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## Tell it Slant

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Tell It Slant

Andrea Ribaudò

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**Tell It Slant: Collection 2010**  
Andrea Ribaldo

## **October 2011/Counting**

Seven years (give or take) since Dad died. Six years (just about) since first day of college, orientation, undergrad. Five years since Mom really started talking again, really. Four years since Eva started researching, talking, planning the Peace Corps, so seriously. Four years since I started writing again. Three (two and a half?) since Carlos and John and that bar. two years, six months since Eva left. two years of Brent (only two, only two). One year since Mom. Since Mom.

## **Sisters/Daughters. Backwards and forwards. October 2011**

She left in April before I knew what to say, before either of us did. We drove to the airport in silence. Past battles and wars floated above our heads, crowding the car. Hypothetical arguments echoed in our minds, ready to slip out of our mouths, so we kept them shut. I sped through ugly predawn suburbia in Mom's car as Mom lay at home crying in bed. Dad nowhere. But they wouldn't have known what to say either. So in the car we sat side-by-side, eyes forward, letting strange thoughts unthaw us from restless sleep. I knew while I was driving that I would replay that ride thousands of times in my head. That part of me would be trapped in that car forever: Me, sitting by a ghost,

shivering. When we pulled up to the airport it was busy. The sky was lightening through clouds. I didn't touch her. Before I knew what to say, she left. Then I left. Who's to blame for not knowing the script? I wish there was dialogue here. But there's not.

She returned completely about thirty months later before we were certain... thirty months from that initial airport car trip I sit in a large waiting room that smells of cleaning product not far from my apartment where her dirty things lie scattered. Dad is nowhere. Eva, my sister is in her hospital room and the last time anyone saw Mom was in this hospital.

So, she returned- somewhat unwillingly- to us who are still here. And I sit with my hands crossed in my lap down the hall from her room with a stack of letters in my bag. Rubberbanded together and curling at the edges: letters she had sent, letters I had forgotten to mail, copies of letters I wrote or thought of writing, letters that stayed close to me, letters full of stories. But they were written over those months before. Before we found our voices. I reread these letters in my lap with my hand across my stomach.

Perhaps tomorrow I'll lose them, recycle them, retire them. Perhaps I'll leave one on every street corner I pass. Relinquish responsibility. Well, my bag would be lighter.

Right now the entire design of my body has changed, is changing, and manipulates the architecture of my brain. You have no idea, of the constant swirl of consciousness and what we do with it. I wonder what made my mother, my sister live the lives they chose or fell into. Lives understood in fragments, lives like looking into windows with curtains blowing in the breeze- different glimpses of the shadowy inside at

every instant. Maybe you can feel it now, this wonder and curiosity that keep us moving forwards and backward. How we become who we are, how we ever know anyone else.

So maybe this is to understand. For all the ideas to come.

Before this, before we sat down here in this small, windowless room, I drove my sister to the airport. She left us to go to another world, a part of and beyond this one. I wrote letters until she came stumbling back. But now it's a force of habit- to write constantly these little letters, on laptop, on paper, in my head alone. But there's no one far away to compose to right now. Except, perhaps, for everyone here and everyone who walks through them.

In my big blue bag I have the usual things, I suppose, and some other things. Those letters with an ancient feel, notebooks and books that weigh a ton, weigh me down, an umbrella, a flashlight, always prepared. I sift through the contents, excavating, finding the rolled up letters barely preserved through the beating they get every day in this packed back, riding on my shoulder. What is the earliest one I can find? How far back can I go? Can I trace? Can I trust? Can I go to find what happened? To make this clear?

These are pages archived in my mind; my thoughts, my body the context. So this is as much as I can do: a struggle and attempt (there's too much to tell).

Brent leans over and asks, "What are you writing?" His hands are folded in his lap because mine are busy. His deep grey eyes are curious and calm. Hair falls across his face and he makes this place feel almost comfortable.

"More," I smile, because his left hand takes my right hand, turning it over, tracing my lifeline down to my wrist, where the skin is thin and sensitive and it tickles.

“Just writing something more.” Because I’m smiling he reaches over with his other hand to tickle me lightly on my side under my jacket in the waiting room of the hospital. We attempt so much.

## **May 2009/The first letter I never sent**

Dear Evie:

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Eva, happy birthday to you. May all of your birthday wishes come true and may you remember that we’re alive over here and occasionally thinking about you. This is a month early because I have no concept of how handwritten mail works when trying to reach a village with no roads thousands of miles away and because I don’t know if I’ll feel like sending it if I wait.

So what does a birthday feel like when you’re on a different continent from anyone who remembers your birth?

