

SIGNS OF SUBMERSION

by

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A Thesis
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in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
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Creative Writing

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

For the GMU MFA class of 2015

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ABSTRACT

SIGNS OF SUBMERSION

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George Mason University, 2015

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Signs of Submersion is a collection of short stories that seeks to illuminate how relationships function in not-so-everyday life. From a man in courtship with his sex doll, to a couple in the final act of their lives coping with dementia, to a young woman on the cusp of consummating her love for adult Simba from *The Lion King*, these stories explore the dysfunction, heartbreak, and unexpected surprises of love in the contemporary world and beyond.

THE DOLL HOUSE

The house in which Turner and his fifty-seven dolls live is a detached ranch-style home, though Turner refuses to call it as such; there is nothing mid-western or farm-like about it—he just doesn't have stairs. Even with all the lights on, each room in the house seems to be cloaked in shadow, as though it were perpetually late evening. Nearly every inch is filled with the wooden and plastic faces of his friends and paramours, each carved or painted or molded with lifelike detail. The dolls sit in dwarfed chairs in corners or casually lean against walls, their miniature arms and legs crossed, solitary expressions on their faces. There are arm puppets, wooden dolls, marionettes, plush dolls, and silicone dolls, a beautiful collaboration of online purchases and creations of his own hands. If he ever had any guests over, they would have struggled to clear a spot on the couch or at the kitchen table, every inch occupied by a cotton-stuffed body, a hard synthetic face, a drawn raised eyebrow.

Barkley, his first puppet, is a brown-spotted dog with floppy ears. Its seams have long since unraveled and been re-stitched, its colors faded, but its mouth still smiles when Turner opens his hand inside of it. His mother made it for him out of felt when he was just a toddler, and underneath the scent of dust and mildew, he swears he can still smell her. Fifteen years ago, a mere ten days after he tore away the wrapping paper from Barkley on his tenth birthday, the authorities found his father drunk and unrepentant in a

motel four hundred and seventy two miles from where Turner had been staying in the Second Chances Group Home. The chief of police shoved his father's head into the caged backseat and charged him with murder, or more aptly, pushing his wife down a flight of stairs.

Turner has had breakfast with Leonard, his fourteenth creation, every morning for the past eleven years; he allows fifteen minutes for eating, fifteen minutes for small talk, and the remaining fifteen for washing dishes and preparing Shelly's first meal. He washes his hands before touching the food, pushing the soap into his hands as though he could clean the slender bones inside. He counts a slow twenty seconds aloud before rinsing each sud and bubble thoroughly away.

Turner often gripes to Leonard about the high cost of homes these days and laments how glad he is he purchased his quaint abode in a buyer's market. Leonard is a ginger-haired forty-something of plush and plastic sporting black-rimmed glasses and a pea-green sweater vest; a bushy moustache hides the better part of his thin upper lip, and the vacant look in his marbled eyes tells Turner he cares little about markets and mortgages. Each day the two of them eat dry toast and grits and sip black coffee, Lenny's moccasined feet hanging motionless a foot above the linoleum kitchen floor. When Turner clears the table, Leonard's food is untouched, his napkin clean and still folded. Sometimes Turner is offended by the doll's refusal to eat, and he wonders if it's his cooking or if perhaps Leonard raids the fridge in the middle of the night instead. He ignores that, day after day, nothing has been touched—there are no crackers or bread

slices missing from the cabinets, no newly dirty dishes in the sink—and continues to pour his friend a mug full of coffee anyway.

After breakfast, Turner walks into the living room where Shelly is usually asleep in her cage. He pulls off the canvas covering that signals to her it's time to rest and unlocks the metal door; the sound shakes her awake and she instinctively knows its feeding time. Turner lets her sit on his lap while he hand-feeds her cooked carrots, raw snow peas, and pieces of a baked potato. She chews the food vigorously, her stubby tongue searching for the next bite. Bits fall onto his jeans and the floor. "Good girl," he says, and strokes the gray fluff on her chest while balancing the paper plate of vegetables in his other hand.

Turner bought Shelly with the money he'd saved from odd jobs and allowances he received during his time in foster care. On his eighteenth birthday he left his twelfth and final placement home and purchased the bird from a newspaper ad that evening. He moved into the first studio apartment he could find and spent the rest of his money on birdseed.

After feeding Shelly, Turner lets her perch on his wrist, her talons leaving dent-like impressions on his pale skin. Before returning his friend to her cage, he always sings her favorite song, the song his mother would sing to lull him to sleep after a nightmare or a particularly rough bout with his father. She'd stroke his sweat-soaked hair, working the tangles with her long fingers, and coo:

*And the songbirds are singing,
Like they know the score,
And I love you, I love you, I love you,
Like never before.*

*And I wish you all the love in the world,
But most of all, I wish it from myself.*

Placing the bird back in her cage, Turner bumps Mr. X's limp limbs that hang next to the faded red curtains cloaking the shuttered window behind him. Invisible strings, made more noticeable by tiny, clinging flecks of dirt and dust, are looped around his joints and neck. Mr. X, his ninth addition, is one of three marionettes in the house, but is the only one without a face; he does not wear clothes. On occasion, when Turner sings (admittedly slightly off key), he holds the puppet's control bar loosely and makes him dance, his sculpted feet clicking against the floor like tap shoes. When he is not strung up and his body is allowed to assume its own shape, he is listless and lifeless; only Turner can resurrect him with the flick of his wrist. As he was carving and drilling and screwing and putting Mr. X together, he could not help but recall the sight of his mother's twisted and broken feet at the bottom of the staircase and his utter inability to fix them.

He walks back into the bedroom to wake his girlfriend Petunia.

Petunia is not his first lover. His relationship with Jade, his twenty-first conception, a blonde-haired Marilyn lookalike clad in a tight black mini-dress with a perfectly round mole on her left cheek, served a different purpose than he had originally intended. He wanted to love—he thought he might be good at it—so he scoured through Internet images from his search for “the perfect woman” and after three months, he had built Jade. Jade has a plush body and a soft plastic head; she is a voluptuous maven with eyes the shape of almonds lined in black and eggplant purple. Her corset pushes her breasts of cotton and cloth up to her manmade clavicle. Standing at 4'5” tall when held

upright, she is nearly the size of a human middle schooler. Before she was complete, Turner cut a slit in between her legs using his trimming shears; he left her mouth closed.

In the beginning, Turner spent all his time with his new courtesan, preparing her meals for which he found recipes on YouTube, ordering her new lingerie online and securing it with safety pins, and watching the news with her and giving his opinion on gun control and fracking (he is for and against, respectively). But something was missing. Jade didn't seem to reciprocate his affections; she was a lackluster lover, rarely able to make him come. Her skin was dry like new bed sheets, her hair as coarse and tangled as a horse's mane. Her constant blank stare proved to him her artificiality; she slept with her eyes open.

"How do you feel about our presence in Afghanistan?" he would ask her, but she had no opinion.

"I'm not big into politics," he would hear her say.

"Do you think I should start working out?" he would ask her.

"I think you should do a lot of things," he would hear her say. "I think you should shave your moustache. I think you should wear nicer clothes. I think you should leave the house once in a while. But it doesn't matter what I think; you'll never do those things." Her words echoed in his head like a nagging whisper, coaxing him awake in the mornings and keeping him from sleep at night.

Jade was also offended by Turner's strict schedule, his need to pencil time with her into his daily calendar that hung on the fridge. She resented Shelly because he spent more time with the bird than with her. He didn't hold Jade after their lovemaking, or

smooth her straw-like hair away from her face before he got up to wash and urinate. Whenever Turner spent too much intimate time with someone else, Shelly would squawk and caw for attention or yank out her feathers with her mouth until they littered the ground below like sidewalk trash. Like a morning alarm, he would obey her, rushing to her side to sing his song and rub her beak with the soft pad of his pointer finger.

After a year of courtship, Turner and Jade were sleeping in separate beds.

“I feel like we don’t even know each other,” he told her.

“We don’t,” he would hear her say.

Recently, when he looked in the mirror, Turner could see his face had long since paled from the darkness of the house; he could see the gray circles tattooed onto the thin skin under his eyes. With some color and a comb through his hair, he could be considered almost handsome, but he wasn’t one for grooming. When he and Jade first got together, he made sure to shower every day and even spritz on the cologne sample he’d received in the mail, but he quickly let that all go. He wished he had someone for whom he wanted to dress up, to impress, but none of his other housemates cared how he looked—they told him so.

Petunia is the only companion he has not made with his own hands; his blood is not in her bowels, his sweat never slipped into the stuffing of her skin. He had been saving up for her, setting aside weekly allowances from his paycheck as a software engineer. His salary was limited from the start because he would not meet on site, setting the requirement early on that he must consistently work from home. But didn’t mind the

cut; he was never an extravagant spender, buying only the necessities for himself and Shelly and his dolls. After three years, he had put away more than the \$6,000 he needed to bring her home.

Six weeks after placing his order, the doorbell rang and he knew she had finally come. Once inside, he pried open the life-sized wooden crate and removed the plastic packing in as much of a hurry as he could without disturbing the girl hidden underneath. Her eyes were closed when she arrived: a sleeping beauty that only his touch could awaken. He stood unmoving in the middle of a pile of Styrofoam, paper, and plastic. The crate looked like a coffin where she lay with her hands by her sides, her thick lashes grazing her sharp cheekbones. He stood her up and her lids snapped open. A diamond-like stud the size of a freckle winked at him from the side of her nose. The crevices of Turner's palms grew damp like tiny rivers, and his chest tightened with anxiety.

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” he managed to say.

He had changed only one thing about her since she had arrived. Petunia was not her given name; RealDollz.com had named her Leila, but Turner didn't feel it fit her. Her lips were full and soft like flower petals, and she smelled new, fresh—Petunia.

For the first few weeks after her arrival, Turner found himself unable to interact with his newest houseguest. He slept on the couch and gave her the bedroom so she would feel comfortable, but still found himself tossing and turning with nervousness. When he accidentally grazed her French-manicured hand during “Jeopardy” or absent-mindedly walked out of the shower without a towel and caught her eye, he shuffled to

another room and pinched the skin on the top of his hand between his thumb and forefinger until he could breathe again without difficulty.

“You’re too good for me,” he told her once, when he had begun to feel a touch more at ease in her presence. “You could do so much better.”

Petunia stared at him with her lips gently parted, the locket necklace he ordered for her sitting comfortably in the cavern her plump breasts made, a picture of the two of them with Shelly hidden inside. “I don’t want to do better,” he imagined her saying. “I want you.”

Turner read her his favorite books, taught her about politics and economics, and showed her how to feed Shelly, laying dishtowels over her arms so the bird wouldn’t scratch her pristine skin. He stopped writing in his calendar and started sleeping in. After a month, while Petunia sat with the newspaper in the thin cotton pajamas he had ordered her, his hand found its way to her lap and hovered above her exposed knee until the muscles in his arm were exhausted. With a quiet quivering in his fingers, he slowly lowered it onto her thigh, never once taking his eyes away from the blank space on the wall in front of him. A few minutes passed and his hand began to grope, his fingertips pushing into the PVC piping that was her bones. As he probed, he noticed a gray film on her skin and a dullness to her hair like an old penny. And then it hit him: he had never considered how he would keep her clean.

He immediately concocted a lie, telling her he had to finish some work in the study, and rushed to the Real Doll message boards. He searched “cleaning,” “washing,” and “bathing,” hoping he would find an answer that contradicted his fear: he would have

to get her naked. He had changed her many times, but she kept on her underclothes. And then there was the intimacy that a bath implied. With Jade, he felt no shame in seeing her undressed; when she looked dingy, he soaked her in a tub of warm water and set her to dry overnight. But Petunia was different. They had been growing closer, that was true, but he wasn't ready for this stage of their relationship.

He walked back to where Petunia was still sitting and turned on the television; every channel he settled on pictured a couple kissing, a professor and his student hurriedly touching on top of a desk, bikini-clad housewives in Aruba. He flung the remote on the floor and shuffled over to Shelly's cage in the dark corner of the room. As she crawled out and grabbed firmly onto his wrist, he hummed her song and watched her sway like a foxtail in the wind. She pushed her small head under Turner's unshaven chin when he began to sing. Hours later, when his anxiety could no longer triumph over his exhaustion, he set Shelly back on her perch and approached Petunia on the loveseat.

"I need to talk to you," he said. "I don't want to do anything you're not comfortable with, so please tell me if I'm out of line here." His hand moved to her shoulder, fingering the lace on her sleeve. "I was wondering if you would let me give you a bath."

He could swear he saw her eyes brighten at his request, so he rushed to the bathroom and began filling the tub. He had no bubble bath, but there was a bottle of Petunia's perfume on the sink, so he added half a dozen sprays into the running water. He closed the door while he shaved, extra careful not to nick his neck. Drops of water rested

atop the high cheekbones of his fresh face, and he inhaled deeply enough to taste the bitterness of aftershave on his tongue. He turned off the lights and went to fetch Petunia.

He carried her into the bathroom, her arm around his shoulders, and set her down on the side of the tub. His fingers trembled as he combed out the tangles in her hair, took a warm cloth to her face. He reached for her shirt, but dropped his hand before he lifted it past her navel.

“It’s okay,” he thought he heard her say. “I want you to.”

He slid it off and folded it neatly, setting it on top of the closed toilet seat. He had seen the pink corset dozens of times before, but tonight it looked different—the color appeared brighter, the ribbons sleeker. He knelt down, his face at her stomach, and removed her shorts and panties in one movement. After taking some deep breaths and squeezing the skin on his hand until the pain forced him to stop, he reached both arms behind her and unfastened the three metal hooks of her bra. As he held the thing in his hand, he took in her small brown nipples, the curve where her back met her bottom, her painted pink toenails.

Once in the bath, he lathered soap between his hands and massaged it onto her shoulders, her arms, her chest. After several minutes, he replaced the bar back in the dish and submerged his shaking hand. He lingered by her knee for a while with a tightness in his chest like he had swallowed too much water all at once. Between her legs was pink and sweet and blossoming—Petunia. He kissed her mouth for the first time and tasted sterile traces of soap, his hand frozen inside her. This is what he imagined she would feel like: soft and fleshy and warm.

His face was suddenly flushed and hot, and he hoped the water was the right temperature for Petunia. He pressed her closer to him, splashing water over the ceramic and onto the tile floor. As they shifted, he caught sight of the tiny impressions the stubble from his chest left on her skin, and made sure to hold her less firmly. Finally he began to wiggle his fingers as though he were scraping icing out of a can. His head was spinning; he imagined himself on the moon, weightless and free.

In the quiet of the encounter, he thought he heard a whisper, a faint sound in his left ear, his other pressed firmly against Petunia's chest. He rose up from the water, his hair dripping into her heavily mascaraed eyes, and listened; it sounded like a cough, a wheeze, a labored breath. He struggled to get out of the tub and nearly slipped on the puddles of water on the floor. He rushed to the living room and lifted the cape that concealed Shelly's cage; she was bent over with her eyes closed, a constant sneezing noise escaping her opened beak. He took her into his cupped hands and sat on the floor.

“What's wrong, girl? Tell me what's wrong. Please.”

He noticed she had defecated profusely down the side of the cage, and she hadn't touched the food he had left for her earlier that evening. He raced to the study and searched for symptoms of sick birds, possible causes, remedies. He found a user on a pet health forum whose bird exemplified similar symptoms, but most other members told him there was nothing he could do; the best thing for the bird was to be as comfortable as possible so it could die in peace. His naked skin was wet with bath water and sweat as he worked to swaddle Shelly in several of his T-shirts. He set her in his lap and looked up the phone number of the nearest vet.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the receptionist on the other line said. “I wish I could help, but there’s nothing we would be able to do.”

“How did this happen?” he asked, his cheeks suddenly wet. “She was fine earlier. She was just fine!”

“Birds are prone to hide their illness until it overcomes them,” she said. “It’s like they don’t want to admit they’re sick. She may have been ill for some time now.”

He pleaded with the woman, offering every dollar he had for surgery and medications, but got the same responses. He hurled the phone into the wall and returned his gaze back to Shelly. He pushed all of his faith and hope and frustration into her, willing her to live. After several moments, he looked down and was shocked at the whiteness of his knuckles, and only when he relaxed his grip did he realize how tightly he had been holding her. Her beak was still slightly open, her eyes still closed, but she was quiet now. He sat with her listless body for hours, stroking the soft fluff on her chest, singing “I love you, I love you, I love you like never before.”

The next morning he awoke on the floor, Shelly still shrouded in his clothes. He carried her into the bathroom to find Petunia still naked, immersed in the cold bathwater. She looked at him with both concern and surprise, her lips slightly parted. Turner held Shelly in one hand and used the other to lower himself into the water next to the doll. Putting his arm around her small waist, he hoisted her upright and took her hand. He sat with her in the water for a long time, his pruned, sodden fingers interlaced with hers, rubbing the wrinkled tips across the smoothness of her skin. Her body showed no signs of

submersion: her makeup was un-smearred and the edges of her nails were still firm and the color of a Georgia peach. He shuddered and released her hand, letting it fall back into the cold water, and watched it slowly sink until it settled on the tub's floor. He kissed the mass of cloth and feathers that was now Shelly and set her on the soap dish.

Turner reached over Petunia's hard body and let the frigid water slip down the drain, plugging it back once the tub was empty. He turned the faucet to the hottest setting and let the basin fill to an inch below the brim while he pulled and tugged at his waterlogged clothes and let them drop to the floor with a slap.

He was surprised to find himself steady, not shaking or nervous, as his thumb slid around the smooth circle surrounding Petunia's nipple. He put his mouth to hers and she kissed him back, passionately circling her tongue up and around his, her hand groping through his hair. Without thinking, he closed his eyes and slipped inside her, his body both tense and utterly relaxed all at the same time.

