns to us like we're going to say something or laugh or smile. None of us do. "Come on," he whines to her. "I was just being friendly. Don't get worked up. It's New Years, lemme buy you a drink."

"Okay," she says. "Pay for my drink."

She flings her glass to the ground then thunders outside on her heels. We hear her pick-up rev up out in the parking lot, the gravel popping. The bar's so quiet the sound of her truck reaches us a mile down the highway. Then it's gone and the only sound in the bar is the New Year, already begun, in New York on screen.

"Well it didn't get me a kiss," John Walker says to us, after a long silence.

We know John Walker's embarrassed and wants us to laugh so he can laugh too but none of us laugh. None of us even look at him. The Pilot is staring at us, as if to judge how well we know John Walker. If he'd asked, we'd have told him exactly how well we knew him: that he's a friend of ours, the kind of friend you have because he works at the same place you do and because of that, survives the better judgment you'd apply to people whose presence you have more of a choice about because it would be unbearable otherwise, to hold John Walker up to the standards of a normal person, painful for him and for us. And normally, we feel good about this, the charitable geometry of our unintentional friendship with John Walker—who will stop being our friend as soon as we stop working with him, and is the kind of person, who when we plan

parties, we forget to tell him, and when we have girlfriends, we neglect to introduce him. But John Walker doesn't understand the terms of our friendship—that it's fine what he does at work, or here when it's just us—but that there's a line he can't cross into the rest of our lives. And right now we're in the rest of our lives.

*

Most of us will stay in town. Most of us, even after they mechanize more than half of the assembly line, will work at the factory. For a while we'll fear being let go and then one day, quietly, we'll be moved sideways into other production lines, feeding rubber into the salt baths, or soldering tubes of rubber into circles, and we'll joke about ever having been afraid of those machines which nearly every day will break down, so that the managers who were warning us, comparing us to the machines in a way that was meant to get us to do our jobs better, will spend their breaks complaining about ever having installed them. So most of us will still come to the bar after work and even the people who'll leave and find other jobs we'll see around town occasionally and say, "You should come to the bar." To which they'll say, "I might do that." And sometimes, they'll mean it.

We all think John Walker will be one of those people we will always work with, see around town forever. We all believe, that in five years, in front of new in-laws or friends, he'll greet us enthusiastically in the grocery store check-out line, say something inappropriate about us or himself in front of our real friends or perhaps our wives or new in-laws, so that afterwards, we'll have to explain to these people in a lowered voice, "Oh, that's just John Walker. From work." And it's because we think this, because we're already depending on having to acknowledge John Walker in the future, that we ignore him in the present.

“I’m sorry,” he’s saying. “I shouldn’t have done that. Can I buy y’all a drink?”

We’re pretending we don’t hear him, when Monica starts shouting at him.

“John Walker,” she says. “That’s two glasses you’ve broken tonight. Nothing’s coming your way over this bar until you pay.”

In the mirror of the bar, we see John Walker go red in the face and for a minute, we think he’s going to leave. But then, whether angry or happy, he starts laughing.

“You know what,” he says, handing Monica his card. “Fuck it. Put it on my tab along with the most expensive bottles of champagne you have. I’m quitting this month. I’m starting a company. I’m gonna be a rich man. Ya’ll are gonna see me on TV one day and remember when I bought you champagne.”

None of us believe John Walker about either the champagne or him quitting. Monica doesn’t either. When she pulls up a bottle of prosecco, though, John Walker shakes his head.

“I want the good stuff,” he says. “Gimme the best you got.”

We still don’t believe John Walker when Monica goes back to the stock room to find the most expensive bottles of champagne, which ends up being the owner’s private stock, three hundred a bottle we hear Monica say, of which John Walker, after a moment of hesitation, orders three. All of us think John Walker is waiting for us to save him, to tell him what he’s doing is stupid, that he should stop, so none of us say anything when Monica takes his card, runs it and waits and hands it back and has him sign it—with tip—and does everything but collect collateral before she sets up each bottle on the bar as carefully as a house of cards, one, two, three, a whole month of John Walker’s wages in green glass, sweating like John Walker’s red face, the way it does after eight hours of soldering rubber. Only then do we think he might do it.

“John,” we say, because despite everything we do like John Walker and we don’t want anything irreversible to happen at the start of a year. “Don’t be an idiot. Take a seat. Buy some Buds or something. Let’s not start off this year stupid.”

John Walker is hesitating, floating his hand near one of the bottles as if unsure how to touch it, and we still think he’s bluffing, but as soon as we speak, he grabs it like a stick of dynamite, as if all the motivation he needed was for someone else to tell him exactly what he’d been thinking.

“This is for you to remember me by,” he says sounding out of breath as he pulls at the emerald foil in one long smooth tear, which some of us don’t watch because we have to shut our eyes. But after he untwists the dainty wire cage of the cork, it’s effortless, like someone falling, except upwards. We all watch as the cork slides up the neck of its own accord. And months later, after John Walker does quit to be VP for his friend’s knife company, we’ll think about this moment most: John Walker standing there alone, seeming to be listening to something very far away, or maybe within the bottle, or even within himself.

The pop of the cork empties the room of sound. We watch the first fifty dollars of champagne cascade in silence down the bottle’s neck, John Walker’s wrists. We almost expect John Walker to give a sob when it reaches him. But John Walker, instead, laughs, like a boy who suddenly plunges both hands into the cold foam of the sea.

“Happy new years!” he crows, walking down the bar, filling the flutes Monica sets up for him, right to the brim, brimming over so that none of us dare to even lift our glasses, but have to go down to them like hummingbirds. “Cheers,” John Walker says, swinging his glass forward, catching the pilot’s by surprise with a clink on the rim, spotting the bar with ten dollar spots.

“Cheers,” the pilot says, and he and John Walker drain their glasses in one go. John Walker’s already opening the second bottle, and while we’re still on our first glasses, sipping slowly, wasting nothing, we hear him declare, as if he knew, “For champagne this good. You need a new glass.”

The pilot doesn’t object when John Walker takes his glass. Monica doesn’t object when John Walker smashes both glasses on the ground. “Another glass for everybody,” John Walker shouts, then points to a bus boy, coming in to sweep up shards. “Even him.”

It’s then that a roar drops out of the sky, sucking all the conversation out of the bar. Though we know its just another plane coming in fast to land we could almost believe this roar is the sound of another year descending, thirteen minutes late, and grinding into Marion Ohio with the noise of a chop saw meeting a steel plate. Only the Pilot looks up. He’s shouting something, but we can’t hear him over the rattling of the liquor bottles behind the bar, and the glasses on the bar top, the windows humming like wasps, and the door rattling in its frame. The whole bar heaves and shudders. Some of us drop our glasses in the middle of drinking them. Walking around to fill our flutes again, John Walker, in his pair of hand-stitched buckskin Ariat cowboy boots, slips in the spilled champagne and lands in glass shards. The lights flicker and dim so all of us turn to the window to watch the plane drop into sight, slightly blurry through the humming panes of glass, with a noise compared to which everything else in our lives up until this moment—the daily thrumming of the machines, the crying of our kids—sounds like a silence, as if we’d been traveling at twenty thousand feet this whole time without knowing it and someone had finally flung open the door.

We feel it touch down on the runway in our bones and afterwards, for weeks and weeks, we'll remember that feeling when we see it on the news, the Boeing 737 being evacuated after it has to make an emergency landing in the Marion Municipal Airport. Each time a clip of the evacuation plays, you can see the bar in the background and after the reporters are done talking about the plane, the passengers on board, the technical failure, they'll mention us, how low the plane came in, how if the roof hadn't been there, we would have seen the wheels just feet over our heads, how we nearly died the same way some people win the lottery—a stroke of luck like bolt of lightning. Afterwards, our pictures from the paper will go up on the glass behind the bar, lined up as if for a gallows, and around town, people won't be able to stop talking about it, how lucky we were, reaching out to touch us like we're celebrity, saying “Just making sure you're really there.”

At the time, we don't know anything about it. The lights go back on and the pilot is screaming over and over again, “Thank Christ,” crying, and we don't know why he's saying it, but we start saying it too because we're all dizzy, a little giddy, not so much from the plane, or the champagne, which goes down so smooth we don't taste it, but from doing math. We're translating each sip to five, six hours of work, wondering how it is that so many hours could taste so light, be gone so quick, leave no aftertaste after. John Walker is still on the ground, fumbling his second bottle, and we're watching whole days, weeks of John Walker's life spill out on the floor in champagne.

We're calling for more champagne and John Walker can't get up so Monica opens the final bottle and pours the champagne, snuffing the singing of the plane's roar still trapped in the flutes on the bar, one by one. Out the window, the airfield is blazing with lights. Orange slides

have deployed from the doors of the plane and the passengers are sliding down them, now huddled silhouettes crossing the field, that every twenty seconds or so go up like match heads in the swinging beam from the beacon tower. We're all at the window with our champagne. We can hear sirens down the road, like the night John Walker got arrested for fighting, and like that night, he's on the ground, beaming, benevolent, bleeding, as usual.

"What's happening?" he asks us, sounding a little afraid of being left behind.

He's too drunk to stand up so we stoop down and lift him, and as we're all touching, pushing, raising him, he smiles and mumbles, like a little boy on the edge of sleep, "When I'm gone, y'all'll remember me, right?"

Of course we will, John Walker, we tell him, back to looking out the window.

*

Sometimes, now years later, John Walker comes up as a subject of discussion. One of us will look at his picture, fading on the mirror and talk about the night he got into a fight with the trucker, or the night he bought the champagne, or the day when he quit, right in the middle of a chewing-out that Randy, our supervisor, was giving him. "You know what Randy?" John Walker said. "I think *you* should pay more attention. What do you think of this?" John Walker asked, holding up both middle fingers. "John Walker," we remember Randy saying, his face grey, "You are the dumbest piece of shit God's ever squeezed out." And we talk, too, about how John Walker looked at all of us as Randy said this and smiled, like he were doing it for us.

"I wonder how that knife company is?" we'll occasionally bring up, as a joke.

"Probably not well." We have all, we know, Googled John Walker just to be sure.

"Imagine if he was rich by now."

“Christ. He’d better not be.”

By now, some of us have families, and some of us are too old to be drinking at two in the morning, so most nights when they ask me if I want to go out for a drink, I say, “I might just do that,” but, like tonight, I go home instead. Tonight, as usual, I’m driving home when I stop for gas at the self-pump on the edge of town. I do this often, not because my tank is empty but because the vibrations of the machines still linger in my ear drums and my bones and I don’t want to go home quite yet with that slight hum hanging in my ears for hours as I lie next to my wife, listening to her sleep while I stare up at the ceiling.

My lungs catch on the cold when I step out of the car. It’s snowing a little tonight and there’s no one in the lot so while I pump the gas, I close my eyes, feeling the snow melt on my shoulders and the sweat in my shirt cool, and beneath that, almost more constant than my heartbeat, the thrumming of the salt baths and the rubber presses which begins to quiet by the time the pump shudders in my hand, and I look up at someone walking towards me. They’re walking towards me and I’m still holding the gas nozzle, and the first thing I think, strangely, is that tonight I’m going to die, and somehow I’m relieved I’ll be alone, in a quiet lot as it happens, when the person lowers their hood and I see John Walker grinning at me, rubbing his chapped fingers together.

“Did I scare ya?” he says. “I saw y’all’s car and knew it was you.”

I have not seen John Walker in years and maybe it’s because I expected that I wouldn’t be able to get rid of him that I’m overjoyed to have him back. And it’s maybe because he can see this that he immediately takes on a disinterested attitude, as if he knew he’d see me here, as if, right then, he had better things to do.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask.

“Walking home,” he says, nodding down the road. Beyond us, it’s dark. Two miles after the self pump, the streetlights give out and then its a wall of night, like the side of a ship.

“It’s cold,” I say, and somehow, by observing this, I feel I’ve insulted him.

“I like the walk,” he says. I look down at his feet for his Ariat cowboy boots. Only sneakers. I see him see me do this and feel obliged to ask, “Do you want a ride?”

He shrugs, as if it’s no concern of his, or like he’s doing me a favor.

We’re driving out into the country, towards the county line, with the snow melting on the windshield, and the heat loosening an odor that makes me wonder just where John Walker has been these years. He’s fallen silent so ask him what he’s been up to these days and he starts telling me that he has an aunt out this way, who sometimes lets him sleep in the basement.

“I’m gonna grow vegetables,” he says, leaning forwards and, without asking, turning the heat higher. “When it gets warm. In the spring.”

“Did the knife company not work out?” I ask slowly.

He turns to the window and blows a fart with his lips. “That’s gone.”

Ahead of us, the wall of night is approaching. Overhead, a beam of light that keeps swinging across the sky becomes clearer and clearer. Though I know he sees it, I don’t say anything about it. I’m remembering the night he bought us champagne, wondering how often he thinks of dropping a grand on us, when I see John Walker hold something out which, as we pass beneath the last streetlight, flashes. It’s a knife. I keep my hands steady on the wheel, the needle floating below sixty, the knife floating between him and me.

“Isn’t it a beaut?” John Walker says, and I can barely hear him through the thunder of my own heart. “My friend took all my money, but I got this off of him. Told him if I see him again, I’m going to give it back to him right between his ribs.”

He turns the knife as if to catch the light, but our headlights are the only lights on the road. Then he flips it around and points the handle at me so I can take it. I take it. It’s heavy. I can tell he’s sharpened it. I give it a look, and nod, then grab the back of the blade to hand it back to him. “A beaut,” I say. He puts the knife away and blows on the window like a little kid, fogging it. He draws a heart on the glass and cuts it in two with his finger.

John Walker tells me where to go and when we pull up my lights illuminate a little one story, a bush out front. The windows are dark. There’s no car in the drive.

“Is this hers?” I say, even though John Walker had already said it was.

“Yeah,” he says again and doesn’t get out, and I get the feeling then he’s thinking of something to say. I feel like I should say something too, should offer John Walker a bed, or some money. I only have twenty dollars in my pocket, which I think about giving to him, but I’m afraid to remind him just how much he spent on us that night and by the time I’ve resolved to do it anyways, he’s starting to leave and I’m too relieved that he’ll be gone soon to interrupt.

“Well,” he says. “See you around.”

“See you around,” I say, and then he’s out of the car, walking up the drive and I have to control myself so that I don’t back up immediately before he gets in the house. I count down seconds, but John Walker, when he gets to the steps to the door, looks back at me. I roll down the window.

“Hey,” he says. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“What?” I say. I’ve already put the car in reverse. My foot is hovering on the break.

“The night we almost died,” he says. Then he pauses. “To be honest I didn’t even know. I was so drunk. I didn’t hear about it till three days after. It’s like it didn’t happen at all.”

“Yeah,” I’m agreeing, and at the same time, with the feeling of setting down a great weight, I lift my foot off the break. I’m so relieved and guilty to be leaving that, rolling backwards, I say, “You should come by the bar. I’ll buy you a drink.”

He stares at me and I know we both know he won’t come to the bar. The headlights are widening on him as I back up, and if he says anything to that, I don’t catch it. I’m already at the road, and as I give him one last wave and put the car in drive and push down on the gas pedal and begin moving again, I know it’s the last time I’ll ever see John Walker, but I can’t help feeling, as I leave him, that I’m almost lifting off the face of the earth.