I dreamt of Dad. He was singing *The Star Spangled Banner*. We were all at a baseball game. It was very strange. He was wearing his uniform I only remember him wearing in pictures.

"Why are you singing that?" I asked and he didn't hear me. Mom started singing, too. She was wearing the green dress she wore to his funeral and her hair was longer and a deep red.

"Why are you singing that?" I asked. Dad stopped to talk to me while Mom kept singing.

"We can all do this, we can all sing together for a moment, right?" And he held my hand but I didn't feel his hand- the rough skin and thick fingers, the scar he got from learning how to clean a fish fifty years ago- there was only this feeling of cold air rushing against my palm. But he smiled and his eyes lit up and he started singing again, "By the twilight's last gleaming".

Mom didn't turn her head, but whispered something always meant for us "It's nice, just do it, please, girls". And I looked over at you. You were wearing the black sweatshirt and baggy jeans I last saw you in, hair hidden by a bandanna. You were sitting in a seat but stood up, smirked at me and started singing "Happy Birthday". I was angry that you changed the song. Mom and Dad stopped singing. I woke up.

Your sister, Leah

## **May/Counting/Looking out the window of the subway car underneath Broadway**

Twenty-two days until graduation. Thirty-three days until (big) move (with C). Twenty-three days until move back in with the Mom for ten days. Forty-six days since Eva's plane took off. Fifty days since we said a word to each other. Forty-two days since mom got better and got out of bed. Twenty-two days since I got my period. Five days since I've written anything, Three days since I've tried. Two days since I've slept. Three days since I decided on this move. Twenty-three days until I leave the room I moved into four years ago (how long until I leave the next one?). Twenty-two days until my graduation party with family (except Eva). Twenty-two days until graduation. Thirty-three days until move.

## **June/The second letter I never sent to my sister**

Dear Evie,

~~I didn't know if I would miss you. But after three months across the world, it feels like years, or it's the years we didn't talk magnified and examined because you've so completely taken yourself away.~~ How are you?



How is the village? The people? The food? The weather? The work? (What work is it again?)

My work for now is getting ready to move and keeping Mom ok. Aunt Abby comes by a lot. They're still in shock that you really went and that you're still there. "Having a daughter like her must be very difficult," Aunt Abby consoles Mom in her commanding voice; she must be right.

I don't think they know how to act. Mom has a new role to play and doesn't know how to do it. M was completely depressed for a while after you left. She watches the news constantly on TV for any information- natural disasters, terrorist attacks, genocide- and wonders how close they are to you- or will be to me for that matter...

I'm moving next week after many long discussions with everyone. I imagine Dad- he would be trying to talk me out of moving to Queens even more than he would have tried to talk you of the PC. You think?

So, I've been home since I was kicked out of the dorms-- graduating is tough-- and I've been contemplating the big framed picture in the hallway between the living room and the den across from the Hawaii pictures. It's the big one of us hiking the Appalachian Trail. I forget who it was or how we found someone to take our picture so nicely, but we did, and our family of

fifteen years ago remains immortalized on that wall. Do you remember that vacation? That day? That picture? I really don't and that compels me to try because it might be one of those pleasant memories I know to be overpowered by all the conceived unpleasantness that gets in the way. M+D look young, attractive. Mom's hair is in pigtails and Dad has that weird mustache. They're thin and they have their arms around each other. They almost look like teenagers in love- Dad looking at Mom, Mom smiling dreamily into the camera. All past indiscretions ~~forgotten~~, forgiven, future problems unforeseen, or is that just for the picture? Or is that just me?

And then, connected to each other but not to them, we are standing on a rock or boulder or something to the left. You have your arms around me (in mock imitation of the parents?) and I am smiling brightly into the camera. Your face is turned slightly to me but I can't decide on your expression exactly. All of our hair- the sturdy, dark, and crazy Jewish-Italian hair blows in the wind of that captured windy day- but yours drifts more across your face; I can't see it as clearly. I was seven; you were six, right?

What I'm trying to remember is this: did someone tell you, or us, to pose that way? Was it natural? What happened after that picture? We are rarely touching in other later pictures, usually not even together in pictures,

and then sometimes, if we are, our faces are twisted in grimaces, sarcasm, mocking the coercion that forced us so close. So, I was wondering, what happened on that trail among those mountains? I can imagine Dad giving directions and Mom asking questions constantly. We were probably arguing about who led the way, or is that all wrong? What was it like? Did we walk holding hands and telling secrets up front while M+D held hands and hid secrets behind? Did Dad capture a spider in his hands to scare us? Did I try to convince you to eat the wild red berries? Or that there was a girl-eating monster behind the trees?