"It's okay," she told him, and her voice was soft and sweet. She smiled, and in a flash he lost control, and a kaleidoscope of colors swirled around in the dark space behind his eyelids—red and yellow and orange and pink. A flood of pink.

Seconds later, as he lay still in the water, so hot now it nearly burned, he breathed heavily into Petunia's chest. His hands were weak and useless, though they ached to hold something—Shelly's stiff body, Petunia's soft hand, a mug full of coffee with Leonard across the table. He looked up at the hidden body of the bird and felt the air leave his lungs. He thought of the sudden stop of her organs, wondered how a living thing could just cease being, what it felt like for it to all just shut down.

He spent the rest of the morning with Petunia, fixing her breakfast and reminiscing about Shelley and making love. The idea of burying her, of disposing of her tiny, pathetic body, was not yet even a seed planted in his mind, and instead, he focused his thoughts on the friends and lovers who would never leave him, would never fall ill or perish or die. He lay on the floor and sang Shelley's song to Petunia, to all of them, and relished the thought of their unchanging faces and their perfectly preserved skin and their flawless, newly beating hearts.

ACADEMIA

we sit down by the rain streaked window for cheap coffee and instinctively begin citing transcendentalist evidence in modern literature running our hands through descartes and voltaire and as i trace my finger around the rim of my empty cup my mind races with thoughts of how to get you into the bathroom to ravage your metaphors and rip off your analogies stripping you down to reveal the naked splendor of dickens slamming every six feet of you against the wall while discussing the brilliance of cummings and in-between each chapter paragraph page we make our case for our favorites your updike and my vonnegut and as i turn my head to catch sight of that inevitable rising action you scream about your passion for faulkner and i cry out my admiration of dickinson and after we reach our story's climax we leave behind remnants of prose so divine it would be a crime to clean it up and though we have no time or space to read over our work and put our hearts to rest it doesn't matter because you were brilliant as i always suspected you would be.

SOMETHING LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY

It's a fifteen-minute drive to the dead-end street where they park the car and climb into the backseat together. They make the trip twice a week on their lunch break, stroking each other on the way and kissing at red lights. She tries to make conversation but he's a quiet man—she knows this—so she watches him drive her car with one hand, the other resting heavily on her thigh or petting her between her legs as he swerves around slow-moving minivans. It comforts her to know he's just as eager to reach their spot, an empty cul-de-sac of half-built houses and plots of barren land. She locks the keypad on her phone every time, paranoid her foot will accidentally bump her purse and dial her boyfriend's number, leaving him a voicemail of her screaming another man's name.

They take off their jackets and toss them into the front seat; she kicks off her shoes and lunges for him, awkwardly straddling him as he grabs a fistful of her hair and bites her bottom lip. She sucks his long fingers and digs her nails into his shoulder, a small part of her intent on leaving a few semi-permanent marks. When they're done, her body aches and she lies across him, naked and unafraid. He looks at her shyly, smiles and says, "You're amazing. You're the best I've ever had," and she almost believes him, and she almost starts to cry.

They met on a Tuesday. She doesn't remember seeing a ring, but she does remember his soft voice and his sad eyes. When she pictured meeting her new boss, she imagined an older man with a salt-and-pepper beard in an office with glass doors and a mahogany desk; she never imagined the timid thirty-something in a black velour blazer with darting eyes and a softness that seemed to cloak him like a blanket.

He stumbled over his words, and she spoke too quickly, too excitedly. She giggled and talked about herself too much. He kept his hands in his pockets. Finally, she shook his warm right hand and said, "It was nice to meet you, I'll see you next Monday, bright and early, bye!" and rushed out to her car with her heart beating and her face a burning red.

Now, they talk on the computer every day for hours; he makes her laugh and she makes him feel a little less invisible. He has never been comfortable around anyone, not even his kids—the fear that he's not a good enough father, not better than the one he had, gnaws at him like a dog with a rawhide; with her, he knows he is good enough and for this, he loves her.

One day he tells her she is the only thing in his life that makes sense. She looks up to meet his eyes and beams at him, color rushing to her cheeks and an ache in her chest that overcomes her, like the feeling of jumping off a swing at maximum height and, on the way down, being suspended in air for a split second—excited but afraid.

She asks him not to talk about his wife, the mother of his children.

In the evenings she goes home to her boyfriend who is always relieved to see her and is constantly asking, "Do you still like me? Do you still love me?" and she purrs, "Of

course I do, of course” and strokes his white blonde hair, but before bed she undresses in the bathroom to hide the scratches on her back and the finger-shaped bruises on the inside of her thighs. She lies awake and anxiously waits for morning, for the chance to glance at him as she walks to her desk and feel his eyes on her as she takes a little too long to slip off her coat and slide into her seat.

One night, when the white-haired boy is on top of her, she closes her eyes and propels herself far away from the moment and into a memory:

She is eight years old sitting on the concrete steps outside of her first house, the same steps she carelessly rolled down two years before, marring the right side of her body with bloody scrapes and purple bruises. Ralph, her imaginary pet mouse, sits in her lap and she strokes the air in gentle wisps as she watches some neighborhood teenagers smoke cigarettes under a tree across the street. She longs to be one of them, with their T-shirts of bands she’s never heard of and unwashed hair; she feels a pang of embarrassment at her cartoon overalls and jelly sandals, but then she remembers Ralph, picking him up and pretending to place him on her shoulder, twirling his make-believe tail in her small fingers.

She has a hamster of her own in her room upstairs, but she likes how Ralph doesn’t bite or pee in her hand or run away when she tries to hold him. She doesn’t have to clean his cage, and he will never die.

“Tell me about you,” her boss coos. “I want to know everything. I want to know about the things that have made you so wonderful.” So they sit in a tucked away room

and touch their knees together and she tells him about the father who never loved her, and the mother who loved her too much, and the boy who threw her head into a wall when she was only seventeen, but she loved him anyway. “He works at Pizza Hut now,” she says. “He delivered to my house one night when I was home from college. We didn’t look at each other.” When she’s done, she says, “So, now that you know all my secrets, do you still like me?”

“I more than like you,” he says, and for a moment she can’t breathe.

I do not love you, she thinks, I cannot love you.

They eat lunch together and their feet lie still, touching under the table. She takes small bites of her sandwich and covers her mouth with her hand as she chews. She looks at her watch: only seven minutes left in their lunch hour but she never wants to leave, wants to stay here forever, leaning over the table a little too far and pretending not to know how lucky he thinks he is to have her attention. No matter the number of lunch dates or backseat rendezvous they’ve had, she still cannot seem to ease her anxiety whenever he’s near, or slow her heart whenever their eyes meet. She walks quickly everywhere she goes, the tangled ball of light—a perfect conglomeration of anxiety and contentedness—in the pit of her stomach propelling her forward like a gust of wind at her back.

She pauses before speaking, calculating how to deliver each word and wondering what it means that he slid his foot back under his chair, away from hers.

“Sometimes I wish I had a machine that could stop time for everyone but us,” she says. “We could be together whenever we wanted.”

“That would be nice,” he answers, and smiles at her, knowing she wants him to say something more, but not knowing what.

At night, she listens to the sounds of her sleeping boyfriend, staring at his bare back, long and winter white, and wonders if she could ever love him again if she tried her very hardest. She thinks of getting drinks with their friends, and their friends’ wedding they’re both in this spring, and his family who loves her like one of their own. She recalls his dress clothes pressed flat against the rain-soaked pavement when he left work early to change her flat tire. But then she remembers how she loses her breath when she walks the hallway that leads to her desk each morning, and the stabbing pain she feels every Friday evening when her boss leaves to return to his life without her, and the ache that overcomes her when he drives her car with both hands on the steering wheel, not touching her.

Feeling restless and hollow in bed, she'd often slink downstairs and rummage through his Internet thumbprint for something, anything, about his wife: a woman with a round face and hair the color of faded wood. She once found a picture of the whole family outdoors, in what appeared to be their front yard; he is holding a little girl of about three or four while his wife cradles a baby, both of them laughing. He is happy—a kind of happy she doesn't recognize in him. The picture is dated to a time long before they met, but still she is angry with him—angry that he could have ever been happy before that first Tuesday.

She remembers their conversation earlier that day and allows herself to get lost in the memory, shrouded in a dusty haze like a flashback scene in a movie.

“I almost won the lottery last night,” he told her one afternoon. The flash of his name on her computer screen still makes her jump.

“Almost doesn’t count,” she said, winking at him from over her cubicle but unsure of if he saw.

“I was two numbers away; my heart was beating so fast.”

“What would you do if you won?”

“What *wouldn’t* I do?” he said. “I’d set the kids up with nice trust funds. Buy a summer house somewhere exotic. We could have our own little hideaway—in Spain or Prague or the Maldives.”

“Good answer,” she said, picturing their legs entangled under a table in a café and reading Tolstoy together on the beach.

“It’ll be wonderful,” he said. “We’ll go all those places when we win.”

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard for several moments as she stared at the word “we,” running her mind over all of its possibilities.

She wrote this exchange down in a notebook she keeps with all of the lovesick things he’s ever said to her. Sometimes, when she allows her mind to go too far, she imagines reciting them in front of their family and friends, her hands shaking and her white dress stained with drops of happy tears and black mascara.

“Let’s go somewhere,” she says one afternoon. “Out to my car, a conference room. I just want to be alone with you.” But he can’t be home late, not today; he has things to do: pick up his daughter from ballet, make dinner because his wife is working late. She walks to her car and tries to ignore the dull pain in the pit of her stomach. He is

gone; the thought of waiting until morning to see him again sickens her and she can taste a sourness rising in her throat. She can still smell him on her hands from their morning meeting and she breathes in the scent until she has devoured it away.

One weekend her boyfriend mentions the state fair, claiming it would be good for her—for them—to get out of the apartment and do something together. She knows that nothing will ever be good for them again, but she allows him to drive her the fifteen miles south anyway, staring out the window at the trees and pavement whizzing by, blending into a gray blur as the car speeds toward its destination.

The smell of barbequed pork chops and horse manure emanates from two blocks away, only exacerbating her already churning stomach. When they stop at the gate to buy tickets, she scrutinizes the crowd: men in cut-off shorts, overweight children licking dripping fried ice cream, women in animal print spandex with big hair. She spots a couple on a bench a few feet away, unattractive and crude, his hand up her shirt, hers fiddling with the crotch of his dirty jeans; without warning her eyes and cheeks are wet—big fat tears like summer rain—and it feels good.

And then she sees him. Five o'clock shadow, relaxed faded jeans, college T-shirt, though it's not his own alma mater. She's only seen him out of his work clothes once before, and despite the countless times she's seen him naked, he looks more foreign to her dressed this way. He's far off, standing in line for cotton candy or lemonade, three children surrounding him, their grubby hands grabbing at his pants, one pulling another's hair. A sickness overwhelms her, and suddenly the smell of bacon and grease and human

sweat is stronger even than when she first got here. She stares at his blurry outline, tries to recognize any familiar mannerisms, make him see her, but he's busy digging in his wallet, seemingly pleading with his offspring to give him space, stop fighting, behave.

Then: a woman. Her hand on his back, her lips on his face—but it's not his wife. This woman is younger, slimmer, prettier. Her hair is effortlessly twisted into a knot atop her head, and even her tank top and cotton shorts look stylish, put together.

She is sweating now, but her insides—her organs, her blood, her heart—feel cold. Someone behind her shouts for her to move up the line, but she's frozen. She thinks of texting him, something furious and callous and witty, but her arms won't move to retrieve her phone. She thinks of confronting him, making a scene in front of his kids, threatening to expose him to his wife, but her feet won't go.

Her boyfriend hands her a ticket and, despite her pink and sticky face, puts an arm around her shoulder and silently guides her past the hot dogs and the funnel cakes and the whirring soda machines. She approaches him, standing with his children and the woman while they all gnaw on pretzels and guzzle liquefied sugar in an array of radioactive colors. She stares at him as she trips by and can see: it's not him. This man has the same whisper of gray in his hair, the same thick, long nose, but it's not him. She breathes for the first time in several minutes and her body almost goes completely limp.

Her boyfriend leads her straight to the Ferris wheel at the other end of the park. Once aboard, her hand limp and sweaty in his, she listens to the squeaks of the tinkering gears and looks out into the vastness of the sky ahead. As they creep toward the top, she

imagines the whole machine coming apart, screws and scraps of rusted metal tumbling to the ground below, and she wonders how badly the fall would hurt.

THE PEACE THE EVENING BRINGS

I have never had a boyfriend. I think most women would be embarrassed that, at 22, they hadn't yet kissed a boy or felt another person's skin on their skin, but I'm not worried about it. I met my soul mate when I was just nine years old, at the 4o'clock showing at a strip mall theatre in Gary, Indiana on June 23, 1994, and ever since that day, I have never wanted to be with anyone but Simba from *The Lion King*.

When he first transformed from a boy to an adolescent, dancing along that log that stretched over the running river, and he strutted and swayed with a confidence I had never known, I knew, with unshakeable certainty, that no mere mortal would ever stack up. Take my father, for example: I had always viewed him as rather pathetic, someone afraid to speak his mind or stand up for himself, and because of that, I felt he only lived half a life. Whenever my mother commanded him, he just sighed and did her bidding. I felt sorry for him, but I also wanted to shake him out of his funk. Simba's poise and coolness were traits I had never seen a man embody, and I was drawn to him for it. I couldn't possibly have known then how much I would come to have in common with Simba, or how much I would understand his suffering.

When the movie was over and my mother took my younger brother to wait in line for the restrooms, I pretended to go to the ladies' room on the other side, but as soon as they were out of sight, I turned around and walked back into the theatre. I don't know

exactly why I went back, other than I experienced something similar to how I've heard divine intervention described: I had the feeling that I left something vital behind, and I had no choice but to go back and get it.

I remember the red velvet curtains that framed the screen that day, heavy and dark. I imagined wrapping myself up in them, the musty smell of dust filling my nostrils, and twirling and spinning around in them until I lost myself completely. The theatre was empty and the lights were dim. In an instant, the screen flashed white, and Simba appeared, just where he was mere minutes before.

"You came back," he said. I looked up to the projection booth, but no one was there; absent, too, was the stream of light beaming down and onto the screen the way it does when a movie is playing. Simba looked me square in the eyes as I stood there, shocked but not scared. I tried to speak, but the only sound that came out was a kind of choking sound, a gruff cough that in no way resembled words.

"I am here to tell you that right now is not our time. But if you wait, you will find your way back to me."

"But I don't want to wait," I said. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't let him think I was a baby, so I bit my lip and tried not to blink.

"Everything exists in a delicate balance," he said, and then he was gone.

The house lights came on and my family appeared in the doorway. My mother scolded me and grabbed my hand, pulling me back into the reality I wasn't ready to reenter. But it didn't matter what I wanted; it was time to go. It all happened so fast, but it is still my most vivid memory to date.

Now, twelve years after I first saw the movie and heard Simba's prophecy, I am standing in his apartment in front of three cameramen as a large fuzzy microphone hangs above my head.

"I'm sorry," Simba says. "They're from ABC. They want to make a documentary about my life after the movie, how I've coped with being a child star. I understand if you want to leave—"

"No," I say. "I'm not leaving." I wave at the camera to my right, wiggling my fingers back and forth shyly.

"Just pretend they're not here," he says, and my face reddens with embarrassment.

I am not totally sure how I got here. The last thing I remember is standing in line for coffee, and then I just appeared, standing upright in Simba's kitchen. I look around to get my bearings and to my left is a wall of windows that bathes the whole apartment in a wash of light. Outside, we are surrounded by sharp-edged buildings with mirrored facades, and I realize we must be on the top floor.

"The Big Apple," Simba says, as he joins me by the windows. "I figured it was a good next step. You get type-cast in a place like Pride Rock, and I wanted some new opportunities."

I am unsure of what to make of all of this, but underneath my confusion is a sheer happiness that this day has finally come, that the universe has decided to bring us back together. I want to ask him so many things, like what it was like to rule an empire, and if he misses Africa, and is it just me, or was Timon kind of a dick? But I don't say

anything; I always thought that when this day came, everything would be easy and natural, but with every second that passes I am reminded of how not good at this I am; in fact, I am utterly terrible at this.

He asks me if he can make me a drink, and I hesitate because I don't drink much and don't know the names of any fancy cocktails, so I tell him to surprise me. As I watch him in the kitchen, I can see that he looks just the same as when I first saw him; he hasn't aged a day, and I'm glad. I had never thought about what a cartoon would look like in the real world, but it's not much different than you would think. He's just like he was at the end of the movie: golden brown fur, auburn mane, and black, expressive eyebrows. Though he doesn't look like the lions I've seen at the zoo, he is every bit as large.

I watch him take a plastic drink stirrer in his mouth, his hair swaying as he moves the stick in circles to mix up the liquid. I remember how, in the movie, his mane was always perfectly coiffed, even when he fell into the water or sprinted through the jungle. No frizz, no tangles, just perfection. I want to reach out and touch it, but I don't.

