

WHEN THE PEOPLE GO AWAY

by

Julie E. Dickson  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Creative Writing

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Spring Semester 2015  
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Fairfax, VA

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

For my family and Phillip, with love

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## **ABSTRACT**

WHEN THE PEOPLE GO AWAY

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*When the People Go Away* is a collection of thematically linked short stories and personal essays. In the stories, we follow characters through their various struggles with separation and self-actualization in worlds marked by homelessness, addiction, isolation, environmental destruction, and loss. In the personal essays, the author explores the distances in her own relationships, and how her need for understanding and connection reveals itself as both an obstacle to writing and its deepest motivating force.

## PROLOGUE

In the spring of 2012, I was living in Gainesville, Florida, in a gorgeous mid-century modern house that I shared with my brother and two other men in graduate school. Somehow, the landlord agreed to lease this model of architectural style—with its vaulted, “post-and-beam” ceilings, its circular pass-throughs and honey-colored hardwood floors, its broad, geometric windows in every Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired, light-flooded room—to a bunch of hard-partying boys who wanted to work for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the 26-year-old English teacher who boasted she could keep them in line.

But it was the garden behind the house that was the true wonder. The patio opened to an arc of fruit trees—persimmon, hog cherry, tangerine, fig. A mix of herbs crowded the beds beneath. Each day, as I followed the mulched paths with my morning coffee, some overlooked shrub revealed itself as a bouquet-laden hydrangea, a simple rose, the curious shrimp plant. In the center of it all stood a trellised bench, where I stretched out on the sweltering evenings when the mosquitoes were bearable and stared up into a canopy of red flame vine.

I rented the studio addition on the kitchen side of the house. My room had a separate entrance that I used to sneak out and indulge a smoking habit I believed I was hiding from my brother and then-boyfriend, Kyle. I’d crouch under my bathroom

window, behind a massive rain barrel that fed the garden's drip-irrigation system. Then I'd creep back in, brush my teeth, Febreze my hair, and tell myself no one knew—in the same way I told myself my roommates couldn't hear the humiliating sex I had with Kyle through the pocket door dividing my room from the rest of the house.

I pretended a lot of things that year: that I'd left the man I'd been with since age 20 to "find myself," that the rebound relationship I'd rekindled from high school was a return to lost love, that I'd quit my public school teaching job for a lower-paying adjunct stint to have more time to write, and that a writer was what I was, deep down, if I could just escape the obligations that got in the way. It was a year spent drinking bottles of wine on the patio in the afternoon, looking out onto that beautiful garden and scribbling in my journal about sun showers and deep connections and the bathwater of Cleopatra. A year of spectacular self-delusion.

One afternoon, Kyle had driven over from where he lived in Lakeland and was lying on the couch by my bed, occupied with something on his computer, when I got a phone call from a number I didn't recognize.

I slipped through the sliding glass door and walked out onto the grass by the hog cherry in my bare feet. The sky above was the slate blue of evening. I hit play on my voicemail and held the phone to my ear.

"Hello, Julie!" a man exclaimed. He sounded out of breath, eager. "This is Brian Morton! The program coordinator at Sarah Lawrence!"

My own breath quickened. Sarah Lawrence was one of the few schools to whose Creative Writing program I had applied and not yet been rejected. I'd spent the past few

weeks steeling myself against more of the same. But the voice in my ear chattered on about planning a visit, meeting the faculty, seeing more of my writing.

“I just wanted to give you the news personally! I hope you’ll decide to join our program!”

I played the message over and over, trembling as I held the phone, too happy to believe what I heard. In the coming months, I would keep the message in my voicemail box and listen to it, imagining scenarios where I would not have to call to tell him *no*, pushing back that moment until, at last, I let silence be my answer. That summer, I would write the message down, word for word, in my journal before deleting it, and with it yet another of the possibilities for this life.

But on that day, I remember jumping up and down on the lawn and waving my arms. I might’ve shouted. I might’ve turned my face to the sky and said *thank you, thank you, thank you*. I do remember looking around at the garden, at the hog cherry and the cascade of flame vine, at the yellow curling fingers of the shrimp plant, at the gardenia budding beside the rain barrel. I’d learned the other trees by their flowers—magnolia, dogwood, sweet-blooming loquat. Now a mess of fallen petals ringed a camellia nearby. In that moment, I felt, without any trace of irony, as though the world had conspired to be beautiful and perfect for my sake. To let me know, that after all the paralyzing doubt and indecision, I was on the right track.

Back inside, Kyle was sitting where I’d left him, his dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, his tattooed fingers clicking absently at the track pad of his laptop.

“I got into a writing program,” I said. “In New York. That’s who just called me.”

I stood in the center of the room as I spoke, facing this man I'd been dating for almost half a year. He gave me a blank look.

“I didn't know you were applying to schools.”

I imagine I gave him a blank look back. At least for a second. I certainly felt as stupefied as he did in my surprise.

“Are you serious? I've been talking about this for months.”

What happened in the next few minutes, I don't remember clearly. Of course he said he was sorry, made excuses about his pot-head memory, pulled me to him and said he was so happy for me. I said nothing. I didn't trust my voice not to break. I fought back tears and let him hold me.

Perhaps he took my silence for absolution. Because I don't know how else to explain what he said next.

“Here,” he gestured towards his computer. “Do you want to see the pictures of me and Joelle?”

Yes. The name of another woman. And no, I did not hit him. I couldn't have if I wanted to. My body had turned into lead. Very hot lead.

This Joelle was his ex-girlfriend, a French Canadian make-up artist who'd picked him up off the side of the road on her vacation to Florida a few years back, and who he'd mentioned, it seemed to me, every day since we'd gotten back together. Now I'd just broken the biggest news of my 20s, and we were talking about her.

I almost laughed out loud.

“I really want to share this part of my life with you,” he whined. “If you’re going to know me, you have to know about this huge thing that shaped who I am.”

Or something as nauseating as that.

Still, I must’ve said, *yes*. And I’m sure I forced myself to say it in a way that sounded as calm and convincing as possible. I might’ve even said something awful like, *Sure, I’d love to*, because that’s the kind of thing I did. It was more important to me in those days that I could make someone believe I wasn’t jealous or hurt when of course I was, that I could convince myself that a person cared about a meaningful relationship with me when his actions screamed that he did not, that I could content myself with treasuring this wonderful new thing in secret, when, for the first time in who knew how long, I wanted to share something from *my life* with someone else.

But in those days, I kept my life valuable by keeping it secret. At least, that was one of those things I pretended to believe.

So I got up, uncorked a double-bottle of Woodbridge Cabernet, returned to the couch with glass in hand, and submitted to a Facebook slideshow of Joelle and Kyle on a hike to the lighthouse off St. Augustine; Joelle and Kyle, arms around each other, smiling like idiots, outside Ripley’s Believe It or Not; Joelle, blonde and windblown and beautiful beside her Nissan pick-up truck, while in the background sea oats bent over the dunes; and on and on.

As I tuned out Kyle’s giddy monologue, I pictured Joelle in her hipster studio in Montreal, painting a delicate shadow around the eye of the next Sundance Film Festival sweetheart. So cool, so artistic. She could never imagine, let alone be, someone as

pathetic as I was in this moment, sitting here beside her rejected lover, stuffing down my happiness and rage. I found myself wishing I was with my own ex, who I never talked about and who had always encouraged my silly dreams, as I gulped cheap red wine until I passed out.

\* \* \*

That same spring, other people in my life were doing much more mature things than re-dating their poor excuse for a high-school sweetheart and fantasizing about book promos on Oprah. Lauren, my “best friend” since eighth grade, was graduating from veterinary school and getting married. One April weekend, I found myself in the throes of prepping for her bridal shower.

It was to be hosted at what I thought of as my enviably beautiful and sophisticated-looking home. The mild temps meant the affair could be held al fresco, on the patio overlooking the burgeoning garden. I aimed to show her snobby vet-school friends that this small-town working woman (yes, I actually pictured myself in these terms) could throw a classy party. It was my chance to prove, once and for all, that despite my tendency for procrastination and my cynicism about marriage, I deserved my coveted place as Maid of Honor (yes, there had been attempts at an overthrow).

I’d hand-made the invitations myself, with help from one of the traitorous bridesmaids, and sent them out in a timely fashion. I’d planned a three-course menu with gratuitous cocktail options. I’d chased the ogling-prone boys from the house for the

weekend, printed cards for Bridal Bingo, and bought ten packs of Bubalicious gum for the disturbing How-Many-Pieces-of-Gum-Can-You-Stuff-in-Your-Mouth-While-Trying-to-Answer-Obscure-Questions-About-Your-Husband game, a popular favorite, according to the Internet. My mother had even made the four-hour drive up from Ft. Pierce to help me cook.

Now, on the eve of the shower, Mom stood at the stove unwrapping whole chicken carcasses and dropping them into an industrial-sized pot of boiling water.

It was near midnight. We'd gotten a late start. There'd been the requisite glass of wine and catching up, the shopping, and then we lost a good two hours at Fresh Market debating bouquet color schemes. I don't think we started cooking until nine.

Now I stood, dazed with exhaustion, watching those dead birds plop into the steaming vat one after another, where they'd boil for God knows how long, then have to cool and be shredded and mixed with 14 more ingredients, before they finally became the Walnut Mandarin Chicken Salad in Sliced Croissant Sandwiches that were only one part of *one* of the three courses for this imminent brunch.

What the hell was I doing?

I'd invited 30 people, most of whom I didn't know and was determined not to like. I'd taken a second job that semester to finance my part in this extravagant wedding. I'd lost every weekend I could recall to either my MOH duties or the demands of my recently arrested, interstate pot-dealing boyfriend. And I hadn't written a word since the phone call about my acceptance to Sarah Lawrence two months earlier, unless you

counted scrawling in your journal after work while getting tanked on bottom-shelf wine as writing.

I looked around at the disaster of half-made fruit salad and broccoli slaw that crowded the countertop, sat down in the middle of the floor, and started laughing.

Mom turned to me, bewildered, then burst into her own giggles.

“Julie!” she said. “This is crazy! We just started the chicken salad! When are we going to have time to arrange the *flowers*?”

She opened her eyes wide in cartoonish shock and shook her head back in forth. I got up from the floor, still laughing, and hugged her. Mom kept her arms out straight, careful not to touch me with the meat juice.

We stood there holding each other, hiccupping and trying to catch our breaths. As the chicken steam billowed over us, I realized I hadn’t laughed this hard all semester, hadn’t felt such a basic sense of being understood. This was one of the things I loved most about my mom, that we laughed at the same stuff—usually ourselves, usually when we felt like crying—and for a second the insane party felt almost worth it. But I should’ve known better than to say anything out loud.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” I blurted.

Mom stared at me. Her smile turned sentimental, her eyes misty.

“Oh, Julie,” she sighed. “This is fun.”

She pursed her lips, about to cry. I felt myself stiffen in our embrace.

“I just hope when you get married,” she went on, “you’ll let me help with the parties.”

I pulled back. My anger flared up so fast I was afraid to meet her eyes. She was always saying ridiculous, insecure things like this.

I let her go and turned away.

“Of course,” I managed.

I took the knife off the counter and started hacking at the cantaloupe. Mom said nothing and at last moved back to the chicken.

*When you get married.* I hadn't even told her I'd been dating Kyle, and it had been six months. She'd only met my ex before him a handful of times, and we were together five years. Relationships just weren't something I shared with my family. Did she expect me to announce, out of the blue, that I'd found The One? That we could simply slip into the Rom-Com version of what our lives should be? I wasn't the only one adept at pretending. Yet I got upset when she doubted her place in my life.

She stood at the stove with her back to me, poking the chicken, tucking and re-tucking her hair behind her ears, wiping her eyes. I wondered if, before she'd spoken, she'd been thinking of her own wedding. Of her own mother. I wondered why I never asked about these things.

Because, as halfhearted as it might have sounded, I knew I meant what I'd said. I knew I wanted her to be *there*, whatever that might mean. I knew I wanted something from her that a wedding, with all its preparations and festivities, vaguely implied.

But I also knew—on some level I think we both did—that the operative word here was not *when* I would get married, but *if*.

And that was a possibility that my mother, now miles away across the kitchen, could not yet entertain.

\* \* \*

Lauren tied the knot, and I spent her wedding night down the street in the hotel room of a sun-tanned aerospace engineer who'd lost his eye in a surfing accident. Yes, the glass eye was part of the attraction.

The next morning, I met the bride and the other girls by the pool for Bloody Marys.

"Where were you last night?" one of my friends shrieked. "I can feel the sex just pouring off of you!"

I was a relative stranger to the one-night stand, and was technically still dating Kyle, who I had not invited as my plus one. I flashed a sly grin.

But then, over the next few days, I planned my life with this new man, stalker style. One-Eye was the first guy I'd slept with that didn't spend the majority of his free time getting wasted, and I took this as the most meaningful of signs. He would transfer to the Boeing headquarters in Virginia, where I was moving in a few months to join the M.F.A. program at George Mason University. After I published my first novel, we'd start having blonde, beautiful, two-eyed babies. I actually told my coworkers at the English Language Institute that I was in love.

When I stood in my garden and called him a week later, he was in line at Tropical Smoothie. Between placing and picking up his order, he told me he didn't have time for a relationship. Then he indulged me in some miserable small talk. After hanging up the phone, I went behind the rain barrel and cried.

Of course this hadn't been love. It had just been so much better than what I had at the time. And I don't only mean the sex, but rather the possibility of a life with a responsible, and—from all outward appearances—respectable, non-criminal-record-having man. That Saturday, I drove to Lakeland (Kyle couldn't leave the county under terms of his probation) and said I couldn't do it anymore.

I kept teaching through the suffocating Gainesville summer. I went to two more weddings. I spent as much time as I could with my brother, out on the patio drinking wine, trying to believe that after I left for Virginia our relationship wouldn't change. By August, I'd packed up my beautiful studio and arranged for my parents to keep my cat until I got another sophisticated—and this time roommate-free—apartment outside of Washington, DC.

The only loose end left was the motorcycle.

It leaned on its kickstand at the front of a junk heap that had taken over the carport. A Honda Shadow, 750 cc, with red factory-issued flames on the gas tank. Her name was Gloria.

I'd bought the bike when I was 20, young enough to be required to take a certification course one weekend out in a high-school parking lot with a group of other,

mostly middle-aged, road hog hopefuls. Six months later, I took off for a semester in Paris and left her in the care of my other brother, who dropped her on a slow turn through some sand. She spent the following years, rarely ridden, in various stages of disrepair. Truth be told, the motorcycle scared me, as much as I wanted to pretend that it didn't.

Now I was selling it, for \$1000, to my *real* ex-boyfriend, Phillip. The one I'd dated for five years. The one I'd lived with and then kicked out, only to have him move next door and the relationship continue on. The reason I'd moved in with my brother was because I wanted to break up and didn't know how. Relocating across town seemed a good first step. Kyle turned out to be the second.

But that same week I got accepted to Sarah Lawrence, a few days after I sat on the couch with Kyle as he tried to process his feelings for Joelle, Phillip called me. I was standing out in the garden again. All of sudden there was his voice in my ear, so familiar.

"Thanks for picking up the phone," he said.

"Thanks for wanting to talk to me."

I don't remember the first awkward moments of that conversation. He probably said that work at the restaurant was as frustrating as ever; I probably complained about being too stressed. I know we both claimed we were good, though our tones said otherwise. It was February then, so he likely mentioned being in the middle of his annual month off from drinking. Somehow I got around to saying I was going back to school.

"So I guess that means you'll be moving," he said.

"Yeah. To New York. Or maybe somewhere else." I tried to sound excited, but the words were hard to form in my mouth. "I haven't heard back from everyone yet."

He seemed to be having the same word-forming problem.

Then, after a second: "I'm happy for you. I know this is what you wanted."

"Thanks," I said.

"I'll miss you," he said. "I miss you now."

It took three months after my breakup with Kyle, but here Phillip was in my driveway, digging around in the toolbox of his 1980 Ford F-150 for ratchet straps. I'd made sure to call him when the rest of the boys, my brother included, were gone to a conference for the weekend. I'd talked a lot of shit to them about Phillip in the beginning, and I felt oddly ashamed to have him here, let alone to be selling him the bike.

We walked Gloria, dry-rotted tires and all, up a reinforced plywood ramp and into the bed of the truck.

"You shouldn't've gone so long without cranking it," he said. "Now the carburetor's fouled up for sure."

We'd been hiding behind that kind of shoptalk since he got here.

"Are you sure you still want it?" I asked. I sensed some vague guilt creeping in. I knew Phillip didn't have money to throw around.

"It's worth three times running what you'd get for it now," he said. "I'll fix it up and sell it. And then we could, I don't know, split the difference."

He didn't look at me when he spoke. And he was careful to keep any hope from his tone. Instead, the words sounded final, sad.

"No. Keep whatever you make. It's yours now."

He nodded.

Then I watched him move from one side of the truck to the other, weaving the straps through the bike frame, hooking them into the walls of the bed, cranking them tight. He always worked fast, whether he was cooking on the line at the restaurant, or turning the vegetable garden we'd planted together, or moving our boxes into the old apartment and, a year later, moving his out. It was one of the differences between us: He was fast, I was slow. You wouldn't think things like that should matter, but they do.

Though now as I watched him, I admired his efficiency, his sureness. This hadn't changed, but something had. He'd gotten so skinny. His tall, lanky frame only made it more pronounced. The dark circles beneath his eyes were deeper, and long periods passed when he said nothing. Yet something in him seemed so solid, reassuring. So known.

"Do you want to stay and hang out?" I asked.

He looked down at me from the truck bed for a moment, puzzled.

"Yeah."

I didn't tell him about Kyle, or the other guys that year. He kept quiet about any adventures of his own. We didn't talk about the future, or pretend that we were getting back together. But the next morning, as we lay in bed in the otherwise empty and sundrenched room, we said *I love you*.

We embraced before he got into the truck. I stood at the end of the driveway as he pulled away, and the blue sky opened up in a brief shower. I let the heavy drops fall on me without moving. I didn't think about the bathwater of Cleopatra, or anything else

ridiculous or profound. When he turned the corner, the sunlight flashed off the red gas tank of the motorcycle, and then he was gone.

I stood there for a long time, listening as the chug of his engine faded into the main road rush. As I watched the steam from the rain rise off the asphalt, I wondered just what it was I felt so desperate to leave behind.

## WHEN THE PEOPLE GO AWAY

The day Bobby Two-Hats ran out onto the porch clutching a kitchen knife over his head as the neighborhood looked on, and the last illusions of this little community collapsed and scattered out like so many leaves in the wind, Allison was not there. She had moved away and on to her new life, and so could only imagine the end through the witness of others:

Roger: That bitch was crazy. Ever since he turned on me in the dish pit like it was ME that was the asshole after I got him the job, I was DONE with that motherfucker. (*Arms flapping*) And he's always like, Man, I thought you were my friend?

Nathan: Well... I dunno what set him off, dude. He thought we were in trouble or something. But we had it under *control*, you know? (*Looking around*) We just can't have that kinda *thing* here. You know?

Molly: Nathan and Zach were talking with some guys who came to pick up, and they weren't guys that had been here before, and they said something to Bobby. It was a bad vibe for sure. But it wasn't until they said something to Zach that Bobby got up all of a sudden and went inside. (*Eye contact and pursed lips*) You know how he is about Zach.

Zach:

\* \* \*

When Allison moved to the neighborhood, she painted each room of her half of the duplex apartment a different color: Robin's Egg blue in the living room, lavender in the bathroom, and in the bedroom, a pinkish orange. The kitchen she painted a brilliant lime green, so the walls glowed under the fluorescent tube lights like the inside of a leaf. Bright colors energized a room, especially when you didn't have a lot of stuff to clutter it up and make it look small.

On the outside of the front door, iron bars crisscrossed the window panels. Allison pulled sheets of fading delivery flyers free from the bars and scrubbed between them as best she could. Then she painted the street side of the door red for "Welcome" and the ugly bars white. Across the street, an older man in a Hawaiian-print shirt swept little puffs of dust off his porch into the dirt yard. He looked up at her, and she flicked her eyes back to her painting.

Allison knew that a clean house might be called *modest*, but that a dirty house was poor. So she scrubbed the sticky cabinet shelves and drawers, and measured them and cut liners from newspaper like she had watched her mother do growing up. She mounted rods for her hand-made curtains and then stuffed the grimy blinds from the previous tenants in the garbage outside. At the Salvation Army, she found a rag rug to cover the stained

living-room carpet and two practically-unused tasseled pillows that were perfect for the lone sofa. She hung her clothes neatly in the closet and stacked her thrift-store dishes in the cabinets. Then, with the last packing box broken down and the cleaning supplies beneath the sink, Allison opened all the windows and stood in each room, taking in the light, the colors, the simple order of her solitary life.

Outside, the sun setting behind the row of houses edged the peaks of their sagging roofs with gold. Allison plunked down on her front steps, the decorating all finished and no one to show it to. Her cat lay curled in a patch of ferns against the house.

Across the narrow street, the older man from before sat on the porch with a younger man, a kid really—close to her age—smoking cigarettes. The older man wore a floppy hat, glasses, and the Hawaiian-print shirt. He saw Allison and made a wide wave with his arm.

“Hey! New neighbor!”

Allison moved her face in what she hoped seemed a natural smile, and she wiggled her hand to wave back. The younger guy, in a movement that seemed hardly movement at all, brought his cigarette to and from his lips, exhaled, and stared at her through a cloud of smoke. Her chest tightened, and she turned her eyes back to her cat where he slept on the ground.

