

2011

Smaller Spaces

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Smaller Spaces

David Plick

12/1/10

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
of the City College of the City University of New York

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September 15, 2000

Only a month after Gabe's twenty-fourth birthday, from the late evening of September 14, 2000 into the early morning of the fifteenth, after he woke up that morning, made love to Leah, walked with her and her daughters to school, ran off to his friend Jason's, drank whiskey, smoked cocaine for the first time, cried, forgot, he realized he left two innocent, frightened children waiting on the front steps at school, argued with Leah over his negligence and shower water, and disappeared again in the middle of dinner to do more drugs and whiskey; there was a fight.

"Your girl's probably fat," the guy finally said to him. They'd been going back and forth for awhile.

Jason whispered in Gabe's ear, "Look, he's been drinking all day. Just ignore him, he'll stop."

The guy, an acquaintance of Jason's from an alternative high school, ran at Gabe and Jason tackled him to the ground. They were at a friend of Jason's Gabe had never met, out in what seemed to be the last piece of farm country in New Jersey, where the stars shone high above corn stalks, and cows slept amidst an expanse of tall trees and no sounds.

"You're lucky bitch," the guy said when he was on the ground. "You're fucking lucky."

Everyone stood outside on the back deck smoking a joint. Gabe was too frightened to take a hit.

Gabe drank his whiskey down and went inside to the upstairs bathroom. He opened the cabinets and saw several pills, not the kinds he would usually take, but a few

showed the warning, "Do Not Consume Alcohol While Taking This." So he figured they'd do something. He swallowed one of each.

Someone pulled on the door, but it was locked.

"Just a minute," Gabe said, looking at himself in the mirror. His skin was pale and his cheeks looked sunken underneath his shadowed eyes. The bones in his shoulders stuck out.

"Oh, it's you?" the guy said. "No one's here now. I'm gonna fuck you up." And he started slamming his body into the door.

Gabe found a can of hairspray and stood on the other side, waiting. The guy busted the door down and Gabe sprayed in his direction.

"What the fuck," the guy said. "Mother fucker's spraying me!"

Jason walked into the hall, grabbed the guy, and pulled him back.

"Your boy is a pussy," the guy said.

Jason walked the guy over to their mutual friends on the deck, and Gabe followed, but stood off to the side. They calmed the guy down.

"Is everything cool?" One of the friends said to the guy.

"Yeah, everything's cool," the guy said.

"How about you Gabe?" Jason said.

Gabe returned to the kitchen to pour himself a drink. His stomach and hands were shaking and he couldn't tell if it was because of the pills, or the guy. His neck started to tingle and feel weak. He closed his eyes and let his head hang, rubbed his neck, and when he looked up the liquor bottles seemed to move like gelatin, swaying slowly back and forth. The whole room started to vibrate and become blurry. He wanted to lay his

head down on the table until it went away, but that usually made him throw up. He thought he should get back to the group. It wasn't safe in the kitchen. He walked slowly, careful not to fall or spill his drink, keeping the whiskey in front of him and following it, until he found the deck.

No one was there.

"Hello," Gabe said, wondering how long he was in the kitchen. "Hello," he said again.

He heard voices whispering and giggling and thought they were watching and laughing at him. The whole thing with that guy was probably setup by Jason, who wanted to prove to Gabe that he wasn't a fighter by scaring him a bit; show him he'd been too serious since he started dating that older woman. Jason said to Gabe earlier that day, "You haven't made a joke in months."

Well it's not funny, and look what happened, the guy was sprayed in the face-- they took this too far.

He thought maybe they left to get beer, and when he turned around to go to the driveway, there was the guy. Standing still and staring. The whispering stopped.

Gabe looked down at his glass, hoping to finish it off, but it was empty. He saw him clearly, but everything else was covered with thin clouds. The guy's eyes were big and white. His tank top had stains all over and his jeans were falling down his legs.

He was holding something.

Gabe screamed, hoping someone could hear, and the guy ran right at him. Gabe threw his glass, hitting him somewhere, and saw his hand thrust towards him. Gabe

swung down on his wrist, seeing it was a knife, and the thing went free and fell onto the deck.

They reached for it, slammed into each other and collapsed. They wrestled--their hands frantically grappled, shoved, and slapped the other in the face. Gabe sensed no pain though, and finally felt the knife underneath his foot. He held it in his hand. The guy reached around his neck and squeezed him tighter and tighter.

When Gabe tried to breathe, he choked. His arms were weak and he couldn't see, but he forced himself to swing the knife up and around several times.

He heard screaming and hoped it was Jason, who had come to save him. He opened his eyes, feeling no pressure on his neck. No one was in front of him. No one was anywhere.

Blood covered his hands and dripped onto his forearms. He watched the guy lie on his back.

Through the darkness and the fog Gabe glimpsed the front door beyond the kitchen and the living room. He stepped over the guy's body, who was rocking back and forth with his eyes closed, like he was having wild dreams, and rubbed his right elbow slowly up and down against one of his wounds.

Gabe fled through the kitchen, the house, the front door, and threw the knife into one of the bushes lining the path to the road.

It was a farm road, newly paved and surrounded by tall corn stalks on both sides, and with the stars shining on his back, Gabe ran and kept going.

December 23, 2001

Gabe pinches his tired eyes shut as he passes under the doorway. He searches for Leah's expression, how she would look right now watching him leave, walking out of C-pod with his eyes closed, an orange jumper and orange floppy shoes, an unending smile, but he can't piece her all together. Somewhere in there he lost her.

When did it happen? Where did he leave her?

He doesn't give up because since he'd been arrested an hour hadn't passed without her, usually hearing their last conversation when she said, "How can you take care of me when you can't even take care of yourself?" Other times, like when he was in the shower or lying in his bed, he'd hear something like, "All we need is time for you to get through this. Find yourself--not through me and not for me, and you will naturally become the man I need."

Officer Bard nudges him to move but Leah tries to come back to him. Her crinkle that appeared as she smiled from her dimple to the side of her mouth. Her long hair falling on her shoulders. Her green eyes and eyelashes that would flick his own. Her lips tracing the outer edge of his earlobe. He remembers her face as if it was pressed up against him.

What is she doing right now? Is she wrapping presents and stuffing them under her tree? Does she feel warm with the glow of candles on her face as she smiles thinking of her daughter's opening Christmas gifts? She always cooked too much food and spoiled those girls with too many presents.

He rubs his thumb along the lapel of his jumpsuit, imagines wool sweaters and jeans, soft burly cotton blankets and velvet rubbing against his skin. All those fabrics in

existence out there he can roll into and out of, feeling all the differences between air and the physical, the rubbing of his prickly little goosebumps with corduroy or satin.

There's cold snow outside, but the air will calm him; he imagines white powder in his palm, it'll fall onto his head like he's in a snow globe and little crystals will melt inside his ear. He can roll in it now, feel its coldness now, making him numb as slush gets inside his shoe, inside his socks, his toes wiggle reminding him of his skin's sensitivities, and that being touched brings sensations--Leah's soft hands scratching from his forehead up his scalp and his whole body shivers from her touch. If she'd massage his mind, he'd forget everything.

The door to the pod closes behind him. He stops and listens to the air moving through the vent, breathes dust kicked up from his floppy plastic shoes. His cell buddies Chill and Poppy yell something from inside the pod, but he can't hear them through the glass. He thinks about making a scene, having Officer Bard drag him out kicking and screaming, or like a corpse with his feet tied together, and the inmates still trapped inside could laugh and scream; he could howl wildly at the moon, like he realized this second that the bullet merely grazed his leg and his lungs still hold air.

Bard points to the exit, "Let's go Gabe."

He stands still, remembers that everyone he's ever known is still alive, and feels the pod's door in front of him--it's like a castle's gate, a mortuary, and he can't get back in. "Who's gonna help you with your college classes?" he asks Bard.

"Don't worry about it man," Bard tells him. "I'm sure you got better things to do."

Gabe waves goodbye to the officer in the control booth. He doesn't know him, and the officer doesn't wave back, but Gabe doesn't care. Everyone will know he's leaving.

The pods: A, B, C, D, and E, surround the booth in a circle except for two hallway's jutting off. One hallway, painted yellow, leads to the gym with pull-up bars and a basketball court where other inmates would gather to watch Gabe play. He was the best ballplayer in there. Further down is the conference room where Gabe and other inmates met with their lawyers, and the visitors center where Gabe never went.

The other hallway, painted blue, leads to the nurse's office where Gabe had gone when he had a nervous breakdown and the nurse gave him medication to calm him down. It was the middle of the night, he keeled over and held his stomach, knowing he was weakened only because he was in jail and afraid, and it had finally got to him. His urine was brown, stomach convulsed, and he couldn't eat, or sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time.

Beyond the nurse's office is the jail's intake/outtake and a holding cell.

"Keep going straight," Bard says. "Your bondsmen will be here in a few."

Outside the jail two police officers hunch over *The Florence Gazette*. The moon lights up the page on the left where one officer's body blocks the light from the streetlamp. Their breath scatters thickly over the pages, and then disappears, floating into the night. One of the officers had a cup of coffee, but even with gloves on he still

couldn't bear the cold. He dropped the cup on the ground, with the spilt coffee now covering the bottoms of his boots.

A jeep parks in the spot closest to the officers. Gabe's sister Julia steps out and the cops stare at her---she's dressed in all white from head to toe and blends in with the snow on the ground. Her short blonde hair curls up at the bottom. Her blue eyes reflect light from the lamp.

"You alright Mam?" the one says.

"I'm great thanks."

"You waiting for somebody?" the other asks.

"Yes I am."

Julia stands on her tippy-toes, looking up to the one window where she can see the tops of people's heads moving slowly. She hops, slips on a patch of ice, and laughs as she regains her balance. "Come on already!" she says quietly to herself.

Julia put up the money for Gabe's bail and his lawyer. She would've saved him sooner but she was tired of saying, "Why are you doing this? Why are you throwing your life away? Don't you care about anything? I can't be there to hold your hand all the time." She thought jail time might actually help him.

And Gabe told her not to worry; his safety wasn't an issue, jail wasn't like prison, especially this one, in the richest county in New Jersey. The inmates were mostly suburban drug-addict-petty-thieves, and guys behind on their child support, so she felt no remorse for making him sit and wait. She wanted on visit him while he was in there, but Gabe refused. He didn't want anyone to see him. She told him she'd come anyway.

"Don't bother," he told her. "I won't even come down."

The only way they could communicate was through letters, and she was the only one he would write.

“Wait in here,” Bard says, handcuffing Gabe to a bar inside a holding cell. “Paperwork’s taking a little longer than we expected.”

Gabe sits on the dusty concrete with his back against the wall. The chain is barely long enough for him to rest his hands on his knees. He stares out into the darkness hoping he doesn’t look too different, or unhealthy. Julia can’t pity him. She can’t look at him like he’s injured and needs to be nursed back to health. Physically, he’s never felt better in his life. He had been running three miles a day and could dunk a basketball. He lifted weights--his shoulders had never been so broad, arms never so defined.

His skin is pale, reddened from the jail’s cheap soap and the cold shower never allowing his pores to open up. He’s clean-shaven with razor burns from the jail’s old disposable blades.

People in the intake are talking but he can’t make out their words. A phone rings several times before someone answers it. He fixes his hair, missing the way it was, grown out to his shoulders. He cut it to look presentable for his bail reduction hearing.

He sits up straight and closes his eyes, trying not to hear anything. Fifteen months? Was it really fifteen months? Fifteen months of standing still in this big room.

In the darkness, with only faint whispers in the distance, he feels neither in jail, nor free. All the moments of the past couple of years, everything that led up to this, seems like a dream. There was a time, it began a few months in, when a few other

inmates convinced him he was going to prison for a long time so get used to it, and he conditioned himself to incarceration--jail became all he knew; he was born there. It was his only home. The warden was his father and the nurse his mother. He knew all the guards names, where they were from, if they were married, single--they were his friends. He started to believe he would die in there with them and wondered which one would give his eulogy.

Jail was Gabe's life, and the streets--the grass next to his grandmother's apartment building, the creek behind Leah's house, the cities he'd never seen, the long American roads pushing towards mountains and another ocean--he refused to think about because he knew it was hopeless.

The living world where everything grows and dies.

The living world where everyone suffers.

When Gabe was first arrested he thought the other guy was dead. He sat in a holding cell waiting for them to question him, dizzy and confused, calling his sister hoping she would bail him out so he could kill himself. He lay with his arm chained to a pole in the ground and cried, fantasizing about jumping off the top of the Menlo Park Mall. He saw his broken, mutilated body lying on the bottom floor as a crowd surrounded him, people pushing each other to get a closer look, or run away from the horror. Gabe thought it was his only way out, and what the hell, he was going to die young anyway, so why not show everyone else how much he suffered? Why not make them feel his pain? Make them see it. He was twenty-four and his life was over. All his loves, any moments he shared with people, everything he knew, was gone. He'd be stuck

with nothing but regret while he lived in cages, barb wired, fenced in yards, smoking cheap cigarettes, running from gangs, getting raped, for the rest of his life.

In that holding cell he had visions of Leah crying on her kitchen floor with her daughters. The three of them with their heads lowered and eyes closed, weeping onto a bloody mound. His sister and grandmother, friend's parents, teachers, basketball coach, everyone, all followed Leah and the girls from their house to the small cemetery next to the Methodist Church in Blooming, and sung and prayed, around his somehow peaceful face sitting still and cold in a casket. Someone cried out, "But he's so young! He could've done so much! It's not fair!"

"He didn't deserve this!"

A couple hours later though, Gabe discovered from the detectives that the other guy didn't die, but was only severely injured. This changed everything--the guy attacked him! He started it! Gabe was only defending himself. Maybe they would leave him alone.

But, and this happened during Gabe's first week in jail, the grand jury still indicted him on numerous charges, the worst of which, was Attempted Murder. Gabe learned there's no self-defense law in the State of New Jersey. His bail was set at \$250,000, and he was left to wait.

The Courier, the major local newspaper the next day featured this headline:

TEEN STABBED AT PARTY

Everyone in Gabe's town, his basketball coach, neighbors, friend's parents, even Leah's friends, must've read about it. And of course, they didn't hear Gabe's side of the

story. *The Courier* didn't know what really happened. Only Gabe and the other guy know what really happened.

What did Leah think? What does she think now as she sits on her couch, wrapping presents and drinking tea?

What if she doesn't think anything at all? She can think anything, the most negative insults, Gabe doesn't care, as long as she doesn't abandon him from her thoughts completely.

A bell rings somewhere and a door opens and closes. Someone enters and the voices grow louder. Gabe smooths out some sore spots on his cheek and sucks in his stomach. He wonders what Julia will say first. The holding cell door opens and light shines in his eyes.

"Come on Gabe," Bard says. "Leave the jumper in there."

The intake is a small room with a little office behind bulletproof glass. A man stands on the other side wearing a bowling league coat, signing papers. Gabe approaches him in his basketball shorts and white t-shirt, the only clothes he was allowed to wear.

"Gabriel," he says, extending his hand.

"Hi. Thanks for your help."

"No problem. You're gonna be living at 5035 Soundview Terrace after this right?"

"I will," Gabe says, remembering the last time he was in this room, when he was fingerprinted and the Florence guards mocked him, most likely because they were scared, unaccustomed to an inmate with such serious charges. The exchange of his bloody

clothes, and Gabe finally falling onto his cell's bed for a long, agitated nap, wondering what the hell jail could be like. Hopefully he doesn't get into a fight.

It was a surprisingly humid morning with no clouds, the sun pounded on Gabe's heavy head and body. Steam lingered above the dark pavement as his blood-stained shirt stuck to him. He walked towards an underworld, and heard clicks and clangs, words; he knew they spoke to him but he couldn't respond to their questions. *Do you understand your charges? Do you feel suicidal? Are you on medication?* He hadn't slept. His mouth was pasty like he drank glue and tasted like whiskey.

Those first few days happened without a thought; there were movements, but they had no particular direction, and he latched onto his cellmate in the reception pod, where inmates go before they get classified. He was a funny and charming Southern guy named Jacob, who was merely passing through on his way to New York. He was arrested for starting a campfire in the middle of Route 22, and it turned out he had old warrants. He calmed Gabe down as they spoke, mainly Jacob telling him the story of the fire over and over again--"I don't even know what the hell I was thinking, I was so dead drunk. Shit man, I just wanted to see New York, I felt like such a pussy for never going." By the time Gabe was moved to C-pod, maximum security, Jacob was bailed out, and he never saw, or heard from him again. He was like a ghost.

Gabe signs a few papers, looking at the guards, deciphering which ones were there on the first day. Which ones gave him dirty looks? Who laughed at him?

"So you're not gonna be moving right?" The bail bondsmen asks. "Cause we *always* need to know where you are."

"I'm not going anywhere."

“Who are you gonna be living with?”

“My grandmother.”

The bail bondsmen signs underneath Gabe’s signature. “No running right?”

“No running,” Gabe says.

“Good. You have to call this number once a week.” He gives Gabe a card. “And I’m gonna be calling you periodically as well.”

“Ok,” Gabe says.

“Are we good to go?” Bard asks the intake officer.

“Yeah, he’s free to go.”

Gabe’s bail bondsmen shakes his hand after he signs and walks out ahead of him.

“Good luck to you,” the bail bondsmen says.

“Thanks,” Gabe says, waving goodbye. He scans the intake and all of its officers, for what he hopes is the last time. If he never returns; if he beats the trial, or pleas out to a lesser charge, giving him no more jail time, then everything they’ve said about him has meant nothing. Then the pods, cells, basketball court, the hallways that led to nowhere special--the anger and doubt, his lucid dreams where he explored his former life, waking up at the shouting on the megaphone, “Chow up! Chow up!” devastated to still be in a dirty cell; the guy that sung Happy Birthday to himself in the middle of the night; inmates dancing around the pod with towels on their heads, chanting, praising Osama Bin Laden on 9/11. That whole desperate world will only live in his memory.

“Here Gabe,” Officer Bard says, handing him a garbage bag of his belongings: legal documents and the letters his sister wrote him. “Let’s go. I have to get back to the pods.”

“Bard,” Gabe says. “Thank you for not judging me. When we used to talk about football and our ex-girlfriends and stuff I really felt like you were treating me like a regular person.”

“Well,” Bard says. “I know a good guy when I see one.” He slaps Gabe on the shoulder. “Just don’t come back, ok? Watch yourself out there. Be safe.”

“Wait, wait,” Gabe says, as Bard opens the door. “How cold is it outside?”

“Real cold, but I bet you won’t feel a thing,” Bard says, pressing Gabe’s lower back gently so he continues.

Gabe steps out with one foot, lands on an ice patch as the brisk air and bright lights touch his face. His eyes shut as he loses his balance, nearly dropping his garbage bag. Bard grabs onto his arm, guides him as both feet stand atop the ice outside the door, and suddenly Gabe’s reentry into the world feels like walking into a surprise party. The lights are off and everyone’s hiding. He imagines a diamond eyed peasant girl standing at the bottom of the steps. “Surprise!” She yells to him, her arms wide. “You’re a part of the world and all its excesses and wonders!” And if he opens his eyes she would brighten like a spark and offer herself to him—everything that lives in her world, all she knows she would share, saying, “Since there is a heaven there’s no such thing as time. I’ll take you away where no one will know your name, your past, or will care about where you’re from, that you grew up in low income housing without parents. All I would ever ask of you is to love me. Can you love me? If yes, then come to me.”

Gabe says to her, “Days don’t exist unless people share them. A whole year, or even a little more than a year, can be nothing but a secret. If it wasn’t for each other wouldn’t time be a myth?”

Bard says goodbye and Gabe returns his kindness. His right foot continues further and buries itself into the snow. It feels soft to him, just like he remembered it, and the reflected light shines in Gabe's eyes making blurry white spots like he's looking too closely through a microscope. He can't see his sister but he hears something.

Back over his shoulder the intake door is closed and hiding in dimness, the interior world long gone and clandestine behind many walls. A fog light hanging above shines out and the jail's entrance looks like an altar with a cloudy orb surrounding its edges; straight ahead lies the sounds of Gabe's chant and sermon.

"Gabe! Hey!" He hears, watching his breath fly through the air.

"Gabe! Over here!"

He walks down the steps still unable to focus his eyes. He holds the rail so he doesn't fall. When was the last time he saw his sister? She said to him, "What do you expect to happen? Do you just expect people to keep on taking care of you? Leah keeps calling and calling, what are you doing to her?"

But he didn't care then about anything she had to say. He was young and how could there be a problem, that's what young people do--they drink.

Jersey December makes him shiver, and his older sister, a foot shorter and shining like a star, runs to him.

"Hey!" She yells, and jumps into his arms. She reaches up and hooks her hands around his neck. She hugs him, rubs his face like she's cleaning him. "I got this for you," she says, pointing to a black leather jacket on the ground. She holds his hand and walks him to her Jeep. "It's cold, here, take it. Someone left it at the Marina. It's nice though, a Wilson's, probably really expensive. Here, it's yours."

Gabe peeks back over his shoulder and sees Bard and the other guards have gathered around a window to watch. He waves goodbye to them. “Thanks Big Sis that’s littler than me,” he says, smelling trees, leaves, snow, a small town. Before sliding his arms through his new jacket’s sleeves he rubs the leather against his forearm. It feels rough against his tender skin. His arm hairs stand straight up over his goosebumps.

“Do you like it?” Julia asks.

“I love it.”

The perimeter of the jail isn’t what he expected. He always pictured a loading dock like in the back road of a grocery store--unloading people in wooden crates, hay on the bottom, a beast in chains kicking the hay, trying to break free, a forklift pushes him off and officers pry his cage open with crowbars. It’d take four guards to hold down the beast while he’s strip-searched. He grunts as they’d ask him, “What’s your name? What’d you see? Where are the drugs?” He pulls his hairy arms away from their grip; and is thrown into a wet cell to wait, until he’s united with the rest of them.

The narrow streets of Florence though, line up tan, brown and light blue houses, brick and burgundy siding with swings hanging from trees in their little front yards. It’s like Leah’s block in Blooming and Gabe wonders what it would be like to walk their beagle Cricket on these yards, little patches of neatly trimmed grass covered with snow; if he knocks on their door, asks them to borrow some milk, seeing those faces behind those doors, the books on their shelves, the food in their cabinets. They’ve been neighbors for so long, why couldn’t he climb their maple and magnolia trees, hook his legs around the strongest branch, and dangle, the blood rushing to his head? Would they take one look at his orange shoes and shorts throw him back in C-pod?

Gabe watched Florence's maple trees from his window on the inside: green in spring, searing red in summer, orange in autumn, and barren in winter, all plotting a path to the town's Main Street, the kind where Italian men gather in outdoor cafes to play backgammon, speaking fast and dramatically on Sunday afternoons—they laugh and tip their hats to the businesswomen that pass, then back to their game. A small country town with a small jail off to the side, and he watched that cycle and the town, its festivals and families walking down the street with carriages covering their babies' faces. Did they question this building or the people who slept in there at night? Did the children ask why it's covered by wires and fences?

"This is where bad men go," the parents probably said.

"I'll never go there will I Mommy?"

"Of course not you honey, you're a good boy."

Fathers with khakis, cardigans, and docksiders, holding their wife's hand as she pushes the stroller, walking their half Asian kids on Sunday afternoons to parks and shopping for antique records and toys.

Julia smiles on his cheek, still holding him tightly, "You're never going back, you hear me?"

"I don't know," he says.

"You're making it through this."

"I was in there for a while."

"And you're *never* going back."

"I might have to go to trial."

She clutches his cheek, forcing him to look at her. “The most important thing is that you’re out,” she says. “Everything else will fall into place. You have the rest of your life to figure it out.”

Gabe nods, focusing on her unblinking eyes. “Thanks Julia,” he says. He releases her and looks towards the jail’s side entrance, at the TUSCANER COUNTY JAIL sign. “Is it ok with you if I walk around it really quickly?”

“Ok,” Julia says. “I can’t go with you?”

Gabe zips up his new jacket, walks carefully in his little shoes. “It’ll only take a second.” He walks up a little hill following the edge of the fence, searches for his old cell which faces a tree without limbs, a tall stick shooting straight up from the ground.

The cell is empty and the bed is made. Some guys kept theirs clean and tidy, but he never understood why. He never made his bed once.

He had so many conversations in there, up late at night, speaking through the bars, voices traveling through the pod, about anything and everything--growing up, the first time he called a girl for a date, losing his virginity, drinking and feeling like there’s something wrong with you. What makes them different from anyone else?

Good people in there, he thinks.

And I’ll never forget how they made me laugh and forget about the pain.

The moonlight brightens the grey concrete between the windows. He notices exactly where it ends at the edge of his bed, where it would hit his feet at night, where he angled his book and read until he finally fell asleep.

Guys in there would make fun of him, say he “read” (making a masturbation motion with their hand) all night and slept all day.

*What you goin' to "read" again Gabe? Damn, Gabe. You "read" a lot dontcha?
I hear sometimes you be "reading" in the shower for like an hour!*

The lights are off and they won't be allowed to leave their cells until breakfast is served in the morning. Their heads sleep on cold, plastic pillows, and someone will cry tonight because every night someone cries.

He walks back around and sees his sister sitting in the Jeep with the engine running, playing with the knobs in front of her. She's smiling, shaking her head, talking to herself in the car. She never looked happier. Gabe steps from the hard, icy grass to the pavement, thinking,

I'll die one day,

but today,

I am beautiful.

And I don't want to leave this world tired and unforgiving.

He opens the passenger side door, looking back at the jail's sign above the side entrance and the curve where his room once was. He closes the door and fastens his seatbelt.

"So I've been wanting to ask you," Julia says. "What do you want to eat?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"What? You're not hungry? Don't you want to eat some real food?"

She pulls out of the parking lot onto Court Street and turns left toward the highway.

"You cook?"

"I have kids," she says, seeming disappointed by the question. "I can cook."

All Julia made in high school, before she moved out of their grandmother's, was Oodles of Noodles. She also brought home pizza and calzones from Luca's, where she worked, but she never stayed in the kitchen for longer than ten minutes.

"I'd love to see that," Gabe tells her. "You in a kitchen."

"Shut up! I'm not that bad! Things change ya know."

"You thought lasagna was a pizza topping before you worked at Luca's."

She slaps his arm. "Well, I learned what lasagna was, and I think I'm a much better person because of it," she says. "So what kind of food?"

"Honestly Julia, I'm just very happy to be with you right now. I don't need anything."

They drive down the highway and Gabe watches the exit signs and mile markers drift pass. He thinks about how they all direct ways out, to other towns, places he's never seen. The jail wasn't in Gabe's town and most of the guys he met in there were from places he had never visited. He knows, that even though he lived with them so closely for a long time, he will never see any of them again.

"The kids are going to be up waiting to see you."

"I can't wait," Gabe says. "How's Kayla?"

"Smartest in her class. They promoted her to the gifted and talented program. She'll tell you all about it."

"And Austin?"

"Fidgety as all hell, just like you when you were a kid. It drives me nuts."

Shadows flicker on their windows as they travel east, the wide expanse of Western New Jersey through their windshield with white stars still and shining, large

sloping hills surrounding them, trees poking out into the sky now bare and covered with snow--the Jersey mountains are barely mountains at all. Gabe imagines himself perched at its highest point, looking out at all of the hills rolling down to the sand and ocean with everything green and pulsating; the maple trees become pine trees and grass becomes sand; green Jersey becomes tan Jersey as he reaches the cold ocean. Reminds him of the drive down the shore every summer--staring out of the window fantasizing about girls in bikinis.

Tonight though, the world is brilliant, dark and pale, with moonlight cutting through the snow-topped pine trees quickly and irreverently, like a silver stallion through the fields, pine needles withered and thrown to the ground making little X's in the snow.

“So,” Julia says, scrunching her face up. “It wasn’t hard in there?”

“No,” Gabe says. “Just like my letters said, it wasn’t that bad.”

“I thought you might have been just saying that to make me feel better. You weren’t exaggerating about how sometimes you had a lot of fun?”

“No, I wasn’t. I made friends, played cards, basketball, worked out, read and wrote a lot. One day I watched all of the *Godfather* movies.”

“I bet you have some stories.”

“I guess. But I don’t think they’re that interesting. Not sure you’d even like to hear them.” Gabe senses that would scare her. “And not because they’re so horrifying. That’s not what I meant at all. But just because they’re boring. Nothing tremendously exciting happened in there.”

Gabe adjusts the heating vent to blow on his legs, the garbage bag of papers Bard handed him rests in his lap. He rubs down his calves, his leg hairs laying down against

his skin as the hot air calms them. There were heating vents in jail, but they were on the ceiling, so he never actually felt the air moving. This breeze is warm, reminds him of summer nights as a child when he lay in a field of grass letting the wind run through his hair.

“Can you tell me one though?” Julia asks. “Nothing too scary.”

“I really don’t even think I have a scary story to tell. I saw one guy get punched in the face, another one withdrawing from heroin, met a pedophile. Other than that it was pretty low-key.”

“What was the pedophile like?”

“Quiet, he just kept to himself.”

“You don’t want to talk about this do you?”

“I’ll talk about it. I just don’t know what to say right now.”

“It’s ok if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“How about we just don’t talk about it right now?”

“Ok,” she says. “And I’ll believe you that it wasn’t scary.”

Gabe leafs through the pages sitting in his bag. His first hearing, unless it’s cancelled, which seems to happen often, is in a month. He wasn’t lying to Julia, jail wasn’t frightening--the idea of going to prison though--is. A week before he was bailed out, his friend Poppy, a short, round Mexican guy in his late thirties with a pock-marked face, who had the same charges, was sentenced to ten years.

You’re gonna die if you go upstate Gabe, Poppy told him.

Why would you say that?

I'm not trying to mess wit' you, it's the truth. I have Mexicans in there that fight for me. You'll be alone. White guys don't make it out. Get out of here. You got a good lawyer. Get bailed out and do what you gotta do. Don't go to prison. You gotta do 85% of the sentence cause it's a violent crime. No parole. I'm telling you cause we're friends.

Gabe searches for Leah's letter. He hasn't read it in over a year. It sat, for fifteen months, on the bottom of the pile inside his desk.

"Did you save all the letters I wrote you?" Julia asks.

"Yeah, did you save mine?"

"Yeah, they were actually fun to read," Julia says, flipping through a few stations before she turns the radio off. "So tell me one funny thing you saw."

"Well," Gabe says, looking up, knowing she won't stop until he appeases her. "This one guy in my pod was a big gambler. He even bet his dinner sometimes, and whatever else he had to. Sometimes if he went on a bad run of cards, he wouldn't eat for a day or two. So he made a bet with this guy with Neuropathy, do you know what that is?"

Julia shakes her head.

"It's nerve damage from drinking too much. The guy drank a liter or more of vodka a day. He was in bad shape."

"Horrible."

"Yeah, but he was an asshole so no one cared. Anyway, his hands never stopped shaking. That's not the funny part."

"I would hope so."

“The guy that was a gambling addict, he bet the guy with neuropathy that he could stomp on this shaving cream packet and break it in one try.”

“Shaving cream packet?”

“That’s how they gave us shaving cream, in these little packets. Kind of looked like those little packets of mayonnaise you get at a deli.”

“Are they hard to break?”

“Oh yeah, you have to rip them really hard with both hands just to get them open. It was a pretty safe bet for the guy with Neuropathy I thought.”

“What happened?”

“He stomped once and didn’t get it, so he lost. But then he was pissed and stomped again and smashed it open. But, he was at the top of the steps to the downstairs cells, and didn’t see that there was a guard right below him. After it exploded the shaving cream flew and hit the guard in the face.”

Julia laughs, “What did they do to him?”