I look around at his apartment some more and notice a photo of him with Nala in the Savannah, the sun blazing hot behind them. It makes me think of the scene in the movie where Simba and Nala kiss for the first time—actually, it's more like a nuzzle, but close enough. I've never forgotten the sexy come-hither look she gave him after they tumbled down the hill and “Can You Feel the Love Tonight” played in the background. Her pink tongue brushed against his face, quickly but sensually; it was a smooth move. I've practiced that same look in the mirror for years, playing with my makeup, unable to achieve Nala's cat-eye, because, well, she's a cat, which is something I will never be. It's

an impossible standard I'm holding myself to, comparing myself to a lioness. And forget Photoshop; Nala was literally drawn from scratch, the pillar of perfection. But despite all that, I've compared myself to her my whole life. Every year of middle school, I wrote my research report on wild cats. I stopped shaving when I was 15 so I could have more body hair. Then one day, at the start of my freshman year of college, I was sitting on my parents' couch petting my childhood cat. I studied the curve of her back, and the perfect almond shape of her eyes, glowing the most radiant yellow-green in the sunlit room. Her tail was coiled neatly, stuck tight to her furry side, and as she pushed her head into my hand for a scratch, she purred softly and sweetly, baring the delicate underside of her chin. Later, I watched myself in the mirror, trying to mimic her, but to no avail. I looked clunky, my movements forced and unnatural. Even the hair on my body pointed in all different directions, refusing to lie flat and smooth. I was a human, indefinitely.

"She moved out a few months ago," Simba says, when he sees me staring at the photo. "Said the city just wasn't her thing. It's okay, though, because you're here now."

"What about your daughter?" I ask. Simba gets quiet and looks at the floor. What is wrong with me? He was trying to be romantic, and I ruined it.

"We share custody," he says. "I get her every other Christmas and in the summer."

I need a drink, and, as though he could read my mind, Simba picks the tray back up in his mouth. I can see his teeth, sparking white and solid as steel bars. They remind me of my first dog, a German Shepherd named Blue. When we'd play fetch or tug-of-war, I always had to pry the toy from his grip by squeezing the sides of his mouth with

my fingers. One day, when we were out in the yard with a tennis ball, he went to grab it from me and latched onto both the toy and my hand. The pain was something I'd never felt before, like a billion pounds of pressure all concentrated on my tiny bones and tendons. Blue released the second he realized his mistake, but the damage was done; my hand was broken, crushed like a shell on the beach. Ever since that day, I was more careful around Blue, tossing him treats instead of letting him lick them out of my hand, afraid to get between him and something he wanted. That day in the yard made me realize his strength and, in comparison, my weakness.

I take a sip of the drink and it's sweeter than I anticipated, like Kool-Aid. The glass is cool in my palms, and pink. We walk toward the living room, whose floor is comprised of grass and dirt, piles of smooth rocks in every corner. There's a pathway of what looks to be bamboo flooring that leads from the kitchen straight to the couch, a red carpet of sorts. I imagine he cleared it away so humans don't get their shoes all dirty, or maybe it was just for my arrival; I hope so.

Simba slides onto a heap of straw and dried mud in an effortless single movement. I balance myself on the brown suede sofa across from him and take tiny sips of my drink, holding the liquid in my mouth and swishing it from side to side, imagining the sugar eroding my teeth with every second. Suddenly, I am afraid I will smile and all my teeth will fall out onto my lap, black and corroded. I set the drink down and hold it between my feet on the floor.

Simba laps at a bowl of water below him, the hairs on his nose sprinkled with droplets. He looks serene and majestic. He doesn't act like the lions at the zoo either,

pacing and angry, sleeping lazily on a rock, or concealing themselves in the brush. He is open and unabashed, and he looks me in the eyes. I want to crawl toward him and rest my head on his soft belly, hold his enormous paw in my hand.

He looks up at me and grins, shakes the water from his face. He starts humming, and I recognize the melody as “Hakuna Matata,” only slower; he’s turned it into a ballad. I find myself humming along; I start to sing, and then we are singing together, soft at first, but then louder. Our voices bounce off the walls and slip under the door and into the hallway. I never knew I could sing like this. I am Whitney Houston, and Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin, all in one voice. I am the soprano to his tenor. I remember that conviction I first admired in him years ago, and I realize that I embody it now, while we sing; I realize that with Simba, anything is possible.

We reach my favorite part in the song; it’s when, in the movie, Simba becomes an adult, that moment I remember best as the one where the seed of my love for him was planted. For over an hour, I had watched a child mourn the loss of his father, navigate the mysteries of the jungle, and embrace his newfound maturity, and he did it all with wonder and humor and bravery. He was everything I wasn’t, but wanted to be. He was also everything my father wasn’t. My father, whose final act of weakness was to take his own life when I was thirteen years old. My father, who died in his small office, the one with his own telephone and a door that locked—his greatest accomplishment. He didn’t even have the gall to tell me goodbye, so he just slipped into the oblivion in his suit and tie and waited for the janitor to find him.

When the song is over, we erupt in laughter. He smiles at me again and I can feel myself blushing. I have dreamed about this moment for so long, and now that I find myself in it, I'm paralyzed. When I rehearsed this day in my head, I would walk right up to him and tell him everything I've ever felt, then pull him into the bedroom and show him how I've grown. But being faced with it, I'm afraid and unsure. I thought about sleeping a couple boys in college as practice for this day, but when it came down to it, I couldn't betray Simba that way. I couldn't betray myself. Plus, all the frat boys smelled like stale beer and too much Axe cologne, so it wasn't that hard to turn them down.

"Come sit with me," Simba says, and my heart leaps. I stand up too quickly and nearly knock over the drink I forgot was between my feet, catching it just before it spills and shatters. Pink liquid sloshes over the rim of the glass and splashes onto the floor. I panic and rush to the kitchen for a paper towel, but Simba just laughs and says, "It's okay, don't worry," and pats the earth beside him.

I smooth the front of my dress with the dampness of my palms. I am wearing leopard print and I worry that it offends him. Two cameras follow me as I walk across the room, my heels clicking on the hardwood floor. I imagine this moment being put to music in the editing room, and I try to determine what song they would use. Something slow and sensual? Or something to more accurately fit the mood: staccato and anxious? Probably the latter.

I had thought about sleeping with Simba many times before, and each time I imagined it, it was almost always the same scene. We'd meet, and not a word would be exchanged between us before we'd run to each other, him bounding toward me, his mane

blown backward by the wind. We'd embrace, and kiss like it was the first and last time we ever would, the way a soldier kisses his wife before he heads off to war. Simba would stop and pull back, look into my eyes and smile, then ease me onto the ground, cushioning my head with his giant paw like a new mother laying down her baby. When we made love, I would grab fistfuls of his fur, and it would be soft in my hands. The whole event would occur in silence, but not the uncomfortable kind, the kind where no one makes a sound because they're both scared or nervous. No, it would be silent because we wouldn't need words. We would want to listen to the inconspicuous sounds of our quickening breath, the whisper of my eyelashes sweeping against his. Afterward, he would lick me and I'd giggle, breathlessly; then I'd rest my head on his chest and pet him until we fell asleep, the sky turning to dusk and the sun just a sliver falling below the horizon. The exact setting is never defined in this imagined rendezvous, maybe because it's so exciting just to think of it happening at all that my mind doesn't get around to those details. But the moral of the story is that it is gentle and sweet and perfect.

This is not how it happens tonight.

Tonight, I walk to him and stare at the pile of terrain he wants to me sit on; I don't want to ruin my dress, but I also don't want to appear shallow by saying so. He can sense my worry and takes a throw pillow from a nearby chair in his mouth, setting it down beside him. *How chivalrous*, I think, and just as soon I'm embarrassed; I'm acting like I'm better than him because I won't sit where he does, like I'm above lying on a pile of dirt. He must notice the change in my mood because he asks me what's wrong.

"Nothing," I say. "I just don't want to screw this up."

“And what is *this*, exactly?” he asks, and my face gets hot.

I shrug and smile, tight-lipped. I sit down. I watch his face float toward mine, his eyes slowly close, and in my head I am screaming and laughing and flapping my hands in excitement. And then, for some reason, I turn my cheek, and he accidentally licks my eyelid. He pulls back, much quicker than Blue did before mangling my hand, and I think, *I'd rather have my entire arm amputated than live in this moment*. I force a clumsy laugh and silence soon surrounds us.

“Okay, so that was awkward,” I say, because I am stupid. I try to recover: “I’m glad to be here with you.”

“I’m glad, too,” he says, and my confidence is back.

“And I’m sorry about Nala. You know, the breakup.” Clearly, it was false confidence.

He doesn’t respond and I wonder if I’ve just blown this whole thing. Then I wonder if he misses her. I wonder if I’m the rebound, if one day soon I’ll show up here, at his apartment, and everything will be gone because he’s flown back to Africa to be with her and their child. I want to ask him about her: if the passion they shared in the movie carried on after, if she was a good lover, if she satisfied him. I mean, did this chick have any flaws? But I don’t ask any of it, and he doesn’t say another word about her.

I want to get this back on track, despite the whole eye-licking incident and then bringing up his ex, but I don’t know how.

Simba licks my hand. I wince at the roughness of his tongue against my skin, tiny spikes caressing my palm and the pads of my fingers.

“Salty,” he says, grinning. I pet his face; it is thick and coarse. Even though he looks like a cartoon, he feels like an actual lion, and I can’t understand how that could be.

“So, um, what are you made of?” I ask. “I know Pixar uses Claymation, which I find to be a really fascinating but confusing phenomenon. But you don’t feel like clay; you feel so...real.” I am rambling, trying to distract him from the shaking of my insides and the sweat I can feel forming on my hairline.

“Shhh. Lie down,” he purrs, and I do.

I’m on my back now. Simba pushes up my shirt and his cold nose on my stomach makes me jump.

“Sorry,” he says with embarrassment, and I feel defeated. The excitement I once had has dissipated, and I just want to start over. This isn’t anything like my visions, like the dreams I’ve had since that day in ‘94. I wonder if I can get out of here the way I came in, appear again, maybe drink more this time.

He nudges my shirt back down and rests his big head on me, and for the first time I realize just how powerful he is. I can feel him holding back, not allowing his full weight to fall on me, but even still, it’s getting hard to breathe.

I study the things within my line of sight. The place is pretty bare, only the necessities; maybe Simba is a minimalist. I realize, though, that there are no pictures of Mufasa anywhere. I open my mouth to ask him about it, but quickly decide better of it; nothing like asking after someone’s dead dad to kill the mood. But I wonder: what’s it like to watch your father die? We have that in common, though, Simba and me. Two dead parents; the only difference is, Mufasa died trying to save his son, and mine was

saving himself.

After a few minutes, I notice that Simba's breathing is even and soft. The full weight of his head is on my stomach and I have to shift and squirm to breathe properly. With great effort, I lift it and set it down on the grass beside me. He yawns, bats at his ear with a floppy paw, and settles in. It's at this moment I feel the most love for him, though not the passionate, voracious lust that has consumed me since I was kid. This new feeling is warm and dizzying, but also a little sad. There's a pain in the center of my chest—not my heart, as it's not the clichéd love of the movies—and it feels as though he is still resting against me, making it impossible to take a full breath. I thought my mission here was to consummate my feelings for him, to give this thing a real go; I've waited so long to be reunited with him, and now I'm more unsure than ever. I stroke him, gently so as not to wake him, and the pain increases. I try to sleep too, but sleep doesn't come.

I get up and grab a blanket from the couch: a snow-white cashmere blend, it appears; another spot where Nala has left her paw print. I wrap the blanket around myself—a thick velvet curtain in a movie theatre, the smell of popcorn in my nose, my hands sticky from melted Raisinets—and curl into him on the floor.

WALTER AND LILY

Walter remembered the affair again. Lily didn't know what triggered it this time—she had stopped trying to figure out her husband's mood swings and their catalysts. It could have been a tiny shift in the universe or a slight rotation in the earth that jolted his memory and propelled him into another reality, or maybe it was just the clouds outside that cast a sleepy shadow on every room in the house. This remembering and forgetting was part of a series to which they had both been subscribed for nearly almost a year now. Walter remembered—and misremembered—the whole thing like it was still happening, and not 40 years since. And he hated Lily all over again.

“I want to talk about Doc,” he said to her, her back turned as she pushed a half-fried egg around in a sizzling skillet. He wasn't sure if she hadn't heard him or was simply ignoring his demand, so he repeated himself only to meet the same silence. Lily walked around to the sink, her head slightly down, eyes averted. She grabbed a bowl from the counter, its sides slick with pancake batter, and began rinsing. Walter had wanted to talk about Doc Newton nearly every day for the past two weeks, and at first she had indulged him. The psychotherapist had warned her that something like this could happen, that he could remember and forget things unexpectedly, become unaware of the time and space of his own reality. “It's all just part of the disease,” he had said. But she

could only relive her own transgressions so many times before her will broke, and she felt it breaking then.

“Breakfast is almost ready. I brought the paper in; why don’t you sit down?”

Walter obeyed and began reading the front page, but it wasn’t long before Lily heard the thud of a chair hitting the floor and turned just in time for the Sunday paper to collide with her face.

She blinked, held a hand to her cheek, and furrowed her brow. “Walter…”

“He’s my best friend, Lily. My best goddamn friend,” Walter yelled, standing over the wooden chair that was turned on its side. Lily glanced at the clock, aware that it was already past time for her husband’s meds. “These violent outbursts,” the therapist had said, “they’re only going to get worse. I’ll prescribe an anti-psychotic, but there are no guarantees. He’s not the man you’ve known anymore.”

“It’s time for breakfast, Walt. Sit down and have something to eat,” she said.

The egg hissed in the pan.

“I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna go down the street and kill the son of a bitch.”

Lily sighed. “Doc’s dead, Walt. He’s been dead. He hasn’t lived down the street for a very long time.”

“You’re lying,” he said, shaking his head. “You always lie to me.” He sucked in a deep breath and took a slow step toward his wife.

Her right hand crawled up her aching left arm and found the bruise he left three nights ago. *Did adrenaline push blood toward a contusion, she thought? Away from it?* She stroked the pilly cotton of her sleeve.

“What if June finds out?” he said. “How am I going to tell her that her mother is a whore?”

He stepped toward her again, tears in his eyes—she didn’t know if they were from anger or embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Walt. There’s nothing else I can say. It was so long ago. It was a mistake, and I’ve regretted it every day. Please. Take your medication, Walt. Please—”

Before the last word had escaped her mouth, Walter leapt at her with a dexterity she hadn’t seen in him for decades. Lily could see her husband’s hands outstretched, the bulging, deep blue veins than ran from his knuckles to his thick wrists. He came at her with his hands posed perfectly to fit around her small neck, and she knew her recently diminished frame couldn’t fight him off this time, the firm bite of her dentures not nearly an adequate weapon against the sheer weight of him.

Lily grabbed the frying pan still burning on the stove beside her and flung its contents at her charging husband. The second the scorched egg left the pan she shrieked and dropped the iron mass to the floor.

Walt fell back, eyes closed, hands on his face. Lily stood, stunned. The room was deafeningly quiet, and Lily could swear she could hear her lungs contracting, the whoosh of blood being carried through her veins toward her thrashing heart. She gazed around and through him, her eyes darting from a crumb on the counter to their wedding china collecting dust in the hutch next to the table. There was no sight of the slippery, burning thing that had just flown at Walter until they both heard the limp plop it made as it fell to the floor, leaving behind its oily calling card on the floral wallpaper of the dining room.

After several seconds or minutes or days, Walter looked up and, his thick glasses askew on his face, and said, "I'm very sorry about that."

Unsure of what else to do, Lily walked over to her slumped husband. She steadied her shaking body on the countertop and knelt down. She stared at him intently, realizing she hadn't recognized this man, this man she had given nearly all her life to, for the past ten months. He refused to meet her gaze, but she hardly blinked, studying the creases in his neck, the fine hairs on the inside of his ears and nostrils, the pale pink of his lips. Her sun-spotted hand floated up to meet the imaginary burn he kept touching on his face, but stopped midair.

She picked herself up, left Walt on the floor, and shuffled up to their bedroom. She sat down on the smooth white coverlet, folded her hands in her lap, and closed her eyes. She was tired. For 53 years she had been part of a whole, part of something larger than just herself: 53 years of loving, and fighting, and forgiving. She had never pictured their last years this way; when she imagined their "Third Act," she saw them leading a quiet life where she would have time to pick up painting again, join the church ladies' group, and maybe they would even host family dinners on Sundays with the grandchildren. But the kids were all grown now, in college or about to be, and they didn't see them much anymore; they had their own lives, which were just beginning. Walt had always wanted to travel, see the world together, but they had waited too long and now they weren't going anywhere. She was tired, and in this dusk of her life, she just wanted to rest. Exhaustion struck her, so she lied down on top of the made bed and slept.

The next day, before his third doctor's appointment of the week, Walter fidgeted with his cell phone in the kitchen, turning it over in his big hands. "I don't know why they make these things so goddamn small," he said. "How's anyone supposed to be able to see these tiny numbers?" He threw the phone down, the battery cover bouncing on the carpet. Lily bent down to pick it up.

"Leave it," Walter said over his shoulder. "And you should drive today. I can't find my good glasses." He walked out of the room as Lily brushed off the phone and set it on the coffee table. As her hand released it, she caught sight of his glasses folded neatly in their case next to a vase of wilting poinsettias.

She wasn't comfortable behind the wheel of a car, never was; driving always made her nervous, and throughout their marriage, Walt was usually the one to drive them around. While they owned two cars—his the truck, hers the barely-used Camry—she really only drove around town for errands. Besides, Walt liked to be the driver, said it made him feel in control. "A man should take his lady wherever she wants to go," he used to say, and he'd give her wink. Lately, they'd relied on their daughter to be their chauffeur, but Lily didn't want to burden her with yet another call, and by the time June could get to their house, they'd already be late for their appointment. Still, Lily tried to dissuade her husband, told him she'd call the hospital and have a volunteer pick them up, but he just sat down in his recliner and said if she wouldn't take him, he wasn't going at all.

Even with the seat slid as far forward as it would go, Lily had to stretch her foot until it felt as though her body would come apart just to reach the pedals. She had lost

several inches in the recent years, and she wondered if the brain shrank with age like the body did, cortexes and lobes folding into themselves and taking all of their memories with them.