The last Saturday before Allison started classes and her work-study job at the bookstore, she monitored the house across the street. Midday, a Honda Civic pulled up, and several college boys in team sweatpants stumbled out and up onto the porch. The

older man lay on a couch behind the railing and cradled a guitar, but he didn't do more than steal a sideways glance at the boys and continue to nod to some rhythm in his head. The guys looked at him and looked away without greeting, knocked on the door, and went in. About 30 minutes later they came out laughing. Car doors slammed, music cranked, and tires screeched down the street. Not too long after, a white trash couple with another girl piled out of a rusted hatchback. The single girl showed half her behind and thong underwear while getting out of the car before she hiked her shorts and then pulled down on them at the crotch, as if doing all this in broad daylight were nothing to be embarrassed about. Allison turned away from the window.

As the day went on, every time she glanced out, there was a different car parked across the street and people going in and out of the house. It was obvious now what that meant. It made her a little uneasy, but it figured. Her duplex was on the side of the "student ghetto" that didn't have so many students. Though they did make up a share of her neighbors' business.

That evening, before she walked down to the end of the street to get a snack at the gas station, Allison made a mental note of the current vehicle in her neighbors' yard, just in case, and locked her door. The older man, again in the Hawaiian-print shirt, looked up from his guitar and waved. He had taken off his floppy hat, exposing a bald head. Allison forced her arm up to wave back. How stupid that she once thought about having people over for a "house warming," or something like that.

As she walked back from the store, the streetlamps lit a dim tunnel beneath the oaks that canopied over the block. So many trees had been allowed to grow up over so

many years that, even during the day, the neighborhood remained in shadow. Allison had never thought it possible to have too many trees, until she realized grass would never grow through the layer of thick leaf litter over her yard. But the cockroaches loved to nest in it, and so, adorably enough, did her cat.

“Hey! New girl!”

She jerked her head towards the sound and stopped still in the street. A dreadlocked girl crouched on the steps of the porch. Behind her, the older man stretched out on the couch with his guitar, singing to himself as a cigarette jiggled between his lips. Two other boys Allison hadn't seen sat in folding chairs beside the strange, still boy from the other day. Everyone turned to her but the old man, who continued tapping the side of his guitar and mumbling.

“I'm Molly. Wanna beer?”

Allison's heart started thumping and her apartment pulled at her so hard she must have been leaning towards it, but the girl held out a Miller High Life like a command. Allison walked over to take it and sat down.

“This is Nathan, my boyfriend,” Molly winked at the skinny boy with long greasy hair. “This is Roger,” she said, elbowing the guy back to her left. “Asshole, by the way.” She turned to look at him and smiled as she said it. “And this is Zach.”

She gestured at the young guy Allison had seen smoking on the porch before. Now, as then, he seemed to exist without motion, a statue, even when he lifted his beer at his name. His skin and hair were dark, and his face was soft like a child's, but handsome. Allison's chest tightened again. A smile curved at the corners of Zach's mouth, and then

his expression became still, and distant. She blushed. He must be shy. But it wasn't like she was so great at talking to people, either.

“Nathan and Zach live here,” Molly kept going. “I live south of campus, but I'm here a lot. Roger lives in your other half. And this is Bobby.” The old man in the Hawaiian shirt grinned a mouthful of brown teeth.

“I stay on the porch and try to keep it cleaned up for these bastards. Ha ha! I seen you going to school in the mornin' and I wave atcha to say, Hey!”

Allison laughed. He was a little off, but seemed kind, though who knew why he was hanging out with people so much younger than him. She turned back to Zach to find he was staring at her, or sleeping with his eyes open. His mouth bent again into a smile, and she smiled back. Molly tapped Allison's bottle with her own and gave her a wink. Allison blushed again. It must have been since graduation, if not before, that she had actually had a lighthearted conversation with anyone her own age. The strangeness of it was almost funny. Maybe these people were all right after all, though somehow they translated into the exchanges she watched from across the street.

“We're always here, dude,” Nathan said, clinking his beer against hers. “Don't be a stranger.”

\* \* \*

Saint Leo Community College required all students to register their phone numbers so they could be notified via text message of safety threats on campus and in the

area. At the start of the semester, Allison found herself receiving frequent and rather inconclusive robo-text bulletins:

Monday, 2:47 pm: SLCC Alert (SLPD investigating shots fired call in area of east campus off Waldo Rd. x2 blk male suspects. Contact Police if you ha

Wednesday, 1:56 am: SLCC Alert Reported armed subject (Blue jeans, flannel shirt, cleaned shaved Asian Male) w/ knife, poss gun at collg row SLPD on scen

Wednesday, 3:41 am: SLCC Alert SLPD was unable to locate armed subj. Witness advised possibly left in unknown veh. Contact SLPD w/any info

Molly: These alerts are completely unhelpful. What? (*Arms out*) They wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me how safe I'm not?

\* \* \*

Allison stood over an extra-small version of a gas stove, likely dating from the 1960s. She stirred a large pot of minestrone, made, of course, only for herself. She took her time when she cooked, rinsing and measuring, boiling and stirring, rereading the old handwritten recipes with the evening breeze drifting in. The screen had fallen off the kitchen window, and her cat perched halfway in and halfway out on the sill above the

sink, squinting his eyes into the setting sun. Bobby Two-Hats was strolling back from the gas station with a six-pack of something in a plastic bag. He was singing “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” loud enough to hear a block away. He must’ve just come back from playing at the plaza for donations. Yesterday, Allison had walked to the plaza for the farmers’ market and saw Bobby there sitting in the grass between the booths.

“Hey Allison! How ya doin’ girl!” He’d held up a pink pouch with machine-embroidered bamboo and koi fish. “Check this out! I found it on the ground when I was walkin’ here. And I thought, Yeah! Some college chick will buy this! You wanna buy it? Two bucks!”

Bobby Two-Hats got his name because he wore two hats, floppy canvas hats, one over the other. He carried his guitar downtown to play in the plaza or on the corners outside bars and shops, where he sat cross-legged on the sidewalk as passers-by dropped change into his case. Allison went out once with some girls she worked with at the bookstore, and they almost stumbled over him when they rounded a corner.

“Hey ladies!” he shouted. “Play a song for a dollar! Whatcha wanna hear? I know Bob Dylan—”

The girls twisted their faces in disgust and kept clicking down the sidewalk.

“I even got a Katy Perry song! Allison!”

She stopped in front of him.

“I didn’t recognize ya there for a second. You look all *nice*! How ya doin’ girl!”

She smiled, maybe because it was the first time she had seen him off the porch, and he looked like he was having fun.

“I’m good, Bobby.” She had a silly affection for street music—how it could ring from a shadowed enclave the nostalgia for an unknown life.

“I don’t have any cash on me,” Allison apologized. “But I’ll bring you a beer later.”

The other girls looked back at her in disbelief.

“Aw, Allison. You rock!” He lifted his grimy hand for a high five. She hesitated a second and wished she hadn’t, then slapped the raised palm. “See ya at home, girl!”

Bobby made most of his money on the weekends, and when he was ready to call it a night, he walked back to the neighborhood, stopping on the way at the gas station for a hot dog, 305 cigarettes, and a six-pack, usually High Life. Then he returned to his couch on the porch to enjoy the fruits of his labors. In the morning, he picked up the empty beer bottles and put them in the recycling, dumped the brimming ashtrays into the garbage, and swept.

Molly: You know Bobby went to college, right? Or did for a while. Law or something.

*(Raised eyebrows)*

Nathan: Yeah. He *chooses* to be this way, man. He just rejected that whole consumer *life* and shit. And what he’s playing now is amazing. *(Eyes closed)* Really *amazing*.

Roger: That dude says his mom was schizophrenic and he claims that he is, too. That bitch is NOT schizophrenic. (*Unblinking stare*) Have you ever MET someone that's schizophrenic? He's cool and all. But he could have a job if he wanted.

\* \* \*

A couple months into the semester, kittens showed up at the house across the street. They took to following Allison's older cat around, pouncing through piles of leaf litter and scrambling in through the screenless window. She walked out of the bathroom one day to be ambushed from the sofa by a tiny tabby with needle claws. She looked around and spied a second striped tail twitching from under the bed, and smiled. She gathered them against her and walked across the street.

"Thanks for bringing my cats back." Zach said, holding one in each hand, as they batted the strings of his sweatshirt. "I'm sorry if they're bothering you."

He smiled his small smile. She had grown familiar with the sadness behind his usual lack of expression.

"They're not bothering me."

Night after night, Allison came out and sat on the porch, hoping for friendship, sure (she could admit she had never been good at making friends), but really for someone who would eat the dinner she cooked and lie next to her on the couch while they watched T.V. reruns. Someone she could whisper to at night and just be with, yes. And there was something in Zach, his stillness, his quietness, like a hollow carved out in the heart, that

told her they understood each other. She wanted to tell this melancholy boy that she was melancholy, too. That there were people she missed. The cats were an excuse—to come knock on the door, to see what he was doing, or maybe ask if he wanted to come over sometime. But she couldn't bring herself to speak.

The smell of bitter smoke reached her from inside. Pizza boxes and crumpled paper clogged the hallway behind him. An unfamiliar voice called from farther back in the house. "Zach! You gonna come hit this?"

"I gotta go," he said. But he didn't move when she turned and stepped off the porch. When she looked back, the door had closed behind him without a sound.

Sunday, 6:56 pm: SLCC Alert Robbery occurred at 1610 SW 13th St no weapon involved suspect white male 6 ft 160lbs wearing green shirt dark pants

Sunday, 8:10 pm: SLCC Alert SLPD still investigating Robbery at 1610 SW 13th St suspect fled Westbound on foot call SLPD 955-1818 if you have any info

Allison checked her phone as she walked home from class in the dark. She was tired. From the months of work and school, from waking in the night to the noise of shouting and breaking bottles. The couple next to her and Roger was in a regular state of dispute. A few nights back, Allison had heard a woman screaming and ran out to see her neighbors wrestling each other a hundred yards down the street. She watched, frozen, as the man finally got a hold on the woman and threw her across his shoulder.

“Don’t call the police.”

Roger’s voice spoke out of the darkness, reading her thoughts. He sat alone on the porch, it being after midnight. Bobby snored on the couch behind him. “Those jackasses fight all the time. Call the cops, it’ll only make trouble for YOU.”

Now, her phone read 10:48. If only she didn’t have class so late this semester. Then down the street, in the shadows, she saw two figures. They were tall, inhumanly tall, coming side by side at a slow pace. She hiked her backpack higher and quickened her stride in the direction of the turn.

In this moment she hated the neighborhood and these dark shapes she could not force her exhausted mind to comprehend. Fatigue fell like a curtain over her, slowing her movements. She wouldn’t run, wouldn’t give in to panic. She would walk quickly and purposefully like she did every night and no one would bother her. She fixed her eyes on the ground before her feet. She turned onto her street and did not glance back until she heard a hollow noise at the intersection.

There, under the lamplight, she knew them for what they were—animal muscles contoured in the glow, reflection on belts and helmets—the mounted officers of the Saint Leo Police Department. Her held breath rushed out. God, she was a stupid, fearful girl. The clomp of hooves echoed off the block walls of the houses, as the dark patrol passed like the ghosts of her imagination.

She glanced over at the porch across the street. Bobby squatted alone on the steps. He grinned, but didn’t lift his hand as usual to wave. In the crooks of his arms nestled the sleeping kittens.

\* \* \*

On Saturdays, once the weather got warm, the neighbors across the street swam in the pool at a nearby apartment complex. Allison and Molly ambled down the street in their swimsuits and shorts with their towels draped over their shoulders, taking their time. Allison had forgotten, in the swelter of summer freedom, that she had been raised not to be half naked in public unless she was in the water already. Instead she daydreamed, enjoying the sun on her bare shoulders and the company of a girl she was almost confident enough to call her friend.

The day before, Allison and Zach had hiked together in the city preserve behind Eighth Avenue, with the sun coming down through the leaves, and the clear Hogtown Creek winding along. They had talked, just a little, about their mothers, about coming to a new town. They had taken off their shoes and waded in the cool stream, shuffling up the soft fine silt, and had followed the twining water away from the trail into the preserve. (Roger: That creek is the most polluted in the state! There's MERCURY in that shit. And you idiots went in with your bare feet!) Hours later they had sat together on the porch, sun-warmed bodies leaning against one another, and eaten ice cream sandwiches from the gas station. Now Allison was getting up her courage to ask Molly about it. She wanted to know if Zach might like to go to dinner and a movie sometime, even though it was old-fashioned, of course.

Molly sighed. “You know Zach’s mom is dead, right?” She looked sideways at Allison, who nodded her head yes. “Do you know what she died from?” Allison said she hadn’t asked. “Do you know Zach gets disability checks from Social Security?” Molly’s voice became suddenly gentle, full of purpose. “Because he *got it* from his mom.”

The air sucked out of Allison’s chest. No, she had not known that, she told Molly, or had even thought to guess.

Her friend took a deep breath. “He can’t live like other people live. That money is why Nathan and him are so laid back dealing.” Her voice regained the distance of casual conversation. “They could never make enough doing it how they do, you know?”

They arrived at the pool, and Molly reached through the gate bars and lifted the latch from the inside. Two girls lying out across the deck exchanged looks as Molly pushed open the gate. They were probably legitimate residents who didn’t want outsiders at their pool. Molly plunked her bag down three chairs away and untied the scarf from around her dread-locks. The other girls frowned. Bobby Two-Hats was there, alone in the deep end of the pool, drifting around with his clothes on, and his hats.

“Molly! Allison!”

“Hey, Bobby,” Molly said as she slid in. “Great day for a swim, eh?”

“Oh yeah, man! And!” He held up a dripping finger and pointed at himself. “This is how I do my laundry!”

At that, the two girls in the chairs got up and gathered their things. They stomped over the deck and let the gate door crash behind them. Allison stared at the water around Bobby. Maybe it wasn’t as blue or *clear* as she remembered in other pools. The sun

shone hard on the white deck, and she was glad for her sunglasses. Besides, she was fighting something in her eyes, something tight and uncertain in her chest. Something that made the world alien and removed from behind the shield of the plastic shades. What would she say when she saw Zach again? She knew what Molly meant. She didn't need to hear the words themselves to believe in yet another loss. That much got easier. Allison sat down on the edge on the pool and dangled her legs in the water, but she couldn't make herself get all the way in.

\* \* \*

In August, about a week before the start of the new semester, Allison came home from a late movie to find her T.V. smashed in and the living room furniture shoved around. In her bedroom, the window was broken. The curtains billowed up as a night breeze drifted through the jagged hole. She forced her head to turn to the dresser. The jewelry box was gone. Of course it was. And with it, her mother's necklace.

So was her computer, and all the work she had done that year and never backed up, though she had thought about doing it a million times. They hadn't taken the T.V., probably because it was so old, and had just smashed it out of frustration. Allison stood in the bedroom, not moving until she was sure she wouldn't be sick, transfixed by the sparkle of the light from a streetlamp caught in the broken glass on the floor. Finally she curled up on her bed with her face in the pillow, and cried.

After three days, her cat reemerged from wherever he had been hiding since the break in. Allison had surveyed the full array of apartment complexes in the newer and actual “student” area south of campus, and had made a decision. The old landlord hadn’t fixed the window by the time she moved out, and so when she went room by room for the last time through her first apartment, the garbage bag duck-taped over the broken pane blocked the light, where once the pinkish orange walls had glowed in perpetual sunset. Her new place had strict rules about not painting and came with modulated furniture. It had all new amenities and screens on the windows. A good thing, she guessed, as she’d be on the fifth floor, and she didn’t want her cat thinking he could climb out from that height. There was an indoor pool, a gym, and a schedule of social events for the residents, none of which Allison ever took advantage of.

Instead, she rode her bike aimlessly around town. She thought about her old friends, but didn’t call them. That wasn’t part of their relationship—she didn’t even have their numbers. Only once, after a month or so, did she go back, and there they were, on the porch. Minus one.

“Hey, stranger,” Molly half-looked in her direction as Allison leaned the bike against a tree. “How’s the new place?”

“It’s fine.” She forced her eyes over to the old apartment, still unrented, with the silly red door and white bars.

“You wanna beer, or something?” Roger spoke without moving towards the case.

“No, it’s OK. I got stuff to do later. Thanks, though.”

He nodded. There was a heaviness all around. Zack leaned in the chair in his usual corner, veiled by a cloud of smoke. After the conversation at the pool, Allison hadn't looked for reasons to get him out of the house with her anymore. She still went to hang out when the others were there, and he never asked her any questions. When she told him she was moving, he just nodded, and a fracture opened in her for what would never be. There lay another emotion behind it. Cowardice maybe, or shame.

Then Nathan tapped his cigarette into the ashtray and leaned back on the couch. *That's* what was different.

“Where's Bobby?”

\* \* \*

After Nathan told Bobby to leave the porch and never come back, Allison seemed to see him everywhere. When she was riding her bike, she saw him walking St. Leo Avenue towards downtown, guitar bumping on his back, Hawaiian-print shirt, floppy hats. Another time, a few blocks down from the old street, she passed a vacant house with a porch and thought for sure a bald head bobbed up, as though someone had been sleeping behind the railing. She spotted him cross-legged on the street corner from a distance, but didn't go over, afraid he wouldn't remember who she was, or some excuse like that. He floated up in her thoughts when she read the headlines of the paper: “St. Francis House places limit on meals served after complaints from community” or

“Homeless man attacked by alligator in Tent City, loses leg.” Each time he surfaced, there rose up behind him the specter of the porch, of Zach, of other specters.

Saturday, 5:53 am: SLCC Alert Possible homeless man attacked at 1200 w st leo. Suspect white male in a white van. Call SLPD w/info

Saturday, 5:57 am: SLCC Alert Updated Suspect Info. White male, med build. About 5’11 160 lbs. Poss bald with white pants and flower printed shirt

The time Allison and Zach walked in the preserve together, they came upon a dense and unnatural clump of palm fronds.

“Watch out!” Zach grabbed her arm and pulled her back—the first time he’d touched her. A current jolted through her body. He hesitated as he let go, as though the contact had startled him, too. They looked down. Directly before them, a row of sharpened sticks stuck up from the ground.

“Booby traps,” Zach said. “Somebody lives here.”

\* \* \*

It was halfway through her year in the neighborhood that Allison and Bobby had their only real conversation. She was standing in her side yard, where she could get cell reception, talking on the phone and kicking the leaf litter. An orange cat trotted towards

her and started rubbing against her legs. There were so many cats in this neighborhood—her own had fought them almost every day since they moved in. She didn't know this one, didn't want to be paranoid, but it was rubbing against her kind of hard. Head-butting her almost. She walked away. It followed. She turned back and forth, pacing. For the cat, this became a game. She looked down at the thing with angry annoyance and growing fear, and met its frenzied eyes. The cat leapt onto her leg and sank its claws into her flesh.

She screamed and dropped her phone. Bobby started running over from the porch as she kicked the animal free from her leg. It stood stunned a foot away, and before it could move, she kicked it again as hard as she could.

“Hold on!” He scooped up the cat and held it tight to his chest. It clawed at him and hissed. “Stop it, you lil’ bastard!”

Allison blushed in shame. Who had he come to help, her or the cat? She had been angry, irrationally angry. It was all just too much then—the leaf-litter, the lack of reception in her house that made her afraid sometimes to be alone, the stress she carried in her body every day, home and to school and work and home again—why did this creature have to bother her, too? She would've never thought she could hurt an animal. But she had, and had wanted to.

“This is Marla’s cat,” Bobby said, and they walked a few houses down while the animal snarled and kicked against him.

“He’s not a bad cat,” he said after they left Marla. “He’s just growin’ into his balls and actin’ real nasty. Time to get him fixed.”

Then as Bobby turned off the road to go back to the porch, he looked at Allison.

Bobby: Cats ain't like dogs. Lil' bastards, man, and just for the hell of it. My mom used to say to me when I was a kid, you know, When the people go away, those cats have a party on the kitchen table! (*Cracked smile*) And it's true, man! It's true!

## **DISTANCES: 2013**

My sister-in-law volunteers on the night shift at the Crisis Center. That means on Fridays at 10 p.m., after locking all the doors behind her as she goes, she enters a little room somewhere deep in the Health Department building and sits there alone until 6 a.m., as she answers the Suicide Hotline and tries to talk the callers down.

The other day, all my relatives were over at my parents' for a weekend lunch, and my sister-in-law went back into the guest bedroom to rest, as she usually does at some point during these claustrophobic affairs.

“Where’s Ernestine?”

Family members like to take turns asking this, more to remark on her absence than as a genuine question. They’ve not yet accepted her occasional need for solitude.

When she finally came out this time, though, I saw she had been crying.

“We lost someone yesterday at the Crisis Center,” she said.

We were standing alone together in the foyer. Her lip trembled. It was the first time she’d let me see her upset, the first disruption I’d ever witnessed in her chilly and constant poise. So disorienting was this that, at first, I couldn’t figure out what she meant.

“One of our regulars,” she went on. “He’d been calling in every day for three years. And yesterday—”

Her voice gave out, and I understood. I put my hand on my heart.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, knowing these words were hardly enough.

She nodded and wiped away a tear that had escaped down her cheek. Then she took a deep breath and walked out to the kitchen, appearing almost as composed as always.

For hours afterwards, I could not clear that image from my mind. Not of the tear, but of the shift in the very substance of her face as she set her countenance against the strangers waiting in the next room, who were, at least in name, her family. Nor could I ease the tightness building in my chest as I watched her move among us with a dancer’s measured, untouchable grace. By evening, as I stood on the porch looking out on the rising dark, I at last admitted to myself the source of my sadness. For even then, there in the foyer, in that first longed-for moment shared with my new sister, I was unable to overcome my own reserve and embrace her.

\* \* \*

My brother got married in late December, looking out over a lake from a tiny chapel with walls made of glass. After the reception, the whole party moved up to the second-floor hotel common room for delivery pizza and the remains of the open bar. Several cocktails in, and alternately stumbling over my floor-length, strapless bridesmaid dress and hiking it up again, I blundered into a conversation with my Uncle Frank. He had cornered one of my brother’s groomsmen, Kevin, and his wife.

