

University of Nevada, Reno

**A Place to Share with No One**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Art in English

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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## Abstract

I've deeply enjoyed working on these stories during my time spent perusing a graduate degree at the University of Nevada, Reno. Through them, I've learned some valuable lessons about my process as a writer, such as the importance of getting to know my characters, watching them, listening to them, and allowing them to guide the plot. As such, the stories within this collection are character driven, presenting men and women who wear their grief, paranoia, and anxiety on their sleeves. Though they range in topics from death to beauty, and experiment with genre and style, they all ask the reader to consider deeply alienated characters, and the ramifications of the loneliness that accompanies physical and emotional isolation.

For Darrell

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## The Art of Eating Alone

“What’s this, Bailey?” Sam asked as he eased one knee into the dirt. He was speaking to his beagle. She didn’t look up, but she had already put her nose to the ground in an attempt to determine the answer. Her ears traced faint lines in the earth as her nose lead the way, scooping up dirt like a plow. When she looked up to find her bearings, her snout was covered in a fine brown dust. She sneezed and went back to work.

Sam identified the object first. When he picked up the white sphere, dust dropped from its dimpled surface exposing a black TopFlite logo. “A golf ball?” he said, still uncertain. He rolled it around in his hand. What was such a nice, new golf ball doing out here in the Pah Rah Range? This was dirt bike territory at best; the nearest golf course was more than a forty minute drive back into the suburbs of Reno.

Sam pocketed the orphaned ball. He pressed a heavy forearm on to his bent knee, and was pushing himself up one vertebra at a time, when another white flash caught his attention, partially hidden by the skeletal branches of a desert shrub. Bailey, who had reached the end of her leash, whined in protest, prepared to continue their hike. Sam gave the leash a swift jerk and when she returned, he led them over a mound of flat rocks toward the object. Bailey scurried between his legs, nearly tripping him; his boot narrowly missed a critter hole. When he reached his target, he bent to find another clean, white golf ball. “Two in one day, what are the odds?” He added the second to his pocket

and rolled them through his fingers for a moment like Chinese stress balls; they orbited one another smoothly. This time when he rose, he surveyed the landscape with straining eyes. It was all desert: low lying shrubbery, clusters of flat, black rocks, stacked like fallen dominos, and dead yellow grass sprouting in regular bunches. No houses, no cars, no people—he and Bailey were in their own private wilderness. Sam could no longer see the mountains that folded into one another, the ones that framed Reno in their uneven layers—he was inside them now. From this angle the peaks looked more like a succession of protruding domes. The nearest summit rose up behind him, blocking the view of the suburban sprawl he called home, and the next waited ahead of him—an immovable wall.

Then, like the moment an image finally rises to the forefront of an optical illusion poster, Sam began to see white spheres dotting the landscape around him. When he realized what they were, he stopped and counted: nearly fourteen golf balls. But why? He turned and looked for the nearest tire tracks. About twenty feet away, a faded set of parallel lines grew smaller as they wound up the hill and over the top of a distant summit. They weren't fresh. Sam was considering going out to collect all the golf balls he could find, for no particular reason, when he felt Bailey tug again on her leash, stronger this time. He turned to her in frustration.

“Hold on Bai—”

Sam had always wanted a basset hound. When he was a little boy growing up on Fig Tree Circle his parents had only ever owned retrievers—black, brown, yellow, it didn't matter, his father always accustomed them to the sound of the shotgun blast, and

taught them to wade through the marsh and bring back the mallards he had shot. When one dog expired from old age or disease or a stray bullet, the family bought a new one. After hunting trips, his dad told him how he made sure each dog carried the bird with the utmost care; if the dog brought back the bird without any stray puncture holes, his dad bit off a small chunk of beef jerky and tossed it to him. If the dog brought it back flattened, bloodied or otherwise mutilated, he scolded him sternly, dropping a hard fist on the top of his snout. “You got to teach them right and wrong,” his father used to say.

Sam never actually saw their dogs at work; he never went hunting with his father. “You’re too damn loud,” his father told him once, in a gruff, hunter’s voice. “And you can’t sit still.” But sometimes his father would call from the lake and tell Sam how things were going, or wish him a happy birthday, because duck hunting season always started in October, near his birthday.

Mrs. Hartford, their next door neighbor, kept an eye on Sam on the days his father went hunting. She was the one who had Basset Hounds—two—Bert and Stella. On the weekends she pulled weeds in her front yard in her rubber boots and pink gloves, and when she saw Sam outside wandering, she always invited him in for Kool-Aid and Cheese-Its. Sam liked playing with Bert and Stella more than he liked the crackers or the purple juice with floating sugar granules that felt like sand in his mouth. Mrs. Hartford let him play with her dogs right in the living room. She gave him two toys, one pink and one blue, and he tossed them alternately for the two hounds, who clamored after both, regardless of the color, baying and colliding into one another, crumpling the area rug when they clawed themselves to a stop.

“Don’t worry about the rug, Sweetie. Happens every day,” Mrs. Hartford used to call out over her shoulder while she was cooking at the stove. She always seemed to be cooking when Sam was over, her house rife with the smell of onions and wet carpet, but she only ever fed him crackers and Kool-Aid. Sam tried to imagine what his father was doing while he played with Mrs. Hartford’s dogs. Was he crouching in the grass? Was he wading through the lake water in his own tall, rubber boots? Was he already on his way back home, having had a “hell of a good morning”? Sam wondered if one day, when he was older and stronger—quieter and more still—if he might be a better hunting partner than a stupid dog.

In the end, Sam was glad he wasn’t the one who had to fetch the ducks. Bleak days, cold water, coarse winds, a fist to the snout. There was even one time, when the dog supposedly went crashing through the brush and came back with porcupine quills stuck in his muzzle, like little arrows to a target. Despite the stories, Sam still figured that the dog had the easier role. After a few quick swims through murky water, the dog was able to retire to the bed of the pick-up truck with a rolled rawhide. Once home, the dog was released into the side yard where it would hunker down in its house like a good soldier. This was when Sam’s dad would unpack his gear, and hand it to his son one at a time: shotgun, wet hunting jacket, lunch box. Once everything was stacked in a corner of the garage, Sam’s dad would put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Come here son,” he’d say. “I’m going to show you how a man makes dinner.”

\* \* \*

“Holy shit, dude,” a male voice said.

Sam opened his left eye just in time to watch a mouth come down against his, blowing air into his already breathing lungs. He coughed and found that his arms were capable of movement—he meant to push the mouth away from him but ended up thrashing his arms weakly against the man’s torso instead. He couldn’t open his right eye at all.

“Are you OK? Don’t move. You might have a concussion,” the voice said again.

Sam pushed himself onto his elbows and then upright completely.

“Fuck, I said don’t move. Shit, what if your spine is broken or something?”

“My spine is fine,” Sam said. He reached for his right eye and felt the swollen flesh rise up to meet his fingers. It felt gelatinous and the smallest brush shot pain across his face in every direction. “What’s wrong with my eye?” he asked the man crouched next to him. Through his one good eye Sam could see that the man was shirtless and tan. He had a pale raccoon mask where his sunglasses had rested, which were now pushed into a mess of brown hair reaching nearly to his shoulders.

“It’s purple, and pretty swollen—shit; you really did take one to the face, didn’t you.”

“Take one what?” Sam was slowly starting to remember.

“This, I suppose.” The man held up a golf ball between his thumb and forefinger, before pitching it aside. “Shit. My bad. I’m really sorry. No one’s usually out here.”

“Well, *we* were out here—” Bailey. Sam scrambled to his feet. “Bailey. Bailey!” His legs wobbled beneath him and his hands clenched at the surrounding air for balance.

“Whoa, you need to calm down.” the man said. He thrust his shoulder under Sam’s arm to steady him. “You’re going to stroke out, screaming like that. There’s no one here—just you and me.”

“Bailey,” Sam called again, his hand still hovering protectively over his right eye.

The man insisted, first and foremost, on hiking to his house for first aide. Just over the hill, he told him, attempting to point with Sam’s weak body still weighing him down. Sam finally relented. After a few minutes Sam had regained his mobility, but he walked near his shirtless guide, a hand on the man’s muscled shoulder, in an attempt to avoid large rocks and reaching braches that eluded his limited vision. There was something wild about the man—primitive—even beyond his unkempt hair and lack of clothing. Sam couldn’t gauge his age, but the skin under his eyes betrayed a familiar exhaustion; his lips were thin and sun-chapped. He introduced himself as Trenton. “But call me Trent,” he had said.

On the climb back to the Trent’s house, Sam explained that Bailey was his dog—a small breed, with few defenses. The man had scoffed at that, saying: “A beagle, huh? Aren’t those supposed to be hunting dogs?”

Well, yes, Sam reasoned. But *she’d* never hunted.

After that, Trent remained relatively quiet as they walked; he nodded as Sam gave a detailed physical description of his dog, seeming to agree with the urgent need to mount a search. When they overtook the crest of the first hill the man lapsed into conversation.

“Here’s where I tee off.” Trent pointed to a flat boulder that stood nearly five feet off the ground. When Sam walked up to it, he saw that there were a few holes drilled in the surface and that a collection of tees encircled the perimeter like a halo.

“How do you tee-off of a rock?” Sam asked.

“Carefully,” Trent replied. Sam slid a hand over the abrasive surface, letting the ridges and hollows move his fingers along an untraceable path.

“So what are you, a professional golfer?” he asked. Trent laughed.

“No. A cyclist actually. You know, Iron Man, Tour de France. I come here to unwind, go mountain biking, find my center again. Northern Nevada is beautiful in the winter. Much dryer than Napa—that’s where I’m originally from.”

“Huh,” Sam replied, “I grew up in that area too.”

“Really? Whereabouts?”

“Santa Rosa.”

“No kidding. Small world.”

Trent’s house was symmetrical; the tan stucco walls erupted from the desert in even lines, creating two identical halves to the left and right of the front door. Only the garage detracted from the balance, adding bulk to the east wing where a driveway extended thirty feet before abruptly ending. Everything about the house seemed abrupt and out of place. The neatness of the landscaped front yard was disturbing—Juniper bushes were planted at even intervals, giant rocks inserted for aesthetic purposes: everything perfectly positioned and perfectly pruned.

“This is mi casa,” Trent said. His voice held no indication of pride or conceit.

The inside of the house was equally impressive, but Trent hurried through with vague nods as they passed each room: living room, dining room, bedrooms he rattled off.

Sam lived in what he considered a nice house, in one of Reno’s fairly respectable neighborhoods. He had a pleasant-looking mailbox out front, a tidy garage and three

bedrooms, two of which he rented out to college students. He never really saw them; the doors to their respective rooms were always closed. Sometimes he could hear the sounds of video games as he walked through the hall at night. When Bailey barked in the backyard he heard them pounding on their walls or windows in hopes of quieting her. Besides the fact that they never emptied the trash in the kitchen or pre-rinsed any of their dishes before stacking them in the dishwasher, they were fine enough tenants. And their rent money helped compensate his unemployment payments, especially since Christine left.

When the two men entered the kitchen, Trent began humming with excitement; he showed Sam the full-sized pantry, the stone pizza oven, the industrial dishwasher. He was particularly proud of the oversized metal refrigerator.

“I spent some time studying at the Two Bordelais Culinary Academy in Bordeaux,” Trent said over his shoulder as he searched through the vegetable crisper.

Sam hadn’t heard of such a place. He smiled and let his good eye peruse the room.

Trent turned and handed him a bunch of basil. “Jacques Pepin. Alain Ducasse. I mean, why not, I was already over there for *de Tour*.” Trent pronounced the last few words with a heavy French accent. Then he paused with his hand on the door. “Fucking Lance Armstrong,” Trent said abruptly. He twisted his mouth at the taste of the name, but immediately turned and went back to cheerfully rummaging through the refrigerator. After carefully stacking his cooking supplies on the counter, Trent filled a Ziploc bag with ice and handed it to Sam.

“Thanks,” Sam replied, pressing the ice pack to his face. Like a burst star, pain surged from his eye socket in every direction; it penetrated his lips and made his teeth ring. “I really appreciate your hospitality,” Sam said, delicately repositioning the ice so he could get a clear view of Trent out of his good eye. “You think you could give me a lift to my car after dinner?”

Trent paused, then shook his head. “No can do—I got rid of my car over a year ago. I just bike now. But no worries, we’ll get things straightened out tomorrow.” He continued to pull supplies from the surrounding cabinets while Sam’s face slowly acquired a frozen, red hue.

Trent didn’t ask for any help from Sam in the kitchen. He worked quickly and with a sense of mastery as he sautéed fresh halibut, tossing the basil in at predetermined intervals. At some point during the meal preparation, he placed a glass of water before Sam with a few white pills. “Anti-inflammatories and a pain killer,” he said, and went back to work.

The next thing Sam knew he was eating from a plate decorated with food beyond his ability to describe.

The smoke alarm startled Sam awake the following morning—the deafening buzz pulsed in the flesh around his swollen right eye. He reached his arm across the bed, but the other side was empty.

When he walked into the kitchen he found Trent cooking again; a large wok sat on the gas range with flames licking high around the sides. The back door was propped

wide open. A large map was spread out across the kitchen table, a concise red circle already drawn on.

“Morning,” Trent said. He turned from the stove, dug a hand into his pocket and tossed a set of keys onto the table as Sam sat down. “I brought your car up—quite a ride from here. It’s parked out front. Didn’t want you to have to worry about it.” Sam looked at the car keys—they were, in fact, his. He subtly slid a hand over his pocket and felt for his wallet. It was still there.

“So,” Trent said, turning off the stove and approaching the map. “We’re here.” He pointed to the center of the red circle. “I figured we could scout the area in a one mile radius. What do you think?”

“Sure,” Sam said, squinting at the map in front of him. It looked like a surveyor’s map—depicting only geographical traits. The roads were missing. The lines on the map blurred together as he strained to use his good eye. “You think we ought to call animal control?” he asked.

“Dude, I *get* dogs. I mean, I fucking understand them and shit.” Trent widened his eyes. “Your dog’s out here, I know it, and we’re going to find it before any animal control truck picks it up.”

They prepared to set off after breakfast. Trent brought his mountain bike around to the back porch and was adjusting his chain, when he stopped abruptly and let the bike fall to the cement. The clatter startled Sam and he turned back from where he had been scanning the hills. Trent was standing erect, his head bent stiffly toward the surface of the patio. He was staring at something. Something brown and lifeless.

Trent bent down and picked up the dead rodent in his bare hand, and held it clenched so tight it made Sam shudder at the prospect of the thing's head exploding.

"Fucking garbage," Trent said, his voice going dark. The man stood for a moment quietly staring into the desert. His body was rigid—his torso bent stiffly into an unseen wind—and the veins in his neck were beginning to inflate. Sam noticed a thick vessel, like an earthworm under his skin, growing near the man's left temple. Then Trent screamed.

"Fuck you, Nevada!" A single bird that had perched in some low lying shrubbery, not twenty feet away, took to the air. "Don't leave your fucking garbage on my fucking back porch," Trent said, quieter this time. Sam expected Trent to chuck the carcass into the desert, or scream some more profanities, but the man stood silent. Even when Sam approached and put a hesitant hand on his shoulder, Trent didn't flinch. Sam stood next to him for a few moments, as if they were both admiring the sunrise, until Trent's body loosened and, without acknowledging Sam, he began walking east. Toward his tee-off rock.

Though the rock was concealed from view, a good fifty feet down the hilltop's peak, Sam swore he heard the padded thud of the 9 iron against the dead rodent.

Sam had adopted Bailey three years earlier. He found her at the Humane Society. She was only eight weeks old when someone dumped her there, so young that the facility kept her in a private, indoor kennel; only a four-by-four information card posted near the entrance identified her presence. Sam saw the card on one of his ritual visits: Basset

Hound, tri-color, 12 weeks old. He pondered it for all of five minutes before asking to adopt her.

At her first vet office visit, Sam filled out the patient form in the waiting room with large even letters: name, age, sex, breed. Bailey shivered in the space between his feet; her orange nylon collar looked large and awkward around her tiny neck.

The veterinarian was a woman in her fifties who wore navy blue scrubs and a white medical jacket; she carried a stethoscope in the breast pocket like a real doctor would. She scanned the patient record, then scanned the puppy, and laughed lightly to herself.

“That’s not a Basset Hound. That’s a Beagle. But I can see how you’d think it was a Basset Hound. Similar markings. Very similar markings.”

Sam’s girlfriend, Christine, never liked Bailey, regardless of her breed. Perhaps Sam should have discussed puppies with her before bringing one home. He should have taken Christine with him to the animal shelter, shown her the information cards, let her pick out Bailey on her own. She would have thought the decision was hers. Instead he brought her into their house unannounced, nestled in the crook of his elbow, and set her down on the living room floor near Christine’s feet. Once there, the puppy lifted her clumsy paws high into the air, as if tip-toeing on hot coals, and they both watched her—it was at this moment that Sam thought Christine might have fallen in love with Bailey, had the puppy not stopped, and without so much as a glance at the two humans in the room, squatted and peed on the carpet. Sam could see the strain on Christine’s face.

When Bailey was seven months old, the breaking point came. Sam came home to find her penned off in the kitchen and Christine crying in the bedroom. She didn’t want

to say at first what had upset her, so he consoled her by sitting near her on the bed, caressing her back. She went into the bathroom, and he could hear the faucet running; Christine blew her nose into a tissue. He saw, on the comforter, what she had been protecting. Dr. Seuss' *Oh, the Place You'll Go!* was heavily chewed, and still wet with saliva. The book's spine had taken the brunt of the damage, as had the bottom right corner. When Sam opened the cover, the pages threatened to fall free.

"Oh, Chris, I'm so sorry. I'll buy you a new copy," Sam called to Christine when the faucet shut off. Before he closed the book he noticed a note inscribed on the inside cover: *For my Peanut. Never stop dreaming. Love—*

The last word was lost somewhere inside Bailey's stomach.

Per Trent's instructions, Sam took off walking due south from the house; he turned and watched as Trent's mountain bike crashed northward through the brush. The plan, Trent's plan, had been for both of them to travel a mile in their respective directions before making 90 degree, left-hand turns, and walk the circumference of the property until they reached a certain, unspecified point, upon which they would turn to the left again, and reconvene at the homestead. Sam didn't have a compass, or an instrument with which to gauge distance. He kept walking in what he deemed a steady, straight path. He called Bailey's name at regular intervals and paused to quiet his breathing, in order to listen for the sound of her bark or a whimper in the distance.

Sam found the house as the sun began to make its westward descent. The back door was unlocked and Trent was in the kitchen, cooking again.

"Tonight I am making caille rôtie." He sounded cheery.

“Did you find anything?” Sam asked, sitting down at the table and absently scanning the map again. New marks had been made within the red circle: long slashes that seemed to indicate ground covered.

“Nope, not a thing. But don’t worry—sometimes *no* news is good news. You know what I mean?” Sam cringed at the idea of the man clutching his dead dog with the same angry grip he had seen earlier.

“Maybe I should head back to town,” Sam said. He hesitated, waiting for Trent to respond. “I could call the shelters; get some fliers put up in surrounding neighborhoods.”