As she drove, Walter spoke incessantly of violence. His temper had heightened in the last few months, and an obsession with fighting had quickly washed over him and begun carrying him away. Lily had been told this was a common symptom, but that fact didn't make it any easier for her to quell the storm swirling inside her husband's head.

"That Billy Barbo, boy, he sure could fight," Walt said. "He could kick anybody's ass, no matter how big they were. These guys now are such pansies—back in the 40s, I tell ya, that's when real men were made. There was a rumor around school that Billy wrestled an alligator; I don't know about that, but I sure wouldn't put it past him."

Lily was silent, letting him go on for as long as he needed, recounting fights he got into when he was younger and war stories of him and his buddies in their prime.

"Your daughter needs to learn her place," he said, out of the blue. That morning they'd had a particularly volatile phone conversation. "She thinks we need to hire a goddamn assistant."

Lily ignored his word choice, no longer offended when her husband referred to June as only hers. She had dedicated her life to her daughter and her grandchildren, making sure they were happy and provided for. She wrote them letters as often as she could, her nearly indecipherable scrawl telling them how proud they made her, how much she missed them, how her heart ached to hear her grandson was sick or that June had lost

her job. She sent them checks for \$100, unaware of how little it could buy now, and wrote *Love* on the “For” line next to her signature.

“What kind of an assistant?” she asked.

“And that good-for-nothing husband of hers says we need to move into a home. Says he’ll take me himself. I’ll knock him on his ugly head if he lays a finger on me. We’re adults. We’re perfectly capable of getting ourselves around. Look at you! Said you couldn’t drive and you’re scootin’ around like an old pro! And I can take my own damn pills, and wash my own damn dishes, thank you very much.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I wouldn’t mind a little help around the house every now and then.”

“Last thing I need is some stranger walking around *my* house, looking through *my* things. You can’t trust people, you know.”

The truth was, she needed help with more than just the house. She wasn’t used to the responsibility of another human being since her own child was small and helpless. On top of everything, Walter was a true man of his time and refused help from anyone, especially Lily. She had begun grinding his pills into dust and sprinkling them into his nightly whiskey and water. She struggled with remembering to take her own medication, and with her husband’s mental state tumbling downward like a pebble in a well, she felt more like a nanny than a wife.

Walt had begun reverting to childlike behaviors early on. One day, about a month after his official diagnosis, she’d found him sitting on the mat in the upstairs bathroom with his head in his hands, his pants in a heap on the floor beside him.

“I couldn’t make it in time,” he’d said when he saw her.

“Oh honey,” she’d said, “it’s alright. We can just wash them.” She pushed back the urge to cry as hard as she could, but some things you just can’t stop.

“Walt, do you want to talk about what the doctor said?” Lily asked him in the car on the way home, her hands still tight around the wheel as the car idled at a red light. The air outside had begun to wear thin, and an iciness crept in that caused Lily’s joints to stiffen and ache. They had been told that his “condition was deteriorating,” that it probably wasn’t safe for either of them to stay in the house alone. Her mind flashed with images of Walt above her in bed, his large hands around her throat in the darkness, or the broken end of a liquor bottle pointed at her face, his boots stomping through puddles of the golden liquid, coming toward her. Walter was quiet so she asked him again, but he just looked out the window at a group of teenage boys waiting at a nearby crosswalk.

“When I was their age, boy, I was trouble,” he said as the light turned green. “Always pickin’ fights. I gave one of the senior football players a bloody lip when I heard he’d made a pass at my friend’s girl. Punched him straight in the mouth.”

The wind had picked up and Lily could feel it pushing against the side of the car. The steering wheel began to move on its own and she had to work harder to steady it, causing her to sweat through her silk blouse. She began to second-guess her ability to get home, not recognizing certain buildings and becoming confused at every intersection. She nearly drove through a stop sign trying to get her bearings.

“What the hell are you doing, Lil?” Walter bellowed, his arm jutting across her to take the wheel. As she pushed on the brake, the weight of her husband leaning into her—still nearly every bit of the height he was the day they met—caused her foot to slip. Unconsciously, Lily shut her eyes just before the collision and felt the thump of the bumpers meeting one another before hearing the scrape and itch of metal on metal.

The car, she thought. Oh God, the car. The thoughts that followed were quick and panicked. Images flashed behind her closed eyelids: dents and scratches, glass and car parts scattered on the road, repair bills, Walter’s rage.

Walter.

She opened her eyes to find her husband still holding the wheel, watching her with a look she had just recently come to recognize. Her lungs could have collapsed just then—or perhaps they did—and it would have made no difference. After a few moments he opened the passenger-side door and a teenage girl who barely looked old enough to drive stepped meekly outside.

Lily watched her husband. Her chest was tight and her shoulders, which had been slowly losing their angles to the inevitable softening of aging muscle and bone, like a mudslide inside her body, sat just below her ears. It wasn’t until she began to feel dizzy that she realized she’d been holding her breath.

Walter walked unsteadily to the front of the car, not yet acknowledging the young girl to his left. He studied the damage, mentally noting every cut and abrasion, groaning and wincing at each newly discovered mark. Suddenly he looked up at Lily and jerked his head backwards to indicate she join him in the street. With the car still running, she

carefully slid out of her seat and shut the door behind her. She stepped over shards of orange-colored plastic and instinctively held out her hand for Walter to help her across the debris, but all that graced her palm was the November wind that whipped through her thin shirt and cooled the hot skin on her back.

They both surveyed the car in silence, their eyes running over the depressions and sharp edges of the front bumper, unaware of the cacophony of horns around them, drivers shouting at them to get out of the street, the girl telling them calmly she was going to call her parents and let them know what happened.

Lily couldn't look at her husband, sure that the muscles in his jaw were trembling and afraid he'd strike her for her carelessness, for harming his last possession of pride.

"I'm sorry," he said to the girl as she poked at her cell phone. He hunched forward so his face was nearly level with hers. "I'll give you my insurance information. Your car will get fixed, honey. This wasn't your fault."

The girl nodded her head and smiled weakly. Lily was surprised at his composure, grateful, even, for his kindness toward the girl. "This is how it happens," she heard the doctors' voices say. "He will have moments of lucidity. They come and go." Like waves, she thought, except with less predictability.

Walter walked back over to Lily. The breeze rippled their clothes and danced in Lily's short, silver curls. Her head was raised, eyes squinted behind her thick glasses as she looked at the clouds. There was a sodden feeling in the air, the kind that settles before a heavy rain, and Lily could almost feel the thickness on her fingers.

Lily started for the passenger door to retrieve the trusty green folder that held all of the necessary paperwork, but after two steps she felt a tug on her arm wrench her backwards. She imagined an altercation on the street, men rushing to her aid as Walter pummeled her, called her a fool. But instead, he pulled her into him, his heavy head bent forward into her hair, and she could smell the familiar, sterile scent of Chapstick and Polident as he breathed. She didn't embrace him, but instead let her goose-bumped arms rest at her sides as the rest of her strained under his partial weight.

"I'm sorry, Lil," he said. "Things are gonna be different."

Bits of their life began to rush through her head, from Christmases with the children, to the day their only dog, a curly black mutt named Mike, was hit by a car and Walt held her all night while she cried, to the diamond pendant he had picked out himself and given to her on her last birthday. She thought of the day years ago when he came to her at the breakfast table and said he forgave her for the affair, said they could make it work, and she hugged him and felt sorrier for him than she ever had, sorry for his pain and that she was a part of it.

Even when she'd slept with Doc, she had never wanted to leave Walt. Their affair was a transgression, a time of weakness not long after June was born. She was often home alone with the baby while Walter worked long shifts, and she had felt herself losing her identity of "wife" to become "mother."

As she leaned against the man her husband had become, she tried to think back to the past, to the days when they were happy and things were easy and they would begin each day making love and lying together in the stillness of the morning, the day still full

of possibility. She remembered their honeymoon at the beach, when Walter spent a whole day collecting sea glass. When they got home, he went straight to his desk and drilled tiny holes in each piece, stringing them all together with twine to make a necklace for her. She could still see the colors, misty blues and frosted greens. She wondered where that necklace was now, perhaps tucked in the back of a closet or long lost, the casualty of a move or annual spring-cleaning.

But those days felt so far away, like they belonged to another life, and the space in which she now lived was devoid of that old laughter, that sparkle in her husband's eye.

Now, she raised a hand to feel the stiffness of his shirt and patted his arm for several moments. "Oh Walt," she said. "Things *are* different."

They stood there in the street, the car humming its constant song and warming the whole right side of Lily's body. Walter slid his face against hers and she could feel a cold sting on her cheek from where the air had chilled the wetness from his eyes. She thought about the girl waiting in her car not ten feet from them, the damaged bumper and the inevitable increase in their upcoming insurance payments. She wanted Walt to let go, to take care of this mess and go home, but he simply stood there, staring at her.

"Things will be different," he said again, just as the rain had begun on the other side of town, sweeping toward them like a speeding car.

HOW TO MAKE LOVE TO A MERMAID

1. Find a mermaid. You may have been told that they swim the depths of the Aegean or wash up on the shores of Tahiti, but these are lies. She will surface only at night, in a storm, after the first clap of thunder.
2. Gain her trust. Read her poetry; compliment her seaweed hair or her operatic voice or her divine beauty; remember she is a woman.
3. Wait.
4. Ask her about her day. Remember, she is still a woman.
5. Seduce her. You may have been told that mermaids are sirens, but this is a lie. They are shy like stray cats.
6. Lead her to land. You cannot trick her by stealing her voice and hiding it in a clam shell; you cannot bribe her with your special human kiss.
7. Wrap her glinting gold tail, smooth like snakeskin, in dampened cloths and watch it split, divide, part like the Red Sea.
8. Lay her down. Not on the sand or in a dune or atop a beach towel. In a bed, like a woman.
9. Let yourself in. Then let yourself be taken.
10. Sleep.
11. Awaken to find nothing but the faint smell of salt.
12. Google: “unrequited love;” buy a boat; search for her; track weather patterns and water densities and become a coastal storm chaser; dream of her—of fishermen and divers and passionate sharks forcing apart her scales and—; wake up with a fever and a brick where your heart used to be; refuse to give up; do not meet anyone else; grow old; keep searching; die.

THE LOST BOY

The boy stands in front of the glass as reflections from the blue-green water dance on the ceiling and make shadows on the walls. Keyboard music floats through the speakers above, like elevator music in a fancy hotel, he thinks, or something from a low-budget porno. He looks around at the people near him: mostly families, the kids' noses pressed against the glass, parents clicking on cell phones. There's a couple, standing alone, arms around each other's waists and staring at each other instead of at the tank; in the back, three lone men, two with beards and one with fingerless gloves even though it's spring in Tampa, lean against the wall or stand awkwardly with hands shoved into dirty pockets, waiting for the show.

The smell of chlorine is strong, but it doesn't bother him; it smells like sanitation, like germs burning away into the ether. The place is just like the pictures online, only the colors are muted, and everything is a bit dingier than what's shown on the web site. It's really just a big fish tank without the fish. The lights in the aquarium dim and everyone stops talking, faces forward. The children in front squeal and giggle, hug each other with big eyes; they make him wonder what it would have been like if Tommy had lived, if he'd had a big brother to talk to, someone to fight with and show him how to shoot a basketball and what it means to be a man. He wonders if Tommy

would have made fun of him for coming here, called him a weirdo, or if he would stand next to him and point out the side boob of the girl currently in front of him, a shock of white flesh spilling out from her tank top.

The curtain rises. The music changes, a piece heavy with woodwinds, flittering flutes set off by the depth of oboes and clarinets. The lights above the aquarium shoot rays of violet and neon pink through the water. Then: a woman. The boy sees a surge of red hair blow into view behind the glass, covering the painted face beneath. Shells the colors of a peach cover her breasts, secured by a seaweed-like ribbon. The water isn't perfectly clear, but a little murky, like old bath water; despite the cloudiness, he can still make out the curve of her hips and large, hollow belly button above her scaly green tail. Before he can take it all in, three more girls swim into view, their hair and bodies and fishtails twisting and tangling and sparkling, making the bottom of his stomach feel warm and full.

The men behind him move up, press their dirty palms to the glass, pupils dilated and searching, but he doesn't notice them. The girls dance underwater, something he didn't even know was possible; they have clean, immaculate armpits and long fingers with chipped nail polish. He spots a few thin, green strings dangling from one girl's tail, missing sequins on another; their makeup, however, is un-smudged, and their hair floats around their head, swaying to the music.

More and more girls descend; where they're coming from is unknown, they simply appear like visions from the top or sides of the aquarium. Three mermaids in blue and pink bikini tops and shimmering tails perform synchronized backflips

underwater, turning and somersaulting in a cloud of bubbles. The boy notices several gray air hoses on each side of the tank, and every few seconds another girl takes her turn sucking on one. He thinks of how unsanitary it is for them to share, so many mouths on a single apparatus, and he has to look away.

They smile and wink, but there's an artificiality about them, and he can tell they're performing. The redhead, though, is different. He looks at her spinning in circles over herself, only stopping to look up at the surface of the water with a hunger burning behind her glittered eyelashes. She doesn't look at him, but rather through him, as though the glass is a two-way mirror and she's unaware of the families and the excited children and the hobos with erections watching her every move. If mermaids weren't just a fisherman's fantasy, but something you could see and touch and love, she would be it. She is, he thinks, almost the real thing.

As he leaves, the boy takes one last look at the redhead; she is looking just past his left ear, smiling, her hair waving goodbye.

When he gets home, he goes straight to his room and pulls his iPad out of the protective sheath his mother made him promise he'd use. He Googles "Misty Waters State Park" and clicks on the Mermaid Roster menu. He combs through photos of the girls, and a few men, until he finds her: Mermaid Lucy. That red hair is unmistakable, and she smiles at him from the brightly lit screen with large, snowy white teeth. Her bathing suit top is barely visible, dots of purple and red peeking up from the bottom of her photo, a faint shadow of cleavage in-between her modest breasts.

His eyes dart through her bio; he reads it several times, devouring every word:

Tell us about yourself. I like country music and being outdoors. There's more to me than people think.

What's your personal motto? "I think everybody's weird. We should all celebrate individuality and not be embarrassed or ashamed of it." – Johnny Depp

Who is your role model? My dog Pepper—she's always happy.

What is something most people don't know about you? I like to scrapbook. And I work part-time at Applebee's.

Normally he would scoff at a profile like this—*who says their dog is their hero?* A dog literally cannot be a hero because he acts on instinct, not out of valor or compassion or good intent—but there's something about her picture that makes him pause. Her eyes seem to follow him from every angle; they smile at him and make him believe there really is more to her than people think. The other girls' profiles scream words like "YOLO!" and "Dance like no one is watching!" but Lucy's is different; her motto actually means something. If everybody is weird, that means he's not weird. Or, he thinks, maybe she's weird, like him. Maybe she's a mermaid because she truly believes in the magic of it, because she wants to make people happy. Maybe she—

He Googles "facts about redheads" and clicks on every link on the first page. "Only 1-2% of the population has red hair," he reads, which makes him revere Lucy even more for being so unique, so special. "In Roman culture, redheaded slaves were more expensive as they were thought to be strong and determined." "Gingers have more sex," reports another site, and the boy can feel his pants grow tighter at just the thought of it. He shakes away the image, embarrassed to be male, to be human.

He Googles "mermaid myths" and stumbles upon a Native American legend from the Lenape called "The Lost Boy." In the tale, a young boy is carried away by a

wave and was thought to have drowned. The boy's parents visit a mystic who tells them that a beautiful woman took their son to live with her at the mouth of the river. The next day, his parents stand on the riverbank and see the missing boy with a mermaid by his side. Because he seemed so content, they left him to live in the water, and it is believed he still swims the river with the siren seductress to this day. The boy imagines Lucy leading him into the water and letting the ocean engulf him. He thinks it wouldn't be a half-bad place to live, down deep where it is dark but still warm, and maybe he could feel free.

He Googles "Lucy Tampa, FL" but the 1,440,000 results are overwhelming, and he only gets through the first seven pages before he rubs his eyes with his knuckles and flips back to the Misty Waters site again; he stares at her picture for three and a half minutes.

He looks at the time. He sets out a shirt and pair of pants for tomorrow on his dresser, takes a shower, and goes to bed six minutes ahead of schedule.

The next day, the boy does a Sudoku in his car, which he finishes in 107 seconds. The air is thick and swampy, but the air conditioner in his mom's old Camry hasn't worked for three years and he's started not to mind the heat even as sweat drips down his back and into the gap of his khaki cargo shorts. Most of the kids from school are down in Panama City or making out with college students on the beach, or possibly even visiting university campuses for spring break, but he's here, in the Misty Waters parking lot, flipping through his puzzle book for a crossword he hasn't done yet.

There's a knock on his window.

“Hey!” says a voice, muffled through the glass and the heat. “Hey man, is that you?”

The boy jumps, his book falling from his hands to his lap and sliding down to the floor of the car. He looks up to see Elijah Ackerman, and the only thing the boy knows about him is he’s in his senior seminar class, is the “Team Manager” for the school football team, and is half Jewish; he knows this last thing because for some reason Ackerman makes sure everyone knows it.

The boy puts up a hand, a half-hearted salute, but doesn’t look up at Ackerman’s face. The buttons of his shirt are pressed hard up against the car window, so hard the boy imagines them poking back into his skin, leaving round imprints on his white belly.

“What’re you doing here?” he asks, and the boy can hear Ackerman’s mom calling his name. “I’m here with my dumb parents,” he yells through the window. “My sister wanted to see this shit. You know how it is.”