The picture is big and heavy and hopeful and I looked closer at it today. Of course the setting is lush and beautiful as only carefully planned nature vacations can be. The leaves on the trees are changing colors and falling all around, we are framed by elegantly drooping branches and slits of autumn sky. We are pretty colorful ourselves in navy, green, orange, and red jackets. I'm the only one in shorts and as you follow my legs down to the rock we're standing on, my right ankle turns in a bizarre way, contorted. I don't know how I'm standing up in the picture. From the waist down it looks like I'm about to fall or move out of a painful position, but from the waist up I'm smiling- like all or most of us.

I asked Mom if I could take the picture with me when I moved.

She said, "That picture? What do you want with that picture? We look mismatched and crooked. You girls were constantly climbing and jumping off rocks that day. Drove us crazy. If you want a picture, take the Grand Canyon one. You can see Evie's face in that one. But who am I to tell you how to decorate? I'll see about making a copy. Where would you put it anyway? This is a picture that needs to be hung, not bookshelf or coffee table picture you know...."

I'm guessing I'll leave picture-less.

What did you take with you from home? ~~What do you think about when you think of us? This?~~

~~How are you doing? Is the experience everything you imagined? Have you run far enough away from all of us? Are you happy? Do you miss anything?~~

I do want to hear about what you are doing. ~~I won't tell you about Queens or Carlos. I want to write you. I really do.~~

Love, Leah

## July/The third letter I never sent

Four A.M. here and what time is it over there? Is it light out where you are? I miss the purplish orange night sky of the city, though your darkness is probably more profound than my darkness. I woke up and remembered how we would tell our dreams to each other when we were little. You run and jump on my bed if it's the middle of the night and mom and dad are sleeping and we share, or first thing in the morning if we can wait all night. We tell each other our dreams wondering if eventually we'd dream the same thing. Or solve something? Answer something? I woke up just now dreaming about ballet class. We were young, babies but in pink tights, holding onto a chair and learning our positions. The dance teacher was tall, towering, showing us how ballerinas stand, how ballerinas move, how ballerinas dance. She touched our legs and arms and folded us into shapes, tiny specks, till we flew away. I woke up and couldn't remember where I was for a moment. And then I remembered. And I remembered where you are. I knew you would leave.

## **August/Quick Question/I never sent...**

Dear Eva-

What do you dream when everything is dark at night? When you hear sounds that have been killed off here? I dream of Mom screaming or sitting up at night or the memories we don't let ourselves have...

In the mirror today I cut my hair. It was halfway down my back, hasn't been that long since we were little. I made it so short that it puffs out and makes my head look enormous. In the bathroom mirror my eyes look dead under the lighting. Big brown circles without light or depth. I even squinted to see if I could see what was wrong with them. But I guess it's getting older. Twenty-three years old next week and living in an apartment with bad lighting and a boy and a dog I don't write about in letters to you.

## **September/Confession**

She's not as smart as she should be. Years of school, good schools, and she doesn't know enough. Not as much as she should. Years of opportunity and she hasn't done much. Not like some people she knows—people who give up their world and run

away from their lives to help other people completely. Like her sister in the Peace Corps...somewhere in Africa. Little sister in Africa is wearing a headscarf and sitting in a hole and showing people how to wash their hands so maybe they won't die. But, to be completely fair, Eva has her own deep and selfish reasons for what she is doing over there. It was her way of escaping who she was here—NYC—what used to be a home to both of them and still is somewhat home to one- older sister adrift, me. Yes, alright-- years of writing everything and playing every role tempts me to slip into the third person. But it's hiding. Playing god. It's cheating. I know. It's confusing, weak, unsustainable.

It happened on the subway and it hurt. I am a bad person, or was.

My little sister in Africa is not that little and not that much younger. She used my fake ID when I turned twenty-one for the next fourteen months and it worked every time. We could have been twins. I might have been the evil one.

When she was five extraordinary Eva wrote out a list of everything she wanted to accomplish. Joining the Peace Corps was number nine out of sixty-three (in no particular order though later alphabetized). At twenty-two more than half are checked off.

I never wrote it down but I knew all that when I was five, too. Sure! Broadway was in my future. Not that musical crap which holds so much possibility but is mostly throw away tricks for the slow and silly tourists, but real Broadway for me. And Manhattan. And helping out people and saving the world, of course. I'd do it all. We're all born believers.

And look at me now. Typing in this squeezed, sucked out bathroom in a basement apartment in Queens. I'd laugh out loud if that fucking dog wasn't here.