“They charged him with assaulting an officer.”

Julia stops smiling. “That sounds bad.”

“I know I felt bad about that. He didn’t deserve it. And they put him in the hole.”

“What’s the hole?”

“Solitary confinement, they call it “the hole”. But it kind of is one because it’s in the basement and there’s no light or windows or anything. Supposedly he lost it in there and attacked a sergeant. I think he’s in prison right now.”

“That’s not funny Gabe.”

“That one part was funny.”

He returns to his letters as they roll through the highway, hearing the consistent thump every five seconds from cracks in the pavement, the moon off to the right on Gabe's side.

He finds Leah's letter--its yellow pages have withered edges, blue cursive scribbled with words straying beyond the lines and margins, like she wrote part of it with her eyes closed. He unfolds the creases in the paper, remembering when he first opened it, the scents of basil and rosemary between the pages. He smelled them. He saw Leah's kitchen, with her spice garden above the sink, and her crying at the dinner table, tears falling onto the oak making little brown puddles. She walked away from the paper, unable to cope with what he had done to her.

He left her all alone and for no good reason.

Gabe knows it must've taken her a few days and a few tries, tearing it up before deciding that no words are the right words for this moment so just write from the heart. And when she did, she wrote continuously with her arm shaking and didn't stop until she was done. At the end she wrote *Love, Leah*, and immediately stuck it in an envelope and mailed it off.

Through a stretch of pine forest with the moonlight on the page Gabe reads,

Dear Gabe,

I was driving home from work this past Saturday thinking, the summer is gone and so is Gabe, this happened so fast, and there's nothing I can do about any of it. This is all so unfair. Unfair to me. Unfair to the girls. How do you feel about yourself? We loved you unconditionally and you not only left us, but you left us with a horrible last memory. How do you expect me to keep this from them? It was in the fucking papers! I know you're not a violent person, and I believe what you said, that you acted in self defense. It's not that I don't trust you in that way. Deep down you're a sweet and sensitive guy, I know this. But our problems have nothing to do with this. You have been hurting me for a long time. And I know you're left thinking about all that. You are probably feeling the hurt

I've been feeling. Well I've felt empty for a long time Gabe, no matter how much you thought you loved me.

You have no control over what you do so why would you have control over the things you don't do. I told you not to go that night. I told you that those guys weren't your friends, that they were never your friends. I always thought something bad was going to come of that. And now it did. I wish I wasn't right about this or anything. I wish you talked to me more, about this, about anything, about how you were feeling. Don't think you are the only one hurting. The thought of never seeing you again, I can't think about that. I can't think about you because I can't function knowing you're in there. Do you know how much I love you Gabe? I can't function right now.

I know I wasn't pleasant to be around but I was upset with you and I had a right to be. Where were you? Where did you go? Those disappearing acts that I never understood are still left unanswered. You were great with the girls. They keep asking about you. Daniella was crying the other day over you which made me cry, "Are we ever going to see Gabe again?" I said I don't know, maybe not. Then she said, "Why, why, is it something we did?" Of course I said no but then I started crying along with her.

I made pork chops the other night for dinner and I still put four plates out. The three of us were eating and Daniella said, "The last time we had pork chops Gabe was here." Lara then says, "Shhh-shhhh, don't say his name. I miss him and you'll make Mommy cry." This is the stuff that goes on around here.

Lara too, "I miss Gabe, can't you call him. Call him call him" you know how persistent she is. All of this, even Cricket hasn't been the same. I swear I think she's been depressed.

You asked, expected, wanted, I don't know what the right word is, for me to deal with your history and that you have a severe drinking problem, which you did tell me but I did not realize how bad it is. You don't want to see how bad it is. It started showing up more and more and you couldn't hide it. I know I can't help you now. I wish I could. I want you to be ok my love and safe when you go through what you have to. Remember it's just something to go through and beyond, that's all. I don't know what else to say except to think of you in this world without me feels strange, and I hope you're safe.

I will love you always, but I can't keep this going because it hurts too much. I don't know if I hurt more because I miss you so much, or because what you did to me. You don't do that to people you love Gabe. I wish I could help you work through your problem but I can't. I love you and I will pray for you to make it through this. Be strong my love.

Love,

Leah

Maples and grass have become pine trees and sand as they turn off the highway onto Route 9. Christmas lights beam onto the street, making small country houses shine like mosaics. “We’re almost there,” Julia says.

“Ok.”

“Are you ok?” She asks, rubbing his arm.

“I’m ok.”

“The kids will get your mind off things I’m sure.”

His sister’s home is on a cul-de-sac with tricycles and basketballs, doggy footprints marking the snow. There’s always a puppy on the loose to chase, horses whinnying in the stables in the back behind the houses, front yards neatly manicured with shapes and distinct lines cut into the grass.

Red, green, and golden lights shine like fireworks, and wreaths and reindeer are everywhere, giant blow up dolls of Santa Claus with his arms stretched out for hugs and kisses. The lights inside the houses are off and the street is still and waiting for the next day, and for Christmas.

The last time he saw Kayla she was five years old. They were standing outside her rabbit’s cage and she said, “Sometimes I cry that she has to be in there. It’s not fair.”

“Well,” Gabe said. “You know it’s for her own good. She’d die if you let her out.”

“I know,” Kayla said. “Sometimes I cry and I don’t know why.”

“What makes you cry?” Gabe asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know why I do the things I do.”

The last time he saw Austin he was four, and Gabe remembers him saying, “Uncle Gabe,” with his arms folded and a stern face, “When I get older, I’m telling my wife I’m not watching any girly movies.”

When Gabe walks in they’re right there, sleeping still on the couch with bags of chips, Hi-C, UNO, and Monopoly money spread out over the table, little bits of animal crackers hang from their lips. Gabe approaches them, whispers in their ears, “Hey you guys.”

“Ahhhhhh!” They jump on him and he flies to the floor.

“Were you really sleeping?” Gabe says.

Austin plants his knees on Gabe’s shoulders and he can’t move. Kayla sits at his head smooshing his cheeks. “What a pretty girl!” she says, playing with his hair.

Hahaha!”

“Where have you been?” Austin asks.

“College,” Julia says quickly.

“We missed you!” Kayla says.

“I missed you guys too. You look so big!”

“So big!” Austin says, squatting over him, flexing his arm. “Feel my muscle!”

Gabe squeezes his arm, tickling Austin in his armpit.

“Hey!” Austin says, laughing. “Stop i-i-i-it!”

Kayla laughs too, clearly jealous at all of the attention her brother is receiving.

“Do uppies!” She says.

“Do Frankenstein!” The boy yells.

Gabe picks them up, stomps around with his feet banging the floor, “Arrrrrrgh,” he says, “Frankenstein like child brain!” He scoops them up, throws them in the air, surprised they’re so much heavier than he remembered. They fall back down, land in a big pile and start wrestling. Gabe is careful to not be too rough with Kayla, as they crawl all over him, kneeling him in the stomach and jumping on his chest.

“Where are Daniella and Lara?” Kayla asks.

Gabe looks at his sister, shocked. “They’re not here honey,” Gabe tells her. “Maybe next time.”

“I love them,” Kayla says. “They’re so much fun.”

“What’s your girlfriend’s name Uncle Gabe? The one with the daughters?” Austin asks.

“Leah,” Gabe says. “You guys remember her?”

“Yeah,” Austin says. “She was nice. She gave me a truck on my birthday.”

“Are you gonna play Santa Claus on Christmas again?” Kayla asks.

“I’m not sure,” Gabe says, remembering, that even though the suit was uncomfortable, it was his favorite part of Christmas. “We’ll see.”

After more uppies and couch baseball the kids yawn, unable to keep their eyes open. “Can we sleep out here Mommy?” Kayla asks.

“Yeah,” Austin says. “Can we stay with you guys?”

Julia agrees and tucks them in under one large blanket on one side of the couch.

“Love you Mommy. Love you Uncle Gabe,” Kayla says.

“I love you more than Kayla does,” Austin says.

“You do not!”

“Do too!”

“Guys, guys,” Gabe says, kissing their foreheads. “I love you both equally.”

Later, Julia sits on the floor, lies back against the couch by their little feet, watches the news and drinks tea. Gabe remembers her sitting like that when he was a kid, after school with her Oodles of Noodles watching *General Hospital* before she was off to work—an 80’s queen with blonde frizzed out, crimped and permed hair. She wore Au Coton and Benetton shirts, ripped Z Cavaricci’s, and had a musclehead boxer boyfriend from Philly, who took Gabe to car shows and drag races.

When she was in high school she had B.F.F’s--the cheerleaders, the pretty girls---they tickled Gabe, kissed his cheek, made him blush saying they’d marry him one day. Julia won Best Eyes in her high school and Gabe was upset because he expected her to win Most Popular. He was stunned years later when she said, that even though she was invited to all of the parties, dated the popular boys, she never felt like she fit in.

In Lowell, where Gabe and his sister were raised by their grandmother, there were rich people, like most of Gabe and Julia’s friends, that lived up on the mountain. Gabe told her towards the end of high school, even though he felt horrible saying it, that he was embarrassed to show his friends where he lived. He’d have his friend’s parents drop him off down the street in the nice part of the development away from the projects. Because he knew if anyone saw the black guys hanging out on the stoop drinking beer, smoking Black and Milds, they’d look at Gabe differently, and maybe never let their son speak to Gabe again.

Julia said to him, “Oh yeah, I used to do the same thing. Don’t you remember my friends never came over?”

Gabe pours himself tea and sits next to her, reclining against the couch. “How’s Grandma?” Gabe asks.

“Well I’m not dead, if that’s what you’re asking,” Julia says in a raspy voice.

“She still says that?”

“Oh yeah, or she complains about Elizabeth and Fulton Street and how the family isn’t close enough,” Julia says. “She misses you, but is *‘horribly disappointed’*. She still says that, like she’s shocked what happened. She’s excited you’re coming home, she is, but expect a huge speech when you get there tomorrow.”

“I’m going *tomorrow?*”

“Yeah, you have to spend Christmas with her. I’d have you stay here but we’re going to Steven’s parents in Maryland,” she says, turning the volume down on the TV.

The kids alternate inhales and exhales.

“She’s gonna make you go to meetings. She said she’ll go with you if she has to.”

“That’s fine,” Gabe says.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“I went to some meetings while I was in there. They were ok.”

“Alcohol runs in our family,” Julia says. “It could’ve been me, but for some reason, it wasn’t. It was you.” She turns off the TV, tucks the blanket under Austin’s feet, and rubs his blonde hair. “The important thing right now is that you recognize you have a problem and do something about it. You’re still young. You have the rest of your life to make up for the past couple years.”

“I know.”

“Nothing is over yet, but if you decide to keep drinking, it is done. You are done. And I can’t sit around and watch you self-destruct.”

“I know.”

“You were smart,” she says, rubbing his shoulder. “People believed in you.” She tilts his chin up, and, staring at him for a while, starts to cry. “How did this happen? How did we let it get this far? I should’ve stopped you. I should’ve pulled you out of school, away from Leah. You could’ve stayed here with me and the kids. Nothing would’ve happened then. You would’ve been safe.”

“It’s not your fault. Maybe I had to go through this. And now that I have, I’ll never go through it again.”

“I’m sorry Gabe. I’m sorry I didn’t help more.”

“Stop it,” he says, backing away from her. He holds her shoulders. “I’m going to be fine. Isn’t it better to get this over with at a young age then later when I had kids?”

“What are you going to do?” She lays her teacup on the table.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean? You have to have some idea.”

“I’m going to listen to my lawyer. Hopefully I’ll get a plea with time served and probation. If I get probation I’ll try to turn this whole thing into something positive. If I don’t get a decent plea bargain, I’ll go to trial. I just don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Julia dries her eyes with the end of her children’s blanket. She tucks her long pajamas under herself and lies back, closing her eyes as she listens.

“I’m going to go to meetings,” Gabe says. “I’m going to go back to school. I’m going to get a job and try to find some old friends--not drinking or drug friends, but old friends. People that knew me before all this.”

Julia dims the light above them on the ceiling fan. “When is your first hearing?”

“About a month.”

“What’s the hearing about?”

“Confirmation of Discovery. Basically both sides declare to the judge that evidence and information in the case has all been disclosed and no new evidence can be submitted. I actually don’t even have to go.”

“What does the lawyer say?”

“She says that the witnesses saying I acted in self-defense is the major reason why my bail was reduced. That guy has a criminal record and I don’t--and a history of violent behavior--so all these things are definitive evidence that I acted in self-defense. But, that doesn’t take away from the fact that it did happen, and I did hurt him. And Tuscaner County’s really conservative and he almost died. Who knows how people will interpret the law and whether or not *they’ll* think I acted in self-defense?”

“You wouldn’t want to go to trial? You could get off.”

“I don’t want my name in the papers anymore. I would be the headline everyday, with pictures of me looking like a criminal. I want a plea bargain and for this to be over.”

“Does your lawyer think you can get time-served?”

“She says it’s a possibility.”

“I guess we’ll see,” she says, putting the dishes away. She turns off the lights, and says goodnight, kissing him on the top of his head before she goes to sleep.

As she walks down the hall Gabe says, "Wait," and hugs her. They hold each other and Gabe rests his head on her shoulder. "Thank you for everything."

Gabe lies down at the opposite end of the couch with his feet a few inches away from his niece and nephew's. Above him is a skylight looking out to the moon--this is the first time in a long time that he could fall asleep watching it disappear in his eyes. He stares up at it listening to the whir of the ceiling fan and the children breathing, and tries to picture the few years he lived by the ocean, near this town, as a child. He was like his niece and nephew, blonde and blue eyed, chasing waves and making sand castles, digging for hermit crabs and chasing the ice cream man, with the whole world being the small HUD house his dad bought, the sand in his sandbox and the ocean.

The waves, five times his size, taught him limitation, and he was afraid because it never stopped, going on and on into heaven, where dead people went. He thought it would suck him in, that no one could help save him, not even his mom or dad.

He remembers his dad saying, "Fucking whore wanted another guy at the same time, you know that Gabe? Can you believe that? Your mother wanted another guy in bed with her and me at the same time ... You see that table over there Gabe? You see that table? If your mother was invisible and you couldn't see her and there was cocaine on the table your mother would sniff it up just like this up her nose."

He can't recall much from being a child and living with his parents, but he can still see vividly the blue whale that washed ashore one summer. He didn't know then how rare, special, and bizarre it was. No one saw anything like that again.

The whale was bigger than his house and helpless in that water. The Coast Guard came with ships, cranes and everything else, an arsenal, and everyone else helped to keep it wet--Gabe came running with his little pail full of hermit crabs.

“Whale,” he said, looking for his mom, but he couldn’t see her. “Whale,” he said to a stranger.

The Coast Guard yelled to everybody as Gabe stood close to the huge, suffering animal, “It has to stay wet, keep it wet, thank you, you’re doing great.”

Everyone chipped in and it worked, the whale, everyone was told, was released somewhere out by Nova Scotia, where it was from. Gabe talked about it for the rest of the summer, telling everyone it was a killer whale, the biggest thing he’d ever seen.

Why did it come ashore? Gabe thinks.

All it had to do was go up and down its entire life.

Go up and then down.

Down to the ocean floor eating seaweed or plankton or whatever, but it had to go back up to breathe. Something inside the whale says it has an hour before it comes to the surface, and it budgets its time. Eating, then floating up, and it’s so huge that no other fish would dare touch it.

Whales always know what to do next but for some reason this guy didn’t understand. It wanted to do something different, test the boundaries, until something else came along to save it.

Gabe held his pail and smiled the rest of the summer, imagining himself to be a daring hero, and told the story of how he helped save a whale.

Only whales keep a schedule, Gabe thinks, but this one wouldn’t listen.

He prays for the world to be kind to Kayla and Austin, for their cul-de-sac and their mother to protect them. What will their world look like? Where will they go at night to be safe?

Austin mutters in his sleep and kicks his sister, but luckily, she doesn't wake up. Gabe thinks about nights wrestling with Leah and her daughters in her foyer, walking down by the creek and playing soccer in their backyard. What would Leah say if he knocked on her front door?

His eyes grow heavy as he turns his body away from the light. He pictures the headline TEEN STABBED AT PARTY spread out on top of dinner tables all over Lowell, the shock on everyone's face discovering it was Gabe--it doesn't add up, why would he do it?

And how will they respond in a week or two, or in a year when they run into him in the mall? What have they said about him?

The day of the incident Gabe was supposed to pick Lara and Daniella up from school and walk them home. Daniella was eight, and Lara was five, and the school was only a few blocks from their house, but they were accustomed to Leah walking with them. Ever since Leah had marital problems she had been protective and accompanied them to and from school everyday.

It was a Thursday morning. Gabe answered a phone call from Jason saying, "What are you doing right now? You wanna hang and drink a few?"

"I can't man," Gabe said. "I'm kinda broke and I have to pick up the girls from school later."

“Don’t worry about money, I got it. And it won’t be all day, just have a few. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

Gabe looked at the clock, and thought he could hang out for a few hours, and then sober up and get them from school. And talking to friends like Jason, Gabe always felt regretful and jealous he couldn’t party too. He couldn’t be spontaneous and act like a twenty-four year old. “Why can they go out and I can’t?”

Gabe drove to Jason’s house around noon. He drank a beer and a few shots of whiskey. He was listening to music in the kitchen when Jason pulled a little bag out of his pocket. “You down?” Jason asked him.

“Sure,” Gabe said, thinking maybe coke would make him drink less.

When Gabe was drunk he would do almost any drug--weed, acid, mushrooms, ecstasy, Xanax and other pills, but coke was rarely around him.

Jason pulled a drawer open and took out a tablespoon.

“What are you doing?” Gabe asked.

“It’s so much better this way,” Jason said.

Jason put water in the spoon, dumped all of the coke in there with a little baking soda. He lit the bottom of the spoon with his lighter and let it all bubble together. He took the pieces that floated to the top and dropped them on a plate. The pile was about an inch wide, and a fingernail’s length high.

Jason grabbed little pieces and dropped them into the top portion of a thin glass pipe. The top had a burnt piece of brillo pad stuffed into it so the pieces of coke couldn’t fall down. Jason tilted the pipe in the air and lit the top, sucking in all the smoke. He was gasping trying to not let any out.

“There’s a lot left,” he said, and a little cloud escaped his mouth. He handed the pipe to Gabe making sure the top stayed level.

Gabe held the bottom of the pipe and thought of Leah, what she would think if she saw him now. Gabe watched Jason breathe deeply with his eyes closed--the look of pure pleasure. He pet the kitchen counter and licked his lips.

“What’s it like?” Gabe asked.

Jason was silent. He poured a drink of water and sat down at the kitchen table. After a few seconds of breathing heavily with his eyes closed, he said, “You finished?”

Gabe tilted the pipe in the air thinking that he would smoke this hit, and then maybe a couple more, but stop around two o’clock to be sober by three to pick up the girls. He lit the top, sucked in the white smoke and held it in, immediately feeling numb and light-headed. His heart started pounding and he could feel the blood pumping through every vein in his body. He kept the smoke in his lungs and felt the high getting stronger and stronger. He placed the pipe down on the plate with the coke pieces on top still smoking.

“Hey,” Jason said. At that point he had risen and was standing next to him.

“You’re wasting it.”

Gabe paced back and forth in the room, faster and faster, still holding it all in.

“Stop that,” Jason said. “You’re going to give yourself a heart attack.”

Gabe exhaled and there was no smoke left. He gasped, with deep breaths filling up his lungs, picked up the pipe and quickly took another hit. He walked from the kitchen into the living room, sat down on the couch and closed his eyes. “Oh my God,”

Gabe said, and breathed out. His eyes couldn't focus, and he assumed they rolled into the back of his head. He licked his lips and turned on the TV.

Jason called from the other room, "You know what we should do?" He entered the living room, holding in the smoke like Gabe did, and exhaled a thin wispy cloud. "Get a prostitute to suck us off while we take a hit."

They sat there and smoked for awhile, paced the house licking their lips, and watched porno. Gabe started disappearing to the bathroom to take his hits, not because he was stealing extra, but because he didn't want Jason to see him cry.

It was 4:30 when Gabe realized there was something he was supposed to do. He left without saying anything.

While he drove an intense guilt set in, knowing that at one point in the day, Daniella and Lara had stood in front of the school with their backpacks in their hands excited to see him. They would've jumped all over him, probably Daniella on one leg, Lara on the other, and Gabe wouldn't have been able to walk. He would've done his Frankenstein for them.

He called Domenick, their neighbor who was Lara's best friend's father, from his cell phone. That's where Daniella and Lara went after school to play most days.

Domenick was a police officer in North Jersey and only worked three days a week.

"Hey Domenick, it's Gabe."

"Gabe? Where are you man? The kids are freaking out."

"They're there?"

"Yeah they're here. Where were you?"

"My grandmother had a seizure. I had to get her an ambulance."

“Oh shit, I’m sorry. Is she ok?”

“Yeah, she’s ok, but I had to ride in the ambulance with her. I’m sorry I didn’t call man.”

“It’s ok, when can you get here?”

“I’m leaving the hospital now. I should be there in twenty minutes.”

“Leah’s been calling too. You should call her.”

“Thanks man, I will. I’m really sorry about this. I’ll see you in a few.”

Gabe’s cell phone rang. It was Jason saying he wanted to drive out to Philly and get more coke, but Gabe said he couldn’t. He took the long way to Leah’s, stopped at a Dunkin Donuts and a pharmacy for some Visine.

He walked up the steps to Domenick’s house, who met him outside. “They’re really mad at you,” Domenick said to him.

“The girls?” Gabe asked, avoiding eye contact.

“Yeah, they’ve been crying and shit. They’re upset, they’re kids. They’ll get over it.”

“I’ll make it up to them. There’s nothing I could’ve done about this. She has epilepsy.”

Domenick looked in Gabe’s eyes. He said, “You ok Gabe?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? You sure there’s nothing I can’t do for you?”

“No, I’m good man, thanks. I should get going though. I need to make them dinner.”

Daniella and Lara marched past Gabe with their backpacks on and their heads down. Their facial expressions looked exactly like their mother's. Gabe entered the car and said, "Did Mr. Cusati tell you what happened to my grandmother?"

Daniella and Lara both stared out of their windows, and they drove the few blocks in silence. He couldn't look at them. His heart beat quickly, his body felt sore, and he had an excruciating headache. "My grandmother's sick girls, what can I do about it?" He said, opening the front door for them.

Daniella and Lara brought cheese and crackers and juice boxes to the den and watched television.

"Do you need anything to drink or anything?" Gabe asked them, but they ignored him, keeping their eyes on the TV.

Gabe knew as soon as Leah walked in the door they'd run to her, tell her how long they waited, describe in detail how scared they were. They would cry. They were waiting for that moment when they could let it out; waiting to ruin him, as they lie down looking peaceful and innocent.

And all Gabe wanted to do was leave them in the house and go back to Jason's.

May 14, 2000

The Warren in Blooming, New Jersey, has a tin ceiling, linoleum floors, the best barbecue ribs and fish-fry in all of Venetan county, and Sierra Nevada on tap. There are pictures of stern men on tractors from 1914 on the wall, the most tender prime rib and Steak Diane, and every now and then, crème brulee or Bananas Foster to order. Light it on fire for someone and it's a big laugh.

Gabe waits tables on Wednesdays and Sundays all day and bartends Friday nights. He's worked there for almost a year, the longest he's ever worked anywhere. When he goes back into the kitchen he tells the cooks about the good-looking women out in the dining room. When he goes to the bar he hears stories about who's cheating on who with whom, and for how long, and who's getting the house in the deal? He goes into the kitchen and tells them the gossip. The owner is the head chef and his younger brother is the sous chef. Their sister is the general manager and almost everyone who comes in is a regular.

Gabe hasn't had a drink in a couple of days. Not since he flipped Jason's coffee table. He was drinking Coors Light cans all day before deciding beer didn't work, better go to gin. He passed out at six before the sun set, Jason and Dante put makeup on him and when Gabe awoke, he flipped the table. He said, "Fuck you both," as they laughed. He ran out of the house and down the mountain, several miles back home.

Some days he comes into work so hungover he has to hide in the bathroom, slam down a couple beers he steals from the cooler when no one is looking just to get out the shakes.

There was one day last week when he was out all night drinking and snorting Adderall, and he went into work with no sleep. He was behind the empty bar for a few hours during the lull between lunch and dinner and swore he kept seeing people. There would be a flash in the corner of his eyes, but when he would turn around, nothing. He kept going like that for most of the afternoon chasing flashes, praying that no one was watching him.

He actually likes this job and gets along with the managers and owner. It's the first time he's worked for a restaurant that isn't a corporation.

His Sunday lunch shift is usually boring. He mostly sits around watching football, or if the wrong crowd comes around, Nascar.

He begins to approach a new table seated next to the front window, looking out to the cemetery across the street. It's around six o'clock and the sun is setting above the trees out beyond the graves. It's two women, yet he seems to only see one.

He immediately knows this is no Venetan County girl. They usually wear dusty flannel and look like they've been rock climbing. Gabe stops, hovers around the bar, before saying hello or taking their order.

She has a defined, angular face with high cheekbones and long auburn hair. Her legs are tucked underneath her like she's stretching or practicing a yoga position.

She starts to laugh and she won't stop--it seems like her whole body is taken over. She repeatedly slams her hand down on the table, and her friend looks around to see if anyone is watching. She sees Gabe laughing too, and seems to become embarrassed. But he's simply enjoying this wonderful image. There is nothing like it, watching her fling

her head back, the tips of her hair whipping the table like the snapping of a matador's cape.

He's dying to find out what's so funny. He thinks about saying that: "Hey, what's so funny?" But he knows that's too familiar. She's too interesting looking to try to be clever right away. What is she doing here? She seems too cosmopolitan. Too traveled. Too something.

She's probably just passing through. On her way from the city to the Poconos, got lost and needs to find her way. If she asks for directions that would be his one chance--he'll find out anything he wants, but she needs to ask. Can't just pry into a woman's life like that otherwise.

She covers her mouth as she gasps for air and Gabe notices she's not wearing a ring. Her companion, a heavy set woman dressed fashionably, shakes her head because she made the joke and can't believe her beautiful friend found it so funny. "Calm down," she says to her, looking over at Gabe, embarrassed.

But the woman laughs even harder. She's having so much fun. Is this the way she always is? She can hardly breathe and she tucks her legs even further underneath her, crossing them under her body.

She's wearing a peach, tight-fitted v-neck tee shirt. Her hair matches her skin tone perfectly--a little tan, and she has light brown freckles scattered throughout her shoulders and arms; pale green eyes and soft thin lips that curve up a bit. Gabe wonders what her heritage is--a mix of Colombian and French? Spanish and Native American? Whatever it is, it's something spectacular. She looks like Jackie Onassis.

He stands in front of her for a few seconds waiting to be noticed. “Doing some Yoga?” He says.

“Excuse me?”

Gabe has a tendency to talk quickly when he’s waiting tables. He thinks that last joke wasn’t funny so he thinks of trying another one. He knows if he pushes on with that same line of questioning it will appear that he’s trying too hard to be funny and charming. He thinks though, for some reason, and he doesn’t know why, even though she’s probably a little too good for him, that he can get this girl.

But he knows he has to be impressive. Not in a cocky, obvious kind of way. He needs to be cool and probably a little smart, like Robert Redford. He especially needs his humor and he needs it now.

“Are you praying to the Sun god?” He asks her.

“The Sun God?” She says. “What makes you think I’m not *Injun?*”

He stares at her for a second, searching for the most clever comeback. He’s seldom speechless. In fact, he rarely stops talking, especially when he’s nervous. He sees flashes of ... *Peace pipe ... Do you have reservations? ... Geronimo? Tonto?*

Nothing witty comes though.

He finally asks, “Well, what tribe are you?”

“What tribe do I look like?”

“Cherokee?” Gabe says, because it was the only tribe he could remember.

“Maybe.”

That’s it, he blew it. Gabe has nothing to say to her anymore. A woman like that has men hitting on her with lame jokes all the time. He would’ve separated himself by

not trying so hard in the beginning, but he couldn't help himself. He thought she wanted a smart and clever guy. He didn't expect her to be so smart and clever in return. And what could he do with the fact that she's Injun? Maybe she's sensitive about that stuff and doesn't want her waiter making thoughtless jokes about it.

This woman is too much.

He realizes he has yet to look at her companion. "So what are you drinking?" He asks.

She says, "Corona light."

And then to the Injun.

"Corona," she says.

Gabe retrieves their beers, telling the bartender in the meantime how he just made a complete ass of himself, and how this woman is probably laughing at him as we speak, to her friend.

When he asks her what she wants to eat, she says, "What do you recommend?"

He loves it when people ask him for recommendations. He tells her, "The pan seared Ahi Tuna. It's smothered in sesame seeds and served with wasabi mashed potatoes and sautéed spinach. It's amazing."

While he says this Jackie Onassis, the Injun, prepares her Corona. She squeezes the lime into the beer and licks its excess around the edge of the bottle. "I don't really like tuna though," she says.

"You'll like this tuna," he tells her, watching her tongue move in little circles.

"And if you order it, you'll make my night."

She smiles at him and says, "Ok."

“Ok?”

“Yeah I’ll have it,” she says.

“Really?”

She giggles, saying, “Yeah, you said it’s *good* right?”

Gabe walks away feeling redeemed, but also, that that exchange felt a little too perfect and he should stop before he says something stupid or mildly offensive again. At the very least, he thinks, she must consider him mildly entertaining and a little cute. She probably wouldn’t be repulsed by going out with him. But she is in a different league. She has to have a career and money.

He thinks, *What could I offer her? I can’t say anything else. Just go back, make sure the food’s ok, and that’s that. Don’t say anything.*

But what he wants to say, what he’s waiting to say, is, “When are we hanging out?” Or, “What’s your number, I’ll give you a call sometime?” All those things Gabe usually says to get the girl, but the more thinking he does, the more nervous he becomes.

He does his job, gets her another beer.

And another for her friend.

Their food comes out and he checks to make sure it’s ok. She ate the sesame seeds off of the tuna, the mashed potatoes, and the greens, but left the tuna on the plate.

“You really don’t like tuna, do you?” Gabe says.

“No,” she says smiling, and Gabe takes their plates to the kitchen.

He returns later with their check, and without thinking, as he closes the check presenter, with his body moving downward towards the table, or perhaps because of this

simple, dominant action, his body arching over theirs, he loses his sense of space and himself, and the words, “Are you two from around here?” Come out of his mouth.

Jackie Onassis says, “No. I just bought a house around the block.”

Around the what? he thinks, with his eyes on her. He nods slowly, imagining what it would be like to kiss her. That moment when they would both realize, maybe simultaneously, *yes, I think you're beautiful and you might think I'm beautiful too.*

He says, feeling like he'll never see her again so why not try it, “Well, I'm a new guy in town looking to meet some people. We should hang out sometime.”

The words stay in the air and Gabe wishes he could dive out and claw them back in. He anxiously awaits her response.

Did I sound desperate? God I hope that didn't sound desperate.

Gabe hears, “What are you doing tonight?” As he stares at the curve in her lips moving up and down. The sun comes back out and flickers all over the restaurant, their table, and his pounding heart.

Tonight?

He realizes at this moment, that for some reason, he has no face. He can't feel a thing.

Did she say tonight?

He shakes his head from side to side. He moves his mouth to say, “I don't know,” but words don't come out and he looks like a tuna.

“What's your name?” She says.

“Gabe.”

“I'm Leah, Gabe, nice to meet you.” She offers her hand.

He watches her soft, long, ringless fingers slide into his palm.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“So you don’t have any plans tonight?” She says again.