The boy nods his head, shrugs, avoids eye contact. His mom calls again.

“Alright, alright, I’m coming! JESUS!” Ackerman says, and flips her off behind her back. The boy can see the mother waddling ahead, nearing the entrance; the two halves of her body move separately from one another, her behind thrusting to the left when the rest of her moves right. His little sister’s lop-sided pigtailed bounce with each step. “I gotta go. Mom’s being a bitch. See you in there?”

The boy stares at him, Ackerman's fat nose touching the dust on the outside of his window. He shrugs, and Ackerman slaps the window and jogs away. The boy moves his car to the back of the lot and waits until most everyone has cleared out.

The last show has already started when he walks in, and a chubby brunette is performing a solo in the tank. He stands in the back near the trashcans, the smell of hot dogs and stale ketchup emanating from the overfilled bins. The floor underneath him is sticky, the bottoms of his sneakers anchored in place by discarded gum and spilled soda.

Twenty minutes go by and not a single strand of red hair has shown itself behind the glass. Inside, the aquarium goes dark and the house lights come on, revealing the boy and one of the homeless men from his first visit as the only audience members. The man wanders over, right arm outstretched, and for a second the boy thinks he's going to grab him, maybe try to rob him right here in this worn-down replica of paradise, but instead he grabs a half-eaten box of Milk Duds from the top of the garbage, pours them all into his nearly-toothless mouth, and wanders away.

The boy stays. He wonders if Lucy will walk out this way, if perhaps the dressing room is somehow underneath the tank, if she'll see him and say: Hey, haven't I seen you before? Let's go somewhere.

"Excuse me?" There's a tap on his shoulder that makes him jump.

"Don't touch me!" he yells as he swats the hand away. A woman in a blue polo shirt with a smiling, yellow-haired mermaid logo stitched onto the breast pocket takes a

step back, her mouth and eyes open in surprise. His shoulder is on fire with her touch, and he feels like he could explode and disappear at the same time.

“I’m sorry, hun, it’s just that...we’re closing, so I just meant to—”

“I don’t like to be touched,” he says.

His head is cast down and he can see discarded snack bar receipts and rusted loose change littering the ground. A ripped foil wrapper the color of a gold coin catches his eye, the letters “TROY” in black print emblazoned across the top, and he thinks about the people who have hooked up here. There’s the young couple he saw on his last visit, the sweaty sides of their torsos stuck together through thin tank tops, skipping off to the bathroom between shows to shove their bodies against the dirty walls of a stall, her back pressed against the rough carving of “JACKIE WARSAW IS A CUNT,” wet toilet paper sticking to the bottom of the guy’s flip flops. Then there are the homeless men who stand behind the trash can at closing and jerk off to the images of the mermaids they’ve stored in their heads, finishing up just before the woman in the blue polo comes around to shoo them away.

His hands begin to cramp, a symptom of an anxiety attack creeping out of his head and moving its way through his extremities, and he narrows his eyes, blurring out as much of the filth as possible. He thinks of how Lucy is above this, how this sticky ground doesn’t deserve the presence of her step, how he wants to rescue her from this place. And then, he thinks of himself with Lucy, in her dressing room with her fin strewn over a chair and the straps of her bikini top swinging by her sides, her red hair covering her face, pieces of it sticking to the wetness of her lips. He imagines himself

carrying her out over his shoulder, delivering her to a cleaner, purer place, a place she belongs. He wonders what it would be like to feel the touch of a hand other than his own. He tries to envision kissing her, but it makes him uncomfortable to think of having someone else's saliva in his mouth, germs crawling everywhere.

He is shaking his head back and forth, a kind of thrashing nodding, though he is unconscious of it.

"I apologize," the woman says, and takes another step back.

The boy turns to leave, but pauses right under the glowing Exit sign and says, his back still to the woman: "The schedule said Lucy was working tonight."

"I'm sorry?" the woman says.

"Lucy. She was supposed to be in the last show. She wasn't."

"Oh. Lucy. Um, I really don't know, hun. Maybe she called out sick?"

"But the schedule says she's working today," he says, and pulls out his phone. "Look, I'll show you."

"Well, yes, you're right," she says, the two of them leaning over the glowing light of his screen. "But she didn't come in today. I don't know what to tell you."

"Maybe tell me why her name was printed on the schedule when in fact she's not working today. Isn't that false advertising or something? Don't you think that's misleading?"

The woman sighs, apologizes. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Obviously not," the boy says, and turns to walk away.

At home, his iPad screen informs him that Lucy isn't performing for the next two days. He searches for the closest Applebee's restaurants to Misty Waters and the first result says "Locations—Applebee's—See You Tomorrow." He narrows it down to three possible locations. He writes out a schedule with times and addresses so he can be sure to hit all three by dinnertime. He goes to bed and says, into the darkness, "See You Tomorrow."

Applebee's #1. He sits in the parking lot and watches people walk in sporadically. Two o'clock isn't usually primetime, but the restaurant has more people than he expected for this time of day. He watches an older couple sitting by the window, cutting and buttering and arranging their food, not talking. He thinks how nice it must be to have the company and distractions another person can offer, but not have to talk.

At 2:15 he gets out of the car and walks toward the entrance, smoothing the wrinkles in his shorts with the dampness of his palms.

"Hi!" says a hostess, a plump girl in a black shirt and khakis. "Welcome to Applebee's! Just one today?"

As he looks around the dining room, the only other person eating unaccompanied is a man who looks older than his grandfather, sipping soup from a spoon too big for his mouth. His face feels hot and he wants to throw up, or punch the hostess for making him feel this way: embarrassed and alone. It's the same anger he felt when his mother told him Tommy was dead: a desire for violence against something

larger than himself. He nods and meanders behind her to his table, not looking at any of the other patrons on his way.

He is seated at a table by the window, two sets of silverware wrapped in pressed white napkins before him. He thinks of Lucy in the Applebee's uniform and wonders if she'll be wearing pants or shorts and what she looks like without all her mermaid makeup on. He looks around, waiting for a glimpse of red hair as the restaurant starts to thin out: the lunch rush is over and it's hours before dinner. He orders a Sprite from a boy not much older than he is. Half an hour goes by; while he waits, he memorizes the menu and determines how many possible lunch combinations there are: exactly 200.

He wishes Tommy were here to sit with him, fill up the empty space across the table and stop the stares he feels from other customers. Next week it will be four years since the ocean took him, swallowed him up and spit him out onto the Miami sands, still tucked neatly in his wet suit. They spread his ashes on the beach he washed upon, his lips as blue as the sea.

After an hour and two Sprites more, the waiter says he has to order something or unfortunately, he'll have to give up the table. He wants to ask if Lucy is working today, if she even works at this restaurant, but the words won't come; he is unprepared for either answer. He takes one last look around the place, even peering into the kitchen at the several men in white pantsuits and hairnets, and asks for the check.

Applebee's #2. The early dinner crowd has arrived and he's the youngest customer by at least thirty years. When the hostess asks how many, he says "Two. I'm

meeting someone,” so she grabs a menu from behind the front podium and leads him to a small table near the bathrooms. A man sitting in front of him, also alone, wears a plastic tube across his face with two nozzles in each nostril. There’s a tall, silver air tank on a small dolly next to the table. He thinks of Tommy in the hospital: all the wires and tubes and noises; he remembers the smell of urine and pudding cups, watching his brother succumb to the water he so loved.

The boy listens to the old man breathe as he chews his food, small particles sticking to his lips and chin like a child. He coughs each time he swallows, a wet hacking muffled by the napkin over his face. On his left hand is a dull brass wedding ring.

The boy looks around for Lucy.

“Hey there sweetie,” says his server. Turning to look at her, he’s startled—her face is made up like a clown, bright pink rouge and blue eye shadow all the way up to her brow bone. Her face is round and her eyes are big, bulging. “What can I get you started with today, handsome?” He pauses at her last word. No one has ever called him that before, not even his mother.

“A Sprite.”

“Goin’ for the hard stuff, eh?” she says, and elbows him in the arm. He pulls away quickly, but she doesn’t notice.

The man with the tank never looks up, just keeps his eyes on his food. He imagines Tommy calling him an old fart, chewing his own food slowly and letting it fall out of his mouth in mimicry.

The boy pulls out a crossword puzzle while he waits for Lucy to appear. 28 across: sixth most abundant element in Earth's crust: SODIUM; 34 down: was visibly distraught: WEPT.

“Whatcha got there, darlin’? A puzzle?” The waitress breaks his concentration and sets down another soda. He notices the man with the air tank is gone, and it makes him a little sad. “You gonna eat or just suck down sugar all day?”

“Actually,” he says, “while Sprite does have the same amount of sugar as other soft drinks, colorless sodas won’t stain your teeth because of the lack of dye. It’s at least the lesser of the evils.” He is surprised by this admission, shocked at how comfortable he feels speaking around this woman.

“Is that right?” she says, and laughs loudly. “I’m a sucker for sweet tea myself, but I’m glad you’ve found somethin’ that works for ya.”

After he finishes his last Sprite, the waitress asks if that’ll be all. He pauses before asking his question, the muscles in his hand beginning to cramp and his heart sprinting to an invisible finish line under his shirt. He stutters almost every word. “Is, um—does Lu-Lucy work? Here?” He tears his straw wrapper into bits while he talks, looking at the ketchup trail still left on his plate.

“Hmm, I don’t think we got a Lucy here, baby. We got a Lacey though—that who you lookin’ for?”

Applebee’s #3. It’s 5:30 now, an hour before his mother expects him for dinner, and this location is twenty-two minutes from his house. He tells the people at the front

he'd like to order takeout, so he puts in for a Cowboy Burger and takes a seat near the bar to wait. Two men in business suits sit drinking beer from a glass, slapping their knees in laughter discussing fellow colleagues, or their wives. The sound of their voices annoys him, so he moves a few chairs over. The bartender asks if he can get him anything, and the boy notices he looks a little like Tommy: blonde hair that's just barely too long, a stoned, far away look on his face. He wishes his brother had taken him to just one of the beach parties he used to rave about, with the Miami girls and their thongs, Latin music and dancing on the sand, watching the waves roll in as the sun crept up over the horizon.

The boy bows his head and asks for Lucy, but his voice is so soft the bartender has to ask him to repeat himself. "IS LUCY HERE?" he says quickly, shouting.

"Geez, man. Yeah, Lucy's here. She's in another section though. Do you...want me to get her for you?"

After all this, his first instinct is to say no. No, he doesn't want the bartender to get her like she's a puppy in a pet store he can take home. No, he can't possibly face her, tell her this is the third Applebee's he's been to today looking for her, and now his stomach hurts from all the fucking Sprites he drank. No, do not go get her, because he has nothing to say to her, because he didn't think this far ahead, because really, he never thought he'd actually find her. He wants to rip off all his clothes he's so hot, like the thermostat suddenly broke and the fire from the kitchen has made its way into his belly, his lungs.

“Hey, Luce,” the bartender calls, barely audible over the commercials playing on the TVs overhead and the businessmen still drinking and laughing. “Luce! Your friend is here, or something.”

The boy doesn’t look, switches his gaze to the television playing a “Seinfeld” rerun and pretends he’s not this friend, not the person here to see Luce, just a boy getting a takeout Cowboy Burger.

“Who?” a soft voice surprisingly close to him says, and the bartender points in his direction. He keeps his eyes on the TV.

“Um, hello?” she says. He lets her words settle in his ears, a foreign sound, but musical. She sounds younger, her pitch higher than he imagined. He looks at her, and for a moment he doesn’t recognize her, can’t understand how she looks so different without her costume and pink lips and, he assumes, red wig. Her hair isn’t even really a color, more like the memory of a color, a mix of pale yellow and light brown, like something faded and weathered.

“Can I help you?” she says when he doesn’t answer, and when he sees her teeth, he knows. Her left front tooth is crooked, intruding on the space dedicated to the right one. Lucy, the real Lucy, has beautiful teeth, including two large straight ones in the front. This girl, with her nearly undetectable eyelashes and small, pointed nose, is an imposter.

Without saying a word, he gets up and heads for the exit without his Cowboy Burger. He pushes on the door that says “Pull” and his body slams into it, the handle

smacking him in the hip, making him yelp. He hears cackles behind him and imagines the fake Lucy laughing and rolling her eyes with the bartender, the fake Tommy.

He sprints to his car without looking back and pulls out of the lot with a screech.

Two days later, the boy is back at Misty Waters. The schedule online told him Lucy is working today. In his button-down shirt and khaki pants he pressed himself this morning, he makes his way to the entrance. He realizes he didn't bring anything with him—no gift or card or bouquet of flowers—so he buys a half a dozen candy bars at the Snack Hut and hopes they are a suitable replacement for a box of chocolates.

He watches two shows in a row, fidgeting with his keys in his pocket, grasping the melting candy in his sweaty hands.

“Hey man!” a voice says, and when the boy pulls his eyes away from the tank, he sees Elijah Ackerman. This time he is alone.

“Couldn't stay away, eh?” he says, and tries to wink, though both eyes end up closing at the same time. “I guess I'm caught. Not here with my mom this time. Glad to see I'm not the only one who digs this place.”

The boy stares, raises his eyebrows, and turns back to the tank.

“You got a favorite?” Ackerman says.

“What?”

“You know, a favorite chick. Most of them are busted, but there are a few hot ones.”

“Oh,” the boy says, and squeezes the chocolate until he can feel it soften under his grip like molding clay. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Come on dude, loosen up.” Ackerman grabs the boy’s shoulders and shakes them.

“No!” the boy yells, and pushes Ackerman backwards into a family of four. “You cannot touch me like that!”

“Whoa, whoa, chill out.” Ackerman holds up his hands and approaches the boy slowly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had a thing about it.”

The boy says nothing; he watches as the third show begins behind the glass. The music starts and one of the younger mermaids with sandy-blonde hair swims along the periphery, circling the tank.

Then: Lucy.

The boy’s eyes widen and he drops the candy bars on the ground. A sickness that is not entirely unpleasant fills his stomach. Lucy twirls and blows kisses to the audience, fanning her tail from left to right. She pulls on the air hose with painted lips but leaves no trace of the raspberry pink stuff on the nozzle.

“Ohhh, *she’s* your favorite!” Ackerman says. “Not my type, but hey man, whatever floats your boat.”

“Shut up,” the boy says, both embarrassed at his transparency and enraged that a loser like Ackerman would disparage her that way.

“You want to know a secret?” Ackerman says, his voice low.

The boy shrugs him off and keeps watching Lucy, silently begging her to look his way.

“I can take you backstage. Get a peep at Ariel over there. *Changing.*”

“What?” the boy says, without meaning to actually say it aloud.

“Yeah, man. I know how to get to their dressing room. Last time I was here, I ditched my mom and sister and went exploring. I found a backdoor that isn’t locked that leads to where the girls stay between shows. You in?”

The boy immediately imagines He imagines her inviting him in, offering him a Sprite, and—

“Hello? Dude, are you in or not?”

“I don’t know. Are there security cameras down there? Is there a guard by the door or anything?”

“Nah, man, this place can’t afford that fancy stuff. We just gotta be sneaky and not let anyone see us. You can be the lookout.”

The boy scans his surroundings, searching the perimeter for security cams, managers, janitors. Everyone is preoccupied with their own tasks: watching the show, emptying trash cans, chattering away on cell phones. He is nervous, but something in the pit of his stomach propels him forward, tumbling into Ackerman’s plan.

They wait until the show is over and everyone begins to shuffle about, forming lines at the restroom or rushing toward the food court.

“Okay, let’s move,” Ackerman says, and he leads them behind the bathrooms to a door marked “EMPLOYEES ONLY.” The boy is hesitant, afraid of getting in trouble

or running into the woman in the blue polo again. “C’mon! Don’t you want to see your girl?”

Down a flight of stairs and around two more corners is another door where a paper sign written in sharpie reads “Girls Grotto” in flowing, cursive letters. “And now we wait,” Ackerman says. “We need to hide behind this corner until they come down. They usually leave the door propped open because it gets really hot down here.”

The boy crouches down on the cement floor, the candy bars squishing and shifting in the cargo pocket where he shoved them. He tries to take long, even breaths like Tommy taught him to do whenever he got nervous, but it feels as if his lungs have shrunk and he can only take in half the air he needs.

After a few minutes, the boys hear girls’ voices down the hall, echoing and bouncing off the thick walls of the basement. The boy peeks his head out from the corner but Ackerman yanks him backward by his collar.

“Are you crazy?” he says. “They can’t see us! We’ll get kicked out for life!”

The boy listens for what he has imagined Lucy’s voice to sound like, feminine but mature, drawing out letters like “s” and “f,” making them linger.

As promised, the last girl of the group props open the door with a faded brown brick, allowing their voices to blend and sing throughout the bottom floor.

“You know what’s sad?” they can hear one of the girls say. “The old men don’t even bother me anymore. They used to creep me out, but now I just feel bad for them. *That’s* how long I’ve been here.” The other girls sigh and agree, and one tells a story

about how one of the regulars looks just like her grandfather, and how every time she sees him, she could swear it's her Pappy; the others laugh and tease her.

“Okay, see those mirrors on the wall?” Ackerman whispers. “We’re going to stand outside the door, really fucking quietly, and if we look into them, we can see the girls behind us. You can’t say a word. Just look.”

They scoot along the wall like movie spies, walking on the balls of their feet until they get to the outside of the door. The boy looks in one of the full-body mirrors, braced to see Lucy in her underwear or sitting in her bra combing her hair, but instead he sees two other mermaids in sweats sitting cross-legged on the floor of the tiny room. He hears other voices but doesn’t see Lucy, so he stretches his neck out to see more.