“So are you going in as maintenance?” he asked Kevin.

I looked back and forth between the two men.

“Oh, no,” Kevin said. “I’m infantry.”

Uncle Frank was standing in the chin-up-chest-out-stomach-in-neck-back pose he assumed when discussing the military, though now somewhat relaxed by a quantity of bourbon and the security of years. Kevin stood almost at ease, legs apart, with a beer in his hand.

Frank looked pointedly at me.

“He’s fulfilling his duty as a citizen of this country.”

I tried my best for a good-natured smile.

“Uncle Frank! Despite what you may think, I really do support our troops!”

Kevin and his wife, Diane, exchanged tense looks beside me. My brothers and I had known Kevin since we were children, knew that Diane’s parents had not come to their wedding, knew that the two had just bought a house in North Carolina, and that Kevin was shipping out in ten days.

“Everyone should have to serve in the military,” Uncle Frank went on, smiling. “It would make this country a much better place. Teach people some dignity and respect.”

He was pushing on purpose, and I’d had too much whiskey already. I could feel my neck getting hot and blotchy, and I turned to Diane for relief.

“I don’t know about that,” she said to me. Her face had hardened into a mask of self-willed strength. I became furious for her at my uncle.

“I saw the recruiters on campus when I taught at CHS!” I blurted out. I’d been a teacher the year before at a low-income high school. “What they’re doing is wrong!”

Frank frowned. “Joining the army is the best thing that could happen to those kids.”

“Or the worst!” I caught the look in Kevin’s eyes but couldn’t stop. “It’s predatory! Those kids are babies! Babies!”

Then someone jerked me back, and I turned to see my newlywed brother glaring at me in a cold rage. He pulled me around the corner.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing.” His grip tightened around my arm. “But you’re gonna knock it off. Now. Understand? This isn’t about you. Or your goddamn students.”

He turned and walked away. I set my jaw at his back, trying to hold onto whatever self-righteousness I had left as a shield against my growing shame. Tears streamed down my face as I stood silently apart from the celebration in the next room. All that I had meant was that I wished there was not a war in Afghanistan, and that my friend was not going there to fight it.

\* \* \*

My mother has been a first-grade teacher at the same elementary school for 28 years, but for some reason, she’s never become particularly close with any of the other teachers, save one woman, once, named Barbara Shallow. But Barb died a few years back

of what was a little too enthusiastically whispered to be cirrhosis of the liver. Mom kept a potted arrangement from her funeral for months, even after it withered and died.

I used to be a teacher as well, before “moving on to better things,” as my former colleagues joked in a combination of envy, resentment, and genuine happiness for me. That year at Columbia High, I always called Mom on the way home from work, and we would swap stories and blow off steam about everything from the kids and the lack of planning time to Senate Bill 6. Being in the classroom bonds all teachers, like members of some elite but publically misunderstood unit. So even though we didn’t work together per se, the shared job title brought she and I closer in a way we may have never been as mother and daughter. But I felt uncomfortable when she told me our phone chats were the best part of her day. When I announced my decision to resign before the next school year, Mom told me she would miss our talks.

“I’ll still call you, don’t worry,” I promised.

“It won’t be the same,” she said. “But I’ve accepted that. I’m happy for what we had.”

It was as though I was leaving her behind to struggle alone.

Then, two weeks before this past Christmas, a 20-year-old young man, a victim of childhood bullying, brought his mother’s gun into an elementary school in Connecticut and killed 26 people. Among them were 20 first-grade children and their teacher.

That morning, as I stared, despairing, at the news coverage streaming across my T.V., I felt a frantic longing to be with my mother. I needed to touch her, to hear her

voice, to know, irrational as it may sound, that she was all right. But she was a thousand miles away, in her own classroom with her own first-grade students.

At 4:30 p.m. I called her.

“Julie! Hi!”

It was clear from her tone that she had not heard.

“I’m just closing up the gate—can I call you back in one minute?” she pleaded.

As though I might become too busy to talk by then.

“Sure.”

I hung up and waited, the news building inside me like a wave. Then the phone vibrated in my hand.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi! Sorry about that. I’ve had such a day—you would not believe! The kids are just out of control. I’m so happy you called!”

From her voice I could tell she was smiling, the laugh lines around her eyes crinkling like starbursts. She was breathing a little heavy from lugging her stuff. I could picture her hair fluffing in the breeze as she walked through the sunny parking lot, homeward bound. But I couldn’t hold it in.

“Did you hear what happened?”

She registered my tone and hesitated.

“No?”

I told her. The sentences poured out of me with a terrible momentum.

Then silence.

“I just don’t know what’s wrong with people,” she said at last. Her words sounded so final. So full of defeat.

I tried for the sake of staying on the phone together to be angry about the news. But soon I gave up. My mother did not respond to anything I said, had withdrawn into a place I couldn’t understand. Something sank inside me at the thought that I could not reach her. So separate our lives now were.

We said I love you and hung up. I stared down through tears at the dark screen of my phone.

Who was I to have expected that we could comfort each other, that we could share in the same grief? I was not the one who would have to walk into her classroom the next morning as if life could still go on as before.

## DRIVE-THRU

Jim had a soft face that slumped in on itself, and some teeth missing, so he looked a lot like a jack-o-lantern that had begun to rot. Which was a terrible thing to say about someone. Especially in this case, because Jim was a very nice person. At least according to Sammie. Still, once we got started saying it, we couldn't stop. I'm pretty sure he never heard us, though it didn't help that it was getting to be that time of year, and one afternoon we were actually sitting in the middle of the floor on spread-out newspapers diving into a big ole orange pumpkin when they walked in.

“Hello, ROOMIES!”

Sammie muscled her way through the door, both arms heavy with grocery bags—“and Kel Kel—HI!” she added, and then turned back to Aaron and me. “AHH! AHH!” She did some curls with the bags. “Gotta get 'em all in one trip!”

“Show off!” I shouted as she crossed the living room.

Jim ducked through the doorway empty-handed and gave us a goofy wave.

“Hey, guys.” He sounded spitty when he talked. Probably from the missing teeth.

Sammie shook her blond hair back and forth, continuing to be a cavewoman or a super-amped superhero or something, and pounded into the kitchen. She was usually upbeat, true, but this was manic mode. Probably because Jim was here, meaning she had just scored some Xanax and was eagerly anticipating the next six hours of pharmaceutical

coma. By the look on his slumpy face, he was taking her enthusiasm in all the wrong ways.

“You guys are so CUTE!” Sammie returned from the kitchen. “I LOVE Halloween!” She looked positively ecstatic. Like it was her favorite freaking holiday. “Me and Jim are gonna go watch T.V. in my room. YAY! Maybe this weekend we’ll get some trick-or-TREATERS!”

Aaron and I exchanged looks as Jim followed her down the hall. I pursed my lips and sighed. Jim looked like a damn puppy dog. I almost felt bad for the guy. Aaron lifted his shoulders in response—what could you do? Then I stared meaningfully at the pumpkin and nodded, intent clear. Aaron shook his head in silent laughter. *No, Shell, no.*

“What’s so funny?” Kel Kel asked, too loud.

“Shhh!” I was picturing Jim’s droopy eyes on the face of the pumpkin and considering the appropriate number of teeth.

“I’ll tell you later, Kelly.” Aaron reached over in an excuse to touch her. Ah, young love. I had known Aaron since age five, so it cracked me up to see him with girls. Like we were brother and sister or something. I swirled my hand around in the pumpkin goo and plopped a glob of seeds into my bowl.

“I don’t get it,” she went on, oblivious. “Are they dating or what? She is way too pretty for him.”

Aaron smiled at me again, and I just grinned, no comment. Sure, Jim had been at the house a lot more. Yes, it had started with him selling to Sammie. But then they hooked up, and Sammie said she just went along with it because she didn’t want to hurt

his feelings. Because he really was such a sweet guy. Right. I personally thought Jim would've been smarter than that—even Kel Kel was smarter than that—or that he might even be taking advantage himself. But he blushed and smiled and giggled through all that loose spit in his mouth too much for that to be the case. Still, I wasn't about to tell House Mom her business. Or explain this delicate relationship to the lovely but somewhat judgy Kel Kel. Sammie may not have been perfect, but she looked out for the people she cared about, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for some. And Jim actually did seem pretty nice. But that face. I didn't know how Sammie could do it.

“Are you ready to go?” Aaron took Kel Kel's hand and shook it playfully. His voice got babyish when he talked to her.

“Where are we going again?” She sounded distraught. “Karma Kream?”

I looked down and swirled my hand around in the pumpkin. I had a hard time not smiling when I wasn't supposed to. Kel Kel wasn't one of those you'd describe as *an eater*. Her leg was about as thick as my bicep.

“You know I'm lactose intolerant, right?”

Oh yes. And allergic to glucose. And a vegetarian.

“I know!” Aaron pleaded. “I remember everything about you!”

I cringed and looked down into the goo.

“I checked—they have soy!” The poor guy looked desperate and hopeful at the same time.

Kel Kel made a face. “I'm not really into *soy*. But we can still stop by. I need you to take me to print some stuff for class anyway, okay?”

At that, my friend made a highly admirable effort to leap to his feet and offer his hand to help her up, all the while smiling like a big goof, as though taking Kel Kel to print stuff was just what he wanted to do on this beautiful autumn afternoon. I squeezed some pumpkin goo through my fingers as they headed out the door holding hands. To each his own.

\* \* \*

Tuesday and Thursday, Aaron and I had Astronomy together, and then on Friday, Astronomy Lab. The main class had what looked like a thousand students, because it fulfilled a Gen Ed requirement, and it was held in one of those enormous and impersonal auditoriums. After I realized this, along with the major letdown that we were not going to learn the constellations (this was a *Physics* course), I tried to talk Aaron into skipping as much as possible. But he was kind of a goody-goody when it came to school. Even so, the lab together was a nice end to the week.

“Can you believe she said that? I just hope there weren’t any Muslim students in the class.” I was recapping a particularly disturbing morning in my French class as we took turns dropping a metal ball into a sandbox and measuring the size of its impact.

“Yeah, I guess cultural awareness wasn’t part of TA training,” he said, distracted. He squinted as he held his ruler over a mini crater.

“Someone should say something to her. I don’t think she knows she’s wrong.”

Aaron looked at where I was holding the yardstick that measured the vertical distance above the sandbox.

“Was it slanted like that when you dropped the meteor?”

I shrugged. Meteor? It was a freaking marble.

“Great,” he said. “We should probably start over.”

“I’m pretty sure it doesn’t matter at all as long as we do the formula right.” I had been feeling pretty disillusioned all semester that this was a college course.

“Just hold the stupid stick straight, will you?”

After class, we walked home together. Our route wound back through an old neighborhood and past a little park and plaza. The weather was getting cool, and some of the leaves were beginning to change colors—at least the few that did this far south. I knew Aaron would get over the lab. I understood the formulas, and sometime before we turned them in he would officially forgive my sloppy procedure and ask if we could do our report together. Even now, in the crisp afternoon air, talking up the weekend as we walked, he already seemed over it. We were young, and the air was brisk, and it was Friday and about to be Halloween. A person couldn’t stay mad. I was giddy with that weekend sort of happiness, when school or next week or even the next hour seem part of another space and time. I linked arms with my old-time friend as we started up the last hill before the shopping plaza.

“Wanna get some Karma Kream?” he asked as we passed.

“Don’t you think it’s a little chilly for ice cream?”

“No! And you know I can’t get anyone *else* to go with me.”

I laughed. At least he wasn’t so into Kel Kel that he couldn’t joke about her.

“Next time, I promise. I have to get home and change ’cause I’m opening tonight.” Sammie and I waitressed together downtown.

“Are you and Chris going out after?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“I don’t know. Sometimes he meets up with me and Sammie.” I let go of Aaron’s arm. It was a bit of an awkward subject, since Chris probably wasn’t the kind of guy Aaron had imagined me ending up with.

“Well, text me and let me know, and me and Kelly will meet up with you guys.”

I had to love the guy for making an effort, but I almost laughed imagining innocent Aaron and Kel Kel chatting over beers with Chris.

“Will do. That’ll be fun,” I said, trying to sound cheerful enough that he would believe me later when I “forgot.”

When we walked in the house, Sammie was sitting on the couch watching reality T.V. in her black work outfit.

“Helloooo! Little Brother and Sissss-ter!” She sounded sleepy. She must’ve taken her “social level” of Xanax. “I’m sooo excited!”

She actually did look pretty excited for someone with her eyes half-closed. Sammie was one of those you would call *enthusiastic*. It was probably the best thing about her. At least when she wasn’t passed out for 16 hours a day.

“He sent home that skank whore Brandi! I just know he’s going to pick the other Sam!” She was addicted to VH1 *Bachelor* spinoffs, to the point where I think she secretly wanted to be in one. Or at least considered it a viable dating option.

I dropped my stuff and snuggled next to her on the couch. I wasn’t ready to go to work, and the living room looked so peaceful in the afternoon light.

“Hey, Mom,” I said into her shoulder. I don’t know why I called her Mom even though she called me Sister, but I liked that we were a family.

The credits started rolling and a commercial flashed onto the screen. Sammie woke from her trance, reached her arm across me and slapped my behind.

“Get a move on girl! We got to GO!” She jumped up from the couch and started punching the air, warming herself up. “I’m goin’ out for a smoke and you better be ready by the time I’m DONE!”

That night, after I got cut from my shift and did my side work, I sat at the bar waiting for Sammie to finish. This was our Girl Time before we went out and Chris met up with us, so I frowned when Jim came in and sat down next to me. Plus I remembered Sammie didn’t like people to see him visit her at work, even though I knew for a fact she wasn’t the only one buying from him.

“Hey, Shell!” he slurred in his spitty way. He had to be mid-30s—how he had lost so many teeth already? I vaguely worried about my own future smile.

“Hey Jim. You here to see our girl?” By which I meant *my* girl.

“Yeah. She called me to pick her up. You meeting Chris later?”

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t even thought about it. It had been kind of a busy night. I looked down at my phone. He had already texted me to ask when I was getting out.

“Maybe I’ll just go home with you guys and tell him to come over when he’s done at the hotel.”

“Sure thing, sweetie.” Jim patted me on the back. I usually hated it when people called me sweetie, but the way he said it sounded like he felt a little down. Like he might even want me to hang out with them. Sometimes Sammie could be overwhelming one-on-one. Or a Xanax zombie.

“It *is* Halloween tomorrow. We could pick up an old movie or something, like *Dawn of the Dead*,” he said.

I laughed. “Oh yeah. At Video Rodeo! The last remaining rental place in America!”

“I know, right.”

“Or like *Evil Dead*!” Nothing said Halloween to me like cheesy violence.

“That’s what I’m talking about!”

I caught myself for a second because Jim was actually smiling a full smile, which he didn’t do often for obvious reasons. He might be more self-conscious than he let on, which was kind of depressing. He was probably pretty lonely, but I had never seen him doped up like Sammy, or high in any way, or even drunk. Just quiet, and like everyone said, *nice*. I guess he had to have a lot of self-control, given his occupation.

He looked at me kind of solemnly.

“You doin’ all right, Little Sister?”

I balked—was I acting weird or something? And Little Sister? I guess he felt like we were on that level. Or maybe we were actually sharing something together right then. Who knew, though I had noticed he did have a toothbrush now in our bathroom.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I mean, it seems like Chris is kind of a tough guy. And you’re a nice girl.”

Didn’t people just love to tell you about your business.

“Well, we have more in common than it seems,” I said, though all I could think of was the argument I’d had with Chris about Sammie a few days before.

Jim looked down at his beer and let it drop.

“So, I hate to ask you this,” he began again. “But how’s Sammie? I mean—how does she feel about me? Has she said anything to you?”

Of course. Here it was. I shouldn’t have acted so buddy-buddy with him. He looked like he already knew the answer. I felt bad for him and didn’t like being forced to lie. Sammie wasn’t super young, but she looked great. She had her hair dyed professionally and her nails done, and she went running a lot when she would get up in the middle of the night, so she was in shape, too. Which meant we all knew she was out of Jim’s league. And so he might finally be acknowledging that she was using him, which doesn’t tend to make people feel so great.

“It’s just that when you get to where I’m at—” he started, but at that moment Sammie walked up, and I waved so Jim would know she was behind him.

“Oh my God! I’m so glad you’re here,” she said to Jim. “I’m totally having a panic attack, like, for REAL. I have to get outta here.” She huffed like she was out of breath and shook her hands a little as she pulled off her apron. We started to walk out.

“She’s coming with us,” Jim gestured at me.

“Oh, good.” Sammie turned to me. “I’m sorry. I just can’t go out.”

“It’s totally fine.”

Jim winked at me and mouthed, *Bruce Campbell, oh yeah.*

“And no offence or anything,” Sammie continued, “but can you maybe not call Chris to come over? I can’t handle him right now.”

Chris didn’t buy into Sammie’s *anxiety*.

“Yeah, sure.”

We climbed into the car and Sammie pulled a little baggie of pills from her purse.

“And keep freakin’ Kel Kel the hell away, my GOD!” We both laughed. She was starting to relax. “Someone should give that girl a hamburger!”

She broke a pill in half and then swallowed both pieces. “But you know,” she continued, “that’s why everyone gets so crazy on those reality T.V. shows! They don’t show you, but the producers hide all the food!”

I laughed again. Sammie was a little nuts herself, but you had to love her.

\* \* \*

Autumn held a certain romance for me, though maybe it was a desperate romance, since everything is kind of dying then. But there was something about the cooler air that freshened things up after the suffocating humidity of the summer. And the energy of the football season, though I'd never really been into sports. Or just the beginning of a new school year when I had convinced myself that I'd finally found direction and was going to meet new and exciting people and do new and exciting things. Starting with having a totally kick-ass Halloween costume.

“Okay, hold your arms out straight,” Sammie said as I stood in the middle of the living room in jeans and a sports bra.

“A mummy? This is so not going to work,” Chris laughed. Sammie started wrapping. He had stopped by since we hadn't hung out the night before.

“Oh yes it IS, Mr. Negative!” Sammie chirped. She was in a great mood. “We bought out the whole first-aid section of Walgreens. And look at all of our CANDY!”

That definitely should've impressed him. I don't know what happened when we went to the store—though it might have had something to do with all the whiskey we drank that afternoon—but now we had seven jumbo variety packs of bite-sized candy, 30-something rolls of gauze (which still looked like it wouldn't be enough), and a polyester Morgana dress and wig for Sammie. We ignored the teasing from Chris, who was too *mature* to dress up. Or drink whiskey in the afternoon, apparently.

“You guys aren't even going anywhere.”

“Oh, we are GOING somewhere! BELIEVE you ME!” A good time was a mission with Sammie.

“Aren’t you a little old for this, Sam? What are you now, 30?”

“I am NOT 30! You jerk! If I am, YOU are!” Chris had actually been the one to introduce me to Sammie and get me the job at the restaurant. They used to work together before he left.

“So where’s your man?” He was really trying to get at her.

“First of all, he is not my man.” She switched into a more patronizing voice.

“That said, he’s working.”

Considering what Jim did, I wasn’t sure what that meant.

“Hey, wrap it tight so I look skinnier,” I said when she started around my stomach.

“Oh, shut up,” Chris said and threw a roll of gauze at me. “So, Sammie. Are things getting serious between you and this *delivery driver*? I thought you were looking for a rich man?”

Sammie got quiet, and I glared at Chris for killing the mood. He enjoyed picking out the one thing people couldn’t admit to themselves and nailing them on it. When we first started dating it seemed sexy, because he gave other people a hell of a time and then worshiped me as his girlfriend. But lately it was making it hard to hang out with friends. I had tried to tell him to tone it down, but he clearly wasn’t going to.

“I never meant for him to like me.” Sammie tried to sound sincere now. “And I know I have to say something to him. He’s just really a nice guy, you know, and lonely. I know he would just be devastated.”

Of course he would be, but this sounded too self-serving for Chris to take. I could feel the charge between them in the air, like they were baiting each other.

Chris sneered. “Oh, I know he’s a really nice guy. He’s very PILL-ite, and physically he’s really a-PILL-ing, in his own way, of course—“

“Fuck YOU!” Sammie shrieked. “Get the hell out of my house!”

“Fine!” Chris stood up and turned to me. “Call me when you want me to pick you up from whatever ditch you two end up in tonight.”

He slammed the door behind him. I didn’t realize how hard my heart had been beating until he left. I didn’t do well with arguments.

Sammie started crying on the couch.

“I know it looks like I’m using Jim! I know. But I still pay for everything. He doesn’t give me anything for free.” She was trying to convince herself. I knew it couldn’t be true, and that she probably had her reasons, but I wished she knew I wouldn’t judge her either way.

“He’s not that ugly,” she went on. “I mean, why does everyone have to be so superficial?” Again, it sounded like a script. Sammie was pretty superficial in some ways, too. Or at least she looked out for herself. When I first moved in, she said over and over, *We’re gonna get one of those engineers, or, I heard about this bar by the hospital where all the doctors go*, and she would drag me to the gym or the mall or the first manicure of my life, because you always had to be ready for when you might meet The One. That is, The One with a Lot of Money.

She reached over for the bottle of Jim Beam. I took some too.

“You wanna split a bar with me?”

It took a second for what she said to sink in. I had never done Xanax before, and she had never offered.

“Sure.”

I took the half and it tasted bitter. Soon enough I felt it, and more than I would’ve thought. It must have been the whiskey, because after just 15 minutes I stumbled to my room to pass out.

Sammie woke me at midnight.

“Little Sister, GET UP! You missed all the trick-or-TREATERS!”