My sister didn't like NYC but what does she know? There's anything you can imagine and more, worlds of possibilities. We tried to enjoy it together when she was here. It's weird to talk about her like she's dead. But sometimes it feels like that. And I don't know how much effort we put into this "trying". I took her to the café down the block from my dorm and she stood still with arms crossed, my friends asking "What's wrong with your sister?"

But the café part comes later.

It usually feels like this apartment is at the end of the civilized world but Eva in Africa has two mud rooms with a flashlight (sometimes) at night (I think), and watches cows being slaughtered for dinner or celebrations... the ex-vegetarian! (Oh, now the parents are proud and tell everyone they see. Last girls' day in the city my mother told our cab driver, our waiter, our pedicurist.)

At least I have my laptop to take with me into the bathroom. I can stretch out a towel on the cracked, cracking tile and lie down on it and pretend I'm not cold even though the bathroom could be our refrigerator. The coldness creeps through my legs so my knees hurt and my toes get tingly then it makes my eyes water. Ok. So I stop writing, get up, put all the towels we have down under me and my laptop and start to write again but I lost my place or my thought...

...Little sister in Africa has invited me to come over to visit her and/or live with her for a year. She entices me by suggesting that I could write a cookbook, a study of all the dishes in her remote village maybe even document the herbal remedies that would wind up curing cancer here. Or I could record the oral history of the villagers who have told stories for thousands or hundreds of years that have never been written. Stories that



hold the spirit, stories that are history, culture, humanity. Stories that mean something, told in languages that will die soon. All of that stuff. I like languages, and stories. She knows me, sort of. She knows I would like to do that. But I won't. I'm not that brave. So it's a challenge, a taunt, and it's hateful.

But this isn't about her.

I have to take a lot of subways now. I have to take A LOT of subways because I live in the middle of nowhere. I have to take subways that I didn't know existed before three months ago...or maybe four months ago when the boyfriend somehow talked me into living here and I was struck dumb enough to nod my head to make him happy. So, I'm forced to take many subways to get where I should be- Manhattan, glorious home of halcyon college years, where I should be if I had any self-respect. But that's not true. I'm being harsh and unfair. He still loves me and he needs me here. So here I am, hiding in the bathroom from his dog.

I HATE that dog! And I love dogs, really do. I love animals. I'm a vegetarian for ethical and environmental reasons and I really feel for endangered animals. BUT in this hairy, smelly, slimy apartment I'm the endangered one. His dog doesn't like me. And when we fight, his dog is smart. His dog knows and wants to kill me. He trained him that way—to attack. He had to, he tells me. There are words to make him (the dog) violent. He (the boyfriend) grew up not that far from where I am now. He hasn't done it much, but when he loses it and grabs me I think the dog wants to jump at my throat. Or that's what I imagine.

I could feel sorry for him, too, (the dog) sorry that he's alone all the time. His whole life has been in hairy, smelly, slimy apartments crowded with too many loud people. And whenever he goes on walks he gets into fights with other dogs or yelled at or pulled and jerked around. He seems vicious to whoever walks into the apartment or on the sidewalk close to the windows. He jumps up and down higher and higher and barks and curls his lip and goes crazy for attention. It must be terrible for him... It seems like we should be friends. I'm here now and I could keep him company. I could pet him and play with him. But he doesn't like me. Maybe he's scared, too. He's pawing at the door now, scratching.

He knows I'm the only one here and he's doing this to torment me. He knows what kind of night this is. And this dog won't leave me alone; he'll scratch at the door making me hear his stinking, heavy breath until he gives up. I'm beyond wishing he was nice and small and soft so I could put him on my legs and we'd be warm together or that I could hug him and feel better, a kindred spirit, something silly like that. But I know the truth. I know he is large and damaged and dangerous. Tonight he has been abandoned again. He must be sad, too.

I remember the story where his master is the hero: Found five weeks old and dying next to a dog bowl of beer and chicken bones outside of a house not far from this apartment, he was taken and pushed back to life, obsessively trained and selfishly left alone alternately for the next six years. His master is very proud of himself for saving this crazy dog, this idiotic, tragic, confused dog. It's like his son. He says, "I'm damn sure when he dies I'm getting a tattoo of him. No matter what you say. On my shoulder. I promise you that." So the dog will haunt me forever. I know. I've never seen a tattoo up

close before. I wonder about the needle and the flesh, how they do it. I wonder how deep it goes.

All I can do here is wonder and type and kick the floor covered with towels but that makes my knees hurt and I feel old, at twenty-three.