Trent abandoned his cooking and examined the map with Sam. “Yeah, you could, I guess. But I really think your dog is somewhere close.” Having hiked the terrain for an entire day without encountering another person, house, or vehicle, Sam couldn’t help but think Trent was right. “But you have your own place don’t you? Of course.” Sam thought Trent looked a little sullen for the first time since he had met him. “I totally don’t want you to think I am holding you hostage or something.”

“Not at all. I just don’t want to impose.”

“It’s no problem. Whatever you think is best. You know I got your back right? I am not going to give up on this search.” When Sam didn’t respond, Trent added: “Cheer up; we’re having roasted fucking quail for dinner.”

Again, the food was exquisite, but Sam couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d offended his host. “So, Trent,” he asked after a long period of silence, “How did you get into cycling?”

Trent told him about how his father had been a cyclist, and that Trent hadn't had much option growing up. It was OK at first, despite the fact that his father was a "real fucking son-of-a-bitch," he said. A ballbuster.

"He must be pretty thrilled with your success though, right?"

Trent laughed. "That success is a legacy now. I haven't raced in years. Not since my father left my mother for some 22 year old cycling-groupie chick. I dumped him as a coach, pretty much dumped him as a father too, but he still thinks I owe him something."

"That's rough man," Sam said, suddenly imagining his own father with someone like Christine.

"More than the divorce, though, was the fact that the man was a fucking hypocrite. When you hit an incline, and your fucking quads and calves are on fire, you don't give up. You push through."

Afterwards, Trent took the dishes and loaded the dishwasher. He didn't ask for Sam's help—in fact, he prescribed another set of anti-inflammatories and instructed Sam to unroll the map and plot out tomorrow's search. Just as the lines on the map began to form a coherent landscape, an odd, tinkling ring interrupted the path of Sam's pen. Trent answered a cordless phone in the corner of the kitchen before it had a chance to ring a second time. Sam had surveyed the entire room twice since he arrived and he hadn't noticed the phone.

With his finger tracing a northern mountain range, he tried not to eavesdrop. It wouldn't have mattered though; all that escaped Trent's lips were a few ambivalent OK's and uh-huh's before he excused himself from the kitchen. Sam sat listening to the paper

crinkle under his elbows for a good fifteen minutes before he heard the ruckus. It came from outside. Trent was yelling: nothing coherent, just loud guttural screams.

When Trent finally returned he was sweaty and had removed his shirt, but he appeared calm. “Just like fucking clockwork.” He placed a stack of hundred dollar bills on the table before Sam. “Now you can’t say that I have your money, Pop.” Trent was smiling wildly. The money was crisp with newness; it still had the bank-issued paper ribbon around the middle.

“Have you ever watched a bird fly?” Trent asked Sam the following morning. Sam had stayed the night again, and the two men had taken tequila shots together, until they were both wasted and talking shit about fathers and girlfriends and dogs. Now they were on the back porch, preparing to start the day’s search. A wounded sparrow had been left near the back door.

“Sure, I guess,” Sam replied.

Trent picked up the bird carefully and examined it, turning it from one side to the other; it didn’t make a sound, but Sam could see the animal’s chest fluttering wildly. Whether it was from terror or pain, he couldn’t tell.

“I have,” Trent said, still staring at the animal in his hand. “Depending on the type of bird flying, their wings have at least four positions: full spread eagle for gliding, mid-spread for slowing, flapping, and then there is the point where they flatten their wings to their bodies. Completely flat, so they look like a torpedo dive-bombing, kamikaze style, from the sky.”

With a serene expression on his face, Trent wrapped his fingers around the bird's head and gave it a swift jerk. Sam heard a pop.

"Like a fucking kamikaze torpedo," he said again, before lifting the lid to the garbage can and tossing the bird in.

Sam had once held a similar bird in his own hands. He had wrestled it away from Bailey after Christine came inside crying.

"She's killing it, Sam. Stop her." Christine had real tears then, big, rolling droplets, running down her cheeks—all over some stupid sparrow. He had to stick his thumb and index finger in the sides of Bailey's mouth and wrench her jaws open, to get the bird away from her. Once he had it in his hands, he could hear his father's voice in his head telling him to put it out of its misery. But he couldn't do it.

So, instead, he took it to the front yard and laid it under a bush, hoping it would, after a rest, just shake itself off and fly away. With it safely out of Bailey's reach, Sam finished his laundry and started making dinner. Christine went out to the front yard to check on it every half hour. The bird was dead by the time dinner was ready.

Sam did a lot of the cooking in that relationship. Spaghetti with roasted garlic Ragu sauce, seasoned ground beef, and frozen garlic bread—that was the last meal Sam had cooked for Christine. He nearly burnt the bread, having taken a minute to wash his hands again. He used wet fingers to flatten the hairs that had gone awry since he had showered and dressed. He should have trimmed his eyebrows; he yanked at a long gray eyebrow hair until it pulled free. Sam was scraping the charred pieces of bread over the sink when he heard the front door open. He waited for her familiar "I'm home," but it didn't come. Her job had been getting progressively more stressful.

“Hey,” Christine said at last, as she came into the kitchen and dropped her purse heavily on the table. “Spaghetti again?”

“I thought you liked spaghetti.” Sam wiped his clean hands against his jeans.

“No, it’s fine. Where’s the dog?” She sat down at the table without taking off her jacket.

“I put her in the backyard so we could have a nice, quiet meal.”

“Thanks.” Christine sighed and rested her chin against the palm of her hand.

Despite the nearly burnt bread, Sam thought the meal came out well enough. He’d had a lot of practice cooking since LLB Construction laid him off for the winter. Christine seemed to like coming home to a meal.

“I saw a therapist today,” Christine said and took a bite of spaghetti.

“What?” Sam put down his fork. Christine continued to chew.

“I’ve been sad lately. Or stressed out, or something,” Christine said. She continued eating as if her announcement was perfectly normal. “He thinks—“

“He?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, Dr. Carter, he thinks I need a better support system. Like maybe I am isolating myself, cutting myself off too much from, well, everyone.” She took a bite of garlic bread. Outside Bailey barked and scratched at the sliding glass door.

The kitchen was empty when Sam returned from another unsuccessful search—only faint traces of that morning’s spinach quiche still lingered. Maybe Bailey was OK; maybe she was digging holes and killing small animals and having a hell of a time. Maybe she didn’t want to go home. Sam absent-mindedly opened the fridge, and then

closed it when he remembered that it wasn't *his* fridge. Not his kitchen; not his house. Maybe he didn't want to go home either.

"I want to eat this," Trent said, walking into the kitchen stiff-legged and sun burnt; his sudden presence caused Sam to flinch. In the man's fist dangled a dead jackrabbit; he had his fingers around a pair of fawn-brown ears, long and pristine.

"Shit," Sam said, eyeing the dead animal. His gaze dropped to the tile floor expecting to see a slow-forming puddle of blood at Trent's feet. There wasn't one. "Did you kill that yourself?"

"No, I found it on the back porch. It's fresh though, still warm. I want you to help me cook it."

Sam pursed his lips and filled his mouth with air, letting it seep out slowly, containing his sigh.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm serious," Trent replied, still holding the rabbit at shoulder-level. His face and neck were rigid.

"Yeah," Sam said and nodded a bit. It was a rabbit, not a duck, but it made him think of his father. He remembered how even when he'd grown tall and quiet, his father still hadn't let him go hunting with him. "Bring it over to the sink." Sam went to where the knives hung evenly against a magnetic wall mount, selecting the sharpest one he could find.

"No," Trent said, unmoving. "Outside. We can build a fire. Skewer it with a sharpened stick. We'll singe the fur right off this fucker."

"Yes," Sam said. "You're right, that is better."

In the backyard, where the landscaping gave way to unorganized brush and rock, they built a fire inside a barrier of stones gathered from the front yard.

“Just watch: we’ll roast this rabbit out here and the smell will draw your dog right in. I know it.” Trent said while tossing dried leaves into the flames. Once the fire touched them they melted into nothing—burned so fast they didn’t even have time to char. With the fire full and aglow, Trent left the rabbit lying at Sam’s feet and went off in search of a sapling branch still young enough to withstand the flames. Trent took a small paring knife with him to, “sharpen it like a spear,” he’d said. It wouldn’t be easy to shove a sharpened stick through the middle of a dead jackrabbit.

Behind the fire, the setting sun cast shadows on the surrounding hills making them look as tall as giants. Deep wells of darkness filled the hollows between them. He imagined Bailey out there: digging up the roots of a spindly bush; unearthing a lizard’s den and nosing at it while it stood frozen in fear; then encircling her freshly excavated hollow and nestling into the cool dirt.

“Fuck you,” Sam said and nudged the animal with the toe of his boot while he watched the tip of the flames lick at the air, then disappear.

The fire cracked and Sam heard Trent cutting through the brush, back toward the house. Then a howl found his ear from somewhere far off, but it wasn’t the howl of a dog—instead it was the call of something wild, undomesticated.

## The Failed Existence of Claire Elizabeth Winslow

Out of all the Users who could have been assigned to this body, I ended up here—and for the past thirty years I have utterly failed. I am a User, you see; I inhabit bodies. Or perhaps it's appropriate to say, I meld with whatever innate force is already in a particular body, and together *we* animate it. At times, I can feel the flicker of innate human animation tugging me in different directions, like the pull of the ocean beneath a ship, but these are sensations that can be easily navigated, with practice. The mechanics are not important, though; what is important is that I have completely and uncharacteristically ruined my current body's life-plan.

I am sure The Origin must be surprised, seeing how all my previous bodies have been successful, insofar as their respective plans were concerned. My professional resume boasts the navigation of a Vietnam veteran, a governor, a composer/pianist, a large-game hunter, and an inventor—all of whom were great triumphs during their eras, thanks to me. My most recent assignment, however, has been more difficult than I ever could have anticipated. This does not justify my shortcomings: it is merely an observation.

I received my current assignment after a brief hiatus, which I was granted to recover from the exhaustion of having operated my previous model well into his elderly years. These new orders came prior to fetal conception, which I found odd, because

nearly all assignments are drawn-up during parturition, giving The Origin ample time to analyze the body and evaluate User files.

Upon receipt, I immediately noticed that the information packet was more meager than I was accustomed to—there were only three pages of text detailing identification specifications. I had been assigned to inhabit body id # CLAR56473-10, model XX-567, lot 1984USA. I was going to be female-gendered, which excited me at first, because all my previous bodies had been male. The destination-map for CLAR included the following milestones: broken wrist, age 8; virginity lost, age 15; Paris runway, age 19; cover of *European Vogue*, age 25; marriage, age 27; conception, age 29—fetal identity pending assignment. This was all that had been written.

At first I gawked at the pages, holding them between my fingers like scripture. Only six milestones? There were only six trivial, superficial—no, demeaning—milestones, with not one pivotal event in the bunch. Of course, as a User, I was in no place to question The Origin's assignments. I have accepted, long ago, the reality that *everything* is done for a reason; every inhabited body must carry out its respective orders, no matter how inconsequential, so that humanity progresses according to plan. Furthermore, this was my *job*, so I resolved to approach the upcoming lifespan with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

Even now, I can still recall the day I took my place within CLAR. I remember the sensation of entering the world: the blinding sterility of my new surroundings, the lightness, and air so cool it pained my skin until I was awash with agitated bumps. Once free of the womb, I cleared my lungs violently as per standard procedure and looked upon

my guardians with excited curiosity. As it happened, my nominal identification ended up being Claire Elizabeth Winslow. Sometimes these things are just coincidence.

I adapted to CLAR within mere days—her immobility and soft, fluttering limbs paired with the frequent need to urinate and short attention span. Once within her, I noticed that I was more prone to distraction than I had been in previous infant bodies. Through her eyes, my gaze was drawn repeatedly to a fluffy pink mass twirling above my head. I also noticed that I lacked the urge to engage with the material world—feeling little need to challenge my physical limitations—and spent hours basking in my own internalizations.

Don't misunderstand, I've always valued the infant stage—so much time to analyze and strategize, without any need for self-sufficiency. Most of my rigorous mental outlining happens during these first few years because, after all, The Origin provides the assignment, but the User constructs the plan. By year two I had formulated a rough direction by which to proceed: Step one—gain metabolic control of CLAR56473-10 and maintain a body fat percentage of no more than 18%. This action would, by and large, predict success for many of the following requirements, after which, only minimal technical training would be needed to facilitate CLAR's projected career.

Once this initial task was underway, I would be free to leisurely address the next few assignments. Year eight, for instance, would require a minor act of bodily damage—nothing too difficult. There would be an array of opportunities available when the time came. Year fifteen would require the development of intra-social skills and an understanding of female sexuality, both of which could be attained from research conducted during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> years. After adolescence, I could focus CLAR on the

procedural training needed for the modeling industry while honing her physical appearance. Given her genetic predisposition for beauty, this should be no problem at all. Finally, her last two assignments relied on the ability to find and secure a mate—a task I'd accomplished easily for each body I'd inhabited thus far.

Amidst all my planning, however, I found myself plagued with skepticism concerning the importance of my impending tasks. *How trivial CLAR's life was to be*, my infant mind concluded. I have fought in battles, taken the lives of men and animals, ruled over state-ships, and created beauty out of empty air—or at least I am pretty certain that I have.

I cannot recall everything of course—I am not The Origin—but I do remember each life's wide, overarching themes, enough to be assured I had once played roles of importance. Past careers I am certain of, as they have been cataloged in User files and are the subject of each body's post-extraction debriefing. The smaller events are the ones that sometimes elude me.

My recollections exist mainly in ethereal feelings of familiarity. I am drawn to what I've known before, and usually find I am most comfortable where lives overlap. For instance, I am enticed by musical beauty, but CLAR's hands have failed me in my attempts to create music as I once did. I am also drawn to intellectual pursuits, but find CLAR's mind lacking in the capacity to mediate converging ideas. The concept of heroism appeals to me, but for practical usage I find that CLAR is quite meek.

Sometimes I can recall certain, small details though; brief snapshots of moments passed. The smell of wet forest pine brings forth the image of calcified antlers through a cluster of tree branches; the sound of a Colt .45 incites the remembrance of my own

hands blackened with rich soil and slick with sweat and blood; and the touch of an ivory key ignites the image of a woman's fair physique, sheets of music fluttering through the air as I press my body to hers. But I digress.

What I mean to illustrate here is the ferocity, valor and passion with which I've steered my previous lives. Now I was destined to—what? Inspire a nation through vanity and whimsical fashion? Perhaps the significance of my assignment was in the conception of the next generation of User. Such occurrences had been known to happen—Users acting as guardians to infant Users until they were developed enough to carry out their objectives. I had never had the privilege of acting as a guardian; thus, my newest position could have been an act of good faith on the part of The Origin, or the issuance of a well-earned honor.

Returning to CLAR's upbringing, though—the toddling years, being on the cusp of locomotion but at the mercy of weak limbs and poor coordination, are always an annoyance. They do pass with a relative speed, though, and early childhood is a marvelous time of freedom and discovery (rediscovery is more like it) when a User can begin to hone skills necessary for future endeavors. Come to think of it, I do believe I made my first kill at age six in the mountains of present-day Russia; but that was another life. CLAR, as a six year old, was eager and energetic. She had a beautiful face with impeccable bone structure, and though her guardians never made an explicit reference to the fact, I knew they expected her beauty to provide advantages a middle-class upbringing might not. It was during this childhood phase when my first milestone approached.

At the start of CLAR's eighth year, I had 365 days to achieve my first task: a broken wrist. Self-inflicted injuries have always provided a topic of discussion for all generations of Users. During the pre-insertion waiting period, groups of us meet with discretion to debate the relevance such physical pain may possibly contribute to the progress of humanity. Many find these tasks unfounded. I myself, always have accepted my duties regardless of their nature; for instance, I've been injured in battle several times, suffered multiple gunshot wounds, been attacked by large animals on occasion, and once fell, with commanding veracity, from a second story window. Of course, with my current body still a child, I now had fewer methods at my disposal.

When the time came, I fell off monkey bars and rollerbladed into walls; I even leapt from the lowest branch of our cedar tree, landing on my left shoulder and knocking the breath from my lungs. The worst I got, from any of it, was a jammed finger and a bruised forearm. In all my past bodies, injury had never been so difficult to achieve.

All these events culminated on the eve of my 9<sup>th</sup> year, as I sat in the Douglas County emergency room with my father, waiting for the doctor to deliver my x-ray results.

"What possessed you to climb onto the roof from your bedroom window?" My father's voice was muffled behind his hands, which cupped his face like parentheses as he massaged his temples. Those were the first words he'd spoken to me in an even tone since the incident that morning. I studied the Band-Aids on my knees.

"There was a bird," I told him. That was the truth. There had been a massive black-billed magpie prancing on the shingles outside my window, opening and closing his wings.

When I first saw him, my mind had drifted to the image of coarse linen, wired to a metal frame, like wings. I then remembered that I had once attempted to create a remedial flying contraption, or at least something designed to glide upon an air current until safely within reach of the ground. That was the invention that inspired the second story fall, all those lives ago. Between the magpie and the memory is where I found my final and most glorious attempt at injury. And it was a spectacular fall; I only missed the concrete by a few inches, landing instead on the hardened winter lawn. CLAR was the one who began screaming out for her Daddy though—the eventual means by which I arrived at the hospital.

I was cradling my sling-bound arm when the doctor hastened into the waiting area with my file in hand. “One lucky girl,” he called me. I had evaded broken bones, and so close to my birthday no less. *Someone must have been watching over me*, were his exact words. Both the doctor and my father assumed the tears which followed were the delayed effects of a seriously traumatic incident, and I was assailed with sympathy and affection. The real truth was: my first failure unnerved me.

After the ninth year, CLAR started to grow toward adult specifications. Her model and lot was intended to reach 5’11” by age 14, but retain a body fat percentage of 16.3%; however, something malfunctioned in the hormone repository, or during the metabolic process, and CLAR’s body mass rose. Luckily, I was accustomed to the operation of male-gendered bodies, so this increased stature was of no consequence.

As a result, by year fifteen CLAR was of a lower social status within her peer-group than I would have liked. She was still remarkably pretty, but her high cheek bones

were padded with a layer of adipose tissue, as was much of her anatomy. This aesthetic set-back was not from lack of trying on my part; in fact, I had never before invested this much effort into the physical maintenance of a body. I challenged CLAR's cardiovascular wellness daily. When that didn't work, I starved her system to near caloric-depletion, but her hunger persisted and her cells clung stubbornly to all the nutrients that entered her body, whether they needed to or not. But as I stated before, I am not one to be deterred by physical limitations; thus I continued with CLAR's life as planned by attempting to engage in intercourse before the age of sixteen.

I had, by this time, developed CLAR's communication skills, so I approached the task in the most straightforward manner: I analyzed all available males, selected the most promising, and simply presented myself to him.

This was a male named Jordon Aldridge, who I chose to approach during class on a Tuesday afternoon. He was among his friends when I walked CLAR up to him and, using the appropriate language for a teenage girl, asked to see him privately outside of school. He replied abruptly: "Not a chance, fatty." An array of snickering followed. It was during this moment of rejection that a forgotten surge of testosterone gripped me and I swung a fist, hitting him right in the mouth. Needless to say, another milestone passed unaccomplished. It took nearly four years after this point before any male of comparable age within her peer group was willing to approach CLAR in an intimate manner.