There’s no one on the road. Far ahead, I can see the lights of Marion bruising the sky. I’m thinking of home and I push the pedal further and further to reach it faster until I feel the pedal meet the floor. The engine is roaring. Any second a deer might saunter onto the road and I’ll go careening off into the night but as I crest a rise, Marion comes into sight and I have that feeling again—I’ve forgotten it for years—that I did when I heard, a day later, about how close we came to dying that night from the plane. It’s not just gratitude for my life. I look at the lights, thinking about all of us, how there are other kinds lives that seem to resemble the rest of ours, lives like saints, which you look back on eventually and see you’ve misunderstood. People who, until their moment of transformation, seemed like minor sinners, doing everything they could to push greatness away. How it was as if they knew they would give up everything, how it was as if they forced their rise to be greater by its unlikelihood, so that it when it did come it was

inevitable, indomitable, against their will. And while they were laying down their lives for sainthood, we were dreaming of fame in our homes of small comforts, going to church every Sunday with a hangover, sinning venially, praying venally, grateful, at night, we could look out our windows, knowing that people in passing cars can guess nothing of us, our house just one light among many.

That summer, Val was learning from Millie how to hit a streak. They lived in Mansfield then in the new millennium, one of those times when everyone felt a change coming. The Ford plant had just shut down. Oprah had done a feature on the heroin epidemic in their town, the most attention they'd gotten since *Shawshank Redemption* put their prison on the big screen. For a whole year afterwards, people talked about it. They watched the news every night to hear names of friends and acquaintances spoken on television. The Shelby police chief, Don Krueger, appeared on national news in a suit and a sheepish smile, his hair pomaded flat, having in his initial outrage charged the reporter with "corrupting another with drugs" among other things.

They were sixteen then, a year away from the thought of leaving. They went to an all girl's Catholic prep school, were on the track team. Across the street from their church, broken ribbons of police tape swept porch boards. A month into the thick of summer, Millie had seen a classmate of theirs fueling up a car that didn't belong to her. An old red MKII Mustang that would tuck into the lot of a hardware store two blocks down to pick Anne up. The rumor was he was over twenty five. Everybody had been trying to get a picture of him on their iPhone, or at least a glance. Anne had been hanging up the spigot when Millie hailed her, already disappointed he wasn't in the car. Anne turned around from fueling up this guy's car and looked at Millie like she were a stranger before slipping back in. They'd both driven off by the time Millie realized that under her eyeshadow, Anne had the biggest shiner she'd ever seen.

The next weekend, as every weekend of that eagerly anticipated, and yet now pointless feeling summer when Val hung up her Dominoes apron and Millie wasn't painting her father's

rentals, this was the two of them: black hoodies, two ski masks Millie's mother had bought for a trip they never went on rolled up as caps to hide their hair, and a bat. They'd go to Millie's house because her father was either on base, or, if he was home, as soon as he retired from his post on the couch, drinking Bud Light, watching movies on TNT, he wouldn't leave his room till late morning the next day.

When Millie first told her what they were going to do that summer, Val had privately doubted it all as something vain and reckless, the thought itself an outgrowth of the fruitless weight of that summer heat. In some vague way Val sensed she was letting Millie teach her to overcome a lifetime of modest expectation, and yet, she was naturally practical, cautious, frugal with enthusiasm. She'd learned these values from her own body - a plain one, lank limbed, flat chested with a body language of apology, hair so fine she could gather it in a diameter no wider than a dime. She knew from the way people regarded her father that silence was often best: it couldn't be disproved.

But in the water-cool air of the night, batting that first mailbox had been so sweet, Val's mind went blank and animal for hours, and afterwards, lying in bed with the dawn light seeping into the window, for the first time she could remember, she couldn't find her fear: of saying the wrong thing, of embarrassing someone, of being herself. She believed it then when Millie told her that all around the city people were giving up their money, their bodies, their minds, striking them like match heads for a few moments of incandescence. Millie believed in moments like this, metamorphosis, sacrifice. From then on, Val would follow her everywhere.

Here was Millie, in an hour like an un-struck bell. Ahead, limbering up, she swung a bat into the palm-warm air of the night. They were on a road - Val didn't know which - like any

other: gentle sloping lawns, the coupled shadows of pines, the rotating parabola of a sprinkler. Everything housed a vibration at the hour - the panes of glass flashing with puzzles of streetlight, trees breathing cicada song, Val's hands, shaking. Millie had this effect on things.

Val had already watched Millie go through a streak of six mailboxes five blocks ago. When Millie asked her if she wanted to go on, Val hadn't said no, even though she wanted to, just retucked her damp hair beneath the rolled up ski mask. Earlier that night Val had stood in Millie's room, staring at her face, naked without her hair. She had frank unfeminine face. It often happened in a restroom she would look up into the mirror and catch the girl next to her glancing at her speculatively. Val shied from reflective surfaces, ducked around camera eyes, but tonight, unsexed in the shapeless hoodie and cap, she stood in Millie's room looking into the mirror for as long as she could with the thought that it looked right.

"You ready Val?" Millie asked, pressing the tip of her bat against the pavement and swiping it like a match. The aluminum sung. "You're getting the first one this time. You didn't get to go at all."

Millie stopped in front of a mailbox to hand her the bat. Her knuckles beneath the streetlight bristled. They were studded with cubic zirconium, rings pocketed from Walmart - Millie didn't believe in property. Val had the feeling that behind the facades of the houses, Millie envisioned a future in which they all lived beneath trees, by a river, free. Val only saw houses, a street, Millie standing in front of them. In her hat she looked androgynous, elven, like a fey girl or a beautiful boy.

"You afraid?" Millie asked.

Val didn't even think of lying. "Yes."

Earlier that night a door had flung open and someone had chased them the five blocks here and if Millie had steered them home, Val would have been grateful. After vandalism like that, people would often decline to call the police, opting instead to drive around with a grudge and a bat. But Millie had been revved up because of seeing Anne the week before. All week she'd been waiting to blow off steam even though she wasn't a friend of Anne's. Few people were, though no one made a show of it. She was the type of girl who'd wear her skirts two finger lengths too high and one extra button unbuttoned. For a long time there had been a rumor she'd masturbated using the D-Cell batteries they used to run the projector in Bio and after Alex Schumeyer made fun of her for this, she opened her locker one day and found a used tampon on the bottom. Everyone knew Anne had been kicked out of her mother's house when she was fifteen and since had been living with various aunts and friends.

Val had a hard time looking at her ever since she'd run across her searching for Millie at a joint Satie Hawkins dance with St. Luke's boy's school. Millie had been with her date in her car, Val learned later. At the time, she'd found Anne with her friend Sable, standing in the center of a circle of boys, nacreous beneath layers of peach lotion and the sequins on their dresses. Some boy had volunteered his hat and it traveled hand to hand, everyone putting in a few dollars. When it finally came to a stop in Anne's hand, she had a wad of singles as big as a human skull. She held the hat as she leaned into Karen, mouth open, and the boy to Val's left, apparently mistaking her for another onlooker, turned and said, "This is fucking great."

In class, Anne would snap her gum, text on her phone, talk loudly. She mostly left everyone alone and people left her alone. Teachers wouldn't look at her. Whenever she spoke everyone stared forwards, as if watching something occur far away. She didn't speak much.

People were already beginning to treat her as someone they'd seen around in high school, vaguely remember, like those Greek symbols you study, that one day come to symbolize everything you've forgotten.

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The mailbox Millie stopped them in front of looked new, as if its owner had just replaced it. It was black with hand painted birds frolicking on the sides. Val studied feathers, no more than tropical lace, wondering if she would have noticed them if she wasn't going to destroy it. Destroying something, Val knew, changed it before you even touched it. Things became easier to see, illuminated by their coming loss.

"I've been talking to Anne ever since," Millie was saying behind Val, looking down the street at cubes of glass cast into the gutter like dice. Probably from a clipped side view mirror. "She moved out of Erik's place."

"Erik?"

Val looked back. Between the thick slant of the bat and the corner of the hoodie, like a pixie standing on her shoulder, there was Millie. Millie bent to stub out her cigarette on the curb, lit a new one on the way up.

"The guy," Millie said, "who owns the car. The guy who hit her."

"Oh," Val said, turning back around. She picked an iguana green bird as the target, one wing forward, one wing back, like it were windmilling or dancing. She squared her feet, reaching out with the bat to the bird on the box to show herself she could get to it. What persisted was that each time before she swung, in some deep part of her, she didn't believe she could hit it.

“They were living in those cookie cutter apartments,” Millie said. “You know, where Park Ave makes its way out of town and all the streets start sounding like retirement homes. Woodcrest, Woodbine, Woodvine, Vine, Sunset, Suncrest, Crestcrest. I think she lived with him for over a year.”

“Did he hit her before?”

“Maybe,” Millie said. “Probably.”

Yes, that sounded right. It was the kind of thing you expected when you saw Anne: tan limbs, red lips, the painted, normally animated face that in moments of reflection turned clown-like, tragic somehow in the way of things once they seemed to separate from their decorations. Something in Anne suggested, even insisted on the sordid, the shocking, like she'd gained some power over it by expecting it. But at some point when Anne had been living with Erik, she must have come out of the bathroom with the tired, scrubbed and older looking face of someone without makeup. And this was what Val could not reconcile: there must have been scenes of domestic tranquility, not even bliss, but boredom between them, when they sat down at the table, eating dinner, asking, half listening about each others days. How could something so unreasonable occur in front of the daily witnesses of the cutlery, the tables and chairs? Val couldn't tell who or what was betrayed, the people who'd sat calmly eating dinner, or whether the other side of dailiness was treachery. From there, it was not far to the thought that anyone could make that transformation.

“What's happening to him now?” Val asked.

“As far as I know nothing's going to happen to Erik. She's not calling the police.”

There it was again, she couldn't stop it, that sense of things returning to how they were. Her picture of what had happened was fading like a bruise and whatever had opened briefly and shown its face had withdrawn and closed up, healed, though incompletely - there was always a scar to suggest. Val stared at the mailbox, it joining the normalcy of everything, the street, the yards. She felt if she swung as hard as she could, it would only bring the bat gently to the ground.

“So what's going to happen to Erik?” Val asked.

Millie had pulled out a box cutter that she'd stolen from her father, the kind you used your thumb to push the blade up, each inch long segment razor sharp, and was stripping the branch of a front lawn pine of its needles. She always kept in her pocket so she could cut out the detectors from clothes at Walmart.

“It seems like nothing.”

Val was about to turn around with the bat again to contemplate the distance between her and action when she stopped herself, asked, “What would you have done?”

The edge of the cutter had apparently gotten dull because Millie broke it off, pitched it. Pushing her thumb up, she produced a perfect, clean sided, luminous triangle.

“I would have killed him.”

Val remembered then, as she sometimes did, what Millie told her. When she'd been young, right after her mother left for Gavelston and a job writing self-help books, her father used to beat her horribly. Millie would know the days, for whether to get ready for it, or whether it happened because of it, he would start drinking early, and she would play quietly in her room,

and then wait outside as long as she could before it got dark and she'd have to go in or risk him calling her.

Val had trouble looking at Millie now, staring at her, the way she did looking at Anne. It was hard to look at somebody that had been wounded. They commanded some sort of power over you that resulted from their defeat and your helplessness to do anything. It was the same way Rod avoided Millie now, as if he hadn't beaten her, and rather, it had happened the other way around. It made Val wonder what Millie had finally seen in Rod that negated her fear, the thing he was trying to destroy her for, to erase that knowledge.

Val had to look away. The mailbox was in front of her. She swung.

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There was a moment in pole vaulting, Millie had explained when she tried to teach Val how to do it, in which the pressure of the pole built. Once you embraced its force, you'd be carried upwards. Val, lanky, uncoordinated, had never been able to do it. Always at the crucial moment, she obeyed something that told her to let go. For some reason, this had been the first thought that surfaced after the white pain that scalded her mind blank. In the moment, it had felt like someone snapped her arms backwards through her elbows.

"Well fuck," she heard Millie say. "I guess someone already got to them."

Val's bones were still humming, like bells coming to rest. The other sound was the bat, rolling its way back to her in an arc across the pavement - the impact had made her let go - and coming to a stop by her foot. She was bent and when she could finally look up, she saw Millie beside the mailbox. Inside the mailbox was another mailbox. Between the two, a layer of concrete.

“At least you got a dent in it,” Millie said.

Val stood up, massaging the vibration out of her arms. As she lifted her foot to walk to over, the bat, interrupted on its course, kept rolling. The dent was about the size of an apple. She’d cracked the birds face and brought its arms together, as if it were illustrating the side of something. If it hadn’t been for the concrete, you could have popped your hand inside and smoothed it out. All that fear, pain, Val thought, and such a little mark.

“I would say,” Millie said. “That isn’t very fair.”

Val wasn’t listening to Millie anymore. By various postures she was trying to wiggle out of her pain. When she looked up, Millie was squatting beneath the mailbox like a little grinning totem, facing the street. She stood up, brining her shoulder up under the lip of the mailbox and strained. It began to pull out of the ground at first reluctantly, with a tearing sound like it had roots, then ejected all at once, toppling over Millie’s shoulder, hammering the street, spraying dirt clods into the air. Afterwards, they could smell damp soil as if it had rained.

“You know,” Millie asked, bending down. “We’re actually doing them a favor. Some kid breaks his arm on that and they could get sued.”

Millie lifted one side of the box and looked at Val. She was almost crying but she bent to take the end of the four by four, still wet with dirt clinging to it, in her red trembling hands. Millie whistled loudly and tonelessly as she marched them up the drive past an Audi. When a light flashed, Val stopped. She turned automatically to run, but felt the mailbox tug her onwards and followed. The automatic garage light hadn’t even put a hitch in Millie’s whistling.

Millie, finishing her tune, crab walked the mailbox up the steps. They both lowered it down right in front of the door, neat as a delivered newspaper before Millie, halfway down the

steps, remembered. She opened up the mailbox and pulled out a fist full of outgoing mail. She delivered it into the storm gutter when they were in the street.

The bat had completed its arc, having rolled to the curb. Millie picked it up and offered it to Val, who's arms were hanging loosely at her sides. She was vaguely annoyed at Millie, who'd chosen her mailbox. Millie shrugged, seeming unbothered by Val's withdrawal. She moved on to the next mailbox, a normal one with 'mail' engraved in light relief on the steel. Val turned over in her mind whether or not she'd suggest checking it but Millie had this look on her face, a tight abstract sort of smile that told her even if she did say something, Millie would want to take the risk. Millie stared down the long smooth street, orange under the streetlights, over which protruded the faces of the mailboxes. Despite herself, Val felt a pleasurable excitement.

Normally it happened too quickly to remember, the way that, when she would sometimes at track practice just stop to watch Millie pole vault, it was impossible to remember the movement of Millie's body in the air, as useless as trying to follow the tying of a knot. Millie did this for hours after school, hurl herself skywards, eyes closed, body and breasts and throat bared to the knife of the sun. Val thought she resembled the saints in their church painted on the walls in their fiery assumptions, but upside down, and only briefly. What Millie did was the most graceful thing she'd seen anyone do.

But when Millie swung, crushing the mailbox like a can, she didn't run to the next one. She walked, the mailbox door swinging open after her, comically, like a cartoon character had come running out.

Millie twirled the bat, whistled, sent the next mailbox skidding down the street. She sauntered to the third box.

“What are you doing?” Val asked, not meaning to laugh, really not, but she was giddy, with the extraordinary force of the noise they were making, and the ludicrous darkness of the houses tempting them to make more.

Millie grinned at her, played a tune on the next mailbox. When she hit it, it streamed a tail of letters like a comet. “Wake up,” she screamed.

Val was worried now. Millie was flaunting how slowly she was moving between mailboxes, walking down the middle of the road beneath the lights, as if she wanted people to see her. As she connected her next hit, a series of dining rooms and kitchens flashed out of the night like a string of Christmas bulbs. It was marvelous. They both couldn’t help laughing, feeling like they were populating the town by her noise.

Doors opened. People had started shouting. A dog barked. As Millie lagged around the next mailbox, light lanced up a yard and a man came at them, screaming, in his bathrobe. Val was behind Millie, in the street, ready to run. She couldn’t see Millie’s face. Millie had stood up to watch the man approach. The bat swung slightly, as if of its own weight, by her ankles. When Millie brought the bat up, Val knew something horrible was going happen. But then she turned and ran towards up the street towards her.