“I can’t see her,” the boy says. Ackerman flicks him in the shoulder and mouths “shut up,” putting a finger to his lips.

The boy waits several minutes longer, listening to the girls talk about their boyfriends and breakups, and gossip about other mermaids. He feels his insides contract tightly and then expand to their full width, pushing against the walls of his body. There’s a dripping sound somewhere far off he hadn’t noticed before, probably, he thinks, sewage water from the bathrooms above. He feels sick, the same feeling he got after the first time he ever drank alcohol at Tommy’s insistence the week before he died. Their mother had been working at one of her three menial part-time jobs, and Tommy had burst into his room with two plastic grocery bags in hand.

“Hey, little bro!” he yelled, and dropped the bags onto his bed. “I’ve made an executive decision: I’m gonna get you drunk today.” The boy still remembers Tommy’s

smile, the excitement he felt at ushering his little brother into this rite of passage, and though he knew it was wrong, and had read all about the perils of alcohol and underage drinking, he spent the next three hours suffering through four Miller Lites and a few sips of Mad Dog 20/20. He spent the next morning in agony, vomiting and balled up under his covers.

“You’re a man now,” Tommy had said, and slapped him on the back, and that had made all the sickness worth it.

That same nausea is back in his throat now, and the drip is getting so loud it makes his head ring. He coughs, loud and wet, his stomach retching with the effort to both clear his throat and stifle the noise.

The girls all cease talking at once. “Did you hear that?” one of them says.

Silence engulfs him. Ackerman glares at him, mouth agape. They both stand as still as their shaking bodies will let them, afraid to move and more afraid to stay.

“Uh, can we help you?” says a girl’s voice. The boys turn their heads to find a blonde in a cut-off T-shirt and cotton shorts. She is holding the door open with one hand, the other hand on her hip. They all stand there, staring at each other, silently, until the boy’s cough comes roaring back.

“Who the hell is it?” another shouts from the dressing room, and it startles him.

“Hey, kid,” says the blonde. “What the fuck are you doing down here? And you, too.” She points at Ackerman, who has already started hyperventilating. “Get out of here before I call security, you creeps!”

Ackerman turns and runs, stumbling on his way and grabbing onto the wall for support, but the boy stays. He wants to escape too, but his feet won't work and his mind is blank.

"Are you retarded or something?" the blonde says, and one by one, each girl emerges from their grotto and stands before him. Then he sees Lucy.

"I'm here to see her," he says, his eyes fixed on her bare face, her wet hair wrapped in a towel.

The others walk toward him, shielding his view of Lucy.

"Do you know her?" says another voice from the group, though he doesn't know who; he can only look at Lucy.

"Yes...well, not really, but I've been looking for her. For a long time," he says.

"This kid is wacked," the blonde says. "You're as bad as the old guys who follow us to our cars at night."

"No," he says. "I'm not." She bends down to remove the brick and close the door, and the boy feels his window of opportunity literally closing.

"Wait!" he says. "I brought her this." He reaches his hand into his pocket and his fingers are submerged in melted chocolate. In shock, he leaves his hand hidden.

"You better pull that little hand out of your pocket right now, kid, or I'm calling security," the girl says, and he sees that Lucy has stepped forward to stand in front of the others.

The boy pulls out his hand covered in the sticky mess and the girls erupt in laughter. He looks down to see the candy has seeped through his khakis and half of his thigh is stained brown.

“You’re a mess, kid,” the girl says, shaking her head. “Come on over here, hot stuff, and maybe Lucy here will give you your first kiss.”

The boy stands in the doorway, his grimy hand tucked behind him. Lucy steps forward into the hallway and kicks the brick to the side. “Give me some privacy with my not-so-secret admirer, would ya?” she says to the group, and closes the door behind them. “What’s your name?”

The boy says nothing. Instead, he stares at the hair peeking out from the towel—not a wig, but amber red and real. Without makeup, her eyes look smaller and her forehead shines, reflecting the fluorescent lights of the basement. She looks older than before, but none of that matters.

“Okay, I’ll go first,” she says. “My name isn’t really Lucy. We’re not supposed to use our real names here; you know, for safety reasons. So if I tell you who I really am, can I trust you?”

The boy nods his head almost imperceptibly.

“Alright. I’m Sheryl,” she says, and extends her right hand.

The boy stares at her, then looks down at his chocolate-stained pants, his hand still behind him.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry,” she says. “I forgot. It was so nice of you to bring me...something. My husband sure never buys me candy!”

There is a stabbing in the boy's chest he has never felt before. It's not like the anger he feels when his mother grounds him, or even the emptiness he lived in right after Tommy died. It's something more present, something that physically hurts.

He wants to tell her about his search for her, about how her profile made him feel less alone. He wants to ask her about the Johnny Depp quote, if she feels like an outcast too, if maybe she is a little like him. But he doesn't ask her these things, and in the midst of his not asking, he remembers that Elijah Ackerman is gone, which makes him feel even more alone in the musty hallway. He aches for Tommy to be next to him, to smooth-talk his way out of this mess and somehow convince Lucy, and perhaps the blonde, too, to let us buy them drinks. *It's the least we can do after startling you lovely ladies*, he would say. Later that night, at home, Tommy would throw the boy a beer and they'd cheers to the mermaids, the women of the sea. He has never missed his brother more than at this very moment, and before he can try to stop it, his eyes well with tears.

"Listen," Sheryl says, "I've got to get changed for the next show. Do you want me to sign something for you, or...?"

The boy shakes his head.

"Okay then. It was nice to meet you, Mr. No Name. Hope to see you out at a show sometime." She smiles, but it's not the same one she flashes behind the glass during performances; it's not the kind of smile that shows all of her teeth, the kind that makes creases by her eyes. This smile is smaller; only one corner of her mouth is up-turned, her naked lips pressed tightly together. She walks back into the dressing room and doesn't prop the door back open. He can hear the girls shouting, asking her what

the “little boy” wanted, and he hears Lucy—for she will never be Sheryl to him—shushing and scolding them.

He stays standing at the door for a long time. Finally, when he hears someone inside say it’s almost show time, he turns and walks down the hall and back up the stairs, stopping only at the Men’s room to wash his hands and blot paper towels at his ruined pants.

Inside his car, the air is thick and wet with heat. He sits for a moment, lets the warmth fill him up, looking at the park in his rearview. He does not see Lucy at the entrance, running toward his car or waving him down. He waits a while, just in case, but after almost an hour, he feels that sick-drunk feeling again and starts the ignition. He points the car in the direction of Miami, toward that unforgiving ocean.

When he gets there, he sits on the beach and watches the sun slip down below the horizon. He tries to envision Tommy on his last day out on the water, his last day on land. He can picture his brother struggling to reach the shore, gasping for air and swallowing mouthfuls of sodium and magnesium and microscopic oceanic debris. He can picture him lying flat on the sand, bystanders rushing to his aid, but none with any clue how to help. He wonders if Tommy’s last moments were peaceful, like the way he used to describe the perfect surf: calm, and smooth, and free.

The sky is now a deep Egyptian blue; the water is black and quiet below it. The reflection of the new moon bounces around in the waves, bright and electric blue. The boy wonders what life is still undiscovered in the depths of the sea, in the places where even the light cannot reach. He knows the bottom of the ocean is the blackest black,

with lunar-like trenches and colder than a tundra; but life still exists there, even when it shouldn't. He hopes, against all logic and possible reality, that Tommy is somewhere down there, with a siren seductress by his side, and that he is free.

ON THE MARKET

The house is nearly empty. He sleeps on an air mattress in their former master bedroom, the walls now devoid of photos and the kitschy “Love Lives Here” sign that used to float above the bed. All that remains are odds and ends they don’t know how to split up: the blender they got as a wedding gift, a box of monogrammed bath towels, miscellaneous kitchen tools, the dog.

She is late. He waits for their sounds: her car door thudding closed, the children’s voices as they struggle to reach the door handle, the baby’s cry.

The key turns in the lock and they appear in the foyer. Their daughter is hugging the babysitter’s leg, a pout on her puffy face. He waves to her and she scowls. The dog whines and he pushes it away.

“All gone!” his son says, teetering around the dining room. There is chocolate all over the kids’ mouths, even a smear of it on his son’s forehead; the man knows she took them to their favorite cupcake shop down the street, the one with the checkerboard floor and soft rock music seeping softly from the speakers.

“Let’s just get this over with,” she says. The baby is strapped to her chest, always, like a talisman. She pets his soft head, the thick brown hair he inherited from his father. He doesn’t respond, but instead stands in the doorway and watches his son trip over the

loose cord of the blender on the floor. The sitter rushes over to him. *Kiss it*, he whines, pointing to the flushed pink splotch on his knee, and she does.

“You can have this box,” she says, pointing at the towels with her foot. He looks over at his daughter giggling as the dog licks the buttercream frosting off her face. Her little hand is submerged in the water bowl, but she is oblivious.

BORDERLINES

Kate kicked off her sandals and flopped onto the king-sized bed sprinkled with magenta hibiscus petals. She had hardly shut her eyes before she felt Jones slide in beside her and slip his wet tongue into her ear.

“We’re here, baby,” he whispered, and wrapped his arm around her hip.

She was grateful to him for bringing her on this vacation, one she couldn’t afford to take on her own. Everything had happened so fast: she had signed up for an online dating site, at the insistence of her friends, only a few months ago, and Jones was her first match. They met a week later at a coffee shop; he pulled out her chair and paid the bill while she was in the restroom. Her friends lauded his kindness and told her it was about time she met a nice guy, told her to let her guard down before she let a good thing pass her by. “You’re in your thirties now,” they told her, as if she didn’t know. “Don’t you want to have kids someday?” Before she knew it, she was shopping for bikinis and packing for this trip.

Her entire being craved sleep following their early-morning flight; shortly after takeoff, Jones had left his seat and returned with a red blanket encased in a plastic sheath.

“Here,” he said, and handed it to her. “You should try to get some sleep.”

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“From first class. I asked around and a woman up front said she didn’t need it.”

Kate felt a quiet sadness at this gesture, a mixture of appreciation and a sense that she didn't deserve his gift. She turned in her seat and hugged him, petting the soft hair of his neck. The turbulence and crying baby two rows back made sleep impossible, but she kept herself wrapped in the cheap fleece and until they landed.

After retrieving her luggage, the couple spent over an hour at the baggage claim desk trying to locate Jones' suitcase.

"Sorry ma'am," said one of the airline employees, a stunning Dominican girl. "We try to locate it and send to your hotel soon as possible." She turned to the man beside her, said something to him in Spanish and they both laughed.

"Excuse me?" Kate said. "What is he supposed to do? He has no clothes. He doesn't even have his toothbrush."

"Sorry ma'am," the girl said again, and shrugged. "Nothing I can do." She flipped open her cell phone and started tapping.

"No," Kate said. "You will find this bag." The girl's insincere apologies no longer dissuaded her anger.

"It's okay, sweetie. I can manage for a day or two without my stuff," Jones said, trying to calm her. She ignored him.

"And if you cannot find it, you will reimburse us for our troubles and issue us a formal apology for the time we've wasted in this basement you call an airport." The middle of Kate's forehead pinched, as it did on the rare occasions that she lost control of her temper.

Jones pet her arm. She usually didn't get like this with strangers, but she felt she owed it to Jones to help him with something, to be useful to him for once. Part of her wanted him to get angry on his own behalf, but that just wasn't who he was; that was Paul.

Hours later, in a room with a swan made out of bath towels on the coffee table and a view of palm trees bathed in fading sunlight outside the window, she kissed him wearily, feeling the sting of exhaustion behind her closed eyelids. She pushed through her fatigue and moaned loudly enough to make the maids in the hallway giggle and whisper. She faked an orgasm and fell asleep at once.

The next morning she awoke in a haze; a plate stacked with pancakes, eggs, and toast sat on the small table beside the bed.

"Good morning, beautiful," Jones said with a smile. "I walked down to the buffet while you were sleeping and grabbed what was left. I hope it's okay."

Kate sat up and took the plate into her lap, the smell of maple syrup and black coffee nudging her awake.

"Thank you," she said. "I think you're the most thoughtful man I've ever met."

His cheeks reddened. "I also scheduled a horseback riding tour for us today. I thought it might be fun. We can see so much of the country this way."

Kate admired her boyfriend's sense of adventure, and pictured the two of them riding horses on the beach, drops of clear blue water spitting at her face as they whipped past sunbathers on the white sand. They showered and headed to the hotel lobby where a

stout, mustachioed man from the events agency picked them up in his van and drove them to a dusty clearing where three horses stood tied to a fence.

“Hola amigos!” called a thin Dominican man in a cowboy hat. “Me llamo José. You ready to ride?”

Kate looked at the horses: their slender necks sloping downward, their coats devoid of luster. “This is Caballero,” José said, and motioned toward the honey-colored creature before her. She stroked his nose and gazed into his murky eyes. A fat fly perched on his ear. José helped her into the saddle and adjusted her stirrups; she let him show her how to hold the reins and steer even though she already knew.

“Ah, el capitán!” he said to Jones, and slapped him on the back. He led him to a smaller white horse named Blanco and performed the same routine before mounting his own and leading them down a dirt path. The horses ambled up and down hills, partial to the softness of the grass over the bumpy, rock-laden road. José pointed out each type of tree indigenous to the area—cocoa, banana, coconut, mango—as well as Mount Isabel del Torres, a beautiful lump in the distance surrounded by woolly cumulus clouds in an otherwise clear sky. Kate cooed at each malnourished dog they passed, pained by their bony hips and narrow faces; she tossed them handfuls of Chex Mix from her satchel and watched them gobble up each salty crumb.

After about an hour, they came upon a small village where José instructed them to dismount and leave their horses by yet another fence. Settled in the woods up a small hill were a series of one-room shacks and a tent that housed various handmade artifacts. More

stray dogs roamed the property, along with chickens and roosters scratching at the dry dirt with their long talons.

Two children were standing next to a tree nearby, a small white flower in each of their hands. “Como se llama?” the little girl asked Kate. She had long black hair, big brown eyes, and a perfect nose.

“Me llamo Kate, y tú?”

“Estefanía. Y mi hermano, Marcos.” The little boy looked up at her and grinned in flirtation. They extended their hands in unison as if they had rehearsed it and gave her their two flowers.

“Gracias,” she said, and tucked one behind each ear. She dug around in her pockets and gave them each a few pesos. Like the sickly dogs and tired horses, these children caused an ache in her chest. *Children shouldn't know greed*, she thought. *They shouldn't have to beg.*

Their innocence and the affection she felt for them reminded her of a winter day in North Carolina, just a few months after she and Paul had married. It was the first and only snow day that year, and they had ventured out to the churchyard across from their new home to play in the freezing flurry that had draped itself across the entire city. Icicles clung to the tree branches and sparkled in the light, sweating and dripping from the bright sun. Kate held Paul's hand through their gloves and they waddled across the street outfitted in snow pants and galoshes.

“Can we make a snowman? I've never made one before,” Kate said, and started scooping piles of snow between her hands.

“That’s not how you do it, honey. You have to make a ball first, and then keep packing it until it’s too big to hold.” He knelt down beside her and helped her make a sphere of snow, pushing and rolling it to build a base. From across the yard two neighborhood children approached them wearing bright-colored woolen hats and mittens.

“Can we play with you?” the smallest girl asked, her big sister kicking snow over her boots and looking downward.

“Sure you can,” Kate said, and patted the hard ground for them to join her. The girls began forming misshapen balls of their own and adding them to the foundation. The older sister scooted closer to Kate so that their knees were touching.

“I like your pants,” she said, and pointed to the pink polka dots stitched into the shiny nylon.

“Well thank you. I like your hat,” Kate replied, and flicked the puffy ball on the top of the girl’s head; she laughed and tossed a handful of snow onto Kate’s lap.

“Our snowman needs arms!” the smaller girl shouted, and grabbed Paul by the hand. “C’mon, let’s go look for sticks.” She led him over to a circle of trees and Kate watched as he lifted her up to break off twigs from the snow-covered branches. When their mission was complete, Paul hoisted her up onto his shoulders and trotted back to the others as she squealed with glee. Kate studied her new husband with delight, the black of his hair a striking contrast to the brightness of the snow around him. She felt a nervous fear—that basic maternal instinct—that he would drop the girl, and her body was ready to spring into action and sprint to the rescue; but suddenly, she was overcome with her trust

in him, in his ability to keep the girl safe, and her muscles relaxed, a stillness soaring into her mind and her chest.

When their masterpiece was finished, the four of them stood back and admired their work, the snowman's lumpy head complete with a wide smile of small rocks and bits of mint green gum from Paul's pocket. Kate slid her arms around his waist and pushed her head into the cold wetness of his jacket.

She wondered if she remembered that day to be more perfect than it actually was, if she had glorified it in memory. Had he snapped at her that day, as he would later in their marriage? Had he ignored her or blamed her for the cold he caught? She could not remember.

"Sweetie, come over here! There's someone you need to meet," Jones shouted. Kate was watching the resort bartender with disappointment as he dispensed a premade mix of rum and lime juice into her glass; bits of slimy mint leaves floated amongst the ice cubes like algae. A group of Dominican employees danced meringue around the pool, and even in the dark, she could detect their blood red lipstick and ruffled skirts. She wandered over to the other end of the bar where Jones was laughing with an older couple; she guessed they were in their late sixties by the wrinkles lining their faces and the way the woman's jowls sagged at her chin. She knew Jones was drunk by the amount of times he touched this strange gentleman on the shoulder and spoke just inches from his face. The man was tall and lean with skin the color of a rotisserie chicken. His eyes were welcoming and kind, and his back stood as straight as a lamppost despite his age.