My trials continued as CLAR advanced into womanhood and I struggled in vain to secure her a position among fashion's elite industry. Thanks to many years of dedicated practice I walked comfortably in 5 inch stilettos while pressing her shoulders back and elongating her neck. I parted her lips and delivered a seductive pout; I knew

what kind of light and which camera angles captured her best. Against her guardian's wishes, I forwent the traditional college preparatory path in exchange for photo shoots and meetings with talent scouts.

My third life-failure was marked by an unpleasant meeting with the Alexander DeFuentes Modeling Agency, after having secured a consultation with Mr. DeFuentes himself. DeFuentes was a slender man in his forties with a smooth complexion and white rimmed glasses that accented the silver highlights in his hair. He had seemed polite enough as I rose from the leather ottoman in his foyer and extended my hand, until I introduced myself as Claire Elizabeth Winslow, after which his smile dimmed.

After a brief chat in his office, he approached, sat on the edge of the ottoman, then clamped his fingers onto CLAR's jawbone, and like an anthropologist examining a primitive skull, he tilted her head back and rotated her face from left to right.

"Ideal nasofrontal angle, deep set eyes, broad forehead," he said. His brows were furrowed as he observed her. Before dropping her chin he blew an exasperated gust of air from his nostrils. "Your face would be wonderfully angular if you lost some weight. But I have no work for a model of your stature."

I skimmed my mental arsenal of memorized facts: the information I had painstakingly collected over the years.

"And what about real-size models?" I asked.

"Darling, 'real-sized models' are simply girls who can't starve themselves into a size zero so settled for a size 6. You might be able to find some commercial work at a size 6, but you'd need to be at least a 2 to be in high-fashion. Either way, you've got to drop some poundage."

He drew his finger through the air in a loose figure eight, highlighting the length of CLAR's inadequate body.

By age twenty-six CLAR had never been to Europe—which signified yet another unfulfilled goal. I did not wield the persuasive demeanor or the infectious personality needed to sway events in my favor. Not even my faint memories of self-campaigning or elections-won could launch me into the sphere I so desired. I had a portfolio full of expensive head-shots and had shaken the hands of hundreds of well-manicured socialites, agents, and fashion designers but had yet to make a name for myself among them. Disappointed, I attempted to maintain some semblance of plan by finding employment in the retail fashion industry. I had hope for my final two tasks though; I was still young, fertile, and had all the necessary feminine-attributes required to produce children. Further, this task did not rely on the approval of a superficial and often exclusive industry—these last milestones were entirely in my control.

I went about the task in a manner most appropriate to the current cultural norms: I posted personals on the internet and signed-up for dating databases. I tried group speed dating. One time was all it took.

When the timer chimed and the herd of sweaty-palmed men settled into their seats, metal legs scraping at the linoleum while they each scooted into their respective tables, I sat facing an empty space. Something in this systematic dating-game had gone awry. As I scanned the layout, I noticed another young woman in the same predicament: alone at her table at the opposite end of the room. She, also, was surveying the situation, attempting to locate the cause of the setback. When our eyes crossed, she waved, then

gathered her purse under her arm. Pairs of daters glanced up from their conversations as she hurried to my table.

“I don’t know what happened,” she said. She sat before me and rested her arms on the table between us. “How did we both end up dateless?”

“I don’t know.” I suspected that our intended gentlemen had each, taken either a strategic bathroom break, or stepped out for a smoke so as to avoid being paired with the room’s two metabolically-impaired women.

“I’m Miranda,” the young woman said, reaching a supple hand over the table between us which I shook in the feminine-appropriate manner I had made habit.

“Claire Elizabeth Winslow.”

“Well, Claire, we can go ahead and have a little mock date anyway—screw the boys.” She smiled as she leaned closer to the table. She hadn’t appeared like much from across the room: a woman of a similar age to CLAR with a similar build. At this proximity there was something familiar about her gentle naiveté: a feeling accompanying her wide set eyes and pale lips that reminded me of the composer’s mistress. What had the mistress’ name been? Analinda?

“Well, let’s cut to the chase,” Miranda said, drumming her fingers against the tabletop, her eyes searching upwards for an appropriate first-date question. When she spoke, even her voice mimicked a hushed, feathery tone my ears seemed to recognize.

“If you could ‘un-know’ one thing you know, what would it be?” Miranda asked.

“One thing. What kind of thing?”

“Like a fact, or a reality, or even an opinion, I guess. What would you want to be ignorant of?” Miranda leaned forward and rested her chin on her hand while she fixated

on CLAR's face. She appeared interested in my potential response. Of course I couldn't tell her the truth, so I made something up.

As it happened, neither of us had much interest in completing the evening of speed dates, so we retreated alone to a café down the street. At one point, our coffee mugs too near each other on the table, our fingers brushed against one another and the swelling that seized my chest catalyzed a sensation I had never experienced with CLAR before. I suspect that Miranda had a similar awareness, as her face flushed velveteen pink.

After that night, I took Miranda as a lover for CLAR; though the act didn't aid in the procurement of a mate, it wasn't specifically forbidden, either. Any act not cited as a milestone was considered to be subject to User discretion. Miranda seemed genuinely attracted to CLAR's physical attributes and completely engaged in the personality I had contrived for her. Moreover, she comforted me, offering lyrical nostalgia from a more successful life. Miranda was a distraction from failure.

CLAR's twenty-sixth year soon passed, but instead of acquiring a spouse and mate I had attached myself to Miranda, whom I loved with as much passion as I had ever loved a woman, but, due to gender restrictions, could not marry. We remained together, allowing our two separate lives to wrap themselves around one another. Toward the end of CLAR's twenty-eighth year, I asked Miranda about having a child.

"Oh, darling," she had said, her mouth rounded in surprise, "I've always thought one day I might adopt a daughter." She smiled and squeezed CLAR's hand. "I didn't think you were interested in children, though. This makes me so happy."

This would not suffice though; I needed a holistically produced child. “What do you think about seeking a donor and having our own child?” I asked her as delicately as I could.

“Oh, but there are so many children already out there who need parents. I don’t care about biology—we would love them as if they were our own.”

In bed that night, I looked at Miranda’s soft, sleeping form next to me, and I considered the possibility of seeking a male counterpart outside of my current relationship for procreation purposes: how easy it might be. I watched her chest rise with breath, then sink into the hollows of the mattress below us. I knew, then—every cell in CLAR’s body alight with static—that I could not do that.

I have heard it uttered among non-Users that *life is short*. I believe this statement reflects the tendency for humans to squander away their years while they lust, insatiably, for more time.

In my opinion, life is long.

This year, this very day in fact, marks the thirtieth anniversary of my assignment to body CLAR56473-10. Over the past weeks my nerves have twisted themselves into spring-coils and I’ve ruminated on the likely repercussions for my failures. I only had six vital events to orchestrate—six. In previous assignments I’ve had dozens, once as many as fifty-eight separate assignments spanning eighty-some odd years, and I’ve always managed to achieve at least a 94% accuracy rate. For body id CLAR I’ve missed every one: a 0% success rate. If only I had hit those few important milestones, my purpose would have been fulfilled and CLAR56473-10 would have been a success.

In retrospect, even during my successful lifespans (having accomplished feats of apparent significance) I've *still* grown weary as the decades dragged on. So you can understand why my failed operation of CLAR weighs upon me.

Fortunately, this very morning I received correspondence from The Origin on the status of CLAR56473-10. I have always wondered if post-insertion communication was possible between Users and The Origin, and further, how such messages would be received. The answer came to me not more than a few hours ago. I was still in the stages of REM when a new thought emerged, something quite disparate from my own; this thought had a unique weight in my mind, prompting me to sit up and open my eyes. It was some type of message spontaneously generated from the outside and injected into my brain like an encrypted code. As such, it took me several moments to decipher the meaning, but when I did the message amounted to the following instructions:

*CLAR56473-10: Terminate. Mode of termination: User discretion.*

I am at this very moment devising a tentative plan for the execution of this, my most pressing assignment.

## Deer Crossing, Next 20 Miles

Start on Highway 20.

There you are in your four-door sedan, the passenger seat crowded with an oversized suitcase, lumpy duffel bag, and a leaking cooler. Stacked on the floor are a few boxes of household supplies like laundry detergent and dish soap—items the movers wouldn't pack but you couldn't bring yourself to throw away. You'd need them in Washington, just like you needed them in Arizona.

In the backseat, Bella lies on a wadded pillow, her body rigid with discomfort. Each time you slow, she stands, and you can see her angular, Doberman face and pointed ears in the rearview mirror.

“Sit down, Bella.” Again and again. “I can't *see*.”

You've been driving for two days. Halfway, at the motel, you explained to the dog that this was not her room—her house—and that she need not bark at every passing tenant. The two of you watched HBO and fell asleep above the comforter.

Today, finally, Highway 20 reaches Republic, Washington, having snaked northward through Oregon and Idaho: a two lane highway rolling past farmlands that gradually changed into evergreen mountains. Within these trees, the town of Republic bursts into view, as though the forest is throwing you a surprise party. As you round the last curve, a sign appears: *caution, reduced speed ahead*.

The entire town is located on this road: Clark Street. The drug store is on the corner next to the pizza parlor; it is called, simply, The Drug Store. Two bars rest side by side, leaning on each other like old friends. One has a pair of saloon-style wooden doors, the other—ordinary glass. Next, a mercantile with rustic, log walls, advertises: fresh bait; night crawlers; minnows. Another sign announces: hunting knives are in.

You can hold your breath the length of the whole town, until you reach the fork that marks Highway 20's return to the wilderness. On your way out, you pass the Episcopal church, its stone bricks so thick, the walls look like stacked rocks. Then you pass the Lutheran church with its brown siding and pointed ceiling. A wooden cross hangs over the front door.

As you reach the town's summit, the speed limit increases to 50 and you hit the gas, sending the car sailing over the peak like a roller coaster. You careen down the hill, and take the swift curve past the Baptist church, a massive red building with a white roof. Horses stand in the adjacent field like far-off figurines. They probably belong to the ranch half a mile away, not the Baptists, but, either way, they look sad and lonely grazing on their sloped pasture. You think perhaps you should join a church. It would be a good way to meet people. And where else, but here, could you find fifteen separate denominations in a one-mile radius?

After you round another rocky curve, the valley spreads out before you, Curlew Lake in the center; the mountains that form the backdrop are thick with evergreen trees and look as pristine as a photograph from a calendar or the label on a bottle of salad dressing. Houses and cabins dot the hills. Farm houses, surrounded by wispy grass that

bends in the wind, really are painted red, which makes you wonder what the Baptists are trying to say with their choice of paint.

You let your speed inch toward 55 mph.

You don't slow until you approach two thin-legged deer grazing along the highway. Their heads dart up, eyes full of contemplation—run out into the road or stand, transfixed? As you speed past, you think: don't you fucking dare.

Before you left Tucson, you made sure to have a proper night out. You met your girlfriends at a bar downtown and drank overpriced mixed drinks. You all leaned heavy elbows into the table when the alcohol hit, while other girls danced in dark, open spaces.

“So how's the single life?” they asked. Your husband, David, had been gone for six months by then—relocated to Washington for a job, while you stayed behind to finish up the spring semester.

“I'm alone but not single,” you told them.

They nodded knowingly. They understood the freedom of time and space: late nights and weekend outings, without asking permission or phoning in updates. But they didn't realize how long the couch felt with you sitting alone at one end, your legs curled underneath you; or how unusual Saturday mornings felt: you, wandering the house like a spirit.

“So, are you excited to move to—where are you moving again?”

“Washington.”

They asked the obvious question.

“No, not Washington DC,” you explained, “Washington state. Above Oregon. A town called Republic.”

They looped their mouths and foreheads around the shape of their response.

“Oh.” They call you brave.

You settle into a single-wide trailer house the shape of a boxcar: long, narrow. There is barely enough room to walk around your king sized bed, and your TV sits a mere seven feet from your sofa. But, still, the trailer is comfortable enough. If you are feeling generous you might describe it as cozy. There is a wood stove inside, and the carpet nearest to it has been burnt in a few places—a fact you made sure the landlord was aware of before you moved in.

The whole place smells like a smothered camp-fire, even in July. It makes you crave s'mores. Soon the smell fades into the background, though, and you realize that all the smells of Washington have faded into the background. The whole forest-smell is gone completely, until you drive past the lumber mill, with its sleek, naked logs stacked like pyramids. There, the smell of wood is so sticky sweet in your nose it almost masks the smell of dead skunk. You hate camping.

Your landlord's wife has painted the trailer's interior a pale, pastel blue. She's affixed white curtains to the windows that look so much like lace petticoats you can imagine giant, baby-doll legs hanging under each frilly valance.

On your first full day as a housewife, you cook David corned beef and cabbage in the baby-blue kitchen. Unloaded boxes still wait in their respective rooms. With

cardboard walls surrounding your bed, you make love to your husband for the first time in months. The sex is good. Afterwards you roll to face him.

“I can’t even remember what *bad* sex is like,” you tell him. A compliment. “Can you?” He is quiet and you wonder if he is asleep, but you keep talking because you feel so damn good. “You know, like the kind of awkward, pitiful sex you have with someone you barely know.”

When your eyes adjust to the dark you can see his straight nose, thin lips, and the whites of his eyes; his face looks foreign without the glasses he normally wears, as if that helix of metal and glass holds his whole identity.

“I slept with someone before you got here,” he says so fast, you think for a second he is speaking French or Spanish. “But it didn’t mean anything and I’m sorry.” When you roll away from him, the dog is sitting with her chin resting on the mattress, staring at you.

“Why the fuck are you telling me this?” you ask him. You’d had an agreement, before: no cheating. It is unforgivable. Also, you agreed not to tell. What is the point of telling? If he were really sorry, he’d have buried it forever.

“I was lonely and it didn’t mean anything. I’m sorry.”

“You said that already.”

“Do you hate me?”

“No,” you tell him. You scoot your back into the curve of his waiting body, and it locks into place like a missing jigsaw piece. His sigh sounds relieved, but you only moved to give Bella room to crawl onto the bed next to you. Now you can wrap your arm around her barrel chest and hold on to her like your lost puzzle piece.

\* \* \*

Four weeks have passed since you arrived; you keep waiting for evidence of the town's smallness, but it hasn't happened yet. People here are detached. Uninterested. No friendly prying. Cashiers keep their heads down, and ask if you'd like paper or plastic, just like in the big city. It's as if they've already seen it all. Perhaps some things still surprise and shock them—the hot pink highlights in your hair or the tattoos on your wrists and forearms. But they probably figure you're just passing through, or that you're attached to one of the nomadic workers the mine draws in. They're right.

Every morning, at six AM, you wake up and follow your husband into the kitchen so you can drink coffee with him before he leaves for work. He's the newest geological engineer at the Kettle River Mine, fifteen miles away. That's why the two of you moved to Republic, he jokes, doing his best prospector imitation—for the gold. At least one-fourth of the town's population is employed by the mine: scientists, rock-haulers, even administrative staff. The population of the town itself is only about a thousand, but drive sixty miles in any direction and there's another town about the same, maybe more, so count them all together, along with all the backwoods folks living off of unmapped dirt roads, and you could probably amass a decent-sized city.

In Republic you are unemployed for the first time in ten years. Oh, there was a time, while working for the publishing house, when every quarter you were afraid of getting laid off. But that never happened. Now you are honest-to-God unemployed—a kept woman. Your dwindling bank account, the one left over from your single days, has been left, paralyzed and nearly empty. Your husband, David, says you should close it—

why do you need your *own* money anyway? The two of you share everything. “My money *is* your money,” he says.

So you stay home now, and write during the day—poetry, sometimes prose. You learn how to knit. You read all the books that you’ve been gifted, the ones you have never gotten around to—some days you can finish one before it’s time to start cooking dinner. You like to try to have dinner ready by 6:15. You tie your pink-streaked hair up in a bun, and put on the apron you bought at the town’s craft store. It’s very important to look the part.

You cook country-type meals. The cans of Campbell’s soups at Anderson’s Grocery have recipes on the backs of their labels: chicken pot pie, hearty beef stew, pot-roast and potatoes. You make sure to clean the pans as you go, which is something you never did before, but you don’t have a dishwasher, and you don’t have a job, so why the hell not.

Each day is similar to the one before; another similar day will follow. Monday and Fridays are irrelevant. You’ve been here four weeks, but it could just as easily have been six months. Or two years. And you pretend like you’re having fun—hi honey—and that this is not just an extended camping trip—how was work? You try to convince yourself that you’re still pretty enough, smart enough, good enough. You pretend this is life.

When you first got to town, every other house you passed on Highway 20 had a *For Sale* sign out front. Most of them couldn’t even be called houses—shacks; sheds; dilapidated, single-wide trailers with miss-matched aluminum siding and rickety wooden

porches. One house, about two miles from town, looked like an underground bunker—if you were being whimsical you might liken it to a hobbit home—its ceiling claiming the curve of a hilltop, grass sprouting where shingles should have been, and a door and two square windows affixed to unfinished, black siding. The *For Sale* sign had been planted outside a barbed-wire fence that surrounded the property, next to the sign that read: *Keep Out*.

You didn't end up in the hobbit hole though. David found a nice, conservative trailer on two acres of land.

"I'll need a first, last, and security deposit—to cover any pet damage," said the first willing landlord you'd found.

You wanted to tell him, the house you left behind in Tucson—the house your husband and you *owned*, and were now renting to a family of four (with two dogs)—had brand-new wood floors, white Venetian blinds, beautiful, six-inch baseboard, crown molding, and granite countertops in the kitchen. His 1980 brown carpeting did not impress you, nor did the laminate counters and the bathroom that smelled a little like urine and had brown water stains in the corners. But he was negotiating his pet policy, so you smiled and agreed with all his terms.

"What's most important," he said, shifting the toothpick from one corner of his old-man mouth to the other, "is that you gotta keep your dog under control. We've got deer in these parts, and they kill at least 7-10 dogs each year, either by horn'n em or trample'n em."

"Trust me," you said, "I am more concerned with my dog's safety than anyone else you'll meet."

“Your dog gets to chasing deer, someone’s liable to shoot it.”

You didn’t intend to let her roam wild, you explained. She’s only ever had a fenced yard.

He nodded in agreement, and then he said something about city folks having poorly trained dogs on account of their work schedules, and repeated, again, the need for you to keep your dog under control.

You spend a lot of time alone now. You take Bella for long drives, listen to music, and let your left elbow ride on the open window of the driver’s side door; Bella thrusts her face out the window behind you, her nose erect as an arrow. She sneezes from time to time, and you worry that she might gag on some large bug, because the bugs are large here.

It is a comfort to know that Bella would go anywhere with you, willingly. If you left, she’d forget David, the trailer, and the endless stretches of green grass. She’d bark in every hotel room, all the way back to Tucson. Then she’d live with you in a one-bedroom apartment where you’d share your vanilla ice cream with her. But you don’t want to leave. You like the abandoned fields along the highway and the rusted farm equipment that rests near broke-down fences. You’ve gotten used to the quiet.