As they sprinted, she was laughing. Millie was laughing. She didn’t know why Millie was laughing, but she was laughing because something horrible had seemed like it was going to happen and then it had not. She’d been wrong. She forgot about her arms hurting.

After a couple blocks, they’d lost the guy but they ran a few more just to squeeze the joy out of it. When they heard a car turn onto the road, they ducked around a house, careful not to trip the lights, down a long back yard that ran to a gully choked with weeds. Tall pines swayed

above it. Beneath their dry mothering skirts, they huddled into balls in their black hoodies so that if a flash light brushed them, they'd look like shadows, while up above on the street, headlights flickered through the gaps in the houses like a marquee for a show. Stars pressed through the pine needles.

At one point, Millie lit a cigarette to savor the risk. Val turned to her. She was going to ask what she'd been about to do with the bat. She didn't ask though.

Some teacher, in English, had told her that everyone was the main character in their own lives. Sometimes Val wasn't so sure. They'd been sitting for an hour or more, but she could feel their hearts beating and beating like they were still running, like they'd left everything behind and there was only Millie and her.

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Eventually all three sources of light faded, first the cigarette, then the cars, then the stars. They made their way back to Millie's house a block at a time, Millie standing at the end of every street, bat hanging down her leg so it'd vanish into her profile, watching for people. Eventually they gave up caution, straggling down the middle of the road. It was still dark. Val's pants were soaked from dew. The adrenaline had worn off and left her feeling scraped out as a bad tooth. Millie had gone stone silent, walking alone as if she were contemplating some failure of hers. Val wondered if she were thinking about what she'd almost done to the man who'd chased them.

In the driveway, when Val was almost to the door, Millie stopped, looked up at the sky, then Rod's window, both of them mute and dark. She didn't look at all tired.

She turned to Val. "Let's go to Erik's house."

Val could see by the light of Millie's eyes what was happening. She knew that Millie, for whom the mail boxes were casual fun, wanted to get something Val couldn't even find the right name for, maybe justice, maybe revenge. She wasn't sure. She agreed though, because despite that her arms were throbbing, she knew if she went downstairs, she'd wait, sleepless, while Millie and life were elsewhere. Besides, she felt, despite her apprehension earlier, excited. This was something they'd never done.

In the garage, not bothering to be quiet, Millie grabbed a pair of Rod's pliers, climbed on Rod's Buick. She disconnected the motor from Rod's garage door. When she finished, Val helped Millie raise the door, inch by inch, on its rollers. As they lifted it, Val felt like they were shrugging something off that had been on them all summer, maybe all their lives. With the door up, the wind that came before dawn blew through the garage, making all the tarps flap, held down beneath cinderblocks. While Millie got the keys to the Buick, Val looked out, in the direction of the last rows of houses, at the articulate ladder of the local radio tower climbing the open sky, between tracts of trees, a red light blinking on top.

When Millie put the Buick in neutral, Val stood between the twin beams of the headlights, pushing the car slowly down into the street. As soon as they turned out of the development, the lights of downtown Mansfield winked over the knee high shadows of late June corn. Val lowered her window and let her palm ride air.

Millie drove through fields, then suburban clutter, then downtown. When she turned and drove up onto Park Ave, a Bud Light bottle rolled out from beneath Val's seat and chucked her ankle. Millie drove them a ways down Park Ave before pulling off into the weedy lot of a closed gas station to tape two plastic bags over her license plates. Val sat on the warmed hood of the

car, staring east at the sharpened lines of roofs, her stomach hurting. She thought about asking to go back but by the time she got into the car, she was resolved for whatever would come.

They crossed the city line and exited into a field of marsh grass, following a line of telephone poles, and then they entered a smooth grey tunnel of strip malls, used car lots, restaurants, all of them dark. When these petered out, the same apartment complex repeated itself over and over again like a song you couldn't shake. Millie's face was pale, staring down at a map. Val sat beside her, passive, breathing hard. The road kept going on until the apartments petered out. By the time they got to where they were going, they could make out the blank space of air beyond the last building right before they turned into the cratered lot of an apartment complex. Val realized she'd been holding the bat, as if she'd forget it, since they taped over the plates. When Millie got out, she left the doors unlocked.

Val followed Millie, glancing around at the lot, expecting to be hailed by a voice at any second. It was empty. The sky was cobalt blue. Millie stopped beside a red Mustang. It was the MKII that had pulled up beside their school to pick up Anne Hornicle all last year. Val looked at it as if expecting to find blood on the seats, windows. There was none. It was parked lengthwise beneath one of the building's windows, back bumper facing three steps rising to a door with a brass rusted number *139* nailed to the wood.

Millie was standing at its side, looking down at it. She had her box cutter out. Very casually, like she were picking off a hangnail, Millie snapped off the old blade, slipped it into her pocket, and pushed up a new one, the same blue as the sky.

Millie could slash a tire so quietly, it gave up its air like a secret. She genuflected by each corner of the car as it danced down to the pavement. A long loud hiss issued from the car until it settled on its rims. When it was over, Millie stood up, looked at the window.

“Are we going?” Val asked quietly, because she could hear the beeping of a garbage truck backing into an alley, a car door slamming. A few birds chirped in the trees. They’d never done anything like this so late in the morning. As Val looked at Millie standing there, she felt an uncomfortable thought trying to surface that she pushed back down. She was doubting Millie’s judgement.

Millie reached up a hand and unrolled her ski mask down over her face, becoming anonymous. The only thing recognizable was that her hair threaded through the eyes sockets, like straw from a scarecrow. Millie turned away from the car, walked up to the door, and like she’d arrived at a friend’s house, knocked. She had the knife in her hand.

“Millie,” Val said. “We should go.”

“Get in the driver’s seat,” Millie said. “Start the car.”

On the other side of the apartment, Val could heard the murmurs of a pair of people walking by. They were about to do something illegal, Val realized, staring at a cracked brick in the wall. Something final seemed to have folded around them, as if the material of the world had changed from something forgiving and forgetful to something that remembered, that scarred. Or maybe it had always been that way.

Seemingly very far away, Millie knocked on the door again. By now the unseen sun had crested the horizon and band of light blazed on the top of the roof. The trees had gone up in a wildfire of birdsong. Turning around to go back to the car, Val saw her reflection in the

windshield of the Mustang. There they were in miniature, her and Millie. In the curved glass everything looked distorted and small and silent, like an old movie on a mute TV with the kind of ending you already know.

When Val swung, she aimed at herself. An alarm resumed so abruptly it was if they'd been listening to it all along but had only just heard it. Birds went quiet. The windshield's reflections had shattered. They were replaced by new edges, a puzzle of light. It'd be a mistake to say it felt good. Right then, it was like the only thing she'd ever felt, the glass smashing, giving beneath the bat. It was like she'd found something she didn't even know was there: an edge to the world that she could grip to pull it open.

It took a hand pulling on her hoodie to get her to look up. Millie ran past her. The kitchen light was on. Val caught a glimpse of a sparsely furnished kitchen - a table, a fridge, two chairs, some stains. A magnet, a green tropical bird, hung in the blankness of the room, pinned to post card on the fridge. There was someone pressed up against the glass looking out at her. For a second she couldn't think why he'd be there.

They'd just gotten in the car when the man came sprinting across the lot. Millie had the Buick pulled out and facing the exit when he got to them. He slammed his arms down on the trunk, denying everything "No. NO. NO. NO." Millie floored it out of the lot. When Val looked back, she saw the a clavicle like a coat hanger, a skinny flat chest, like hers, and then a face which rapidly diminished.

On the road, he followed them up Park Ave, but they got ahead of him easily. The sun had risen between the buildings filled the street, recasting the buildings in bronze. People were in their yards, getting into their cars, picking up papers, staring behind them at the shirtless man

running after them. He got smaller and smaller until the orb of the sun, hanging low above the pavement, seemed to swallow him. Val was laughing hysterically. She couldn't stop. Her empty hands were shaking and she looked down at them like she'd done some act of magic - the bat was gone. She must have dropped it. She looked up at Millie. Millie was staring straight ahead.

"You should have let me finish that," Millie said.

Val almost asked Millie what she'd been about to do. But she didn't want Millie to say it. Afterwards, she knew the word would stay between them, inexplicable. Instead, she settled back in her seat. Everything was so bright, she had to squint facing forwards. Constellations of last night's beer bottle glass sparkled in the gutter. The grass, each blade, ten thousand of them, was tipped with hard points of dew. The world flashed on its new edges. Val looked until her eyes bruised.

They stopped once to take off the bags from the license plates but the ride home was as quiet as the ride out. When they reached Millie's house and pulled into the driveway the tarps had blown loose of their blocks. People were out walking their dogs. None of them looked at the two girls, knew what they'd done. When the garage door shut, the room was cool and concrete smelling. Millie climbed onto the hood to connect the motor again.

"Goddamnit," Millie said, looking down at the trunk.

Val had been rubbing her arms. An ache had climbed in them that wouldn't go away for days. When she looked she saw there were dents where the man had brought his fists down. They weren't big though, Val saw - you could reach inside and pop them right out. All that anger, and such a small mark.

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She thought of that dent more than a year later when Millie called her. She was in Pennsylvania, at college. She stared at the name on the phone before answering it.

Millie said she found out when she saw the Mustang parked in a gas station. She knew it was the one because of the hole in the back windshield. Someone had filled it with a tarp. She was in the same car they had been in so she was driving away when in her rearview she saw Anne Hornicle come out with a pack of Pall Malls and get inside. Clean face, no shiner. She hadn't talked to Anne since graduation. She'd never told her what they'd done to Erik. She called Anne later, and Anne told her all about what happened.

"A gun in his mouth," Millie said over the phone. "Blew his brains all over the kitchen."

Anne had left Erik and Erik had lost his job, started drinking, and gone into debt, Millie said. The funeral was small. Hardly anyone came. Anne tried to speak at the funeral but she'd never been a good speaker and halfway through, she broke down. Anne blamed it all on herself, Millie said. Millie had to carry her away, because Anne's mother wasn't there.

Millie said she and Anne go often to a bar where they don't check girls' ID's. She said Anne wants to talk about him, every time, and that every time Anne did, Millie got closer to admitting what she'd done. "She's in love with him still," Millie said, "in a way." It wasn't quite like love. Maybe something like hate. The kind of thing once you get in, you're afraid, because you know only some desperate action can retrieve you.

As she talked, Val looked outside at the trees, changing their leaves. She tried to imagine Millie holding Anne Hornicle, in the funeral parlor, holding her up on the barstool. She tried to imagine their closeness. The body. The weight in her hands, the warm shuddering, the animal

smell of breath. But she couldn't imagine that kind of weight now. All she could think about Millie was the bat swinging, the aluminum singing as it struck glass. The way the impact stayed in your bones after it made you let go.

You see the German woman again, today. You've seen her almost every day, going to and from the gardens. Some days, you catch her staring at you. Once, you thought she was walking right up to you. She passed about five feet away and then stopped at the dondurma stand where you overheard her order ice cream. As she ate her ice cream, you caught her glancing at you out of the corner of her eye. You wonder if she works around here too.

"Do you know her?" you ask Reçep.

He follows your finger to where she is, making her way across the square to the gates of Topkapi. The tips of the cyprus are bent over the top of the wall. As she walks, she holds her hair against the top of her head. A pamphlet flutters by your ankles. Reçep smiles. You shouldn't have said anything. You want this man to know little, nothing about you.

"Ah, fistik" he says, would say about any woman. He looks at you. "You want her, eh?"

"No," you say. "I thought I recognized her from somewhere."

Reçep isn't listening to you. The sun skates over his sunglasses as he turns. A middle-aged couple is walking toward you. "Folks?" he calls out, his voice suddenly affectless, American. Indeed, he could almost be American—tan, potbellied, his black hair moused and gleaming like his teeth. His accent is barely detectable. It stirs behind his words without changing them, like a perfume you notice after a woman passes through a room.

"I'm sorry," he says to them. "They've closed this way for construction."

You watch flocks of brick-colored pigeons bob across the cobbles between sandaled feet, snatching crumbs. A child runs screaming and they scatter, shadows flung across the square, to

roost on the opposite massed domes of the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque. The spring sun squints the distance. It gleams on the tips of minarets across the Bosphorus, in Karaköy. The onion-domed cupolas of the sahlelep vendor carts blaze, tufts of steam tugged sideways by the wind.

“You want to see something?” Reçep says. The middle-aged couple are walking away from you quickly. He waves at a woman walking by. She has black hair, pale skin, like the German woman. She stops. He waves again and she comes over slowly.

“You look lost,” Reçep says.

She smiles and shakes her head to tell him she has no English. Reçep looks at you and gives you a grin then begins speaking a language that might be Russian. The girl’s face shifts from a beautiful perplexity to an even more beautiful recognition. She has a helmet of shining black hair, the bangs cut straight across. The wind frays the edge of it. A strand keeps getting caught in her mouth and she pulls it out with an unconscious gesture as she listens. Her eyes move to you and you know he is talking about you.

Reçep turns to you. “Do you want her?”

“What do you mean?”

“I can get her for you.”

“What did you say to her?”

She’s staring at you.

“There’s an English expression about looking at the mouth of a horse,” Reçep says.

“No,” you say.

He shrugs. He returns to talking to her, low, quick. You turn and look for the German woman but she's gone. There's a guard at the gates to the palace gardens. The middle aged couple is arguing in front of him. You look between two minarets of the Hagia Sophia at a ship inching its way out towards the horizon. Slowly, it goes grey. Suddenly, it's gone.

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You've seen the German woman walking to and from Topkapi almost every day, so on Monday, your day off, you sit in the public section of the gardens where they sell the tickets you're not going to buy. Tickets to the palace are fifty lira, which is how much you get paid per day, without commission. You've been working for a week. After seven months overseas, you have no money left. You spent the winter hitchhiking through Eastern Europe. It's March now, warm enough to sit outside in one of the two T-shirts you own. They have holes. Your bones are pushing through your skin, your skin is pushing through your clothes, wearing the knees of your cargos to a soft white shine. Your hostel is the cheapest in the city. The people there are like you: the kind of people who count the change they're given, who stitch the holes in their clothes. Who cheat.

"I don't sit down at a table for less than a hundred lira an hour," Randy told you when you were thinking about giving private lessons in English. You'd watched him every day, walking out in a three piece suit to some cafe. Then you realized that each time it was the same suit.

"How do you charge that much? Do you have a TOEFL?"

"If you went to Yale, you could charge that much."

“You went to Yale?” you asked. All you knew about Randy was that he’d quit his job at a CopyHut in Duluth and became an expat after his ex-wife left him. He’d told you all of this one night after getting too drunk. He cornered you in the common room, told you about that bitch Beth. Said he’d slap her if he saw her again. Cried on your shoulder.

“I should be charging you that much,” Randy said. “I’m doing this as a favor because I like you but I don’t tell anybody my method. Everyone in this city is trying to rip you off. Even the whites. It’s a pack of fucking savages and I’m Henderson the Goddamn Rain King.”

Before you started selling carpets with Reçep, you tried posting an ad on Craigslist for lessons at eighty lira an hour, listing as the two jobs you held positions at two English Language schools you’d never even seen, but had only considered applying to. When no one responded, you dropped to sixty. When mustafaoner@gmail.com responded to your ad, he told you he could not afford lessons at sixty lira an hour. You dropped to thirty. He said thirty for two hours. You were on the brink of agreeing when you added the stipulation that he pay for the coffee at the cafe in which you were to meet, and then you got his final email:

What kind person you are?? First, I cannot call you as a human being. I didn't say anything about your character and I tried to be polite as much as possible yesterday, but I feel that I must be free what I tell you whatever I think about you. You hold jobs at two schools but you try to get the lessons covetously. You are native but you are nothing. English is your native language that's why you are able to save your life. You behaved piggishly. I don't get the conversation courses from you even if it is free of charge. What I am offering: go to the toilet and look your funny situation in the life at the mirror. Now, you don't need to chuckle even you can laugh.