I couldn’t figure out what she was talking about. I was underwater—or no, my memory *was* water. I was sunken in the dream memory like in a dark, cool, lake. A heavy world, but I didn’t want to come up yet. My limbs felt constricted.

“Get UP, mummy girl! We are goin’ OUT!”

I blinked open my eyes and checked out the bunched up wrappings around me. They had made red lines on my arms where they had pulled too tight. That’s right. Halloween. I rolled out of bed and kind of shook myself awake. Even out of the dream, things still had extra weight around me. I probably looked more dead now at least.

Sammie had on her Morgana outfit with the neck pulled way down to her bra. She had glued black plastic talons on her nails.

“First we take a shot,” she cooed in her party voice and handed me a little glass. This was bringing me up, and only Sammie could do it. I needed her enthusiasm, or else I

would lie back in bed. I needed her to get me out of the house. I had been stupidly looking forward to Halloween, as if one night dressed up as something else would cross over into all the days after. But I was tired, really tired, as though all the hours of everyday effort had come to cash in at once.

“Okay,” she said. “Let me straighten your bandages.”

I laughed as she tried to do this with her spiky nails, in her wig and purple goth makeup, and with her cigarettes tucked under her bra strap, plucking at me with one taloned hand while she clutched a glass of whiskey in the other. She pursed her lips as she evaluated the jumble of gauze. I could tell she felt responsible for making sure we had a good time. She knew I had been excited about Halloween. She was the one friend I could count on to care about silly things like that. I don’t know if it was the ridiculous outfit or the concern or what, but in that moment she looked really beautiful to me. Trashy, for sure, but beautiful.

“Thanks for fixing me, Mom.”

“It’s Mummy, dah-ling! Come ON! I have GOT to smoke! And then I have got to EAT!”

No two ways about it, Sammie was drunk. But I rode with her anyway—for some reason I just trusted she could handle it. I also didn’t smoke, and she knew that, but she offered me one, so I took it. Maybe this meant we could be a different kind of friends. Partners in crime. Though with that thought I felt suddenly overwhelmed, tired, and I

wished we could just go home and be Mom and Little Sister. I dragged on the cigarette and leaned back in the seat as the cool night air whipped through the window.

When we turned in, the drive-thru was jammed with cars. The too-crowded Civic in front of us bounced around with a bunch of guys, probably drunk too. I swear it was taking ten minutes for each car to get their food, and Sammie and I smoked another whole cigarette before the line moved up. Then we waited a good two minutes for the Civic to realize this before Sammie blew the horn.

“Look at these yahoos!” She turned to me and raised her eyebrows, then leaned half her Morgana body out the window.

“HEY! You up there! It’s not like there’s a line or ANYTHING!” She ducked back in and smiled at me. “Oh, yeah!” Sammie got excited when she yelled, and she yelled a lot when she was drunk.

The line moved up and a guy got out of the back of the Civic. He wore a football jersey, so he might have been in costume, or just a frat boy. He leaned on the door through the rolled down window.

“Heeeey ladies!” he slurred.

“Hello! Is this drive-thru thing new for you fellas?” Sammie was loving this.

“Oh my God!” He strained to open his bloodshot eyes wider. “You guys look fantastic! Is that a mummy?” The guy could barely stand up.

“Oh yes. 28 rolls of gauze! I wrapped her!”

“So,” he went on. “I know this sounds totally random, but you wanna go to a party? My buddy lives just around the corner.”

Sammie raised her eyebrows at me. This was my cue to say *yes*, so she could seem more nonchalant and thus desirable.

“Yes?” I had doubts about this party. I didn’t really like fratty scenes. Or party scenes in general. Plus I was starting to feel a little messed up again.

“Sweet,” the guy said. “Follow us.”

We pulled up to a house just a block away from ours. Who would’ve thought? I wondered about all the rest of the neighbors we didn’t know, which depressed me a little. All the lonely people. I should be having fun.

We walked through the carport into the house through a human crush, and Sammie and her new frat friend—Mike, I guess his name was—pulled me into the kitchen for another shot. I wasn’t a huge fan of crowds, and I noticed that a lot of the girls here wore costumes that involved high heels. My wrappings drooped down and showed my sports bra.

“WHOO!” Sammie had downed her shot and lifted her arms over her head. She laughed as she put them around Mike’s neck. I don’t know how she did it. My shot hit my stomach like a punch, and I knew I’d probably puke if I went prancing off into the living room like she had. I would never be able to keep up with her. And at this point, I wasn’t feeling like I wanted to.

As I turned to leave, I ran into—who else?—Aaron. I didn’t recognize him in suspenders and a fedora. He grabbed my arm as I squeezed by.

“Whoa! Hey!” I couldn’t believe he was here. Or that he looked so handsome. I forgot sometimes that we were both pretty much grown up.

He smiled. “What are you, injured or something?” He tugged on one of my bandages.

“No.” I laughed. “A mummy. I’m feeling a little *unraveled*, though. Get it? What are you doing here?”

“Well, I came with Kelly, ’cause I guess the guys at this house are in her sorority’s partner fraternity? I don’t know. But she got sick and one of her sisters took her home. We went as a pimp and ho. Whaddaya think?” He stretched out his suspenders with his thumbs and leaned back.

“Lemme guess. Her idea?”

“Yeah. Maybe I should stick to being a nerd, huh?”

“You wanna go?”

“Do I ever.”

Someone had put on yet another song by the Ying Yang Twins, and I felt like I might be sick myself. I scanned the room for Sammie, then figured she could find her own way back. I didn’t want to kill her game, either. Aaron and I walked home shivering in the dark.

I went into the bathroom and took a long time unwrapping my mummy costume as my stomach slowly calmed down. I kept stopping to stare in the mirror and wondered why my eyes looked so hollowed out. What was I doing living such a boring life? I went to school and then I went to work, and sometimes I went to stupid parties I didn’t like, or

hung out with a guy I couldn't believe I'd already been dating for a year. How had so much time gone by when it felt like nothing happened?

After about 30 minutes I snapped out of it, and, still in my sports bra and jeans, I stumbled down the hall past my room. I knocked on Aaron's door, thought I heard him mumble something, and then went in. It was dark and he was in bed.

“What's up?”

I stood in the doorway.

“Can I come lay down with you?”

He hesitated for a moment.

“Sure.”

He moved the blankets back and I got in. I lay down with my back to him and he put his arm around me. He actually put his arm around me, like it was no big deal. Sure, I leaned on his shoulder when we watched T.V. with Sammie in the living room, and I held his hand as a joke sometimes when we walked home from school, but it startled me how lying there like that could feel so natural. So natural that maybe it wasn't wrong.

I lay perfectly still for several minutes, trying to convince myself that I should go to sleep—that's what Aaron seemed to be doing. His breath had slowed and his arm lay heavy across my hip. Why had I gone in again? I had been lonely I guess—and what had I wanted to do, talk? I told myself I should just take it at this and be happy.

Because in that moment I was, I realized, incredibly happy. Burning up with happiness. Then I let the thought pressing up in my mind become real—me and Aaron. Me and Aaron. There I was smiling in the dark like an idiot. This had been the obvious

thing I wouldn't let myself admit—this was why everything else had felt so empty—and now it was happening. Chris flashed for a second into my mind—had he already seen it? I pushed the thought away, and turned to face my friend. I put my hand on his neck—so warm—and I kissed him.

When our lips touched and parted I thought for a second he was going to kiss me back, but I guess he had just been waking up. He pulled away.

“Michelle.”

My full name—I almost cried out at the sound. I had gotten so used to Shell or Shelly. And his voice was so deep and soft, more like a man's than that of my childhood friend.

“I'm sorry, Michelle,” he said. My eyes searched the contours of his face in the dark. “Maybe it could've been, last year or something, but not now.”

I cringed to think of all the silly dorm events he had asked me to that I turned down. At how I'd still thought of him then as a little kid.

“You're with Chris,” he went on, as if I didn't understand that well enough. “And I'm with Kelly.”

Without meeting his eyes, I got up and hurried out, down the hall, and into my room. I curled up in a little ball underneath all my blankets in the cold room and cried. Deep, heaving, silent sobs with not enough tears, so my face hurt. I cried and I hated myself and I hated Aaron for humiliating me. Which didn't change the fact that I loved him too, now that I'd allowed myself to feel it. I hated Chris for dating me last year and

this year, and myself again for being too dumb to recognize how I felt about my friend before it was too late. Now Aaron wouldn't respect me, let alone want to be with me.

My phone buzzed. I had like a million messages from Chris. He wanted to know where I was. Why I hadn't called him.

*I'm sorry to tell you this way, I texted, but I want to break up.*

It had to be like ripping off a band-aid, right? I needed something to change.

Right then.

I waited a few minutes just staring at the phone. Finally it lit up.

*You're a bitch.*

No argument there, really. I waited a few more minutes and nothing happened. I knew he wouldn't come over. He was too proud. Then I wondered if he was curled up in his bed crying now too, and I started to sob again. It's not like he was actually a bad person or that he couldn't be hurt in his own way.

I heard the door open and I froze. Then it shut softly and I didn't hear footsteps. Sometimes Sammie would just pass out on the couch after a late night. I relaxed my face back into the pillow, my eyes swollen and burning, and wondered if I could sleep.

Then the door opened again and banged shut.

"Oooohh!" The squeal pierced the stillness of the house. Unquestionably Sammie. Then stumbling footsteps.

"Shh, shh, shh," I heard her say. The sound of two people bumped down the hall.

"Don't worry, they're asleep." A man's voice. It must have been Mike from the drive-thru.

“Just be QUIET!” Sammie whispered, giggling. “And hold your horses, mister!”

The bedroom door slammed carelessly behind them, and my heart dropped. Who had come in earlier, then? I grabbed the Maglite I kept under my bed and told myself I could be brave. Unless it was Chris, and he was sitting out there in the dark waiting to do God knows what. But no. That wasn't his style. I pushed open my door as softly as possible and crept out into the hall.

Before the house opened to the kitchen and living room on either side, there was a little foyer, and a light switch. But I tripped over something. A man's shoes—probably that guy Mike's—and heard someone move on the couch in the living room.

“Little Sister. It's just me.”

No mistaking that spitty whisper. I went to sit next to Jim on the couch, not necessarily relieved. Sammie must not have seen him when she came in. Why hadn't he stopped her?

“I could have totally bonked you with my flashlight,” I teased half-heartedly.

“Thank goodness you didn't, kiddo.” He seemed calm, but I wasn't sure.

“What are you doing here? It's a little creepy.”

As soon as I said it I wished I hadn't. Jim's face looked slumpier and sadder than ever.

“Well. Sam called me a few hours ago and asked if I could bring her something. I guess she forgot.” He struggled to force the words out and kept looking down at his hands. “Who's that guy she's with?”

“I don’t know.” Somehow that made it worse. “Random.” I reached over and took one of his hands.

“Yeah. That’s what I figured. It was bound to happen.” He squeezed my hand hard. “I’m not stupid, you know?”

I nodded my head. “I know.”

“I guess it was just nice to pretend.”

I took a deep breath. “Aren’t you mad?” I asked.

He forced a laugh. “Of course I’m mad. I’m really mad.” He sounded instead like he was about to cry. “But that’s not going to change anything.” He got up from the couch and walked to the door.

“I’ll see ya ’round, Shelly,” he said, and stepped out onto the street.

\* \* \*

All the next week I avoided Aaron by skipping Astronomy lecture. And then Astronomy Lab. He didn’t text me to ask what was up, which meant that he felt just as awkward. He avoided me by staying the whole week with Kel Kel. I didn’t see him come home once—he must have packed a bag. Which by Friday kind of agitated me, because I felt we should be able to deal with this like adults. I was entertaining a pretty powerful sense of denial in the hope that everything would just go back to normal. Then I would start kicking myself again for screwing up. At least I wasn’t allowing the word *heartbroken*.

Chris didn't call or text me either, or come over. I knew he was hoping I was suffering over how unforgivably immature I'd been. And I was. I pretty much spent all of my free time snuggled in Sammie's bed watching the marathon recap of *Rock of Love* and trying not to cry about everything.

"I can't believe he picked Jes." Sammie had been rooting for a girl covered in tattoos with her same name. "The problem is Sam was too real. If you're actually a genuine person, you just can't survive on these shows. They break you down, and then they make you look crazy."

An aged Bret Michaels was crooning "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" at a girl with a pink pixie cut. It seemed like he played that song every episode. Sammie totally had to be high to watch this crap.

"Did I tell you I broke up with Chris?"

"Oh honey! Is everything okay?"

"He isn't talking to me."

"Of course he isn't, the jerk." Leave it to Sammie to put it back on the guy.

"And I tried to make out with Aaron."

I pulled the blanket over my head after I said it and burrowed into the down comforter.

"You didn't! I totally saw that coming! So is he going to dump his little Kel Kel? I don't think I can live with a couple."

I was almost laughing at how embarrassed I felt. Then I was crying.

"No. He rejected me," I said through the blanket.

“Oh, Little Sister.” Sammie hugged me over the covers. Under all the down and Sammie it felt like being a baby bird in a nest, and I laughed again and came out.

“Now we’ll both just have to find handsome and successful boyfriends who truly appreciate how wonderful we are!” Sammie said. She was always one for a pep talk. But I was starting to question how wonderful we actually were.

“What about Jim?” I asked awkwardly. I hadn’t seen him since Halloween night, and I hadn’t told Sammie he’d been there. The other day I had thrown out our jack-o-lantern because it had started to get slumpy. It just didn’t seem that funny anymore.

“Jim is moving to Texas.” Sammie took a deep breath after she said this and exhaled for a long time, as if to announce that she couldn’t explain.

“Did he want you to go with him?” I asked, then wondered where the question came from. There was something about Jim’s sad acceptance that night that had been gnawing at me.

“God, no! And I wouldn’t have gone if he did.”

If it were me, I would have moved to Antarctica, I was feeling so down.

“Is he going for his business?”

“Ha ha, no. He’s quitting that. I think he’s moving to get away from it actually.”

Good for him.

“What’re you going to do?” I asked.

“Go back to my psychiatrist. I do have anxiety, you know. I’m *supposed* to have a prescription. They just won’t refill it unless you come in and talk to them, the jerks.”

That hadn’t been the question I meant.

“What about that guy from the other night—Mike?”

“Oh, that was just for fun! I think he’s like your age anyway. But let me tell you, it was FUN!” She wiggled around and then hit me with a pillow. “But I did get a cold sore the day after.” She touched her lip. “I hate when that happens.”

This whole conversation was making me feel lonely for somebody, but I couldn’t figure out which person it was.

“You know,” I said. “We could move to Texas, or somewhere. I would totally go with you.” I don’t know how this came out, or why it sounded so much like I meant it. But I did mean it. At that moment, I meant it very much.

“No, no, no... There’s too much...*big hair* in Texas, you know?”

I did not. She was starting to doze off amid the pillows and then jerked up her head. Her pupils had gotten small. She must’ve had some of her stash left.

“We’ll be fine here, you and me....” She pulled the blanket up over us and adjusted the pillows so she could see over my head. Another episode of *Rock of Love* was starting on the T.V. I felt horribly heavy, like the whole dream-filled world of relationships and expectations and disappointments had paralyzed me under its weight.

“I don’t know Sammie,” I started, “—I think it might be time for me to—”

“Mom,” she corrected me.

“Mom,” I said.

Then I turned around to look at her, but she had fallen asleep.

### **THINGS I FIND MORE IMPORTANT THAN WRITING:**

1. Teaching my two assigned sections of Freshman Composition.
2. Bitching with other TAs about having to teach Freshman Composition while chain-smoking and chugging beers on my back porch.
3. Reading the *Washington Post*—the actual paper newspaper—front to back, including the Style section. To stay informed.
4. Cleaning the bathroom.
5. Meeting my M.F.A. colleagues at the bar to “build community.”
6. Getting back with my ex, Phillip, who lives in Florida, because none of the guys I’ve thrown myself at here have asked me out.
7. Talking with Phillip for hours, like a good long-distance girlfriend.
8. Continuing to throw myself at guys in order to find out if I actually love Phillip or am just using him because I’m lonely.
9. Learning to meditate.
10. Going “green” by starting a compost, planting a container garden that covers half the porch, guiltig my roommates into using cut-up T-shirt squares instead of paper towels, buying only organic and unreasonably-priced produce, and ranting about the state of the world.
11. Trying to quit smoking because I feel like a hypocrite.

12. Continuing to smoke and rant, even after I get pneumonia, because “I have a right to choose which poisons I put in my body.”
13. Reorganizing my 10’ x 11’ bedroom to make it more conducive to work.
14. Reading books about writing to learn the tricks.
15. Going to readings in DC because other writers seem to enjoy them. Pretending to enjoy them myself while secretly resenting authors and readers everywhere and taking full advantage of the free cocktails.
16. Sorting my closet.
17. Worrying about my biological clock and if I’ll ever get married while inventing scenarios in which Phillip starts making tons of money so we can live off the grid in a renovated farmhouse and have lots of babies.
18. Calculating the number of waking hours in a week: 112. Drawing up detailed time charts in which I allocate said hours: writing (20), teaching (20), class (15), email/admin (5), working out (10), chores (10), daily life (14), “personal” (7), and socializing/down time (11).
19. Redrafting the above schedules because they do not work.
20. Drinking alone in my room instead of at the bar. To save money.
21. Signing up for counseling at the Student Health Center to figure out why I’m so unproductive and depressed.
22. Disregarding the counselor’s advice because I’ve heard it before.
23. Binging on my stash of “room whiskey” while planning life makeovers.

24. Scrawling late-night tirades in my journal about why I hate my friends, my family, capitalism, and/or myself.
25. Counting the above as writing.

## TAKE OFF

“Give me the mini liquors,” Caitlyn hisses from the seat beside me.

It’s 84 degrees, here at Jacksonville International Airport, and my 23-year-old sister is wearing two pairs of pants, three shirts, a *leather* biker jacket, and some giant homemade patchwork scarf. Supposedly, all her clothes didn’t fit in her bag. Supposedly, it’s still chilly around Denver, at least at night, or so she claims. That may well be the case, but it’ll be noon when we get there. And it’s not like she seems at all self-conscious about this get-up. She doesn’t even ride a motorcycle. And the jacket smells. Sweat has melted her mascara into rings under her eyes, and her hair is matted in gross lumps that are way too thick to be acceptable dreadlocks. She looks homeless.

“No!” I hiss back. “I told you to bring your own mini liquors.”

“I didn’t think I’d need them at 6 a.m. in the goddamn morning, Davey!”

The man and woman across the aisle are staring rigidly at the seatbacks in front of them. I look straight ahead at my own tray table, which is secured in the upright and locked position. My neck is burning with the embarrassing red blotches that come out when I get upset, and this in turn is making me more embarrassed and upset. Aside from this—which I hate that I can’t control—I’d say I’m cool under pressure. I, unlike my sister, do not make scenes, like the one just a moment ago, when we stepped out of the gate onto the tarmac and Caitlyn lost her mind.

“We’re *walking* out to the plane?” she shrieked. We shuffled toward what was obviously our aircraft. Sure, it was a little smaller than I’d expected. But what can you do? Her voice screeched through the pre-dawn calm like a megaphone. I glanced around to see who had heard her, but the other passengers stared sleepily off into space, clutching their post-security McDonald’s coffees, clearly *not* surprised to be standing on the pavement a short distance from the runway on this slightly muggy morning. Pleasant really, when you considered the daytime highs. I turned back to Caitlyn and cringed. There was no getting used to those lumps that had been her hair.

“Where’s the fucking tube thing?” she went on. She even flailed her arms. “No. Oh, no. We are not getting on that fucking tin can of a plane.”

The old ladies in front of us exchanged looks.

“Shh! Don’t say *fuck*. Jesus,” I whispered and glanced around again. I have nothing against cursing, believe me, it’s just that a person has to have some consideration. And what was wrong with small planes? What about Leerjets and all that? I joked that this was like being the President.

“This is in no way like being the fucking President. No, I do not want to check my bag!” she shouted at the stewardess at the ramp. “You are not taking my bag!”

Sweat started to seep through the armpits of my shirt, despite the cool-ish air. Which we could have been enjoying, by the way. I gave the stewardess my best *I’m-so-sorry* smile. She just leveled her gaze on my ridiculous sister.

“Ma’am.” The woman’s middle-aged mouth made a firm line. “There isn’t space for that size bag.”

I looked down. Somehow I hadn't noticed Caitlyn dragging along the world's biggest "carry-on." It bulged. The zippers were bound to split at any moment. How the hell did she get through security?

"Everything I have in my *whole life* is in this bag!" she shrieked. "I'm not handing it over to get lost in some luggage loop in God knows where!"

"Ma'am." The stewardess did not change her flat, uncompromising tone. She almost sounded bored. I bet she wished she were serving cocktails somewhere in first class. "You are not getting on this plane with that bag."

Then she turned to me and arched an eyebrow. At me! Like I was the one responsible!

"Just give her the stupid bag, Caitlyn," I said. Then I kind of jerked the handle out of her hand. This had gone on long enough. People were mumbling behind us.

Caitlyn looked stunned, but she let go.

"Goddamnit, Davey! This is the last time I let you book the tickets!" We were boarding now. "This is a bad plane! When was it built, the 70s? Bad pilots fly these bad planes!"

I prayed as we passed the cockpit that the men inside already had their headsets on. Ten rows of passenger eyes blinked at us in horror.

"Did you hear me?" she shouted at my back as I moved, apologizing, down the aisle.

God, she was being a bitch. Who *was* she right now?

"Bad pilots fly these bad planes!"

“Caitlyn!”

I stopped at the last row and moved aside so she could sit down first, by the window. Because I’m thoughtful like that, even in the heat of the moment. But she just stood facing me, kind of twitching. What was she planning to do, run off the plane? Have a seizure? In the cramped cabin it felt like I towered over her—I forget sometimes how short she is. And to be honest, I was trembling a little myself, though it’s not like I was going to hit her or anything. I’m not a violent person. I handle stress all the time at work, I’m *known* for it, but for some reason, if I couldn’t get my hippie dippy sister to shut up on this plane full of rational adults whispering all around us, I didn’t know what I was going to do.