“I had plans,” Gabe says, which is a lie. “But they fell through.”

“So call me when you get off,” she says, handing him a slip of paper with her home phone number and her cell number on it.

“Sure thing.”

“Then we’ll figure something out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he says, enclosing the most valuable little slip of paper in the world in his hand. He looks at it. It says, Leah, and it has numbers written all around it.

At the end of his shift Gabe cleans himself up and changes out of his waiter uniform into sandals, khaki shorts, and a light blue oxford that he unbuttons far enough to show her his chest hairs. He hasn’t been this nervous and excited about a girl since Angie.

When he goes outside to the front of the restaurant Leah pulls up in a black Lexus minivan. There are child seats in the back. She waves to him and opens the passenger door. Walking to the car he remembers he hasn’t had a real date in months. Lately his experience with girls had been waking up still drunk from the night before next to someone he couldn’t recognize.

“Nice car,” he says, sitting down. He smells flowers like she swam in a bath of roses before she left.

She changed from her jeans and peach t-shirt into a short black skirt and a white tank top. Her high heels lay on the floor. Her slender feet have a high arch starting from her heel.

“Thanks,” she says. “I’m actually about to trade it in for something smaller.”

She drives. It’s a clear spring night with stars dotting the sky in every direction. They drift onto the highway and listen to music. Gabe thinks really hard of something interesting to talk about, an anecdote maybe from the restaurant that afternoon. *Oh you wouldn’t believe what someone ordered?* But he doesn’t want to remind her of the fact that he’s a waiter.

“So where are you from?” He says.

“Freehold,” she tells him.

“Freehold? What are you doing here?”

“Buying a house.”

“You’re buying a house? Why here?”

“I told you I bought a house,” she says.

“You did?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I guess I wasn’t the only girl you talked to today.”

“No, no,” he tells her. “You were. I’m sorry. It just slipped my mind. I remember. I remember because I assumed that that was the reason you were in such a good mood.”

“It was.”

“So why in Blooming?” He asks. “Honestly, it doesn’t seem like your speed.”

“It’s cheaper, less crowded.”

“But I bet the commute’s horrible,” Gabe says, hoping to sound mature.

Questions pop into his mind like:

Are you married?

“I actually just opened up a salon in town,” she says. “So I won’t really have a commute at all.”

A couple others:

Have you been married?

Do you have kids?

But she so spontaneously came on this drive, how could she have any of those things? Women with husbands and kids don’t run off on trips with random guys at the last minute. She must be single, just never met the right guy, and--not to mention--her body couldn’t have had babies pass through it.

“That’s great you own your own business,” Gabe says. “You’re your own boss.”

“Yeah it’s alright. I’ve been doing it for awhile,” she says. “Do you do anything besides work at the restaurant?”

“I’m going back to college in the fall.”

“What do you study?”

“I switched my major a few times. From history to philosophy to English, now I don’t know what.”

“Ahhh, you’re one of those.”

“One of those? Yeah I guess I am. Were you?”

“No, not really. I was in the military.”

“Get the hell outta here.”

“No, I was.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I was a private first-class for three years,” she says.

“Did you go to war?”

“There was no real war to go to at that time.”

“So what did you do?”

“Push-ups, learn how to read maps and shoot a rifle. I don’t know, it was a while ago.”

“You’ve killed people, haven’t you?”

“Not yet,” she says. “You never thought about joining the military?”

“No, not really.”

“You think you could handle it?”

“I think I could handle the discipline component of it. But I can’t take people yelling at me. Especially if I think I’m smarter than that person.”

“You don’t like taking orders?”

“From the right person I’ll take orders. But from a racist, chauvinist bully? I couldn’t do it.”

“It gives you structure though.”

“I’m sure. I’d just rather figure that out on my own.”

“Fair enough.”

“I can’t believe you were a Marine.”

She smiles. “I don’t look like it?”

“Got any tats?”

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“You do?”

“No, I had it removed. It was awful.”

“Where?”

“On my leg.”

“What was it of?”

“Can we not?”

“Come on,” he says. “What was it?”

“No way.”

“Please.”

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Sure.”

“A female dragon in a marine outfit.”

“Really? Like in a wetsuit?”

“You told me wouldn’t laugh.”

“I didn’t.”

“You joked.”

“I did. I’m sorry.”

“It sounds cheesy I know. But I was really into Chinese astrology at that time.”

“And that’s your Chinese sign? A dragon?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok.”

“What’s yours?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s your regular one?”

“Leo,” he tells her.

“Ahhh, that makes sense.”

“Don’t give me that.”

“It does,” she says.

“What are you?”

“Gemini.”

“Is that good?”

“The best.”

“So you say. How’s Gemini with Leo?”

“I think compatible. But, turbulent. They need to work at it.”

“Are you still into all that stuff?”

“Not as much, but I still remember it,” she says. “So what do you wanna do?”

“Like, for a career?”

“No, I’m not your counselor,” she says. “I mean tonight.”

“You wanna go to the city?”

“God.”

“What?”

“I knew you were going to say that.”

“What did you think you were going to respond?”

“Honestly?”

“Of course.”

“I was kinda headed there anyway.”

“Really?”

“In that direction. And I was thinking if you were going to offer ...”

“So we’re doing it?”

“It seems like fun,” she says. “I haven’t been there in years.”

“Could we go see a show?”

“Like a play?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“Won’t it be too late for that?”

“I guess.”

“You’re into plays?”

“Yeah, I love it.”

“I could see that. I could see you being an actor.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you have a look.”

“Ok,” he says. “There was a period when I wanted to be a playwright. But I never thought about being an actor.”

“You should try it.”

“You think I have what it takes?”

“I don’t know,” she says, smiling. “Maybe.”

He sits up straight. “And in that sleep of death what dreams may come when once... Something, something, something or other.”

“That was pretty good.”

“It’s one of the lines I remember.”

“From?”

“Hamlet, I think.”

“Ahhh.”

“How ‘bout you? What’s your art?”

“What makes you think I have one?”

“You have one.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“What is it? Spit it out already.”

“I paint.”

“There we go. I knew it.”

“And draw.”

“Ok.”

“And I do woodworking.”

“Now you’re showing off. I believed the first two. But an ex-Marine barbershop owner that whittles wood, come on?”

“It’s all true.”

“And what else?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well it’s impressive.”

“Thanks,” she says.

“I’d love to see your work.”

“I have a showing in a couple weeks.”

“Where?”

“Clinton.”

“I’m there.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“No, I love Clinton. It’s one of my favorite towns.”

“Me too.”

“And I wanna check out those war scenes you’re painting.”

“Not quite war scenes.”

“What are they? Landscapes?”

“No.”

“Well what?”

“Kinda hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

“They’re kind of like family scenes,” she tells him.

“Ok.”

“Well they *are* family scenes. Families around the dinner table, that kind of thing.”

“Ok.”

“But, you can tell something is off. Like, maybe someone just died.”

“Or they’re having an intervention.”

“It’s not obvious though.”

“So it’s a little creepy.”

“Maybe,” she says, laughing. “I don’t know.”

“Well I’d love to come to Clinton and check out your creepy paintings and whittle some wood with you.”

“Ok.”

“Can’t believe you were in the Marines,” he says. “That was true?”

“Yes, it was all true,” she says.

He imagines them as an artsy couple at one of her galleries in a quaint town in Jersey. Everyone’s drinking red wine, discussing the emotional complexity of her work, how she paints the “American Ideal” with all it’s ups and downs, the little lies hidden beneath all of us that come out at the most inappropriate moments. Someone asks Gabe what he’s up to and he tells them he’s touring up and down the Appalachians with a theater group doing *Desire Under the Elms*. He’s playing Eben.

Eben? Isn’t that the starring role?

It is, and I’m so excited for this opportunity to grow as an actor. Doing O’Neill is a challenge.

Jersey trees pass them on the left and right, and Leah accelerates, passing people in the left hand lane. They drive past Summit and Berkeley Heights. They keep driving on Route 78, talking.

The sky swirls metallic blue and indigo amidst a black blanket as they pass electric cogeneration plants and rubber factories, black smoke pouring into the air, mack trucks with No Haz-Mat signs, soccer moms returning from the day’s tournament. Some in the left lane. Some in the middle lane. All drivers avoiding State Troopers.

Light from a highway lamp high above shines on her face and her eyes look like antique emeralds. “So,” she says, turning her body slightly towards him. “I’m surprised you asked me for my number.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just am,” she says.

“Didn’t you ask me for my number?”

“No, you definitely asked for mine.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Well, either way it was a surprise.”

“A pleasant surprise?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “A surprise.”

“Well I’m having fun.”

“Me too.”

“Why do you live in Blooming?” she says.

“I don’t live there actually. I just heard that restaurant was hiring. I live with friends in Lowell, which is where I’m from,” Gabe says.

This is partially a lie. He still lives with his grandmother.

They travel under highways criss-crossing all around them like a forming spider’s web, through the marshes of Jersey covered by telephone polls, electric wires, rubber tires floating in the water with dandelions growing out of them. They talk about how sad

it is that all the little towns are vanishing and becoming one big lump of developments between two cities with an ocean off to the side.

“That’s another reason why I’m moving to Blooming,” she says, pointing to the gridlock traffic on the opposite side. “I want some peace.”

“But just wait,” he says. “It’s only a matter of time until they turn Blooming into the rest of it. People have to go somewhere. I guarantee you there will be a Starbucks there within a year.”

She comes to a toll and leans out of the window to drop a few coins in the chute. Her tank top rises exposing the slope of her stomach--tan and smooth, with little muscles leading up to her ribs. The first time he can see underneath her clothes.

Leah says, “Can I ask you a question? I’m just curious.”

Under normal circumstances this would terrify Gabe, but with her, he’s curious back. What does she want to know? With the exception of his financial situation and upbringing, she can know anything she wants.

“Do you fall in love often?” she asks.

“I don’t think so,” he says. “What’s often?”

“Like, I don’t know, once a week?” she says, smiling.

“No,” he tells her. “I’ve only fallen in love once. When I was seventeen.”

At the toll booth outside the Lincoln Tunnel Gabe realizes he has yet to pay for anything. When the car stops he hands her a twenty to pay.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says.

“Come on, you got the last few. Let me chip in.”

“You can buy drinks or something else. It’s my car.”

“That’s what I’m saying. You’re paying for the car, the least I could do is pay the toll.”

They enter the tunnel and as the lights all around them disappear, and their surrounded on all sides with concrete, Gabe watches her left foot stroke her right calf.

“Should I drive somewhere specifically in the city or just park?” she asks.

“Let’s just park first and then figure it out,” he says, realizing this is the first time he’s come into New York sober.

They begin walking down tenth avenue, and Leah seems to enjoy the movement of the city--drunk people already stumbling, billboards for Broadway shows and designer clothing, cabs honking, the smell of dirty concrete and garbage mixed with river air floating over them. She looks up and around with a tiny smile, and listens to Gabe talk and talk.

“So you think I look like an actor?” he says, noticing she’s walking in heels, and they have no destination. He knows he should show initiative, make a decision on their trip, and their mode of transportation to get there. He hails a cab. “Bleecker street,” he tells the driver, because it’s the only one he knows by name.

He turns to Leah, whose legs are crossed in the seat, and wonders, when she looks out of the window, her head tilted up to see the tops of the buildings, what does she think? Is it artistic things like the architecture or design, how it’s bizarre and wonderful these buildings don’t fall over? Or the future, reconsidering, in the split second, a former decision, something from her past?

The cab seems to be taking too long, like the driver went in a couple circles, but Gabe doesn't know how to criticize him. He doesn't want to be wrong, so he says nothing.

He can't wait to walk around with her. He wants to jump out of the car and start this already.

The cab stops and Gabe pays. They walk around the Village and he stays on the side closest to the street. It's a calmer night than he expected. No transvestites or prostitutes, no drug dealers. He's disappointed. He thought that intensity might be a great way to get to know each other.

He looks at her as they stop at a corner. Taxis and buses drive by and there's suddenly an army of people, and the Empire State Building's lit up blue and white high up in the air. He wants to say something beautiful but he can't think of anything.

He swings his arms gently, occasionally grazing her, and she walks close to him. Air wafts under his oxford and cools his body. They stroll along the streets commenting on people's clothes, and how crazy it would be if someone came into The Warren or Blooming's grocery store looking like that.

Gabe hopes she doesn't feel out of place or think he'd prefer being crazy with the other young people.

"People reinvent themselves here," Leah says. "I always regretted not living in the city, even if only for a while."

"You still can. I bet you would rake it in with a salon here."

"Maybe."

They pass restaurants on Christopher Street trying to decide where to eat. Gabe, who has a huge appetite when he doesn't drink, wants to go into them all and eat everything. They see a Peruvian place. "You ever had a Pisco Sour?" Leah asks.

"No, are they good?"

A Moroccan place.

"Tagines!" she says.

"Tagines?"

"You like couscous?" she says.

"Couscous?"

The restaurant is called, *Le Kous*. There are dim lights and candelabras from Africa or somewhere above their heads, rusted metal with diamonds shining out on the curves, like a traveling bazaar or something, with smells of curry and jewels hanging from the low ceiling.

They sit at a banquette with velvet lining the wall, little buttons on the seat with golden tassels dangling as candles reflect strips of light. Behind the banquette the exposed, medieval looking brick is faded, and every fifth brick missing, cut out to make room for burning candles--all of it stretches to a corner where a jazz band warms up to play. Gabe can barely see them in the dimness, through the golden flashes darting in the room like it's being lit on fire. It's hot like a desert.

"It's really dark in here." Gabe says, opening up the menu.

"You wanna go somewhere else?" Leah says.

"No," he tells her, though he does. "What are you gonna order?"

“Everything,” she says, looking with her big eyes up and down the menu. “I just wish I could deep fry this whole restaurant and eat it. I’m *that* hungry.”

“Fried food? You seem so healthy.”

“I exercise, but I’d deep fry a cheesecake if I could,” she says.

The waiter comes over. “Could I have a Rioja?” she says.

“And for you sir?”

“I’m still thinking,” Gabe says.

“Do you want me to ask the waiter to get us a bottle?” Leah whispers.

He’s peed in the middle of the night on a couple girls already. And his last relationship, which wasn’t very long, but still, ended because he insulted her when he was drunk. That girl lost her virginity to him at a party, and he said to her, “If I wasn’t there that night, you would have fucked some other guy.” She hung up the phone and never spoke to him again.

“No,” Gabe says. “That’s ok.”

“Do you drink wine?” Leah says.

“I’ve drank wine,” he tells her. “But I’m more of a beer guy.”

“Ok, they have some good Middle Eastern beer here,” she tells him, her finger rolling down the back of the menu. “Efes is a really good beer.”

“When he comes back maybe I’ll order one,” he says.

The band starts playing and it sounds like gypsy music. The table has sauces on it Gabe can’t recognize. There’s no salt or pepper. The room is full with chatter in a few strange languages. The waiter comes with Leah’s wine and she smells it. She takes a sip

and keeps it in her mouth, swirling it around like mouthwash. She chews it, then finally, swallows, nodding her head to the waiter.

“And a drink for you sir?”

“Did you want to order?” Gabe says to Leah. “You know what you’re eating?”

She orders the lamb tagine. He orders the chicken tagine, whatever that is.

“And to drink?” The waiter again says to Gabe.

“I’ll just have a club soda and lemon for now,” he says.

“No Efes?” Leah asks.

“I’m good for now,” he tells her. “With my meal.”

“Do you want some of my wine?” Leah asks.

“No,” he says. “I’m ok.”

Leah picks up her glass. The purple wine moves in and out of the light like puddles on the side of the highway, and Gabe reminds himself of the days, before he was twenty-one, when he would bribe homeless guys on the street with nickel bags to buy him bottles of sludge vodka before he went into work.

She drinks that glass down and orders another one.

The food arrives and Gabe’s surprised by the size of his pot. It smells like burnt peppers and cigar smoke, with large pieces of carrots sticking out through the mess. It’s too hot to taste. “What’s the name of your salon?” he asks.

“Bianchi,” she tells him.

“What does it mean?”

“It’s my last name.”

“It doesn’t sound Injun.”

She chews slowly, remaining quiet until she swallows. "It's my ex's," she says.

The band begins another song. The saxophone starts slowly, guttural and sensuous. The whole restaurant is quiet for a second while the saxophone pauses-- everyone is waiting to see what is going to happen.

"I know," she says. "I have an ex."

"It's not a big deal," he tells her. "How long have you been divorced?"

"Well, I'm not actually. I'm separated. We're going through a divorce now."

"So you're married?" Gabe asks, already embarrassed by the question.

"Technically. But, we're not together. It's more because the lawyers have been slow with the paperwork."

"Ok."

"We haven't been together for over a year," she says. "You sure you don't want that beer?"

"Yeah I'm ok," he says, shaking his head. "So you must be excited that you're moving?"

"No, moving is awful, honestly. But I'm happy with Blooming. My girls will have a yard to play in. I never had that as a kid."

"Girls?"

"Oh," she says. "Bomb number two. I have two daughters."

"Really?" he says.

"Check please?" she says, motioning to the absent waiter.

"No, don't say that," he says, putting his fork down. "I didn't think that at all."

And it's true. He didn't. He has thought though, that he loves the way words sound coming from her mouth.

"How old are your daughters?"

"Eight and five."

"What are their names?"

"Daniella and Lara. Daniella is eight, and Lara is five."

Later when the check comes they reach for it at the same time. They stare each other down with smirks on their faces. "Don't even try," Gabe says.

"The deal was you could get drinks," she says to him. "It was my idea to go this restaurant."

Gabe tickles her arm and snatches the check away.

Does she not think that this is a date?

"This is our first dinner," Gabe says. "I got it."

Leah sits back on the banquette, defeated. He can see the freckles on her chest in the light. "Fine then," she says. "But I get next time."

"Deal," Gabe says, relieved there might be a next time.

Gabe pays, pulls out the table for her, and gives her his hand. She rises, keeping her hand in his, and looks at him softly as she moves between the tables. Gabe stands behind his chair and lets her pass. He watches the way she walks, her long legs in high heels swaying with the rhythm of jazz and a glass of wine. She has an effortless stride, and each step accentuates the curve in her hips like she's warming up to dance. She wraps her fingers around her purse's handle, slowly clutching it to her body, tightening her arms and shoulders, before she looks back at Gabe.

For a few seconds in the dimness, as flashes of gold spotlight her image, he can't tell if his eyes are open or not. His stomach is hot and his head could drift away into the jeweled ceiling. She must know he's watching her. His neck can't hold his head anymore.

Where did she come from?

He begins to move through the room, which helps him. He opens the door for her. "Now, which way do we turn?"

Leah closes her eyes, and with people walking all around them, she spins in a couple circles, and then stops, pointing in one direction. They walk, passing porn shops and pipe shops, cafes and bars, not seeing anywhere to dance. Leah doesn't seem repulsed by the atmosphere, but she doesn't seem charmed by it either.

"There are so few special places anymore," Gabe says.

"It's cute around here."

"It is, it's nice. But this neighborhood lost its energy," he says. "It's just not the same as it was twenty or thirty years ago. People come to the city and they think, 'Oooh the village. The artists and the weirdos'. And then after awhile, before you even realize, everyone's coming, and they've ruined it."

She watches him speak, not saying anything. He hopes he's not talking too much, being too opinionated. He decides he's not going to express an opinion about anything for the next twenty to thirty minutes.

They stop in front of a lousy looking building with a small door.

"*Smalls?*" she says. "This place is famous!"

Gabe looks at the sign and the steps that lead to the basement.

“Can we dance here?” he asks, knowing that’s his only chance to really get his hands all over her; the immediate excuse to touch her back and hips and hold her hand.

He imagines them pressed up against one another, talking closely into each other’s ears, and the room would be so tiny with the lights drifting past them that they would drift, and she would drift, and they would kiss. And once they kissed, everything else would be so simple. That’s the plan. They can’t do that in a basement.

“Not sure,” she says. “Do you still wanna go?” Her eyes grow bigger and her smile won’t go away.

“Sure,” he says. “I love jazz.”

They walk down the steps and he pays. This time there’s no argument. She’s too excited to even think about paying. They enter the small, congested, smoke-filled room, and the musicians, who seem in a way, larger than life, with their posturing and a crowd of people surrounding them, warm up. There’s a piano, upright bass, and drums.

There’s a row of couches lining the back wall and they sit in a love seat--Leah next to the armrest and Gabe gives her a little bit of space, but very little. She crosses her legs with her knees poking out and watches the band get ready.

“Are you really into jazz?” he asks.

“I love all kinds of music.”

“What’s your favorite kind?”

“Peter Gabriel,” she says.

“That’s a kind of music?”

She laughs. “I don’t know, probably not.”

He settles into the couch and he doesn't know what to do with his hands. Rest one on her knee? Put his arm around her on the couch? Just thinking about it makes his heart pump blood to every corner of his body.

“What're you drinking?” Gabe asks, slowly getting up.

“Wild Turkey,” she tells him.

“Wild Turkey?” he asks. “What are you growing a moustache?”

“Bourbon and jazz,” she says, and by the way she looks at him, Gabe could lay her down on that couch right then and there.

He approaches the bar and orders her bourbon. The only bottles back there, besides Wild Turkey, are a few scotches, one vodka, and some red wine. Not things Gabe would usually drink. It's been such a nice night, it'd be great to have a beer and listen to some music.

“And a Coke,” he tells the bartender. He returns to Leah who seems content looking around at all the people. Smoke floats above her head, yet all Gabe can smell is the Wild Turkey, remembering a night when he blacked out with half a liter of whiskey in his stomach and he fell down a flight of concrete steps.

“What'd you get?” She asks.

“Just a Coke,” he says. “I don't drink what they have back there.”

She puts her arm around him and says, “So I have to drink alone?”

He says, glancing around, “All these people are drinking.”

The tips of Leah's high heels flick Gabe's knee. Their bodies are separated by a thin wall and he would do anything to know what she wants. Does she want him to kiss

her? If so, when? When the band starts playing no one will be looking, they'll just be another lump in this big mess of a room.

The players start with a booming crescendo of notes and a break, the pianist solos with the band quietly accompanying. Leah closes her eyes. Her head sways with the rising and falling of music, and Gabe can tell she feels the composition, the emotion of the piece. It's like a lover mourning. A town lost after a tornado came and swept everything away and everyone is helpless.

Gabe sips his Coke and enjoys the music, but everyone else is drinking. "I'll be back," he tells her and returns to the bar.

Just one, he says to himself.

He comes back, and though the Wild Turkey is revolting, he'll take it. He thinks he'll keep it together. There's no reason why he can't have a little buzz and leave it at that. This girl is too amazing. This night is too perfect.

"What'd you get," she says, opening her eyes.

"Same as you."

"How is it?" she smiles. "That face doesn't look too good."

Gabe takes another sip. His face scrunches up like a prune and he loses his breath. She laughs and sinks into the cushions, returning to the music, which has become an energetic driving force, like an army marching into battle. Gabe sits back, their shoulders touch.

The music surges and Leah plays piano notes in the air.

Gabe's hand lies next to her leg on the couch. When he brings it up to grab his drink in front of them, Leah starts playing notes on his knuckles. His hand is warm and numb. He forgets what he was doing. His drink sits there while his heart beats faster.

She keeps with the pianist's movements, but seems to become bored and starts improvising, making up her own accompaniment. Her eyes are closed and she's having so much fun like when she was at the restaurant.

She plays a single note on his ring finger.

"Beep!" Gabe says.

She smiles. Plays a note on his pinky.

"Boop!"

She giggles. Plays chords.

"Bonk! Bonk! Bonk!"

She throws her hair back as she laughs, and slams her whole hand down.

"Bomp! Bomp! Bomp!"

The band kept playing, for hours and hours, but they couldn't hear the end of that song or any others. They couldn't hear the next number and the segue into the bass solo when the player slapped his way up the neck and everyone erupted into applause. A piece called, "Elegy," where the drums went into another mysterious place only the drummer seemed to understand, and people enjoyed it for a while, but then grew tired of it. How much time had passed? The band even announced the playing of their final song.

It was a love song, the pianist said. "For those lucky few who find someone that understands them so wholly, so deeply, that they can see into their soul. For those people

who could still give themselves over to someone without fear or desperation, the remembrances of those ones that got away, that broke your heart.”

The pianist apologized, “For being so sentimental. For being so corny. But sometimes it’s those sentimentalities. Those corny moments that we all have and they mean so much whether we want to accept it or not. But, enough of all that mess, here’s the song.”

Gabe and Leah didn’t hear any of that because they ran out the door. Hand in hand. Her fingers wound through his as they jumped into a cab.

“Where are we going?” Leah says, her green eyes lighting up seventh avenue all the way to Empire State. Her body presses against the cab door as he leans into her.

He tucks her hair behind her ears, stares at her lips and says, “I can’t take this anymore.” They kiss as the buildings fly above their heads. He lays her down on the seat so the driver can’t see them. They kiss with the dark night keeping their bodies in flickering shadows.

Leaving the city, Gabe asks her if she’s ok to drive and she says, “Sure. I only had two drinks.” They drive far away, back through the Lincoln Tunnel and when they get to the other side, through the river and into Jersey, circling this stretch of highway around a baseball field, the city lights rise and fall with floating brilliant squares like a million checkerboards were lined up. Gabe watches the skyline, the place where it first happened, and tries to figure out where they were in that mess of towers, the huge world in there, all the hidden people that lived in the middle of it all. He looks back at Leah and decides it doesn’t matter. It happened. It happened. It happened.

They drive back down Route 78 with the small Jersey mountains surrounding them on both sides; the road looks abandoned as they listen to music, sailing west and a little south without a thought in their heads. Occasionally, their hands touch.

Gabe tells a story of playing Little League as a child. And they decide it's too early to say goodnight, how could they, they're having so much fun. She shows him her new house in Blooming. But there's nothing to see because it's night and she hasn't moved anything in yet. They drive through the town before deciding to go back to Leah's old house for a bit. Maybe they could watch a movie.

Her home is a mini-mansion in a development of houses, the very houses that Gabe resents. It has bricks intermingled with tan siding, and a large chimney on the roof. The yard has landscaped bushes along the walkway. It's five times the size of any place Gabe has ever lived in. Thank God he's seeing this now and not in the beginning.

"I'm so glad I met you," Gabe says.

She turns to him. The night is calm with a gentle wind and her little skirt billows as she moves. "I'm so glad I met you too."

"Where have you been all this time? I've been working at that little restaurant for awhile."

"I'm just moving here now. I just got here."

Inside, her home has high ceilings, shiny hardwood floors, and a long curvy staircase that winds from the entrance. The colors are all perfectly matched, and though her floors are covered in boxes it's clear she designed the place, and put a lot of effort into it.

Gabe walks into the dining room. There's a huge mural of brown birds flying through willow trees with a stream underneath. Two little girls are bent down at the stream running their hands through the water.

She turns on the light and walks up behind him.

"You did this?" He asks.

"I did." She hands him a Corona.

"It's beautiful. And that's Daniella and Lara?"

"Good memory. Yeah, that's them."

"I'd love to meet them."

"You're not just saying that?"

"Not at all. I love kids."

"Everyone loves kids," she says, beginning to laugh. "Do you like women with kids though?"

"Honestly," he says, standing in front of her. "I've never, done it. But I'm not that kind of guy ..."

"Every kind of guy?"

"I'm not that guy," he says, thinking, maybe he is and he hasn't realized it yet.

He would like to believe he wouldn't be.

They look at the painting and Gabe hopes nothing has changed. So what she has kids?

"You want the tour?" she asks.

She leads him around the house telling him stories of when she first moved in. About her daughters playing here and doing that, and all of a sudden, because she's

talking a lot about them, she seems like a different person. She's a mother. Her life is waking up and cooking kids breakfast. Taking them to school and to soccer practice. In the beginning, when he was walking to her car for the first time, he thought that she probably had friends with kids or watched her niece and nephew like he did. He thought because she's sexy, and acted young, that she couldn't be a mother. Why can't a mother be beautiful and sexy?

She's changed, but in a way he can't explain. For some reason, she's even more beautiful--her kindness and openness right there on her walls, in those girl's bedrooms with murals everywhere. In the family photos hanging in the upstairs hallway.

She's an amazing mother. A nurturing, artistic, funny, mother. Any child would be blessed to be raised by someone like that.

They rest on an old couch in the living room. It looks more like an old hand-me-down, something she was using temporarily until she moved. Gabe assumes her ex-husband took their old sofa.

He puts his hand on her knee, squeezes, and turns her toward him. They kiss and Leah reaches behind him, pressing his body against hers. It's like she wants him inside her skin. They open up the pull out on the couch, place their drinks on a box off to the side, and lie back down.

"Where are your daughters now?"

"With their Dad. He takes them every Sunday."

"So you're busy all the other times? Am I only going to see you on Sunday?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"I don't want to."

“Then you can see me when you want.”

The moonlight from the sky windows, the large gaps above their heads, shines on the fireplace ahead of them. Gabe imagines winter time with her, the snow powdering her hair, sitting by the fireplace with her and her daughters telling stories, drinking hot chocolate, laughing and being a family, and he feels for a second strangely jealous of her ex-husband that he already experienced that with her. What kind of person would let her go?

Maybe after spending time with her he'll start going on auditions. Imagine that-- Gabe at an audition. What if he gets the part? He'll never know if he doesn't try, and if he gets rejected, who cares? Being worthy of her love is an accomplishment in itself.

In a year or two years maybe Gabe will come home and tell Leah, his love, that he got the part. It's a small part in a small movie, but nonetheless. Does she think she could help him memorize his lines? Would she mind him leaving? They're shooting in Paris.

“You got it!” She would say, jumping into his arms. “I knew it! I knew it! I knew it! I knew you were *perfect* for that part!” She doesn't care about Paris. All she cares about is her love is living out his dream, and she was there for it. She is the reason why it all happened. “Of course I'll help you with your lines! Why would you even ask that? I love you so much baby. I'm so proud of you.”

Daniella and Lara come downstairs from their rooms. “What's going on? What's the big news?”

“Gabe's gonna be in a movie!” Leah screams.

“What?” They would say. “Yaaaaaaaay! Congratulations!”

Now that's a life.

With this perfect person with a perfect mouth that needs to be kissed, and not by anybody, but by Gabe and only Gabe. A gift that only he has. She needs his hands right now on her body. His face against hers, feeling the warmth of his skin.

“I wish there was somewhere else for us to go,” Leah says. “But I already moved my bed to the new place.”

“This is perfect,” Gabe says.

She says, “This was all you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tonight.”

“No it wasn’t. It was both of us.”

“No,” she says. “I’m not like this. You brought this out of me.”

The moon above them is the smallest dot in the history of the world. They gaze at it as their eyes slowly close.

She brings her face to his. Her mouth is in front of his mouth. Her eyes watching. She caresses his chin and his cheek. “You are so handsome,” she says.

September 14, 2000

The final image Leah glimpsed of her mother was the back of her head, and the fender of a rusty, light blue pick up truck in the middle of the night. Leah was six years old and sleeping on the couch in the living room because she was afraid of the sounds upstairs, the wind whistling through the trees. She awoke after the first honk and saw her mother run outside in jeans and a tank top, holding a large duffel bag. There was no goodbye.

And to this day Leah's still unsure if she's alive or dead. She never tried to find her.

Her mother left because she discovered Leah's father was having an affair with the fifteen year old babysitter, and he got her pregnant. The babysitter, Ellen, was a nightmare for everyone. She attempted suicide a couple times while she lived with them, and on more than one occasion tried to starve Leah when her dad was away at work. She'd lock Leah in her room for hours.

This continued until Ellen picked Leah up in her bedroom and threw her out of the second story window. Leah was taken away from Freehold, her father and Ellen, and started her life in foster care.