Here, nobody knows you. When you go out together, people come up to your husband to say hello or good morning. Sometimes he introduces you, sometimes he doesn’t. You ask him, afterwards, if he might give you a brief aside about each individual. It’s polite. You have no idea who these people are, if he’s told you about them before, or if you should try to remember their names.

He looks at you as if he's offended or annoyed. You can't tell which. You just want to be included. A few brief words.

"That was my boss," he could whisper to you, after she'd left. And you'd whisper back, "Oh, the one who's applying for a position in Utah?"

And he'd say, "Shhhh. I'm not supposed to know that."

Then he'd tell you, "That's the man who owns the hardware store, who sold me the steel bolt when the door to the wood stove broke." Or, "That's the girl I fucked while you were teaching the course on literature and the American dream at the University of Tucson."

You wear a dress to the Baptist church on Sunday because that is what you think you should do. Inside, you sit on a folding chair next to a man in clean overalls and a woman in a floral skirt. The pastor asks everyone to extend greetings to one another, especially those who are new to the congregation. You shake about a million hands—God be with you—and people cross the aisle to fold you fingers into theirs. You are here alone; your husband says that football is his form of worship.

You find the pastor, afterwards, and ask him a few questions pertinent to your choice of church.

"What do you think about being gay? Abortion? Sex outside of marriage?"

"God forgives all sins."

But you don't want to know what God thinks. It's important for you to know what *this* man thinks. Your husband isn't here to back you up.

But you see David later, at the local diner, for a late lunch with some of his co-workers. You sit next to him and let your shoulder graze his, because he is trying: he really is.

“That’s Amber, from the payroll department,” he says with his face tucked to yours. He gives a little nod to the woman across the table, two seats down. She is telling a story about how she woke up one morning to find a bear sitting in the bed of her pick-up truck.

“What did you do?” you ask her when she finishes speaking.

“I screamed,” she says. She thinks the bear heard her scream, because it looked up and sniffed at the air.

“Did you kill it?” you ask—your immediate and best solution.

But she said you can’t do that around here—there are consequences, though no one at the tale can tell you exactly what they are.

And you are sitting there, eating your steak, when, suddenly, you know that it was one of the girls from his office. You understand now—mining folk stick together. They don’t mingle with the town folks, and the town folks don’t mingle with them. The town folks are all ranchers and shop owners and retired ranchers and retired shop owners, with no real money. You can always tell which houses are owned by the miners—they are what you think of as real homes, not shacks or trailers.

You’ve probably met her and not even realized it. She is probably some kind of scientist. She is probably in love with David: shook your hand, feeling a twinge of hope, because her lover’s wife looks like a twenty-year old hipster with ten pounds to lose. She doesn’t know you have a PhD in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature. You taught at a

university before you moved here. Your husband told them you were a teacher, but they all assume you taught kindergarten or something. When you tell them you taught courses in classical literature and feminist theory, their faces look as wide as a planet. Maybe they think you are lying. You don't know. But the university you attended didn't give a fuck about the color of your hair, or your wardrobe, or whatever else you did to your body. It was a progressive school.

Before long, someone asks you the question you have been waiting for.

You've rummaged through the aisles of the local tack and feed store, reading bags of chicken food and horse oats, searching for a suitable brand of dog food. Bella has a sensitive stomach. You decide to inquire about special orders.

"Are you from around here?" asks the young man who is working the register.

When he asks, you notice that country boys really *are* strapping. He hunches a little to seem less intimidating.

"I am now," you say, having waited weeks and weeks to deliver your line. "I just moved here."

"Nice," he says, and he doesn't sound very country anymore.

You tell him what you are looking for, and he performs a search on his computer. He says he can get you what you need in about a week, but in the mean time, have you seen the store's selection of beef knuckles, hooves, and pigs' ears?

You haven't, so you buy an armful, and Bella is over the moon when you get back to the trailer. You drive into town every other day for the next week to chat with the clerk, and buy more dog treats, until you've amassed quiet a hearty pile.

“Don’t you think you’ve bought enough stuff for the dog?” David says, picking up a receipt. “Whoa, twenty dollars on pig ears—you’ve got to slow down. Were living on one income here.”

But you can’t, because there is nowhere else to go in this town, and nothing else to buy, and when your dog food finally arrives, the strapping country boy hauls it to your car, even though it is only thirty pounds. You always lugged your own dog food in Tucson. And as he shuts the trunk, the sun hits his face and he cups his hand over his eyes. He says, he thinks you look like Marilyn Monroe, with pink streaks in her hair. Which makes you think, maybe you should hold on to those ten extra pounds, and wonder if this flirting will become a regular thing.

When you see him a few days later, you smile and tuck a strand of pink hair behind your ear, and he asks if you’d like to come back to his place—the ranch off of Highway 20, near the Baptist church.

“Your horses look sad,” you tell him. He laughs and his face is warm and tan and familiar.

You tell him you can’t—what do strapping country boys know about infidelity? So you go home alone, and leave your country boy stacking bags of fertilizer.

On the drive home, it strikes you: what you told David that night in bed was wrong. First-time sex can actually be pretty spectacular; the boy at the tack and feed store might have been the best sex of your life. You understand. You feel so good you want to call David from the car, right now, and ask him the question that has just popped into your mind. When he picks up the phone you tell him you are on your way home.

“Good,” he says. “I miss you.”

“And I have a question,” you say. “Next time can we move somewhere without bears?” You ask this as if you’re the kind of couple who takes turns choosing what restaurant to eat at, and now it’s your turn. “A city so big that there is no wildlife anywhere. We can rent a nice house with a fenced-in yard. There won’t be any deer poop on the front lawn.” This is where you just moved from, but David says: OK. Then: “How long until you’re home?”

You also think it might be nice to have a small allowance, a stipend—like you got when you were a kid, for washing the dishes or vacuuming a room. You could spend this on Bella.

“About ten minutes,” you say. You both hang up.

Before long, you’re doing 50 on Highway 20. You watch a shape come into the road. It’s well past twilight, so you can’t be sure what it is. Could be a deer, or perhaps a moose. Moose have been seen, from time to time. Or it could be one of the sad horses from the hill next to the Baptist church. You hope it’s a bear. Either way, you want to hit it. So when your headlights catch on the brown fur, the carpeted body standing dumbly in the middle of the road, you slam your foot on the gas pedal and lock your arms tight. You close your eyes.

## So He Named Them, Creatures

Jennifer doesn't acknowledge the small cluster of protesters gathered on the sidewalk as she approaches the security checkpoint. Every day they assemble there—the group of middle-aged women wearing sandblasted Levi's and worn-out tennis shoes—to display handmade posters at passing cars and keep the facility's security team monitoring the back entrance. And every day Jennifer passes them on her way into work—their exchange is always the same.

As she rounds the corner, turning into the parking lot, the group rise in unison from their lawn chairs and all five of them hoist their signs above their heads and stare at her through the tinted windows of her Subaru. *Animal killers*—one sign reads. The jagged black script is carved above the image of a rabbit with its head in a vice; its left eye is pink and swollen, crisscrossed with bulging vessels.

Jennifer gazes past them, and maintains a relaxed expression, but the hairs on the back of her neck prick at her skin.

She watches the protesters in her rearview mirror as she scans her badge and waits for the slow-moving gate to clear her path. She is watching as they sit back down in their chairs and put their signs on the ground: each long, wooden handle propped against a metal-framed armrest. One of them—a gray haired woman with large Hollywood sunglasses—reaches over the side and picks up a plastic travel-mug and takes a sip before

setting it back down. The clock on Jennifer's dash reads 7:22 when she passes the black, wrought-iron bars and turns into the employee parking lot of ImmunoTech Laboratories.

ImmunoTech looms ahead of her, consuming the skyline and blocking the view of everything other than itself. It is a non-descript building tucked deep within the maze of Sacramento's industrial district, indistinguishable from the warehouses and old production plants that crowd the narrow streets. It is marked only by the spear-tipped railing that surrounds the 2.5 acre property, the modern architecture that accents the concrete cinderblocks, and the dual terracotta smoke stacks that emit wide billows of steam into the air. There isn't even a sign present to indicate the type of business that is conducted within its walls.

The client entrance is on the east end of the compound, separated by a row of pruned hedges and saplings that are planted in beds of decorative stone. There, the formal lobby, with its tiled entry way and sleek black furniture, waits under the vaulted ceiling, illuminated by the gray light that passes through the windows. A framed print of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, hangs on the wall opposite the reception desk; his arms and legs reach, longingly, for the halo that encircles his body. At 9:05 AM the receptionist will badge-in through the eastern door.

Jennifer, however, enters through a double-reinforced steel door on the building's west wall, marked by small block letters that read *employee entrance*.

At 7:25 AM ImmunoTech swallows her whole.

"Hey Lisa, hey Dave." Jennifer's voice comes out, still hoarse with sleep, as she waves at two passing technicians on her way through the boot-rack. Their faces are

obscured by medical-grade respirators and clear plastic safety goggles, but she can discern them by their height and gait and by the few facial features still visible. With their eyes creased in recognition, they nod back and mumble incoherent greetings.

Her rack, a tall, door-less locker mounted to the wall alongside fifty others, is where she begins the complicated dressing process: steel-toed work boots over the company issued socks; bleached lab-coat over sterilized blue scrubs; latex gloves, in two layers, followed by a respirator and goggles.

When she is completely shrouded she passes through another security door, her badge beeping against the sensor before the lock releases, and enters the vivarium.

When Jennifer was eight she visited her father's brother in Phillipsburg, Kansas. It had been a long day of driving, and the dust rose in thick torrents around her dad's pick-up truck as they made their way over the crunching gravel roads. In every direction fields of wheat and corn stretched on and on, held at bay by long twisted coils of uneven barbed-wire, strung from wooden posts.

"Almost there," her father said as he watched the road with smiling eyes, his hands vibrating on the steering wheel as the truck absorbed the rocky surface.

They hadn't talked much during the five hour drive, only listened to The Eagles and Neil Diamond on the truck's cassette player. When the landscape between Missouri and Kansas got too dull, Jennifer had closed her eyes and let herself drift in and out of sleep with her father's music carrying into her dreams, and the sun warming her forehead through the passenger-side window.

His expression looked serene now, searching the blue Kansas sky, and she felt like crawling across the center console and snuggling into his side like she had done when she was little. Instead, she looked over at him and searched for something, anything, to ask him.

“Dad?” Jennifer said at last, as she watched the blurred fields speed past his steady profile.

“Does Uncle Steve have any horses?”

“No. I don’t think so. No horses. He has cattle and some hunting dogs still, I think.”

“Cows? Really? Are they nice? Can I pet them?” Jennifer’s voice rushed out eager and enthusiastic and small. Her dad chuckled.

“Well, you’ll have to ask your uncle. Maybe one of your cousins can take you out to see them.” Then he patted her thigh, his hand making a loud smacking noise against her bare skin.

If it hadn’t have been for the small, shabby mailbox sprouting out of a cluster of fox-tails, Jennifer would not have realized that they were stopping to turn onto driveway; to her it seemed like another endless, gravel road.

The house was in the middle of a cleared dirt lot, which was surrounded by tall wheat fields on all sides that reached along the flat horizon.

Jennifer’s uncle was already outside when their truck pulled up and grinded to a halt. He had his head deep under the hood of a green tractor; his shoulders hunched and tightened as his arms labored out of sight.

“Hullo, Steve,” her dad called as he pulled himself out of the cab and shut the door behind him. Her uncle lifted his head, cheeks pink with exertion—a large sweat stain darkening the neck of his t-shirt. When the man smiled back his thick mustache lifted to reveal a set of teeth identical to her father’s.

“Well howdy,” Steve said; his voice was loud and cheerful, and had a slower drawl than her father’s. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and it left a dark streak of motor oil behind. Then the two men embraced, abruptly, giving each other a solid pat on the shoulder as they did.

“And who’s this?” Steve asked, squinting at the truck where Jennifer had emerged and shading his eyes with a steady palm. “Is that Jennifer? It can’t be.”

“It’s me, Uncle Steve,” Jennifer said as she ran up from behind her father, ducking under his right arm and pulling it around her shoulders.

“Well, yes you are. You’ve gotten big since the last time I saw you.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve gotten any horses, have you?” her dad asked right off.

Steve shook his head. “Never liked horses much—just another mouth to feed. That’s what the bikes are for.” He jerked his thumb toward a pair of rusted dirt bikes leaning against the outside of the shed.

“Didn’t think so,” her dad said, squeezing Jennifer’s shoulders.

Steve looked at Jennifer and his face softened, his moustache lifting again.

“Tell you what though,” he said. “Jimmer’s got his 4H steer out back. I bet he’d take you in the pen to visit with it.”

The steer was dark brown, his fur just beginning to lose the softness of youth, in exchange for the sleek hide prevalent among Angus. The animal stood idle in a thick layer of manure and sod, swinging his tail alternately against one side of his body and the other, dust rising like smoke and disappearing in the sunlit air after every thump.

He put his head through the rungs of the fence and nuzzled Jennifer's chest, sniffing and leaving a muddy mouth print on her blue, cotton shirt. She stood for a moment observing the steer until he let out a low bellow and nudged her again.

"What's his name?" Jennifer asked.

"Uh. I dunno. It hasn't got a name—it's a cow," her cousin Jim said, his eyebrows bent deeply. "Steer?" he suggested after a moment.

"He's like a dog." Jennifer waved a cluster of flies from the corner of his eye. The steer fixed his glassy stare on her as she reached under his mouth to scratch the soft folds of skin on his neck. He leaned into her scratching. When she withdrew her hand he flared his nose and snorted warm droplets onto her arms. Then his tongue stretched from his lips like a pink tapeworm and cleaned the inside of each nostril.

"Kinda. I guess," Jim said, patting the steer firmly on the neck, a slow, half-smile curling the right side of his face. "Wanna see something?"

Without waiting for a reply, Jim walked around Jennifer to where a red nylon halter was affixed to the corral, its matching lead hanging to the ground. He unbuckled it and threw it over his arm, winding the lead rope around his wrist a few times, and then ducked between the fence beams.

"Watch this," he said to his cousin as he fastened the halter around the steer's head. Then he drew the lead around its neck and knotted it on the other side into a make-

shift bridle. After giving the halter a couple of tugs, the boy climbed the railing and eased onto the steer's back.

The animal stood quietly, not seeming to mind the additional weight. He stomped a foot into the dirt and shook his head, rattling the metal clasp affixed to the lead rope.

Jim clicked his tongue and kicked his boots hard into the animal's sides and the steer lurched into a walk, dragging its hooves with every slow, labored step. Breathing heavily, the animal made a gradual stop after covering about ten feet and stood resolutely. It shifted its weight onto its hind-legs. The boy kicked him again and rocked his hips vigorously forward.

"C'mon stupid." Jim turned and looked at Jennifer. "He's lazy," the boy said as he slid off of the animal's back. "You wanna try?" he asked her. "I'll hold onto the halter and keep him moving."

"Am I allowed to?" She looked over her shoulder at the back of the white-washed farm house.

"I dunno." Her cousin shrugged his shoulders. After several seconds he asked again. "Well, do you want to or not?"

"OK," Jennifer said at last.

The steer's spine was sharp, and the bones dug into her groin as she balanced carefully on his back. His gait gave a rocking motion as one leg lifted, followed by the next, and his tail continued to swish to and fro, smacking her in the thigh every once and a while.

Jennifer was just starting to get used to the unsteady feel of the animal's walk, her legs tiring from squeezing into his sides, when the steer balked, and raised his head high

in the air pulling the red lead rope through her cousin's fingers. Looking past the steer's shoulders, Jennifer could see Jim jerking the animal's head back down; he pulled all his weight into the rope until it stretched taut, like a steel tightrope.

The steer was snorting loudly now, and his hind legs were beginning to kick at the empty space behind him and Jennifer thought she could feel his back-end rising behind her, sliding her further up onto his shoulders.

“Whoa, there. Whoa. Easy there.” Jennifer could hear cousin's nervous voice.

She steadied herself by lowering her chest onto the cow's neck and wrapped her arms as far around it as she could. With her cheek pressed into his warm hide, she breathed him in with every breath—thick, dusty air.

He smelled different than she expected.

Inside the vivarium the hallways are narrow white tunnels that branch off into successively narrower hallways. All of them dead-end eventually. The monotony of the white cinderblock is broken only by the pattern of gray doors, equally dispersed, each with a small, glass observation window that looks into the anteroom. There is no sound in the hallway, except for the echo of heavy footsteps, the squeaking of a hand-cart being pushed somewhere within the maze, and the constant hum of the cage-wash machine that fills the air twelve hours a day.

Jennifer winds her way down one hallway, then the next, listening to these and listening to the heavy pull of warm oxygen through her mask. It sounds like a hospital ventilator pounding in her ears.

Finally she stops at one of the gray doors, reads the sign posted, and pushes her way in. Inside, the anteroom is noisy and crowded. Similarly clad technicians fill the space, their muffled voices merging together with the sound of rattling metal and the collective hum of sixty animals just beyond the anteroom walls. The technicians congregate around a stainless steel countertop that serves as a workspace for documenting times on pen and paper, and the preparation of dosing supplies.

Jennifer steps into a tub of bleach next to the door, immersing both boots before stepping out and leaving wet footprints as she crosses the room. She reaches, first, for a black binder that hangs in a rack over the counter, stretching her arm between two technicians. With the binder open, she quickly skims the study-outline in the protocol.

*IntelliSci, Study-44493—Protein B inhibitor intended for use in the treatment of sarcoma. Test article administered intravenously to mature, male Cynomolgus monkeys once weekly, for 52 weeks.*

“Where do you need me?” She calls into the animal room. None of the technicians lift their heads but from somewhere in the back a voice calls out: “Dosing, please.”

“Jennifer!” A voice suddenly emerges from within the animal-room. “I need you to try this one; I blew the vein.”

“OK,” she calls back, rummaging through the clutter of medical supplies on the countertop, before pocketing a few clean butterfly needles, some alcohol swabs, and a handful of animal cookies from the opened bag.

As she hastens into the animal room, she is struck by the thick, hot scent of excrement and damp feed—a smell so potent it saturates her clothes and settles heavily

into her pores. The long, narrow room seems to go on forever; its stainless-steel cages stacked, top to bottom, at least thirty deep on both sides. At the very sight of her—an indistinguishable mass of plastic, tyvec and latex—the primate colony erupts into a cacophony of high pitched squeals and guttural moans.

“Oh, simmer down,” Jennifer sings through the chorus of gibberish. Some of the larger males violently shake their cages in response, threatening to ricochet them right off the walls.

“What happened?” Jennifer asks, crouching down next to a bottom cage.

“I don’t know,” Amanda says, gripping the monkey’s leg, which she has manipulated out of the cage through the four inch feeder-hole on the front. She uses her free thumb to press a wad of blood-soaked gauze into the monkey’s calf. “I think I went straight through the vein, or something. It’s shot now.”

“Ok, I’ll give it a try.”

Jennifer takes Amanda’s handhold, and positions herself on the over-turned bucket the girl had been occupying. The large male curls his lips back, exposing his canines in an open-mouth threat while he shakes at the bars between them.

His lower calf is muscular and so thick Jennifer can barely wrap her hand around it completely. His Saphenous vein, like a pipeline, is easily visible on his shaved, grey skin, and she can see the bruise forming where Amanda had attempted veinipuncture and the swelling where the dose had gone subcutaneous.