“Sit. Down. Now,” I managed. And, thank God, she did. Not without a crazy raccoon-eyed stare down. Not without a lot of theatrical huffing as she stuffed herself and her 18 layers of clothes into the tiny non-reclining last row seat. I’ll give her that. The space is tight. I had to put my own small duffel between my legs and my knees up a little against the seat in front of me. But I’m 6’ 4”, and I know how to deal with things without acting like a child. How should I know the difference between a 747 and an Economy Airbus? I’m not some international businessman.

“Give me the mini liquors,” she hisses again. “For Christ’s sake, Davey. I deserve them at this point.”

I don’t know where that flawed logic is coming from, but at least I have her sitting down and kind of blocked in. We’re on the plane now, and we’re going to fly. Or fall out of the sky to a fiery death, according to Caitlyn. Which, granted, is depressing to

think about. Not so much the death part—I’ve never been able to make myself focus on that stuff the way all those “live-for-the-moment” people say we should—but the idea that my sister might fear dying, if that’s what this whole tantrum is about. She used to be so adventurous.

I toss the clear plastic quart bag onto her lap and wince as the twist top of a tiny rum cracks through the cabin. She downs the bottle and reaches for another. I snatch the bag back and crack my own baby rum. I brought these mini liquors, after all, and I’ll be damned if she gets them all. Though I wanted to wait for a mixer and drink them discretely like a civilized person.

But fuck it. The couple across the aisle is now openly staring. Why can’t people mind their own business? I give them a fierce look, my neck and face flaring red again, I’m sure, making me look not at all like the mature, professional person they’ll never know I actually am, when I’m not escorting my kid sister to meet her loser boyfriend in some pot-farming fantasy world in Colorado. I empty my bottle and open another. There probably won’t be beverage service on this piece of shit anyway.

When Mom called me up a few weeks ago to ask if I’d accompany Caitlyn on her move to live with this now “farmer” Rob outside of Denver, my first response was, *Hell no*. I should’ve stuck to my guns. I’m away from my wife for work enough already, and I only get so many vacation days as it is. Plus, Caitlyn’s an adult, I tried to explain, and perfectly capable not only of making her own decisions, but also of getting on and off an airplane. Both of which, it’s now clear, are up for debate. But I agreed to go. I thought

this could be something of a brother-sister trip, like in the old days. I haven't seen a lot of Caitlyn lately, as evidenced by the hairdo shock this morning.

However, on the phone, I did refrain from telling Mom that this is a *marijuana* farm Caitlyn's going to, that even though pot is legal in Colorado, I've heard the Feds still make the occasional flyovers and arrests, and that I think Rob is a brain-dead granola-eater who wears his greasy hair in two braids like he thinks he's a white Indian or something. Not that I've spent a lot of time with the guy, but I've spent enough. Mom thankfully didn't start in on how she wishes Caitlyn had gotten a real job after graduating or how Colorado is just so far away. She did say, however, that Caitlyn told her she's in love with this guy. In love! I can't imagine what Mom said to that.

"I'm worried about her," was what she said to me.

"I'm sure she'll be fine."

But now I'm wondering what the hell is wrong with her. She's behaving like the polar opposite of the chill hippy chick I know—or knew—her to be. Hysterical even. Like, in short, our mother. I choose not to verbalize this observation. We finish the six assorted mini liquors, which at this rate will be nowhere near enough. We have a layover in Memphis.

The plane begins to taxi and Caitlyn gazes sullenly out the window at dawn breaking over the runway. We pass a fat US Air double-decker, and I brace myself for more of her comments. Mercifully, she is silent. I say *mercifully*, but "retreat into angry silence" isn't exactly the trip I envisioned. She turns even more toward the window, blocking the whole view with her weird head. She must be staring straight into the

sunrise, because all of a sudden the red rays glow around her hair like the edges of a star. Or maybe the edges of some deformed starfish.

As we start to take off, she grips the armrests and begins taking measured, audible breaths. I don't remember her being nervous about flying, but it's been a good number of years since we've been on a plane together. Time enough to develop anxieties, I guess. Not to mention obsessions with organic food, some kind of "hot yoga," and other way out enviro-shit she no doubt picked up from this yahoo, Rob. Gross stuff, like composting toilets, that I am not excited to see in action on the "compound." Which, by the way, sounds like a synonym for "cult." Though I'm not sure what it means if your cult has only two people.

We go through some considerable dips and bumps on the ascent. Whether this is due to the size of the plane is not for me to say. She's over there with her eyes closed still doing the breathing, which makes a raspy sound that I refuse to be alarmed by. And upon closer examination, those mats on her head are genuinely disgusting. I don't understand why some girls try to make themselves ugly. But I've seen that hair on other stoners, guys and girls, so maybe it's a thing. When had she gotten so into that lifestyle? Sure, I'd been the first one to get her high, when she was in the sixth grade, which, in hindsight, does seem too young. But you don't think about that stuff when you're 18. And I turned into a fully functioning member of society, in the end.

As the flat, familiar landscape disappears below us, something seems to occur to her and she relaxes her grip on the armrests. I don't think it's the mini liquors. They're just starting to hit me, and so maybe it's nothing more than acceptance of a situation no

one can change at 20,000 feet. But either way, she lets out a sigh and turns slowly from the window, and I catch a glimpse of the last squares of farmland fading beneath the clouds. She wipes the mascara from under her eyes with the end of her scarf. Had she been crying? No, that's right. It melted in the heat long before we got on the plane. She massages her scalp between the dreadlocks. Those things must itch like a mother.

“I'm okay now, Davey.”

Her voice catches me off guard. It's level and a little deeper than I've heard before. Definitely not her usual chirpy voice. She reaches for my hand. Hers feels clammy and small.

“Shit. This is fun,” she offers. “I've never ridden in one of these things before.”

“You were being a real bitch.”

She winces a little, and I feel bad. I forget she doesn't like that word.

“I know,” she says in that new low voice. “I'm sorry.”

She smiles and looks tired. I feel suddenly exhausted myself. The stewardess announces that we've reaching our cruising altitude, and Caitlyn squeezes my hand before turning back to look out the window.

Maybe this will be okay after all. I take one of those deep breaths and let out a long sigh. Just as the fucker in front of me reclines his seat.

I must've dozed off at some point during the flight. Not that restless sleep, either, but the heavy blackout kind. The kind where you rise up from some depth the way they show in movies, closer and closer toward two fuzzy eyeholes. Then you blink awake,

unsure of where you are, a hospital room maybe, and an official voice is going on about some horrible accident. Or, in this case, announcing that we've begun our descent over Memphis.

I feel great, like I've slept for days. Except for a mean crick in my neck. And the light in the cabin seems especially bright. My brain fumbles with the math: a two-hour flight, we haven't landed yet—it can't be later than 8:30 a.m.

I look around the cabin at the other passengers sleeping, reading, talking softly across the aisle. They, too, seem to have been released from the anxious captivity of only a few hours ago.

Those earlier events come back to me as though over a great distance, hazy. Caitlyn shouting on the grey tarmac. The pained look on her face as I snatch the bag out of her hand. The pink dawn glowing through the strange tentacles of her hair.

But they come as images without emotion. I feel nothing now, at least nothing like anger. It's comforting, this relief from feeling. It's as though I've woken up in some alternate, better version of our trip, where all that stuff might've happened, might've not. I run my tongue over my teeth and remember the mini liquors.

I turn to Caitlyn. She's sitting exactly as she was before I went unconscious, slumped down as far as she can be in these god-forsaken non-reclining seats, staring trance-like out the window. She hasn't noticed I'm awake.

Past her, out across the patchwork land, a broad, brown river curves through the floodplain.

That takes a second, too, to register. That this is it—this flat thing snaking through the quartered landscape, that every second now grows fatter and fatter. Disturbingly fat, when I think about it, to be something that *moves*. Though of course there's no discerning movement from this altitude. But I know that it moves in some places a mile wide, as I recall from high school Geography, and over a distance of more than 2,000 miles.

*The Mighty Mississippi. The river that bisects a nation.* Textbook-sounding phrases flutter up from my memory as the water expands outward beneath us. I can't say it's not humbling, seeing it for the first time.

We sink down toward it, and high rises and clusters of houses take shape on the banks, miniscule against the stretch of brown. It's unsettling, in that thrilling way. The way I feel when I'm out on the ocean, just after we've passed shore visibility, and we kill the engine and float. That kind of smallness. I live near the ocean, I've seen it almost every day of my life. So I understand firsthand the *force* part in *force of nature*.

But this river, this water is a different animal. I feel that just by looking at it. Through the porthole window a spidery bridge comes into focus, and some kind of pyramid, and bulky freighters the size of buildings, and finally tiny cars crawling around. But in the midst of it all swells the vast plain of water.

This is a water, I philosophize, that moves huge amounts of raw material over a great distance. An industrial water. A water with a mission. A water that people can understand. Man and nature, in the great history of American Progress, collaborate here on this water. In this place, even destruction can be traced down a logical line of cause and effect.

Not so with the ocean, that feral beast. She'll take it all when she wants to. No warning and no explanation after. That, too, I know firsthand.

So yes, I'm waxing romantic over Old Man River. Maybe the sense of adventure is at last kicking in. We're already farther west than I've ever been. We're going West, I say to myself. And in my mind it's The West, with capital letters, as though I'm a damn pioneer or something.

I look over at my sister. She grips the armrests as we jostle into our landing and screech to a halt. Then she pops up in her seat and flashes me the biggest grin, like all of a sudden she's realized where she is, like she's just snapped out of hibernation.

She slaps my knee.

"Ready for round two?"

I crack a smile.

"Yes, unbelievably, I am. Just don't pull any more crazy shit, okay?"

"What, Davey? You don't feel up to a cavity search this morning?"

"You know, I would. It's just I don't think we'd make our layover."

"Too bad." She socks me in the arm. "You might like it."

I give her a fake freaked out look and start to unfold my cramped legs. That's a good sign, her making jokes. I take a sidelong look at her, at that outfit, which seems more comical now than irritating. But something tells me not to let my guard down just yet. There's something there that didn't use to be, something I don't quite register as my sister.

On the exit ramp, the blessed bag is waiting, just as it should be, though I must confess I feel a little relieved myself.

Inside the airport, we grab extra-grande coffees and book it to the bar. I'm awake enough now to remember that this is a vacation after all, at least for me. We order two double whiskeys, no chaser, and Caitlyn takes hers without a flinch. *That's the girl I remember*, I say and slap her on the back. The one who's not afraid of planes or anything else. So we board our second 1970s-era junker with only minimal comments, mostly good-natured. And, thank God, she hands over the bag without a word.

When we're seated, I ask her how the heck Rob knows what he's doing out there.

"This past year he's been WOOFing," she says.

"Woof? What is that? Like a dog?"

She laughs. She's got a great laugh. Not too loud. Like a trill on the piano, rising and falling. I remember that word, *trill*, from her piano days.

"No, silly! World Organization of Organic Farmers. I've told you this."

She explains that it's basically like working for other hippies for free around the country. For experience, or whatever. I guess I know he's been gone, I just didn't remember doing what.

I ask her where she got her tough jacket.

"God, your memory sucks. Rob has a bike."

Right. I wonder how I missed that too during our occasional happy hour chats. Though to be honest, I haven't had a lot of time to hang out these past few months.

"Did he bring the bike out to Colorado?"

“Of course. And don’t sound like Mom, Davey. I wear a helmet. But it’s getting too cold to ride it anyway. Once you factor in the wind chill at 60 miles-per-hour, it’s brutal.”

I nod my head like I know. I can’t put my finger on it, but something bothers me about the motorcycle. Which doesn’t make sense. I used to want one myself. The older I get though, the more they just seem, I don’t know, *pretentious*. Like this guy Rob needs everyone to know what a badass he thinks he is. And let’s face it, they are dangerous.

Then Caitlyn asks me about my job. I say it’s a job and not much else. The conversation falters for a moment, but I just don’t want to get into it. She has to have noticed the press we’ve been getting, what with the “vulture fund,” as one column put it. *Cannibalizing their own properties. Profiting off the misfortune of others.* Those op-eds don’t pull any punches. But it’s not like I’m the CEO or anything. I’m not making these decisions. I’m lucky to even have a job. I’ve got to remember that. And I’m probably getting marked down as we speak for being away.

“Did you ever get out from under that last flip?” she tries again. She’s talking about the house I got stuck with when the market crashed. The one I’ll be paying on from now until I die. Not that she would understand the concept of a mortgage. She’s never even had a career.

“I’m keeping my head above water, if that’s what you’re asking.”

We’re silent again.

“So I know they just legalized recreational use,” I say. “I mean, duh. Everybody knows. But I read that it’s not going to roll out until 2014. Are you guys going to get on that?”

Caitlyn sighs. I get the feeling this is an obvious question.

“Yeah, we’re classified as medicinal. But that opens the door, since we’re already in production. Which was, of course, the point.”

Right. I’ve revealed yet again that I wasn’t paying attention during some previous conversation.

She looks out the window. We’re high enough now that we see only faint wisps of clouds against a blue so bright it hurts.

“Rob’s partner, Mike,” she says. “You don’t know Mike, he’s not from back home. He saw this coming. After they legalized medicinal, it was only a matter of time. And he knew, when it finally did happen, that it was going to be big.”

She says this all to the window, in a tone too nonchalant, considering what they’re looking at. I’m playing dumb. I’ve done my research. I Googled it. I know. I know that medical marijuana farms currently in operation have their foot well in the door, are months if not years ahead in terms of meeting facility requirements. I know that they have their teams in place and their contacts in the legislature, and so they’ve already submitted their licensing paperwork. Likely on the day the amendment was passed, if they were smart. Which it sounds, as much as I hate to give it to Rob, like they are. I know the sheer amount money they stand to make. The predictions are mind-boggling.

And I also know, though again I'm not sure why, that something about all this doesn't sit right with me. But that's not a topic, given the precarious feel of this trip so far, that I'm about to bring up.

Instead, I let Caitlyn ask me about my wife.

"She's good," I say. "You know, actually, we're trying to have a baby."

"Aww! It's about time, you two. But that's such an awkward way to put it. What part of the trying isn't working?"

Unbelievably, I blush. "Well, little sis, there are these things called eggs, and these other things called sperm..."

She punches me in the arm.

"I don't know, honestly. Leah has a chart for us and everything. She drinks fertility smoothies."

"Oh! With alfalfa and açai, right?"

"And why would those be words I know? You aren't drinking fertility smoothies, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. And you'll make a good dad," she says. One of those standard phrases. "Plus, it's getting to be that phase in your life."

"I don't know since when you know about that kind of stuff," I say.

Or how, speaking of phases, that for a guy working 60, 70 hours a week on a new unit, it's hardly the time to take a trip to La La Land, Colorado, let alone have a kid. But I keep this to myself.

"Relax, dude. I'm sure it will all work out."

“Thank you, Ms. Marijuana, for your vote of confidence.”

She forces a laugh. “On that note, though, maybe you shouldn’t smoke too much while you’re out here. I hear it lowers the count, if you know what I mean.”

I don’t know why, but I don’t respond.

After a second, Caitlyn turns back to the window.

I’m not mad, though maybe she thinks I am. I know it’s a joke. But sometimes lately I can’t think of a word to say to save my life.

Caitlyn leans back in her seat and closes her eyes. Somehow we make it all the way to Denver, the Mile-High City—with all those mountains I’ve never seen before, breaking up in a jagged wall from the edge of the world—in silence.

We disembark and that’s when Caitlyn decides to break it to me that Rob isn’t coming to meet us. No wonder she didn’t mention it earlier. She knew how I’d feel, how anyone should feel. That it’s piss poor. Your girlfriend puts up with your absence for a year and then decides to move halfway across the country—more than halfway!—to live with you, and you can’t even meet her at the airport? We’ve already established why he can’t ride the bike. And apparently he doesn’t have a car. Or any friends who can be bothered to lend him one.

“He cares about his carbon footprint, Davey,” Caitlyn says. Her attempt at a joke, sure, but I wonder how he calculates the carbon footprint of a multi-acre grow-house operation.

We stand at the Hertz counter waiting to rent a car—excuse me—waiting for *me* to rent a car, and I ask her if she wants to stop by one of those Cannabis Cafés I’ve heard so much about. I’m thinking I need a little buffer between me and this loser she’s supposedly in love with.

“Why? We have plenty of pot at the farm, duh.”

Fine, that makes sense. Then I ask, very nice of me I think, if there’s anything we should pick up at the store. Like a little housewarming or goodbye dinner material.

“Aww, that’s nice of you. But we grow everything on the compound. We’re self-sufficient and organic.”

Right. Organic. Of course. I want to tell her that the Egg McMuffin she scarfed down this morning was not organic, and that those dreadlocks on her head look like cat hairballs. But that would not be the mature thing to do, and I remind myself that it might be a while before I get out here again to visit, so I should be nice. And when did she start using “we” when talking about the compound?

We make the drive out of the city in near silence, not for lack of effort on my part. But Caitlyn doesn’t seem to notice because she’s jabbing away at her iPhone, probably texting the douchbag.

To our left, the snow-capped Rockies rise so massive and distant above the horizon that they look unreal. It’s so open out here. And in the thin air everything seems sharper. I ask if she wants to stop for a second and take a look at the scenery, at these crazy huge red rocks we’re passing, jutting out of the prairie. I’m surprised she’s not

*ooing* and *ahhing* over the “natural beauty”—she likes that stuff. Now she just waves me off, looks briefly out the window, and goes back to her phone.

I get it. She wants to get there already. And I don't say anything because I want to be the cool brother who isn't thinking about the fact that my sister is thinking about getting laid. By some dude who's been away for a year hanging out with a bunch of other traveling chicks.

Caitlyn points out our road, and I pull off quickly at the gas station before the turn to load up on beer. Rob probably makes homebrew or prison wine under his bed, and I'm definitely not drinking any of that. I try Caitlyn's deep breathing strategy as we wind down the long dirt road.

“Are you okay?” she asks. She's beaming. Way too excited to care about the real answer to her question.

After about an hour, we pull up to a locked gate in a fence topped with barbed wire.

“What the hell?”

“You know,” she says. She starts to get out of the car. “People try to steal the crops. It's just one of those things.”

She walks over to the gate and punches in a code. Steal the crops? Oh, right. They're not exactly growing potatoes here.

“Does Rob have a gun?” I ask when she gets back in the car. Not that this would comfort me in the least.

“No. We’re pacifists,” she says. “And the owner employs guards to monitor the periphery.”

Guards? This is not the idyllic red barn and rolling fields kind of farm that, for some stupid reason, I’ve been imagining. I don’t know why I’m still driving forward. Maybe I’m in shock. I can’t believe I didn’t look up *pictures* of the farms when I did my research. That would’ve made sense.

I can’t even look over on her side of the car. She should’ve filled me in more. She knows I was trying to ask on the plane. Now I know why Mom was worried. She must have some kind of bullshit sensor that alerts her to lies by omission. Good thing I’m here to see this compound for myself. I have to see this Rob asshole. I grip the wheel to stop my hands from shaking, but I’m trembling all over.

Then, about a half-mile in front of us, surrounded by treeless, easily snipe-able flat land, are the greenhouses. They stretch 50 yards each, row after long row of transparent buildings, over what must be several acres. Through the Plexiglas siding, I see the huge bushes, glowing green as if with their own light. This ain’t no family farm, that’s for sure. This is the real fucking deal.

I feel like I’m going to be sick. I should just turn around. I stare straight ahead at the white trailer materializing at the end of the road. Yep. Trailer. I don’t know what else I expected.

“You’re crazy, Caitlyn,” I stammer, trying to stay calm. “This is intense. This is not something you should be getting into. What the hell is your role supposed to be here? Jesus.”

She says nothing. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her set her jaw.

I pull up in front of the trailer and Rob comes out the door. He's not wearing a shirt. His braids are bumping on his bare chest as he jogs down the stairs. He's grinning like a motherfucker.

I lay on the horn.

Rob jumps at the sound but then starts grinning again and heading toward the car. I turn to my sister. Her face is set like stone, eyes livid. She looks scary. She looks like a scary, 23-year-old, crazy-haired bag lady.

"Listen," she says, glaring. "I'm not asking you to live here. I didn't ask you to bring me here. If you have a problem, go home."

She opens the car door and runs over to Rob. They embrace. They kiss. Her jacket bunches up over his arms. I step out of the car, my vision blurry. Rob strides over and embraces me too. I do not embrace back.

"Welcome! Welcome, man," he says. He has that drawn-out stoner voice. "Oh, man. It's so great you're here. So great. Let me give you guys the tour. You all right, man?"

I say yes, I'm all right. No, *man*, I'm going to sit out the tour. It's been a long day. Yeah, I'll make myself at home.

The truth is, you bet I want to see those plants, that genetically engineered, designer weed. But I don't trust myself yet. I need to calm down. Caitlyn's on the periphery of my vision, radiating a strange mix of exuberance and menace. She moves

over to take Rob's hand and they stroll back down the road toward the greenhouses. My legs feel wobbly.

I walk around to the back of the car and pop the trunk.

Three beers later, the sun has started to set in a spectacular orange blaze behind the mountains. I get what they mean when they call it God's Country out here. I wonder, though, what God thinks about marijuana, about all the crazy things we humans do. But I'm not religious or anything. What I really wonder is where Caitlyn and Rob are. They've been gone a long time. I pull out my phone and dial my wife.

"Hi honey," her voice chirps close in my ear.

I don't respond.

"How's it going, babe?" she tries again.

I clear my throat.

"They've. They've got a fence," I stutter. "And guards."