Her foster family lived in Passaic, a small city up north, far away from everyone who knew her. The foster father was an alcoholic, and Leah's foster siblings told her when she got there how mean he was, and that sometimes he hit their foster mother. One girl said he touched her sometimes, though Leah didn't sense anything like that for years.

When she was fourteen though he came home drunk one night and slipped into her bed. While she was sleeping he pressed his finger inside her and held her down.

When she woke up screaming he slapped her across the face, lay on top of her, and with his hand covering her mouth, took her virginity.

The remaining years of high school were a blur for Leah because she tried to keep busy. Her foster father not only never touched her again, he rarely looked at her. Leah enrolled in design classes at the Vocational School and worked at a Dairy Queen full time to buy her first car. After that she was barely home.

On her eighteenth birthday she joined the Marines. Though there was sexual harassment it was the first time in her life she felt genuinely safe. She loved the consistency of the military. She loved knowing what was going to happen at every minute of every day. She felt like she was finally doing something for herself.

After her three year commitment she took her military pay and went to beauty school back in Freehold. She graduated, worked at a couple popular salons while cutting hair for extra money at her apartment on the side, the whole time taking art classes, until she was twenty six and opened up her own salon.

She bought a condo for herself after her business started picking up and she could hire more stylists. It all happened pretty fast, she thought, and she couldn't help but feel that she did it all on her own. There was no one, except maybe her drill sergeant, to thank.

For whatever reason, perhaps because of her entry into the military, or simply an inborn stubbornness and desire for independence, a need to leave her former life behind, she never attended support groups.

In her twenties she had a few relationships, but they never lasted more than a year. Her longest was with an investment banker, who was only a few years older than

she was, whose main issue was his gambling problem. One weekend in Atlantic City she saw him lose twenty-five thousand dollars shooting craps.

On one of their dinners in New York Leah was approached by a modeling scout. He told her that with the right representation she could travel the world and make a lot of money. After initially taking his business card she lost interest after her boyfriend told her she'd have to sleep with all the photographers to make it.

When she was approaching thirty she met a handsome and charming Sicilian named Piero. He had been in the country a few years and ran the family business which was a collection of restaurants spread throughout New Jersey and Long Island.

Piero told Leah he was madly in love with her after their third date. He told her he wanted to make beautiful children with her. He pictured them working in the States in the winter and spending summers in Italy. His family was wealthy and he would show her any part of the world she wanted. She had never left the country before. She had never been in love before. She married him. After a couple years she gave birth to Daniella, then Lara, and several years passed. They never went to Italy once.

A year and a half ago rumors started spreading that Piero was having an affair with a regular at his restaurant, a former Miss New Jersey. Piero's sister, who had become closer to Leah through those years because of their mutual distaste for him, told her. When Leah asked him about it he was honest, and they both agreed that a divorce was the best solution.

When the lawyers inquired why they were having a separation Piero claimed it was because it just wasn't working out. He was in the restaurant, slaving over his family business, and unfortunately, they grew apart.

Leah said, “Because he cheated on me.”

By the time Daniella was five though, it was clear to both of them that they didn’t love each other. Not only because they fought all the time and never had sex, but also because they had very little to talk about besides the children and the restaurants. There was no spark or a mutual interest between them.

Leah turned most of her attention onto her daughters. Nothing was more important than giving them a good home. She wanted them confident, yet humble, and for them to feel safe and loved--to be exposed to beautiful, nurturing things.

She read to them every night for one hour, took them on nature walks and to petting zoos; painted new murals in their bedrooms every year as a tradition. She made them homemade Halloween costumes, walked them to school every morning, and every Christmas made piles upon piles of presents under their tree.

Their home smelled, and still smells, like the spices that grow in the kitchen window above the sink.

In her new home in Blooming, where Gabe helped her move in.

Where Gabe has been living for the past four months with her and her daughters, and their adopted beagle, Cricket.

In the front yard a swing hangs from the single maple tree with one side hanging closer to the ground, dangling from a thread. Framed through the thinly worn rope a few more yards away from the street, the front door is a deeply stained mahogany with an antique knocker. Red and yellow leaves kick up into the air, landing on the swing or into the road. There’s a small patch of grass with a line of bikes, scooters, helmets and dirty sneakers, a couple soccer and kickballs, doggy chew toys--all strewn out from the

driveway, blocking the path to the front door. In pink and yellow chalk is written, “Daniella and Lara”, and “Daniella Rules!” several times. The garage door is open with one car parked on the right side and boxes stacked on the left next to a carpenter’s work station against the wall.

The house has tan aluminum siding and red bricks, several windows surrounded by burgundy shutters, with a wrap around porch and two columns marking the entrance.

The back deck has a picnic table, chaise lounge chairs and a gas grill, looking out to the freshly cut grass leading down to the creek--it’s a tributary of the Hopi river, with weeping willows hanging over the water on both sides.

The sun sets beyond those trees, with shimmering waters reflecting light back towards the yard and the house.

Inside, Leah returns from her jog. She’s wearing a running suit and her hair is in a pony-tail. She enters her bedroom bathroom without knocking, feeling the thick fog on her face and chest the second she walks in. Gabe is cloudy, a ghost behind the shower curtain. He faces away from the water, standing completely still. She watches him with the bathroom door open, letting steam escape, waiting for him to notice the change in temperature. She stares down at her watch. After a minute he still says nothing.

“How long are you going to shower for?” she asks.

He moves slowly, rubs the remnants of soap from his eyes and peeks around the curtain. “What?” he says.

Leah folds her arms, and says, “I said, how long are you going to shower for?”

“I don’t know, why?”

“Do you know how long you’ve been in there?”

“Ten minutes?” he says.

“Twenty-five.”

“Ok, that’s a pretty long shower I guess.”

“Why do you take such long showers?”

The curtain falls back and Gabe moves his head into the water’s stream. He rinses the last suds from his body, turns off the water and steps out. He grabs a towel and rubs his back and chest. She leaves the bathroom and sits on her bed, waiting for him to come out. After a few minutes she thinks, what the fuck is he doing in there?

She’s thought for a while that he’s afraid of her--afraid to tell her what he really thinks. He must want this relationship to end, all she does is yell at him all the time. But what is she supposed to do with someone that claims to love her, yet walks out on her whenever he damn well pleases. Sometimes he’s gone for a couple days at a time. All he’ll do is leave a quick voicemail saying he’s spending the night at his friends back home and he’ll be back tomorrow night. If she’s lucky, he comes home the next day for dinner.

She knows this is his first serious relationship and preaches patience to herself, but it’s getting old. *Is it only his drinking?*

She fears he has another girl on the side, some young thing that wouldn’t care if he got wasted and pissed all over her in the middle of the night; whether or not he takes her out to dinner, and definitely, and most importantly, doesn’t have a couple kids and an asshole ex-husband. He’s twenty-four and she’s forty--why would he stay? What keeps him here?

As soon as he walks out, Leah says, “So, why do you?”

“Why do I what?”

“Why do you take such long showers?”

“They relax me,” he says.

“I’m spending all that extra money to relax you?”

“Extra money?” He puts lotion on his face in front of the mirror.

She watches his reflection. The expression on his face makes her tremble. “Yes Gabe, the water bill.”

“I thought water was free.”

“Are you kidding me? You didn’t think that.”

“Well,” he says, turning around. “I never really thought about it, but I guess I just assumed it was a government service, like sewers. We don’t pay for sewers, do we?”

“No, I guess not,” she says, standing up. She walks to her dresser. “But you’ve heard of the term ‘Water Company’ before, right?”

“I’ve heard people say that.”

“Well what the *fuck* did you think it meant?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never thought about it. I won’t take long showers anymore.”

She takes off her running suit and stands there naked. She glances over at him to see if he’s looking at her, but he’s not. He’s in front of the opposite dresser, searching for clothes. He shuffles through his socks and underwear, looking frustrated. His hands are shaking. Earlier in the day, she knows now for sure, when he forgot to pick up the girls for school, he was drinking. Every time they have a problem it’s in some way related to this.

She can't help but take some of the responsibility for it though because he told her from the beginning. After he'd known her for only a week he called her ten minutes before he was supposed to pick her up for dinner and said, "Look, I'm sorry." And he started to cry. "I'm so, so, so, sorry. I have a problem. I know I have a problem. And I'm gonna do something about it."

She said, "What do you expect me to do about this? How am I supposed to respond?"

He came to her after he sobered up a bit and said, "I don't look different do I?" Hopefully it's just drinking though, and not another girl--for that, she could never forgive.

She asks him, "How long are you going to stand there?"

His head rests on his arms on the dresser, probably tired from searching for clothes. He must've not realized she was watching him. He finally puts on boxers and sits at the edge of the bed.

Besides his reflection in the mirror she can't look at him. She can't believe they're still having the same problem. She doesn't even want to talk about it this time, but she knows she has to.

And he still isn't even looking at her. In the past four months he couldn't go twenty minutes without making love. Now she's standing here naked and he can't even look.

She picks out a bra, then decides not to wear one. It would stick out and look awkward with the new spring dress she's been wanting to try out. She slides the white fabric over her head and shoulders; the little pink flowers scatter throughout her chest and

stomach, the pink shear tassels dangle at her knees, all accentuating her tan skin. She sits and crosses her legs, rubs her feet up and down her calves and ankles. She says, “Do you want out Gabe?”

His blue eyes reflect her mural across from them of a Persian cat lying on a bed of white roses, rubbing its nose into the petals.

“No, I don’t want out,” he tells her. His face is in his hands. “I just didn’t know about the water company. I’m sorry.”

“You’re always saying you’re sorry.”

“You make me think I do things wrong that I need to say I’m sorry.”

She turns to him. “So when you say you’re sorry it’s meaningless? You’re just saying it to appease me.”

“No.” He gets up and paces. “I’m saying it because you’re upset, and because I know *I* am the reason. I don’t want to upset you. I just don’t realize I’m doing anything wrong. If I knew it I wouldn’t do it.”

“You don’t pay to live here the least you could do is take a shorter shower.”

“I told you when I moved here that I couldn’t pay. You knew that. I’ll take a shorter shower, but don’t throw anything you want at me because you’re mad.”

“Do you regret moving in?”

“I don’t regret anything.”

“You don’t wish you could be out with your friends, doing what they’re doing?”

“No,” he says. “I’ve done what they’re doing. I’m happier doing this with you. I’m not great at living like this yet, but I’ll learn. I’ll get better. I don’t fix things, but ...”

“You don’t have to fix things,” she says, rubbing her eyes. “Stop saying that.”

“I wish I could fix things, though.”

“You don’t have to fix things. You do plenty of things well enough,” she says, taking the rubber band out of her hair, letting it fall onto her shoulders. “I said that I wish I didn’t have to ask you to help all the time. That doesn’t mean you don’t help. I just wish you were more considerate.”

“I do more for you than I’ve ever done for anyone.”

She sees the sun is gone outside the window. The tops of trees project vague shadows. “That’s what scares me Gabe,” she says. “You’re not ready for this.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You’re not.”

“I hate you! I hate you!” Comes from the next room.

Leah runs out to the hallway, “Lara! Daniella! Stop it! Stop it, right now! What happened?”

Both girls scream at the same time: “She won’t let me play!”

“Play with what? Lara, you first.”

She looks back into the bedroom and sees Gabe dressing himself. He buttons up his white oxford over his t-shirt and puts on pants. He knew better than to be half naked when the kids were around. They could run in at anytime.

“She plays with Cricket so much more than me,” Lara says. “It’s not fair! She was playing with her for hours and hours after school today with Phoebe, and they didn’t let me play with them.”

“That’s not true!” Daniella says. “We asked her and she didn’t want to!”

“They’re so mean to me!”

“Girls! Daniella, let her play with Cricket.”

“But Mommy! She plays with Cricket all the time!”

“Enough! Lara plays with Cricket right now. Daniella, have you finished your homework?”

“Yes,” Daniella says, sulking as she watches Lara disappear into her room with their beagle.

“Then I want you to go downstairs and look through my sketchbook and find a picture for you and me to work on tonight. We’ll do it after dinner.”

Daniella suddenly smiles and says, “After our walk?”

“After our walk.”

“And Gabe’s coming too right?” Daniella asks.

Leah pauses, “Of course.” She bends down, brushes Daniella’s hair off of her shoulders. “Gabe and I are talking. Can you go and do what I told you to do until dinner without interrupting us?”

“Sure,” Daniella says, sounding calm. “I’ll go look through the book. Can I have a juice box?”

“Yes,” she says, then whispers, “Don’t offer one to Lara now, but if she sees you have one, and wants one, get it for her. Ok?”

“Ok,” Daniella says, and runs down the stairs. Leah opens the door and Gabe’s back on the bed, staring at himself, expressionless, in the mirror. He isn’t crying, but something is going on. He doesn’t seem drunk. The last time something like this happened he could barely walk and he cried for an hour, apologizing.

“That dog was a mistake,” Gabe says.

She sits back down, watching him observe himself. “Yeah, I’ve been making a lot of those lately.”

She waits for him to respond, but he doesn’t. Maybe he does just want to be out. She doesn’t want to say anything until he says something, but as the seconds pass it’s clear to her that he won’t. “Cricket was your idea by the way,” she says.

“I wasn’t taught this. I’m learning now.”

“Taught what? That dogs shit on the floor? I’m so sick of these excuses,” she says. She opens the window letting a breeze sweep through the room. “Some of this is just common sense.”

“That’s easy to say when you’ve lived through it,” he says. “I didn’t have parents to show me how families behaved. I didn’t have a dad that taught me how to fix things.”

“I’m so sick of hearing this shit, you have no idea.” She stands in front of his hunched over body.

“It’s true,” he says.

“You had it hard. I had it hard.”

“I’m not trying to make excuses. It’s just the way it is. You can’t say our past doesn’t affect us. Nobody taught me about these things. I didn’t grow up with a family.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself and grow up. Your problem isn’t your parents. It’s not that your dad didn’t show you the difference between a hammer and a wrench. It’s you. You’re the problem. Start taking responsibility for your actions and go to a fucking A.A meeting.”

“Who did I get that problem from? How’d I get it?”

“The sooner you do things for yourself, the better. Your parents are gone. Look at your sister, she’s living fine. She doesn’t sit there and complain.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He says. “That’s all we talk about!”

“Well, she doesn’t let it get in her way at least.”

“All I’m saying is that I haven’t been taught certain things. I know some things I should do, but there are going to be times when I don’t know things, and you’ll have to help me.”

“So I have to keep teaching you?” She says, staring at him. But he’s back to putting his face in his hands and she can’t say the same things over and over again. It’s dark outside the window, and she might be dead before he realizes all the problems in their relationship.

She touches his shoulders and his body jolts. She forces him to sit down on the bed and kneels before him. “Where do you go Gabe?” She says, looking at all of the blue in his eyes.

“I don’t know,” he says, reaching out towards her.

She tries to pull away.

He breathes deeply and says, “Why don’t you tell me when you want me to do something? You know if you ask me I’ll do it. I’ll never say no.”

“What about today Gabe? I asked you about today. You knew it was important.”

“I made a mistake. It’ll never happen again, I promise. I don’t mean to not keep up with things. I want to help you.”

“I know you do, but you have to follow through.”

“I do the dishes. I clean all the time. I’ve cleaned more in the past five months than I have my whole life.”

“I don’t doubt that. But there’s more to it than just doing the dishes.”

“I help with Cricket,” he says.

“I know.” She can’t stand not touching him anymore.

He rubs his head on her upper chest, slides it into the crook of her neck, and tucks himself underneath her chin.

She holds him against her chest and caresses his still wet hair, makes little knots with it and splits them back apart. Water falls onto her chest making little burgundy spots on the trim of her dress. Gabe sniffs his nose, rubs the water out on her freckles.

“Where do you go Gabe?” She asks again.

Gabe brings his head up and keeps his eyes on her cheeks. She touches his chin and lifts his face up looking into his eyes. “Answer me,” she says.

“I don’t know.”

“I wish you could tell me,” she says, rubbing down his face. She wipes her fingers over his lips making them wet.

“Don’t give up on me.”

“I never said I would give up on you,” she says, which reminds her of the conversation they had the first week. “But I don’t know where you are for a couple of days, and then you come back like you’re defeated, and you expect me to just deal with that. You put a lot on me. I know you told me you were an alcoholic before, and I didn’t want to believe, and we went out drinking, but, we had fun.”

“We did, but I can’t keep it up like that. I get bad.”

“Well we don’t need to drink,” she says confidently. “I just can’t take the disappearing acts.” She remembers the last time, the recurring image she couldn’t stop in her mind of his dead body. She’s just waiting for the moment when something horrible happens. Her eyes gather tears. “Where did you go after work on Friday night?”

“Jason’s,” he says.

“How much did you drink?”

“I got drunk.”

“How much?”

“What you want a number?”

“Yes. How many? Fifteen?”

“Around that.”

“More?”

“Probably a little more.”

“Fuck, when are you going to start caring about yourself?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s not me? Do I make it worse? Do you wish you were free?”

“I wish I was more free,” he says.

“What?” She lets go of him, wipes her eyes and crosses her arms. “Well how free do you want to be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what the rules are.”

“We don’t have kids together and we’re not married. So there are no rules. You can leave whenever you want.”

“I don’t want to leave. I want to take care of you.”

“How can you take care of me when you can’t even take care of yourself?”

Gabe stares at the wall. His hanging arms still at his side. His lips don’t move to speak.

“There’s no other girl?”

“Why would you even ask that?” He rubs his temples, down to his cheekbones and face. “Why do you think I’m him? Why do you apply everything you’ve experienced with men to me? You dump everything on me.”

“I can take it Gabe if there’s another girl.”

“Stop it! Stop saying that. Stop thinking that. Never think that. I love you so much,” he says. “This situation is just a lot for me to handle. I’m overloaded right now.”

“If you didn’t drink could you handle it? Is it me or the drinking? Or both?”

“I think they’re one and the same thing.”

“What the fuck? What does that mean?” She asks standing up, and starts pacing in front of him. “How is that supposed to make me feel?”

“I can’t explain it but I think it’s true.”

“You have to stop.”

“I know.”

“You have to stop *now*.”

“I know.”

“Don’t say *you know*. Actions Gabe. Show me you love me by doing something about it. You talk too much. You don’t even realize the harm you do.”

She sees him looking into her closet for some reason. Maybe at her favorite dress. She hasn't worn it since it ripped. It was when they first started dating and he threw her up on the kitchen counter and made love to her.

"I threw out all the vodka," she says. "There's no liquor in this house now. I don't want to drink it. I don't want to be tempted. I don't want *you* to be tempted."

"Don't you think that's overdramatic?"

"The girls were waiting for over an hour! They could've been kidnapped!"

"In this town?"

"Anywhere Gabe, it can happen anywhere. They're five and eight. They're used to being watched."

"You overmother them."

She stops pacing, looks at him. "Maybe that's true, but that doesn't take away from the fact that you left them hanging."

"You do it for yourself," he says. "To make up for your parents."

"Don't be fucking cruel. I just want to know where you were. And don't lie to me. Were you with Jason today?"

"You do it with me too, with your accusations. You're overbearing. You try to control too much. The kids were fine. They were upset, but they're fine."

Leah grabs him by the wrists, pulls his body towards hers. "Where were you?"

"Don't," he says, snapping his wrist back.

Leah falls forward towards the bed. "This won't get better unless you face it."

"Stop."

"Was it just drinking?"

“Yes.”

“No other girls?”

“No! Stop! Why are you fixated on that?” Gabe stands in front of her, rising over her head. His eyes challenge hers.

“Ok, I believe you. It’s just that I asked the girls if you were acting different, and they said you seemed fine. But you did disappear. So you’re hiding something.”

“I’m not hiding anything. I was drinking, but it was in the early afternoon so it wasn’t enough to get me drunk. I wouldn’t get drunk before I had to pick the girls up.”

“Thank god my kids are here to keep you somewhat sober.”

“It was a mistake. I wasn’t thinking. Sometimes I just want to drink and I don’t want to think about what time of day it is or what I need to do.”

“Well you can’t push me and the girls aside. You have to deal with us.”

The door creaks and slowly opens.

“Mommy?” Lara says, poking her head through the door. She looks at Gabe with small eyes, like she’s analyzing him. Gabe looks beyond her, into the hallway.

“When’s dinner?” Lara asks her mother.

“Soon baby. I’m gonna heat up the chicken and mashed potatoes from last night.”

“Ok,” she says, and quickly runs down the stairs.

Leah says to Gabe, “Can you do dinner?”

“Why couldn’t I?”

“You couldn’t even look at her.”

“I can do dinner.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of them. They’re just kids.”

“I know. You always assume I’m afraid and I don’t know why. Sometimes I’m just thinking.”

Leah starts the shower and slips out of her dress. She says to him, moving back and forth from the bathroom to the bedroom, waiting for the water to get warm, “Could you heat up the chicken and mashed potatoes while I shower?”

“Sure,” he says. “When do you want to have dinner?”

“Ten minutes is ok?”

He nods and moves towards the door.

“Don’t let Lara eat cereal ok?” She calls out, “No matter how much she begs!”

She steps into the shower, feeling the hot water on her body, and thinks about the association he made between drinking and their relationship. She thought that she was the thing in his life that took him away from all that. He should be thanking her for saving his life.

But, she fell in love with Gabe immediately, and it’s so easy to keep giving him more chances.

In the beginning it seemed like all they did was make love.

She remembers that spring and summer. If only they could go back.

He said, “I feel everywhere and nowhere,” as he was deep inside of her.

She taught him how to please a woman that wanted to be pleased. The way she used her mouth on him. The first girl to suck on his nipples. The first girl to lick from his neck, down his stomach, and down further.

And she just kept going.

“No, baby,” he said to her. “I’m gonna ...”

So she sucked harder and started rubbing his testicles.

When he came in her mouth she kept her lips around him and swallowed. He lay back down, licked his lips and tried to catch his breath. She kissed her way up his stomach and chest, and rested her head on his neck. She looked down and played with his limp penis.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said.

“Why?”

“I never had that happen before. Isn’t it demeaning?”

“Gabe, I love you. Why wouldn’t I want every part of you?”

She knew her issues. She took on people’s problems too much, let people get too close. It was the way she was.

She believed there was something special in Gabe though, whether it was being an actor or opening up a restaurant, it didn’t matter. She knew that once he did get on the right track he’d start feeling better about himself, and he’d be a better man, boyfriend, husband, or father.

She listens to *The Smiths* while she gets ready. She applies makeup, puts the same dress back on and goes downstairs. Gabe, Daniella, and Lara are all sitting at the table talking, and he heated the food like he said he would. There’s four plates out and everyone has water. Lara probably begged for apple juice, but Gabe knows at this point that apple juice is all sugar and she can’t have sugar this late in the day.

The dinner table is made for a country kitchen--lightly stained oak with long benches that could seat ten people comfortably. She bought it in Soho, thinking it was the perfect kitchen table for her new home and life in Blooming.

The armoire holding the plates and glasses, handmade by a local carpenter, takes up one wall in the kitchen, and shows lemonade pitchers, tea kettles, and ceramic plates with hand drawn sunflowers and Black Eyed Susans on them--all rustic, and all from Pottery Barn.

Gabe praised this kitchen and Blooming, saying it was a perfect match, that he felt like he was finally a part of something small and beautiful. There was something so special about a place no one else knew about besides the people who lived there. Lowell was only fifteen minutes away, but when Gabe was here, he said it didn't exist.

Most nights after dinner they would go for walks along the creek taking turns holding Cricket's leash. Gabe would stop and talk to the old men spending their retirement in their garden. They'd say, "How's the house coming along Gabe?"

And Leah would smile, listening to Gabe speak about the house, the swings and shutters, the back deck, with such warmth. "Oh, you know," he'd say eventually. "A work in progress."

"Rome wasn't built in a day Gabe."

"I hear ya. See ya around."

The weeping willows bowed to them over the water. The ducks chased the girl's little scurrying feet and the trail of bread they left for them. All the way to the edge of town and back and Leah knew this Blooming life gave him the stability he needed. He could feel like a man in Blooming, just another guy living with his lady. No one knew his past or hers.

"Where's Cricket?" Leah asks, turning off the ringer on the house phone. She didn't want to be disturbed during dinner.

“I let him outside,” Daniella says.

“Thank you Daniella,” she says, sitting down. “Well, everything looks great.”

“Hey,” Daniella whispers to Gabe. “Is everything ok?”

“Daniella?” Leah says. “Not at the dinner table.”

“Sorry,” Daniella says. “I was just wondering.”

“Geez *Daniella*, don’t you know we’re having dinner?” Lara says.

“Everything smells delicious,” Leah says. “Right girls?” And they both nod in agreement.

. Gabe takes a large drink of water nearly finishing the entire glass. “You’re not the only culinary talent in the house, ok?”

“Oh really?” Leah asks. “Is Lara making ice cream cones or something?”

She looks for a return smile or chuckle, but he’s sitting there staring at the food absently. “Hey,” she says, looking for a response.

He looks at her. She hugs him across the table. “I love you,” she whispers into his ear. “I love you so much.”

“Yaaaaaaaaay!” Daniella says. “Me too! I love you too Gabe! Are we gonna go for a walk tonight Mommy?”

“Maybe,” Leah says smiling. “We’ll see.”

The trick with kids, which Leah taught to Gabe, is to never commit to anything, and most importantly, never say the words, “I promise.”

“Am I really making ice cream cones?” Lara asks.

Once again, she responds, “Maybe.”

“Maybe, maybe, maybe,” Lara says.

“Maybe, maybe, maybe, all you say is maybe,” Daniella says.

“No,” Leah tells them. “Sometimes I also say ‘I love you’.” She rises again in her seat, whispers into Gabe’s ear, “I really do love you. I’m sorry that today was difficult.”

“It’s ok Mommy,” Daniella says. “We’re ok. There’s no reason to be mad at him.”

“Daniella! How do you hear everything?”

“I keep my ear to the ground,” Daniella says.

“Maybe you should be a journalist,” Gabe says.

“But I wanna be an actress!”

Leah smells Daniella’s hands. “Wash your hands drama queen.” Then Lara’s, “And you too.”

Daniella runs into the bathroom singing, “The sun will come out to-morr-ow, bet your bottom dollar that to-morr...” and Lara slams the door on her.

“Shuuuuuuut up!” And Lara looks at her mother for approval.

“Lara! I was singing!” Daniella says.

Leah looks over, “Stop it Lara! We’re having dinner! Finish washing your hands and get in here Daniella! Let’s see how Gabe did.”

Gabe says, “It’s just leftovers.”

“Well everything looks great Gabe,” Leah says again. The girls sit back down and everyone starts eating. Gabe and Leah drink their water.

Leah says, “Daniella, how was school? Did you figure out what to do with the remainders?”

“Yeah, it was fine.”

“Lara?”

“Yes,” she says.

“And you?” Leah says, a little frustrated.

“Good.”

“School’s good, or you’re good?”

“School’s good.”

“You’re not touching your food,” Leah says.

“I’m not hungry,” Lara says, looking at Gabe from the corner of her eyes.

Leah says to her, “Then you can’t have dessert or fruit.”

“Mommy!”

“No Lara! Don’t try to bully your way in! Eat the chicken.”

“I don’t *want* to! I’m not *hungry*!”

“Then sit there and watch us eat.”

“Mommy,” she says, and starts to cry. Lara was never affected by being scolded and everyone knows her tears are fake--it’s only her mother’s disappointed tone that could upset her. Lara wraps her little arms around her mother’s leg and holds on. Underneath the table she makes sounds in between her stifled breathing, saying in a matter of four gasps, “Mom-my, b-ut, it-s, Ga-be’s, fau-lt.”

“What are you talking about?” Leah says.

“He left us all alone! I was scared!”

“What does that have to do with anything Lara?”

“Mommy!” Lara says, still hiding underneath the table.

“Stop trying to change the subject. Eat your dinner.”

Daniella says, “Lara, come on and eat.”

“Shut up!” Lara says, standing up.

“Girls! Lara! Eat or go to your room.”

“But Mommy!”

“Sit!”

Lara sits in her seat and glares at Gabe.

“She’s manipulative,” Leah says to Gabe. “She just wants a bowl of cereal and this is the length she’ll go to to get one. Isn’t that right Lara?”

Lara says nothing and takes a bite of chicken with her eyes full of tears. Her mouth is full, and through her heavy breathing small morsels shoot onto the table.

“I think it’s good Gabe,” Daniella says, with a mouthful of food.

Gabe nods at her thankfully. They eat in silence, only speaking to pass condiments around as the moon shines high above the trees, onto the picnic table through the double doors. Leah sees Gabe’s not eating much, barely picking at his chicken. He’s staring out at the backyard--the sandbox filled with toys, an old carpet Leah called an eyesore that the girls used for fashion shows, and Cricket digging holes by the fence closest to the creek.

Cricket sits peacefully in the grass looking out at something in the water, runs in the direction of the deck, and stops again in the middle of the yard. Cricket turns around and watches Gabe. They stay like that looking at each other, and Leah remembers the looks on everyone’s faces the morning they adopted Cricket from the animal shelter.

“We’re gonna have a dog!” Daniella screamed, jumping into Gabe’s arms. “Like a real dog! Not a puppet dog or a plastic one, but a real life dog!”

“No *duh* Daniella. What’d you think it was?” Lara said. “I love her more.”

“No you don’t!”

“Do too! Do too!”

And it was all Gabe’s idea. He suggested they adopt a dog, and he wanted a beagle. “Seems like a nice family dog,” he told them, on the way to the shelter. They went home and played with her all day in the grass.

Those smiles were the same smiles on the girls faces on those spring mornings when Gabe woke them up playing slow songs on the guitar. The first time he did that Lara said, “That’s the best way to be woken up ever!”

Cricket hears something, runs back towards the fence, and Gabe, noticing Leah’s watching him, eats a forkful of mashed potatoes.

“How’s your grandmother doing?” Daniella asks.

“She’s ok. Thanks for asking,” Gabe tells her.

“What?” Leah says.

“Gabe’s grandmother had a seizure,” Daniella tells her.

Leah puts her fork down. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t?”

“That’s why he was late picking us up,” Daniella says, looking back and forth from her mother to Gabe.

“What?” Leah says, shaking her head. “I didn’t know your grandmother had epilepsy.”

“Yeah, she does.”

“Really?” She says. “Anything else she has?”

“No, just that.”

Daniella asks, “Is she not ok Gabe?”

“She’s ok,” Leah answers. And into her water glass says, “Him on the other hand?”

“Mommy, can I be excused?” Lara asks.

“Sure Lara, just leave your plate. I’ll take care of it.”

Gabe picks up the plate, moves to get up.

“Sit down. I’ll take care of it.”

Gabe sits, leaving the plate.

“So how long has your Grandmother had epilepsy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Funny you never told me about that.”

“Never came up.”

Gabe keeps his eyes on his plate--at the bones and the mashed potatoes with a gaping hole in them.

“Mommy,” Daniella says. “Can I have more chicken?”

“Yes baby.”

Gabe rises with Daniella’s plate.

“Sit,” Leah tells him. “You’ve done enough today.”

“I’m fine. I can help.”

“Can you?”

“Yes,” he says, snatching the tongs off of the table. “And I’d be even better if you asked me that *less*. Sometimes, less is more.”

“Sometimes,” she says, grabbing the tongs out of his hand. “A little is better than none.”

“That’s really nice,” he says, picking up a chicken leg with his hand and dropping it on Daniella’s plate. “Can you talk about something different? I am one thing to you and that’s it.”

“She prefers the breast,” Leah says.

“Leg’s fine mommy,” Daniella says.

Gabe asks, “But what do you prefer sweetie?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can get you a breast,” Gabe says.