Near the back of his knee, an inch above the rupture, there is a visible portion of vein still undamaged. This is where Jennifer inserts the butterfly needle, and as it neatly enters the vessel, blood flows into the plastic tubing. Then she depresses the plunger and

delivers the drug straight into his blood stream. The Cyno scarcely notices the prick or the sudden influx of test-article into his body; rather he focuses intently on Jennifer, his yellowed teeth scraping against the bars between them.

“That’s it,” Jennifer tells him after a few minutes as she withdraws the needle, and presses a wad of gauze to the dose site. “Wanna cookie?” She holds an animal cookie up to his lips and he bites at it violently, crushing it into a fine powder that dusts the hair on his chest and arms.

Between her sophomore and junior year of high school, Jennifer worked at Sacramento Hills Animal Hospital for thirty hours a week. She spent most of her time shadowing Tracy, one of the seasoned technicians, helping with the feeding and walking of animals as well as the extensive cleaning of the entire clinic. A few times she was allowed to assist with routine vaccinations—holding the animal still, while the veterinarian stuck a needle in its shoulder or thigh—and once she was asked to help take X-rays.

Most of the time, however, she was kept busy hosing down the thirty kennels they had in the back; transferring one dog at a time to the outside pen, then scrubbing and sanitizing the sloped cement until it only vaguely reeked of urine.

On a Saturday she was mopping the lobby when a pick-up truck pulled into the parking lot and skid to a stop in front of the clinic. A couple jumped out of the cab and rushed to the bed of the truck where they lifted a blanket and carried it between them. It sagged heavily, and the two of them struggled to carry it the twenty feet from their truck to the clinic. Jennifer was the first person they saw when they pushed through the door.

“Can you help us?” The woman breathed, frantically. “Our dog got out—we think it got hit by a car.”

“Bring it to exam room one, over here,” Tracy ran out from behind the reception desk and waved the couple over. Then she turned to Jennifer. “Go get the vet.”

Jennifer found him in one of the back exam rooms sedating a black lab on the table.

“Dr. Milton—Tracy wanted me to get you. A dog’s been brought in. It was hit by a car. It’s in exam room one.” Her heart was racing as she spoke.

“OK,” he said. His voice was low, and his eyes remained fixed on the dog as he depressed the plunger of a syringe filled with a translucent pink gel.

“Wait with him,” he said stroking the dog’s side. “I’ll be right back.”

Jennifer had been present before for the sedation process, but she’d never actually witnessed any procedures that required the use of a sedative. Usually when a patient was sedated for a surgery, the vet placed a heart rate monitor its ear; this dog didn’t have one.

She stood quietly next to the table and lifted the dogs lip to check his teeth. They were dark with plaque and in need of a cleaning.

As the sedative began to take hold, the dog’s eyes fluttered a bit—his lower lids creeping up over their glassy surface. She put her hands around his face, cupping his head and shushed him as his hind legs quivered. After a few moments a dripping sound echoed though the empty exam room and Jennifer walked around the table to find urine pooling around the dogs back-end, running off onto the floor.

She was pulling wads of paper towels off the roll on the counter when Tracy came into the room.

“Where’s the vet?” Jennifer asked.

“He’s busy.” Tracy walked up to the table and touched the unconscious dog on the side of the head. “Oh, and that dog that just came in—” she opened a drawer and pulled out a stethoscope. After placing the buds in her ears and pressing the flat end onto the dog’s chest, she continued, “—he wasn’t hit by a car. Some ass-hole shot him.”

Tracy repositioned the stethoscope three times, pausing between each move, before taking it off and placing it back in the drawer.

“In the supply room on the left side there is a box of black garbage bags—do you know where I’m talking about?” she said at last.

“Yes,” Jennifer replied.

“Go get two.”

At 5:52 PM Jennifer is sitting in the technicians’ lounge filling out her time card and waiting to shower and change, when her supervisor walks into the room.

“Can anyone work late today? There is a draw that needs to be collected at 7:00 tonight,” the woman says to the group, looking from face to face. Jennifer looks around the room as she sinks into her chair. Everyone is silent.

“Come on people—its overtime pay.” After a few more seconds of silence pass, Jennifer raises her hand.

“Thanks Jennifer,” her supervisor calls out before leaving the lounge and returning to her office.

When Jennifer re-enters the vivarium, she heads for a familiar animal room where the primates are quietly eating their evening ration.

“Hi little boy—little Caspian,” Jennifer says stopping in front of the third cage in. The name has been written on the cage with a Sharpie marker; Caspian is her favorite. She reaches in her pocket and pulls out an animal cracker and offers it on an outstretched palm. After a moment, a tentative little hand reaches out through the bars and snatches it away and it is instantly in his mouth, the outline clearly visible through the stretched skin of his cheek pouch. His round eyes barely seemed to blink, as they move with the same expressive command as a person’s. Their shade of brown is oddly familiar.

He is standing on his hind legs stepping from side to side, his tail grazing the bottom of the cage. The grayish skin of his thighs are swollen with large purple bruises that fade to green, and then to yellow at the edges. The tattoo on his chest, a series of six numbers, has the large exaggerated look of a child’s hand writing.

Jennifer smiles under her mask and smacks her lips at him to which he loudly smacks his mouth back while shifting to and fro. Her hand is still positioned in front of his cage and he inches forward and sits in front of his door. After a few seconds he thrusts both arms out and wraps his hands around her gloved index finger, eyes wide in wonderment, smacking his lips in approval. He pulls at the latex and when it snaps back into place, he jumps in alarm, but soon he is back, more curious than ever, pinching the rubbery surface and snapping it over and over again. He pats her glove loudly and looks right into her eyes, and then he draws his hand to his face and smells it—licks it.

She cocks her head to the side and he follows suit, turning nearly upside down to follow her movements. She is nearly upside down when the door of the animal room creaks open. Immediately she shoots upright and fiddles with her data pad as Lisa comes in with a supply kit.

“Hey,” she says to Jennifer. “Ready for the 7:00 bleed?”

The animal room is already set for the 12 hr dark cycle when the two of them arrive. After Jennifer switches on the lights the primates began shuffling and hooting and rattling their cages. In the anteroom Lisa begins preparing for the task.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Jennifer asks as she pulls the cage-back forward and begins to draw the animal’s leg out through the front of the cage.

“I don’t know yet. What about you?” Lisa replies. The animal in the next cage over is twice the average size and Lisa struggles to restrain it.

“I don’t know either.” Jennifer shrugs. “Maybe see a movie. Something.” Her animal is still, and the collection goes smoothly. She places the vial of blood in her front pocket and presses gauze into the animal’s leg until the bleeding stops.

Suddenly a swift arm reaches out between the bars, followed by the sound of ripping tyvec and the thud of sudden weight pulled against the cage door.

Next to her, Lisa gasps; she drops her syringe and it bounces from end to end on the vivarium floor before settling next to her feet. Then the girl sits, frozen, with her hand drawn to her chest, staring wide-eyed at the blood as it fills her glove creating a dark spot beneath the translucent latex.

“Lisa,” Jennifer says, once, then twice, in hurried succession. “Are you OK?”

The girl turns her head slowly and lifts her hand, blood rolling down her wrist onto the white sleeve of her lab coat.

“Jesus.” Jennifer’s voice catches in her throat. Then she begins to move. Releasing her animal, she pushes back from the cage swiftly.

“Lisa, Lisa, come on,” she says as she steadies the girl’s shoulders and eases her up. “It will be fine—this way—it's going to be OK.”

As they reach the sink, a weak moan finally escapes Lisa’s mask and she begins to blink rapidly as the tears come streaming out.

“Don’t worry,” Jennifer says, stripping off her own gloves and drawing Lisa’s hand over the sink. She fumbles for the small, plastic tub marked *first aid*, which has been pushed to the far side of the counter, and dumps it out, quickly locating the bottle of betadine.

“We just have to rinse it out,” Jennifer says, turning on the faucet. As she gently peels away the bloody latex a deep gash becomes visible running the length of the girl’s hand, from thumb to middle finger. Something white peers out of the slick, red crevice—the sharp edge of a tendon or bone.

Cradling Lisa’s hand in hers, Jennifer carefully presses betadine into the wound and lets the running water flush it out again as Lisa sucks in whimpering breaths. Both of their hands are trembling.

## One-forty-two

Crap: One-forty-two. I get off the scale and stand motionless on the cool tile while the screen resets, before I step tentatively back on. One-forty-three. Off and then on.

One-forty-two. Fuck.

You are a fat, horrible person, Bren Hastings.

I scowl at the numbers illuminating the digital screen and my mind repeats these words over and over. You'll never be thin. You don't deserve to be thin.

I walk out of the bathroom avoiding the vanity mirror, and look, instead, at my toes. I watch a perfect red toenail kick a q-tip out of its path on its way towards the carpeted bedroom floor. Even my toes are chubby. When I sit down on the edge of the bed the rolls of stomach fat bunch around my abdomen like a heavy knit sweater.

I am fat and horrible and my life is crap. But today I'm not just fat—no—I am *fatter*. Fatter than I was last week—even fatter than I was yesterday morning—by at least two pounds.

I throw my body back against the mattress with a groan. Weak. I'm weak, weak, weak. I can't do it—not today—I can't get up and get dressed and go out into the world looking like this. From here I can see the magazine picture taped onto my dresser mirror. The model in the picture wears frayed denim shorts and a translucent white tank top; with

her left hip thrust to the side she hooks her thumbs coolly from her front pockets and tilts her head. A soft, half-smile lifts the right side of her mouth. She looks streamline—precise. I fucking hate her.

I feel for *my* hip bones. They are there, somewhere, under the fat and loose skin. But what I really want is to see my hip bones—to look in the mirror and see two boney protrusions above my legs and below my navel. I want to see the outline, no matter how slight, of abdominal muscles under my skin. I want to be thin more than I want money or success or happiness.

Except for food. I want that more.

### Binge

I stand in the checkout line casually looking around as the clerk rings up my collection of illicit food.

“Good morning,” she says, scanning a box of pancake mix, followed by chocolate chips, maple syrup, whipped cream, a tube of biscuit dough, bacon, and sausage. “Looks like you’ll be having a good breakfast this morning.”

“Yeah,” I say, letting the word trail off into a weak laugh; I run my finger along the edge of my debit card while I stare at my groceries. I suck in my stomach.

She scans a box of shredded wheat and a 12-pack of Diet Coke before she gets to the economy size bag of chocolate candy. “I couldn’t have this around my house—I’d eat the whole bag,” she says. It beeps loudly.

I wait for her to look up from the register, and then shrug my shoulders and say, “Kids.” She nods knowingly.

“Still, I couldn’t have that much candy around. I have no willpower, if you couldn’t tell.” She laughs and pats her stomach. “Will that be all?”

I nod yes, but what I really want is for her to quit chatting and bag up the groceries that have now accumulated into a disheveled pile at the end of her check stand. I want her to put it all the plastic white bags so the other customers will stop staring at me. They’re judging.

### Therapy

“Do you think anyone can tell?” I ask. “Do you think they can tell, by the way that I eat, that I used to be obese?” I am sitting on Dr. Merriman’s leather couch with my legs crossed underneath me.

He doesn’t respond. He gives me a smile and a look that seems to say, I don’t understand what you mean.

“What I mean is—I feel like I have a scarlet ‘F’ on my stomach or something; that everybody can tell that I used to be overweight, just by the way I eat. What kind of normal person would eat this way?” I look down at my lap.

“You act like all thin people have a disinterest towards food. That’s just not the case. Most people, thin or not, really enjoy eating—really look forward to eating.” Dr. Merriman’s voice is slow.

“No. It’s not normal to spend this much time thinking about food. And when I am not thinking about food, I am thinking about how I am going to get it. I am always waiting for the next meal or snack or dessert.” I pause when he looks like he’s priming to speak, but continue before he has the opportunity. “Really—almost anything you say to

me, somehow, associates with food. The movies: what kind of candy can I get? Costco: the food court frozen yogurt. The hardware store: the snack cart they have in the lobby. This isn't normal. The library: the grocery store *next* to the library that has those chocolate-covered pretzels."

I finally stop when I run out of air, though I could have kept going. Dr. Merriman scribbles quickly in my file as I catch my breath; he leaves my hurried speech hanging in the space between us for a good five seconds before he clears his throat and looks up from his notes. It takes him another five seconds to think of something to say.

### Theories

I have figured it out.

I have been watching a girl in my office—not really stalking, no, more observing. I don't know her name, I think of her only as "that one really tall, thin girl." And she is tall. She looks like a ballet dancer in her black leggings and belted gray sweater-dress. She keeps her long brunette hair twisted round and round into a tight bun and fastened in place with an unseen clip.

I watch her every day with a sick kind of fascination: the way that even the widest part of her thighs still have two inches of open air between them; the sharp, geometric shape of her shoulders. Her body strikes me with a lust so potent that seeing her fills me with a sense of awe and the simultaneous desire to punch something. Anything. Her even.

She must not like food.

It's not fair, but people like her exist. They are the birds of the eating world, the pickers, the busy-body-over-achievers who just happen to be stellar athletes who simply do not have the desire to inconvenience themselves with eating. To them, meals are a waste of time. They grab an apple or an organic carrot stick between social engagements. This has to be it. They could not maintain their slender physiques if they possessed even the slightest degree of food lust—it just wouldn't be possible. It can't be possible.

If all appetites are equal—if every thin woman in the world has similarly intense cravings for chocolate cake and still abstains—that would mean I am abnormally weak willed. It would mean that I am subject to the same temptation but unable to restrict myself. I don't like to think about this. I like to think I suffer from an abnormal level of food preoccupation. My condition is biological or psychological—something-ological—rather than an issue of gluttony or laziness. It has to be.

### Guilt

I am looking at the model again.

I lift my shirt and pinch the fat on my stomach. It pulls away from the muscle easily—a thick roll of solid flab. All those pounds lost, all those miles logged on the treadmill and still—still—I can't wear a swimsuit in public. Hell, I can't even wear a fitted tee-shirt.

As I stand there staring at the glossy magazine ad, the fat on my abdomen hangs down in rippled torrents and perches on the waistband of my jeans. Even worse: when I bend over the skin gathers to the center of my body and puckers, sagging like a fleshy pendulum.

You did this to yourself. You shouldn't have eaten all that crap yesterday. You shouldn't eat—ever.

Enough of this.

I pull myself away from the girl, away from myself, and go into the closet to retrieve the only item that ever seems to make me feel better when I get into a slump. I reach high on to the shelf and drag down a folded pile of Khaki fabric. They are my old pants: pants from forever ago when I weighed a lot more than one-forty-two.

I run my finger over the worn label. Size twenty-two. I had loved these pants once. They had the perfect low cut waist and boot-cut leg openings, and I would wear them during all seasons—with boots in the winter and with sandals in the summer. I had worn them so often, the fabric had turned soft and thin, threatening to tear at the slightest strain. I bend over and slowly step into the legs. I pull them up with little effort over my clothes and hold them in place. I don't have to unbutton them; in fact, I would need suspenders to keep them up now.

I turn sideways and pull the waistband away from my body. I don't remember my stomach ever coming out this far. I try to imagine a three-dimensional rendition of my former fat filling the space of the pants, but I can't.

All the willpower, all the exercise, all the neurosis. I'm definitely not a sane person—not anymore. A sane person wouldn't feed herself baker's chocolate as a means of negative reinforcement for her candy cravings. Nor would a sane person contrive her yearly Halloween costumes around the concept of physical restraint—an inmate, a mummy, Edward Scissorhands—in order to inhibit her ability to eat party snacks. Nope, I left that sane girl behind 100 lbs ago. Better to be thin than sane anyway, right?

But who am I kidding; I'm not even thin yet. All the calorie-nitpicking, the binging followed by hours at the gym, the remorse and self-loathing and, still, I'm not thin—not really.

### Search

Now the peanut butter has disappeared. I rifle through the cabinet, scanning the back rows for the bright red lid of the Jif container. I've never put it in the back; I always put it in the same spot, in front of the cooking oils and vinegars, right behind the cabinet door. But it isn't here. I check the spice cabinet on the opposite side of the stove just in case, then the fridge, because I have been known to place all kinds of odd things in there when I'm not paying attention. Nowhere.

This is beginning to seem a little bit more than a simple case of misplaced peanut butter. Perhaps Mark has used it and returned it to the wrong location. Where would I put the peanut butter if I were him?

I check all the same places again more thoroughly and then I start checking everywhere: with the Tupperware, with the coffee mugs, next to the plates and bowls. I am running out of places to look when a sneaking suspicion creeps over me—he's hidden the peanut butter from me.

I had been talking casually the week before about my lack of control with the peanut butter. It had only been a few days and I had already devoured half the jar. I stopped eating it on celery or crackers and just started eating it off of a spoon. But I never told Mark I wanted him to take it away from me. Lots of times I had told him to hide food from me, like leftover Valentine's candy or the cake from his sister's birthday.

I'd even told him I wanted certain items to disappear before I had a chance to see them in the fridge—like the takeout Mexican food from Don Juan's.

But this—he's overstepping his bounds. He is judging me. He has decided, of his own accord, that I should not be allowed to eat any more peanut butter, and why? Because it will make me gain weight? Because I can't control myself around it? Because I've already been bingeing on it for three days straight? Well sure, but how is any of that his business? Who is he to judge me?

As I stand in the kitchen, with the cabinet doors ajar, I can feel the irritation rising up in my neck. Maybe I can find it if I looked hard enough. Where would I hide it if I were him? I look in the bottom cabinets behind the pots and pans; I look in the freezer, where I had put it before, many of times, in an attempt to slow myself down should I go on a binge (I always end up microwaving it though). Nothing. I give up for the night and sulk.

I do this for two nights, rummaging through the house and then giving up. On the third night I ask him, nonchalantly: "Hey honey, where is my peanut butter?"

He is sitting in my living room watching a football game on ESPN. He is wearing a white undershirt and one of his slimmest pairs of Levi's.

"I don't know," he replies. Through his straight-face I can see the hint of guilt as he feigns innocence. He knows.

"I know you took it," I say. "And I don't appreciate it."

He doesn't respond. His arms, against the thin white cotton, are tanned and muscular and perfectly proportioned. The way he sits, sunk deeply into the cushions, his stomach almost looks concave.

“I am completely capable of making my own food decisions.” The pitch of my voice this time surprises both of us.

“Honey, you told me last week to hide any junk food from you, remember?” His tone reminds me of a first grade teacher’s condescending child-speak.

“Peanut butter isn’t junk food.” Mark gives me an accusatory look across the room as though to say, really? “And didn’t you just tell me that I looked thin? Do you really believe that? Because the act of taking my peanut butter leads me to believe that you think I am fat. Is this the case?” I don’t really believe any of this, I just want to see if I can guilt him into giving back the peanut butter. He doesn’t take the bait. Instead, he returns his attention to the television, with no other explanation and without divulging the necessary information.

Bastard. I feel my nerves getting physically ruffled. I know that if it had been where it should have, I would have already eaten at least three heaping spoonfuls by now.

I start getting cruel and irrational thoughts like, “How can I date this man who takes my peanut butter?” and “How can I be in love with someone who would do such awful things?”