A pause on her end.

"Dave, are you okay?"

"Leah." My thoughts are coming together in a rush. "This place is trouble. I don't know what to do. It's huge. It's the real deal. They've got armed guards around the periphery. I can't leave her here."

"Did you see the guards?"

I don't see the point of this question.

“No. But she told me. She knew all this stuff and she didn’t tell anyone. I don’t know what her plans are. They’re out looking at the plants right now.”

“Dave. Are you drunk?”

She’s not listening. I don’t like the note in her voice.

“Forget it, Leah,” I say. I don’t know what I called her for anyway.

“Hey.”

I can tell by her tone that she’s about to give me some lecture.

“Don’t do anything stupid. Remember, she’s an adult. Get it under control.”

I hang up the phone. Where the hell are those two? Probably out screwing on a bed of hemp leaves. I lug the beer and Caitlyn’s bag out of the trunk and into the trailer. I find the light switch, crack a beer, and sit down on the couch.

The place reeks of weed. Typical pothead crashpad. His bong and his bud are out on the table, in the open, for Christ’s sake. But I guess that’s no crime here. All those years hiding it and now you can have it whenever, wherever you want. It’s weird to think about.

My eyes drift around the room. He’s got an absolutely massive plasma screen T.V. I flip it on. John Stewart is on Comedy Central, but it seems way too early. Then I remember the time difference. I scan the DVDs. No porn immediately visible. I guess that’s a good thing. Or not. Who knows.

Something that looks like a watering schedule is taped up by the door. So I guess “on-site manager” is code for “water boy.” Figures. And the couches look like they came straight from the Salvation Army. Caitlyn was always into that thrift store stuff, so she’ll

probably think they're great. A guitar leans in the corner. That's about it. Stewart is interviewing some lady politician about a book she wrote. The woman's wearing one of those "power suits" and some serious helmet hair. Looks like a ball-buster.

I glance down at Caitlyn's ridiculous bag, propped against the couch beside me. It doesn't look near as big as it did when we were getting on the plane. *Everything I have in my whole life is in this bag.* Looking at it now, that's not much. I wonder what she did with all the books, painted pots, little Buddhas and mandala thingies she and her hippie friends made for each other and that were all over her apartment the last time I was there.

It's kind of making me depressed. I can't stop looking at it. It's a sad little bag. I want to open it. She probably wouldn't know if I did, and maybe she wouldn't even care. What's in there that's so important? What, out of everything, did she finally decide she couldn't leave behind?

Just then they walk in the door. It seems like they've been smiling, but Caitlyn immediately turns a scowl on me, and Rob beelines for the kitchen. They've been talking about me, for sure.

"Thanks for getting the brew, man," he calls from the fridge. His voice sounds less than appreciative, like *you don't have to do me any favors.*

He comes back with three bottles and passes them around. I stand up. We're all standing.

"It seems like you've got quite the set-up here," I say. I don't mean it to come out as sarcastic as it does. I wish he'd put on a shirt. He's got a bad tattoo of a bulldog, or a tiger, or some bulldog tiger monster ripping its way out of his right pec.

“Livin’ the life,” he says flatly.

He and Caitlyn exchange looks.

“Seems more like running away from life to me,” I say.

I don’t know why. But what else am I supposed to say? That I’m so glad you’ve brought my sister into this dangerous fucking enterprise where all you do is get high all day and lie around in your self-righteous bubble?

Caitlyn is shaking her head at me.

“So, what?” I go on. “You’re the water boy? I guess I’d like to spray plants all day, too. Nice life plan.”

That puffs him up. He sets his jaw and looks over at Caitlyn. She folds her arms over her chest and shrugs her shoulders. Shrugs her shoulders! Like I didn’t just spend eight hours of my life getting her ass out here. Like I couldn’t possibly understand anything about the real world, no. *My* perspective has nothing to offer. She and Willie Nelson over there have it all figured out.

Rob’s eyes flash. “It sure beats the hell out of that development shit you do, man. I can sleep at night.”

That’s about all I’m ready to take there. I see Caitlyn start to come towards me with her arms up. But before I can stop myself, I pop that fucker right in the eye.

After that, there’s a lot of yelling “Oh my eye!” and things like that, and my head is spinning and I’m trying to steady myself in case Rob comes at me, but he just storms

off holding his face saying something about my being an asshole. Caitlyn stands there for a second. But I can't look at her, and so she follows behind him.

I sit on the couch a long time. Waiting for I don't know what. Not really thinking about anything. I feel sick to my stomach. I'm pretty sure I didn't mean to do that. I didn't even realize I was that angry. I reach for my beer and notice my hand tingling from the punch. I can hear them whispering to each other from the bedroom, but I can't make out what they're saying. It sounds heated, and I keep expecting Rob or Caitlyn or both of them to burst through the door and tell me to get out. But nothing happens. After a while their voices calm down, but they keep talking.

I go to the kitchen and get myself some water. I better sober up so I can drive somewhere. I drink cup after cup of water. My goal in life is to drink this water. I have to leave, I tell myself, but somehow my feet aren't moving me that way. They're probably sitting in there waiting for me to leave. I hear John Stewart go off in the living room and Stephen Colbert come on. He's doing some bit about Obama.

After what feels like forever, Rob comes out of the bedroom. Maybe he'll think I left and switch off the T.V. and go back. But he leaves it on, and when he comes into the kitchen he doesn't look at all surprised to see me there, leaning against the counter like it's holding me up.

I stiffen, expecting I don't know what. His eye is swollen shut and his face is all red and puffy on that side. He pulls a plastic baggie out of a drawer, opens the freezer, and proceeds to make an ice pack while I toe a crack in the linoleum floor. I can't for the life of me think of what to say.

“I get it, dude,” he says at last. He presses the ice pack to his face and turns my way. “She’s your little sister, right?”

I stay silent. I guess he’s going to give me some high-road shit about understanding how I want to protect her or something. Maybe that’s part of it. But who’s to say at this point.

“Still. It was a fucking immature thing to do.”

I look away. I wish he had just fought me. I guess I should be happy that Caitlyn’s with a guy who doesn’t haul off and clock people when they piss him off. Though I’m not crazy about hearing the word “immature” come out of the mouth of Rob. But maybe that’s what I am.

“Wanna burn?” he asks.

“Sure.” I follow him out into the living room.

He puts the ice down, pulls a pipe out of his pocket, and leans over the table to pack the bowl. His movements are slow and deliberate. There’s none of that electric anticipation about getting high that I remember from my college days. It feels natural, ordinary even. He brings the pipe up to his mouth and holds the lighter over the bud until it glows red. The smell hits me like a wave. Then he moves his finger off the carb and inhales deep. He holds his breath and hands me the piece.

I hit it and immediately start to cough. It’s been a while for me. He lets out a long, smooth breath, smacks me on the back, and waits for me to get it together.

“Smoke the rest of that if you want.”

Then he walks into the kitchen and comes back with my glass of water.

“Let’s talk in the morning.”

I nod without looking up. He flicks off the T.V. and the lights and goes down the little hallway, and I listen to the bedroom door close behind him. The bedroom he now shares with my sister, a grown woman, I try to tell myself, who now it seems I barely know.

I gulp the water and take two more hits off the pipe. I imagine the spotlights along periphery fence beaming out into the darkness. I imagine the massive aisles filling the growhouses, heady and rustling and green, green, green. I really wish we’d stopped along the road on the way here, by those red rocks, me and Caitlyn. Just for a second, to look at the sky, together. By the time we got to the farm, I was too freaked out to appreciate it. But I remember thinking it was the biggest damn sky I’d ever seen. I stretch myself out along the couch, close my eyes, and let the room spin.

## **DISTANCES: 2014**

At some point, around Christmas of 2013, I made the decision to be a *real* girlfriend, long-distance or otherwise. *Real* meaning that I stopped messing around with other guys in order to find out what I felt about Phillip, and started looking at *our* history and *our* relationship, for what it was.

So I told myself. Because though this might have been a step in the right direction, at least in the sense that I was determined to be faithful without the caveat *until something better comes along*, I still wasn't willing to look at the most significant factor in all of this: myself.

I don't remember much of that holiday season. What I think I know, I've had to infer from the facts:

1. I'd left Virginia to make the 1000-mile drive to Florida having hurt the roommate who was formerly my "best friend" so badly that I'd likely have to move out of the house. I made sure to take my box of journals with me, along with anything else I could fit in the back of my giant SUV and that I believed could either be used to humiliate me or that would cause me pain if I came back and found it torched. I was living in a state of constant, low-grade anxiety about what would happen next. I say *low-grade*, because once I drove away from the house, I was

no longer tortured by the fantasy that my ex-friend would stab me in my sleep. Still, I was stressed. And I shared this with no one.

2. I was negotiating a delicate balance between the time I should spend with my family in Ft. Pierce and the time I should spend with Phillip in Gainesville. Until the Summer 2013 Family Scallop Hunt in Steinhatchee, FL, I'd never invited Phillip to any significant family function. I did not intend to invite him to any this season. Both of us pretended not to notice this and did not question what it might mean.
3. I'd taken Incompletes in two out of my three classes for the Fall semester. Over break, I set up a little "office" with a card table desk in my old bedroom at my parents' house, and I was working like mad for the early part of January in the hope that I wouldn't fail out.
4. I was keeping a stash of mini wine bottles—white wine, as red stained my mouth—that I poured into coffee mugs and sipped surreptitiously as I worked. Even though my parents had come around and now kept wine in the house, they'd never been Big Drinkers. But they were Close Watchers. I intended to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

In particular, I don't remember much about the time I spent with Phillip that month. We didn't really "do" Christmas. I gave him a used copy of *1984*, which I knew he'd never read, and spouted some lip service about how it made me think of him, what with his paranoia about the government. I also got him a \$5 baggie of red bottle caps for his homebrew projects. He didn't get me anything. We've never been good at gifts, but I think there was something more to it this year. We both seemed a little reluctant to invest.

But I do know that we went to Flaco's—my favorite Cuban place—and that it felt so good to be "home." I ordered beef empanadas and a quesita for dessert, and I remember looking across the table at Phillip in the low, warm, incandescent light and feeling this incredible tenderness. He can be so handsome at times, when he hasn't cut his hair too short around his little ears, or when he isn't talking too fast, or laughing too loud, or smiling so much so that he shows his missing tooth on the left side.

But it's his inherent melancholy that might be his most attractive quality. Or perhaps *melancholy* is not the right word. An aura of fragility surrounds him, but one without fear, and in his calmer moments it becomes most poignant. His face relaxes from the grimace of hard concentration he wears at work, and that I've so often confused with anger. His brown eyes become soft. I would call them *pensive*, but I've asked him enough times what he's thinking to believe he might be telling the truth when he says *nothing*. Not that he's not smart—I just think his mind is less obsessive than my own. He doesn't seem to be dogged by the same neurotic microanalysis that plagues my every waking moment. For instance:

*What is this person's mood? Is he not talking because I've just bored him to death with this story about my cousin's children's stomach parasites? Or is it because he's judging me for judging her for waiting so long to take them to the doctor? Is he tired of hearing me talk about babies? Does he secretly want to talk about babies too, but is afraid to think of the future because I break up with him every six months? Does he hate me and not know how to leave? Who is that—that person that just walked up to the counter? I think I used to work with her. Should I introduce Phillip? What will she think of him? Why doesn't he wash his work clothes on higher heat so the grease stains come out? Why are all his clothes work clothes? What happened to those nice pants I bought him? Why is it so hard for me to accept him for how he is?*

After eight years—on and off—with this man, you'd think I'd be tired of the mental hamster wheel. And then, all of a sudden, I am.

I reach across the café table to where he's placed his hands, palms down, on either side of his beer. He turns them up to take mine. I squeeze his fingers lightly. I'm not as desperate for attention as I used to be, at least not right now, and I don't take it to mean anything when he doesn't squeeze them back. His smile is enough. That slight, sad smile that says, *I've never given a shit about the people we see when we go out, or what they think of me, or of you. But I know you care. You are how you are. It's okay.*

Or, more likely, he's thinking nothing, and he's smiling because he's genuinely happy we're here together, because it feels so good for once to not be lonely, and even

better to be with a person you've known for so long, who you know in every possible way—know her best and her worst—and who sees that you are just another lonely and vulnerable person in this world. And then you realize that somehow you love this person, though most of the time there's no logical reason why this should be the case, but you love this person, and she loves you, and you trust this, and you really don't give a shit about who's ordering at the counter or why you didn't invite each other to your family Christmases or that terrifying moment when you'll have to make some kind of decision about The Future, because this warm light is the most beautiful light, and these greasy smells are the most comforting smells, and the noises of dishes clattering and machines humming and people talking at the cramped tables beside you are a cloud of wonderful noises, and the person across the table is looking at you with the exact same love and trust with which you are looking at her, and these are the best feelings in the world.

This is the moment I remember, out of all the things that happened that tense month in Florida between semesters. This is the moment that haunted me six months later, after I'd broken up with Phillip yet again and could not stop crying. This is the moment I think of now, as we gingerly inch closer to each other again, because this is the moment that was different. This was the first time I understood, at the time it was actually happening, that the love I'd always wanted, I already had.

\* \* \*

Around the same time, and after I'd gotten back up to Virginia, I also made the decision to be a better daughter. Both of my parents were stuck in miserable jobs, boring routines, and paralyzing isolation. I called them twice a month, on Sunday nights, and we discussed politics, movies we'd seen, family gossip, and the like. My dad dominated these hour-long conversations, while my mom and I listened in complicit understanding that he needed this. His anger at his coworkers and his discontent with everything from the way Obama was running the country to the increased burden technology brought to his job followed a familiar script. Airing these grievances with me seemed to bring him a sense of relief that he didn't get elsewhere. Most of the time, I tried not to think about what this meant for my parents' marriage.

But Mom was the one I truly worried about. We had a phone date every Friday, when she would call me on her way home from Highlands Elementary in Vero Beach, where she'd been a first-grade teacher for nearly all her adult life. She had a new principal, who had no classroom experience, but rather a grand vision for reforming the chaotic, under-performing school. The state had implemented a new teacher-evaluation system that dictated each lesson plan down to how the teacher said *Hello, class*. Every other week, it seemed Mom's students were taking some sort of test, and failing, so that she was assigned more and more after-hours training for a job she'd been doing for over 30 years. I remember back when she got voted Teacher of the Year twice before I turned ten. Now she was on an Intervention Plan, because she "needed support in controlling her 'problem students.'" In the language of K-12 education, *support* seems to be doublespeak for *punishment*.

“Julie!” she’d exclaim when I picked up the phone, and I would know she’d had a good day.

Or, more often: “Hey. It’s Mom,” in a tone of utter exhaustion.

Sometimes she’d be manic: “I’ve had an awful day but I don’t even want to talk about it and I’m just so glad it’s Friday and all I’m going to say is that I’m going to be REALLY disciplined this weekend and do a lot of work but like I said I’m not going to bore you with all that stuff and what I really want to know is How are YOU? How are YOU doing? Tell me about YOU.”

To which I’d respond, “Fine. Stressed of course. What’s new?”

Then I’d laugh it off. Because the truth was, although I did feel constant stress, I sensed that my mom’s was worse. And I certainly didn’t want to talk about my writing—about my fear that I’d never write anything that resembled an indictment of my family or revealed that I might have some experience with dysfunction. Which meant I’d never write anything meaningful. I felt bound by a need to protect them that I could not overcome.

And as their protector—their daughter that they were so proud of for getting her second graduate degree, never mind that it was in Creative Writing, whatever that meant, and that she never called it Creative Writing, but rather something ambiguous like Literature and Writing, Writing and Literature, and, finally, A Degree in Writing and Literature with a graduate minor in Folklore—I could not admit to them that my own life was out of control. After taking Incomplete after Incomplete, and limping along on the sympathy of my professors, I didn’t know if I was going to make it another year, or if I

even cared to try. And I definitely could not admit that I'd begun to think I drank too much, or that I was afraid I couldn't stop.

Then Mom called me one Saturday, off schedule. When I picked up the phone and she said hello, her voice sounded close to tears. She started going on about how my brother and his girlfriend had gone out fishing with Dad, and how she was running errands for the dinner she was hosting that night for the "in-town" relatives—something like 15 people.

"Mom. Slow down. Are you okay?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm really worried about Dad's cat. You know his black cat at the office?"

Thank goodness she couldn't see me roll my eyes over the phone. It's not that I don't love cats. I have—and am obsessed with—one myself, who's name is Oliver Huggiebear. But we'd been through this before. Sometimes Dad's cat disappeared for a few days, and Dad would go out in the woods behind the office to look for it for hours. His coworkers would crack jokes about smelling something dead beneath the woodpile. Once the cat got sick, stumbling around like it was intoxicated, and Dad thought the coworkers had poisoned it. But it turned out the poor thing had just eaten a skink. Dad had a lot of anxiety about this cat, so much so that he went to feed it on the weekends and got his friend to do so when he was out of town. I'd begun to worry whether his concern had become unhealthy, and, more importantly, if he had his priorities straight at work. It

was an outdoor cat. His office is by a busy road. There are certain inherent risks. But of course, as with all of my father's anxieties, this one too had transferred to my mother.

"What's wrong with the cat?" I tried to sound sincere.

"I was on my way back from school this morning—I actually went in and did some stuff in my classroom—and when I passed Dad's office I saw the cat running across the parking lot with something in its mouth."

"I don't understand."

"It had something in its mouth! Something big."

Still confused, I said nothing.

"Julie, what if it eats something bad?"

I felt myself getting angry. This was exactly the kind of ridiculousness that made me thankful I lived a thousand miles away. I'm sure I would've said something snarky or mean, except for Mom's voice. She sounded like she was about to cry.

"I'm sure it was a mouse, Mom. It's a wild cat."

"You...you wouldn't think someone at the office, would, you know, *give* it something, do you? Something bad?"

"No, I do not," I said. An edge had crept into my tone. "And it's Saturday. No one's there. Did you see any cars?"

"No. But it was bigger than a mouse." She was getting frantic. "Julie, do you think I should go back and check on it?"

And then it hit me. Mom had just come from school. On a Saturday. As in the day after Friday, the day after the end of the hellish week when she usually sat at the kitchen

table for hours savoring the newspaper page by page, in the slanted, mid-morning light that came through the French doors. I knew this time with the paper was one of her favorite things. One of her favorite *Saturday* things.

“Why are you coming from school?”

“Did you know Michael and Hannah are in town?”

“Yeah. Fishing. You told me already.”

“Julie, I don’t know if I should tell you this. I don’t want you to worry about me.”

“Jesus, Mom,” I said and mock groaned. “I always worry about you! Whatever’s going on can’t possibly make that worse than it is already.”

She laughed, thank God. And then I could tell she was starting to cry. She asked me if I remembered about her intervention plan. Of course I did. She asked me not to tell Dad what she was about to say, because she didn’t want him to confront her principal and make a scene or anything. I reassured her that I understood Dad’s warped sense of protection and would say nothing. Then she told me about the kid who’d been taken off his meds this week and had cut another kid with scissors. And about the copycat kid who found out the slasher got to play computer games in the principal’s office and decided to cut someone too. And how the principal brought Mom in to remind her that she was already *on a plan* and that she needed to work on her *classroom management*.

“I’m afraid they’re going to ask me to move schools.” She was openly crying now. “I’m afraid I’m going to lose my job.”

I didn’t know what to say. I still don’t remember what I came up with in the end. I remember thinking that I knew what it felt like to be exhausted, to use every ounce of

energy to it hold together and not know why, to feel that, at any moment, all the plates you have been spinning will come crashing down. I thought I knew what it was like to fear failure, and shame.

But what I didn't know—and what I still don't—is what it's like to feel that fear at 58. I stood to lose something I'd worked for only two years, not 35. I still had a choice in what I would become.

“Julie, do you think I should go back and check on that cat?” The anxiety in her voice had given way to annoyance.

I felt annoyed too. Why had my Dad and my brother and his girlfriend gone out on the boat and left Mom by herself? Left her to run all the errands and do all the cooking and cleaning for the dinner, left her to take care of a cat that didn't belong to her, if it belonged to anyone.

“That cat just caught a squirrel and is hiding under the woodpile eating it. This is the best day of that cat's life.”

Mom laughed. “I probably wouldn't be able to find it anyway.”

I felt my own sense of relief. And a sense of pride that I was the one person who could make her feel better. Which I should know, by now, are dangerous things to feel.

“I wish I were there to help you with the party tonight,” I said.

Regret hit me in an instant. I knew this was a lie. Talking on the phone was one thing. Giving the impression I might enjoy that crazy life down there was quite another.

“I wish you were, too,” she said. She sounded sad again. “I'll call you tomorrow, okay?”

And the day after that, and the day after that. And everyday until I stopped picking up the phone again except on Fridays. I felt suddenly very tired, and very stupid. And like I needed a beer.

“Sure, Mom,” I said. My mind was already taking inventory of the fridge. “Good luck.”

## ONE WAY

They were having a late breakfast at Captain's Galley on a Monday. Somehow, they both had the day off. Somehow, they'd sensed that spending the hours sulking together in the house would've been unbearable.

Anyway, they were here now, not talking. Cal picked at the sausage and syrup-drenched pancakes of his Captain's Special. Anne nudged around scraps of her croissant in a coagulating pool of hollandaise.

"Nice to see you two here on a weekday! What a treat!" the waitress had exclaimed when she sat them.

She was an older woman with a stringy, poorly-dyed, waist-length braid. Anne had never not seen her working, as far back as she could remember, and she'd been eating here all her life. Still, after thirty-plus years, she couldn't seem to remember her name.

"Well," Cal had sighed in response. Anne made an affirmative groan. Neither one looked at the other or at the waitress, who pulled out her order pad and dropped the small talk. This was no treat for anybody.