Best Regards, Mustafa Oner

By the time she walks into Topkapi, the sun has shifted all the shadows to the other corner of the garden. She sits down at a bench across from you in a slant of light, opens a notebook, and immediately begins writing. There's a density to her concentration that tells you she's seen you. You wait, looking up over the top of your book, through the intermittent river of passing tourists. Sometimes you stare just above her, over the Palace walls, over the broken-open honeycombs of the sea-walls, as if to scrutinize the sea beyond, the great cargo ships skating a horizon as motionless and pink as the ice in an Avercamp painting.

Her writing is rapid, constant, almost panicky and you decide this is a sign that she's not going to get up and talk to you. When she does pause, in the evening, by the time the tide of the tourists has shifted towards the exit, you're too nervous to stand up and attract her gaze. She lights a cigarette. You roll your own and light it, but you smoke it timidly, looking off, embarrassed at how translucent your tactics are. You've begun to wonder whether the fact that you see her every day is only proof that you have similar routes through the city. You're debating how natural it would seem now if you simply got up and left, when a bell sounds and you both look up at each other. The gardens are closing. You stand. She continues to sit, writing like she's hurrying to finish something or possibly to avoid you. You look at the exit, the tail of receding tourists. You walk over.

"Hold on," she says, without looking up, sensing you where you stand a good distance away. She is pale, dark haired, grave, like the heroine of an old-poem. She snaps the notebook shut, stows it in a backpack, then stands, looking distracted. You're about to offer to leave her alone when someone shouts something. The guard in the gateway, luminous in the dusk in his

white uniform, is leaning out from the gates, looking at you. You both move towards the exit, walking side by side, not saying anything.

Outside the gates, tourists are drifting slowly through the square. The Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, their domes lit up like a circus. The merchants have their wares spread over blankets, are shoveling chestnuts, cracked open with heat and glittering with salt, into paper cones. Sometimes, standing here with Reçep, when there aren't any tourists around, you talk to these men about their families. Now, walking beside this woman, you stare into the lit glass boxes of their carts, at the mounds of rice and chickpeas or bulgur and chicken, as if you hadn't seen it before. Cheap light up whirlygigs soar into the darkening air. Children go running to retrieve them. You can't think of anything to say.

"No one's talking," she says, as if she read your thoughts.

"Sorry," you say. "I just kept seeing you passing by so I decided to say something. I'm not a creep. I'm not trying to sell you anything."

She looks at you like she doesn't understand.

"The merchants," she says. "None of them are talking to us."

You hadn't noticed. You look up at the dondurma seller, Fuat, standing in his bright cart, dressed in his white ruffled shirt, a red embroidered vest, a scarlet fez like those you see on monkeys in movies, the smile he wears from noon to ten. With a long metal bar he beats out a globe of ice cream against the side of its vat, pulls it out, flips it, crowns it with a cone, flips it again into the hands of the waiting boy below, who grabs at the cone which ends up being empty, a second cone clinging to the first which is now dancing in the air above the boy, attached to the

globe of ice cream, stuck to the teasing metal arm of the bar. When Fuat sees you and the German woman, the dance of the bar slows, his face loses its buffo charm. He gives you a wink.

The nod you give in return is barely discernible. Possibly you imagine giving it. He would understand. He told you he has a wife but you've never seen him bring her here.

*

The German woman's name is Maria. She asks if you're hungry, so you walk down the sloping streets to the Golden Horn for dinner. It's night on your side of the hill and the lights in houses and apartments are on, but you can see over the water to Taksim, and further, across the mouth of the Bosphorus, the point of Karaköy, broadsided by the last of the daylight. Clusters of dove-colored domes, minarets cascading down to the sea, the water at their base like molten lead. Ferries, white, cleave white water breasting out to the bay.

On the waterfront, gulls cry overhead as criers sing of the final departing tour ships—*Bos-phor-us, Bosphorusbosphorus Bos-phor-us*. The waterfront merchants have packed up their wares. The beggars have put on their coats. You stand in line for balik ekmek, sold off snub-nosed little ships, lit like old carriages with gold lanterns and rocking like cradles on the dark choppy dock side waves. While you fumble in your pockets, Maria pays for your dinner. She hands the coins to the cashier standing at the edge of the shore, who reaches across the narrow gap of the water to take the sandwiches the cook holds over starboard.

"I always come here if I'm in Sultanahmet," Maria says.

"I think I've seen you over here almost every day."

“The University is just up Divan Yolu. Even on days I don’t have class I like to sit in the gardens,” Maria says, picking up her sandwich but not biting into it. “I see you in the plaza too. Who’s that man you stand with?”

“My boss,” you say, picking up your sandwich.

“What do you do?”

“I give tours.” It’s the first thing that comes to mind, even before the real answer. You know from the way she looks at you that it doesn’t quite make sense, you standing out in the plaza all day to give tours. It’s not exactly that you’d care if she knew, it’s just that she would get the wrong impression if you didn’t explain and there would be a lot to explain. You take a bite of your sandwich and she does too.

When you ask her what she studies, she tells you she’s comparing French and German literature. She tells you about France and Germany, their continual wars. How even the languages war with each other.

“You wanted a break from that?” you ask.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean why you’re here and not in Germany.”

“I wanted a break from a lot of things,” she says wiping her hands with a napkin. You sense the distance she’s keeping between herself and where she comes from. You haven’t spoken to anyone from home in two weeks. When, after a month, you’d finally hitchhiked from Prague to Istanbul, you found dozens emails waiting in your inbox. *I’m sitting here. It’s four a.m. The house is empty. Are you alive?* your mother wanted to know. You told her it’s hard to find an internet connection in this city, even though your hostel has internet and you pass dozens of

internet cafe's every day. As if she knew you'd have to admit this if she pressed you, she said she understood.

You've finished your meals. It's night on a Monday. You are the only people left under the tent. Your coats are on. The cashier is collecting the jars of pickled vegetables. You watch the cook turn off the boat lanterns one by one. He's only in a T shirt. His skin shines with sweat, his shirt damp. The steam from the grill hangs in the air.

"Where are you going now?" you ask.

"I have class tomorrow," she says. "I should go home soon."

"I could walk you," you say.

"I live in Taksim."

"No problem."

"There's a tram," she tells you in a way that lets you know she's already thinking about other things. Tomorrow, for instance.

"Right. Well, thank you for dinner," you say, giving a wave in miniature to show you already know you're type of acquaintances that smile and wave from a distance.

"You could walk me to the stop," she says and you agree to, partly just to show her that you're fine with this too and partly because you know you'll see her again.

As she leads you along the waterfront, towards the Galata bridge, she asks you how you came to the city so you're telling her about the winter you spent hitchhiking, the five days that, because of the snow, you lived in a truck stop that was also a whorehouse. Above you, gulls cry. Maria has her white neck craned back to look up. It's a good city to watch gulls at night. You notice the skies of ancient cities are full of light, all the lights slanted up at the sides of the

buildings so that the skyline is a crown. From here the top of the Hagia Sophia is visible, its circling diadem of gulls.

“Did you sleep with the women?” she asks you, when you finish the story. She smiles to tell you it would be fine with her if you did.

“No,” you say.

“I was kidding,” she says, though you’re not sure she is so you don’t say anything.

“Once,” she starts saying. “I hitchhiked to Nuremberg for a concert and afterward, I got a ride to a gas station where I was going to wait for a ride back to Berlin. It was very cold and very late and no one was stopping in either direction. I thought I was going to have to walk back to town and get a hotel but finally a man pulled over and said he was going straight to Berlin. So of course, I got in.”

You walk up onto the bridge. The March night has emptied railings of most of the fishermen who lean there during the day. The few that are left have rolled out oil drums and lit fires in them. They stand with their backs bright and warming while they look over the water, dyed neon from the light spilling out of the clubs.

“I started talking to him,” Maria is saying. “Because usually people who pick up hitchhikers are lonely and bored and want to be talked to. And he seemed very lonely, yes, but he did not want to talk to me. He would answer questions with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ and when I asked what he did he said ‘I’m an interior designer’ but he seemed happier not to talk, so soon I stopped asking questions and he stopped talking and we were driving for hours like that, without talking. I felt bad because I was falling asleep sometimes, but each time I tried to talk, he seemed very uncomfortable with it. So I just looked out the window and when I saw we were

getting close to Berlin, he asked me a question. I've forgotten what it was. Maybe he was asking what exit I needed. But when I looked over he had his penis out."

You look at Maria. She bursts into laughter. You're standing in the center of the bridge. The sound turns the closest fishermen around.

"Really," she says. She'd stopped walking. "He just had it out. I had to stare at it. I could not *believe* it."

She laughs again and a half-smile involuntarily moves halfway across your face, though you're not sure you should be smiling. Behind you, one of the fishermen calls out. "My friend?" You ignore him.

"What did he do?" you say, beginning to walk again so she'll walk with you.

"By then we were in Berlin so he drove me to his house and asked me if I'd like to come inside and have sex with him."

"Lady?" someone behind you says.

"And then?" you ask because she doesn't go on. You look ahead. You almost have her to the tram stop.

"What do you mean?"

"What happened then?"

"I asked him to drive me back to the highway," she says, as if that settled it.

You climb up onto the platform.

"Lady?"

"Did he?"

"Of course," she says, turning to see who's behind her.

*

“You are my son,” Reçep explains today, donning his sunglasses as you follow him out of the warehouse and into the plaza. He explains what you are every day. Sometimes you’ll be the same thing two days in a row. But he gets bored with roles quickly. “Or wait,” he says. “No.”

He pauses while you pass a tour group of Americans, their guidebooks lifted like a choir about to sing. You can hear them, families like you’re used to seeing in your hometown, the constant undertone of complaint, how long they’ve been standing, how hot it is for March, discussions about the restaurant they’re going to, which is said to have authentic food, but no, nothing gross, nothing like those little pyramids of raw meat. At the head of their group, the guide raises her pink umbrella like a conductor gathering the attentions of her orchestra.

“No,” Reçep continues. You’re walking towards the Topkapi Gardens. “This is it: your parents bought carpets from me years ago. Now they’re my friends. They wanted you to see the world. They sent you here. You’re living with me while I show you Istanbul.”

You reach your spot: a corner of the plaza between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, by the line for Fuat’s dondurma stand. The tourists stream past for the entrance to Topkapi. You’ve stood here every day for the past week and a half, calling out to them.

“Ma’am? Ma’am, that way is closed,” Reçep will say, to a lone woman, or “The tickets are cheaper if you go online.”

It’s because his voice sounds American that the tourists glance up, shade their eyes, look at him, then you. You can now tell the ones who’ve been here for longer than a day by a hardness of expression, a hostility towards the merchants who call out to them. *Lady? Lady? My friend?* Reçep’s smile is like a billboard, broad, white, undented. He doesn’t heckle like the other

merchants, he told you. When you asked about the job, he told you all he needs is the well placed comment and people will stop, listen, buy.

“Everyone thinks that all the merchants in Istanbul sell fake carpets,” he said. “If they did at one point, who knows? No one dares do it now with all the rumors of scams. What we do is give our customers a demonstration that our carpets are *real*.”

“Are they?”

“Of course.”

“And all the other merchants sell real carpets?”

“Yes. But unlike them, we make the tourists trust us. You do. That’s your job.”

“How do I do that?”

“You were born doing that. You’re white.”

People stare at you: the young white man next to the middle-aged Turkish one. They wonder what you’re doing. They can’t look away. You exude something. You are like the monkey on a leash that brings children to an organ grinder they would never approach, the inch of ozone beneath a magician’s hovering feet, the suddenly produced ace, that flash of shoddy credibility. “They’re doing construction over there,” you’ll say to the tourists, or “The restaurants are better down in Taya Hatun Mah.” It doesn’t matter what you say. Like in an Escher, it’s the geometry that convinces. There’s an impossible angle between you and Reçep. People want to be convinced of it.

“Maybe it will be different once Turkey joins the EU, but for now,” Reçep says, in the evening, to a couple that stops for you, “business would be hopeless if I didn’t know the tricks. I

used to live here before I moved to Cleveland. I import carpets actually. There's no better buyer of carpets than a Turk. He knows all the Turkish tricks."

When Reçep winks at the young woman, she and her husband look at you as if to reference its meaning. They are young, about your age. The woman's hands are resting lightly on her purse. Her husband's hand comes to rest lightly on her shoulder. He is tall, like you, but full. He has the crisp but fading angles of someone fattening after active duty.

"How do you know this guy?" the husband asks you bluntly, cutting through something Reçep is saying.

"Him?" you say pointing to Reçep. The man stares at you. "A family friend."

There is that final kind of lying, one that is necessary as it is absurd. When you see the look on their faces—*why are you doing this?*—you pretend not to understand it. Even if they know, even if you can't convince them otherwise, you have to convince yourself, at least until the day is over. You couldn't do this if you didn't pretend to believe it. You have to be someone else—exactly the person you're not.

The couple walks away into the darkening plaza. The sky is bright, dull, striated with color like a stone hit by sunlight. The sun has lowered behind the Hagia Sophia which now, unlit, is one crescendo of shadow. It throws a long shade, the length of the whole plaza, which unoccupied merchants on the opposite side of the square sit in, the lights of their embers seeming as distant as the beacons of oil tankers.

"You should see it in the summer," Reçep says, as if embarrassed at how bare it is. He's taken off his glasses. Without them, his eyes look strangely small, like a crab's. "Some days I

can barely leave the shop before someone else comes in. March is slow, but you'll see how it'll pick up. Once Anzac day comes there won't be any problems."

You're sitting down on the square, feeling the warmth of the day rise back up through the cobbles. You agree with Reçep, not because you believe him but exactly because you don't. You can sense he's trying to sell you a vision of his success. You act like you've bought it so that he stops trying to sell it to you.

"Hey," Reçep says, motioning for you to get up. He smiles a *this might be fun* kind of smile. You look where he's looking and see Maria walking away from the Topkapi gardens. Black hair, head down, as if thinking. Reçep calls out and she looks up. You say nothing and hope she keeps walking, but when she sees you she hesitates. Reçep waves her closer and she slowly makes her way towards you.

"Where are you going?" Reçep says, using the particular tone of voice he uses with women, a slippery kind of amiability.

"I'm just walking home," Maria says to Reçep, looking at you. You acknowledge her look with a slight nod, but don't say anything. You can tell by the way her eyes move back to Reçep that it's been established you don't know each other here. Reçep has been watching you and grins, as if your look with Maria had meant something else.

"Are you a tourist?" Reçep asks.

"No," she says.

"Beni anlayabilir?"

"Sorry," she says slowly. "I don't understand."

“See? She understands.” Reçep laughs, looks at you. Automatically, trained to banter with him, you begin to smile, but then you see Maria’s face has gone flat, expressionless, cautious. You make your face carefully neutral too. You wish now you had acknowledged Maria in the first place, but you’ve pretended too long and you’re afraid even if you said her name, revealed that you knew her, she wouldn’t acknowledge it at this point. Maria shoulders her bag like she’s going to leave.

“Forgive me,” Reçep says. “That’s just a joke.”

“That’s fine,” Maria says, her voice indicating otherwise.

“Don’t rush off now,” Reçep says in a placating tone and Maria, as if to contradict Reçep’s prediction of what she’s about to do, shifts her body so she’s squarely on her feet, in the posture of ease.

“I’m not rushing off. I’m just going home.”

“You don’t want to be walking alone around Sultanahmet at night. So many thieves,” Reçep confides and you’re thinking of some sort sign you can give to Maria that this isn’t really how you are, when Reçep turns to you. “My friend here knows Istanbul very well. He’s a family friend of mine, from America. He could walk you to the tram stop. You can trust him.”