After a moment of me standing motionless in the kitchen, he sighs. “Do you want me to just get it for you? It’s the opposite of what you told me last week, but whatever.”

Fuck.

“No,” I say, and mentally I am kicking the bottom cupboard so hard that I imagine the door collapsing in on itself, the broken hinges clattering across the kitchen floor.

## Advice

From: Hastings, Bren <[HastyBren85@att.net](mailto:HastyBren85@att.net)>  
Subject: Help  
To: "Carter, Samantha" <[sexyblue23@yahoo.com](mailto:sexyblue23@yahoo.com)>  
Date: Wednesday, July 21, 2009, 11:22 PM

Samantha,

I am having the worst anxiety I've had in the last 3 yrs of weight loss and I don't know what to do anymore. I am so anxious that I come home from work and collapse—so depressed—and then I don't go to the gym, which is exactly the opposite of what I should be doing! When I *have* gone to the gym, during my lunch break, it is not even beginning to offset all the extra crap I have been eating. I just can't stop. And I am getting fat, I know it, but I haven't wanted to get on the scale in the last few days so I have no idea how much weight I've gained. And I don't think there is anyone who can understand what I am going through (except for maybe you) because I don't think anyone else freaks about food and exercise and weight loss like I do.

Bren

From: "Carter, Samantha" <[sexyblue23@yahoo.com](mailto:sexyblue23@yahoo.com)>  
Subject: RE: Help  
To: Hastings, Bren <[HastyBren85@att.net](mailto:HastyBren85@att.net)>  
Date: Wednesday, July 22, 2009, 9:02 AM

Bren,

I know how the whole fat-anxiety goes and it's horrible until someone tells you to calm the fuck down, so with nothing but love and respect for you, here I go....Calm the fuck down! You are freaking the fuck out again. Get a hold of yourself girl! First of all, I keep up on your Facebook page and you look great. I am seeing collar bones, cheek bones, a waist—the full deal. I bet you probably need a new workout plan or something to help motivate you. You need some *thinspiration*. You have to buy something ridiculous like a \$300 pair of Armani skinny jeans, and tell yourself that it is your mission to fit into those jeans. Hang in there!

Love,  
Samantha

### Thinspiration

I find them while visiting clothes in a fancy downtown boutique—the pants. At first I balk at the sixty dollar price sticker. Sixty dollars? How is this a sale? Until I curiously peel the label back and see the original price: one-hundred and eighty-nine dollars. I immediately look at those jeans with wonder and lust. What makes them so valuable? Perhaps it is the strategically placed rips, sandblasted seams, the ornate back pockets or the clever little rivets on the front pockets. The jeans suddenly seem an immensely good deal, but the size, the size is an issue.

They are not labeled in standard size, but in the model-speak size of waist inches. Unfamiliar territory. I would surely need a size at least two inches larger, I reason, holding the jeans out at arm's length. I search though the racks, with a calm façade, while clutching my too-small jeans, unwilling to let some lesser, waif of a woman snatch up my bargain. But I can't find a duplicate. Nowhere can I find another pair even similar or relatively close in price.

### Rules

1. No lattes, cappuccinos, double caramel mocha frapuccinos, whipped cream, caramel or chocolate syrup in the AM.
2. No mid-morning candy. Absolutely no visits to the jelly bean jar in Kerry's office.
3. No soda—even diet.
4. Go to the gym during lunch—burn at least 300 calories.
5. No mid-afternoon candies—see number 2.

6. No eating in the car. No pre-dinner snacks. No stopping at the grocery store on the way home for a jar of peanut butter and a plastic spoon.
7. Go to the gym after work—burn at least 500 calories.
8. No post-dinner snacks, desserts, or cocktails—ever.

### Neurosis

Sometimes I feel like quite another person entirely. I try to outsmart my other-self by keeping the house void of junk food and unhealthy contraband. But an inevitable craving always builds up in my chest with increasing pressure and I grab my car keys and sneer at my healthy alter-ego.

Does she think she can deter me with sheer inconvenience?

Then I drive to the nearest store and purchase my sin of choice, inhaling it out of spite before my better judgment can interfere. I have become intimate with denial and ignorance to further my plots. I've thrown away wrappers with absent-minded disregard before I chance seeing the nutritional label. I've guessed at portion size when the mood has struck me or when I've felt particularly hungry. Of course I knew better. No amount of self delusion could erase that fact—hence, I also have become familiar with guilt; the nagging, intolerable creature who calls me thunder thighs and points out my double chin in photographs.

But she is right—I don't *deserve* to be thin. I ate leftover Mexican food before I went to the gym on Saturday morning. First off, I shouldn't have ordered the Mexican food to begin with; secondly, I should have thrown away the leftovers instead of saving them, and thirdly, I definitely shouldn't have eaten them before a kickboxing class. Just

one more example of just how warped and sick I am. And another reason why I don't deserve to be thin.

Once, I conducted online research as to the caloric value of a can of vanilla cake frosting and found it to be approximately 1450 calories in total. From this I discerned I could feasibly, over the course of one day, eat an entire can of the stuff without much consequence, as long as I didn't eat any additional calories. This seemed, to me, a pretty good deal. I have since added it to my to-do list.

### Self-Efficacy

"You don't think I can do it," I say, my arms crossing tightly in front of my chest.

"No. It's not that, it's just—I don't think you need to—or should even want to, for that matter." His tone is calm and matter-of-fact. I hate that.

"You think I'm a lazy and fat and that I can't even control my own body." I want to walk away, slam the bedroom door, but he would just follow me in there, say something sweet and it would all be over. I want to be mad; I need to be mad.

"I never said I thought you were fat. You're not fat. I don't like seeing you stress out over this kind of stuff. I just want you to be happy." Mark looks sincere, sad almost. He reaches his arms out to me and tries to pull me into a hug, but I twist away.

"You know what would make me happy?" I ask him. "Fitting into *my* pants. Losing ten more pounds and fitting into my perfect jeans. That's what would make me happy."

"What's the difference? What if I just cut the tag out, would that help?" He speaks delicately this time.

Of course he won't understand. He'll never understand.

But maybe he is right. Maybe I should get rid of them. Maybe *this* is the best I can hope for: being a functioning binge eater—exercising and starving myself often enough to support my intermittent episodes. The price to be paid. I'll give up the dream of a twenty-eight inch waist and in return I can, every few days, eat to the bottom of a basket of tortilla chips or indulge in midnight cake at the twenty-four-hour bakery.

Perhaps anyone else—any normal person—would say, “Just stop eating. Go on a diet.” And, oh, it sounds simple when put that way. Why can't I just stop eating?

### Weight

The scale reads one-forty-three.

God damn it. I swear I didn't eat anything bad this week. I try to remember what I could have possibly done, what I could have eaten, to cause my weight to go up a pound.

As I sit in my weekly session, I tell Dr. Merriman this. I tell him about the one-forty-three, the grocery store visit, the peanut butter incident, the fights with my boyfriend, and the jeans I can't fit into. I am frustrated and I don't know what to do with myself. I tell him everything.

He looks at me, leans back in his chair and uncrosses his legs. “Bren,” he says, his eye contact making my stomach flutter. “You appear to me, to be a fit, attractive young woman, and what you've accomplished puts you in the small subset of individuals able to maintain long term weight loss.”

The words catch in my ears, metallic and heavy. I look at him soberly. I might be blushing a little, but I don't allow a smile to cross my lips, I just look past his face to a point on the wall. His eye contact really is unnerving.

He pushes his glasses higher on his nose, making his eyes swell under the curved lenses. "You can see that, can't you?" he asks, tilting his head to the side. There is a plaque above his door that says: Do or do not—there is no try.

"Bren," he says again and I lift the right side of my mouth in an unenthusiastic half-grin. He smiles at this and beneath his pillowy lips, I can see large, rectangular teeth, definitive and straight. "Objective self-evaluations and positive self-talk," he says as he begins to write in my file. "That's what I want you to work on. Every day." He looks up. "We'll get this, Bren, don't worry. We just have to get your anxiety under control, and that will take care of the binging; and if we work on improving your body image, I bet you'll find that the fixation on food and weight dissipates as well."

"OK, Dr. Merriman." I smile hopefully. "Thank you."

"Have a good week. I'll see you next Thursday." He stands, and the hems of his Dockers skim the top of his leather shoes. As I nod to him and let myself out, I notice how his pressed shirt is tucked neatly into his belted slacks. That his stomach is perfectly flat.

### A Place to Share with No One

As soon as Aria pulled the front door closed behind her, she could hear the hum of a children's program from the flat screen TV around the corner. She crept in the opposite direction, through the formal dining room toward the kitchen, setting her heels down lightly on the tile. In the family room, a warped, male voice shouted over the sound of discordant, piano-key strikes: *Get your dancing shoes on, it's time to wiggle!*

"Sissy?" she said in an exaggerated whisper. Even at thirty-two, when she was feeling playful, Aria still called her older sister what she had called her when she was six years old. "Sissy" reminded her of the little-girl version of Brooke who used to sit with her when she was punished, and sent to the corner: the child who sat with her, patted her arm, and told her not to cry.

Here sister's voice slipped from around the corner. It was tired, flat. "I'm in here. In the kitchen."

Aria froze, cringing. Right away she could hear the creaking of sofa springs and the shuffling of cushions. Their feet thudded against the living room carpet. Then they were there: two excited five year olds, clamoring around the corner in a flurry of untied pink shoelaces, and dirt-smudged dresses—their matching blonde hair tied up into crooked pigtails and strewn with chunky plastic barrettes. She dropped her shoulders and

walked into the kitchen, letting her heels clack loudly, while scowling at Brooke's turned back.

"Aunty," they said. They drew out the "y" and pressed the letter into a high-pitched squeal.

"Hey." Aria elongated her vowels in exhaustion and lifted her arms awkwardly as they embraced her waist.

"You wanna play? You wanna come outside with me?" one asked hurriedly, as the other jumped up and down. A pair of sticky hands groped at Aria's fingers. "Come see my swing set! Come outside. Please! Please! Please!"

"Oh, no, Aunty's tired," Aria said, gently squeezing her way past them. Her sister had turned around at this and crossed her arms across her chest.

"They never get to see you." Brooke pulled her lips into a tight frown.

Aria was about to protest, but Brooke's coarse expression convinced her that if she didn't comply, she could forget about having any kind of civil conversation. Aria smiled down at them. She didn't want to run circles around their backyard. "What if we go into the play room and you put the make-up on me?"

"Yeah!" they said; their voices echoed off the kitchen walls. "And the nail polish and the lipstick." The two children were still listing off cosmetics as they pulled Aria out of the kitchen, through the den, and into their cluttered play-room.

"Sit here." One brought a glossy, toddler-sized wooden chair. She settled into a position she felt she could comfortably maintain for the duration of playtime: her knees level to her chest. She leaned onto her elbows and rested her chin steadily in her palms.

“Ok, I’m ready. Go get the make-up.” Twenty minutes should be enough to appease her sister.

An hour later, Aria was sitting at the kitchen table, wiping layers of blush and eye shadow off her face. Brooke laughed as she watched.

“It’s not funny.” Aria pulled at the collar of her shirt, straining to see. “They got lipstick on my shirt, didn’t they?”

Brooke didn’t answer, and instead asked: “So, how’s Joshua?” Her voice was cheerful. Aria’s sister always asked the same, prying questions about her boyfriend Josh. It was prying because she knew what her sister was getting at.

They had been dating for three years, she and Josh, and they had been living together for the last eight months, which was going great, so far. Josh was fantastic; he didn’t take life too seriously, and he had a good job as a graphic designer. What he really loved, though, was his art. He drew massive collages in ballpoint pen that featured jumbled depictions of people, places, and things, scrolling wildly into one another—making no sense at all, and making perfect sense. Sometimes Aria’s likeness would appear, hidden in a parade of random objects—her caricature always in profile. She liked combing his drawings for pieces of herself; once she found a solitary eye staring out at her, eyeliner perfectly drawn on the lid above curling lashes, and she knew immediately it was hers. It was drawn next to a flashlight and a slice of cherry pie.

“He’s fine,” Aria replied, sweeping imaginary crumbs off the counter in front of her. “We’re fine.” Here it came.

“You know, you can’t wait forever to settle down,” her sister said. She put her hands on her hips, but her stern face soon melted into a goofy smile. “But seriously, I want the girls to have some cousins.”

Aria could still remember when the twins were helpless, wrinkled infants who cried at her slightest touch; the way her family had thrust them into her arms with expectant smiles.

“Smell her head,” Aria’s mother had said to her. Aria was holding one of the twins, trying to cradle the neck and head as instructed. “Smell it,” her mother said again; her mother held her nose to the baby’s peach-fuzz temple, then kissed it. Aria learned quickly to default to a simple, “no thank you,” for each baby-related request.

There had been a time, when Aria was a young girl herself, when she’d entertained abstract visions of what it might be like to be a “mommy.” She had dreamt up names—Ethan Alexander for a boy, and Tiffany Rose for a girl—and accepted the fact that all women, eventually, had kids. But within the first few months of her niece’s lives, that far-off fantasy faded, and she made an appointment with a gynecologist.

She had prepared, in the days prior to her appointment, a list of questions to ask. On the day of her check-up, when Aria sat alone in the crisp white examination room, waiting to hear rustling medical files outside her door, she mentally rehearsed them. The entire time she was reclined on the exam table, with her heels pressed into the stirrups, she thought of Brooke’s delivery—her sister’s heels wedged into similar stirrups—and Aria’s doctor had to tell her a number of times to try to relax.

After her exam, when Dr. Hudson finally asked if she had any questions, Aria leaned forward with interest. The sterile tissue crinkled underneath her.

“I wanted to ask about methods of birth control.” Aria watched the doctor’s face closely.

Dr. Hudson smiled warmly. “Sure, which method were you considering?”

“What about tubal ligation?” Aria carefully enunciated each syllable. Dr. Hudson glanced quickly at Aria from behind her medical chart, before quietly flipping through the pages. Then the woman placed the file in her lap under folded arms, and sat back in her chair.

“Well, that is a possibility; however, it is not usually preferable for someone your age. I would hate to subject you to the procedure and have you decide, five years down the road, you are ready to conceive.” Dr. Hudson looked at her soberly, and Aria imagined what it would be like to have the woman for a mother. Aria wanted to say she wouldn’t change her mind. Childbearing was something she felt sure she would never want. But the words stuck in her chest: hateful and immature. She didn’t want Dr. Hudson—who looked like a woman who not only had children, but probably also grandchildren—to think of her that way.

“If longevity is what you are interested in, there are other methods of contraception that are very effective. Have you considered an IUD?” Dr. Hudson opened a drawer in the adjacent cabinet and drew out a small brochure.

Aria looked at the front of the brochure as Dr. Hudson spoke. A beautiful woman with spiraling, red curls and smooth, ivory skin was smiling back, almost laughing, with her arms wrapped around the shoulders of an equally beautiful, smiling man. They both looked overwhelmed with joy. The man was absolutely beaming as he gazed lovingly at the woman. He had his hands placed firmly on her ribs, as if he meant to either lift her

into the air, or slide them slowly down the length of her slender body. Aria let her eyes blur the image.

“It really is the most effective method of contraception available.” Dr. Hudson placed her hand lightly on Aria’s forearm.

“Except for sterilization, of course,” Aria replied.

Aria left the brochure on the counter in the exam room: she wanted a permanent solution. The doctor had been reluctant, but Aria persisted. That was over four years ago. Now, her sister was bringing up the topic of pregnancy, again: specifically the idea of providing the twins with a new companion.

“You’ll change your mind,” Brooke said. “I promise—just wait and see.”

Aria touched her lower stomach, imagining her damaged fallopian tubes, like broken wires, iridescent sparks at each severed end.

“Yeah, well, that’s not likely.”

Aria arrived home from visiting her sister at seven that evening. Her nieces had begged her to stay for dinner; she had escaped a meal of hot dogs and tater tots by telling Brooke that Josh was cooking something special at home. When she opened the front door of their downtown apartment, she was enveloped by the exotic smell of coconut and cilantro, and realized her fib was actually true.

“How was the family?” Josh said. He stood at the stove and glanced back at her over his shoulder.

Aria fell into the couch and let out a groan. “Same, I guess. OK.”

Her apartment made her feel a little better. The deep red paint on the south-facing wall, the cheap cherry bookshelves stacked with books and journals, and her hip secondhand furniture put her at ease. Brooke called it college-grunge, and asked Aria when she'd start spending her money on nice things. But it was *her* place and it was just the way she liked it. Between the two of them, she and Josh had a little money, but they spent it doing things, rather than accumulating stuff. They had tried practically every restaurant in the downtown area, and were heavy into the local art scene—mostly music and theater and the occasional drag show. They meshed well because they were in the same place in their lives. Their life was just the way Aria liked it: unpredictable, spur-of-the-moment. Except for her weekly visits to Brooke. That was what she did to be a good sister, and a good aunt, and it was the most she could offer, seeing as she didn't want to offer up those cousins Brooke so desperately wanted.

It hadn't always been that way. There was a time when Brooke had told her sister that she dreamed of living in downtown Portland too. They had attended college together, shared a dorm room for four years, and while Brooke earned a bachelor's in business, Aria worked toward a general studies degree. Even after school, they were close; they had an apartment in Hillsboro, and rode the MET into Portland together every day. And, God, they used to *do* things. They went dancing on Friday nights until two in the morning, then stopped for pancakes and hot cocoa. They caravanned to the coast with college friends and had bonfires on the beach, got stoned, talked about the trips they'd take if they ever started making *real* money. These days, Brooke was finally there—she made a good income at a job that didn't completely steal her soul—but what

she wasn't saving for the girls' college education and next year's trip to Disneyland, she spent on Barbies or mounds of pink kid-clothes.

She and Josh's apartment didn't look like a Pottery Barn ad, but at least it looked like adults lived here. Aria rose and walked the short distance to the bedroom; their comforter was still disheveled, waiting for her to tear Josh away from the kitchen, push him into rumpled sheets, and ravage him. Instead, she pulled her sweatpants down from the closet, and examined herself sideways in the large dressing mirror as she changed.

"I haven't put on weight," she said to Josh when she entered the kitchen. It was more of a statement than a question.

"What? No, I think you look great," he said automatically. "Whatever your sister said—don't believe it."

Behind him, she continued to scrutinize her stomach, extending her abdomen and running her hands over a pseudo-pregnant belly. She tried to imagine, for a moment, a protruding stomach, abnormally firm.

"Your sister's kind of a bitch sometimes. Seriously, don't listen to her."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. You always come back from her place all stressed out."

"It's not her fault. Her kids make her crazy."

"Still."

Aria kneeled on the couch and draped her arms over the back so she could watch Josh cook. "I'm not kidding, Josh. When I was at her house last week, I was in the bathroom looking for some aspirin, and you know what I found?" Aria didn't wait for

him to guess. “I found a prescription bottle for Prozac in her cabinet. That’s crazy, right? Her kids stress her out so much, she has to take anti-depressants.”

“Maybe she’s stressed at work. Maybe she and Steve are having financial issues. It could be any number of things, really.”

“I think she would have talked to me if it was something like that.”