“It’s ok,” Daniella says. “I’m not picky.”

“Gabe will get you what you want sweetie. He’s a people pleaser.”

“Stop,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“Stop berating me,” he says.

“After what you did today you don’t expect a response? You don’t expect backlash?”

“If you’re gonna say it, say it. But wait until the right time. Stop being subtle, it’s not cute.”

“I just received this information Gabe, because, clearly you wouldn’t have told me.”

“I just didn’t think about it. Can we talk in there?” He points towards the living room.

They meet at the furthest corner from Daniella. There’s antique mahogany furniture, a gothic chandelier, and Japanese pictographs. Leah says, “What’s the matter with you? Making up an *illness* for someone? Do you think they’ll never find out that your Grandmother was fine? We see her all the time.”

“They’ll forget.”

“Are you an idiot? Kids don’t forget anything. They’ll bring it up next time they see her.”

“I needed to say something.”

“No you didn’t. They’re kids. You could’ve said that you were sidetracked, got caught up with work or something, and they wouldn’t have questioned that. But you felt guilty. You felt the need to defend yourself. And you made things worse.”

“I felt like I should say something,” he says, sitting on the couch. “Perhaps it was a bad idea.”

“If you forget them like that again I will never let you be alone with them. You have no idea how much faith I have lost in you. I can’t believe it’s only been five months and this is where we’re at? What happened to you? You used to have so much energy. You used to be loving. Are you bored with us already?”

She walks back into the kitchen where Daniella is playing with her mashed potatoes. She didn’t attempt to listen in on their conversation. She always respected people’s privacy, and was happy being alone, keeping to herself, to her eating, and playing with her chicken leg.

Leah cleans up Lara's placesetting around Daniella whose face hangs over her plate, the tips of her brown hair darkened from the greasy fried chicken when she dipped down to play with her mashed potatoes. She says, "Are you ok Mommy?"

"Yeah sweetie I'm ok," Leah tells her, turning on the faucet to rinse off the dishes.

In the living room Gabe stays in darkness, a thin trail of light leads from the kitchen but doesn't reach his feet on the couch. She knows he's had enough and can't talk about this anymore.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Daniella asks. She walks over to her mother, rubbing her greasy fingers on her back as she reaches up to hug her. Leah squats down and rubs her face, looks at her softly, admiring how beautiful she is.

"Baby, you're a mess," Leah tells her.

"I love food."

"I know you do. You love to eat."

"Probably too much," Daniella says.

"No honey. You're healthy, and beautiful. It's fine."

Daniella hugs her mother, whose eyes are becoming more and more red. The man in the next room, who she loves more than any other she's ever known or touched. He could do so much more. And not for her, but for himself. If he could do something for himself, something that he loves, he would see that that the world isn't so cruel.

Leah and her daughter squeeze each other, and she knows Gabe's struggling over there. She wants to go over and shake him violently, slap his face, tell him that she'll

never give up on him, that he doesn't need to fix things, and that this day may seem long, but it's nothing compared to the love that two people can share--so just be strong.

"I love you Mommy," Daniella says, as the water and dishes get soapy in the sink. The kitchen is still a mess, and Leah cries, sniffing her nose, reminding herself that she needs to believe in something.

But she doesn't know what.

The only thing she knows for sure is that she loves this little girl at her feet, and that she'll do anything to keep her safe. Same thing goes for the one upstairs. She wants so badly to believe in Gabe, that he can love and give himself to them, accomplish all his goals, feel good for once about who he is and where he comes from without running away and disappearing.

She wants to tell him all these things, and as she lets Daniella go to bring him back she hears the front door swing open and shut. She walks slowly through the foyer and sees Gabe starting his car. She runs out to him, bangs on his hood, but he starts backing out. He won't look at her.

"What are you doing?" She tries to open the passenger door, but it's locked. "Don't!" She chases him out of the driveway, down the street, and waves her arms in the air, but still he doesn't stop.

She stands still in the middle of the road, praying he will change his mind, until his car disappears. He turns right, which is towards the highway, which leads him back to Lowell, and back to Jason's house.

Leah cries, imagining the look on his face when the alcohol first sets in. What is he going to think about? What does he think he's going to be? He's drinking alone in a

dirty basement, talking about how he couldn't make it work with her--and how could it? Why would you stay with some older woman with kids anyway? And he's drinking with some young girl that's sympathizing with him. How much longer until he sleeps with someone else?

Her green eyes darken as the moon disappears behind a cloud. Mascara runs down her cheek. She can't think of anything anymore.

She walks back inside, letting the front door slam, and sees Daniella has returned to her seat at the table. She drops her fork into her gravy, spilling some over the sides of her plate.

Leah stares at her, crying, and Daniella runs over. She wraps her arms around her mother's waist, squeezing her body, and says, "Where'd he go Mommy?"

"I don't know baby."

"It's ok Mommy," Daniella says, rubbing her mother's hands. "He'll be back."

Leah pinches her tired eyes shut, trying to keep the tears from falling into her daughter's hair. "I don't know baby," she says.

"Remember when he would sing us to sleep with his guitar? Remember riding the roller coaster?" Daniella says. "He'll be back."

Leah's tears fall on Daniella's head. She says, "Mommy, can I sleep with you tonight?"

Leah nods and strokes her daughter's hair, gasping, unable to speak. She picks up Daniella and walks over to the den. Light from a streetlamp shines through the picture window. They lie together, silent in the shadows on the floor, staring at his guitar stand in the corner, the song books stacked to the side, and the harmonica on the armoire.

Back in the kitchen, Gabe's plate still sits on the table, bare chicken bones and a mound of mashed potatoes with a hole dug in the middle.

Lara sleeps upstairs with her clothes on, teeth not brushed.

The moon hides behind the mountains and the house is dark. Faint music from Lara's television travels down the stairs and throughout the house as Cricket barks from the back deck hoping to come back in.

January 15, 2002

Gabe wiggles his toes inside the maroon slippers he's had since he was fifteen. He fidgets with the cotton's hardened tips and he remembers Julia throwing him on his bed and tickling under his arms. And Shannon Doyle, who looked like his sister in the eleventh grade, so he thought it was wrong to be attracted to her. The two of them were alone in his friend's hot tub one night after a basketball game, and he was about to make a move on her but she said, "You're bony." He rarely spoke to her after that.

The TV shows the morning news, but he's not paying attention and his cereal has become soggy. His soft pajamas and his grandma's old loveseat against his skin remind him of Saturday mornings as a child waking up early to watch cartoons, running full speed from his bed to the couch and snuggling up with his blanket and his stuffed toy penguin Jonathon while they ate Honey Nut Cheerios together and his grandma smoked cigarettes and muttered to herself in the kitchen.

Sunlight pokes through white clouds and the shades from the window. He remembers summer nights racing from his apartment up the grassy hill to the community pool, hopping the chain-link fence and diving fully clothed into the shimmering water, swimming to the deep-end, hopping quickly back to his feet and sprinting home. He and his friends would lie in the grass soaking wet, look up at the stars to whisper secrets. Every summer was the same: they played basketball all day and hopped pools at night.

He tried to explain pool-hopping to Kari Shulman. She had dirty blonde hair just past her shoulders, long awkward legs, big blue eyes behind bright red rimmed glasses, and she never used a bookbag. Instead, she clumsily walked down the halls nearly dropping the books from her arms.

On the first day of eighth grade Gabe discovered she was the previous owner of his math textbook and he used this as his excuse to speak to her. As it turned out though, it was simply poor penmanship and it wasn't her, which made sense because they were in the same grade and Gabe was accelerated a year ahead in math.

Maybe she accidentally fell asleep with the math book in her arms, he thought, and stayed that way the whole night. Gabe remembers sliding his nose up and down the pages to see if it smelled like her before he wrapped the book with paper bags from the grocery store, and later his embarrassment when she said, "Why would you swim in someone else's pool?"

"It's breaking and entering," Gabe told her, thinking she would be impressed.

"That sounds stupid," she said. "You could get arrested."

"It's fun, because our landlord comes out and chases us but we never get caught."

"You have a landlord?"

On summer days when the Jersey humidity was unbearable Gabe and his friends Jermaine and Jamie would disappear into the woods, to the railroad bridge over the river. They would climb up to the tracks and jump out from fifteen, forty-five, or sixty feet in their old, dirty sneakers, while railroad conductors tossed them bottles of water out of their moving train from time to time.

They'd swim in the river and jump all day and come back home smiling and smelling like sewage.

Once, Jamie found a rope swing a few miles upstream off of an abandoned farmhouse. All day they soared through the air on a tire and splashed into the river. Jamie suggested later they march all the way to the bridge.

“What if it gets too deep?” Gabe asked.

“Then we swim!” Jamie said.

“What if we can’t make it? What if there’s shit in the water or dead bodies?”

“Then we go around it.”

It took the whole afternoon and they arrived at the bridge as the sun set beyond the trees. They slid down little waterfalls and helped each other climb steep rocks and Gabe thought there was no difference between them and Huck Finn. He thought at any point the farmer of that abandoned house could come after them shouting and shooting his shotgun into the air and it wouldn’t matter—no one could stop them because the whole world was that river and the heavens above them. The blue sky and white clouds, the green river and their soggy feet.

By the time they reached the bridge it was almost too dark to jump—they did one each and walked back home through the darkening forest.

Why couldn’t he have met Leah in the sandbox or at the river? Would she still speak to him then--if they met running around the playground, her bright green eyes shining in the sun, carrying a pail full of sand? They could’ve built a little castle or see-sawed back and forth while Gabe told her all of his little secrets, his stash of secret paper airplanes he kept underneath his bed, and maybe they would make rhymes with each other’s names--

“Gabe the slave! Gabe the babe!”

“Leah makes me pee-ah!”

“Shut up Gabe! That doesn’t even make *sense!*”

Or if they met in high school would she have minded his braces and big eyebrows?

Maybe he would've made her laugh--the beautiful and misunderstood girl--all the guys too intimidated by her--but Gabe would make a simple joke about lockers or the Vice Principal, do an impression of a giraffe eating fruit from a tree, anything to make her smile. And she would love it because she would want attention.

His feet rest next to the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, open to page one of Bill's story. The pages are yellow, falling apart at the edges, and the cover has a tear down the middle. When Gabe's grandmother gave it to him on Christmas she told him that it was once his mother's, and she hoped it would work more for him than it did for her. There was no tree sitting in the living room and they had no presents, besides for the Big Book, to exchange. Gabe made a turkey and they watched Christmas movies, and never talked about jail once. A couple times she let him bum a cigarette.

The day after he was bailed out, when he first walked into the apartment, he smelled liverwurst and coffee, her stale *True Blue* cigarettes, and noticed the dust lingering in the light stretching from the kitchen window. She was in the kitchen smoking by the window while Julia waited in the car.

"Hi Grandma," Gabe said, keeping a few feet from her.

She kept looking outside the window. "You made it here okay?"

"Yeah, no traffic."

"You take the parkway?"

"Yeah."

"I hate that road."

"I know. It's always backed up."

"Julia's in the car?" She pointed towards her white Jeep in the front.

“Yeah.”

“Why doesn’t she come in? Is she afraid of me?”

“No, of course not. She thinks we should talk.”

“We’re talking.”

“Yeah, I know.”

She poured coffee into her cup. “You want something to drink?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Okay,” she said. “Well, go and look at your room. I did a lot of work on it.”

The room looked huge. Bigger than when he was a child. The bed was made and everything was in its original place. His stereo was on top of his dresser with his tapes and CDs stacked and organized on the side. On the floor next to his desk were his VHS movies--alphabetized, just like he did.

His shoes were lined up in his closet. The same Michael Jordan poster hung on the wall. His table fan sat on his desk blowing around the room and it smelled like lemons. She must’ve dusted all day for him. The two windows, looking out to the small patch of grass behind the building, had their shades drawn.

He remembered being locked out when Julia and her boyfriend were in there and when she was changing. “Just a minute!” And her bras on the floor for all those years they shared the room.

Once, late at night when their grandmother had gone to sleep, when Julia was fourteen and Gabe was nine, she practiced French kissing on his ear. Her tongue swirled around his lobe and Gabe wondered if she was eating his wax and what would it taste like, and if it was wrong what they were doing. He didn’t stop her though, either because

it tickled and it felt good, or maybe he liked them being that close. Gabe was someone she could do that with, and it wasn't strange.

After Julia left it was just Gabe and his grandma.

And the apartment was always small even for the two of them, God knows how there was ever three.

There are pictures of Native Americans scattered on the walls, and dreamcatchers hang in every room. Dusty black-and-white pictures of the family sitting on ragged steps in Elizabeth, when they first came to America.

All the furniture is either from yard sales or hand-me-downs. The armoire's corners are chipped with little bits of white showing underneath the fake wood. The couch cushions of their love seat have dark spots on them and cigarette burn holes.

On the ledge between the living room and the kitchen is a picture of Gabe and his grandmother at his high school graduation.

He's felt for the past couple weeks that it was always his grandmother's home and she was merely helping him out. He never understood why she didn't go to his Little League games or the Spelling Bees, the PTA meetings. That was just the way she was. She doesn't like crowds or socializing much.

At most times though, growing up, Gabe and Julia had enough fun between the two of them it didn't matter much if grandma was involved. She let them have their fun and they listened to her complain.

Gabe hears her rustling in her bedroom and assumes she's smoking a cigarette next to the window. Under the Big Book is Gabe's old Al-Anon guide when he went to meetings as a kid. His grandmother went with him but Gabe didn't like it because the

other boys all wanted to play tackle football in the church parking lot afterwards and mocked Gabe when he didn't want to.

When Gabe picks up these books, opens to the first pages, seeing the small print and the browned, withered edges, it reminds him of those boys being little jerks to him and his mother saying, "God grant me the serenity," over and over.

He doesn't remember much about his mother but he does recall going to the bar with her, when she would leave with some guy and go into his car for a little while. He didn't know what she was doing, but he always knew it was bad. He knew there was something wrong with her, even when he was five.

He doesn't know what to think anymore about all the dirtiness he felt as a child towards her and alcoholism because he doesn't see his life as dirty. He doesn't have scumbag friends driving beat up pick-up trucks, late on their child support, spitting and chewing Tums, drinking *piss-warm* Miller High Life's.

He picks up the Big Book and leafs through its pages. There's a chapter entitled, "*Me An Alcoholic?*"

One line is marked:

And though perhaps he came to scoff, he may remain to pray.

He returns to the twelve steps, reading the first one: "We admitted we were powerless over our addiction--that our lives had become unmanageable."

He closes his eyes, brings the book up to his nose and smells his mother.

"There's a meeting at ten at the church across the street," his grandma says, walking into the living room. She sits next to him, opens her TV tray in front of her. "I think it's a beginners meeting."

“Ok,” Gabe says.

“We can walk there.”

His grandma is short and chubby in grey sweatpants, slippers, and a long black t-shirt. Her short, white puffy hair has blue tips, like a little storm cloud.

Gabe looks back down at the book. "Sounds like fun." He gets up, walks through her cigarette smoke into the kitchen to make coffee, looks down at the black and white checker tiles in the kitchen, and remembers the time a police officer came into the apartment. He was asking questions about the domestic abuse downstairs. Gabe was probably fourteen.

The police officer said, "This is by far the nicest apartment in this neighborhood."

Gabe had a hard time believing that--he lived in by far the most disgusting place out of all of his friends. Everyone else had long backyards full of grass, in-ground swimming pools with diving boards and slides, hot tubs, saunas, tennis courts, trampolines, and decks looking out for miles and miles sometimes stretching all the way to the city. It couldn't be true that this apartment was the nicest.

When Julia drove him here a couple weeks ago he saw his neighborhood's main intersection for the first time and was amazed how much it changed. Lucky's Bar and Lounge had been torn down. All that was left was the rubble and concrete dust and dirt piled up on the corner, a "For Sale 1/4 acres" sign posted outside a fence. Shoprite became *La Comida Mexicana*. There was still the Happy Mart convenience store and the AAMCO on the opposite corner.

For the past couple weeks he's been pumping gas at the Exxon down the street and walking the snowy blocks of his childhood. He hasn't seen one old friend. He's looked

but he can't find them. He's walked to the basketball court and the highway, to Felix's Diner. He's seen the seasonal ice cream shops closed and all the liquor stores. The hills that his friends sledded down on snow days when school was closed.

He stands at the kitchen window with his coffee. His street looks the same. At the end of the block there is a ramp to the apartment complex's main road surrounded by a thick metal chain. People can't enter or exit. The low income housing section, instead, has a separate entrance off to the side. In high school Gabe actually didn't mind the separation; it gave him an excuse to ask his friend's parents to drop him off a few blocks away from his apartment. No one had to see where he actually lived.

He watches his neighbors scrape ice from their windshields, knock snow off their roofs. A few black kids hide behind electric generators and throw snowballs at a car until the alarm goes off. They run away, scattering through the snow in several directions. When the alarm stops ringing, it's quiet.

Most days as a child, if Gabe went outside to play touch football in the street the game would be broken up by cops making their rounds. They had a few select kids they chose to bother. Ray Brown, who was stocky and strong, had a pit-bull as a pet, and was from Newark. He fought a lot and had dislocated a kid's jaw in the seventh grade. Once, Gabe heard the cops call him "Blackie", and they asked him if his mother was still on welfare. The football game was over after that and everyone went home.

Looking out into the street that's what Gabe remembers--cop cars and guys drinking on stoops, and Miss Sweetie, an old black woman from the deep South who used to yell at people from her porch.

The snow must be three feet high in the street. One car attempts to drive through it,

but it's not making it very far. The landlords always plow their street last, or not at all.

The buildings have dark red bricks and bright orange doors. Power cords stretch from building to building with an inch of snow on top. There are a few cars with taped up broken windows. A few others seem abandoned. There are few trees and small bushes in front of every building.

Gabe sits back down with his coffee, glancing at the Big Book. It says *powerless*, and give yourself to a higher power. He remembers Leah waking up early in the morning. The sun wouldn't be out yet and Blooming would be still and vacant like a cemetery. But Leah was already on her Stairmaster and doing yoga, fixing the bumper on her car, or building something. There is no reason to wake up at five o'clock in the morning every day, but she did, and she got work done so she could play with her kids later. She took on everything--running a business, raising two children by herself, volunteering, painting, and the PTA. She did it all at once.

Gabe reads the section about being powerless, lays the book back down, and remembers those moments, as few as they were, when Leah broke down and cried. She said she couldn't take it anymore, not just Gabe, but everything--the divorce, Lara's incessant screaming, making dinner, paying bills, thinking that if it doesn't work out with Gabe she'll never love again. We all have our breaking point, the way we cope is what separates us. Leah exercised or went to inspirational movies or listened to self-help tapes, anything she needed because sometimes she felt like, "there was nothing I could do but cry. And I was tired of crying."

His grandmother cracks a few eggs in the kitchen. "You want an omelet?"

"Sure," Gabe says, walking towards her and into the kitchen to watch her cook.

The frying pan sizzles and pops little bits of vegetable oil into the air. Gabe smells grease and smoke from her cigarette. He looks at her white hair through the haze as sunlight marks a line between them.

“When’s the court date again?” His grandma asks, dicing onions and peppers, keeping her back to him.

“Next week.”

“You sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

His grandma flips the omelets. He doesn’t know how she makes them look perfect. Gabe sets the table. He would turn on music, but she always says, “Her nerves don’t like it.”

“Set the table,” she says.

“I am,” Gabe tells her, opening up the cupboards. “It smells delicious.”

“I’ve been trying not to smoke while I cook.”

They sit down at opposite ends of the dinner table. There is one long candle in the middle and a few ashtrays.

“Have you spoken to Julia?” His grandma asks.

“Not in a couple days.”

“You owe her so much. And I don’t even mean money.”

“I know.”

“Did you thank her for what she did for you?”

“Of course I did.”

“God knows where you’d be if it wasn’t for her.”

“I know.”

“Now eat,” she says, tucking a napkin underneath her chin.

Besides for the faint sounds of children yelling outside, they eat in silence.

Quietness was an unspoken rule in their apartment. Only Julia broke it and chatted throughout the entire meal, though grandma would rarely respond.

Julia never let grandma bother her. She’d say, “Oh Gram, come on! Lighten up!”

“You kids don’t know hardship. You don’t,” Grandma would say.

“And is that so bad? It’s not 1930 Grandma. It’s not the Great Depression. And we’re not in Elizabeth anymore so lighten up.”

There reached a point when grandma accepted, and maybe even enjoyed Julia’s chattiness. And back then there was more light in the apartment because the shades were drawn. There was more food in the fridge. It was cleaner. After Julia left though, and then even more so when Gabe left, the apartment became quieter, until it finally made almost no sound.

As they eat Gabe tries to remember being a child here and how meals were. He can’t remember what kind of kid he was-- if he laughed a lot, or if he was a leader, but he does remember the quiet of that apartment when Julia wasn’t around, and how dark it could be, and falling asleep at night on the couch.

His favorite part of the day was when his grandma went to bed early and he’d have the living room all to himself. He would open up the blinds and look out at the moon and love how it made him feel as the TV played sounds in the background. He could watch late-night TV infomercials about exercise equipment and touch himself, and fall asleep thinking about the girl he had a crush on. Late at night the world seemed to open up to

him.

Since he's been out of jail it's been that same kind of quietness, but his grandma has been going to bed much later. He didn't understand why at first, but then he realized she doesn't trust him being alone. He was offended initially, but later thought, he wouldn't trust himself either.

Sentences between them have been short and conversations only in passing. He comes home from work, takes a shower, and watches television with her. He calls his bail bondsman, avoids his drug buddies and drug dealers, and sits amidst the calm of his grandma.

"How's work?" She asks, putting down her fork and picking up her pack of *True Blues*.

"It's okay. A few of the guys there are really funny," Gabe says. He places the dishes in the sink. "It passes the time."

"They're not the idiots from around here, I hope." She lights a cigarette and pulls the closest ashtray to her.

"No, they're not from around here and they're older too. So I don't know them."

"Don't get too close to them," she says. "And don't tell them about your situation."

"I don't," he tells her, though he's told everyone there everything, mainly because they're already on probation or parole and they give him advice. It's actually the only thing they talk about.

"Keep to yourself. I don't want you getting involved with anybody for a while."

"I won't."

"We have to leave in ten minutes." She goes into her bedroom.

A few minutes later she comes out wearing a long black dress and stockings, and white porcelain earrings. She carries a black purse and looks herself over in the mirror. “You ready?” She asks.

“Yeah.”

They walk down the stairs. The smell of bacon has gone away and it smells like stale smoke again. He moves slowly behind her, reminding himself to be patient. Let her take her time.

At the bottom of the steps are Gabe’s old sneakers, hockey skates and basketball. They must have been there for over five years.

The cold air hits his face. Gabe says, “Every year it’s like it gets more and more brutal.”

“Ehhh,” his grandma says, swatting the air with her hand. “You’re not used to it by now?”

“I’m used to it,” he says. “I just don’t like it.”

“Well you don’t have much of a choice. You can’t go anywhere.”

There are a few people out still cleaning off their cars, but his grandma walks past them without saying hello. They walk down a set of icy stairs and his grandma holds the rail, moving one foot at a time.

“When is this meeting?” Gabe asks.

“We’ll make it, we’ll make it, don’t worry.”

They continue on the block and he’s amazed that he still can’t recognize anyone. After only a couple of years the neighborhood and its children have all run away.

They reach the one road extending to Main Street. There’s mailboxes for the entire

block and a row of electric generators. Snow is piled up everywhere.

They walk on the sidewalk down to Main Street's corner. "What's your lawyer like?" His grandma asks.

"She's okay."

"Just okay?"

"She's a great lawyer. Very aggressive in the courtroom."

"What does she think is gonna happen?"

"She doesn't say."

"What do you think is gonna happen?"

"I don't know," he says. "I just don't want to go back. And if I do, I don't want to go to prison."

Cars drive slowly on the road splashing little grey slush puddles. There's no traffic lights stopping cars from turning and they have to wait until the road is clear. Directly across the street is the Methodist church. The brick is brown and reddish in spots and the steeple shoots high up into the air. The little black iron fence and tree branches have an inch of powder stacked up and the path is neatly shoveled. Gabe never noticed how pretty it was before. Which is strange because he's passed it so many times, walking to the Burger King or the bus stop, to the basketball court, or to his friends house. It's so easy to look past it and towards the intersection--to the gas stations and convenience stores, bars, and the baseball field, and he never gave it a second look.

"Ready?" His grandma asks.

"Yeah," he says. He holds her hand as they cross the road.

As they walk up the steps to the door he keeps her hand in his, careful to not let her

slip on a slick patch. Once inside they walk down to the church basement.

The room is small with people already gathered at a long table, books laid out in front of them like they're waiting for a class to begin. A few sit with their hands folded, some people are looking around, unable to sit still and focus their eyes in one spot. Others are at the coffee and cookie table off to the side, talking about work and the holidays.

"How was New Years?" Gabe hears some guy say to another.

"Ok," another guy answers.

"What'd you end up doing?"

"Nothing, just stayed home. Watched the ball drop on the TV. You?"

"Same."

They sit and the man who seems to be their leader, a man in his late forties, early fifties, bald, wearing flannel and jeans and worker's boots, calls the meeting to order.

"Hi, I'm Steve, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi Steve."

"This is a beginner's meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, political organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

Gabe's grandma's hands are folded in her lap and her eyes are closed. Gabe wonders if she'll fall asleep.

Steve says, "How was everybody's New Years?"

No one responds.

Gabe remembers, though he can't recall exactly how old he was, when he watched his mother fall down a flight of steps at a New Year's party. She cried out, "Help me, help me." And Gabe wanted to but the other grown-ups wouldn't let him. He saw through the large bodies of strangers that she was bleeding from her mouth. A few men picked her up into the air and carried her to a station wagon.

Gabe ran outside. "Where are you taking her? Where are you going? Take me!" They let Gabe ride in the front seat, but every time he turned around to look at her, they told him, "Just let her be."

She kept saying over and over, squirming in the backseat, "How did this happen? What happened?" And she could barely hold up the ice cube to her bleeding mouth. She dropped it on the dirty floor and wiped the filth all over her face.

Steve says, "It's a speaker meeting, kind of. No one needs to speak if they don't want to, but if you feel like you want to share, you can. For the time being, I'm going to share. If anyone feels like they can relate to any of my experiences, please raise your hand."

This is Gabe's third meeting and he has yet to speak up. He can't see himself standing up from his metal seat in front of a room full of strangers and saying, "Hi, my name is Gabe. I am an alcoholic."

And hearing their forced excitement when they respond, "Hi Gabe!"

I've been sober for 16 months now, but mostly because I was in jail.

Get a sponsor! It works if you work it!

“It’s been one year, three months and seventeen days since my wife Marion died,” Steve says. “And it’s been one year, three months and sixteen days since I had my last drink.”

Gabe glances at his grandma’s hands and watches her raise them to her mouth. She shakes her head slowly from side to side. Gabe reaches for her hand but her eyes are closed and she doesn’t respond.

A few other people look sad but others unaffected like they’ve heard it before, or they’re so hung up on their own stuff they don’t care.

“She died drinking and driving in the early afternoon. I had been out all day, trying to cop in Newark for us. We were both using heroin at the time. She got impatient though and went to the liquor store and got a handle of Jack Daniels on her way to driving to Newark herself.”

“I called her from a pay phone and left her a message saying I had a bag. A brick, that’s a hundred bags. My throat was scratchy because I shot up immediately, like I usually did once I got it in my hand. But she was already on the road.”

Gabe’s grandma’s keeps shaking her head from side to side. He watches her, wondering if she realizes what she’s doing. Her lips are quivering. She notices him looking at her, and she glances back and doesn’t seem satisfied by his response.

“I would like to think that she went to look for me,” Steve says. “But that’s probably only partially true.”

“She drove to Route 278 and made it only a couple of miles before she slammed into a wall doing seventy. They found her body about twenty feet from the point of impact.”

“She was a sober person before she met me. I mean she drank at happy hours like anybody else, and she was smoking weed occasionally at parties, but that’s it. I was using the whole time and then one night when we were drunk I instinctively took the bag out of my pocket and did a line.”

‘You do coke?’ she asked me.

“And I couldn’t say the word heroin so I told her it was strong opium. Really strong opium. And she told me she was wanting to try that for a long time. I told her it was really strong and she said it was okay that she would only do a little bit. I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t know why I would ever let her do that. She was a good girl and came from an established family. I don’t know if it was because I was drunk, or maybe I just wanted someone to do it with. Maybe I was sick of doing it alone. That was about two years ago.”

“Not too long ago some guy at a meeting in another town, told me she was lucky she didn’t kill any other people and it took great willpower not to strangle and kill him. He said she couldn’t have gone to heaven otherwise if she had caused all that destruction and, I’ve never been a religious at all, I wasn’t even baptized, but really, of the few things that help me get by, after what I did to her, is the fact that Marion is in heaven right now. Cause she really never hurt anybody but herself.”

Steve looks around and waits but no one contributes to the discussion. A few people have their heads down. A few others are looking away.

“If it wasn’t for AA,” Steve says. “I’d be dead. Point blank. There isn’t a single doubt in my mind.”

“Amen for that,” a woman says.

“Amen brother,” says another.

Steve continues and tells stories of copping in Newark and Philly, friend’s that O.D’d and died, friends in prison, disabled, and the fact that he’s in his late forties and he’s starting completely over. He’s learning how to pay rent, talk to his family, hold down a job, and be a person, and the whole time the guy sitting next to him pats and rubs his back. When Steve stops talking the guy says to him, “Thanks for sharing.”

There is silence for a bit and people look around until a girl in her early twenties rises and says, “My name’s Hillary and I’m an alcoholic and an addict.”

“Hi Hillary.”

“I’ve been sober for eight days.”

Gabe notices her hands trembling. Her gold bracelets clanging against her watch. She is tall and skinny with baggy pants and a hoodie.

“I dropped out of college. I lost my boyfriend. My parents won’t speak to me. Every day is so hard and I can’t imagine it being harder--the past ten days have been nearly impossible. The first couple I thought I was going to die.”

She tells her story and Gabe thinks back to the conversation he had with Jason this morning before his grandmother woke up.

It was seven-thirty, Gabe was watching the news, and he could tell Jason was still partying from the night before.

“How did you know I was out?” Gabe asked.

“Somebody said they saw you walking on Lowell Avenue,” Jason said. “And then I looked it up online and saw you were bailed out. Why didn’t you call me?”

“I was going to. I haven’t been out long.”

“I missed you so much,” Jason said. “I felt like part of me died when you left. What are you doing tonight?”

"Probably just staying home," Gabe said. "I'm not really allowed to do much."

"Well I'm throwing a party for you. So you better come."

"What?"

"I said: I am *throwing* a party for *you*," Jason said. "So you better be here."

"I can't drink though."

"You don't have to drink," Jason said to him. "We just haven't seen you in a long time. Everybody misses you."

"But people will be drinking."

"But you don't need to. Do you think our friendship was based on drinking?"

"No," Gabe said. "But, do people still crush up Vicodin and Adderall, smoke weed, and do coke in the bathroom?"

“I told people not to bring any of that. In fact, if I see you with a beer, I’ll kick you out. Ok? Please come, please.”

"It's been a long time," Gabe said.

"I know. And wouldn't it be good for you to get out of your grandmother's house? We talk about you all the time, even Angie."

"Angie's going to be there?"

“She invited herself,” Jason said. "I hope that's okay. She said she'd love to see you."

“Angie said that?”

“Yeah.”

"I can't believe that."

"Why?"

"It's just been a long time. I don't even know what I would say to her."

"You're saying that now," Jason said. "But after a few minutes you'll see that things haven't changed."