You look Reçep. He winks. You feel Maria watching you. It’s as if she really doesn’t know you. “Oh,” is all she says.

“He’s a good boy,” Reçep says to her, then to you. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

You say something in reply and Reçep is leaving you and Maria standing there, watching him go. The merchants on the other side of the plaza are gone. Neither of you say anything, and

for a moment it's almost as though, if you kept pretending not to know each other, you really wouldn't.

"Sorry," you say.

"You give tours?" she says after a moment.

"We get tourists to buy our carpets."

"You scam tourists with fake carpets?"

"Surprisingly," you say. "All the carpets in Istanbul are real."

She stares at you. It reminds you of the way people looked at you this winter, when they'd pick you up on the side of the road. Each time they couldn't believe you were out in that cold. *Why?* they would ask, not waiting for the answer to open their doors. The way they trusted you because you needed them.

*

Maria is at her door, fumbling with her keys. You can still hear the crowd you'd passed through on Istiklal—neon blue even on a Wednesday, so packed the trolley had to part the crowd with its front bumper. Maria's street is quiet, lit, empty. Bright shawls and dark hijabs billow on laundry lines above you. In a tea shop still open across the street, men huddle by a wood stove, steam rising from their tea glasses, smoke rising from their cigarettes.

When you'd asked if you could walk Maria to the tram stop she'd said yes, and then you'd been talking about selling carpets, and she paid for your token on the tram. Now she's unlocking the door to her apartment. While you wait behind Maria, one of the men from the tea shop limps out, tesbih clicking. He pauses in the doorway to stare at you.

“It’s a very traditional neighborhood,” she says, waiting till he passes down the street to open her door.

“Well,” you say, giving your little wave.

“Would you like a drink?” Maria asks.

You follow her up a staircase, stone, cool as a cistern. She doesn’t look back at you. As she unlocks her own door, you stare at her hair, how it lifts from the back of her white neck. Her room is white, wide, like an art gallery. There is a table set in the middle of the room like an exhibition. Maria arranges on the table a bottle of gin, half a lime, no tonic. While she pours drinks, you look at the table, the chairs. All the furniture is made of the same blonde wood.

“Everything matches,” you say.

“My roommate made it,” she tells you, handing you a glass. It’s a very tall glass of gin.

“Is she here?”

“He’s out of town,” she says.

Both of you drink, staring through the window. No matter where you stand in the city, you can see them, the rival domes of the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, now, from far off looking like antique jewelry boxes. As you sip your drink, you think you can even pick out the light of your hostel by finding the glass top of the train station and moving three buildings up.

“I would sell carpets to live here,” Maria says, as if she’s been thinking about it. “Is it fun?”

“Not really. I’m a terrible liar.”

She takes a sip.

“Everyone says that but I think it’s just a way of consoling ourselves for being good at it,” she says and looks at you. “I thought you did okay. I really did think you gave tours.”

“I wasn’t sure if I was even going to keep that job,” you say, as an apology, aware afterwards that this isn’t really true either. You become aware too of how little you like talking about your life and you take another drink as a silence builds that you can’t think of how to enter. You take another drink. You can feel the gin.

“I get drunk so quickly now,” you admit but it sounds suspect once you say it, as if you’re still out on the plaza, negotiating. “I lost a lot of weight this winter,” you explain. “It was very cold.”

She stares out the window as if she hadn’t heard you. You’re beginning to feel this silence indicates a new misunderstanding. You’re wondering, in fact, if Maria had simply been polite, asking you, who she only knows by sight having passed you while you were trying to scam tourists, for a drink that you should have declined, but that you’d been too ignorant to pick up on her hints. You finish your drink so you can excuse yourself and leave. Before you can go, Maria takes your glass and fills it once more to the brim.

“I feel like I drink more in this city,” she says, almost speaking to herself as she fills her own glass. She seems comfortably remote in her gin. “Last one,” she says, lifting it to toast you. Instead of taking a sip, she drains the whole thing in one steady, practiced gulp. You decide it’s time you go. You drain your glass, look up for a clock. The wall is blank.

“I don’t want to keep you up,” you say. You stand. She doesn’t say anything. You begin to gather the glasses. Her hand pauses your hand.

“Wait,” she says as you feel the gin billow up to the top of your skull. You rock forward slightly, close your eyes. When you open them she’s staring at you. You think you know what this means. You lean down and when she doesn’t flinch you kiss her. When you do her lips don’t move and her eyes are open as if you’re not even there.

“Stop,” she commands calmly and firmly, and you feel the space between you turn treacherous. You stand. You back up. Your face is burning.

“Sorry,” you say. “I’m a little drunk.”

She doesn’t seem to hear you.

“Kiss me,” she says, in the same voice.

You study her face but all you can get from it is that she’s waiting. You lean down again. When you kiss her, she half-closes her eyes, moves her lips this time, but keeps them barred against your tongue. After a minute, she says, quietly, “Stop.”

You stop, but this time you don’t stand back up. You lean back a little, hovering near her face, and when she says, “Kiss me,” again, even more quietly, you decide that this is some sort of game, that she wants some show of obedience and force, a red rover of sorts. She seems to just be waiting to see what you’ll do as you move one hand to the back, the other to the bottom wrung of her chair. The unfinished wood abrades your fingers as you dip her, your arms burning a little as you hold the chair at equilibrium. This time you feel her reserve melt. Her tongue flicks into your mouth. Her hand skirts the edge of your shirt and your skin breaks out in goosebumps just before you hear a crack and she flies backwards.

She’s splayed on the floor beneath you as if you’d thrown her there, one half of the chair beneath her. The back’s snapped off. She gives a surprised laugh. “You broke his chair.”

For a moment you almost apologize, but you say “Fuck it,” and kick one of the broken chair legs away from you. She laughs and that’s your permission. You kneel over her and lift. You haven’t felt your own strength like this in months. For months it’s been dormant but you can feel it now like a column climbing through the slow glow of the gin. She gives a little scream as she rises. When she wraps her legs around your hips, and her weight settles against you, she begins kissing you hard, almost frantically. She bites your lip. You bite her neck and she moans in your ear, and for a second your knees go weak and you nearly trip over the other chair. You kick it, sending it halfway, clattering across the room.

“Stop,” she says, breathlessly and you think she means ‘go on’.

“Shut up,” you say. You take her in your hands and get ready to spill her across the table like a feast.

“Stop,” she says, frantic. You feel her body go tight like a wire. The space between you turns dangerous. She’s twisting away and pushing, and you, very carefully, not wanting to drop her, set her down. As soon as her feet touch the floor, she’s backing away, something in her face nearly animal in its fear. There’s something you did not understand. She must think the same thing. She crouches down and picks up one of the legs of the broken chair.

“Why don’t you listen when I say stop?” Her voice is hoarse. She has the chair leg in her hand. If she raised it, it could be a weapon. “None of you know that fucking word. Not one of you.”

*

“By the way, how did last night go?” Reçep asks you in an undertone as the women follow you up into the warehouse. You’d been waiting all morning for him to make a comment about Maria. You wonder if he waited so long to ask just so you’d be waiting on him.

“Good,” you say as you step into the show room.

“How good?”

You don’t answer the question, which is rhetorical anyways. The woman are almost at the top of the stairs. He breaks eye contact with you in a way that is final.

“Please come in,” he says turning to the women, who are paused in the doorway, waiting for an introduction. “Don’t mind the carpets. Go ahead, take a seat on a stack, if you’d like.”

You sit down on the side of the room. The women, both of whom are American, take a look at you as they did outside on the plaza, to reassure themselves. But they understand that here, something has shifted and you are merely part of this room. Interesting but latent, like one of the folded carpets that they now sit on across from you, like one of the carpets which he lifts and unfolds.

“I’m sure you’ve seen their like on the street?” he says splitting the dull outsides of a carpet on a brightness like a geode: the center marbled imperial red and gold, clouded quartz, storm purple, shadowed olive grove. You’ve seen him do this a number of times, but you still enjoy seeing within the broad regions of color, vines, arabesques, the Arabic language which to you looks smoke-like, pliable, strong; reeds rising out of water, the masts of ships massed in a bay, a hundred bodies all bowed and bowing.

“It’s beautiful,” one of the women, the white one, says, her gold earrings bobbing. Beside her, her friend pats her afro for dents. She’s looking up at the pictures covering the walls

as you had that first day, when a man you haven't seen since lead you from a hostel, where you were trying to find work, to this room. You sat waiting, looking at pictures of Reçep, casting a line from a boat off the coast of what looked like Florida; nervously holding his cowboy hat over a cliff above the Grand Canyon; standing beside a Turkish boy on an American college campus in a way that suggested something patriotic, paternal. Now, you see the woman staring at the picture of you. It's of you and Reçep, heads close, the flash on so that you can't see the room you're standing in, which is this room. You wonder how long it will last on the wall.

“But—ah you're asking how do you know they're real?” Reçep says, throwing one carpet then another on the floor, open, before the white woman. “Can you tell?”

The white woman purses her lips, then points to the more beautiful carpet, the fake carpet, which Reçep chose because it convinces people of its reality by its beauty. He smiles and shakes his head. You notice again his smooth cheeks, the peripheral wrinkles, the expressional inexactitude of someone who's undergone facial surgery.

“You see ma'am, I'm a *whole seller*,” he says. “I sell to Amazon, to internet retailers. And so,” he says, bringing out a lighter and pressing the flame to both carpets. “I know how to tell true silk from fake. Cotton will turn chalky when it burns. Do you smell it? Like burning paper. Now notice how these fibers turn glassy and break off. They smell like burning hair, yes? The proteins. Touch. It feels oily. That's the feeling of authenticity.”

He's only talking to the white woman now. He brings the carpets forward and leans them on his thigh so she can touch the burned spots. The black woman is staring at you. You pretend not to notice.

“You would be shocked to know how many of the carpet merchants are scam artists,” he’s saying to the white woman.

“I’m sure,” she says, flicking ash from her fingers.

“You either have to have an eye for the weave, or else you have to study the merchants themselves. I’ve learned to do the latter but it helps that I grew up here. Now I live in Denver, of course. It turns out, I’m very useful to American retailers who want to sell Turkish carpets.”

“It’s so beautiful here,” the white woman says, consolingly. “It’s a shame there’s so much dishonesty.”

“You know,” he says. “It’s ironic. If merchants were honest they might make more money. Of course, it certainly helps me that they lie. In turn, I feel I should help tourists out, give them a demonstration. I even sell carpets from my off stock. Of course there,” he points out, “I’m helping myself too.”

He laughs and the white woman joins him, but when he leaves a silence afterwards to give her room to say something, she picks up her purse. This moment, when the customer has grasped the illusion, used to make you nervous. You expected people would get angry, start shouting. But you’ve done this long enough to know that the people who walk out of this room want to preserve the illusion that brought them into it. That if it were broken, they would have to admit they’d been deceived and Reçep that he’d been lying. They would have to blame him and themselves, and instead, they act as if nothing at all had happened.

“This has been very fun,” the white woman says, as if they’re old friends. She stands and shoulders her bag. “But we’re meeting someone.”

“Of course,” Reçep says, and looks off politely as the women collect their things and begin to leave in that silence that tells you they’re going to speak about you both when they get outside. You sit back against the carpets and close your eyes. You’re going to have to return the plaza soon and do this again.

“Are you alright?”

You open your eyes. It’s the black woman. She’s standing in front of you. The white woman is at the door, looking like she wants to leave. Reçep is standing to her side, interrupted in escorting them out. Everyone is looking at you.

“I’m fine,” you say, blinking rapidly.

“He’s fine,” Reçep says, as if he’d said it before, but the black woman ignores him.

“Does your family know you’re here? Do you need money?”

She holds out her hand. There’s money in it. You realize then what you look like, how desperate in your torn clothes, how thin you are from weeks living in the cars of strangers.

“I’m fine,” you say, trying to smile easily. “Really.”

It’s like the woman doesn’t hear your words. She holds the money out to you.

“Take it. Don’t be ashamed,” she says. “I’m somebody’s mother. Just take it.”

Behind her Reçep is saying something. You don’t hear him. You can’t turn away from her face. She looks at you as if something’s terribly wrong, but you can’t see it.

In high school, the girls we knew used to find excuses to go down to the courts at the park and watch him play tennis. He was very pretty for a boy. His features sharp, his hair golden, curly, like a cherubim's. After he was done, he would walk around with them in what he'd played in: his gym shorts and a T-shirt, one of a whole closet full whose sleeves he'd ripped off himself. He'd always find something to point at, or would stretch his arms above his head. To flex—just a little. If he climbed the jungle gym, or did a handstand that caused his shirt to fly down over his abdomen, or did a standing flip, the girls would watch, all of them, laughing as if they were watching because it were funny. When he would leap down from the monkey bars, or end his handstand by rolling to his feet, or land his flip, he'd look up at them, as if he'd just noticed, and smile.

He practiced that smile continually. Walking past bathroom mirrors, office windows, car windshields—even glancing into the convex shrine of a spoon—he'd flash a grin as if he'd heard his name called. “Oh what a wonderful boy. *That smile,*” people would say, to his parents. It didn't have to be to his parents. People with no relation to him talked about his smile the way they would about weather, just another thing to comment on. If his name were mentioned in front Dr. Reuter, the town orthodontist, Dr. Reuter's eyes would grow distant, as if reliving the moment when he removed the braces from the tennis player's teeth. “That smile gets him into as much trouble as it gets him out of,” Mrs. Bernadetti, the school secretary, would say often and sanctimoniously if his name popped up in conversation, which it did, so that people could mouth that phrase before she even said it. If people praised or even just spoke about him too much

around her, she would adopt an air of exasperation that would rapidly evaporate when he was late coming back from lunch and stopped at her desk for the tardy slip she always forgot to give him, because of a joke he told, accompanied by that smile of his, that set all three hundred pounds of her to giggling and blushing.

Every week you would see him walking around with a different girl, leaning against her locker, allowing her to snatch the baseball cap he sometimes wore, bill backwards on his head, rewarding successful grabs with a smile. One week it would be Chelsea Hamlin, a shy beautiful blonde girl who often wore a dress instead of pants and whose full calves all of us would stare at in sixth period chemistry when the light lay on them and they began to glow. No one would say what Chelsea and him were, if they were anything, but you'd see them together at soccer games, or walking out of the movie theater, or laying in the hammock in his back yard and then you wouldn't see her at all and if they happened to cross in the hallway, in front of everyone, she would turn around and hurry the other way while he continued on walking like he'd noticed nothing. Sometimes he'd follow around a girl like Debbie McGuire: a pale, plain, studious, myopic girl who until then no one had noticed, in fact had deliberately ignored until he started leaning over her desk and in a deeply interested tone that caused her to blush and stutter in front of all of us, asked her something about *Pride and Prejudice*. And once he, without noticing the impossible social labyrinth that Debbie understood to interpose between and forever keep their hands from touching—and perhaps because of that, it was his hand that Debbie thought most about taking, since it was safe, preserved from the corruption of actuality—without any hesitation, he reached out and took her hand in the middle of class. “Your nail beds are very

even,” he observed calmly into the agonized and blood heavy face of Debbie McGuire. After that class, in the hall, someone had asked him in a joking voice, “So, what’s Debbie like?”

“She likes me,” he said, giving that smile of his.