There had been times, intermittently, when Brooke admitted that her job was less-than-ideal, or that day-care costs were killing them; the one thing she rarely complained about were her kids. To Aria, parenting appeared as a great, hidden disease: misery, disguised by Mother’s Day cards, school pictures, and crayon drawings on the front of an old refrigerator. No one ever admitted how ugly everything was underneath.

“What if I got pregnant?” Aria said, admiring her own sleek, black fridge from across the room.

“Really?” Josh turned, and Aria could see that he had scrunched his nose. “With your IUD?”

An IUD had been the easiest explanation to give Josh in the beginning. The longer they stayed together, the less she wanted to tell him about the procedure. She hadn’t told anyone.

“Just *what-if*. What would we do?”

“I suppose we’d have to discuss it, if it happened.”

“What do you mean *discuss it*?” She could hear the pitch of her voice change before she could right it. There was only supposed to be one answer—no discussion needed. “I thought we agreed we didn’t want kids?”

“We don’t. *Not right now*. But you never know how you might feel in a few years.”

“I don’t think I am going to change my mind.” Her words came out with frantic speed. She was beginning to feel hot.

“Whoa. Hey. You’re not pregnant, so this isn’t something we have to worry about right now.” Josh abandoned the spatula and sauté pan, walked over to the sofa, and hugged her firmly. He caressed the side of her face and pushed her hair carefully behind her ear, and his hands smelled like onion and curry powder. “Don’t even worry about that. There is nothing to worry about.”

Six years ago Aria had watched her sister fall apart.

It had been springtime, every morning saturated with gray light and wrapped in the sort of wet fog that chilled Aria’s lungs and left her hair hanging limp over her shoulders. She avoided those mornings on the weekends, and wrapped herself in a fleece blanket and drank coffee in the living room of the apartment she shared with no one. Brooke was the last person she thought would be knocking on her door at nine AM on a Sunday morning, but when Aria opened the door, there was her sister, hair pulled into a damp ponytail.

Two months before, Brooke had met Steve.

“He’s an architect, isn’t that sexy? An artistic guy who actually earns good money.” Brooke told Aria this over drinks one Friday night. Aria’s boyfriend, Gabe, played the guitar in a band called *Thirteen Cold*, and bussed tables at a sports bar four nights a week.

“But he’s old,” Aria replied.

“Thirty-two isn’t old. He’s only five years older than me, and six years older than you.”

But Aria had to admit that Steve was handsome, for thirty-two; he drove a Subaru, which was kind of cool, and he picked up the bill the few times Brooke invited her to have dinner with them. But Aria thought he was boring and that he squinted too much when he talked: especially when he talked about architecture. She figured Brooke would get bored of all the talk about building specs and structural soundness, but instead she moved in with Steve a month after they met.

Now she was standing in Aria’s hallway, her face wet with rain or sweat or tears.

“I need your help.” Brooke let her head drop between her shoulders and stared at the ground. “I need you to go to the store for me.”

At the drug store, Aria thought of her sister’s face while she discerned the difference between the various brands of pregnancy tests, with their competing claims of early detection, accurate results, and easy-to-follow instructions. She ended up choosing a brand that featured a small digital screen displaying, in clear letters, *pregnant* or *not pregnant*, unlike the more simplistic models that relied on the interpretation of parallel or intersecting lines in specifically assigned colors. These results were too important to rely on linear coding; they needed the weight of letters, words in black and white. Her sister did not need to be using some sort of hieroglyphic, decoder key at a time like this.

Aria allowed her mind to fill with lingering dread as she wrapped her fingers securely around the cardboard package. What if *she* were the one who was pregnant? She forced herself to consider the possibility. She imagined the whole nine months as a

single moment—her lying on her back in a hospital bed, with an enormous belly jutting into the air. The most intense agony she could fathom. Horrible—but she thought she could survive that. Afterwards came the image of her arriving home with a baby. This was the part of the dream when her whole life turned upside down.

She could see Gabe holding the baby, herself somewhere in the background—he would look so happy, so in love. She could see her parents obsessing over it—their *grandchild*. Her family, his family: everyone would want to see the baby. Everyone would *love* the baby.

Aria steadied her features. This is not mine, she said to the box in her hands. Not mine, but Brooke's. Maybe the cashier wouldn't assume it was hers. Maybe she'd know that this was the sort of thing a girl sent her sister or best friend to buy. Or perhaps the cashier would think she was *hoping* to get pregnant, and that this was not a purchase driven by panic.

When she got back to her apartment, Brooke was lying on the sofa, arms curled around a throw pillow, head nestled in the crook of the armrest. Aria sat on the edge and put her hand on Brooke shoulder. Here she was—the younger sister—struggling to comfort her pillar of a big sister.

Aria thought her face looked like that of a frightened animal. She could feel her sister's eyes pulling at her, wanting her to say something.

Aria handed Brooke the package. "I got you the expensive kind."

"Thanks," her sister said, and she withdrew into the bathroom, where she stayed, alone, for the full five minutes. When she finally came out, her face was dry.

“What did it say?” Aria asked. She could feel the fear circling in her own chest now.

Brooke just nodded her head, and said, “Yeah.”

Aria had planned on telling her sister that she’d be supportive, no matter her decision. She had planned to invite her to move back into their apartment, help her talk to their parents, drive her to the doctor, or to a counselor—which ever. But when she went to say all this, the only thing that came out was: “I’m so sorry.”

The next Friday evening, with Josh not yet home from work, Aria cleaned the entire apartment. With a damp cloth, she wiped each surface and the edges of all the picture frames. None of them held portraits of her and Josh—Aria hated the awful, contrived poses and large, artificial smiles—rather, they displayed photos purchased from galleries, and Josh’s artwork. The few pictures she did have of them were candid self-portraits, the camera an arm’s length away. Those were filed away in a photo box in the bedroom closet.

She retrieved a collection of wine glasses from the back of the cupboard; her fingers left oval windows in the dust-covered surfaces. After she washed and dried them, one by one, she lined them up across the kitchen counter for the party.

The word *party* had gotten her in trouble earlier that afternoon when Brooke had called.

“I know its short notice, but can you please, please, please watch the girls tonight?” her sister had asked.

“We sort of have plans tonight.”

“Chinese food and a movie are not really plans; can’t you move something around? Please, Sis?” Aria hated when Brooke tried to play the sister-card.

“Actually, we’re kind of having a *party*.”

That was the mistake. Brooke suddenly began asking questions, namely, why didn’t Aria ever invite her and Steve to her parties?

“It’s not really *my* party, per se.” Aria thought hard for an escape. “It’s like we’re hosting a gathering—it’s really more of a gathering. And it’s mostly Josh’s friends.”

Aria could imagine Brooke rolling her eyes in the kitchen of her suburban, three-bedroom house.

“It’s really not a *party-party*, Brooke.” Silence. “Hey, the four of us should do something tomorrow night.”

“Fine, whatever,” Brooke said.

Aria wanted to tell her sister to, please, not be mad. Instead she zeroed in on a piece of information she’d been squirreling away for the last week. “Remember, after college, how we used to dress up and go to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*?”

Brooke’s voice lifted a little. “Oh, God, I can’t believe I ever dressed like that in public. Steve would have a heart attack if he ever saw me come home like that.”

“Well, the downtown theater is having a midnight showing next month. It will probably be all teenagers, but I’ve still got our costumes.” Years ago, the event had been their yearly ritual: a night to dress in lingerie and heavy make-up, to parade among the drag queens and slutty girls.

“Oh, Aria, can you imagine me wearing that now?”

“Well, yeah. That’s why I’m bringing it up. Come on.”

“I just don’t think it would be any fun anymore.”

Aria was about to tell her how hot she’d still look in Magenta’s French maid costume, when Brooke suddenly screamed.

“Shit—Gracie!” Her sister’s voice grew both loud and distant, as she left the receiver on the counter and began yelling. “What were you thinking? What is wrong with you?” Then her voice was near again, and she was telling Aria: “I’ve got to go—Gracie pulled the coffee pot off the counter, now there is coffee and broken glass everywhere.”

“Is everyone OK?” Aria asked, but her sister had already hung up.

By nine o’clock the apartment was full of acquaintances Josh had acquired over years: co-workers from Flynn Graphics, other artists, and people he’d met in between. The Klines, Derrick and Lisa, their neighbors from down the hall, sat together in the living room with an abnormal amount of space between them; their hands rested in that space, fingers grazing.

After a bottle of wine and a number of awkward conversations about the hors d’oeuvres, or random pieces of décor in the apartment, Aria was prepared to sneak off to their bedroom—no one would notice—when she saw the young man sitting on the sofa. He was alone, but he didn’t appear altogether bored. When he saw her looking, he gave her a nod with his chin. She walked over and set her wine glass on the coffee table.

“I’m Chase, I work with your husband at Flynn Graphics,” he said.

Aria let the word “husband” hang in the air. Marriage, weddings, vows—they were all terribly presumptuous. Until death do you part seemed like such a bold-faced lie, especially when a person brought God into it.

Aria still remembered the first time Josh gave her the speech about God and presumption. They were having dinner at the dive Ethiopian joint on 8<sup>th</sup>, when Josh put down his glass of wine and delivered such a convincing argument, Aria decided, at once, she agreed. Then she had realized she was terribly attracted to him.

She extended her hand to Chase. Correcting him would be too much trouble.

“Aria,” she said. His handshake was firm, but soft enough to indicate that he thought her delicate.

“Had enough awkward small talk yet?”

Aria let out a breath and sunk into the sofa. “I know, right? I was starting to think it was just me.”

“I saw you in the kitchen with that bottle of chardonnay. You looked like you were going to make a run for it.” Chase laughed.

“I was thinking about it.”

“Well I’m glad you didn’t.”

The man kept his eyes on Aria—wide, as if absorbing her image as they talked. She tried to match his gaze, second for second, but it made her stomach leap, which she liked. She tried again and again. Soon it became a game: how long could she look him in the eyes before she glanced away? At one point in the conversation, she wanted to blurt out, “My God, you have great eye contact.” The more she thought about it, the stupider it sounded.

Aria was still sitting on the couch with Chase when the last guests started ambling out.

“It was so nice to meet you.” Chase reached out his hand for hers. This time when they shook, he used his free hand to seal the connection, and Aria thought she felt his thumb stroke the skin on the top of her wrist. “Josh is a lucky man.”

“Not to get you worried or anything, but one of your friends thinks I’m a catch—real wife material.” Aria said to Josh as she watched him slip out of his jeans from where she laid in their bed. She pulled the covers up to her nose to hide her smirk.

“Oh really. Who?” he asked.

“Chase.” Aria still felt the warmth of the man’s touch pulsating through her hand.

Josh unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it into the hamper, then grabbed a white cotton tee-shirt from the top drawer. “I think,” he said, then stopped. He had the tee-shirt stretched between his arms. Instead of slipping it over his head, he tossed it on top of the dresser. “I think that *I* don’t need a legal document to keep you interested.”

“Is that so?” Aria pulled the covers tighter to conceal a laugh.

“Yes. And do you know why?” When Josh flipped off the light switch, Aria could see the light from the window hitting his bare chest.

He crawled onto the bed, carefully placing his hands and knees in the spaces between her limbs, and hovered above her. “Because I am awesome, and I have skills.”

For a long time, every time Aria had sex, she was reminded of Gabe. He was the first guy she dated after college, when she was still naive to the world beyond homework

and casual hookups. He was a musician and, appearance-wise, someone she considered way out of her league. She made him wait a very long time before having sex with him, so after two months and eighteen days, when he stood in front of her apartment, kissed her hesitantly goodnight, and asked if he could take her out again tomorrow, she knew she was in love.

The sex life that ensued after that was sometimes wild and animalistic, and other times gentle and poetic, but it was always enjoyable, and moreover she felt safe with him. One night, immediately after a particularly heated encounter, as she lay in a blissful daze, she heard him rustling gently in sheets next to her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, playfully rolling to her side and reaching her arm across his chest.

“Um.” His voice was a hesitant whisper. “The condom is gone.”

“What?” The warm lightness suddenly drained from her body and her head began to pulsate with a dense pressure. She groped herself frantically, patting the sticky hot skin of her inner thighs and combing the search up her pelvis, to her hips and stomach. Nothing.

“I don’t know where it went,” he said finally, as though he was completely willing to write it off as a mystery and be done with it.

She thought of one last place to look, but she didn’t want to. With no other option, she touched, at last, the smooth folds of her skin before slipping her fingers in, shallow at first, feeling in a circular motion what she saw in her mind as the swollen red membrane of internal organs. Then, submerged nearly to the knuckle, she felt something tickle the tip of her finger. With a twinge of panic she added a second finger, clamped

onto the tickling, and drew it out. The empty stretch of latex seemed to extend forever before finally emerging in its entirety, with a quiet pop, leaving her empty once again.

She spent the rest of that month waiting. The red, circled number on the calendar finally arrived on a Sunday. She waded through each hour, distracted, willing the sensation of rushing heat, frequenting the bathroom to check. When it finally came, she nearly cried in relief. She called Gabe and in a sigh of liberation announced, “Don’t worry, it came.”

He seemed to have no idea what she was talking about. After a moment he responded: “Oh. Good. That’s good.” But he hadn’t been worried. He hadn’t spent the month agonizing over it. She should have been furious at his lack of concern, but she was too elated—her mind finally free to drift onto other things. After Gabe, and the condom incidence, sex had always been a little nerve-wracking.

But not now—not since the procedure. Aria felt completely comfortable lying in the bed next to Josh, still warm and damp and naked.

“He’s so good with them,” Brooke said, nudging Aria with her elbow. After the fallout from the party argument three weeks ago, Brooke had been withdrawn, but within a few days the calls came: first she needed a sitter, then the twins needed to spend time with their aunt, and lastly, she had called with an invite for an evening of dinner and Scrabble.

Aria had been impressed with Steve’s burgers and Brooke’s homemade potato salad, but now the twins kept stealing Scrabble tiles and crying when they didn’t get a turn.

“Settle down,” Brooke had said; the words old and meaningless. Steve had looked at them, said *girls . . .*, and they quieted for a moment. That’s when Josh lifted them both into his lap, one on each knee, and now all three were attempting to read the letters aloud. Brooke apparently thought it was adorable.

“Ok, girls. What do you think?” he asked them. “You’ve got a C here, and there’s an A, and look, a T. C-A-T. What’s that spell?”

The girls got excited, and shouted “cat” over and over again, but when it came time to place the tiles, they fought over who got to hold the squares.

“Josh. Josh, it’s your turn,” Aria said. She wanted to go up to him and push the kids off his lap, tell them to go play in their rooms. Tell him to pay attention to the game. Aria looked at Brooke. “Are we still playing this game or what?”

“Don’t be so impatient,” Brooke said, fiddling with her own tiles. Steve had rocked his chair back to watch the television in the other room. He wasn’t even interested in the twins and they were his kids. Across the table, one of the girls knocked their entire collection of tiles to the floor, and Josh charged them with the task of picking them up, counting them aloud as each retrieved tile clattered on the table top.

“I’ll be right back.” Aria said and pushed back from the table.

The mirrored medicine cabinet in the bathroom was where her sister kept the aspirin; it was the place Aria once found the prescription bottle. The Prozac was still there, the translucent orange cylinder nearly empty. The label was addressed to Brooke Horngrove. There was something new on the shelf though: a small, pink box. Aria shook it. It rattled like a children’s toy.

Before that day, six years ago, in Aria's apartment when she held the pregnancy test in her hands. Before she handed it to her sister. Before she'd given a useless offering of pity: *I'm so sorry*. Before Brooke's searching eyes and that need for connection and understanding. There was another time. Aria had never told Brooke about the time in high school—she'd never told anyone.

She had been fifteen—only a sophomore at Western High School—the day she entered that windowless, concrete restroom. Struck by a draft of stale, cold air, she groped in the darkness for the light switch. When she found it, and flipped it up, a single light bulb flickered slowly to life. She leaned back into the door and it winced, struggling to conform to its ill-fitted frame. The door's slide lock was worn and crookedly mounted so she had to push the weight of her body into it to secure her privacy.

The gas station's small bathroom was by no means tidy: crumpled paper towels formed a small pile in the corner where the waste bucket had spilled over the top and onto the floor, and pink hand soap was pooled on the industrial steel sink under the leaky dispenser. But the air smelled sanitary enough, like bleach and detergent. She dropped her backpack to the floor and leaned heavily into the sink, exhausted, clenching its cold stainless surface and sinking into her hips. Then she bent down and unzipped her bag.

She examined the cardboard box in her hands only briefly before pulling it open and peering inside. A plastic stick rattled against its walls; she pulled out the instructions, which had been folded at least ten times over, and held them up to her face like a map. She read them over carefully, twice, before examining the sturdy construction of the plastic test stick. It reminded her of a digital thermometer or a thick marker, or perhaps both. She touched the cap, wondering what was beneath it, before

remembering that the instructions had said to, *remove the cap only immediately prior to use!* She hastily placed the instrument on the edge of the sink and skimmed over the directions a third time.

There was a lot to remember: she was not to remove the cap until just before use; she was not to hold the wand upright, only horizontal. She was to either immerse it in a stream or dip it into a cup, for five or twenty seconds, dependent upon the chosen method. The longer she looked at the instructions the smaller and more crowded the words started to appear.

Aria had to take a moment to remind herself she could figure it out. She was a smart girl. Her mother had told her that before. Not more than two weeks ago, her mother had said something to that effect. Her mother said how proud she was of Aria—how Aria was a smart, strong girl with a good head on her shoulders.

Aria had tried to be smart and safe and responsible. She had told him to wear a condom, and he had. She remembered how the weight of his body on top of her seemed to crush the air from her lungs, and she felt the need to nearly gasp for breath in the moments when his mouth was not pressed to hers. She remembered that he had paused and she could see his concerned expression through the darkness.

“Are you OK?” he had asked. She could almost see worry in his eyes. She told him it was hurting her, the condom was hurting her, and so he took it off.

“Don’t worry; I’ll stop before I finish,” he said, “so you don’t have to worry.”

So she didn’t. She felt assured that he had been right, and that everything was fine. Until one day it wasn’t.

Now, she willed her hand to steady itself as she held the test stick in position. Seeming to realize the gravity of the task, it steadied. She counted to five in her head, waiting an additional second to account for the speed of her counting, and then retracted the stick, careful not to shake it. She held it perfectly horizontal as she reapplied the cap as per the instructions. Then she gently slid it back into the darkness of its box to await the results.

Three minutes had never passed more slowly. In those three minutes she carefully carried the box over to the sink and placed it on the edge as she washed her hands, which had resumed their quivering. She looked at her flushed face in the mirror. Maybe it would be all right.

When her shivering body was too much to bear she took a breath and reached into the box, feeling for the smooth plastic, and drew out the test stick, an inch at a time, until the result screen came into view, displaying one prominent blue line. Her nerves froze as she realized that she didn't understand what the lines meant. Abandoning all delicacy she snatched up the instructions and searched for some picture or diagram explaining her results. She held the stick against the paper, looking for its match, until her fingers fell upon the illustration of the test stick harboring a negative sign.

She wondered how long it would take for her erratic heartbeat to resume its quiet, undetectable palpitations, for her lungs to abandon their gasping draws, and for her body, her mind, to regain some semblance of control.