Hillary is sharing her experiences of selling her body. A few older women shake their heads and Gabe can't tell if they disapprove, or they're relating to her experiences.

He isn't sure if he's ready to be social yet, especially with his drug-buddies, but he has to go. Gabe knows, because he's read the Discovery for his case and all the pertaining documents, that Jason has yet to testify or give a statement. He's listed as one of the witnesses who were detained, but under his statement it says, "N/A". And Gabe knows it's because Jason's mother, a corporate executive in the community, won't let him. Without Jason's testimony Gabe has no chance. He must convince him to do it. He needs a witness to say he acted in self-defense.

What would Steve say about all this?

Maybe he'd say, "I don't know if it's a good time for you. I mean, are you ready?"

Where are you on your steps?

I don't know about the steps Steve. I'm not convinced to be honest with you.

How about the first one? Are you powerless over alcohol? Is your life unmanageable?

I don't feel powerless Steve, not really. It's been a long time since I drank.

Didn't you just get out of jail though? Have you ever really been tempted? Have you had it in front on your face?

No.

How about Step two? You have to believe in a higher power.

I don't think I do Steve.

Step three: You have to give yourself to that higher power.

I can't.

Step four: You have to make a fearless, soul searching, moral inventory of yourself.

I do that.

Step five: You have to admit to God, to yourself, and to another human being, the exact nature of your wrongs.

Ok, fair enough. I can do that.

Step six: You're entirely ready to have God remove all those defects of character.

You humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings.

You make a list of all the persons you've harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all. You make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Continue to take personal inventory and when you're wrong promptly admit it.

Seek through prayer and meditation to improve your conscious contact with God as you understand Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The twelfth step: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, you need to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all your affairs.

I don't think I can do all that Steve.

That's why you're gonna relapse Gabe. It's inevitable. You have to do the steps. It's the only way. You have to admit your powerless. You have to give yourself to a higher power. You have to be honest with yourself. You have to make amends. If you don't, you will drink again.

Later, everyone gets in a circle, holds each other's hand and says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

And, as they rock their hands up and down, they say, "It works if you work it."

Gabe releases his grandmother's hand.

She says to him, "Do you wanna stay and talk to anybody?"

"No," he says. "Can we just go home?"

They walk back out into the cold and Gabe looks over his shoulder at the little trees with the inch of powder laying on top of their branches, slowly blowing away bit by bit. They look like the trees in front of Angie's house. He hadn't been there since he was seventeen.

He remembers the smell in the kitchen when her mother made dinner. Her name was Lucia and she was from Naples and made tomato sauce, risotto, fresh bread and everything else, from scratch. They lived up on the mountain in Lowell, towards the peak where the streets are hard to climb in the winter, but when you get to the top everything is pearl white and untouched, and birds chirp much louder than the passing cars.

Gabe hadn't been there since she stopped speaking to him, but one thing about living in a town most of your life is you never lose your way. No matter how many years

he'd left Lowell he could always find his way to Angie's house, tucked away in the back of a dead end street behind all those trees.

It was a blue colonial set right off of a back road with a short driveway and a big backyard that disappeared into the woods stretching far back into the mountain. To think of that--Angie's family owned part of a mountain.

"Not the whole mountain," she told Gabe.

"But still," Gabe said to her. "That's amazing. You must've had so much fun playing in the snow when you were a kid. Running upstairs to your room and taking off your snowsuit."

"Gabe," she said. "It's just a house."

It was one of those houses that was built to have snow on it. The light blue siding softened by the white powder on the windowsills and above the altar over the front door. The little bushes lining the path to the door and the clouds which always seemed right above everyone's heads. Little crystals on the roof top shining out into the front yard. A huge flat expanse of white like cotton blankets leading into thick forests of oak and birch. Gabe would be blinded as he would pull in to park there for a few seconds, dropping her off after a movie, nervously waiting for the right time to kiss her.

They were seventeen, reminiscing over their childhood's, and they met in the springtime. They hiked and climbed trees. They swung themselves from thin, drooping branches, and fell on top of one another. It was their excuse to feel the other person's body.

Her long, opal black hair, swung wildly around Gabe as they would play. She had pale skin and thin lips. And she didn't have the body men cheat on their wives with, but

she was beautiful. They met each other when they were both coming out of their ugly phases, and were surprised or flattered when someone cute or popular showed them attention.

It was spring and Gabe was seventeen and in love. He felt the earth waking up from its six-month-nap and everything was growing. Sapling Magnolia's were feeding and becoming green; bees not just sitting down for Sunday brunch floating along, but hopping from dandelion to dandelion with starving plants giving thanks, leaning in towards the bright sun. Gabe and Angie were both tall and confident with strong, unfounded opinions.

And there was no question what would happen next, it happens every year--- colors ... warm green beds and watersheds and birds that whiz pass little heads, and she showed Gabe all those nooks and niches he had never known growing up in a cement neighborhood. Those parts he couldn't see from the highway--they're hidden in that little corner out of a poor kid's reach. Those poor kids that grow up to be hopeless romantics.

She took him on long drives. Two, three hours around farm roads and winding up and down the mountains, listening to PJ Harvey, talking about cookie-cutter houses, and how they were different, and there's so much to explore in this world it'd be so sad to stay in the same place.

She drove stick accelerating inches from the incoming bumper. He closed his eyes certain he would die.

Hers always seemed open. Those eyes that were a different color than his.

Angie liked small things and took him to the side streets. She loved the oldest tree in New Jersey, took him there, showing him its arms that stretched out like an old

man, and the leaves dangling.

She laid her head on his chest and he held it there--a poor hopeless romantic wanting to say all those things he had thought of saying to the first girl he loved like, "You look like a great Italian painting."

But what if she came back with, "Which artist?"

He only knew a few, so he would have to pick the right one. Which one did *The Mona Lisa*? He couldn't remember.

How about, "Your eyes have history. Your soul may be old, but your heart is young."

Right then, with the sun setting far in the distance from the old tree, her leg grazed an area near his penis. She said, "I think you're sexy."

His heart seized. This was Gabe's first real kiss, it should've been a more tender moment. He had just started wearing tighter shirts, not feeling embarrassed by his physique, and probably enjoyed her comment a little too much.

She laughed, looking down.

He felt strong holding her.

She started breathing heavily on his neck--it was probably one of her first experiences of sexual arousal. It was more accurately for Gabe, somewhere between the 4000th and 6000th moment of sexual arousal, but he still didn't know what to do. How far should this go? He was a hopeless romantic and wanted it sweet.

He had to say something, had to confront the nerves. They always laughed and told each other stories, where was the right one for this moment? There were roots underneath them that ran miles deep to hard and soft earth--infinite stories and memories

surpassing all of our lives. So much to talk about.

So much to talk about but they were too young and hung up on their own chemicals. She started rubbing from his fingertip slowly down his arm. What did this girl think she was doing? He was nearing orgasm and needed to say something, so he said, "It's a pretty tree."

She nodded.

"And an old one too, right?"

"Yes," she said. "The oldest in fact."

Gabe decided to stop speaking. He was content to merely look at her. Inevitably, a hopeless romantic with a hopeless erection.

He wanted to start slow dancing there in the rain, but she'd think it was a cliché.

Gabe liked clichés.

She started crying one afternoon as they lay in her bed listening to music and he didn't know why. He assumed it was the song or something. She played him a tape of a classical piece she wrote called, "The Deepest River in England." It was piano, violin, viola, and cello.

She was the first girl he deeply kissed for hours and saw partially naked.

But she wouldn't have sex with him. He tried. He begged. She told him she wouldn't let him lose his virginity to her.

There was so much she didn't know about him.

And there were other guys.

She said she was a virgin like him, and he believed it from their mutual awkwardness when he managed to get some of her clothes off. She had older men in her

life though, which girls without fathers sometimes do. Her ex-boyfriend that she still met for dinner was an artist with a weak heart--something rare that made his lips blue. He was in his late twenties and probably going to die before he was forty. Gabe thought he was her *ex*-boyfriend because he was her emerging boyfriend.

And another guy.

The previous summer she worked at a coffee/gelato shop on Main St. where she played a Billie Holiday album. She loved Billie Holiday. Some guy heard it and came back with a tape of other jazz, probably Ella, Nina, Sarah and some French stuff Gabe didn't know about. He was twenty-eight or so at the time, a musician, or something like that, a writer, at least she claimed he published something, who knows? His name was Stephen.

All of them were in love with her. She would ask Gabe if he was, knowing that was precisely her intention from the start.

"I don't know Angie," Gabe would tell her. "I'm not sure what that means."

Her real name was Angelina. That's probably what Stephen called her.

The first time Gabe called her Angelina she never spoke to him again.

The following months after that Gabe couldn't go up the mountain. Summer drained the rainwater and dissolved it into the smoky air. The grass was all burnt, dandelions wilted, bees hiding. Everything was getting smaller again.

He still vividly remembers her sleepy eyes the morning she slept in his bed, the first time that ever happened for Gabe--and the crack in her voice when she woke up yelling out, "Where are you? Where are you?" and he came over with coffee breath and held her body. Her body that became invisible, beyond his reach. Ran from him until it

was out of sight.

He had spoken to her once since high school. She called him while he was dating Leah. After hearing about Gabe's new relationship from Jason maybe she expected this conversation: I date older men, you date older women, let's talk about it. But Gabe kept the conversation short and uneventful. He wanted Lowell, and his past, long gone.

But people don't go away unless they die.

And never a letter, not even one, in fifteen months. She knew he was in jail, and what had happened to him. What did she think the truth was? It's been a long time since he's seen her, but it always matters what your first love thinks of you.

Gabe thought maybe she would've understood. Everything they did together--it was special, and not just for him, though, for a while he thought this; she knew what they were doing the whole time. Gabe made her laugh and said interesting things. She was the first person to tell him he was beautiful. She wrote to him once, "You know about a world I know nothing of, but desperately want to, and if you let me in I will be forever grateful."

And she used to say, "You have wonderfully innocent potential."

She was gone forever the moment the handcuffs were wrapped around his wrists. She disappeared and ran away to live in her own world, still in New Jersey, with thoughts and opinions maybe the same as Gabe's, but parallel, never to meet. Like after their dates when Gabe would kiss her in the car and back out of the little driveway on the small back road, watching her disappear into her huge house through his rearview mirror.

You can't make someone love you.

She was his first love.

The last person since Leah to tell him he was beautiful.

This afternoon he asked his grandmother if he could go see a movie. "It's the three hour one," he said. "The World War II one, so you'd be sleeping by the time I get back."

And for whatever reason, she probably figured, "Hey it's the first time the kid wants to do something, just let him. It's only a movie." She said yes.

It's nighttime as he drives the long way to Jason's. Angie used to say, "You give the best hugs out of anyone I know." But what will she say now?

He keeps his face forward, concentrating, with streetlights shining on mounds of Jersey snow piled on the side of the road. He sees his town pass by on the side. It's empty and frozen solid.

Gabe knows, given his circumstances, how lucky he was to be raised in a town like Lowell. He went to a nationally ranked public school, and was surrounded by fields of grass and flowers--his high school had a zip-line for gym class, a brand new gymnasium, Olympic swimming pools and TV's in every classroom. His friend's parents were economists, radiologists, and attorneys.

Driving along those same streets he saw as a child stop signs and traffic lights are covered in frost. Mailboxes look like little white pillars. He passes the Elks Lodge he went to with his friend Derek's father, the antlers on the statue topped with snow like it just stepped out of the Yukon territory.

He stops at a red light. Squirrels are hopping through the snow making their way to a tree. A few men are bending over and shoveling their driveways.

Slides and merry-go-round's, the basketball court--and it's all buried and kids can't play unless it's sliding down hills on sleds or throwing snowballs at one another.

Lowell is dead and waiting for the sun to bring it change.

There are no cars in the parking lots of the Lowell Commons Mall, the little league baseball fields, or his high school.

Up Lowell mountain he's careful driving the thin winding roads. There are potholes and if he doesn't pay attention he'd end up in a ditch on the side of the road. Deer trot along the stretches of forest and through the front yards of Victorian homes set back in the distance. There are stone cabins and outhouses and wells—the Lowell never to be bowled over to produce mini-mansion developments. Never a convenient store or gas station. These homes have stayed in their families for almost two centuries and they'll never give them up.

Fences in the white thicket mark the town's hunting territory with thin creeks meandering through the trees. Icy water moving slowly through little pebbles. Glancing over, Gabe thinks he sees a child practicing ice skating, remembers his friends trying to teach him how to hockey-stop, but he could never do it. He was always afraid of falling face first into the ice.

There are little holes in the earth from groundhogs and the possums, baseball fields covered with thick snow and the boys of Lowell, just like Gabe did, are keeping their mits in their rooms, oiled up and ready for the next season. Ready to go out into the wide open spaces of their home, the green fields and tan dirt covered by blue skies. Your friends and families rooting you on from the sideline.

Lowell winter and the Lowell of Gabe's dreams which always seemed so far away.

The hills leading up the mountain have deer footprints dotting the snow, and trails extending into the forests, and Gabe wishes he could turn around and go directly to

Leah's and listen to the shouts of playing children. It would be Tuesday night and she'd be preoccupied with Daniella and Lara and wouldn't be able to talk, but he could stand there and watch them. He could help them wash the dishes, lie down and watch a movie, or read them a book. If they only let him.

But who knows where Leah's going to be and if she even still lives there? She's moved around the state her whole life and might not stop. If Gabe made a u-turn and drove to Blooming instead, would she be in the kitchen cooking Amatriciana, dicing onions, pulling basil off of the plant above her sink, wearing a strapless white dress with her freckled shoulders showing? Lowell winter--he'd give anything to come up from behind and put his arms around her waist and kiss from her shoulders up to her neck. Blooming is only a few miles away, it would be so easy to make that turn, drive quickly until he pulled into her driveway, turn off the lights and go through the front door (it's always unlocked), and smell the food and her neck.

"I look at you. And it makes sense," she'd say, like she always said.

Is she laughing, rolling around on the floor in the foyer from wrestling with the girls and Cricket? Do they go for walks down by the creek after dinner?

Or maybe she has another man.

Gabe thinks though, he wouldn't mind, as long as she doesn't let go of that special thing inside her. He doesn't need to complicate her life by trying to rekindle something. He pulls into Jason's driveway and Leah's entire face is clear like a sunrise over the ocean: from her chin to her lips, from her lips to her nose, from her nose to her eyes, from her forehead to her hair. She's naked, lying on her side, inviting him to join her on the bed--to laugh, to cry, to pray and tell each other everything they think and feel in this

world because that's what they do.

What would she say if he showed up on her porch right now?

Don't lose that Leah. Don't lose that special thing that you have inside.

If love is love, then keep loving.

Because it doesn't matter if Gabe can come up from behind her and wrap his arms around her waist, his mouth on her neck, he'll always love her.

He turns off the headlights and the ignition, watches shadows and figures move through the picture window. People have beer bottles in their hands and cigarettes between their fingers. He never noticed it before, but Jason's mother's house looks a lot like Leah's, only bigger.

The front is mostly stone with burgundy vinyl siding. There are Japanese trees planted in rocks and the whole yard is designed and landscaped. Above the roof Gabe can see the trees behind and light coming from the backyard where people are most likely outside smoking on the deck.

He walks to the side of the property towards the fence and for a second, feels wetness touch his head. Since he's been released it's only snowed while he was sleeping and he hasn't felt it fall on top of him.

He looks out towards Jason's yard and up into the air and sees the millions of flakes falling lazily through a stream of light. He moves his hands to feel the powder moving all around him.

It's soft. Flurries barely a few centimeters wide and he catches bundles of them mid-air, squeezes them between his fingers, releasing water down and over his palm.

He runs his hand along the top of the fence. Everyone is inside, and the snowy

grass around Jason's house has no footprints. Snow sits still on top of branches, the birds are long gone, there is no wind or sound, and in the seconds when no one is outside the whole world seems completely still and vulnerable to these little flurries. They cover everything and the city's skyscrapers are vague spots in the distance.

Music starts playing. Songs never last for more than thirty seconds before someone changes it. The back door opens and people walk out onto the deck. One guy says, "I can't believe he's going to be here. Watch, I'm going to tackle that mother fucker."

"I heard he's not drinking."

Gabe recognizes the voices: his friends Dante and J.R, both Chemical Engineering majors at Rutgers. They were on the basketball team with Gabe, though none of them received any playing time.

"I'd love to see that," J.R says. "I've never seen him sober."

Gabe remembers Leah's words, the look in her eyes, on those days when Gabe would leave and not come back for a few days. They're right. Gabe can't think of one moment when he only had one beer. He can't think of more than a few times when he drank and didn't blackout.

He approaches the front door, looking back at his footprints. Wind blows and hurls snow into Gabe's numb cheeks--it shoots up from the ground up his legs. He starts sinking into the snow, and it feels like a blizzard and he's marching through the forest back to his cabin.

The porch light shines and Gabe steps into the light seeing clearly his friend's faces: Jason, Dante, and JR, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Dante was also the center for the football team, and now must weigh almost three hundred pounds. J.R is the

one guy taller than Gabe, but now he has a gut. They're wearing sweaters and Rutgers hoodies, Yankees hats, Birkenstocks with thick wool socks. And they all have scruffy beards and goatees.

Gabe steps quickly back into the shade of the corner, wishing he could jump back into the car and drive away. He remembers Jason burning twenty dollar bills, rolling joints with three papers, throwing beer bottles out of the window of his car, and pacing around his bedroom waiting for their drug dealer to call them back.

Jason was sixteen when they met, a junior in high school, and Gabe was seventeen, about to graduate and go to college. All of Gabe's senior year they smoked weed together everyday before school. After Gabe left for college Jason dropped out, and passed his GED at an alternative school. He usually worked odd jobs--moving furniture or boxes at UPS, bussing tables at a restaurant.

He was the one who originally introduced Gabe to Angie. Jason would get in the middle of their fights and relay hateful messages between them which may or may not had been embellished. Gabe thought it was because he was jealous of Angie, that he wanted to be closer to Gabe--but it was soon clear that Jason was in love with her, like everyone else.

The music is turned up and Gabe remains in the shadow on the porch. His breath floats into the light. He blows on his hands, rubs them against his face, feeling the dry, clean-shaven parts.

He remembers running away and being very high. There were drunken arguments. They smoked resin from glass pipes, piled up opened CD and DVD cases thrown on top of dirty clothes on the floor. Empty packs of cigarettes and white and grey dust spilled

everywhere.

He knocks on the door, turns around to watch the storm on the silent street. The door opens.

“Gabe?”

He feels a tap on his shoulder and turns around, noticing Jason has gained a lot of weight. He has bags under his eyes.

“Come here man,” Jason says. He wraps his arms around Gabe and they hold each other.

“Hey,” Gabe says, patting him on the shoulder, feeling the warmth from inside. “It’s snowing.”

“Yeah,” Jason says, pulling back and getting a good look at him. “It’s fucking winter.” Jason closely watches Gabe’s face and looks him up and down with the door still open, letting cold air inside. “Come on in.”

Gabe crosses under the threshold of the doorway and sees Dante and J.R sitting on the couch. “Gabe!” J.R says, hugging him.

“Hey J.R.”

“Great to see you man!” Dante says.

“You look great!” J.R says.

“Really, really great to see you,” Dante says.

“Thanks guys,” Gabe says, looking at them and the smoke floating in the room.

Angie is nowhere to be found. Gabe assumes she's outside smoking, and knowing her, she probably has a group of guys surrounding her.

The living room basically looks the same. Oriental rugs, golden trimmed mirrors

on opposing walls, a tan plush sofa, and bamboo plants in the corner. His mother traveled to a different part of China and Japan two weeks every year and showed calligraphy on the walls with scripts of Taoist writing.

One says, at least this is what Jason told Gabe: "Victory is never sweet."

Another: "Talking very little is natural."

Jason hands Gabe a Coke and invites him to talk outside.

"Where you guys going?" Dante says.

"Outside for a second Dante," Jason tells him. "We'll be back."

"But it's snowing," Dante says.

"Shut the fuck up Dante," Jason says. "We'll be back in a minute."

"But he just got here."

Jason closes the sliding glass door and they walk out to the edge of the deck, looking out into the Lowell woods--the top of the mountain with the decline leading down to the foothills. They can see only a few feet into the thicket. The branches of the tall maples off to the side of the house reach over the roof.

"Where's Angie?" Gabe asks.

"She's not here yet," Jason tells him, cracking a beer. "She has to work until nine, but she's coming after that." Jason lights a cigarette. "I can't believe you're here man. It's so great to see you."

"Thanks, it's great to be here, but it's very strange."

"I fucking believe it," Jason says. "Hey man, you want one?" He opens the cigarette pack for Gabe.

"Oh, no thanks. I've been trying not to."

“See, that’s why I respect you so much. You have such fucking will power.”

“Thanks man.”

“I really mean it.”

“I know you do,” Gabe says.

“No,” Jason says. “I mean, you have more fucking determination in your pinkie nail than I have in my entire body. I don’t know how you fucking did it.”

Gabe looks out at the snow falling in front of the stars, hoping he’ll stop. Jason comes to his side and blows a few smoke rings.

“Actually,” Gabe says. “Could I get one?”

“You’re gonna be fine man,” Jason says, handing him a cigarette. “It’s gonna work out.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that,” Gabe says. “You don’t have to try to cheer me up.”

“Do you think that’s what I’m doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ve had three beers, that’s it. All I’m saying is man I give you a lot of credit. Look at what you’ve been through already. You know why you can take a hit like that? Because you have a strong mind. You are so much tougher than you give yourself credit for.”

“Is anyone else coming tonight?” Gabe asks.

“I told a bunch of other people, but I’d rather it just be us.”

“And Angie,” Gabe says.

“And Angie.”

Wind blows and tree branches rattle against the house. Jason and Gabe scrunch their faces, protecting their eyes from the snow. "I'm just gonna say it once," Jason starts. "I don't need to keep bringing it up, but if I don't I won't be able to live with myself."

"Don't."

"And I'm not drunk, so don't think that's why I'm saying this. But, I'm sorry about what happened."

"It's not your fault," Gabe says. He zips up his jacket and paces.

"Just let me please," Jason says.

"It's not a big deal," Gabe says.

"Not a big deal?" Jason says. "You were locked up for over a fucking year. Listen, I invited those guys over, and I shouldn't have. I should've known they were fucking scumbags."

"There's no way you could've known. Don't worry about it."

"I'm gonna testify on your behalf. I'll tell them what happened."

"Your mom's gonna let you do it?"

"I don't give a fuck what she says. I can't let you go down like that."

Gabe breathes deeply and walks to his side. "Thanks man," he says, squeezing his shoulder. "I really need that."

"I can't let you go down."

"Thank you."

"Come here," Jason says, hugging him, squeezing his body. "I love you so much man. Not having you around I was just unhappy. I've been hating myself the whole

time.”

“Well I’m here,” Gabe says. “I lived.”

“And you’re gonna keep living. You’re not going back man. Fuck my mom.”

“I see her point though,” Gabe says. “Your name would be in the papers. It’s embarrassing.”

“Fuck that,” Jason says, throwing his beer can into the backyard. “You had to do it. You had no choice.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“Anything I can do for you. Anything at all. I’ll do it.”

They walk back inside. Jason grabs a St. Pauli Girl from the fridge and hands Gabe another can of Coke.

J.R and Dante are talking about high school. About their vice principal who would camp out on the school's roof to catch people smoking. Dante says to Gabe, "I can't believe you're here man. It must've been tough."

“Dante!” Jason says.

“What?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“What’d I do?”

“Let’s just not talk about it,” Jason says.

“I can talk about it,” Gabe tells them.

“You don’t have to,” Jason says.

“Yeah,” Dante says to Gabe. “You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t have to,” Gabe says. “But I’ll tell you it wasn't really that bad. It

wasn't dangerous."

"What was the worst thing you saw in there?" Dante says.

"I don't know," Gabe says. "There really wasn't anything too bad."

"Anybody you know get jumped?" Dante asks.

"No, that didn't really ever happen there," Gabe says, feeling their eyes watching him. "I did have a friend that died. But I wasn't there with him when it happened."

"Somebody stabbed him?" Dante asks.

"No," Gabe says. "He was in solitary and they gave him a can of Lysol to clean his cell. But he had a drug problem and he huffed the can so much that he asphyxiated himself and he died."

"That's fucked up man," Dante says. "He was a good friend of yours?"

"I don't know if I would call him a good friend," Gabe says. "But, he seemed like a good guy."

"You didn't belong in there," Dante says.

"Dante!" Jason says.

"What?"

"Shut the fuck up man."

"It's okay Jason," Gabe says. "Thanks Dante. Honestly, I felt like most of those guys didn't belong in there. But really, they probably did."

"But you see what I'm saying," Dante says. "*You* didn't belong in there."

"I don't know," Gabe says.

"It wasn't your fault," Dante says.

"Maybe it was," Gabe tells him. "The way I was living my life something bad was

bound to happen eventually. It was only a matter of time."

Jason shakes his head and bites his fingernails. His cuticles have flakes of dead skin hanging off, nails ground down almost to the bottom. He paces around the room, checks his cell phone, and walks back outside.

"Well," Dante says. "You made it through."

"Yeah," J.R says.

"Do you know what was messed up actually?" Gabe says, wondering if they want to hear about this.

"What?" Dante says.

"September 11th."

"I didn't realize you were there when it happened," Dante says. "What was it like?"

"They were celebrating," Gabe says.

"What?" JR says. "That's so fucked up."

"I know," Gabe tells them. "One guy ran around with a towel wrapped around his head yelling, 'Islamabad Daka-da bada bada bada', whooping, clicking his tongue and making gun sounds."

"What assholes," Dante says.

"'We got love for you Osama,' another guy yelled. Everyone was laughing. 'Fuck America! They deserve that shit!'"

"How old were these guys?" Dante asks.

“Some of them were kids, like eighteen or nineteen, but others were older, maybe in their mid-thirties,” Gabe says, putting his cokes down on the table. “I remember my friend Poppy asked me if I would rather be in jail or at war.”

“What’d you say?”

“I don’t know,” Gabe says, sensing they’re becoming uncomfortable. They must not know what else to say; and though they’re careful not to ask the wrong question, they don’t want to seem careful. Because they know that would make Gabe feel alienated.

Jason comes back into the room a few minutes later. "I set up a beer pong table downstairs if you guys wanna play." He looks at Gabe. "Is that cool?"

They walk downstairs to the basement. There’s a bookshelf full of war novels, half burnt candles, a wine cage and Van Gogh’s on the wall. Then, looking over towards Jason’s bedroom there are beer cans scattered on the floor and the beer pong table is next to his bed.

"It's not usually this bad," Jason says to Gabe.

It smells like the inside of a garbage can. His mattress is on the floor without sheets. The walls are bare. Pornos lay next to the DVD player with tissues and pay stubs on the table and the ashtray is overflowing.

"I can't wait to get the fuck out of here," Jason says.

Gabe sees himself keeled over with the shakes, sitting on Jason’s bed, being stuck down here in his room, not having enough money between them to buy gas and liquor. They would call people for a ride or money and try to break into Jason’s mother’s wine cage.

If Jason looked over and Gabe was drinking a beer, would he care? Gabe doesn’t

think they'd give a shit. In fact, maybe they'd like it. "There is the old Gabe," they would think. "There's the Gabe we knew and loved. The funny guy. The fun guy."

Leah doesn't know, most likely, that he's been bailed out of jail. She doesn't know he's at a party with his old friends, and she surely wouldn't know if he drank tonight. And he would never tell her.

"Can I go first?" Dante asks.

"Sure Dante," Jason says. "Cause you always wait."

"Fuck you man, you always go first."

"Dante, you're a fucking idiot ..."

"At least I'm in college. What the fuck are you gonna do with your life?"

"Jesus Dante," Jason says, standing next to Gabe. "Just throw the fucking ball."

Gabe sips on his Coke. The doorbell rings. He looks at Jason as he runs quickly up the stairs.

Gabe listens to his footsteps and feels pain rising in his stomach. He hears Angie say, "You have such wonderfully innocent potential," and all the things he was going to do with his life. He thinks he can hear her car still running outside. Maybe she's having second thoughts. Maybe she doesn't want to see what happened to him, what became of him. After all, what do you say to someone who threw everything away? What do you say to someone who has no future?

That's ok because Gabe can't hear the words "wonderfully innocent potential" anymore, "someone who could've changed the world--and there's nothing more beautiful than wonderfully innocent potential". What does she think of him now? Can she look him in the eye?

She took him down the Jersey backroads, winding down the desolate, serene expanses of forests, the oldest tree in New Jersey, and they sat listening to music and talked about the world and their future in it.

When she looked at him with soft, forgiving eyes like on those days when he would run off with his friends to smoke weed and come back to her feeling guilty and she knew what he was doing and didn't like it, but accepted him for what he was.

Angie.

She ran away and left Gabe behind for what he thought was forever. What do you say to a ghost?

And so many seconds later, there she is.

Jason leads her to the bottom of the steps, but then leaves her alone. She looks at Gabe, who looks back with his face turned down slightly.

She runs to him all by herself. "Oh ... my," she says, throwing her arms around him. "God!"

"Hi," Gabe says, accepting her hug. Her arms are covering all of him and his body trembles. He feels light and warm as her heart beats against his for a second.

Somehow she looks more beautiful than before. Her body feels slimmer, still curvy and womanly, but prettier. Her eyes shine and she looks into Gabe's like she's seeking forgiveness.

She's wearing a long black dress down to her ankles, her hips smoothing out on the sides; long, shiny, dangling earrings off of her pale earlobes, and her hair and skin looks exactly the same. Like her house, she was made to have snow on her. "You look great," she says.

"Thanks." He realizes they're still holding each other's forearms. "So do you."

"Really, really great," she says again, and they finally let go. "I was about to go onto the deck to smoke. Do you ever?" She asks, offering him a cigarette.

"Yeah, occasionally," Gabe says. "I'll go with you."

They walk outside and it's still snowing. The flakes have become larger and heavier and lay still on Gabe's nose and hair. He can't help but wonder why she's doing this. Maybe she's here to report back to her friends.

"I'm sorry I didn't write you," she says, walking to the edge of the deck. She covers her hand and lights her cigarette. She still smokes Capri's, a long thin cigarette that makes her look like an old movie star.

"We hadn't talked for quite some time before that," Gabe says, following her. He rests his elbows on the ledge.

"I didn't think you wanted to talk to me," she says. They look into the starry sky all around them beyond the storm. No matter how many snowflakes there are, they could always see the sky.

"Honestly," Gabe says. "I didn't want to talk to you. I needed time."

"And," Angie says. "You had that woman."

"Leah."

"How is she?"

"I don't know," Gabe says.

Angie strolls around the deck with the light shining on her and Gabe can see her more clearly. Her skin is still pale, perhaps more pale in the winter, and the reflected light from the snow and her foggy breath surround her face. She seems as confident as

ever, which Gabe has started to think could be a put on. A show for all of her adoring fans.

He stares into the deep and shimmering black opals of her eyes. The snow in her dark hair looks like stars in the sky. "What are you going to do?" She asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," she says. "You know you can't drink right?"

"Yeah, I know," Gabe tells her, surprised she would bring that up.

"So you're not drinking tonight?"

"Only Cokes."

"And you're not tempted?" She asks.

"Not really," Gabe says. "I haven't drank in a long time. I almost forget what it feels like."

"I don't buy that."

"Maybe I'm too scared to drink," Gabe tells her.

"Ok," she says, stubbing out her cigarette on the ledge. "Do you wanna go back inside? I'm getting cold."

"Sure."

She leads him back inside to the living room and sits on the plush sofa. He hears the guys downstairs yelling at each other.