His senior year that smile of his showed up in the paper, full sized, not only in the sports section, but on the front page, because he’d qualified for the Illinois Boy’s State Championship. That day, the paper was bought out. His family wanted more copies to send to their relatives. Families of friends bought it, school mates, all of us. It only strengthened the feeling that had collected around him about town, that he somehow represented an asset to us, while at the same time representing us, ourselves. At the time, there were rumors about a possible tennis scholarship to the University of Illinois, the mention of which a college talent scout had reportedly dropped to the high school coach, who in turn had let it slip, drunk one night at the Irish Pub downtown. Afterwards, in conversation with the tennis player, people adopted an air of sly knowing, never mentioning the scholarship, but alluding to it vaguely with questions like “Have you been down to Urbana?”. But among each other, they speculated freely about turning on ESPN years from now and seeing his face, knowing they’d several times stood in line with him both for groceries and once, during Christmas mass, for communion. If they saw him walking down the sidewalk, they’d honk their horns. “How’s he doing?” people would ask if someone had seen him, and for a minute or two, they were a temporary authority.

For the week leading up to the game, his face, from the paper, hung on fridges and cork boards around town, until the day of the championship when we all watched him on ESPN7, in an arena in Chicago, get beat out two sets to none by a Filipino boy and afterward throw his racket so hard he cracked the frame.

For a week afterward he didn't go to school. He was sick, his parents told Mrs. Bernadetti, whom in turn, told everyone else, but with an air of skepticism. All of us could guess the reason he was at home, and some of us were already resenting have to pretend he actually had been sick. "I don't feel bad for him," we were saying to each other, reinforcing constantly. But when he eventually did come back to school, he didn't say anything about being sick, didn't say anything about his absence, barely said anything at all. We all sensed his wish for anonymity. Teachers tended not to call on him in class. Classmates didn't address him in the halls. If he was silent, then we tried to mask his silence with a general one. The school took on a funereal air. People saw him in brief glimpses, walking from his car to the entrance of the high school, the entrance to the classroom, the classroom to his car. He didn't come out on the weekends, except to the tennis courts, where somebody would say that at seven o'clock in the morning, running by for track practice, they'd seen him with a new partner, the slim boy who'd recently moved up from Mexico, and again, going to the park for ice cream in the evening, they'd see the two of them still playing.

Eventually, the tennis player started talking to people again. At lunch, he would come sit with us, placing himself on the outside of our circle, not speaking much, but still occasionally laughing. We treated him like a convalescent, anxious not to pressure him by addressing him directly, instead including him by talking about the things he had an interest in, ensuring, even if he weren't speaking, he was still following the conversation. Some days though he would seem distant, remote. We'd see him staring across the lunch room at the Mexican boy, who was sitting essentially by himself at the collective but balkanized table of international students, and we would think we knew what the tennis player was thinking. We never mentioned tennis.

It wasn't long before he started shouting our names down the halls again, wearing his cap backwards, shirts with his sleeves ripped off and the sides gutted so you could see the rows of his abdominals. He began to joke and flirt with the teachers in class again, and if he spoke in a softer voice than before, we all compensated: the teacher pausing her lecture, us going silent. It seemed his jokes were keener after he lost the championship, and we would laugh harder, longer than before, though this might have been partly out of some relief that he'd made a joke at all. By Valentine's day we assumed he had convalesced: he bought Mrs. Bernadetti a massive bouquet of roses, nearly the size of his torso, for which, that day, she bought a crystal vase into which she put the roses and which stood on her desk, as tall and undeniably red as a fire hydrant, her face turning just as red whenever anyone commented on it until Mr. Mark, our principal, asked her one day to take it down because it was inappropriate, as he said, to favor one student over the others and the dropped petals were being crushed into the carpet and staining it.

Around that time, a volunteer theater group who did Shakespeare in high schools passed through town. *Macbeth* was to be put on in the auditorium. It was a great cultural event, we were told by Mrs. Kennedy, the English teacher, who often launched into diatribes about the struggle of the Arts in the Midwest and the importance of The Theater. The ardor of that speech embarrassed us, to see a woman our mothers' age growing so impassioned, blushing so deeply.

But when Mrs. Kennedy appealed to the principal with the effect that our complete attendance was required, we didn't mind, because we missed first through fourth period and in the darkened auditorium, it was easy to dim the screens of our phones and surf the web, or catch up on sleep, or watch, more fascinating than any play, Debbie McGuire and her group of friends, whose affected manner of speaking we often parodied, just as they had sincerely and

painstakingly reproduced the diction and sentence rhythms from a Jane Austen novel we'd read in Freshman English. Debbie McGuire and her friends, either mesmerized and rendered powerless to do otherwise by the force of art produced by the volunteer group on stage, or by a sheer force of will to be mesmerized, were giving half-involuntary gasps and sighs, none louder than Debbie herself, who at one point with her freckled white hand stifled a sob so that all of us had to look down to concentrate on keeping our laughter contained as if laughter were a balloon in our laps that we could, by force of will, keep from exploding.

It was right then that someone started clapping. All of us jerked our heads up, our faces blood red from holding in our laughter but suddenly wiped of expression, our hands automatically rising to clap. We'd assumed we'd missed the end of the second or third act, but as we started clapping, we saw that on stage the play was still going on. Several teachers had turned around to shoot baleful looks in our direction and almost instantaneously the light mist of our applause dissipated, leaving two clear sounds: the solitary clapper, never wavering, never quieting, and what we realized was the cause of the applause—Hamlet, the actor, a middle aged man with a slight stutter, attempting once more and once more stumbling on the phrase 'When he himself might his qu-qu-quietus make/ with a b-b-b...'.

All of us turned around, both actually confused as to who the clapper was and, in order to defer blame, dramatizing our confusion, until we saw him, the tennis player, standing near the back of the auditorium, clapping so furiously that the actor stumbled once more on the word 'bodkin', and then, possibly thinking he'd misunderstood something, that the high school itself were signaling the play's end, or that the applause would be explained, the actor paused.

It might have been the sudden revelation of who the clapper was or the fact that, probably as disbelieving as we were, none of the teachers were doing anything, or the hypnotic intensity of the clapping, which was now the only noise in the room. It might have been the guilty silence on stage, the way that the lone actor suddenly looked like a discovered fraud, not Hamlet the figure of tragedy but rather Bill or Frank the banker or pharmacist he probably was, or also it might have been some latent resentment, despite missing class, at not only being forced to attend the play, but being expected to admire it as an elevation rather than a simple continuation of life. It might have been all these things combining with the sincere look of outrage on Debbie McGuire's pale face, visible in the front row, that caused a ripple of laughter and then contrarian applause, tail-ended by a whistle, to run through the crowd.

"Stop that," Mrs. Kennedy finally hissed.

The unsheathed rage in Mrs. Kennedy's whisper, which would have mortified and subdued any one student in a well lit classroom, had no effect on us. Massed as we were in the darkened auditorium, we had assumed the safety of a fluid anonymity, and furthermore, we sensed a moment of mysterious power opening in the pause that had been prolonged almost indefinitely on the stage, as if the furious clapping of the tennis player had charmed time and art to a halt. A shudder ran through the auditorium. All at once, we began to applaud. Some of us stood. We all stood. The actor, stood alone in the spotlight, not daring to move. The expression of horror on his face encouraged us. The applause rose thunderously, drowning out the rising noise of the teacher's commands. Still audible through it all was Debbie McGuire's plaintive, pathetic outrage, as she called out to all of us as classmates and students to quiet down. People started stamping their feet. Whistling. Some began to dance. One couple took the opportunity

to begin making out. We had the feeling it could go on forever until with a boom, as if the entire room stood on something hollow, the auditorium lights went on. Suddenly finding ourselves visible, individual, exposed, we sat down.

Again, he missed a week of school but this time because he was suspended. He spent almost the whole duration of his punishment on the tennis courts, where, after we got out of class, we'd go to visit him. We felt privileged by the way that whenever we came around, he would pause whatever match he was in to lean against the fence and talk, as if that's what he'd really come here to do. The whole time, his partner, the rather slender Mexican, waited in a concentrated silence, until the tennis player would make a final comment, and cut off conversation by looking down to bounce the ball three times.

During these conversations with the tennis player, none of us ever mentioned his being suspended, or which universities we had all been accepted into because of another rumor running around, that he hadn't gotten his tennis scholarship, that he was staying in town to go to the community college. It didn't matter right then. It was almost summer. In four months, we would be living away from our parents for the first time in our lives and at that moment, we were all waiting for the ball to bounce the third time and for his face to turn up, its expression different than his usual, that superior expression of indifference to reverence, surprise, and pain. All of that emptied out of him the way when the sun strikes a high window, the room behind it empties out of the glass, which only reflects a clean slate of blue sky. You would have thought he was almost praying, when, as the ball floated skyward out of his palm, his face turned up transmuted: awestruck, empty, as if he were watching his life leave him.

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That summer before we all left for college, the tennis player was more often than not on the court with the Mexican he always played, a boy who somehow, despite talking to him several times, asking what city he was from, why his family had moved, we always forgot about. One day towards the height of summer, when all of us were already accumulating a new life's worth of furniture, still unconstructed, in our downstairs hallways to be transported in slim heavy boxes to our separate college dorms in Uhaul's, we ran across them in the park, and as we were chatting with them in the dusk, after their game, we invited them both to come with us because we'd gotten hold of two twelve packs, and we had a tradition of driving out either to the quarry or the reservoir to drink.

We were only inviting the slender Mexican partner out of politeness. By that time in the summer, because of our approaching disbandment, we had developed a culture of homogeny. We knew what we liked and what we would say and we knew how to respond to each other. We didn't want to have to make concessions to include an outsider who's inclusion would only be awkward and slightly painful because at best it would be obviously temporary and superficial and he would know we were simply enduring him. He might have had a sense of this, because after we invited them, the Mexican turned to the tennis player, and a look passed between them. Quietly, the Mexican explained something he had to do with his family that all of us sensed was an excuse and anyways, as soon as he said it, forgot what it was. At the time, in that shared look between them, we thought we had discovered some boundary to their friendship, which began at the white line of the tennis court. We felt elated, as the tennis player crossed it to join our group, discovering it was a boundary fluid to us but not to him, whom at that time, we finally remembered as someone left behind.

With the twelve packs in the back of the van we drove out to the reservoir at a time when the parking lot was empty and the walkers and joggers had long since abandoned it. We climbed the wooden stairs inset into the square hill, stopping at times to look back at the miles of corn, gradually emerging over the tops of the trees and stretching out in all directions. On top of the hill was a breeze you could find no where else in our city, and a lake, square as a city block and as wide as four or five of them put together. It was maybe a mile across. To get to the shore, you had to climb down over large hunks of granite, blasted out of a quarry five miles away, which left the palms slightly chalky, and which forced us to pass the beer along from shore hand to hand like a bucket of water to put out a fire, the bottles clinking, our bodies poised over lacunas in the stone. We positioned ourselves on outcroppings, and as we fell to talking about how things would be as we grew up, we stared out into the middle of the lake where, the light from a lantern at the top of a buoy stretched on the water into a long rod. Anxious as we were in those days for auguries—for horoscopes and coincidences—we felt, though we did not say we felt it, that this was a metaphor of some kind, the clear light blinking, wavering slightly, as visible as if it were a few feet in front of us, while we drank beer, the taste of which we didn't enjoy then, but drank anyways, assured by the thought that as men, we would enjoy the taste.

The conversation turned to the women in our class. There were a host of parties that summer, and in the fever of leaving, these women seemed more attainable by virtue of our approaching departure—just as on the hill, far things seemed closer by virtue of their visibility, since without crowded trees or houses and neighborhoods, we could see clear across town to the red light blinking on the beet sugar silos. None of us had much experience those days, and after we'd exhausted the stories of looks or hints we'd received from girls, we started asking the

tennis player about the women in our class, whom, unlike us, he always had special access to. Chelsea Hamlin, we knew, had come out with him to this same reservoir one Saturday, Junior year, we all knew only too well.

“What did you do?” we kept asking. But again and again, he kept deferring the real answer not out of modesty—it seemed to us then—but simply to prolong the pleasure of being asked. At first, we didn’t mind this. We too felt the gradual pleasure of understanding what had happened, piece by piece, as if we had been part of it, in the present, groping towards a shape that wasn’t yet clear yet. “Like a shop-vac,” he said, finally, which was meant to make us laugh, but instead afterward we all stared out at the buoy rocking soundlessly in the distance, the rod of light wavering and breaking on the ripples, our faces flushed and burning in the dark, not wanting to look at each other. We were afraid he would go on talking about it now that he’d started, but he seemed to regret having spoken, as if he’d broken some contract of silence on the event, or as if he was slightly ashamed of the experience, a shame we now shared, and might have even blamed him for.

Eventually, Ernie Goldstein got up and clambered heavily over the rocks to the path where he inexpertly lit one of the cigarettes he’d stolen from his father and then began walking away from us, coughing occasionally. We thought he was just going for a smoke. The light of his ember was a good half mile away, before it joined the intermittent and drifting lights of fireflies on the other side of the lake and we remembered how he had been deeply in love with Chelsea since the fourth grade.

“Ernie,” we shouted across the water. “Ernie!”

He didn't reply. His cigarette tip was lost in the swarm or had even gone out. We felt a strange panic that none of us related to each other except by shouting his name, louder, not caring if anyone heard, annoyed both that he would make such a spectacle of his anger and that he was pretending he couldn't hear us. The whole time the tennis player said nothing and eventually, sensing that we were sacrificing our dignity, we fell silent, as if we'd forgotten that Ernie had walked away at all or we had ever known him. We silently drank our beer, which, warming in our palms, tasted worse. Eventually Ernie came back shuffling back up the path, his cheeks red, his fingers smelling like nicotine and streaked with luminescence where he had pinched out the living floating lights around him.

"Are you guys ready to go?" he asked hoarsely, when he saw none of us were talking.

We didn't answer him. We sat on our rocks, our legs slightly cold, drinking our beer. Ernie stood by, staring out at the water, and knew not to talk. Soon we got up and went back to the van, where we turned on the heater. Usually someone would nervously bring up the possibility of being pulled over, but no one did. We were more sober than we'd planned to be and without consulting each other, we all took another beer. Driving back to town, several people tried to make jokes, but it was obvious this was to convince the tennis player we were in a better mood than we were, and it wasn't convincing so after two jokes passed in silence, we sat without talking until almost halfway home, Ernie jabbed a pudgy finger from the back seat over the center console.

"What's that?"

It was the face of tennis player, the size of an SUV. It rose ahead of us, spotlight, over a stand of trees dividing two fields. His image was smiling out over us and the road behind us,

dark and empty for miles. Seated up front, he looked up at it, saying nothing until one of us asked for explanation.

“I didn’t know they’d make it so big,” he said, smiling almost the exact smile as that on the billboard, but with a note of sheepishness.

We slowed the car on the shoulder, left the hazard lights on, and got out holding our beers. He followed us, hands in his pockets, shuffling a little distance behind us while we stumbled over the ruts in the field, which had recently been harvested of corn. Above us was his face with the slogan of the town’s community college beneath it: [Be] Successful.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” we asked him.

“I didn’t think they’d be up until people left town,” he said, sounding troubled. Then, almost reluctantly, he told us how there would be more of them soon, by the mall, near the exit for the highway, one on a billboard downtown. “It was part of my scholarship,” he said. “I didn’t ask for it.”

The way he said it sounded strange, and it was clear from our silence afterwards we didn’t believe him. He just kept looking up at his own face, looking back down at him.

“Watch this,” Ernie said suddenly. He sucked down the last of his beer and flung it up at the sign. As it rose, the bottle winked in the flood lights pointed up at the board, but then sailed soundlessly between the posts and crashed in a thicket in the woods. Without saying anything, the tennis player cocked his own beer behind his ear and flung it at the billboard. When it shattered on his chin, we gave a cheer. He took another beer from one of us and hit the nose. He took another and left a dent in the eye.

“Give me another,” he said. In the flood lights, we could see the veins standing out in his arms from throwing. We had all given him our beers.

“There are more bottles in the car,” he said. “Get those.”

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After that night, we didn't see him till the end of the summer. We'd invite him whenever we went out to the reservoir but he always had something to do. By the time some of us sensed that he was avoiding us, we had decided to ask him regardless, as if we hadn't noticed that he declined all our invitations.