Seventeen years later, in Brooke's bathroom, the box felt lighter, more flimsy than the ones she had purchased in the past. She opened it up, sat on the toilet, and peed on it, just to see the comforting negative sign. Then she ripped the cardboard box into

little shreds, rolled them in a wad of toilet paper, and shoved them to the bottom of her sister's wastebasket.

"That wasn't too bad," Josh said, as they pulled out of her sister's driveway. The daylight was beginning to disappear behind houses and trees and parked cars.

"Yeah, right."

This is what it was going to come down to. Three, five, ten years down the line, Josh was going to decide he wanted to start a family. The idea of it made Aria angry.

"Those kids—and you just encourage it."

"Why are you always so hateful to your sister's children? I mean, they're just little kids."

"Hateful?"

She thought about telling him what she'd done to her body—telling him that no amount of time would ever change what she'd done. But then what? Would he leave? Or would he spend the next ten years trying to convince her to reverse it? Instead, she tightened her jaw and said: "I slept with Chase."

Even in the dark, she could see him furrow his brows in confusion. It was a lie, but it felt true enough. If Chase would have called her up in the last week and suggested they meet, she might have considered it.

"Wait, what?" He looked over at Aria. The car swerved, and he pulled his eyes back to the road. "You fucked somebody else?"

"Jesus Christ, Josh, you're such a hypocrite. We're not even married because you can't stand the idea of only being with each other for the rest of our lives."

“You know it’s not like that.”

“What about being progressive? Not bending to the whims of conventionality?”

“I don’t even know what to say.” Josh looked more angry than hurt.

“Just tell the truth. Say that I was never enough. And now, apparently, I am still not enough, unless I agree to pop out babies.”

“I never said that.”

“I see how much you love my sister’s kids. You can’t get enough of them. You’ve even got them calling you Uncle.”

“Shit, Aria. I can’t even talk about this right now, I’m so fucking mad.”

Josh still had his eyes locked on the road in front of them. His mouth was taut. Once, she could have imagined marrying that taut, angry face. She wanted to ask him: why aren’t *we* enough—just you and me? But she didn’t, and he kept driving.

His foot tense against the gas pedal, he showed no signs of stopping. He wouldn’t stop the car and force her out into the street; make her walk until she found her way to their dark apartment. Though, she wished he would.

## We Waited For You, You Never Came

Michael's wife died in September.

5:20 PM;

Interstate I-80;

The Suzuki motorcycle he bought for her;

A Ford pick-up truck;

Now, a month after her passing, Michael sits in her black office chair, his hands wading through her cluttered workspace, collecting all the Post-its, scraps of paper, and receipts with notes scribbled on the back, and reads each and every one of her lists; most of them include ordinary tasks, already crossed off meticulously, from top to bottom. Most of them make little or no sense to him.

That's what Michael remembers most about his wife Kirsten: her affinity for lists. Before she died, she had spent solitary hours in her office jotting down notes to herself about what needed to be accomplished, completed, or addressed in the coming days. Kirsten's dog, Clyde, always kept quiet company with her during these times, watching as she typed, or printed, or scrawled looping words on every medium imagined. Clyde watched her spend quite a great deal of time making these lists.

Michael was aware of Kirsten's list-making as well. Nearly every night of the week, after he had cooked them dinner, over which they discussed the details of their

respective workdays, Kirsten retired to her office to begin her list-making while Michael watched T.V. in the family room, alone. He often thought that his wife spent more time drafting these impromptu documents than she did addressing the items therein. And the volume of documentation was truly astonishing—Michael couldn't dispose of a used newspaper, a piece of junk mail, or a grease-stained paper towel without the fear of Kirsten, later, rummaging frantically through the trash can, claiming that “she had needed that.”

The lists are still everywhere: on the refrigerator, in their car, stuck to the bathroom mirror. When Michael finds a new one, he brings it into her office and places it with the others. He tries not to think about them too much. In the last few weeks though, he has come into her office each night, to ruminate over one particular collection of items written neatly on the back of a used envelope. The envelope is post-marked three days before her death, and the ink that forms the words has a vibrant blue sheen, as if the wandering of a careless finger could still smudge it away. Written horizontally down the back are six tasks, five of which have already been lined out:

Pick up jacket from DC Motorsports;

Order issue 114;

Philosophy homework;

Vegetarian lasagna recipe;

Call Saul.

The bottom-most entry is the only item still pending:

Wash Clyde.

Michael swivels around in Kirsten's desk chair; he rubs the worn envelope between his fingers while looking at Clyde lying on the end of his wife's reading chaise. The dog is exactly where he'd be if Kirsten were there. They'd both be lounging under the glow of the tear-drop office lamp, Kirsten reading and Clyde dozing, his muzzle twitching. The dog does not have the shine of a recently-washed golden retriever. Clyde makes a similar observation about Michael: he smells dirty and strange sitting at Kirsten's desk.

As the pair regard each other, Michael thinks about telling Clyde that *he'll* be the one to wash him now—that his mama won't be able to do it anymore—but the idea of speaking to a dog aloud, the same way that Kirsten had once done, makes the inside of his nose burn. He shakes his head and inhales deeply until the urge subsides. Michael can't remember where Kirsten keeps the dog shampoo anyway.

Clyde's oatmeal lavender shampoo was under the sink in the master bathroom, just where Kirsten had left it; the bottle's waist still collapsed from where she had squeezed it, hard, with wet fingers. Clyde's brush and a handful of liver snacks, sealed up tight in a plastic baggie, waited there with it. Clyde knew this; he always remembered the most important things. Like Kirsten.

For Clyde, she had been a source of excitement—after long hours home alone, the dog looked forward to nothing more than Kirsten's return, as this meant noise and food and games of chase around the living room. Her presence was directly correlated to good tastes, stimulating sounds, and the exhilarating stretch of weary muscles.

The first thing Kirsten used to do upon returning home was switch on the stereo. This released sounds that ignited Clyde's senses and helped him shake the sleep from his ears. Then she would generate her own buzz, and move about the room, hopping and jumping like a puppy. Sometimes she got down on her hands and knees and looked Clyde right in the eyes. She spoke his language. Other times, she would bury her face in his neck so that he could feel her voice in his own throat. Then she'd hoist his upper body against hers, and they'd stumble around upright until their hind legs failed them and they both sank to the floor. The more Clyde wagged his tail and wiggled his body during these nightly rituals, the more enthusiastically Kirsten entertained him. Eventually the two of them took to the kitchen, where Kirsten would toss him any number of edible mysteries from the countertop above his head. He caught each one in his mouth without a second thought—if it was coming from Kirsten, it was guaranteed to be good. This is what Clyde remembered most.

Michael remembered, of all things, Kirsten's persistent and irrational fear. Fear of death, fear of regret, fear of time. She was only twenty-eight. She had been worried as long as he'd known her, worried about not being *present* in her own life—she told him this. She didn't have to tell him that she hated her current job and wanted more out of life—Michael knew it was true. In the beginning, he tried to comfort her, tried to ease her mind with empathic gestures, but he never felt he had anything particularly relevant to offer her.

Despite his attempts at reassurance, Michael had continued to observe an inexplicable degree of unrest in his wife. Only when his therapeutic techniques were nearly exhausted did he notice Kirsten's plotting. She announced her plans to Michael—

plans for adventure and spontaneity—with the itinerary printed and already posted to the refrigerator door; she had signed them up for a pottery class and ballroom dance lessons. Michael still remembered seeing her across the dance floor, taking her turn with any number of elderly men; men who couldn't help but hold her affectionately, letting their hands caress her lower back before they released her to the next dance partner. And Michael, he danced with the elderly wives of these men, felt their slack-skinned hands within his own, inhaled the aroma of sterile, hospital corridors. He smiled while he did this. He was that in love.

Even with the new activities, Kirsten continued to seem genuinely concerned—distressed even—when she discussed with him the abstract possibility of one of them dying, after spending their whole lives waiting in anticipation—after which she apologized, he remembered, for being so ‘crazy.’

“You *are* crazy,” he had told her in a teasing tone, his eyes wide in exaggeration. Then he asked her: “What do you need? What would fulfill you?” When she couldn't say, he told her to quit her job and go back to school. The tension in her face eased a little. “I want you to be happy,” he had said. When the worry finally left her forehead Michael felt relieved.

Clyde had loved Kirsten as well. Her happiness made *him* happy. So when she took him to a grassy obstacle course and yelled, “Tunnel,” he darted through the blue, nylon cylinder and looked for her at the other side. And when she yelled, “Climb,” he scrambled up a steep incline, his paws catching on the wooden rungs, and then nearly

tumbled off the downgrade. Clyde would have weaved through the poles all night, letting the stiff plastic smack against his rib cage, if he thought it would make Kirsten happy.

Clyde still remembered the exact day that Kirsten started being happy—started dancing and singing in his honor. She woke up noticeably later that day, walked leisurely from the bedroom to the kitchen, ate her oatmeal outside while she threw his yellow ball at the back fence, then left the house in tennis shoes rather than heels, with books in her arms and a pack on her back. She came home well before dark, turned on the radio, played with Clyde for a good while, and then sat at the kitchen table rather than in her office, reading her books and making more lists. Some mornings Kirsten took Clyde to the park before putting on her tennis shoes and backpack; other times she stayed in her pajamas until after his midmorning nap. No matter the time, Kirsten's departures were always preempted by a quick pause on the sofa, where she would invite Clyde to sit, hug his neck and then kiss his head. She always told him that she loved him, that she would miss him. She instructed him to be a good boy.

Michael seldom spoke to Clyde the way that Kirsten had. Since she'd been gone, Clyde slept in the office on Kirsten's chaise, alone, but from there he could still hear Michael's voice drifting from the kitchen: frail, exhausted, but resounding with certainty.

Once he had heard: "No, she didn't have a will. Yes. I've looked through her files. I understand, but I know that she didn't want a burial. I know that for sure."

Then on another occasion: "No, I don't want it. That's fine. Sell it at auction, or scrap it for parts. How much? I'll contact my insurance company about that."

Every time Clyde heard those one-sided discussions, they were always followed by Michael's prompt departure—his bedroom door swiftly closed and latched.

Michael had known for sure there must have been something, somewhere. He rifled through every labeled folder in their file cabinet: 2011 tax documents, insurance claims, medical claims. Filed with Clyde's veterinary receipts he found an ad for pet memorials and remembered the way Kirsten got teary-eyed just thinking about Clyde growing old and dying. Michael almost didn't check the unlabeled manila envelope between the resume file and the folder filled with old birthday cards. Inside, he found a single sheet of unlined paper upon which a series of lines had been typed. He read the document to himself.

*Here is the deepest secret nobody knows*

*(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud*

*And the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows*

*Higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)*

*And this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart*

*I carry your heart (I carry it in my heart)*

*e. e. cummings*

Michael never knew Kirsten liked poetry.

Life was difficult, now, for both Michael and Clyde. Clyde didn't quite understand what was different; he knew only that he experienced a sensation of anticipation each afternoon that fizzled into boredom as the night wore on. Much of his daily routine remained the same: breakfast, midmorning nap, noontime potty break, followed by afternoon nap and then dinner. Every night, same as before, Clyde stood at

his dinner bowl in a corner of the kitchen and stared at the eggshell paint before him while he ate his kibble.

Mealtime aside, Clyde remained in Kirsten's empty office. As if drawn by gravity, he had continued to lie at the end of the gray suede chaise when the outside sky finally lost all light, listening to Michael move about the kitchen. Sometimes the man came in and sat quietly at Kirsten's desk only to stand, and minutes later, leave again. This worried Clyde.

Michael wasn't worried about Clyde. If anything, he was furious with the dog. "How can you just keep on living as if nothing has changed?" Michael asked him once, flipping on the light switch and entering his wife's office. "Can't you feel this void?" Clyde lifted his head from where it rested against his paw and looked at Michael. "Of course you don't. You just get to keep on living without a worry." Michael's sinuses were beginning to burn again and he felt the pitch of his voice rising beyond his control. "No. I am not going to let you forget her. You have to remember. She loved you more than I do, you know."

Michael rushed from the room, his limbs making swift, jagged movements, and when Clyde failed to follow he stuck his head back through the door and shouted down to the dog: "Come!"

In the living room, Michael pulled a framed photo off the shelf, knocking over a carefully arranged succession of family portraits, which landed softly on the sofa cushions below. After jostling the picture frame, wood groaning under the strain, he freed an eight by ten glossy photograph, and with the picture in hand he hurried into the

kitchen, banged through numerous drawers, returned, and knelt before Clyde's food dish, laboring over some unseen masterpiece. Then he stood.

"Look," Michael said to Clyde, who had been standing, stone like, in the doorway. Michael pointed a finger at the corner where he had used thumb tacks to fasten a photograph of Kirsten at eyelevel above Clyde's food bowl. "Go on now." Michael patted at the dog's butt and Clyde walked to his food dish, stopped, then looked back in wonderment at Michael. "Well. Eat your dinner." Clyde turned back to his food and Michael retreated, satisfied, but the dog didn't eat. He was too busy staring at the photo on the wall in front of his food dish.

And just like that, despite Kirsten's absence, things kept happening: kibble was dispensed, the phone rang, packages arrived. A man name Saul, from some salon, left a message for Kirsten, reminding her that she had a 4 PM hair appointment on Saturday. As Michael listened to the man's voice catching on the machine, he considered picking up, but he felt tired of explaining the accident.

It was on a Wednesday when two packages arrived—Clyde barked each time the doorbell rang—one addressed to Michael, the other to Kirsten. As for the content, Michael knew what occupied the one addressed from a company called Everlife Memorials. The other was a bulging yellow envelope from something called *The American Poetry Review*. He placed both packages on Kirsten's desk, regarded Clyde, and then turned off the lights to her office. Later that night, when Michael found vegetarian lasagna in the freezer, he preheated the oven to 375 degrees and sat on the kitchen floor and cried.

\* \* \*

After the pottery and the dancing, and Michael's flat-out refusal to bungee jump, there had been the motorcycle riding class. *She* had signed them up for the instructional course. She had made it her resolution to willingly and regularly learn new things. Daring things. Immediately it was clear that she possessed a talent for riding that Michael did not. When she passed the riding exam with a perfect score, receiving a sturdy handshake from the instructor and the praise: "You're a natural," Michael knew he'd be buying her a motorcycle within the foreseeable future. She was never one to allow newly-discovered talents to go to waste.

She fell in love with the prettiest motorcycle at the dealership: a gunmetal gray Suzuki road bike with pearl accents and chrome exhaust pipes. When they bought it, she promised him that everything would be OK, that he need not worry. Kirsten had talked about saving up for a side-car and a pair of doggy-goggles so that Clyde could come along with her wherever she went.

Clyde hadn't been taken anywhere in a while; he hardly left the confines of the office. Michael knew he should take him to the park or the lake, but he just couldn't. Clyde wouldn't have wanted to go anyway without Kirsten. Even without going, they both remembered the last visit the three of them had made to the shoreline park; all three of them—Michael, Clyde, and Kirsten.

It had been on a Saturday morning; the sun hung in the eastern sky, closer than what seemed usual. Michael tossed a yellow ball toward the water and it skipped a few times off the surface before bobbing ten feet from the shore. Clyde raced after it, leaping from the sand and into the lake as far as he could, sneezing the water out of his nostrils

when his head went under, and then paddling frantically toward the yellow ball. His blonde coat was darkened to a caramel brown and dripping from every strand as he dropped the ball at Kirsten's feet. She picked it up and handed it to Michael. Michael threw it again.

The game was delayed only when a man approached the beach pulling a plastic wagon. He had a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes and was wearing an oversized black tee-shirt that clashed with his white sneakers and gym socks. The wagon he pulled behind him was plastic and clunky—the kind with which a child might play. The man ignored Kirsten and Michael as he interrupted the trajectory of their game, and pulled his load into the surf where the wheels caught in the sand and dug deep, parallel grooves. Then, brashly, he tipped it over, knocking the passenger, a black dog in a faded red collar, out into the shallow water.

Michael felt Kirsten's hand squeeze his arm. When he looked at her face, it held the same worried look—the same anxiety he had grown accustomed to. Clyde felt a similar alarm, watching the man and the wagon and the dog; he dropped the ball from his mouth, and slowly approached the shoreline, nose lowered and ears pressed back.

The dog lay limp for a second—a second long enough for Michael to hear Kirsten's muffled gasp—then the man picked up the dog's flaccid hind legs and dragged him, backwards, into deeper waters as his front paws scrambled to touch down. By this time the man was knee deep himself, and still dragging the two deeper, but as soon as the black dog reached the perfect depth, his useless hindquarters floated to the surface like buoys and he was able to move through the water using only his front paws. He was walking on two legs while the water carried his immobile body. Michael saw this and

put his arm around Kirsten's shoulder. He felt her ease into the side of his body. Clyde, too, saw, and approached the water with excitement. The black dog barked madly at Clyde, and both bounded back and forth, always at a strategic depth of two and a half feet of water. With water sloshing audibly in his soaking shoes, the man righted the wagon, pulled it back up the beach and settled into the dirt to watch his dog run the distance of the shoreline.

During a moment's pause, with his chest heaving in and out, Clyde felt Kirsten wrap her arms around his dripping neck, and press her mouth against his ear. "It's you," she whispered to him alone, agreeing with some unasked question. "You're it, you're the whole meaning behind it all, and when you're gone, there won't be anything left." Michael saw his wife embrace Clyde—lake water dripping down her arms and soaking into her cotton tee-shirt, forming a wet spot in the shape of the dog's head—and he felt something rise within his chest, exit through the top of his head, and then hover above him. Michael felt safe, elevated.

The unlined entry stares at Michael tonight as it does every night. He doesn't know where Kirsten keeps the dog shampoo, though. Behind him Clyde lifts his head and Michael can hear the wind-chime tinkling of the dog's name tag against Kirsten's silver locket: the one that holds her ashes. It sounds nothing like the clank, clank, clank Clyde's previous tags had made, rustling with his every movement.

*The American Poetry Review*, Issue 114, catches his attention once more, the top corner protruding beyond the straight, neat line of book spines: the location Michael himself had placed it a week earlier, after stripping its manila packaging away. He pulls

it free and the remaining books expand to fill the space left behind. He jostles it back and forth between his hands, fanning the pages out with his thumb and then snapping them shut again. He doesn't know where the dog shampoo is, but he can look for it tomorrow.

For now, Michael stands up and pushes Kirsten's chair back under her desk. With his bare foot, he smoothes deep tread marks in the carpet where the wheels have rolled back and forth, night after night. Then, holding issue 114, Michael eases onto his wife's chaise, lifting his left foot carefully over Clyde's elongated body, so that dog fits comfortably in the space between his legs. Clyde is slightly surprised by Michael's actions, but nestles his head against Michael's thigh anyway. Once they are both comfortable, Michael opens the book and begins to read, putting his free hand quietly atop Clyde's head. He slides his fingers in circles on the dog's blond head, and reads, then rereads, the first line of the first poem between lifted glances, thinking as he does that Clyde appears content.

With Michael's heavy hand upon his head, and the man's long legs crowding Kirsten's reading chaise, Clyde sighs—a good sigh—and thinks, to himself, that Michael appears content.