As Anne watched her walk away, she pitied the waitress, with her sun-wrinkled face and sad braid. The thought of a life of so little change filled her with terror. It was, after all, what her own life was shaping up to be.

Anne looked out the window toward the marina and the Manatee Observation Center that rose beside it. The building was a tasteless, peach-colored structure, with a platform where you could supposedly look down on the center's namesake in its "natural" habitat. But two years after it had been built, the nearby transformer was demolished, the warm water that was discharged from the cooling units disappeared, and the manatees no longer had any incentive to seek out the canal that flanked the platform side. Misled tourists occasionally wandered up, though mostly the deck stayed vacant, as it was now. It was a shame, really. But that was city planning for you.

Years ago, Anne's husband had explained to her, with a little kid's delight at the perverse, that the mammary glands of manatees—the *breasts!*—were hidden, one on each side, beneath the flippers. It had been winter, if you could call it that in Florida, and they had donned their suits and snorkel gear to go down to Stan Blum, where the sun warmed the slow-moving water enough to draw the creatures in.

*In the early voyages to the New World, lonely sailors are believed to have mistaken the common sea cow for mermaids.* His words had the ring of a textbook. Anne already knew these things, of course, had known them since she was a girl. But the trivia still delighted her, and she'd shared in Cal's excitement without answering, and without taking her eyes from the wondrous gray hulks drifting around them through the murk.

"Thanks, Martha," Cal said when the waitress came to refill his coffee. So that was her name, *Martha*. Anne put her hand over her mug and shook her head. Too much caffeine made her nervous.

Anne felt Cal staring at her as though about to speak. She concentrated on reading the names on the boats in the marina: *Daddy's Dream*, *Windsong II*, *Float Some Jet Some*. After a moment, thankfully, he opted for the coffee.

They hadn't talked much in the beginning either, but for different reasons than now. Back then, Anne had found something endearing in Cal's eagerness, his immaturity even. *Their nipples are in the armpits!* he had laughed at Stan Blum. *But they have eyelashes and fingernails just like ours.*

Now, sitting on the sun porch at this greasy table—the tables here were always greasy—it struck Anne that once she had wanted to be a scientist. Why had this not happened? The answers popped up with suspicious speed: her mother's death, her marriage immediately thereafter, her mediocre grades at community college.

She snuck a look at Cal across the table. He sat hunched over his plate, mashing at his pancakes with a disturbing focus.

Come to think of it, it had never been clear to Anne how one *became* a scientist. She couldn't recall having ever met one. What did they do, day in and day out? She imagined lab tables and foaming beakers.

But as much as she wanted the distraction of these thoughts, Anne couldn't keep them up. Trapped in this cheerfully sunlit, comforting dump of a restaurant, with its menus in their grimy plastic sleeves and its scalloped curtains from the 80s at best, where she'd spent almost every Saturday of her life and was now avoiding at all cost any eye contact with her husband of eight—eight!—years, Anne realized that at some point she

had simply forgotten there were things, outside this predictable little realm, that she could want.

She forced herself to look at Cal.

“Do you remember that day when we were first married when we swam with the manatees at Stan Blum?”

He turned to her and raised an eyebrow. Funny how she only noticed he was handsome when he was annoyed, or angry. Brooding just suited his dark features.

“Is that really what you want to talk about?”

Apparently, it was. She pushed on. Maybe she half-hoped that memory might work some charm on the intervening years. Maybe it was a last grasp at what they call pure data, the point before some error corrupts all the rest. Whatever the reason, Anne tried to tell Cal that on the day they swam with them, the manatees, one came back to her. That when Anne touched its belly, it placed a flipper over her hand.

“As though it wanted me to be there,” she gushed. The false note in her tone startled her, but she continued. “As though it wanted to *hold hands*.”

She described her beating heart and the outlines of the fingernails on the flipper. She wanted Cal to know she had noticed the fingernails. She told him she said *came back*, because she’d recognized the prop scars on the manatee’s tail. There was something important in that recognition, she felt, in that return.

But she stopped there. The emotion in her voice disgusted her. She stared down at the yellow mess on her plate. Why couldn’t she break out of that hacked performance? Who was it for? Not Cal.

He had leaned back from the nauseating mess of his own breakfast to gaze at something beyond the parking lot. He couldn't care less whether she finished her story. He was just waiting her out. He might as well have been alone at that table while she, as though behind some two-way mirror, watched him unawares.

Looking back, years later, Anne identified this as the moment when she accepted her marriage was over.

This day: in mid-July, with the light glinting on the water, bouncing blinding white off the boats in the marina, while she and Cal sat on the air-conditioned sun porch beneath the decorative palm fans and awful pink curtains, in the company of fellow citizens they had known since birth.

Not any of the nights when she had gotten drunk just so she could cry, or the nights she'd snuck out to stare bleakly off the black point of the jetty into the sea. Not the time she smashed her mother's dishes, plate by plate, as she screamed at him, or during the weeks of silent groveling after he discovered her at The Ramp with another man in the midst of her "emotional affair." Surely not in the moments of desperate planning for the future: the vacation funds, landscaping projects, fertility charts.

Anne had always thought it took something big to end a marriage, something dramatic. But after all that time, all that wasted frantic energy, all it took was an unfinished story and a sickening amount of cold hollandaise for Anne to realize this had gone on long enough.

So she dropped it right there, filed it away for safekeeping, the part of the memory that really mattered. The part where they had floated there together through the watery

green silence, she and the manatee, flipper over hand, as Anne peered through her mask into the giant eyelashed eye.

\* \* \*

Unfortunately, it's rare that such moments of emotional closure coincide with logistical ones. So the following Friday, at seven o'clock in the evening, Anne found herself sweating in her car at the peak of South Bridge, headed home to their little beach cottage, windows down, the brackish stink of the river wafting in on the humid air.

On the left end of the island, the spit jutted out into the channel that led around to Stan Blum, but any thoughts of the good ole days there or anywhere were far from her mind. The traffic bottlenecked back from the island, over the bridge, and all the way out to the tracks at Old Dixie, with Anne caught in the red line of taillights arching over the water.

She usually cursed this new "rush hour," the inevitable consequence of poorly planned development, but today she was in no mood to be cynical and in no hurry to get home. In her purse nestled the first physical evidence of future action, and it pressed on her with an ominous weight.

She stared absently back at the mainland and the pink striations of clouds glowing above it. It'd rained non-stop for most of the week. A layer of freshwater dulled the surface of the inter-coastal, *the river*, as it was called, and days of rain and agricultural run-off covered the sandbars. Soon there would be articles about this in the paper, about

the inevitable algae blooms. But Anne didn't think of this either as the line of cars inched down. In fact, she was sick of thinking in terms of the inevitable.

*If nothing changes, nothing changes*, her mother used to say, regarding Anne's attitude about school, or chores, or her terminal boredom. Then, always her own devil's advocate, Mom would chuckle and add: *But the more things change, the more they stay the same*. It had taken young Anne a while to realize this wasn't meant to be depressing. Even so, since childhood, Anne felt doomed to be a person who things only happened *to*.

But lately she'd renewed a different item from Mom's Words of Wisdom: *A woman must guard her inner life*. This had straightforward appeal, no ambiguous moral. Its proscribed vigilance seemed akin to action, if not action itself, and there was both permission and protection there. This pleased Anne, who took *inner life* to be synonymous with *secrets*. Though she'd never been that great a keeper, to tell the truth.

That had been Anne's problem. Not the secrets, but her inability to keep them. She had long given up trying to make Cal understand. She stole a sideways glance at her purse on the passenger-side seat.

Anne's car finally eased off the bridge onto the island. To the left, the great reeking vats of the treatment plant churned beneath the pines. To the right, cars fanned off steadily into the towering Paradise Sands complex.

As much as she hated the condos when they were built and delighted in their sitting empty during the recession, Anne could have seen her mother living there. Then she would've been close, and they would've walked on the beach and lunched at the Tiki

every Saturday, instead of her sitting captive with Cal at Captain's Galley amidst the rest of the known world.

But that was for another life. In this one, her mother was already gone, and Anne went every other Friday after work to see her father at Meadow Woods, 45 minutes down US-1 in St. Lucie West. There she read to him from the newspaper until he fell asleep in his room, or they played Uno in the miserably warm and yellow Common Area. She used to bring the family photo albums, but then a nurse explained he was becoming upset after visits. Today, again, he'd mistaken her for her mother. It would only be a matter of time, she reassured herself, before he forgot her completely.

Traffic thinned out as more cars turned into the grid of houses off the curving Seaway Drive and into the heart of the island, the honeycomb that resisted the frenzied waterfront build-up. Easter-egg colored, concrete block, old-Florida style houses from the forties and fifties with gravel carports and white prop-up storm shutters and jalousie doors. Anne loved those jalousie doors. They had a nostalgic class. Against the houses, palms and Birds of Paradise raised pointed silhouettes.

Blue, pink, aquamarine, all faded to wistful pastels. The colors her mother used to wear when they met at the Tiki. She called them *Florida colors*, being as she was from Pennsylvania, where Anne supposed people dressed only in the stoic browns and grays of coal mining and bitter cold. Mom and Dad had been in their 40s when they moved down south, and were already well into middle-age when they'd had their only child.

Anne passed Summerlin's Smokehouse and On the Edge Floating Bar. It was easier to think about her mother on the island than anywhere else, even though Mom was

decidedly Town and not Beach. Perhaps it was the color of the houses, the age of them, a certain quaintness.

Anne pulled into the driveway of their weathered block bungalow. In the fading light, it looked particularly dull. The corrugated awning over the carport sagged, flaked along the edges with rust. The rectangle of St. Augustine grass was patchy with fire ants. Along the side, a saw palmetto threatened to take over the northeast corner of the house.

Today, as happened every so often, she looked at the house and found it altered, strange. The slant of light maybe, or a detail she'd forgotten. She could never pin it down. It was the same sense she felt when she looked at her parents' place before handing over the keys to the realtor—like the house itself was an old person who had forgotten who she was. It was an odd feeling of slipping, of becoming irrelevant, like all the others who had already passed through.

Who had slept in their room before she and Cal? How many people had filed down the halls, leaving their traces to mingle with one another? Even the wind couldn't blow those out. That was the way space was on the island. There was always so much of it, thin and open. Yet everyone, *the whole parade*, as her mother used to say, was there.

It was not a feeling Anne disliked, perhaps because of her mother's phrase, but rather an uncanny sensation that seemed inherent to the landscape.

So it didn't matter to Anne that her house looked like all the others, had been lived in by countless, unknowable others, was often only a shell that she drifted through. After all, she had favored it simply for the color. Sun orange: for the woman who always wanted to live on the island.

Speaking of secrets:

Last Saturday night, July 12th, 2014:

First of all, it was important for Anne to admit in reference to this incident, that when someone asked her a question about something she wanted that was really a question about something else, she knew she should consider not only the evasiveness, no matter how frustrating it may be, but also the meaning behind the evasiveness. If the question was asked by someone who supposedly loved her, it would've been wise to assume that this was an attempt at communication by means of familiar ground.

But, because she was angry, she ignored this possibility and the obvious domino effect of certain facts on male confidence, and told him instead what the doctor told her (the doctor she'd been seeing *in secret*): that her egg counts were healthy for her age, that her hormones rose and fell with the regularity of tides, that inhibiting environmental factors were, for her, minimal. And since she happened to let this information slip, or rather, hurled it out, she ended up answering not the question asked, or the implied one either, but a question her husband had never meant to consider.

Anne was washing dishes after dinner when he asked it. The question inside the question.

For a moment before she answered, there was something like relief. The outlines of objects became suddenly sharper. The cotton they had spoken through for months fell

out of their mouths, their ears. Even the lights seemed brighter. Why should this have made her feel powerful?

*Are you sure you really want to have a baby?*

He knew the answer to this. Hence, it was not the real question.

However, Anne ignored all inquiry, real or implied, in favor of the above-mentioned, unsolicited, and irrefragable “facts.”

*You didn't tell me you were going to see a doctor.*

He took his keys from the bowl by the door. Anne squeezed the dishrag down under the water until the bubbles stopped coming up. She listened as the engine cranked and the tires scraped over the gravel drive.

Afterwards, for hours, she lay awake in bed with one hand on her chest, imagining his head resting there, her fingers stroking his hair.

So that had been last week's betrayal, the one that ruined—or precipitated—Monday's breakfast. What was going on in that last part, with the imagined hair stroking? That bit seemed laughable now, but there was no denying it, she had cried. If she felt so miserable hurting Cal, why did she keep doing it? A few months before this it had been that meaningless flirtation with her co-worker. And before that, the unprovoked outburst with the dishes. A vague suspicion had crept in that she was coming unhinged. Then, at the exact moment before she decided to leave the manatee story unfinished at Captain's Galley, Mom's warning had flashed through her thoughts like a sign: *A woman must guard her inner life.*

So at nine o'clock that Friday, with twilight over and the humid night settling in, Anne stood in the dim bedroom staring down at the thing in her hands, determined, for once, to keep something for herself. Sweat and over-handling had warped the edges of the paper.

The front door slammed and she jumped. She refolded the ticket, stuffed it in her purse, and shoved the sack against the nightstand. Footsteps pattered through the kitchen and she turned, just as the lights flicked on.

"Auntie Banana!" Cal cried from the doorway. He stood holding the hand of a scrawny, wild-haired girl. He shot Anne a pleading look as the girl regarded her from beneath a mess of red curls.

"Hey, Dani Lynn." She held out her arms to the child and glared at her husband. "You know the phone works both ways."

He shrugged. "I texted you."

Heat rose up her neck. *Sure. Probably he was sitting in the driveway.* She glanced at her purse where the phone would be. Then she remembered what else was there and flicked her eyes away.

"Joanna came by the shop."

"I see that. I guess this means she's back."

He sighed. "Really, Anne?"

She clenched her teeth against a surge of anger. She knew the relief he must feel. The last time they'd seen Cal's younger sister must have been two Christmases ago,

when Joanna had come back to live with Cal's mom after her boyfriend got busted, and everyone tensed around her like hostages wired to a bomb. Ms. Cassavant had kept desperately holding out plates of Jell-O salad and asking, "Did you get enough to eat, honey?" Cal played a manic Uncle/Santa, rolling Dani Lynn around in the wrapping paper and shrieking at an alarming pitch. He and his mother avoided Joanna, or rather seemed repelled from her like magnets from a like charge, while at the same time watching her every move. Anne had been left, with a resentment she didn't understand, to make awkward conversation.

Joanna hadn't been herself then either. Not surprisingly, considering that in the past few months she'd been dragged from her home by the SWAT team, had pulled off a miracle defense of maternal ignorance and denial, watched a jury give her long-time boyfriend/business partner ten years, and was now the center of an absurd spectacle that was, if not for her, at least because of her. The strange thing had been that she seemed so calm. She should have been sad, or grateful, or sorry, or *something*. The operative word here being *should*, Anne realized. But Joanna had never given a damn about *should*. The pinprick pupils of her eyes had looked beyond Anne into some infuriating distance. Then, the next week, she and Dani Lynn had disappeared.

"We stopped by the Redbox and got a movie, didn't we?" Cal said in a singsong voice to remind Anne of the child between them.

Anne stared at him in disbelief. Had he even asked Joanna where she'd been? When she'd gotten back? Why did he expect her to act like this happened any old Friday

night? A suspicion wormed its way backward through her memory of the past few weeks. Cal's wrenched smile begged her, *Please, Anne. Play along.*

"Oh, yeah?" She fidgeted with Dani's tangled hair and took a deep breath. Who knew what this girl had been through? But Anne had to distance herself from that. These next two days were supposed to be ones of *serene detachment*. That was how she had envisioned herself. *Serene. Detached.*

Cal grinned down at Dani Lynn. "Ice Age 2!"

The child nodded.

How old was the kid now anyway? Four? She had lost that puffiness very young children have and appeared suddenly thin, fragile.

"Jeez! It's really good to see you again, sweetie!" Anne flashed Cal an accusing look. "You have gotten so big! How old are you?"

The girl held up five fingers.

"Oh, wow! You're all grown up! Do you like pizza?"

The tone of her voice sounded ridiculous. It seemed like decades since she'd been Auntie Banana. The intervening time now shifted into flatness, a façade behind which something had been hidden from her. It wasn't a new feeling. For months she had been sloughing off the newfound layers, like peeling dead skin from a burn.

She turned to Cal. "Where's her stuff?"

"No stuff. She just dropped her off."

"For the love of God. When the hell is she gonna be back?"

"Tomorrow, Anne. All right?"

“I’m sure.” Anne looked down at Dani Lynn with a stab of panic. How long would she really be here? The girl stared blankly across the room at the window, where the pink sheets Anne had tacked up as curtains shifted in the breeze.

“C’mon, kiddo,” Anne said finally. She took the girl’s hand and followed her husband out of the room.

\* \* \*

Sometimes, in the nights of her youth, Anne would say she was meeting up with friends and drive instead, alone, across the barrier island to Inlet Park to pace the long hooked arm of the jetty that braced against the sea, out to where the jagged rocks camouflaged their peaks among the waves.

Now at midnight she lay, half asleep in the dark bedroom, listening to the hush of the surf breaking and the snores of her husband. Like a fisherman, who, with only a filament, senses the subtle impulses of the waves, Anne knew in the stillness to roll away from the sleeping man and to face, beside the bed, the girl standing close in the corridor of warm breeze that lifted the thin pink curtains in billows about the window. The air stirred the red tendrils around her little moon face with its two wide apart pale eyes. Without speaking, Anne moved back the airy bedding, and the child, warm and light, folded herself beneath the falling sheet. Outside, the palms rustled their dry strands in the salt sweat respiration of the night.

\* \* \*

After breakfast, Anne and Dani Lynn set out for Jaycee Park. Sometime in the predawn, Cal had gotten carefully out of the bed, tucked back the sheets, and patted the fluffy orange head. Anne had kept her eyes closed, following him with her ears as he put on his clothes, took the six pack from the fridge, pushed open the front door, and stepped outside. For a few silent moments, she could not guess his movements, the secret life in these unknown spaces. The idea eased the guilt that had pressed her since she woke, when her thoughts had flown to the ticket in her purse, the disrupted plans. Then the engine cranked and reversed, the boat trailer clip clinked against the hitch, the truck door slammed, and the tires rasped over the shell driveway onto the road.

“How old are you again, Dani Lynn?” she had asked at breakfast.

The girl swallowed a mouthful of toast.

“I’m five. I’m gonna be in first grade.”

Anne studied the wide face.

“Do you know my real name?”

The girl swallowed again. “It’s Anne.”

“Yeah. Why don’t you call me that?”

Now it was 11 o’clock and the sun blazed down on the blinding sidewalk. Dani Lynn clomped beside her in the shorts and tank top from the day before. Anne had stuffed the girl’s hair into an old baseball cap and slathered the freckled skin with sunscreen.

“I was never really interested in other people’s children,” Anne’s mother had admitted once. “Babysitting and all that. Not for me. I just wanted one of my own.”

Now, as they walked in silence, Anne wondered just what sort of emotions she should be feeling for this little girl, if she should let herself feel anything at all, given her plans. But the child trusted her, and after months—years?—of secrets, hers and Cal’s both, trust was a good feeling.

They passed the Avalon Apartments, the odd hexagon house, and Kimberly Bergalis Park on the ocean side. The familiar landscape of block houses, sea grapes, strings of buoys hung in faded loops. Yet today they stood out in striking singularity beneath the relentless sun, as though waving little flags—*notice me*.

Anne began to feel sick under their weight. There was the Jetty Lounge where she’d bought her first rum runner without being carded, the duplex where the surfers lived, their boards racked on a beat-up van outside, where at a party she’d kissed a man who wasn’t Cal. The private beach access where she’d taken Cal in high school to get drunk for the first time and convinced him to eat sand. It had seemed funny at the time—the sand—but now it all seemed too heavy to look at. Memories that might crush her.

But Anne knew better than to romanticize the neighborhood. If she was honest, what captivated her was not the idea of some idyllic past, but the stripped-down present. The sand-scoured stucco and banged up trees, the bare yards battered by summer storms and occasional hurricanes, the salt corrosion on every bumper, the people who abandoned themselves to leathery skin and irresponsible real estate investments and stupefying

quantities of beer. They ambled past her on the sidewalks already, these mid-day pilgrims to the Jetty Lounge. Here on the island, the sun burned off all illusions. Or so she hoped.

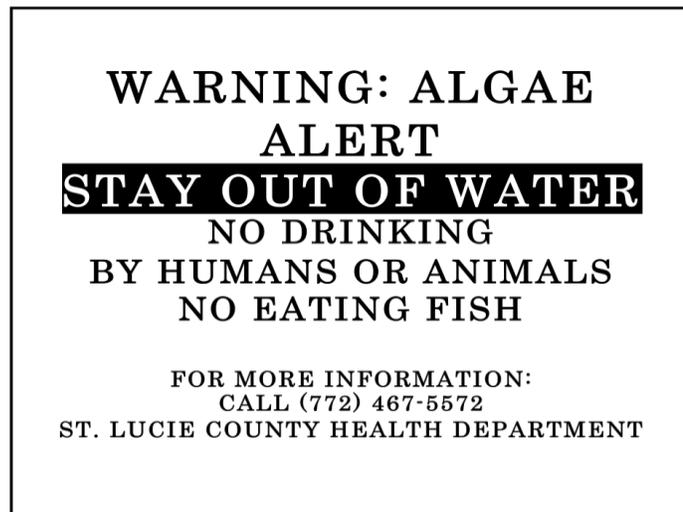
She looked down at Dani Lynn. What crippling attachments did this child already have to the places she'd been? Anne squeezed the girl's sweaty hand.

By the time they reached Jaycee, Anne's face stung with sweat and melting sunscreen. The soccer fields stretched empty, and only a few trucks and boat trailers sat at the far end of the parking lot.