On one of the last weeks before we all left, we shared a bottle of vodka in someone's basement and walked to the park. The park was empty. The pool, which would close soon, steamed slightly, in the night. The tennis courts were lit up like stages. We swung on the swings with our feet dragging on the ground. We tipped over trashcans and shared a spliff on the merry go round, the smoker in the middle, others pushing the wheel furiously, the stars in a vortex. In one section of the park, sprinklers kicked on and we ran through them, tackling each other in the mud. We were walking back through the park to buy eggs for egging at a gas station when we saw two people moving slowly past the first court, back-lit by the light, and so we hid in the jungle gym. We thought someone had called the police on us, but as the light from a second court hit them, we saw who it was.

When we stepped out of the jungle gym, the tennis player and the Mexican boy stopped. We had meant to just say hello, to invite them for a drink, or see if they wanted to egg houses with us but all of us forgot what we had wanted to say when we saw the Mexican boy remove his hand from the tennis player's. One or two of us began to laugh, not because it was funny, but

because the silence was expanding and we wanted to end it somehow. We noticed then that they had begun, slowly, as if they didn't want us to see it, backing up and it became clear that they thought we were something we weren't. We were about to say his name so he would know who we were, when one of us, maybe it was Ernie, suddenly said, as if wondering out loud, "He's a faggot."

Until he said it, the thought had never crossed our minds. At the same time, they took off running.

"Come back!" one of us screamed.

We started chasing, like in a game. They ran up the grassy slope to the street and we followed, some of us stumbling, laughing because our shoes still wet from the sprinklers. On the street, as we sprinted after them, we started calling his name but he wouldn't turn around, didn't look back and let us know that he was in on the game we were playing. Each time they crossed under a streetlight and became visible, we felt a jolt of pleasure, as if by suddenly seeing them better, we had moved closer.

They turned into the old neighborhood of our city that had been built in the oil boom when people drove in carriages and whose blocks were still criss-crossed by alleys that were now unlit. When they dipped into an alley, we followed, sprinting past what had once been splendid, two-storied carriage houses, now dilapidated garages, the boards loose, the paint weathered away, the window panes glinting with fissures. We ran past the backs of yards quiet behind fences, the windows of old mansions half lit, the startled shadows of rabbits racing off into the grass, sometimes a dog hitting against a fence with a boom, the sound of our breath and their breath ricocheting down the alley, their shadows in front of us fleeing. We had stopped calling

his name a some time ago. We were running too hard and the strange thing was, the more they acted like we were chasing them, the more they pretended they didn't know us, the more we wanted to catch them, to force them to stop and acknowledge us. More strangely, even though we were chasing them, we had begun to fear them because of the fact that they didn't turn around, as if the whole time, we had been mistaken as to who they were, and were actually following strangers who had been doing something dangerous which was the reason they had taken off and would not stop for us in the first place.

As they turned onto a side alley, moving back toward the street, one of the windows of an old shed they were passing beneath suddenly flashed, shattered. They covered their heads and sprinted away. We came to a stop. Someone had thrown a stone. "Who was that?" some of us asked, "Who the fuck was that?" even though it must have been one of us.

When a light went on in the yard beside us, we took off again up the same side alley the two of them had used. We weren't chasing them anymore. Lights were starting to go on in the houses around and we were afraid of being caught. As we emerged onto the road, the tennis player and the Mexican boy were already a good way down it. We started calling out his name again, now wanting him to stop so we could run with him, wanting to tell him we were done chasing him, just wanting to finally see his face so we'd know for sure it was him. But he never turned. It was like that name wasn't his anymore and even though all of us would come back to town the next year, and for years after that, we didn't see his face again until long after we'd finished college and stopped talking to each other and moved to new places for jobs that could support our wives and children, and when, those first days in that new city, with our wives humming in the other room as they set the books on their shelves, we'd open a box of things

we'd brought with us from our old lives and we'll see him, staring up at us, that photo in the paper from before the championship game, balled up and wedged between a vase and a stack of plates, or smoothed over the body of a lamp. And quietly, so that no one comes in and asks us to explain what we're doing, or who this is, or how we knew him, we'll spread his face across our countertops and stare, realizing he looked different than we remembered.

That first morning in Tel-Aviv you wake up pressed against her even though she went to sleep on the other side of the bed. The windows are grey; already the heat has penetrated the room. But you lay like that, watching the sweat on her back percolate and collect into droplets heavy enough to fall, until Laura twitches awake and slides away from you. She sits up on the edge of the bed.

“You ready?” she asks you over her shoulder, as she gathers her hair to pull it into a pony-tail. Yesterday, she asked if it looked lighter to you. She’d been swimming in the Dead Sea. It was part of her Birthright Package. There are all sorts of packages: business, sports, drama, the literary arts. Religious Packages, of course. In the Adventure Package they did hikes and swam in the Dead Sea. She said all the salt lightened her hair in one afternoon. You had agreed, even though you hadn’t seen her in a year, and couldn’t tell.

The two of you take a city bus to the station. The two of you, over the past year, have decided your route: from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, then to Jordan, back to Jerusalem, and finally to Egypt where after a week she’ll get on a plane for California again. The bus to Jerusalem is full, half tourists, half military personnel. All of them are your age. Have shot rifles. Maybe even killed someone. As Tel-Aviv falls away, you watch a man your age, in full uniform, staring nowhere in particular, listening to his iPod, eating through a package of crackers meticulously. He catches you looking and you attach your eyes to a spot on the wall above his head.

“Driver?” an American woman shouts. “Driver? Can we get air?”

“It’s broken,” he shouts back, his heavily accented voice implying it would be rude to assume otherwise, his eyes not leaving the road.

It’s too hot for anybody to touch. You can hear the American tourists complaining. The soldiers that bother to listen to them smile to each other. The whole time Laura, in the window seat, looks out the window at the brown dead hills, studded with white stone, what might just be granite pushing up from the bedrock, or possibly the bases of ancient towers, toppled, scattered, receding into the landscape again.

“Are you hungry?” you say. You have a bag of dates in your hand.

Without turning away from the window, she says, “It reminds me of the hills around Sarajevo.”

You look at the sand and rock and don’t say anything. The hills around Sarajevo were green. The first day you met Laura, a year ago, you took took a bus up into them, to the head of a hiking trail. “Stick to the paths,” the driver told you both as you got out of the bus. “There are still mines.” You went on into Croatia, then Serbia, then Slovenia and Italy, moving towards Paris where Laura was taking her plane back to California. You can’t remember the exact moment, the exact bus or train or road you were on, the exact beach or park or plaza you were in when she told you she loved you. Somehow it wasn’t a surprise that a stranger had said it, that you could say it to a stranger. In those days the both of you thought you’d found a new kind of love: something outside of time, dispossessed of consequence, without nationality or hierarchy or law, no kings or kingdoms. No usurper but yourself.

Laura’s hand interposes between your eyes and the book you’re not reading. She moves it to the window. Taps. “I was there. Exactly a week ago.”

When you look up, everyone on the bus is leaning over each other for the windows, risking contact, except for the soldiers, who are sleeping. Laura leans back so you can see it: the water at the feet of the dry sand-colored hills, the chalk-blue liquid, glacial formations of salt, the stones on shore entombed in slow growing pillars of sodium. You try to imagine people there but there isn't even a wind to break the surface. The surface is as still as a windowpane. No fish. Nothing living.

*

Yesterday, you and Laura had met on a street in Tel-Aviv you'd specified by email. After Laura went back to California a year ago, that's how the two of you would stay in touch. The two of you, over the past year, have decided your route: from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, then to Jordan, back to Jerusalem, and finally to Egypt where after a week she'll get on a plane for California again. A year ago, you had done the same thing. In Paris, after you'd met and the two weeks you traveled together, she took a plane back California. You stayed here.

You would write long impassioned emails for which you were embarrassed later: *...and in the worst relationships grows a garden of things unsaid, thoughts that sprout and bear luminous fruit, warm grateful vines, brittle little seeds of malice that unchecked flourish weedlike and choke the ground...* When you ran out of money to live in hostels, you would use someone's computer if you had gotten lucky enough to be staying the night with someone who owned a computer. Sometimes you walked into a hostel and pretended you were staying there to use the PC's by front desk. She would send you pictures sometimes: her on the beach. Her, running a marathon. Her on her bed.

"Oh god," Laura said, after she saw you in Tel-Aviv. "You got so thin. Did you eat?"

You were walking along the beach with the horizon on your right and on the other side the beach passing like one long commercial: men and women, a little older than you—Laura’s age—white sand, tan thighs glinting as if you could see the attention gathered on them. Further back, the skyscrapers as neat as an architect’s sketch, the clean white lines missing some flaw or discoloration in the stucco or a hanging line of laundry that would make them seem more real. You had just come from Istanbul by way of Cairo. In Cairo, you’d watched a riot in Tahrir, after the police, dressed in civilian clothing, had swept through the protesters with shotguns, killing seventeen. You looked at the bodies around you, on the beach, the way people displayed them, as if flesh were a defiance.

“Lemme see your hand,” Laura said and took it. She studied it with mock seriousness. “I’m going to need to feed you.”

When she kept your hand afterwards, you realized she’d only wanted an excuse to hold it. She touched your fingers busily, as she told you about the new hospital she was working for, getting reacquainted with them. Even with the other women you’d been with since her, you’d never held hands.

The two of you stopped at a falafel stand then an ice cream shop on the pier at the end of the commercial beach. Both times she paid, although you tried to object.

“Let me,” she said. “I’m thirty. I have a real job and too much money and not enough to pay for. I just bought a Ducati. You can let me buy you ice cream.”

Families around were looking at the two of you. Laura was wearing new clothes, from North Face and Arc’teryx. She’d bought them for the trip. You were wearing pants a Turkish farmer had given to you. You’d ripped your old ones climbing over a tree, fallen over a sheep

path. It must have looked like Laura was buying a homeless man a meal. In a certain way, she was.

“How long do you think you’ll be doing this?” Laura asked as you were finishing your meals. Around you, the vendors were closing up their shacks, light falling in crisp slats on the pier from between their half lowered shutters. Behind you, the city looked unreal, plated with evening light.

“Maybe when I run out of money? I’m not sure,” you said. You hadn’t thought about it in a long time. Your family had stopped asking.

“How would you feel about visiting me for Christmas?”

You weren’t sure if she were kidding. To buy time you laughed. “I could probably afford a ticket halfway across the Atlantic.”

“I would pay for you to come,” she said.

“That’s a pretty big gift.”

“And then back,” she went on, like you weren’t talking. You saw she saw the look on your face and you changed it to something like a smile. “You don’t have to tell me now,” she said.

“Christmas is a long way away. Why don’t we think about what we’re doing now?” You got up.

“Yeah,” Laura said and got up too.

The sun had sunk without you noticing, without a change in the light. But as you started walking back to the hostel the sky dimmed rapidly. The clouds scudding off-shore went from

gold to red to purple, to black, and finally to a dirty yellow, reflecting back the light from Tel-Aviv. You and Laura were walking side by side, without talking.

You were almost back to your room when Laura turned abruptly and began walking towards the sea. You were standing at the edge of a field of chairs belonging to a beachfront club that was just beginning to open. Behind you, a man with gelled hair kept glancing up at you as he tied chic white cushions to the frames of wicker chairs. Music abruptly issued from mounted speakers, mid-way through a song. Laura had reached the water. You watched her walk in up to her knees. Up to her waist. She kept going out as if she weren't going to stop, but you knew she would. You were waiting for her to come back. You had begun thinking of the emails you had sent back and forth. *I can't. I can't. I can't stop thinking of you.* How, once, in Istanbul, where you had spent the night in a woman's apartment, you had gone on her computer and found Laura sent you another picture. Subject line: *Me, this morning.*

You had waited till the woman left the apartment to open it. *I wanted you to see me,* Laura wrote. You're not sure what happened: she'd attached the file wrong, or the woman's computer couldn't decrypt it, or the file had corrupted. It was just letters and numbers and symbols.

*

When you get to your single room in the hostel in Jerusalem, there are two beds in it. They are separated, pushed against opposite walls, a nightstand between them.

"I guess they mean for us to push them together," you say.

Laura puts her bag on the floor beneath one bed and lays down on it, face into the pillow. You sit down on your bed. The window is blank with light. You hear traffic. Americans out in

the common room talking. You feel remote from this country. A tourist. A member of one of those couples you see in hostels, who in the afternoon, hang a sheet from the bunk above their beds, never leave the room. You'd hear them sometimes at night: one of them whispering, the other crying.

“Look,” you say to the back of her head. “You really don't have to travel with me if you don't want. If you don't want to be here, then go. You should enjoy yourself.”

You watch her. She turns over, stands up slowly from the bed. You're panicking because she came all this way to see you, and you know that in seconds, it will be over, that once this person whom you met one night a year ago walks out of the door, you'll never see her again. And once you think this, along with the guilt, and the loss, you also feel relieved that she can't want anything of you anymore. You'll be free to go as soon as she does, and while she's going back to California, you can go anywhere. All across the Middle East you know, there are uprisings, revolutions. You want to see them. You would always trade what you have for what you could have, the actual for the hypothetical, seen for unseen.

She hasn't moved. She's lifting her shirt over her head. She undoes her bra. Her breasts, heavy, sway out to the sides. They gleam with sweat as if they'd been cast from aluminum.

“What are you doing?” you ask as she walks over to your bed.

“Enjoying myself,” she says.

Afterwards, the mood of things changes. The window is blazing. The room is dim. You get dressed next to her quietly. You can tell she is thinking by way she pulls on her socks but there's a solitude to the way she moves that tells you she's not asking you to inquire. There is some sort of space between you. She looks at you.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing.”

The two of you walk through the tight, shadowed alleys of Jerusalem. Here, in the morning, at five a.m. Italians carry wooden crosses through the streets, heads bowed as if being punished, in robes like Christ that they buy from the merchants who have, by now, in the afternoon, set up their tables. Americans swarm the tables, trying their hands at bargaining, the merchants frowning as if the Americans were just too good, their first time, at driving a deal. Here and there you see, moving with a slowness and meticulousness that sets them apart from the tourists, a pair of soldiers, their hands resting on the rifles. They’re looking through the crowd, their eyes scanning from face to face, your face. There are some things that move too slowly to be seen. Occasionally a tourist will almost run into one of them, look up in surprise, then fear, then recognition.

You follow the alleys as they become tunnels, slope down to the Western wall. The merchant’s stalls are recessed into the stone, like crypts. Laura is speaking to the child of a spice merchant through a narrow stone doorway. She has a shawl over her head. She points to a crumbling pyramid of cinnamon.

“Balashon?” Laura asks.

The child nods. Laura smiles. The merchant, over the top of her head, winks at you. You look off. High, over the tops of the stalls gleams the golden Dome on the Rock. You can only walk up to the door. You can’t go inside. It’s what you look at when you’re leaving the city, the white buildings spreading into dry valleys, the new developments of high rises, the twenty-six foot concrete wall topped by barb wire, its undulations around the countryside, occasional

scorches against its surface. On a hill top: a citadel of new white buildings surrounded by the wall. The rubble of Palestine below.

“What do the yellow signs mean?” you ask a soldier across the aisle from you. Laura has been silent for an hour. She doesn’t look up when you ask the question. She keeps looking out the window, holding your hand, her fingers focusing on this one of your finger bones, that one.

“They mean only Israeli’s can drive on them.”

“Not Americans?” you ask.

“Of course Americans,” he says. “No Palestinians.”

He’s sandy haired, young, your age, apart from you. You can’t even begin to ask about the things he’s seen. The things you ask are obvious. You are a tourist. It gives him permission to stare at you. He does, looking from you to Laura. There’s something about her face. She’s not happy.

“You okay?” you ask.

“Just thinking,” she says.