“This is Roger and his wife Susan. They’re on vacation from London,” Jones said, his eyes a little glazed but excited.

“Hello, love,” Roger said in a thick British accent and kissed her hand. “I’ve been talking to your husband here, and he was just telling me—”

“Oh, we’re not married,” she interrupted. She looked at Jones; he was smiling like a drunk, but she thought she detected a hint of disappointment in his eyes.

“My mistake, dear. When you’ve been married for 35 years like me and my old lady here, you just assume everyone else has the same misfortune,” Roger said, giving his wife a wink and looping his arm around her slender shoulder. “Anyway, we wanted to invite you two to dinner. It’s our anniversary trip and we’d enjoy the company of young love.”

“That’s so nice of you, but the airline lost Jones’ bag and I don’t think he has on the proper attire for a sit-down meal.” She motioned toward her boyfriend’s old college T-shirt with a hole in the armpit.

“Oh no, not your bag, lad. Well, don’t worry about that. Come with me and we’ll find you something of mine. Be back in a jiff!” As Roger led Jones away and off to his room, he looked back at her, grinning, and she couldn’t help but smile back.

The men emerged several minutes later with Jones wearing a short-sleeved button down, striped and faded pink from years of wear, and plaid Bermuda shorts that only reached mid-thigh. His nose was shiny and pink from the sun, and he had put on his square, thick-rimmed glasses that seemed to change the entire shape of his face. He

looked as though he and Roger could be Bingo buddies, griping about arthritis and pensions over supper in a cafeteria.

At dinner, they talked about taxes and health care, and, after a few glasses of wine, love and marriage and children.

“Every couple’s got issues, you know? Marriage isn’t easy,” Susan said, and Kate nodded with a mouthful of Chardonnay. Her mind snapped to the unsigned papers from Paul’s attorney that had been buried under cable bills and coupons for months, her husband’s illegible signature waiting to be paired with hers. It had been over a year now since they parted. She wondered if he was dating.

“Every time I see her, I smile. She really is perfect for me,” she heard Jones tell Roger, and she felt a pang of tenderness and guilt wrench at her insides. The elders excused themselves to the restroom and left their new friends at the table.

“They’re great, aren’t they?” Jones said, over-buttering a crescent roll. “It’s so great to meet people who are still happy after being married for that long. And isn’t Roger hilarious? Are you done eating? Did you want any dessert?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said, and leaned across the table to kiss him.

After dinner, the four of them gathered in front of a stage in the hotel’s main room; a dance performance was scheduled to begin soon and Roger had brought the group a round of beers. Salsa music filled the room and a group of young Latinas thrust and swiveled their way around the dance floor.

“Roger never dances with me anymore, he’s such an old fogey,” said Susan, taking a swig of beer and grabbing Jones by the hand. “Come on boy, you’re dancing

with me. Let's hope we don't make the little lady too jealous!" Jones fumbled as Susan took the lead and spun him around, mimicking her movements to keep up and rolling his hips. Kate snapped pictures on her phone, laughing at his awkwardness and his happy ignorance of it.

When the Latina girls noticed they were sharing the spotlight, one of them sauntered over, ran her long painted nails through Jones' hair, and began dancing circles around him.

"Looks like you've got some competition," Roger said in Kate's ear, and she flashed him a tight smile.

"I slept with someone else," Paul said to Kate's back as she rinsed the A1 sauce from her husband's dinner plate. She let the hot water run over her hands until her brain registered the burn and made her jump. She steadied herself on the counter, red splotches on her hands like poison oak. She did not turn around.

"Who is she?"

"There's no 'is' about it. She's past tense. It's over."

"Don't talk semantics with me. Tell me. I want details."

"Kate, it was a mistake."

Kate was silent; she kept her back to her husband. Paul sighed. "It was after a work happy hour a couple of months ago. She was just an intern. She quit after it happened, I swear."

"A couple of months ago? And you're just telling me now?"

“I haven’t seen her since. I thought I could just forget about it, but I felt guilty.”

“Ha,” she said with a sudden jerk of her head. “Where did you take her? I hope you wouldn’t dare bring her here.”

“No,” Paul said. “I would never bring her here.”

“You say that with such pride. It doesn’t get you brownie points, you know, not bringing your whore to our house.”

He paused, unsure of how to respond.

“So,” Kate continued, “where did you take her?”

He stumbled. “I didn’t take her anywh—it’s not like I planned it, it just happ—“

“Stop right there. Affairs don’t just happen, Paul. You make them happen. You are not a goddamn victim.”

“I understand that.”

“Do you?” she said. She still couldn’t look at him; a sour slime was churning in her belly making her feel ill. Then: “What’s her name?”

“Kate, don’t do that. That’s not even relevant.”

“Relevant to what?” The threat of tears assaulted her, but she battled them back. “Why, Paul? Just tell me why you did it.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I just wanted—”

“Was she any good? Did she do all the things I won’t do? Is she a little blonde-haired teenager like the girls you look at when I’m not around? You really should delete your history when you’re done, every cheating husband knows at least that much.”

“Stop it,” he said, the muscles in his neck pulled tight. “We’ve been over that.”

About a year ago, Kate had found Paul's secret bookmarks and clicked on each link, phrases like "Fuck hot babes tonight!" and "XXX" and "Amateur Live Cams!" flashing at her in large scrolling type. Her eyes darted around each page as she shuffled through Paul's favorites, her heart like a creature clawing at the walls of her chest with every new image. She scrutinized the women and shuddered at how much different they looked from her: young girls with large fake breasts, platinum hair, tattoos. Following that day, Kate tried to avoid sex all together; she began to fear their bedroom as though it were a room full of spiders, lurking and waiting under the covers to swallow her whole. Paul had been her first, her only, and she cursed the impossibility of regaining the innocence he used to admire in her when they were young. Now, she only allowed sex to happen in the dark where she could hide her small chest and bony frame, plagued with the knowledge that Paul was imagining her as someone else.

"Tell me her name," she said again.

"Kate, I know you. You're just going to look her up online until you make yourself sick."

"I'm already sick," she said, and left the kitchen with the water still running.

She didn't get out of bed for days after that night. Unable to eat or sleep, she called in sick to work and scoured the web for forums and chats about unfaithful spouses. "Once a cheat always a cheat," they warned her. "Leave him!" She wavered between wanting to know every detail and wishing he'd never told her at all. She had dreams in which Christina—she had finally worn Paul down enough to get her name—lived in their

home as a ghost, floating up and down the stairs, rearranging photos on the wall, and tucking them in at night.

For three months after Paul's confession, they tried to make things right: he came home early, gave up his Internet passwords, even agreed to couple's counseling.

"I'm tired of talking about this," he would say after another conversation that dragged on into the night.

"Well I'm not. And it's not up to you anyway," she would retort. "This is my pain, and if you want this marriage to have a chance, we will talk about it for as long as it takes."

She asked the same questions she'd been asking for weeks, digging for new answers. They couldn't talk about the weather without Christina shoving her way into it. The affair—a term Paul refused to use—had become a goiter that grew from the both of them, swelling with poison until they could no longer fit in the same room. Paul moved out six years into their marriage and six days before Kate's thirtieth birthday.

Lying in bed on their last night, Jones reached over to stroke Kate's breast and pinched her nipple with his first two fingers.

"Not tonight, babe. My legs are killing me from riding that horse all day," Kate said.

"Oh no, I'm sorry. Whatever you want to do is fine, this is your vacation. You want to see what's on TV?"

"That's alright, I think I'll just read. But you can watch something."

She opened her book and was lost after the first paragraph. Jones was playing a game on his iPad, stroking her arm with his free hand. Although he hadn't yet said it aloud, she knew that he loved her, and it was in quiet moments like this that it was the most apparent.

He watched her stare at the same place in her book, her eyes unmoving. She hadn't turned the page in almost ten minutes.

"You're doing it again—that thing with your tongue. That little clicking noise you make." He paused and stared at her mouth. "I love all the little unique things you do."

"Unique or weird?" she said with a smirk. "I guess it's just an unconscious thing. Maybe I do it when I'm deep in thought or something." She turned back to her book.

"I know you still think about Paul," he said, looking downward and tracing the outline of the palm trees on the bed cover with his index finger. "It's okay. I've always said we'll go at your pace. Sometimes I just worry you won't be able to love me like that. I worry you won't be able to love me at all. Maybe it's not even my fault, maybe you just can't."

She had no words for him, though her mind raced for any semblance of a response. Guilt coated her entire being like a layer of sweat, unwelcome and itchy. She sat still and followed his strokes with her eyes, the curves of the leaves, the straight lines of the trunk. She thought of the papers and knew that the simple stroke of a pen would relax the binding she felt at her feet whenever she tried to walk forward. But the thought of making that stroke, of even uncapping a pen at all, made her lose her breath.

She didn't speak, but instead fell into him, her open book wedged between their bodies, and closed her eyes.

Days later, when they got home and Jones dropped her off at the house she used to share with Paul, she would sit the couch and look through the photos of their trip on her phone. She found one that Jones must have taken, though she wasn't aware of it at the time. She remembered this day, the last day of their vacation, and they had gotten down to the beach early that morning before their afternoon flight. She was standing near the shore, her feet and ankles submerged in the water, her back to the camera. Her hair was blowing all around her head, that ocean breeze giving it life. He had framed it so that she stood to the far left of the photo, the sand and sea stretching out in front of all around her. No other people were nearby, no strangers with their children cluttering up the photo. She was alone, with more beauty than she had ever seen in one place before her.

She stared at the image for several minutes, wondering what Jones was thinking the moment he took this picture. Their plane ride home was tense, plagued by long stretches of silence and an inability to sleep. She could feel Jones' sadness, his disappointment that this wasn't the magical vacation he had hoped for, the one where she fell in love with him and they could return home in love with a relationship full of promise.

The longer she sat in the empty house, on the sofa where she and Paul had both made love and the place she was sitting when he told her he was leaving her, the more she felt a connection to this woman alone on the beach, her partner ten feet, or ten miles, or a whole world away.

THE SEVEN-YEAR RULE

Pre-Decision Day

ALLISON

Our seven-year anniversary is days away and I know what's coming. Whenever we're out at restaurants or in the grocery store, I look at other men and think, *Could it be him? Could I see myself falling asleep and waking up next to the twenty-something in the produce aisle? The man with the salt and pepper hair at the next table, sipping a whiskey sour?* The answer is always no.

We're lying in bed in our apartment. I can hear the rush of cars below us, taxis honking, a group of young people laughing and yelling. I remember when John and I were those young people, and I wonder when we stopped and grew up. He used to drag me to concerts, like the Violent Femmes after they became cool again, and we'd wear faded T-shirts and I'd sneak in liquor in my purse; we'd make out in the bathroom and sing until our lungs ran out of air. What is the point in which we become un-young and how does it happen? Can we prevent it?

The light in our bedroom is dim, and the glow from John's phone lights up his face, casting a radiant blue on all his features. I watch his eyes dart from left to right, the miniscule movement of his jaw when he grinds his teeth—a habit I find both annoying

and adorable. I wonder if the woman I choose will appreciate these things about him; I wonder if they'll lie in bed just like this, not touching, but still connected. I wonder if he'll think about me when he's with her, and if when he comes back home, I'll smell her perfume on his clothes.

He feels my gaze on him and sets his phone on his chest.

"Hi," he says, turning his head toward me.

"Hi."

"Are you sleepy? I can turn out the light."

"No. I want to stay awake with you for a while longer." John touches his hand to my face and his fingers are cool. I take a sharp breath in.

"How are you doing?" he asks me.

"Oh, you know. Trying not to think about it too much."

"It'll be okay. We know tons of other couples who have been through it, and they're doing fine. I think it might actually make us stronger."

He's said this to me before, and it makes me sick.

I roll over on my side and face the wall. He puts his hand on my shoulder and I shrug it away. I can't get certain images out of my head: him naked with another woman, in a hotel bed or the backseat of a car, fumbling and kissing and sweating.

There are some things I just know. I know I won't leave him after this. I know I won't pack a suitcase and ride off into the sunset with my new boyfriend. John tells me it won't happen for him either, but I don't believe him. Not fully.

My stomach is in knots and it's getting hard to breathe. I pull my inhaler out of the bedside drawer and take two, long puffs.

"I'm still going to love you just the same," John says to the back of my head. "That won't change."

"You don't know that," I say, and it's true. "People fall in love this way, John. They leave their marriages. They start new lives."

"That won't happen to us," he says. He starts grinding his teeth again.

I've belabored this point to death, asking him to tell me something he can't possibly know yet. Something about this whole process reminds me of the winter after we were married, and it sickens me. The way I felt so heavy, my side of the bed weighed down and sagging from the months I couldn't leave it. John slept next to me, would hardly leave my side, but the whole house felt so empty.

He leans down and I can feel his breath on my neck, his mouth making wet sucking sounds near my ear. I turn over and let him lift up my shirt, lick the tears from my face. I close my eyes, and let him take me. Only me.

I wake up and John has already left for work. I'm sore between my legs and I remember how often that happened when we were first married. I roll over and look at the framed picture of us from our honeymoon on his bedside table and I wonder how long it will stay there. I wonder if he'll leave it up after he starts sleeping with whichever woman I choose, if he'll flip it down once he starts to have feelings for her, or maybe even slide it into the drawer and shut it away, forgetting it was ever taken.

My friends tell me I should be more worried about who John will pick for me, but I can't seem to make myself care. I know he wants me to have someone kind, maybe someone I can talk to about books and poetry, but it's hard to put too much stock into a stranger or, as it is right now, a figment. We're not allowed to choose someone we know our spouse wouldn't like anyway, so what's the point in worrying? While the thought of him with someone else keeps me awake at night, I like seeing him smile. I guess that's part of what's so twisted about love.

JOHN

It's almost Decision Day. I try to think less about myself and more about Allison—who would be good for her, good to her. When we got married, this day seemed so far away, and now it's just next week. I wonder what she's thinking, but I don't ask for specifics. Part of me is excited, and with that comes an overwhelming sense of guilt. I love Alli, completely, but after seven years you can get stuck in a routine, and though I'd never tell her, I'm eager to experience someone else.

I see her scrutinizing everyone we pass lately. She stares at the women, looking them up and down with this quizzical look on her face, but I know it's torture for her. Sometimes, when she looks at someone for a little too long, I'll think, "No Alli, not her. Don't choose her." And then she looks away, pushes her hair behind her ears, and grabs my hand.

It feels strange to play matchmaker for your own wife, but there's also a kind of odd satisfaction to it. When we got married, I promised to always protect and look after

her, and I feel like I'm doing that in choosing the right person. And I think I may have found someone for her.

There's a guy over in the marketing department a couple of buildings over who strikes me as Allison's type. I always see him in the cafeteria, sitting by himself and reading a book while he eats lunch. I have no clue if Alli would like the stuff he reads as I'm not much of a consumer of literature myself, but he also wears the kind of clothes she always makes me try on at the mall, so that's a step in the right direction.

"Hey man," I say as I sit down next to him. He jumps a little, startled from his book. He's wearing a half-zip sweater with a button-down underneath—an outfit Alli would pay me to add to my closet. His reading glasses look like the kind you'd buy at CVS: cheap plastic frames with bite marks on the earpieces.

"Um, hello," he says back, and slips his bookmark between pages 128 and 129 of a book called *The Polysyllabic Spree* by Nick Hornsby.

"That's the guy who wrote *High Fidelity*, right?" I ask.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I take it you saw the movie?"

"What, you don't think I read? Well, I don't really, but I guess I don't like that it shows."

He doesn't laugh at my joke. We sit in silence for a while.

"So..." he says, and looks at me sideways as I quickly try to formulate the right way to say this.

"I have a proposition for you," I begin, and suddenly catch sight of his wedding ring. "Hey, you're not close to your seven-year mark by any chance, are you?"

He looks at my left hand and sighs. “Pretty close,” he says. “In a little under a year.” He looks young and old at the same time, with one of those faces where he could be 22 or 42, and I don’t know which one I’m hoping for.

“This is a shot in the dark, but would you want to come over for dinner tomorrow? Meet my wife? Her name’s Allison and she loves to read. And she’d really like your get-up.”

He looks down at his clothes, then back up at me, just kind of staring. I take this as compliance, and show him a picture of Alli; it’s from last October when we went to a pumpkin patch, which was obviously her idea. The photo looks like a stock image you’d find in a frame at Wal-Mart. She’s wearing leather boots and a big scarf, and almost all of her perfectly straight teeth are showing as she smiles. He seems hesitant, like Alli, and I sort of feel bad for him. I can just picture his quiet little life, only having sex missionary style, eating meatloaf every Tuesday and letting loose on the weekends with pizza, maybe allowing himself an adult beverage during Sunday Night Football. What a life.

I toss my card in his lap and tell him to call me later. As I stand to leave he says, “Oh, I didn’t get your name. I’m Charlie.”

“John,” I say, shaking his hand. “See you tomorrow, Charles.”

ALLISON

I still haven’t chosen anyone for John. I don’t have many girlfriends, not that I’d ever set him up with someone I know. There’s no way I’d choose a coworker at the bank and open myself up to the possibility of seeing him come into the bank and leave with

somebody who isn't me, or hear her on the phone with him during her lunch break while I'm eating my turkey and cheese.

How do I even go about this? Do I just go up to a woman on the street and ask her if she'd be interested in sleeping with my husband? Do I make a post on the message boards like most people do, listing the parameters of someone who might be his type? I don't even know what his type is, anyway. Is it me? I'm starting to think it's not.

I pull my copy of The Contract out of the drawer in the coffee table and flip to a random page of rules and clauses and agreements I have to sign in less than six days:

Item 4.1: The undersigned will not, under any circumstances, conduct him or herself inappropriately (see Item 2.2 for specific behaviors) anywhere on or inside the couple's shared property. This includes but is not limited to: inside couple's shared living space, garage, garden, front-, back-, or side yard, driveway, porch, patio, balcony, roof, etc.