"Have you been to the new playground?" Anne asked, looking over at the towers of baking plastic.

"I went here once with my mom," Dani Lynn said, uninterested.

They avoided the steaming asphalt and crossed to the riverside beach.



“Heya, friends!” a voice called out from the pavilion behind them.

Anne strained as her eyes adjusted to the shadow beneath the hut. She made out the shape of a floppy fisherman’s hat and the glint of eyeglasses.

“How’s it goin’?” the voice tried again. “Oh man! That the Ginger Snap?”

“Hey, Freddy,” Anne said. She registered the voice as the familiar derelict man who wandered the jetty and the nearby bars. She had never told Cal, but she spoke with him often on her morning walks. Anne had a soft spot for lonely people. As she strode up the beach to the pavilion, Dani Lynn trailed at her side.

“Do you know him?” Anne asked the girl.

“Yeah. That’s the jingle-jangle man.”

“Sure am.” Freddy shook his shoulders so the strange trinkets on his jacket jingled. He took a drink out of a dubious coffee to-go cup and raised his eyebrows at Anne.

“I didn’t know you and Joanna was friends.”

Anne hesitated at the insinuation in his voice. She felt the flash of suspicion again. How long could Joanna have been on the island without running into her? Or—even less likely—without talking to Cal? But maybe Freddy knew her from somewhere else, over the bridge.

“She’s my sister-in-law,” Anne fumbled.

“Ah.” He showed a rotten smile. “So you’re on baby-sitting duty, huh?” He turned to Dani Lynn. “Hey, Ginger Snap! How you been, honey?”

“We can’t swim ’cause there’s algae in the water!”

Anne eyed the little girl. Freddy's familiarity unnerved her. She'd noticed that some of the other bums, though never Freddy, sometimes had the same pinprick pupils she'd recognized on Joanna. Anne knew what that meant.

"Damn right, kid. Seen the dead manatee?"

"Where?" Dani Lynn's big eyes widened.

Freddy got up and motioned for her to come along. He wobbled over to the line of mangroves and looked around before pulling out a stick. Then he led Dani Lynn around a short spit and out of sight. Anne hung behind. It wasn't Freddy that was bothering her—she knew he was harmless—but there was a growing sense that Joanna had been present without her knowing it—not to mention the question of how Dani Lynn fit into all this.

As she rounded the spit the smell hit her, and Anne gagged. They must have been upwind before. In the little cove, a thick film of algae had built up, brilliant green. Trash floated in the slime, and the manatee. Dani and Freddy were crouched on a rock close to the water, taking turns nudging the bloated carcass with the stick.

"Wanna poke it, sister?" Freddy called out.

Anne smiled and shook her head no. She watched the little girl, sitting on the edge of the rock, unafraid, trusting the strange man, who, at that proximity, possibly smelled worse than the manatee. Dani Lynn thrust her stick into the swollen sea cow, and the fleshy blob rocked in the slime. Anne couldn't help but think of the day at Stan Blum, of how this dead manatee too had fingernails, how its dark eyes with their eyelashes would be filmy with death. That is, if some hungry creature hadn't picked them out of their sockets already. Anne's chest tightened at the thought.

“That water killed the manatee,” Dani Lynn said when they were together on the shore again, looking out over the river.

Anne pursed her lips and nodded.

“That’s the fourth one I seen,” Freddy announced. “200,000 gallons a day they’re pumpin’ outta Lake Okeechobee, and it’s supposed to rain all week.”

Anne knew this too, had heard that the lake was already suffocated by the algae that fed on fertilizer run-off. It used to make her angry, but what was the point? Some messes just felt too big to clean up. The three raised their eyes from the surface of the river to the thunderheads building inshore. Freddy turned back to Anne.

“How long she stayin’ with you?” There was no suggestive undertone this time. Rather his voice sounded sad.

Anne squinted at the view before her: brown water, hazy land, towering sky. She looked harder at the dark clouds piling up urgently in the distance, thousands of feet into the air, where the heat from the ground rose in the daily convection that would coalesce and break into rain to cool the land. At least for an hour or so.

She heard the words in her head, as if out of nowhere, as if spoken from the clouds themselves. *Last time.*

The thought almost made her laugh. But maybe it was. It should be, if she was going to do what she’d set out to do.

The black clouds stacked above the horizon like a verdict, pending. She tried it again. *Last time.* But the words wouldn’t stick.

“Just today,” she answered.

Freddy nodded and took a drink out of the to-go cup.

Anne looked down at the girl. “Wanna go swing on the swings?”

“That’s okay, Anne. I’m good,” she said without looking up.

Freddy flashed a sideways glance. “Growin’ up fast, ain’t she.”

“Not much to be done about it,” Anne answered, staring ahead. Water, land, inevitable sky. Then she tugged on the red ponytail coming out of the baseball cap. “You ready for lunch yet, kiddo?”

Dani Lynn nodded. She looked at Freddy. “Where do you sleep at night?”

“Dani!”

“It’s okay, girl.” He crouched down beside her. “I levitate,” he said, raising his arms in a floating motion. “The cops don’t look up!”

“No you don’t!” Dani Lynn shouted and broke away from the two of them. She started kicking sand around the sign.

Anne turned to Freddy and shrugged her shoulders.

“Wanna walk to Archie’s with us? I’ll buy you a burger.”

“Aww,” he said, standing up. “Can’t say no to that. Lemme get some clean clothes from my pack and rinse off real quick up there.” He gestured toward the outdoor showers.

“Sure thing. We’ll be over by the swings.”

\* \* \*

When Cal pulled up, the rain was coming down in sheets around the house. Anne and Dani Lynn, both fresh out of the shower, sat on the floor leaning against the couch and sucking freezie pops as the opening sequence for some crime show re-run played on T.V.. Anne listened through the intro as the boat backed into the carport, the engine died, and the truck door opened and shut. She sensed Dani Lynn's attention beside her as they gazed motionless at the screen. Cal's footsteps splashed up to the door, paused, and he entered. Their heads turned in unison to greet him.

“Got caught, huh?”

He looked at the two for a moment with something of surprise and then relief.

“Got her outta the water fine, but the rain started on the drive back.”

“Catch anything?”

“Nope. Didn't even try. Signs everywhere about the water. We just motored around to check it out.”

“We saw a dead manatee at Jaycee Park,” Dani Lynn piped up.

“No kiddin'. I bet it's pretty gross down there, huh?” The girl nodded her head.

“From what we saw, it gets clearer as you go north.” Cal glanced at Anne. *From what you see here, a certain someone hasn't shown up like she promised.*

Anne looked back at the T.V. A blonde woman lay strategically covered by a twisted bed sheet as the camera panned to a pill bottle on the floor.

“Should she be watching this?”

Anne shrugged.

“Heard anything?” he asked.

“Nope.”

They stared together at the screen. A group of detectives conversed behind a two-way mirror over something in a plastic bag.

“Have you tried to call?”

“Not available,” she said to the detectives. “Sounds like she’s outta minutes.”

“Hmm.” He walked over to the kitchen and opened the fridge. “I see you went to the store.”

“Yeah.” Anne looked down at the new outfit Dani Lynn was wearing and winked at her. During their trip to town, the girl had told her she and her mom had gotten back three weeks ago. Since then Anne had cradled the information in her mind like a prize egg. “I got you a burger from Archie’s, too.”

He hesitated. “Wow, babe. Thanks.” Anne winced at the tenderness in his voice. Why had she bought the food again—a consolation, a distraction? She listened to the beeps as he punched in the cook time on the microwave, then lifted the remote and turned up the T.V.

At 11:00 p.m. Anne stood facing her closet with a pile of clothes at her feet and a smaller folded pile on the bed next to Dani Lynn. A half hour before, after an argument in the carport, while Dani Lynn lay awake inside on the made-up couch, Cal unhitched the boat and roared off in the truck.

“You have no idea where she is,” Anne had said.

“I have a good fucking idea.”

“Because you’ve been talking to her since she got back.”

He slammed his fist against the truck. “Anne, this isn’t about you.”

“Oh, right. I’m no part of this? Who’s been watching the kid all day while you’ve been out with your buddies?”

He glared off into the dark.

“What are you gonna do?” she kept on. She was antagonizing him out of force of habit alone. It had occurred to her after what Dani Lynn said that afternoon that she didn’t even care what he knew and when he knew it.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He snorted and toed the concrete floor. “In case you haven’t noticed, Anne, we haven’t exactly been on our honeymoon lately.”

In case she hadn’t noticed? Anne almost laughed, but then she looked at his eyes. He was shouting at her to keep from crying. His reddened face bulged and his arms gestured towards the wall where Dani Lynn lay on the other side. Anne saw him, too, as if from behind a glass, unreachable.

“What if you do find her? You think she’ll get in the car, no problem?”

Cal put his hands in his pockets and stared at Anne long and hard. She had known he wasn’t angry but only trying to be, trying to get up the nerve to act. She’d also known that he was trying to get at her as well, to find some solace in the familiar script.

In the end, she didn’t tell him to call. She didn’t tell him he better be home by whenever or else. He waited a moment for her to say the words, then got into the truck

and slammed the door. She watched him pull out of the driveway and not look back. Then she walked out to the mailbox and stared at the little house.

Anne had decided to live with Cal (*in sin!* her mother had teased), only a few months before Mom died. She'd gotten the voicemail after work at the tax collector's office and had gone immediately to the hospital, to find she had missed Mom by just 30 minutes. Not until after she'd spoken with the staff, the doctors, the funeral home, and the neighbor that had stayed behind with her father, did she call Cal. As she dialed his number it was not lost on her that both of them now had a dead parent. Now there would be nothing she didn't understand.

She had seen their house differently when she finally got back that night. The halogen bulb on the carport cast its surreal glow over the orange stucco walls, the spreading palms, the sandy edges of the drive. Cal leaned in the doorway, frozen in time, as though he'd been waiting for her there forever, and always would be, to hold open the door to his life.

Something in Anne still expected to see him, as he was that night, whenever she pulled up to the house after dark. But of course now, like always, there was no one there.

Back inside, she found Dani Lynn waiting behind the door, big blue wide-apart eyes, face glowing like a moon.

Now Anne stood in front of her closet imagining that a hurricane was coming and she could only take with her what she could carry in a backpack. Or she was joining a commune and could only keep the clothes she would wear until she got there. Her house

had already burned down in a fire, washed away in a flood, been ransacked. She didn't sort the clothes. She pulled them off the hangers and threw them in a pile on the floor. It was best not to look at anything too long. She placed two outfits, a one piece, shorts, and some underwear on the bed, then stuffed the rest of the contents of the closet in a garbage bag.

“You think your mom would want these clothes?” she asked without looking at Dani Lynn. Of course Joanna wouldn't take them. They were way too big. But she couldn't go on not mentioning her. Dani Lynn made no response.

Anne pulled down a box from the closet shelf. She stared at the mess of papers and photos and ribbons and cards jumbled inside. Too much to think about. She had to move faster. She shut the box and shoved it next to the garbage bag. Then she pulled down her photo album and threw it on the bed.

“Anne?” Dani Lynn's voice sounded small and far away. Maybe Anne had thrown the album too hard. “Are you going somewhere?”

Anne debated her answer for a moment.

“I'm just simplifying my life, kiddo.”

If she could only get the stuff into the trunk of the car. Cal must have gone up to the North Side, which would give her some time. As a kid, Dad had always told her not to go up to the North Side at night. But the North Side was where they had gone to high school, where they'd waited outside the auditorium after the bus came back late from the away games, while the chameleon cars, pink-silver-blue, rolled slowly around the blocks. You could feel it there, the aliveness and the threat. And that's where Joanna must be.

She had to get the stuff into the back of the car. The longer she stayed around the objects, the more the gravitational force of memory would weigh her down. Of course, Cal's things stayed. Of course things like dishes and towels, even though they came from the wedding. Would he think of that? She couldn't think of him thinking of that. She wouldn't take anything to Goodwill quite yet. She would just put it in the back of her car to see what things looked like afterwards.

She grabbed the photo off her dresser and the knickknack angel from her mother and threw them on her bed. *All night, all day, angels are watching over me, my Lord.*

Then she propped the door open and made a quick series of trips to the car. The items to be discarded were now out of sight. The items to be kept were arranged in a small suitcase and put back in her closet. With the doors closed, the room looked almost unchanged.

Anne put her hands on her hips and frowned. "Okay. That's done."

Dani Lynn sat unmoved on the bed. Tears started to run down the little girl's face.

"Oh no!" Anne cried. She had forgotten about the kid. "Baby, baby. It's okay."

She reached for her, but Dani held herself in a ball at the top of the bed.

"Let's go watch T.V., okay? Uncle Cal will be back soon. Do you wanna go watch T.V.? C'mon, Dani, sweetie. I'm not going anywhere."

Anne blinked her eyes open when she heard the door. She looked down to see Dani Lynn asleep in the crook of her arm, and then up at the DVD logo drifting across the screen. Cal stood by the doorway slipping off his shoes. He did not meet her eyes.

Anne lifted the girl, carried her to the bedroom, and came back to stand beside him in the kitchen.

“I found her,” he said. His voice quivered.

Anne nodded. She sensed the pressure pounding in Cal’s body beside her and the hollowness within her own.

“I went to the Edge, Jetty Lounge, King’s Inn, the Bourgeois, everywhere.”

They had both known she wouldn’t be at the bars.

“Then I went to Frank’s.”

Frank’s. At the name, her stomach sunk. Her mind leapt back to the times before Joanna had left, when Anne had sat in the truck outside Frank’s while Cal raged inside. When she’d watched him pull his sister into the front yard, shaking her, begging her to tell him where she’d left her daughter this time.

“She wasn’t there. But he said he was sure she’d be later. And I asked how the fuck did he know that. And of course he wouldn’t give me a straight answer.”

Cal’s hands shook. Anne saw out of the corner of her eye that his whole body trembled. Her own heart thudded in her chest.

“Then I went up to Avenue D.” His voice stopped and he made a choking noise.

“She was there on the corner with some other girl. You know.”

Anne nodded her head that she did.

He shuddered. “I just gave them the money.”

He wouldn’t raise his eyes from the floor. Anne pictured him sitting in the car looking at out his sister walking the street. She put her arms around his shaking shoulders

and squeezed herself against him with all her strength. Squeezed until her own muscles shook. She whispered in her mind, *last time*. And again, *last time*. She dared the words to transmit themselves through her embrace, attuned all the sinews of her body to his response. But none came back. *Last time*, she thought once more. The words gave way within her, opened—into sadness, and relief.

He looked up at her, and in his watery eyes waited all the questions they both seemed to know they would never answer.

He let out a long sigh. “I just gave them the fucking money.”

\* \* \*

On Sunday evening, with the sun sinking over the mainland and the cool breath of rain lifting the pink curtains, Anne sat on the bed holding her ticket. The edges of the paper had become grimy with over-handling. Then she reached down into her purse and pulled out the second one she’d bought that morning, still crisp and white.

“People down here say family is everything, you take care of your family, and all that,” Mom had said during that same last month when she’d seemed desperate to dispense her wisdom. Anne must’ve been complaining about her future mother-in-law, or Cal’s troubled sister, and how he seemed to put them above everything else.

“Don’t worry about anyone, Anne, as far as family goes,” Mom said sternly. “Me or Dad or anyone. You find somebody, whether it’s Cal or not, and you make your own family.”

Out front, in the shell driveway, Cal and Joanna stood talking, their strained tones rising and falling, while Dani Lynn no doubt listened behind the carport door, like she'd done the night before. Anne stared down at the papers in her hands as she strained to hear the voices outside. But the wind warped the sounds and carried them away.

NBTA 0043

**GREYHOUND LINES, INC.**

FROM: FT PIERCE FL DEP: 22July14 11:55a

TO: LAFAYETTE LA BOARDING #

ARR-09:55p 22July14 SCHED 8311 2

**ONE WAY CHILD**

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NON-REFUNDABLE SUBJECT TO \$15 EXCHANGE FEE  
**TICKET FOR SCHEDULE 8311 /22July14**  
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FARE \$155.88 CONF#: 3522784401  
TAX XX 04839 FT PIERCE FL  
TOTAL: \$155.88 22July14 11:55a 4491  
VISA VACT001

VI/VI TKT ORIG: FT PIERCE FL  
MILES: 859 859 TKT DEST: LAFAYETTE LA  
COUPON 01 OF 01 TARIFF: CACP

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## **EPILOGUE:**

In the spring of 2015, I was living in Fairfax, Virginia, in a lovely 1980s-era townhouse that I shared with four other graduate students, two who were in the same Creative Writing Program at George Mason University that I was. A year and a half before, a colleague of mine, a friend of the program coordinator, had agreed to lease this perfect “M.F.A. house”—with its open-plan first-floor common area, its intimate deck out back, its location within walking distance of campus—to a group of hard-partying writers who were convinced they could keep all their plates in the air and have a good time while they were at it.

Not surprisingly, there were noise complaints, code violations, and lots of angry trips to remote garages where our illegally parked cars had been towed. We held occasional readings, frequent jam sessions, and too many pointless, self-indulgent, after-midnight conversations to count. We even had a garden the first year: 72 square feet of raised-bed, all organic, grown-from-seed vegetables that erupted mid-July in towers of tomatoes, walls of string beans, and ropes upon twisting ropes of cucumber vine that all but took over the back deck.

But the true wonder will be if I can leave this place, with all its distractions and missed opportunities, with my diploma in my hand.

There are still some things these days that I find more important than writing.

Though, in my mind, they're mostly the right things:

1. Staying sober, whatever it takes. As of this writing, I've got 386 days.
2. Maintaining balance. Yes, the most obnoxious and cliché of all oft-quoted priorities. But the truth is, if I don't get up each morning, make my bed, wash the crusties out of the corners of my eyes, put on clean clothes, eat decent food, move my body at some point more than just up and down the stairs to the kitchen, and then allow myself eight hours of sleep at the end of it all, my writing will be the first thing to go.
3. Keeping my Friday phone dates with my mom. And my alternate Sunday phone dates with my dad. Making contact at least once a semester with that small core of people who love me "back home."
4. Doing my share of upkeep around the house, and being kind to my roommates, for whose incredible forgiveness I am grateful every day.
5. And yeah, teaching. I wish I could say this one wasn't still on the list. But I just haven't figured out how to manage it yet. It's hard to say *no* to doing the work when you're held hostage, er, *accountable* in person each week by 20 college

freshmen. Although, I could've said *no* much more often: *no* to trying to be the perfect teacher, the perfect student, the perfect friend, girlfriend, environmentalist, daughter, whatever. In short, *no* to caring what other people think, to fear of failure. Because there's a hell of a lot of room in the middle between *perfection* and *failure*. But like I said, I'm working on it.

And that's it! That's all there is!

You may notice, however, that a certain name is conspicuously absent from this list. Which is not to say that my relationship with Phillip is no longer important. In fact, it's the thing I seem to write about the most, in my stories and elsewhere. It's the question that simmers beneath the surface of every narrative, that reaches its tendrils into each of my days through the cyber-lifeline of the cell phone, that conceals the future in its shifting cloud: *Yes or No?* But it's also a question that I need writing to help me answer.

There was a time when I kept the different relationships of my life neatly separate. Phillip didn't come to Christmas, or up to Virginia after we got back together. My parents and I didn't use the word *marriage*; it was hard enough for them to decipher from my clipped remarks whether Phillip and I were in a relationship again or "just friends." It took me until I was two-thirds of the way through my M.F.A. program to finally admit to my competitive relatives that I wasn't studying Literature. And none of the above people *ever* read my writing.

But that kind of careful managing gets tiresome fast, especially when you find yourself lost in The Bleak Morass of Thesis in the country of Too Tired to Care. Or

perhaps no-longer-giving-a-shit-and-just-wanting-all-the-things-you-love-to-coexist-no-matter-how-messy-it-looks is just a symptom of growing up.

Whatever the case may be, I happened to be on the phone with Phillip the other night at T-minus-17-days-and-one-unwritten-Epilogue, when I heard coming through the speaker a question that shocked me.

And no! It was not, *Do you want to get married and live off the grid in a farmhouse in North Carolina and have lots of babies?* I probably should've mentioned that my shock threshold is pretty low after years of conditioning to have no expectations whatsoever. What I heard was the voice of the man I used to call My Somewhat Significant Other asking, without any note of timidity or grudging obligation:

“Do you want me to come to your graduation?”

Like I said, I was shocked.

“Do you really think you'd be able to?” I countered.

And no, he didn't complain that May was the busiest month of the year at the restaurant, what with Mother's Day and college graduation down there. He didn't grumble about how the cost of the flight would total two truck payments, or how he had no one to watch his killer dog. I, for once, didn't say I had promised that time to my parents, like I did with the holidays, or to my friends, as I'd done on other occasions for fear of missing out (on what, who knows). But I also didn't say I was coming “back home” after it all, either.

And he didn't ask. Instead he went on, without pretense or undertone, in that way he has of being so honest that he exposes us both:

“I’d like to come up for it. Do you want me to be there?”

I smiled, because I knew for once that I could answer in kind. At long last, I wanted all the parts of my life—my family, my boyfriend, my writing—to be together in the same place.

“I would love that,” I said. “Yes.”

And though I couldn’t see it, I felt him smiling, too.

That’s the thing about honesty: If I had known it felt so good, I’d have gotten honest a lot sooner. Honest about my writing and its place in my life, honest about the limits of my writing abilities right now, honest *in* my writing itself. But perhaps the end of my graduate thesis is as good a place to start as any. *Yes.*

I know that you can’t see it, but I’m smiling.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Julie E. Dickson graduated from Lincoln Park Academy, Ft. Pierce, Florida, in 2004. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Florida in 2008. She received her Master of Education from the University of Florida in 2010 and taught high school and college-prep English in Florida for two years. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in Spring 2015.