You can tell the soldier is listening as he scrolls down his phone screen.

“What about?”

“Those signs,” she says after a moment.

*

You cannot enter Jordan by the West Bank so you have to take the bus all the way north, Laura asleep on your shoulder, to the border at Amman. You pass through the Israeli border, a huge modern building with A/C, young guards like fashion models, laughing, chatting, standing contrapposto with their rifles. In your ripped clothes, Laura following you, you envy something

about them, the way they hold themselves, without any doubt, like everything—confusion, hesitation—had been given up, as if they understood everything about themselves. They move their bodies the purposeful, intentional way one would handle a weapon.

The Jordanian border office is the size of a double wide. Two overweight guards in white uniforms sit smoking within, wanting the usual bribe. Laura pays. Laura pays for the cab you take into Amman and then the single room you're checking into. The manager of the hotel looks at the claddagh ring on Laura's finger as she's taking her card back.

“Are you married?” he asks, holding your room key on his side of the counter.

You look at Laura. It's as if she's listening to a conversation in a different room.

“Yes,” you say. He hands the key to you.

Once you get in the room, you ask Laura if she wants to go out.

“Are you hungry?”

“No,” she says.

“I'll pay for dinner,” you say.

She's pulling the shawl from her head. She hands it to you.

“Blindfold me,” she says.

You fold the shawl over, then over again, making a thin band. She takes off all her clothes, kneels, if for an execution. You tie the knot behind her head, your fingers careful not to snag her hair, to suggest any sort of advantage, strength. Outside the call to prayer warbles in the heat. Its answer at another mosque across the city.

“Hit me,” she says.

“What?”

She turns at the sound of your voice. The windows are blinding, open, the city beyond like something tossed into a furnace. The only thing that comes through the window is the prayer, a chorus. The whole city holds one note.

“You know,” she says. She bends. “Spank me.”

She makes you ask for things you redden to pronounce. You do it in one embarrassed rush, one pink whisper. She makes you say it slowly with the long sun of evening on the wall like a burning doorway to somewhere else. Afterwards the two of you lay in bed, motionless, the walls fading, your bodies cooling for the first time all day. There is something about the light in this part of the world: the wasting of it.

*

You're up at dawn most days. The sky grays and you're out of bed. The room is hot with your bodies even before the sun comes up, even before the first call to prayer. Lying on her side, she'll watch you.

“How many?” she asks.

You lower your chest to the ground again, push up. Your back studded with sweat, the droplets trembling, falling one by one. It feels as heavy as fingertips running across your skin. You can feel your skin prickling, her tracking the progress of each droplet.

“What do you think about going South today?” you ask, toweling off. You had planned to stay in Amman for one more day. She hasn't gotten up from the bed.

“I don't care,” she says.

“In the south the ruins are gorgeous, people say.”

“Whatever,” she says. “Wherever.”

You spend the days going to sights. She lets you pick. St. George's Orthodox Church, Karak, Petra. You look at a mosaic map of the world, Jerusalem at the center of it. Within a day of travel: Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, all in revolution. This is where the world will end, people say. On the bus south, you drive past toppled cities, some of the first stones to be overthrown.

In Petra, you climb away from the tourists, up small cliffs, your palms burning, to see it all better. When you look down, you see Laura, sitting on the rocks below, looking up at you. She waves. You climb higher. You have to explore every room in the old cliffside temples, as if there were something scratched on some back wall, at the base of some pillar, a message waiting for you to decrypt it. You look at the brown ancient hills, the stones of old cities sinking into them until you lose concentration. When you look back again, Laura is talking to someone.

By the time you climb down, he's gone. You watch a lone figure, ahead, descending. When you reach Laura, she starts climbing down the stairs cut into the stone. The sun hangs just over a cliff. The stone beneath you burns with color, like a Mars, striated pink, and red, and purple. The heat of the day leaks up to your calves. Below, on the sands, shadows go creeping out from the free-standing pillars of a vanished temple.

"Who was that?" you say.

"Who?" She looks at you. You don't say anything. You wait. She looks down so as not to trip. "Oh," she says. "Oh, him. Huge coincidence. He was from California too."

"Oh wow," you say. "Why's he here?"

"He's a Marine. This is what they do on their weekends. He's going back to a Navy ship out on the Red Sea."

You look at her face, broadsided by daylight. The tide of dusk has almost reached up the cliff face to you. The sun is no more than a flickering on the edge of a plateau above. You're passing by doorways, old houses, temples, cathedrals that reach back in honeycombs into the stone. Stone pillars, their centers whittled down by the wind to hourglass waists. This afternoon, with the sun spreading broad, blood colored carpets of light into the cliff dwellings, you could almost imagine people living there. Now all of the doorways, missing doors, a whole city's worth: dark, tombs of evening.

*

"See?" Mohammad, your cab driver says. "There is Banksy."

You look at a spray-painted dove, the size of a Buick, in flight across the side of a souvenir shop. It carries an olive branch in its beak. It's wearing a flak jacket and a target symbol over its heart. You and Laura sit in the back seat, the AC humming, the window open. The two of you took the bus from Jordan into the West Bank, into Bethlehem. Tonight you'll go back to Jerusalem, tomorrow to Cairo.

"I told you that Mohammad could show you revolutionary artist Banksy, my friend. And you see, Mohammad is showing you revolutionary artist Banksy."

"I see," you say because Mohammad seems to want you to express more surprise. "So that's Banksy."

Laura lays her head back against the seat.

When you'd walked out of the Church of the Nativity, Mohammad, driving in his cab, followed you both at walking speed, telling you and Laura he could show you the best parts of Bethlehem, very cheap, very quick. He was, he said, an expert in Banksy. He could separate the

real from the imposters. Since Laura was feeling tired, you agreed and he brought you to the dove. You lift your camera to take a picture of the dove. There's another tourist, standing outside, taking a picture of it too. He ends up in your picture.

"People are coming from all over the world to see the Banksy cartoons. From America, the U.K., even Japan. There is much more Banksy, my friend. I will show it to you."

"Can we go to the wall?" you ask. You'd heard of the graffiti on the wall from an American you met in a hostel in Amman. He had a black eye. He said he'd been in Bethlehem taking pictures of the wall, and the town, and as he'd been walking down the street behind some Israeli soldiers, one of them abruptly fell. The American had thought he'd tripped until the other soldiers looked up, at the kids on the roofs, throwing pieces of brick and stone. One of the soldiers fired a shot in the air, the kids scattered, and then people came out of their homes, some of them with chair legs, others with stones, and as the riot began a stone hit the American in the face.

"Mohammad will show you the wall," Mohammad is saying. "There more Banksy is on the wall."

Mohammad drives you through a residential neighborhood and you look out but it's streets are empty, windows glinting, dogs turned to brown puddles beneath the cars by the heat. A square opens to one side of you. You look at a solitary woman arranging melons on a stand. You look at Laura and see, through her sunglasses, her eyes are closed.

"Headache?" you ask very softly, but Mohammad's eyes flick to you in the rearview.

"Lady, are you okay?"

"Yes," Laura says. She sits up.

“We can get a refreshment. I know restaurants. My cousin owns a restaurant. If you need we can stop at his place. It’s a very nice restaurant. I take all the tourists there. It’s good to get something to drink, yes?”

“Yes,” Laura agrees with a vague politeness.

“We don’t need to stop,” you say, knowing that as a tourist, there’s no difference between a hypothetical agreement and a contract.

Mohammad parks the car on the shady side of a street. At the end of the block is the wall. For a moment, it reminds you of the wall in Berlin. But this is as tall as a three story building, level with the tops of the apartments. A constant watermark of graffiti runs along the base like the line of mud a flood leaves on the sides of buildings.

“Look at it,” you say. “The size.”

You step outside and look back. Laura is in the car massaging her temples.

You lean down. “Do you need to go back?”

Up front, Mohammad turns on the radio in the middle of what sounds to you like the one endless Arabic song that runs through every radio station at all hours—the chanting, the tambourines—simply in its next movement.

“No, no,” she says. “It’s too far. I think I just need to rest.”

“Are you sure you can’t do it? We can just look at the wall and go back.”

“It’s too much sun.”

You look down the block at the wall, back at Laura, with her head back now. Up in the front, Mohammad has his window down, smoking, looking out like he can’t hear you. The street is empty.

“Do you want me to stay with you?” you ask. “We can go back.”

“Only if you want,” she says, after a moment. “You don’t have to.”

You take a step back from the car door, put your hand on the edge of it, lean down again.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

Laura seems not to have heard you. Mohammad leans down into the passenger side window. “Go enjoy, my friend.”

You walk away slowly. At the end of the street you look back and wave but the glass of the car is one glare and then you turn the corner and you’re walking along the wall. There are layers of graffiti, the first timid tags and phrases now covered up by murals, scrawled, hasty words now running into the hip of a soldier or the thorax of the ant painted over them. An aura of respect surrounds the most intricate images. The other images are braided around them like a rococo frame. Often, they reference them: a badly painted soldier looking up at the famous silhouette of girl being lifted by balloons; a field of white stumps around a walled-in tree; a man pulling aside the concrete to display a scene of palm trees; a maid lifting the wall like a rug to sweep some dust under; ‘love wins’ and ‘free Palestine’ and ‘ich bin ein berliner’; a pair of hands from heaven handing down a ladder into Bethlehem, painted as cities are in medieval paintings: a sort of lozenge where perspective flattens to display landmarks. You stare at a portrait of a smiling woman, Letla, the wall tells you, who holds an AK-47. The date of her death is noted. At first you think someone has made the sky night on the guard tower above her, until you realize a molotov must have been thrown at the tower. You try to look in the windows of it but the heavy bullet proof glass is scratched and scorched.

At some point you get thirsty and you turn off down a residential street wanting to find water. A dog is staggering down the middle of the road and when you approach, he stops and looks at you in a way that makes you give him a wide berth. The streets are empty, as if evacuated. Laundry billows on lines above you. You walk several blocks until you find a store. You try the door and it's locked. You look back down the empty street. The dog is gone. There's the wall, bullet holes in it. You begin walking back quickly for Laura.

You didn't know how long you'd been gone. When you get back, the shade from one side of the street is touching the stoops of the other. The car is gone. You stare at the space where it was, sure that's where, but telling yourself, convincing yourself it isn't. You are sure you made a mistake. You walk to the next street and look down it, knowing you'll find the car there. You don't. It's a different street. You keep walking, looking down streets, sometimes going back to make sure, even though you know the first street is the real one. On one block you run across a Palestinian eating an ice cream cone, carrying home a bag of groceries. You almost tear up just seeing another person.

"Have you seen an American woman?" you ask him.

He says something. You don't understand him. You repeat the question and he shakes his head and walks around you like you did the dog.

You're sitting on a stoop on the street where the car had been, thinking of what you're going to do, about calling the American consulate, about calling her parents, who you've never talked to, even seen a picture of, when the car pulls up. You look up. The glass glares. You don't want to believe it. To be relieved in that way and then wrong again would be intolerable.

"My friend!" you hear Mohammad say.

There she is, in the car, where she was.

“What happened?” you ask. “Where did you go?”

She holds up a bottle of water, says calmly, “I was thirsty.”

“All the shops around are closed, my friend,” Mohammad tells you. “Everyone is at work. We had to go to my cousin’s restaurant.”

You start laughing.

“Oh god,” you say. “Jesus.”

Laura drinks some water.

“For a minute there, oh man,” you’re saying, smiling. You’re angry, you realize. You hadn’t realized it because of the relief, but now you’re angry. “God I was scared. I had no idea where you were. I thought. Man, for a minute I thought—”

“We were right here,” Laura says. “We were right here for a long time. We were waiting forever.”

*

Laura hasn’t spoken since you crossed the border and took a cab into Jerusalem, which cost about as much as your entire day with Mohammad, plus tip, which you paid when he dropped you off at the border. “I can drive no further,” he said. You and Laura had gotten out and walked up to the crossing.

It’s evening. The sky is the color of sand. Neither you nor Laura bothered to turn the lights in the room on. It’s dark. She has her shirt off, spreading aloe which she bought at a pharmacy for her pale, sun-damaged skin.

“What do you want to do tonight?” you ask, breaking the silence. She puts the aloe on the way one touches oneself when one bathes: absently, slowly, as though alone. You see her shiver when the gel touches her. You have a week of this ahead of you. Tomorrow, early, the bus for Cairo.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Dinner? Something?”

The room is quiet while she thinks.

“No,” she says, after a minute.

“What do you want to do instead?”

As if she were simply continuing what she’d been doing, she takes off the rest of her clothes. You strip in silence. You wonder if the whole thing will happen without speaking but when you’re putting on the condom, she pushes your hand away.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to feel you,” she says.

She has one leg over you, half mounted. You can feel her skin radiating an aloe coolness, like she’d been in the fridge. Slowly, staring at you as if daring you to object, she plants her other knee and sits down on you without any preparation. She lowers herself slowly but steadily, and when she reaches the base, she closes her eyes and breathes out, bringing her head down against yours with the same slow motion with which you’ve seen people touch their foreheads to the Western Wall.

She lays like that, as if praying. You feel her heart beat with several points of your body. It’s rising and rising, until it feels like one continuous flutter. You’re listening so hard to it that

when she gathers her hip muscles and shifts, the movement almost pulls you all the way there. You breathe in sharply, clench. She rocks you again, as if trying to get you to finish now, and keeps going and you have to force your mind to other things: the wall; that dog; what you saw today as you and Laura walked through the border. Inside, the crossing was the size of an airplane hangar, a maze of turnstiles and gates almost completely empty except for the soldiers, nodding you through, barely even glancing at your passport. There were, again, no Palestinians, just crushed litter on the ground: coke cans, cigarette butts, the smell of bodies lingering in the air. But midway through the room, you could hear a murmur that made you look up for birds in the rafters. As you walked on you realized it was the sound of a crowd, and then what you thought was the far wall turned out to be a dividing wall that suddenly fell away.

You saw them all then: a thousand, two thousand people, crammed together, front to back, in a low, gated corridor, the kind, back in the States, you've watched cows plod through. They were coming home from work: men holding their brief cases, young men talking, snapping their fingers, cell phones blasting rap, or holding packages on shoulders. In a separate line women stood with their heads covered, more space between them, murmuring quietly. You could see the lines stretching out into the sun, the incandescent bodies, some of them leaning against the bars; others seeming to have fallen asleep against the backs of the people in front of them. But across from you in the room, the line was swelling in front of a turnstile that wasn't turning. Men were yelling, gesticulating through the bars, screaming, their voices sounding small and faraway in the high-ceilinged room. They were yelling at a young man and a woman, Israeli soldiers, who stood beside the check point, talking easily as if no one else were there. The male soldier was smiling, saying something to the woman. She laughed, shifted her TAR-21 to

her other shoulder just as a guard in your half of the building shouted at you for stalling. He was waving you on. Laura was ahead and so was the city, now in twilight, visible through a doorway. “Come,” she said, and as she held out her hand you looked back and saw a woman in line, leaning against the bars, the only woman doing so, looking at you.

Laura is looking down at you. She’s stopped moving.

“I want you to know something,” she says.

You stare up at her, immobile, your kegel’s clenched tight.

“I’ve never loved anyone like you,” she says. “And I want you to know that, because I know you don’t. That you might love me, but you love other things more. That you’re relieved that I’ll be going soon. But I want you to know—listen to me: I’d give up anything for you.”

Then she leans down and puts her lips against your ear and her voice fills you like hot thunder. As she talks, your skin prickles and your neck hair rises and you miss the first words. You close your eyes, think of that woman you saw, leaning against the bars, looking at you as if you could bring her home.

“Even if you left me,” you hear her saying. “It wouldn’t change a thing. Even when you’re gone I’ll feel you like this, all the way at the center of me. It doesn’t matter how far you go. You’ll be right here. I’ll remember it. You can’t take that away.”