Item 4.2: The undersigned agrees to refrain from the following: questioning spouse about agreed upon affair; searching for information that could in any way lead to knowledge on the goings-on of agreed upon affair; following, stalking, visiting, calling, writing, texting, or communicating in any way, or have another person follow, stalk, visit, call, write, text, or communicate in any way, with spouse or agreed upon partner.

I fold the papers and slip them back into the manila folder that houses them. I don't know how I'll be able to keep myself from driving by John's work and looking for his car, or snooping through his text messages while he's in the shower. Isn't that just human nature? Instinctual?

I bring my computer to life and browse the thousands of comments from both men and women railing against The Rule, sharing petitions on social media and cursing The Council for implementing it in the first place. When The Rule was still being

debated, there were protests and riots in all the big cities and even some of the small ones. Until just two months before the final decision was made, The Council consisted of twelve men, mostly white and middle aged. As a response to overwhelming public demand, they added a woman to the board to appease the masses, but we all knew The Rule only needed three-fourths of the vote to pass. And so it did.

I try to downplay my resentment of The Rule to John; for the first time in a long while, he's excited about something. I see him look at almost every woman we pass when we're out together. When I stare too long at someone on the sidewalk or in line at Target, I can tell he notices because he squeezes my hand and tugs me away when it's someone he wouldn't want me to choose, and lets me linger when it is.

When I get home from work, John is already there, which never happens. I walk in and see him on the couch; he rushes to kiss me before my keys are even out of the door.

"I have news," he says.

Less than a week before Decision Day, these words do not bring me comfort or excitement—they just make me anxious. John leads me back to the couch and takes my hand. He's just sitting there, smiling at me, eyes wide. For a moment, I wonder if he's on something; he used to play around with coke before we met, and this is what I imagine a high person to look like.

"So?" I say. His grip makes my hand warm and damp, and soon it feels like I'm inside a car in the middle of the summer with the heat blasting.

“I found someone,” he says, and my mind races with all the things that could mean. He just stares at me for a while, the same demented smile on his face, and I can feel my eyes darting from left to right at lightning speed as I quite literally search for meaning in my head, in his eyes, in this room. I pull my hand away from his.

“Okay,” I finally say, because it’s all I can think to say, because I can’t really think at all.

“I think you’re gonna like him,” John says, and tells me about a guy who reads books and wears the thick-rimmed glasses I like and dresses like “a nerdy J.Crew mannequin.” After that I only catch bits and pieces of what he says; I’m torn between picturing this man my husband wants to set me up with and processing the betrayal I already feel at how enthused he is about this potential new partner. I don’t know how long he’s been talking, but I gather he asked me a question I failed to answer when he says my name.

“Alli?”

“Huh?”

“I said, what do you think?”

“Oh. What do I think? I think...I think it’s really weird to talk to my husband about my future boyfriend, and I think it’s even weirder that my husband is this excited about said boyfriend. What is wrong with you?”

I get up and walk to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. I secretly hope John will follow me, apologize, tell me he got carried away. But he doesn’t, and I walk up to the bedroom alone.

I sit up in bed, waiting. Not for John, as his pride has been hurt and I know he'll take a while to lick his wounds. I wait for something I know is coming, but I still dread it. The bathroom door is open and I can see straight into it, the gleam of the white tiles and cotton shower curtain, clean and still. I remember the afternoon I spent in there, sitting on the cold floor. I was bleeding and I couldn't stop it, no matter how I tried. My body was emptying itself. This thing was happening to me, and I was powerless over it all.

When I fall asleep, it is late, or early. I feel that same heaviness again, and even though John is just downstairs, I feel like he's already gone.

The next day I decide to take a walk. Taking walks isn't something I normally do, but it's finally not raining and I can't stay here. It's Saturday and I have no plans. Normally John and I would wake up late, slink around the house in our pajamas, and eat takeout on the floor. When we get Chinese, we'd each pick a cookie for the other and read the fortune, then practice saying the "Word of the Day" in the best accents we could conjure up. I'd collect the little slips of paper and keep them in a drawer in the kitchen; whenever I remembered, I'd pull them out and say each word aloud. I've memorized 17 words in Chinese now, but John can't recall a single one.

I can see John slept on the couch. There's a pile of throw blankets on the living room floor and the remote is wedged between two cushions. Every time he forgets to put his dishes in the sink or leaves his bath towels on the floor, I think of something one of my English professors once told our class: "Do you know what really defines a marriage? It isn't how loyal your spouse is, or how stable or supportive or loving. Marriage is just

putting up with someone's annoying habits as long as you possibly can. So before you get married, ask yourself: can I live with this guy's toothpaste glob in the sink for the rest of my life?" And as much as it drives me insane, and as many times as he's called me a nag for reminding him to clean up after himself, I know I can live with his toothpaste glob in the sink for the rest of my life; I want to.

I throw on some yoga pants and decide to go for a walk. I've heard people say it's a good way to "clear your head," so I figure I'll give it a shot. I write John a note before I leave. I don't know where he went, or when he'll be back, but I write for him to call me when he gets in.

It's late September, my favorite time of year; I love the smell of early chill in the air. I realize there's so much of this city I don't get to see from my car, and it makes me appreciate it that much more. I notice the colorful row houses on all the side streets, and a cat lounging on someone's front porch, basking in the last bit of warmth before autumn shoves its way through. It also feels good to be moving since it seems like I've been at a standstill for so long. I feel like everything I do is just pushing me toward Decision Day. Whenever I lose track of time running errands or cooking dinner, I look at my watch and realize hours have slipped by without my noticing, hours I want to chase after and put in my pocket so I'm not that much closer to the seventh year. I long for boredom as it makes the time go by in drips instead of gushes.

I've been walking for almost hour when I stop at a coffee shop on the corner of a street I've never been before. The outside brick has been painted gray and the front door is a deep eggplant purple. There's a sign on the side that reads "Corner Coffee" in plain,

black text. Inside, the smell of coffee beans and small iced cakes is strong and warm, and I get in line behind a couple who look to be in their mid-forties. I am overcome with the desire to ask them if they were married before The Rule was established, and if not, how did they survive it? Then it hits me that they could be a product of it, a carefully chosen pairing from a spouse, a love that grew out of someone else's marriage. My legs are weak beneath me and I sway backward, just enough to stumble.

My right leg shoots backwards to catch me before I fall, and the moment after, I feel a hand on my back.

"Whoa," says a voice, and a woman appears at my side. She is blonde, rosy-cheeked, and smells like bergamot.

"I'm so sorry," I mutter, embarrassed. Everyone in the shop is looking at me with worry and concern. "I guess I lost my footing for a second."

"That's alright, doll," says the blonde, her hand still touching me. "You okay?"

"Oh, god, yes, I'm fine," I say, shaking my head.

"Ma'am?" a new voice calls, but to whom I'm not sure. "Excuse me, ma'am? Can I help you?"

"I think you're up," the blonde says to me, and points in front of us.

"What? Oh, yes, right." I turn to the cashier and spit out a generic order without looking at the menu. She tells me the total and I fumble around in my jacket pockets for my credit card.

"I've got it," the blonde says from behind me. She shoots out her arm and hands a \$20 bill to the cashier. And can I add a large black coffee?"

“Oh, no, you don’t have to do that,” I tell her, still feeling around for my card. “You already saved my life once.” She doesn’t laugh at my joke. She collects her change, drops the coins in the tip jar, and guides me by the arm to the side of the counter.

“No worries,” she says, “It seemed like you could use a Good Samaritan today.”

I can see her more clearly now. She looks like she just jumped out of an advertisement for a yoga studio with her ponytail and colorful spandex pants. Her workout mat, rolled neatly in its carrier, is slung over her shoulder and there’s the smallest gap in-between her two front teeth, like the most perfectly placed fault line.

Our drinks arrive and she hands me my tea. The paper cup is hot in my hand. I walk the three steps to the condiments station and add my milk and honey. John always teases me about how much sweetener I use. *You might as well just throw in the whole honeycomb*, he says.

“Well, thank you,” I say to the blonde, walking toward the door. I tip my cup to her in a faux cheers.

“Do you wanna sit down?” she says, already pulling out a chair at a small table by the window. “I have nowhere to be.”

Her name is Brooke. We talk about our professions, favorite TV shows, our mothers. She teaches yoga (and Pilates, of course) at a studio a few blocks from the coffee house. I like her, despite myself. She is charming, and she makes me feel at ease, the way an old friend’s mother can make you feel like family.

After about twenty minutes, she is quiet. I sit in the silence, licking my finger and rubbing the sticky tea stains from the plastic lid.

“You seem sad,” she says, and the space between my lungs gets smaller.

“Me? Really? I’m not sad,” I say, too quickly. “At least, I don’t think I’m sad. I’m probably just tired; I overexerted myself on a walk earlier.”

“No, I don’t just mean right now,” she says. “I mean...you. All of you.”

“Are you married?” I ask her, and when she tells me no, I know what my next question has to be.

Post-Decision Day

JOHN

I just had my second date with Brooke, and so far so good. She’s very pretty. I’m still surprised Allison picked her, though I guess I’m surprised she was able to pick anyone at all. The week before Decision Day was a tough one, and I wasn’t sure she was going to make it through it. But the day she met Brooke, her demeanor seemed to change. When she told she’d found someone for me, my stomach leaped and it took all I had not to ask all the questions flying through my head. She described her as a “really nice girl,” which I immediately took as a negative. Isn’t that the same as saying someone “has a great personality?” But Allison said she felt at peace with her decision, that if she had to do this, Brooke made her feel a little better somehow, and that was more than I could ask for.

The night after she met Brooke was the first time Allison had slept through the night in months. The weeks leading up to Decision Day were so much like that winter,

when she stayed in bed for days, but never slept. The doctor gave her meds for the pain, but she didn't take them; she said she wanted to feel the loss.

Sometimes I think of Allison when I'm with Brooke. We haven't slept together yet, but I feel more guilt than I expected. Tonight, at dinner, I reached across the table and touched Brooke's hand. It was electric, the feeling of touching someone other than my wife, but I was also reminded that Brooke's hand is a new hand, a hand I don't know, a hand I haven't held while she cries on the bathroom floor, stains of red smeared all over the tiles around her. Brooke's hand is soft and dry, like notebook paper, while Allison's is often clammy, an effect of her body temperature consistently hovering just below hot-blooded. Brooke's hands are also long, and her fingers are lean and bony. Allison has child-sized hands, and I tease her about them all the time. "What are gonna do with these tiny little hands," I say, holding them in my own and pushing on the pads of her fingers. "How do you even carry anything with these?" She always laughs, even though I've said it so many times it's hardly funny anymore.

I do catch myself thinking about having sex with Brooke a lot, though. It's still an exciting idea, and I can't help but imagine all the positions I can bend her into—she's a yoga teacher, which means she's flexible. But it also makes me nervous. I've fantasized about being with someone else before, but despite my urges I never would have done anything. And then came *The Rule*, and everything changed; I didn't have to feel like an asshole anymore, and I could finally do more than fantasize, because there it was, written into our marriage contract.

Brooke's going on a yoga retreat this weekend, so we made plans for next Monday night. Something about the third date feels monumental, like it means something, but I don't know what.

ALLISON

I feel numb. Ever since Decision Day, my whole life has felt like a chore I can't get out of. I dread going to work because it means I have to actually focus on something, which is becoming increasingly harder to do. The simple act of counting money is near-impossible, and I have given a customer the wrong amount of cash three times already this week. I look at people I've known for years and can't remember their names. It's like my brain is so full of worry and doubt and fear, there's no room for things like simple math and proper nouns. I feel like a stroke victim: I can remember what it feels like to move and speak and feel things normally, but I can't make my body perform the functions.

When John introduced me to Charlie, I wasn't sure what to think. Besides, he spent more time talking to John than to me—well, John really did most of the talking, I guess. Charlie is shy and quiet. Bookish. I guess some people would describe me that way, but is it good to be with someone so much like you? After he left, I Googled “Do opposites really attract?” I ended up on an article from *Psychology Today*. I took notes on what I found:

- We are drawn to those unlike us out of needs and desires that aren't fulfilled in our own lives.
 - i.e. security, intellectual stimulation, comfort.

- However, some of those voids are connected to their opposites, like risk, adventure, and intensity.
- Often, when these things co-exist, it creates a passion that enriches and strengthens the relationship.
- It's the differences that make relationships edgy, interesting, and exciting.

The article also said it's more accurate to use the phrase "Complements attract." I liked that, because it meant that John and I weren't totally different, but that we're each other's counterparts, a true pair. If Charlie and I were so similar, how could we complement each other? What void of mine could he fill, and vice versa?

On that same page was a sidebar of the most popular links on that site. I bookmarked the following web page to peruse later:

- "The One Thing You Need to Look For in a Partner"
- "10 Great Ways to Get to Know People Without Awkwardness"
- "After a Miscarriage: Surviving Emotionally"

JOHN

Allison hasn't been home since this morning. She said she's working late, but that's the oldest trick in the book. Her phone is off, and it's illegal to go look for her, so I keep the TV on just to have some sound in the house. The DVR is filled with her shows, shows I usually make fun of her for watching, but now all I want is to have her here, glued to housewife drama. I remember when we first started dating and she didn't have cable, and she'd record dozens of series on my TV. It felt so intrusive, so permanent, her romantic comedies next to my sports and late-night talk shows. Now, their noise is like

background music, the screeching of middle-aged women somehow comforting, proof that Allison is still here.

I could call Brooke. I know she's free tonight, and she's probably waiting for me to call her, but I won't. If we go out, I might miss Allison's coming home; besides, I'd be preoccupied. I want to like Sarah more than I do, but I guess you can't force that kind of thing. Maybe it'll just take more time.

I decide to text her so she's not waiting up for me, tell her I'm not feeling well. Three little dots bounce around to show she's typing, and I'm preparing to get chewed out for canceling again, but after about five minutes all that comes through is a sad face emoticon.

I must have dozed off sometime after 1AM because I wake up on the couch when I hear Allison's key in the door. The house is dark except for the glow from the TV, so she doesn't see me. The sound of her heels on the hardwood is sexy and it strengthens my early morning erection.

"Hey," I say, and she jumps.

"Oh my god, John, you scared me. What are you doing on the couch?"

"I fell asleep watching TV. Come here."

She walks over to me and I can smell her perfume, faint but sweet, like flowers. Her hair is a little messed up, like she slept on it and didn't bother to fix it back.

"I missed you," I say, and go to kiss her. She kisses back, but it's weak, a little delayed.

“I told you I’d be home late. I’m surprised you didn’t go out,” she says, eyeing the beer bottles and empty bag of pretzels on the coffee table.

“I was going to, but I think I’m coming down with something. Figured I should stay in.” I go to kiss her again, harder this time, and slip my hand behind her head. I try to pull her down onto the couch with me but she resists.

“If you’re sick, you should take it easy, babe.”

“I’m not that sick,” I say, and kiss her again. She laughs a nervous kind of laugh, and it’s the most inauthentic I think I’ve ever heard her sound.

“C’mon,” she says. “Let’s go up to bed. You need to get some rest, and I need a shower.”

I let her take my hand and walk with me to the stairs. I tell her to go up without me, that I’m going to make some tea. I walk to the kitchen and open another beer, leaving the cap on the counter—something I know she hates. I rack my brain for other times she has turned down sex with me in the past, and I can only come up with when she has been sick, or late for work, or too drunk to do anything but vomit and sleep.

I hear the shower turn on above me and wonder what it is she’s washing off.

ALLISON

I dream about natural disasters. Floods, fires, a world without birds. The skies and tree branches are empty, the ponds devoid of goose droppings and breadcrumbs, the world just a little quieter from no chirping, cawing, singing. There is no more Robin’s Egg Blue at the paint store, no more sounds of spring at the parks. I dream about

epidemics, like a national infection of whooping cough or typhoid. A slow fever smears its way across every forehead in the country; headache, malaise, a calm delirium. Every home full of restless, sleeping bodies, sweating and shivering, murmuring and pulling at their bedclothes. I dream about the Cold War, even though I know next to nothing about it. I keep meaning to Google it; I always feel so stupid whenever I hear about it on the news or read it in a book. If someone around me mentions it, I nod and look thoughtful and pray they don't ask my opinion.

I wake up and scribble my dreams down in a notebook, my handwriting messy in the dark, the letters crowding each other, creeping past the lines meant to contain them. They are undated and untitled, just words on page after page of tragedy and misfortune.

I can't remember if I dreamt like this before Decision Day. I hope I did, because that would mean these dreams are a product of my general inner stirrings, my innate fatalism. It would mean they don't represent how I feel about my life with John, about my marriage. It would mean that I don't think staying with him would be a life without birds, without singing—a life that is bearable, but with less joy.

I'm meeting C for dinner tonight. I can't seem to come up with a plausible lie anymore; the "I'm working late" line is tired, and John knows it's not true; I've never worked late—I'm a bank teller, for Christ's sake. I text him that I'm having a drink with Kate, my only friend at work, but I don't anticipate a reply. I think at this point, even he can't pretend to believe me anymore.

BIOGRAPHY

Brittany N. Kerfoot received her Bachelor of Arts in 2007 and her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 2015, both from George Mason University. She was also the recipient of the 2014-2015 Honors Award in Fiction. Her short story “The Doll House” won the Shelley A. Marshall Award in 2014, and her work has previously appeared in Driftwood Press, Paper Tape Magazine, and Cactus Heart Press. She currently lives in Washington, D.C. with her fiancé and their many pets.