"Oh shit," she says. "Did you want a cigarette?"

"No, I'm ok."

"I'm so rude. I asked you if you wanted to smoke."

"I'm ok."

"I'm sorry," she says. "Would you mind pouring me a glass of wine?"

"Sure. What kind?"

"You know something, actually, I'm being lazy, and insensitive. I should do it."

"It's not a big deal," Gabe tells her. "What kind?"

"You don't mind?"

"What kind?"

"Anything red."

He goes into the kitchen, grabs the first red bottle he sees, pours it, and brings it to her. She's looking around at the Asian art.

"Do you wanna go downstairs?" Gabe asks.

"I could use the quiet," she says.

He watches her cross her legs, remembering the first times he squeezed her thighs. "What have you been up to? Are you done with school?"

"Yeah, I finished last spring."

"Congratulations, what's your degree in?"

"History."

"History? Not music?"

"Long story," she says.

"No really," he says. "Why not music?"

"Do you know how hard a music degree is?"

"But you love it."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I can't still do it. I was just tired of studying it."

"Ok."

“And I wanted to understand more about the history of the world.”

“Ok, that’s interesting,” Gabe says. “I feel that way too. Sometimes I feel like I want to know everything and it makes me sad that I can’t.”

She sips her wine, tells him stories of traveling during the summer in Europe, and a cross-country road trip she did with girlfriends from college. “You’re going back to school right?”

“I’d love to,” he says. “Probably in the fall though, not now.”

Jason walks through the living room and looks at Angie. He says, “Are you two ok?”

“I’m fine,” she says.

“Ok,” he tells her. “I’ll be downstairs if you guys need anything.”

The door closes. Gabe says, “Is everything cool?”

“Yeah, I don’t know what his deal is.” She turns back to him. “Do you remember when I showed you that tree in Basking Ridge?”

“The oldest tree in New Jersey,” Gabe says.

She settles further into the couch, and keeps readjusting herself like she can’t get comfortable. “You’re the last person I went there with.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just couldn’t go anymore. It was in the past.”

Gabe takes a sip of his Coke. He looks at her, hearing her words: “I think you’re sexy,” and his heart trembling, the feeling of her touch, her soft hands. Her lips on his. He would’ve ran away to the end of the world with her.

They remember together that spring when they were seventeen, admitting how foolish they were. They didn't know what they were doing. They were mere children.

"Can I tell you something?" She asks.

"Sure."

"I wish I lost my virginity to you."

Gabe stares at the Taoist writing. He refuses to look at her, but he feels her eyes on him.

They hear more yelling from downstairs and shake their heads at the ridiculousness of the guys and all their arguing, and Gabe remembers the late night telephone conversation they had when she told him she couldn't speak to him anymore. He was a virgin then, and he cried for a whole day into his pillow. He thought about sending her his pillowcase full of tears in the mail.

"We would've made great lovers," she says.

You have such wonderfully innocent potential.

Gabe lost his virginity a couple months after they broke up when he was drunk at a college party to some girl he didn't know. He didn't remember most of it.

Angie was the first girl he saw partially naked. The first girl that felt his erection pressed up against her. But she never wanted to sleep with him when they were dating. She was in love with one of the other guys.

"Are you still dating that guy?" Gabe asks.

"Stephen?"

"Whatever his name is."

“No, not really. We see each other occasionally, but I told him I want to be young for a bit. I don’t want to get married at twenty-four. I’d end up hating him by the time I was thirty.”

“It is young to get married.”

“I want to have fun for awhile,” she says. “Stephen can wait if he wants to.”

“Do you think he will?”

“Maybe,” she says. “Did you want to marry Leah?”

“I did, but I wasn’t ready for marriage. I thought I was, but I wasn’t.”

“Would you still?” She asks.

“Still what?”

“Marry her?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I can’t even think like that right now. I don’t even know if she would speak to me.”

“If she was in love with you, she’ll always speak to you.”

“I don’t know. I hurt her really bad.”

“You didn’t beat her,” she says, sitting up and facing him. “You didn’t do anything to her or her kids, so I’m sure she would. She might even take you back.” She puts her wine glass down on the table and folds her hands in her lap. “But,” she says.

“Would you want that?”

Gabe can feel her warm breath reaching his face.

“Hey,” she says. “Let’s go for a ride.”

“A ride where? It’s late,” Gabe says.

“We could go to one of our old spots,” she tells him. “We could go to Princeton or to Basking Ridge. We can just drive. We could go to the oldest tree in New Jersey and see if it’s still standing.”

“But it’s snowing.”

“Who cares? It was raining those first days we were hanging out. It never stopped us.”

“We were much younger then.”

“You don’t even seem like you want to be here.”

“I do,” Gabe says. “This is the first time in a long while I’ve seen any of these people. I can’t leave.”

“You’re sure?” She says, picking up her wine. “This is only my first glass. I’m not drunk. It’d be amazing. We could just drive around and talk, go get some ice cream and park somewhere. We could catch up more.”

“I don’t know.”

“We’d drive through the hills and the mountains with the snow surrounding us.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” he says. His heart beats faster and faster. “Let’s go downstairs and see what everybody’s doing,” he says.

“Really?” She shakes her head slowly. “You don’t want to leave with me right now?”

“I can’t. This party’s kinda for me.”

“It’s not even a party. It’s three guys playing beer pong.”

“Nonetheless,” Gabe says. “It’s for me. It’d be rude.”

“Ok,” she says. “Well, I’m gonna go.”

“Why?”

“It’s late and I’ve been working all day.”

“It’s only eleven,” Gabe says.

“I’ve been to these parties before,” she says, picking up her purse. “They never end pretty. Pretty soon they’re either gonna get into a fight or start blowing lines in the bathroom.”

“Well I wish you would stay.”

“I can’t,” she says, standing above him. Her dress is bunched up at her hips and she pulls it down to flatten it out. “And you shouldn’t either. These guys are no good for you. They’re only gonna bring you down. If you were smart you’d run away as fast as you can.”

Run away to where, Gabe thinks.

He looks up at her like she’s the tallest tree in Lowell. The tallest tree that ever existed.

He walks her to her car and opens the door for her. The wind has died down but the flurries still faintly fall. The last remnants of a storm that died away and Angie’s hair still shines. She steps inside and starts the engine. “Come with me,” she says. “Don’t go back in there. It’s not safe for you.”

Her windshield has a thin veil of snow covering it. She turns on the wipers and it all slides away.

“I’m fine,” Gabe says. “Don’t worry.”

“Are you going to drink?”

“No,” he tells her.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Would you tell me if you did?”

“I would.”

“Call me tomorrow,” she says. “Tell me everything that happens.”

“I will.”

She reaches up through her window and hugs him, presses her reddened lips against Gabe’s cheek. “I really missed you,” she says. “You’re a very special person.”

He squeezes her, the first girl besides his sister he’s hugged in a long time. “I missed you too,” he says, pulling back so he can see her dark eyes. “You will always be someone special to me.”

She stares back--maybe she’s thinking about how he should’ve been the one. Why didn’t she just make love to him and marry him, save him? It could’ve all been so easy. They knew each other when they were so young, it’s not too late. And maybe, thinking of all the lines of poetry she wrote for him, saying, “It’s ok not to drink Gabe, cause poor alcoholics love more than anyone else cause that’s all they have, and days are eternal when the setting sun shines brightest against your long dark shadow. Love me, love me, love me. Love me my dear and I will save you from the shadow and the dying sun.”

Like when they hid from the rain under a Gazebo at the boardwalk in Point Pleasant and she whispered in his ear through the misty air. Gabe listened for hours and hours as they kissed and held each other, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

“You’ll always be special to me too Gabriel,” she says. She turns on the radio, lights a cigarette, adjusts her rearview mirror, and Gabe watches her, remembering when she told him, after one of their first dates, that a gentlemen should always watch the lady drive off to make sure she’s ok. Since she told him that, he’s always done it. It was great advice.

She backs out of the driveway and by the time they wave goodbye and she vanishes down the mountain Gabe notices it stopped snowing. The air is clear and cold. The ground is white. He walks slowly back inside and goes downstairs.

He opens the door to Jason’s room and sees Dante sitting on the bed chopping up lines on a CD case. Jason and J.R are playing a game of beer pong and don’t notice Gabe walking in. Dante looks up at Gabe. “It’s just Adderall,” he says. “I swear.”

“Dante!” Jason says. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

“Oh like you didn’t know?” Dante says. “You told me to do it.”

“Shut the fuck up Dante!” Jason says.

“Fuck you! I’m sick of you telling me to shut the fuck up. I could break your neck in three seconds and you know it,” Dante says. He turns to Gabe. “I wouldn’t do coke around you man, I swear, it’s only Adderall.”

“It’s okay Dante,” Gabe says.

“You’re a fucking idiot Dante,” Jason says. He walks up to Gabe and whispers, “What were you guys talking about for so long?”

“Nothing much,” Gabe says. “Just having a much needed conversation.”

“Really?” Jason says, smirking.

Gabe recognizes that face and his stomach tightens. It's the same look Jason had when he told Gabe Angie was cheating on him in high school.

The same face he had when he told Gabe Angie didn't love him. They had smoked a joint and Gabe lay in front of an electric heater. He kept repeating, unaware Jason was even in the room, "She loves me She loves me."

And Jason said to him, "She loves you? Are you fucking kidding me? She doesn't love you."

"Yes, she does," Gabe said. "You don't understand."

"There's a lot about Angie you don't know Gabe."

That's when he told Gabe about the older guys. "She's a fucked up person," he said to Gabe. "I hope you know that."

"We're all fucked up."

"Yeah," Jason said. "But she's a fucking sociopath. The girl is incapable of caring about anyone but herself."

Dante and J.R snort a couple lines and continue playing beer pong. The room is cloudy with dust, dirt, and smoke and Gabe has trouble breathing. He knows they sit in this room night after night getting high and passing out, waking up the next morning still drunk or hungover and go to work. Then they do it all over again.

"Did she say anything about me?" Jason asks.

"No, why would she? We had a lot of catching up to do."

"If I were you I'd never speak to her again."

"Listen man," Gabe says. "First of all, this was all *your* idea."

"It was a bad idea."

Gabe knows he's letting this out because he's drunk and high. "I know we've all said things about each other," Gabe says. "But that was in the past. We just had a nice conversation and I'm leaving it at that. I'm not in love with her, and I haven't been for a while."

"Do you know what she's called you?"

"I don't even care. I don't want to know. I know she's said some pretty fucked up things about me, but she was young. It's not a big deal."

"Not just when you were in high school," Jason says. "When you were in jail too."

"It's late. I gotta go," Gabe says.

"Don't leave," Jason says. "I won't talk about her anymore."

"You're leaving?" Dante says.

Gabe looks at the white lines on a CD case, the cigarette butts floating in plastic cups like rotting corpses, the stains all over the walls. He says to Jason, "It's not that. It's just that it's late and I can't come home past midnight or my grandma will get pissed."

Dante throws his big right arm over Gabe's neck. "Hey!" He says, spilling his beer. "Remember when we played basketball with my dad?"

"Yeah," Gabe says. "I was so drunk I fell over LaQuan and Art. I looked like such an idiot."

"My dad was still impressed. You took five black dudes to the hole."

"We lost anyway."

"They were better," Dante says.

"You played a mean air guitar Gabe," J.R. says. "We had fun. We had fun and no one can take that away from us."

"We did," Gabe says.

"We missed you," Dante tells Gabe.

"We did," J.R. says. "When I read that article about you I cried. I knew that it wasn't true. I didn't believe a word of it."

"We care about you man," Jason says. "I'm sorry I was being a dick. Please stay."

"I definitely want to," Gabe says. "But I can't." He watches the beer in Dante's hand. Little water droplets run off the bottom of the can and drip onto the floor. It seems like he's been holding that beer for hours.

They all walk him upstairs. Gabe hugs Dante and J.R. He notices they're clicking their jaws and chewing on their lips.

"We need to hang," Dante says. "Let's play basketball at the Y."

"I'd like that Dante," Gabe says.

"Or see a movie," J.R. tells him. "There are still things we can do besides drink."

"Thanks," Gabe says. "But you don't have to change your life for me."

"Guys," Jason says. "Can you give Gabe and me a minute?"

They both hug Gabe and go downstairs. Jason places his beer on a small table beside the front door. "I am so sorry about that. I don't know what came over me. You have to forgive me."

"She's not a part of my life anymore. She hasn't been for a long time."

“I know, but you can’t tell me she’ll not always be important. I mean, she’s Angie.”

“She’s Angie, but still, I have my life.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Jason asks.

“Same stuff--working, coming home to my grandma and helping her clean. I don’t know.”

“You wanna see a movie or go to Nick’s and play video games?”

“I’ll see. My grandma probably doesn’t want me going out too much.”

“I understand. Well if you wanna do something give me a call.”

“Sure,” Gabe says. “Thanks for having me.”

They hug. Gabe opens the door and feels the bitter wind against his face. He wishes it was warmer outside, that all the snow would disappear.

“Hey,” Jason calls out. “When’s the next court date?”

“A couple weeks,” Gabe says.

“Do you need me to come?”

“No, not yet.”

“Ok,” Jason says. “Well whenever you need me, just let me know.”

“Sure,” Gabe tells him. “My lawyer will probably call you.”

“Great,” Jason says. “It was great seeing you.”

“You too.” He opens his car door, watches Jason disappear inside the house, wondering if he’s going to sleep tonight. How long is it going to be for Jason?

Gabe waits for his car to heat up, watches the cold mountain from the very top, seeing long tree branches and white snow stretching down the hill. It reminds him of

those quiet nights when he'd be alone in his cell reading a book in the one slice of light that came through his window. The only things that existed in the world were him and that book.

He has to scale down the entire silent and snowy mountain seeing all those places he passed as a child. At the bottom of it all, under all those millions of tons of trees and earth is his grandma, her apartment, and his bed, the pillow that he cried into for Angie. There are so many different ways to get there, but the night is clear and he's not stopping at Leah's, so he chooses the long way home.

January 20, 2002

It's remarkable how snow can change a house. The red becomes more red. The windows have an extra white frame. The roof looks like a puffy blanket. The shoveled paths mark where the yard ends and the driveway begins.

Gabe has never seen Leah's house in the winter. They only lasted the warmer months.

It looks like it did in the dreams he would have in his cell where he and Leah would be living together, celebrating the holidays next to warm fireplaces as rosemary chicken and asparagus sat on the dinner table and Daniella and Lara drew self-portraits in the living room. They would call them, "Girls! Dinner!" And later would clear the dinner table together, watch the snow from the den as they lie on the couch.

Even as Gabe looks back that's most of what he remembers—the playing, the tickling, the walks along the creek, and the lovemaking.

Besides for the snow and the frosts, the icicles hanging from the vents, the house basically looks the same. Same red door. Same door knocker. Same bricks and windows.

A few shades are drawn, the lights from the kitchen and the den shine into the foyer, and Gabe can recognize, as he sits in his grandma's car across the street, that the order of the living room is the same.

Inside is the same woman. On Sunday nights she's alone doing work around the house.

The lights in the kitchen shut off and for a few seconds the whole world seems frozen.

The lights in the stairway pop on and brighten the living room.

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She starts up the stairs, but stops to look at a family photo, saying to herself, like she's said so many times, Daniella has my eyes. Lara has my cheeks and chin. But they both have their father's nose.

She's worrying about them. What kind of world will her girls live in? Will it be cruel and punishing? Or will it open itself? She knows how difficult it all can be, even if you're open and honest, and she prays her daughters never experience cruelty. But she can't be there for them all the time. She can't save them from heartbreak and loneliness--that's just something everyone must go through.

They can feel those things, but not cruelty. Not trauma. They can't be awkward and unhappy children. She sees their innocence, hoping they can't sense her past. They must know deep down that their mother has seen bad things. Maybe they can't put it into words, or come up with ideas as to what it was, but it's there. They can sense it. When will they start asking questions? Why don't you speak to anyone in your family mommy? Why don't you get remarried?

Where will her children go to play if they left Blooming? It seems like the last patch of grass for miles. Are there things the girls don't tell her? Are they unhappy? If there's anything in this world that she can't endure, it's that.

Please let them smile. Let them grow and love and find joy in everything. Let Blooming protect them.

She begs the world to treat them with kindness. They're good kids, she says. They're good and they'll do nothing to harm any of you, so be kind to them, please.

As she walks up the stairs, digging her red painted toe's into the carpet, her knuckles crack from being on her feet all day. She sits on her bed and takes off her sweatpants and hoodie, her panties and bra. She stretches her hamstrings and thighs, her calves and Achilles tendon, and cracks her toes and her back. She rolls her head around in circles. She lies on the floor and does a set of crunches.

She goes into the bathroom and turns on the shower. She tests the water to make sure it's hot enough. She pulls the tie from her hair and it falls onto her shoulders. She looks down at her body and steps in.

The water is almost scolding and the room quickly fills with steam. The glass on the shower door fogs up. She soaps her body, rubbing it between her thighs and in the crevice of her vagina.

She squeezes a handful of shampoo into her palm and slowly rubs her scalp, and watches the subs gather at the drain. She asks herself why she hasn't painted anything new in over nine months? Have the girls noticed? What does it mean to make something beautiful?

Her hair conditioner she buys online from a boutique in Paris. It smells like lavender and daffodils and she never rinses it out fully. She thinks people should always leave a remnant of conditioner in their hair.

After she steps out of the shower she stands in the steam for a minute with her eyes closed. She bends down with her legs straightened and touches the floor. She rises and stretches her hands to the ceiling.

She puts on her robe which is hanging on a hook on the back of the door. She walks over to her steamy mirror and she can't see herself through the fog. She grabs her brush and combs out the knots in her hair.

Gradually the steam clears and she looks at herself. She has lines underneath her eyes. Her face is perhaps a little too thin. She knows people with thin faces age faster and show wrinkles because their face is taught. She fights this everyday with creams and moisturizers, a little extra cover up in the bags under her eyes.

She continues combing her hair. Droplets of sweat and condensation run down her cheeks.

She opens the bathroom door. Steam follows her into her bedroom and vanishes by the time it reaches her bed. She takes her robe off and sits, waiting to dry with her back straight and watches the vapors escape and quickly dissipate.

She goes downstairs fully naked, a secret thrill of hers and something she could only do on weekends when Daniella and Lara were gone, and fills her tea kettle, setting it on the stove with the flame on high.

She opens the drawer next to the stove. This is where she hides her M&M's. She takes a few and pops them into her mouth, thinking that she gives everything to her girls, she must still keep a few things to herself. She refuses to feel guilty about this.

She walks back upstairs and looks for clothes. She debates over putting on panties and a bra. Even though she isn't going anywhere, and she'll just be downstairs in the den for the rest of the night, folding clothes, drinking tea, and watching crime shows, sometimes she'll put on a lace thong to feel sexy, to feel the fabric against her skin.

But that's silly, she thinks, and she grabs a running suit, which will be more comfortable.

The doorbell rings.

She thinks she must be hearing things and she opens her bedroom door.

She hears the ring again.

Sometimes on Sunday nights her roommate Noelle will come home from a date complaining how much of a disaster it was, or another mother from around the neighborhood will stop by for whatever reason, but it's still rare for her to hear her doorbell ring on Sunday night.

She pulls her running jacket over her head and steps quickly down her stairs and through the foyer, hoping the person will leave quickly, whoever it is, because she was thinking of playing music and dancing around the house with a glass of wine. Sunday is the only day she can be alone.

She snaps the door open and gasps.

Her hand is over her mouth. She can't speak. She feels like she has to cry immediately but she can't move or do anything. She stares at the figure in front of her and the snow behind him.

"Hi," Gabe says.

Most times she would have asked who it was before answering the door, but in the past months she'd become increasingly safe and comfortable in Blooming.

Her hand remains over her mouth and she still can't speak. She breathes deeply through her fingers, smelling soap, and feeling the cold air coming in.

"I," Gabe says.

The tea kettle hisses. It was part of their daily routine to have black tea and cream in the afternoons and on Sunday nights.

She can't feel her face or her body. All she can see is him, but barely.

"I had to see you," he says.

Her hand slides off of her mouth. She realizes her hair is still wet and it's becoming colder. If she keeps standing there the tips will become icicles. She rubs her hair and motions for him to step inside.

"I didn't mean to bother you," he says. "I can just leave."

Her hand is open with her fingers spread over her lips like a Chinese fan. She clears her throat. "No," she says, closing the door behind him. "You don't have to."

He steps in and looks around the room, not saying anything. His back faces her. She stares at him thinking he'll never turn back around. He'll keep going through the back door and never come back.

"It looks the same," he says, still looking off into the air.

"I have a new roommate now," Leah says. "She lives in the salon."

"Who is it?" He says, turning around.

"Someone from high school," she says. "You don't know them."

"How have you been?" He asks.

"I'm okay," she says, but she can't remember if she's doing okay or not. Lately, she's been happy. Her salon has been busier than ever. The girls are doing well in school and they have plenty of friends. She has her little Blooming community she loves. But she's still not sure if she's okay. "How have you been?" She asks.

"I'm okay," he says. "It's been a crazy couple of weeks."

“How crazy?”

“Well I guess they haven’t been crazy, but more strange. I’ve been living with my grandmother and working at a gas station.”

“Oh,” she says. “Is it all over?”

“No,” he says. “No, it’s not.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I’ll be okay.”

“Do you want tea?” She says, realizing the kettle’s been hissing for awhile.

“Sure,” he says.

She follows him into the kitchen. His head is moving in slow circles. He looks at the floor, down at the kitchen table, and around at the cabinets. He stops at the counter and looks out through the windows towards the backyard.

“Where’s Cricket?” He asks.

“Oh shit,” she says, and moves quickly towards the back door. She shouts, “Come in girl!”

A few seconds later Cricket runs in and shakes her body in the foyer, rolling around on the floor to remove the snow from her hair. Cricket runs into the kitchen and barks and growls at Gabe.

“No girl!” Leah says. “Stop it! Be nice!” Leah kneels down and pets her and Cricket calms down for a second. As soon as Leah walks away though to prepare the tea, Cricket starts barking again.

“Hey! Hey! Stop that you!” she says. But this time Cricket won’t stop and Gabe is backing away in fear. Leah picks Cricket up. “I’ll just put her upstairs in Daniella’s room.”

As Leah carries Cricket upstairs she sees the back of Gabe’s head in his car the last time she saw him. She sees his car making that right and her body moves like it has no weight. She opens Daniella’s door and plops Cricket in.

As she walks down the steps she tells herself to not think about that, he is a guy she knew and he is visiting and that’s it. It’s no big deal. She tells herself to not think about their past, and the whole time she’s confused and her heart beats quickly and deeply and she can feel these beats in her stomach, and she cringes.

At the same time she can’t wait to get back to the kitchen to see him.

She walks in and he’s still leaning against the counter, looking into the backyard.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Can I take your coat?”

“Sure.” He takes his leather jacket off.

“Did you have this before?”

“No,” he tells her. “My sister just gave it to me.”

“Oh.” She opens up the closet in the foyer. She yells back into the kitchen, “How is she?”

“She’s good.”

She wonders if she’s talking too much. Or maybe if she’s not saying the right words. He was always the one that said the perfect thing in the moment, not her, but she’s saying more than him.

She enters the kitchen and walks past him towards the tea kettle. She takes tea bags from the cabinets and drops them into two matching cups, pours boiling water and cream from a milk pourer and lets them sit. “Cream and sugar right?”

He moves towards her. “Sure.”

She picks up the cups and sees he’s close to her, but she can’t look him in the eyes. She walks past him and sits at the kitchen table.

It’s the same long country table with benches they’ve always had and they sit side-by-side, looking out into the backyard.

She watches him from the corner of her eye. He blows on his tea and stares at it, taking deep breaths.

“It’s hot still,” she says, and all of a sudden she feels his hand on her hand, then around the small of her back, and her body trembles.

She wraps her arms around his neck and tucks her head into his chest.

She hears him start to cry. He gasps and his tears fall on her head. He squeezes her tighter and tighter and she pulls him in closer. “Shhhhh,” she says, as she rubs his head and he cries. “Shhhhh.”

She looks at him, at his lips and cheeks. She rubs his face, and feels like she should say, “I’m sorry.” But she can’t. She doesn’t know what she’d be sorry for.

Gabe says, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” she says. “Don’t say that.”

“I am,” he says, laying his head on her shoulder. He cries some more.

“Just don’t say it,” she says.

She holds him and it reminds her that she's the older one. She's the one that took care of him all the time. He was the one who was always apologizing, and crying against her body. Not her. And there came a point some months ago when she thought it was all her fault, she should've known better.

But his body feels warm in her arms and the sounds from his mouth make her stop wondering and she squeezes him harder without a thought in her head.

"Let's go into the den," she says, picking up their tea.

"Here, let me get it," he says, holding out his hands.

She slides the tea cups to him and he carries them into the foyer. Leah walks past him and flips the light switch so he can see.

"Still the same," Gabe says, as he sits down.

"I like it the way it is."

"You think you'll stay here for a long time?"

"I don't plan on leaving," she says. "It's a great town and the girls love it."

"I loved it," Gabe says.

They sit close to one another with their legs nearly touching.

She wants to kiss him. She wants to press his body against the couch. But she doesn't know what to do or how to act.

"How are the girls?" Gabe asks.

"Daniella gets straight A's and is on the soccer team. I think Lara might be the class bully."

Gabe laughs, "Makes sense."

"I guess," Leah says, smiling, taking a sip of her tea.

“How are you?” She says, wondering if he’s still drinking. She knows she’ll be able to tell whether or not he’s drinking based on his response.

“I’m okay I guess.”

“What’s going on with your situation?”

“Waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For court dates. For a plea bargain or a trial or whatever’s going to happen.”

“When do you go to court?”

“It was supposed to be this week, but that was cancelled. It’s February fifth.”

“What’s going to happen?” She asks, deciding that he’s comfortable with himself, and he probably hasn’t drank. She realizes that if he was drinking he probably wouldn’t have come. That’s why he always disappeared in the first place.

“I don’t know,” he says.

“What do you think?”

“I’m hoping for some kind of plea bargain that gives me time served.”

“How long did you serve?”

“Fifteen and a half months.”

“Jesus,” she says, looking down at her cup.

“It wasn’t that bad,” he tells her. “It really wasn’t.”

“Fifteen and a half months.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m fine.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“It went by. It’s in the past. I did it.”

She looks at the little Asian girl in the pictograph across from her and at the clean room that she worked on all day. Her laptop on the desk in the corner is open and the Dell insignia is lit up.

A light wind brushes against the window behind them and she notices it's become a little chilly in the room. She rises and turns up the heat.

Fifteen and a half months, she thinks, she couldn't even imagine it. How could a person be in the same room with bars on the windows for that long without going crazy?

She sits back down. She blows on her tea and it makes little ripples.

"Are you okay with that?" Gabe says.

"Okay with what?"

"I don't know," he says. "The fact that I was in there for so long."

"What's there to be okay with?"

"I mean, does it freak you out that I was in there for so long?"

"I don't like it," she says. "If that's what you mean. But there's nothing I can do about it. It is what it is."

"I know," he says. "I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable. I'm the same person."

A light, warm breeze starts blowing on her neck. Her left hand massages her right hand. She wishes she could walk away for a second, into the next room and gather herself, but she knows she can't. Not now. She has to listen to him. "What are you going to do?" She asks.

"About what?"

"About anything."

“Well hopefully I don’t go back there, that’s the first thing. Then I’m gonna go back to school and work, and one day I’ll get my charges expunged and I can get a real job like anybody else.”

“So you’re going to school?”

“In the fall.”

“That’s good,” she says, and feels her stomach getting queasy. She might be sick. “Hold on one minute. I’ll be back in a sec.”

She goes to the bathroom and kneels in front of the toilet, but nothing happens. The bowl smells like cleansers and the porcelain is a bright white.

She sits down on the seat and remembers she’d never let him see her or even hear her go to the bathroom. She always waited until he was on the other side of the house.

And one of her recurring jokes throughout their relationship was that she hung up on him on the phone. He’d be in the middle of a sentence, and then, click.

And he’d call back.

“Oh,” she’d say. “Were we disconnected?”

Then, click.

And when he picked up on what she was doing she’d laugh in his ear, and then, click. It really pissed him off.

She remembers how they laughed in the beginning.

She never loved a man like she loved Gabe.

And she loved him instantly.

She reminds herself to not let him get too close to her. They have this ability to get too close too fast. That's why they disappeared into the city together the first night. That's why he moved in within a week.

And that's why it ended so quickly.

Leah started thinking after that, love isn't a whirlwind. Love isn't devastating, or violent, or erratic. Maybe it's exciting, but it still needs to be grounded in reality. There needs to be a future.

Love stays--at least for more than five months, and love doesn't disappear and return when it pleases. Love isn't selfish or desperate, and it doesn't cry on your shoulder all the time.

It doesn't leave for fifteen and a half months and show up on your doorstep.

She returns to the den. Gabe's legs are crossed and his arms are spread on the back of the sofa. She sits behind his left arm and his fingertip touches her shoulder.

"How have you been?" he asks.

"Didn't you ask me that already?"

"I don't think so."

Leah thinks he's digging to find out if she's dating somebody. If she tells him she isn't, he can't think she wants him back. "I'm fine," she says.

"How much are you working?"

"Everyday," she says. "But not for too many hours at a time. And I only cut a few client's hair. I have some good girls working for me."

"So you have time to be Supermom?"

"I have time for them, yes," she says. "Supermom? Definitely not."

“I always thought you were.”

“I’m probably fucking them up every which way,” she says. “I don’t even know.”

“Name one.”

“First of all, I yell far too much,” she says. “That gets them yelling. Every night they have another screaming match, and it’s all my fault.”

“You guys do yell a lot,” he says.

“I know.”

“But there is a lot of love in this house,” he says.

“Thanks,” she says, brushing her bangs off of her forehead. “But usually it’s a freakin’ mad house.”

Gabe looks around. “I really loved living here.”

She can’t help it. He can’t show up on the doorstep and act like nothing ever happened. She says, “Then why did you leave all the time?”

“I was sick.”

“That’s it? That’s the only reason? You didn’t want to get away from us?”

“No,” he says. “I’ve missed you so much you could never understand. I’ve thought about nothing but you and the girls for months. I was sick and I didn’t know what I had.”

“Well,” she says. “That was in the past.”

“And I’m here right now.”

“Gabe,” she says. “Do you actually think you can come back? It’s been over a year.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m alive, and you’re alive. We’re both here so why wouldn’t we speak and still know each other?”

“We can speak and know each other.”

“That’s all I ask for.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” he says. “I don’t want anything from you. All I ask is that you know me.”

She looks at him, knowing he’s completely serious, blinks and moves forward to pick up her teacup. She lifts it to her mouth, but it’s empty. She sets it back down and puts her hands in her lap.

He’s never taken his eyes from hers.

She brushes her bangs off of her face again. They won’t go where she wants and even when she tucks them to the side, behind her ears, they won’t stay. She breathes, remembering the time they played wiffleball in the sun by the creek, and returned to the house and made love all afternoon. She avoids his eyes until somehow her hands holds his and her fingers are wrapped around his fingers.

The TV makes no sound. The trees have no leaves. The birds have flown away. The creek is frozen, Blooming is silent and Daniella and Lara and the rest of the world are so far away. It’s only them in the house and his hands are strong on her back and shoulders.

She pulls him closer to her until his body is on top of hers.

They kiss deeply and she remembers the time she said to him, “If we broke up ever, wouldn’t you want to get back together just because the sex is so good?”

And all those days and nights in the kitchen, in the foyer, on top of the washing machine, in her car, in the garage, in the grassy fields of Hacklebarney State Park.

Without thinking, she holds his hand and leads him upstairs.

She looks back as their steps sink into the carpet, at the look of astonishment on his face, and she thinks, what am I doing? This is happening too quickly. I can’t have sex with him now.

But as soon as she’s about to say, “Maybe you should leave,” he’s kissing her and rubbing her shoulders. He’s lifting her jacket over her head and laying her down on the bed.

She wants to say no, but she can’t, he’s on top of her, sliding her running pants down.

She mouths, “We can’t do this,” but the words don’t come. Gabe’s tongue is inside her and she feels like he’s never been gone.

Like she’s always known him and she always will.

Afterwards, as they seem to inhabit the other’s skin, she looks outside at the moon above the trees. Frost is on the glass and little icicles hang from the windowsill. He moves his fingertips in circles around the freckles on her shoulders. “Leah,” he says.

“Shhhhh,” she says, rubbing his chest. “Don’t say anything.”

Water drips from the faucet in her bathroom. The heater shuts off. Cricket barks in the other room. “Uggh,” She says, and begins to move.

“Don’t go.”

“I’m just going to let her out of the room.”

“Never leave me,” he says.

“I’ll be right back,” she tells him. She gets up and walks naked out of the room, looking back and seeing him watch her leave. He actually looks sad.

She opens the door for Cricket and quickly returns, shutting the door to her room so the dog doesn’t get in.

“Do you remember going to Hershey Park?” Gabe says.

“Of course I do.”

“Do you remember the look on Daniella’s face on Storm Runner?”

“It was her first roller coaster.”

“I should’ve been arrested for child abuse,” he says. “She was traumatized.”

Leah slides into bed and under his arms. “We all had fun though.”

“That was a perfect day,” Gabe says. “One of the best days of my life.”

“Me too.”

“I really miss them.”

“They missed you too.”

“Not anymore?”

“They’re kids. They forget. At least after a few months they did. But they’ll never fully forget you I’m sure.”

Cricket scratches at the door, trying to get in. Leah leans on his chest. “Gabe,” she says. “Maybe we can work something out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Something. You’re right, we should know each other.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“We’ll start from there,” she says. “But I can’t do what we did before.”

“Me either,” he says. “I don’t want that.”

“So you don’t have your stuff outside ready to move in?” She asks, smiling.

“Just my guitar.”

“That I can take.”

He kisses her forehead and she rests on him. She closes her eyes and smiles into his shoulder. That was always her favorite part of his body.

When they first met she wanted to be around him as much as she could. She loved his energy, the sound of his voice, the crevices in his hands and his fingers, the way he looked at her, his little cowlick that stuck out in front.

But tomorrow the girls come home from school and what does she say to them? Tomorrow she goes to work and Noelle will be back. She thinks that he was too young before, but for the little time they did have together, they did experience something meaningful.

Yet they never went on vacation together or over a mountain, into the ocean or to Europe—they never looked out at a desert or felt completely lost in the middle of foreign city. They never walked through, or even looked at snow together.

The world is larger than anything and they’ve only been in these small rooms in Blooming, together, making love and talking all night. If they could have the rest of what’s beyond these small spaces, what would it be like?

But what if he keeps running away? What if he’s not done with what he needs to go through? It’s only just begun for him--should he do it alone?

Maybe things will be different, or make more sense in the morning. Maybe she'll kick him out. Or maybe they'll laugh about it. Maybe they'll take their time to get to know each other a little more.

“Do you still think about being an actor?” she asks, looking up, seeing that Gabe is asleep. She watches his still face. “I could see you reading monologues in your cell. I could see you making the other inmates laugh with your impressions.” She sees his chest move up and down. “And you made it out, you made it back to me.”

Through the window the moon is a spot in the sky. She stares at it with her eyes closing, and begins thinking she should do another mural. It's been too long since she painted something beautiful, since she watched the paint move from her brush onto the canvas, and felt it harden on her skin.

“Never leave me again,” she says. “Never leave me.”

February 5, 2002

Tan, blue, and burgundy houses look like abandoned cathedrals. No cars in the driveway or children swinging from tree branches. No flowers growing in the garden. The snow has all melted away, ran down the hill to the sewers, and out to the ocean. The grass is brown and wet. The sky is gray and the granite steps are darkening at its edges. The marble doesn't shine. Florence, and it's downtown shopping area, is a town that energizes in the summer, and looks like a postcard in the winter. But there are no pictures to take.

Gabe waits outside the courthouse for his lawyer. He feels like it's been February fifth for two weeks and everyday is the same. He's been calling his lawyer but she'll either be on the phone with someone else, or she's in court. Last time he heard they were confirming the case's Discovery today and scheduling a date to pick a jury, but he's not completely sure.

He remembers the underground tunnel connecting the jail to the courthouse. That's how they transported prisoners to their court hearings. It'd be a line of fifteen or so guys chained together by their wrists. They'd march into a holding cell and five guys would go into court at a time.

Gabe sat there in the middle of the earth in his jumpsuit waiting to go in, with ten guys he never met. The first couple of times he was afraid one of them would try to fight him but he figured out later, that everyone knew it wasn't worth the risk. Everybody was on their best behavior before sitting in front of the judge.

There was no toilet or mirror, no desk like his cell in the jail. It was a concrete room with a few bars to chain people down.

When they escorted Gabe into court his ankles and wrists were shackled together, and the guard still walked alongside him. It was the only time Gabe would be in public—in an orange jumper while everyone else was in suits.

This'll be the first time Gabe will be dressed like them. It's a suit his sister gave to him. An old blue pinstripe that her husband grew out of. He wears a black tie and black shoes. He's clean-shaven and his hair is combed with gel.

Staring at the courthouse and the jail in the back, he wonders where Poppy is now. He served twenty-one months of a ten year sentence, and he's still upstate, hiding away behind laundry bins, hoping the Mexican gang will protect him. He probably smokes and drinks as much as he can.

Poppy might make it out but Gabe isn't sure if he would. Especially if he has to serve eighty-five percent with no chance of parole.

When Gabe drove to Florence this morning, before he hit the highway, he made a short detour down a farm road. It was the one stretch in his part of town that had always remained fields and rows of corn until his eyes couldn't see anymore and somewhere in the distance the crops blended in with the trees. He saw though, that the corn had been dug out of the earth, and the farmhouse and silo were gone. He could see clearly through the small field. There were foundations laid for several homes on top of one another, dump trucks and bulldozers, huge piles of dirt and sand scattered throughout, men in hard-hats drinking coffee, breathing out thick gusts of air into surveying maps. He stopped the car thinking, it's not fair what they're doing. It's not fair that to build new homes they're taking away his own, changing the way everything looks all the time.

Every time he goes away and comes back it looks different. Just for once he'd like to see Lowell, once a farming town, look the same; the same stores and the same people.

They must've been building fifty homes in that lot. The last stretch of farmland for miles and they won't even be able to call it farm road anymore. Where will the children play? Where will they go to climb trees and get lost in a forest where there are no highways or mini-malls?

Will they do what Gabe did and go pool-hopping with the other kids on the block? Trespass onto someone's property, spend their childhood being chased by Polish landlords in flip-flops; staring at concrete, metal, and landscaped cut grass, mulch, and birds on telephone wires. Where will they go to whisper their secrets? Where will the new children go to see there are other places unlike their block covered in cigarette butts and empty bottles of liquor, and guys hanging out on the stoop?

Are they going to cover the whole world in stoops?

Gabe drove through farm road wanting to cry for those children and his disappearing town. They won't miss paradise because they won't know it exists.

Driving, Gabe thought about it more, and he rarely played in those woods. Mostly, he ran touch football on the street, basketball at the local court, the whole time falling in love with all the Puerto Rican girls, trying to get them to play with him, go to the slides so he could accidentally bang into them at the bottom and maybe they would kiss.

His dreams didn't live in the forests or the farms. They lived in the hearts of those girls that would rather lick a stop sign than kiss him.

But maybe that didn't help. Maybe he didn't know any better.

The fact is, Gabe never thought about those roads and the woods, but now that they're gone, he misses them.

A pregnant woman waves to Gabe from the street. She has a black dress on and large black sunglasses that cover most of her face. She motions for him to come to her as she opens the trunk of her car. He thinks the woman must be confused, but as he gets closer he sees she's his lawyer, and she probably needs help carrying her briefcases.

"Could you get this for me?" She asks. "Will ya?"

"Sure," Gabe says, grabbing a bag. "Congratulations."

"Huh?"

"You're pregnant."

"Oh, that," she says. "Thanks, but I'm fucking exhausted."

"I bet."

They walk towards the building. She stops in the path. "Okay," she says. "Sorry I've been out of the loop. I've been fucking busy."

"That's okay."

"I filed a motion last week to have your statement stricken from the record."

"Okay."

"I talked to Barbara, the prosecutor. What a fucking Minnie she is. I mean, goddamn these fucking prosecutors have no balls. No balls whatsoever."

Gabe smiles, unsure how to respond.

"She told me that if they dismiss your statement, although to get her to commit to anything is fucking impossible, that we could work out a plea."

"Ok."

“You would most likely plead to a third and get time served with probation.”

“Wait,” Gabe says. He steps back. “What?”

“They’ll drop all the charges,” she says. “If you plead guilty to third-degree assault.”

“Is that a felony?”

“Yeah, but you won’t go to prison.”

“That’s for sure?”

“Well, there’s no guarantees, I mean, you could, but it’s highly unlikely.”

Gabe is confused and she seems frustrated with him.

“Look,” she says. “The max prison time for a third degree is three years. You’ve already served fifteen and some months. And you have no record and you’re a college kid. So most likely, unless the judge is a serious fucking bitch, you’ll just get probation.”

“How much probation?”

“Two years probably, maybe three.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Happening?” she says. “Nothing has happened yet, don’t get your hopes up. But it’s a possibility.”

“This seems so sudden. You’re sure this can happen.”

“You know what it is?” she says, getting closer to his ear. “It’s Jovan fucking Harrison.”

“What?”

“Jovan Harrison, the basketball player.”

“What about him?”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“What?”

“Do you live in a fucking box?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jovan Harrison murdered his wife three weeks ago. It’s the biggest thing this bullshit county has ever seen.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Gabe asks.

“All their prosecutors are going to be working on that case. And they don’t have many. It’s a small ass county. So if they have any cases they could just push through so they don’t have to worry about it, they will.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“It hasn’t *happened* yet,” she says, raising her hand like she’s going to slap him. She leads Gabe up the steps to the courthouse.

They pass through the metal detectors and take the elevator up to the fourth floor. Gabe says, “Do you think it’s too soon to go for a plea?”

“Why?”

“Shouldn’t we see if we could win the trial first?”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to go to trial?”

“I don’t, but ...”

“This’ll make the case go away,” she says. “Why wait for anything? We need to do this while they’re weak. That Jovan Harrison thing fucked them up.”

Gabe pushes the heavy courtroom doors open. It seems as if the sun comes out just as they enter.

There's a skylight high above, bouncing beams of light off of the shiny brown wood, the tan walls, and through the dust floating around. A television and VCR are in the center between the judge's stand and the lawyer's tables. It smells like wood polish and two bailiffs look like columns at the entrance. The tables are empty and a few men in their late twenties with shaved heads sit in the audience.

"Who's that?" Gabe whispers to his lawyer.

"I don't know," his lawyer says, situating her notes on their table. "Maybe interns, law students."

"Do you think they're his family?"

"Who? *The victim*," she says, making quote signs with her hands. "No, definitely not. They're some kind of interns." She looks over at him, smiling, "Are you paranoid or something? Don't worry, everything's gonna be ok. No one's dying here today." She fans herself with her legal pad. "Except maybe me."

Gabe sits. The sun is a yellow spot bouncing light around the room, and with the different tones in the wood, the stained deep reds and browns, the golden spots from the center of the seal of New Jersey, colors dart around the room like a spinning mosaic. He feels dizzy. "It's so quiet in here," he says. "How much time until we start?"

"It's 10:47, so not long. She could come in at any minute."

"The hearing starts at eleven though."

"Yes," she says, slowly lowering herself into her chair. "But you should stay in here just in case. You can't disrespect the judge by not being here when she enters."

"I just have to go to the bathroom," he says, but he doesn't.

She checks her watch, "Be back within three minutes. Seriously."

Gabe calmly walks outside the courtroom. When the door shuts he sprints towards the elevator. People are waiting and he can see it's stopped and not moving on the second floor. No time to wait.

He runs down the stairs and outside to a pay phone across the street. He drops a couple quarters into the slot and dials.

It rings and rings.

He hasn't spoken to Leah in a week. The last time he called her, she said, "I thought about this, and it's not going to work. Not now anyway."

"What are you talking about?"

"We can't do this. We can't start this up again."

"Why?"

"Because you're not ready and I'm not ready. It's too soon."

"But you said we should know each other."

"You know we can't be casual like that. It's all or none for us."

"It doesn't have to be."

"With you it does. And we've never been friends. We can't keep it as friends."

"Why not?"

"Gabe, because we can't."

"You won't talk to me?"

"I haven't sat down and came up with a list of rules or anything. It's not like I won't speak to you. I just can't have it go back to the way it was."

"I said it wouldn't."

"But it would. You know it would."

“If I don’t have you in my life, I’ll feel empty,” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Would you pick up the phone if I called?”

“Right now? I don’t know.”

And she didn’t. He called twice, and at times in the day he knew she’d be there, but it rang until the answering machine picked up, and he never left a message.

She used to say all he needed was a stage and someone willing to listen. And what would he say? Maybe that he was once childish and awkward, but now he found his place in the world, so don’t steal it from him. He may only have one chance at this, so don’t make him walk away.

The phone picks up on the other side. He hears, “Hello, you’ve reached the Bianchi residence. We are not available to pick up the phone at this time.”

He runs into the building, through the metal detectors again, and up the stairs, opens the door and sees it’s 10:57 and the judge still isn’t there.

"That was a long three minutes," his lawyer says.

"Sorry."

The prosecutor enters. She’s a tall, homely woman with large legs and wide hips, in a black dress and a white blouse, a ponytail clipped in the back. His lawyer stares her down and the prosecutor either doesn’t notice, or deliberately keeps her head averted.

The judge enters. She’s a small old woman with white puffy hair like Gabe’s grandma.

"All rise! Court is now in session. The Honorable Judge Harding presiding."

The judge says, "Good morning everybody, you may be seated. Mrs Gerndt and Ms. Lourdes, I believe we are to finalize the Discovery on the Carlson case, is that correct?"

Both lawyers rise. "Yes your honor, that's correct," the prosecutor says.

"But first your honor," Gabe's lawyer says. "I was hoping you could rule on the motion I sent in last week regarding my client's statement."

"Oh yes, I remember seeing that. Prosecutor Gerndt, are you okay with that?"

"Well, your honor..."

"It's just that Judge," Gabe's lawyer says. "It would make no sense to finalize the Discovery to only remove my client's statement later from it. The logical order would be to rule on the legitimacy of my client's statement first."

"Right," the judge says. "Prosecutor, does that sound alright with you?"

"Yes your honor."

Gabe looks up at the skylight and the sun as he hears the court stenographer tapping away. He knows he should pay attention, but sometimes he can't help it. He constantly must remind himself to listen.

"Judge," his lawyer says.

"Wait Ms. Lourdes," the judge interrupts. "I need to get the motion out." She leafs through a folder on the stand. "Ahhhh, Here it is. Proceed."

"Thank you judge," the lawyer says. "If it's okay at this time I'd like to review footage of the defendant in the arresting officer's patrol car. This is the night, or rather, early morning of September fifteenth, the day of the incident."

"That's fine," the judge says.

His lawyer slowly rises, holding her lower back, probably emphasizing her pregnancy, and walks over to the TV and plays the tape. It's dark and Gabe can barely make out the blurry grey figures on the screen. He doesn't remember this conversation, but he can tell it's his voice.

"Where are you taking me?" Gabe's voice asks.

"To headquarters," the officer says.

"What's happening there?"

"You ask a lot of questions, you know that?"

"Is my lawyer going to be there?" Gabe asks.

"Your lawyer?" says the officer. "Do you have a lawyer?"

"I don't know," Gabe says.

"Then I guess not," the officer says, laughing.

"How about a public defender? Can I have the public defender meet me there?"

Gabe's lawyer pauses the tape. "Your honor, as argued in my motion last week, my client's Miranda rights were ignored by his arresting officers. He specifically asked for a lawyer, and a public defender at that."

"Your Honor," says the prosecutor. "Her client signed a waiver dismissing his legal privilege. He gave his statement of sound mind and body."

"Not true!" his lawyer says. "He was coerced and intimidated, lied to, and we have tape on all of that too. The bottom line here is judge, my client requested legal council, and his request was ignored." Gabe's lawyer returns to her seat and sits down with her arms folded. "His civil rights were violated."

The prosecutor sits down.

“Anything further on this, Mrs. Gerndt?” the judge says.

The prosecutor rises. “No thank you, your Honor.”

“So I will rule on this after lunch, does that sound sufficient to both of you?”

They rise. “Yes, your Honor.”

“Yes judge.”

“Okay, then let’s re-adourn at, say, one o’clock? So we’ll have lunch and come back refreshed, sound good?”

They rise. “Yes your Honor.”

“Thank you judge.”

“Great,” she says, pounds her gavel and leaves.

Gabe watches the bailiffs hold their pistols. The court stenographer reads her report. The prosecutor, Gabe thinks, is pretending to review her notes to avoid his lawyer’s eye contact, who is still staring her down.

Gabe has to pee. He’d give anything to leave the courtroom and go back home. He starts to walk out.

“Hey,” his lawyer says quietly. “How’d you know about public defenders?”

“I don’t know,” Gabe says. “Probably got it from a movie.”

“That movie may have saved your life.”

Gabe carries his lawyer’s briefcase and walks behind her out of the room. On the opposite side the prosecutor is waiting for her. “Here,” she says, holding out her hands “Just give that thing to me.”

Gabe hands her the briefcase and turns to walk away. He hears the prosecutor say, “Congratulations! How far along are you ... ” as he walks down the stairs.

He sits on the steps outside, wishing he still smoked. This would be the perfect time. He can't eat and he doesn't want to walk around the jail because he's afraid of seeing somebody he knows. But he doesn't want to stay on the steps either though--if he sees the prosecutor it'll make her feel uncomfortable.

He doesn't want to harass Leah, but he does have news to tell her. It might work out, maybe he won't have to go to prison after all.

He can't make it seem like his excuse for them getting back together though. That's not why he's calling--he'll give her space, all the time in the world she needs. Maybe she would be interested in hearing his news though.

He walks over to the pay phone, thinking Florence would be a dream place to raise children. Blooming was also, but it was more rustic and less sophisticated.

In Florence, their children would probably be more stimulated. They could walk down the main street and hold hands on their way to the gelato shop--gelato, not ice cream. And they could buy handcrafted chess sets and Gabe could teach their kids how to play.

Their kids.

There was a time when Gabe and Leah discussed untying her tubes and having a baby. It wasn't long though until Gabe started disappearing and proving himself too young to be a father. Why was it Piero and not Gabe? Why does he get to have children with her? Why does he get to have a real reason to call her at any minute of any day? And she always picks up because he's their father.

Gabe drops a couple quarters in the slot, thinking he won't give up on her. He'll keep trying. Eventually she'll give him another chance. She has to.

He dials. The phone rings and rings.

He'd give anything to hear her voice.

There is a click and a pause and Gabe waits to hear her—a pain throbs in his stomach and he hears, “Hello, you’ve reached the Bianchi residence.”

He pinches his eyes shut and slowly places the phone back on the receiver.

He drops two more quarters into the slot and calls again.

He hears, “Hello, you’ve reached the Bianchi residence.”

The phone is pressed into his forehead, making a small dent. He looks out and sees a mother pushing her baby in a stroller. She stops, shows the baby some attention, probably tucking her little blanket into her neck, making her feel safe and comfortable.

He bashes the phone against the side of the booth.

He says into the receiver, “If you’re there, please talk to me. Please. Don’t do this. Don’t do this to me.”

The sun hides behind the clouds and covers Florence with grayness. The street is empty and cars are stopped at a red light on the corner.

“Tell me everything is going to be ok,” Gabe says. His face is against the side of the booth. “Please.”

He drops the phone. It swings in front of his body, clanging once against the inside of the booth. He sits on the ground with the phone hanging next to his head. “You said we’d always know each other. You told me not to leave. Why did you say that? Why did you say that?” He starts to cry, but forces himself to stop. He gets up and walks away from the pay phone, and refuses to look back at it.

After a few steps, he thinks he shouldn't leave the phone dangling there like that-- what if someone's looking? What if the prosecutor is watching him right now? What if there are cameras? Maybe she could use this behavior against him.

He hangs up the phone, and stands there, watching the flag on top of the courthouse. It's flapping in the wind, high up above.

He doesn't understand why she's doing this to him.

He returns to the steps. His head is in his hands, in his lap, and after some time he hears his lawyer and the prosecutor laughing together as they walk into the building. He waits a couple minutes and goes in after them.

Upstairs, his lawyer sits on a bench outside the courtroom chatting with the prosecutor. When his lawyer sees Gabe she waves for him to wait for her.

He stands and the prosecutor walks past him and into the room. His lawyer calls him over.

"I think we got it," she says.

"Got what?"

"The third degree."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she says, slapping his shoulder. "She's not as bad once you get her one-on-one."

"So what happens?"

"I'm gonna try to finish this today."

"It's all over? So soon?"

"What do you mean, *so soon*?" she asks. "Don't you want this to end?"

“I didn’t expect it to happen so soon.”

“I told you they’re clearing their workload for Jovan Harrison. They’ll have news cameras here almost everyday. She talked about that at lunch more than you.”

“It’s all over?”

“Not quite. You have to get sentenced, like I said.”

“They’ll sentence me today?”

“The prosecutor wants to rush through this. We might not get to it, it all depends on what they have scheduled for this afternoon. But if I know these people they’ll want to finish this ASAP.”

His lawyer starts to walk and Gabe holds out his hand for her to take, but she keeps going without looking down. He grabs her briefcase and they walk in.

The prosecutor is at her desk arranging papers and everyone except the bailiffs are sitting.

The judge enters.

“All rise! The Honorable Judge Harding presiding.”

“Everyone may be seated,” the judge says. “Ms. Lourdes and Mrs. Gerndt I have ruled on the motion.”

“Yes your honor,” says the prosecutor.

“I have ruled in favor of the defense,” she says. “Defendant Carlson’s statement will be stricken from the record.”

Gabe’s lawyer rises. “Thank you Judge.”

“Okay,” the judge says. “We have another case here at, I think it’s three o’clock, do we have time for the Confirmation of Discovery?”

“Actually judge,” Gabe’s lawyer says. “The prosecutor and I have worked out a plea bargain and if it works for you judge, we could possibly finish this case today.”

“Prosecutor?” The judge says.

“The state is prepared to offer Mr. Carlson a third-degree aggravated assault, and I’ve been notified by the defense that the defendant would accept this plea.”

“Is that true Mr. Carlson?”

Gabe looks at his lawyer. She nods back to him, motioning for him to stand up.

He could say no. He could scream out, “No your honor! I’m going to trial! I don’t deserve any of this and I want to be judged by my peers.”

As he rises he tries to find Leah’s eyes, her mouth forgiving him as they live together in the smallest spaces. He sees the rickety pull-out and her lying back in the cab, racing toward Jersey away from the big city. He says, “Yes, that’s true your honor.”

The judge looks towards the court secretary, “Any chance we can push today’s three o’clock hearing?”

She flips through a set of cards. “I don’t see why we can’t your honor.”

“I just don’t want to lose this momentum we’ve built up. What do we say we come back in an hour?”

“We could do thirty minutes judge,” the prosecutor says. “We have all the paperwork ready.”

“Really? Wow,” the judge says. “But I don’t, so I need an hour.”

“An hour would be perfect judge,” the prosecutor says.

“Thank you judge,” Gabe’s lawyer says.

The judge pounds the gavel and leaves. Gabe's lawyer doesn't even look at him or give him instructions. She immediately disappears into a conference room with the prosecutor and their briefcases. Gabe watches the door, hoping his lawyer waves him in so he has something to do.

He can't call her again. He can't bring himself to go outside and face that payphone. What if it falls through? He doesn't want anyone, even Leah, knowing anything until it actually happens.

He sits on a bench outside the courtroom for awhile, staring at the pictures of former judges and town councilman. He crosses his legs and uncrosses them, trying to act innocent and normal.

He walks to the stairs at the end of the hall. He thought it was an emergency exit. He continues up to the fifth floor and then the sixth floor, reaches the top and wonders if he opened the door to the roof would the fire alarm go off.

He sits at the highest step in the building where there is no sound from lawyers or judges, and he remembers that first holding cell back when he still thought the guy was dead. Gabe was going to die in prison.

Poppy used to tell him though, "Naw man. You shouldn't worry about a thing. You're a white guy."

That doesn't matter Poppy.

Yeah it does. They don't send white guys to prison. Come on!

They don't care about that.

It don't matter. You have a paid lawyer. I got a public defender. They don't do shit for you!

But that didn't help and Gabe counted the days until it was his turn. All those nights he sat still in his cell thinking his life was over, he would never see Leah again.

He walks back down to the fourth floor, returns to the same bench and hears his lawyer and the prosecutor talking. He thinks they're probably reminiscing over law school, talking about mortgages, and the different judges in the state. Or maybe, Jovan Harrison.

He waits a few more minutes and goes into the courtroom. He's the only one there. It sounds like the building is settling into the earth, the heavy oak desks are settling into the building, and he settles into a chair, waiting for everyone else to return.

His lawyer comes in a few minutes later and sits down next to him. "You'll be signing some things," she says. "And I suggest you read them before signing them."

"Sure."

The prosecutor sits down and shuffles through some papers. She grabs two stacks, both sectioned off with paper clips, and hands them to Gabe's lawyer, who hands them to Gabe. "Look these over while we wait."

The court stenographer, the secretary, and the bailiffs enter. The clock shows 2:58 and Gabe looks down at the papers, but he can't read right now.

"All rise! The Honorable Judge Harding presiding."

"Please sit," the judge says. "Now let's get right down to it. Mrs. Gerndt, did you give the defense the plea bargain?"

The prosecutor rises. "We did your honor."

"And Ms. Lourdes?"

"My client has agreed to accept the state's plea your honor."

“Is that true Mr. Carlson?”

Gabe rises. “Yes it is, your honor.”

“May I have a copy of the plea now, Mrs. Gerndt?” the judge says.

The prosecutor walks over to the judge and hands her a stack of papers.

“Thank you Mrs. Gerndt,” the judge says. “Now Mr. Carlson, has your lawyer explained to you the charge in which your pleading guilty to?”

Gabe rises. “Yes she has, your honor.”

“So you understand you are pleading guilty to a third-degree aggravated assault, a felony which carries a maximum prison sentence of three years. You understand that Mr. Carlson?”

“I do your honor.”

“Do you understand that from this day forward, if you plead guilty to this charge, that you will be a felon?”

“I do, your honor.”

“And you realize that by being a felon this will greatly impact your life. It will be harder for you to get a job, to be involved in certain organizations. You understand all of this?”

“Yes I do your honor.”

“Okay Mr. Carlson,” the judge says, shuffling through the papers. “It is of a general practice that we allow the defendant to make a statement prior to being sentenced. If there’s anything you would want me to know, anything at all, that might influence my opinion on your sentence, now would be the time to tell me. Do you understand?”

“Yes your honor.”

“Is there anything you’d like to say?”

Gabe looks at his lawyer, who slowly nods approvingly. He says, "No, your honor. I don’t have anything to say."

“Nothing?” the judge says. “Nothing at all?”

People are most mad during times of transition and ecstasy. Sometimes they feel like their living someone else's life.

Gabe peeks up at the sun above. “No, your honor. I don’t.”

“Ok,” the judge says. “Well, Gabriel Carlson, you are pleading guilty to a third-degree aggravated assault. This is a Class-D felony in the State of New Jersey. This charge carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison, a \$10,000 fine, and other restitutions and fees. If you do serve prison time, you would need to serve eighty-five percent of it.” She looks towards the prosecution. “What is the prosecution’s request for sentencing?”

The prosecutor rises. She says, “The State seeks time-served with the maximum amount of probation, which is three years, your honor.”

“Well I see no reason to surpass that,” the judge says. “Mr. Carlson, this is your first offense, is it not?”

“Yes it is, your honor.”

“Is it your last?”

“It is.”

“Mr. Carlson, I’ve heard that before and I sincerely hope it’s true in your case. Upon entering your guilty plea you will begin your three years of probation. You’ll have to contact the probation office in the county in which you reside. Do you understand?”

“I do, your honor.”

The judge tells Gabe where to bring his paperwork downstairs. She thanks both lawyer’s for their cooperation, pounds her gavel, and disappears into the back.

Gabe’s lawyer slowly gets up and walks over to the prosecutor. She shakes her hand and they chat. Gabe waits in his seat for his lawyer to return.

He says to her, “Thank you. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, handing him her briefcase. As they walk out of the courtroom, she says, “Honestly, I’ve represented plenty of criminals and you don’t belong in prison. You’d probably die.”

"That's what everybody told me."

She points to the papers in his hand. “Take those downstairs. You’re going to have to sign some stuff.”

Gabe wants to hug her, but he knows that would make her feel uncomfortable. The prosecutor waits for her and they walk together to the elevator, while Gabe moves towards the stairs. He waves goodbye.

After he finishes the paperwork he goes outside and beams of sunlight warm his face. It’s all around him, shining down on the wet brown grass and the leafless trees.

He has his plea settlement in his hand, and realizes he has no idea where to go.

He walks towards the payphone, knowing the only difference between him and Poppy was that he had a lawyer. And he hopes that wherever Poppy is that he’s safe and

knowing what moved him, what made him feel alive enough to do the things he did. If he dies in prison Gabe hopes he'd realize before then, that she was worth it.

He hears Poppy's voice saying, "Man, all you need is a good woman," as he dials one more time before entering his car and driving away from this town forever.

After a few rings the phone picks up. His breath stops and his tired heart can't take anymore. He sees her clearly, her entire image on the other side of the phone. She's staring at the Caller-ID. She wants so badly to pick up the phone and hear the news, to hear her great love made it out. Let me hear your voice, she'll say. Hear mine and don't leave me to see this world alone.

He never left her anywhere she wasn't meant to be.

After a pause, a voice says, "Hello, you've reached the Bianchi residence."

The cord dangles and a cold wind starts to blow. Chills run through his body. All those fabrics out there in existence, yet they're no match against nature.

He walks back to his car and drives past the jail, a nameless building with a flag on top, and he knows inside men are crying into stiff plastic pillows, wishing they could turn back time, change what happened. If they're willing to look at themselves, maybe they'll say, "If it wasn't this, then it would have been something else."

But usually they don't. Usually they stay angry, regretful, they hate America, their family, friends, their lawyer, their cellmate, the guards--anyone and everyone until eventually they hide away in a dank lonely cell, staring with vacant eyes up at the cracks in the ceiling. Whose fault is it?

Down the highway the Jersey mountains line up like proud soldiers all the way from green Jersey to tan Jersey, where the pines will begin growing new needles, and the

snow has all melted off of the sand. Gabe can cry in his sister's arms. He'll play with his niece and nephew tonight and maybe Julia will cook lasagna.

He drives, listening to the thump of the uneven pavement, wind whistling in his window, as he continues from the mountains to the valley beneath, and over to the ocean. And after the kids, Julia, and her husband have gone to sleep, and all Gabe's left with are the memories of the past sixteen months and the moon above, knowing he'll die one day, he'll call Leah.

And he hopes she'll answer.