I wondered often about what happened on the subway, before it happened. When you spend enough time imagining something, creating its world inside your head, it can be hard to remember that you invented it. Who can really trust all of their hoarded memories? Memories that twist and stick and become like cages.

On my way home on all of these subways I remember a summer night a long time ago. I bring books or music for the ride but my brain just won't stay there. It's the weather. Fall here feels like summer nights in the mountains, suddenly cool and clear and full of life, or full of something. Summers before this life, before college, meant camp up among the mountains. (And the air was mountain cool after sunset, the wind, weighted romance and mystery like it's supposed to be for fourteen-year old girls pretending they know what love is. Pretending for men old enough to know better.) It's rather simple. I was about to be fourteen, it was one of the last moments I would ever be short and skinny. Nothing had happened to my body yet. He, this counselor/"assistant director", wanted me to get high with him once but I don't think I did. I tried but it didn't work. The actual act of smoking was harder than I imagined it. I knew nothing.

The floor of the kids' art room behind the big theater was hard and it smelled like paint for sets and backdrops and props. It smelled of the slight burning that happens when big spotlights are turned up too long too high with gels hung too close to them. It smelled like Tech Week—the week before a play goes up and everyone works hard

because it's close and exciting and they believe in what they're doing: sweat and sawdust and smoke. All the technical aspects of a show get put together and it's a tedious thrill.

A simple life, a week of nerves and adrenaline, work, fears, and hope.

I wore a costume from another show being put up- unprofessional but he brought it out and almost begged. I'd never seen him beg before. It was for an ensemble dancer in one of the musicals. I don't do musicals. It was tight around my shoulders and my hips; I was scared he might rip it with his hands grasping and tugging all over it. He suddenly wasn't as careful as he used to be. I was scared it would get dirty when we fell or tumbled to the floor. Of course, costumes are precious during Tech Week when all the creations and alterations and plans have been made and opening is around the corner. Part of me wanted to get up, take off the costume, hang it back up carefully (if I could even find the right place), put my clothes back on and go back up the hill to find my bed again (like nothing had ever happened). But I didn't.

He said a lot of nice things that stopped half way through; he still said things to me but they weren't that nice. Finally, I just read the graffiti on the walls and tried not to look at him. This was easy because the graffiti was really fascinating artwork or lyrics of show tunes or lines from Shakespeare or Marilyn Monroe, and he wasn't looking at my eyes anyway. The ghost light was on and I could make out the bigger stuff.

I knew nothing. That's no defense.

He knew more. Now I wonder about lots of things. But that night I had no extra room in my head. Is it possible that I had no idea what he would do when he lifted up the little costume skirt? Is anyone that innocent? Juliet was fourteen, too.

On the wall I read lyrics from *Fame*.

It was colder at night even though it was summer because we were in the mountains and he hurt me and didn't say anything about it. I was mad. He never said anything about it. *Baby remember my name. Remember! Remember! Remember!*

I think I liked him because he liked me. And I was stupidly in awe of him. He was a graduate student and he was going to be a director. That was impressive. He talked to me seriously about plays and things I was passionate about and he told me I was pretty and interesting, everything.

I don't know what would have come next. In my head, I made up different endings to our story every time I thought about it, constantly. The fresh ending that unexpectedly played out in my mind that first night was a dramatic explosion or earthquake on the mountain or only in that art room, so it would all be over, something absolutely destructive.

Eva spent that summer on an organic dairy farm owned by a friend of the family.

It can be empowering to imagine things differently. And then, it can be hard to change them back. They tell Holocaust survivors to "remember" a flower in the camps, to create a memory of a flower in the middle of their concentration camp. They tell rape victims that the rape is their fault so that the "guilty" victims at least, at last, feel "in control".

I was in *Othello* that summer. I went back to school: ninth grade unable to stop thinking about my Emilia. Desdemona is nothing compared with Emilia and the possibilities and the stories I put into her! I went from class to class daydreaming of

*Othello* and thinking I was pregnant. But that's nothing new now. I always think I'm pregnant. I wasn't. It was fine. No one knew. That was an age before having sex was cool... at least for girls. Which is funny. Not much was practiced or confessed so we all used stories, rumors, elaboration, apocryphal truths. We had words whispered in hallways and bathrooms. I rarely whispered mine. Just to one friend who went in confidentiality to the guidance counselor, who was also a preacher, who I didn't like, who procured a pregnancy test. It was just before rehearsal. I took the test one day after school. I came out to warm ups on stage smiling. What did I think?

I didn't tell my parents. The summer before when I had confided to my mother that I'd kissed a girl and saw her eyes pop unnaturally wide and her fearful anxiety, or something like it, I learned not to tell her things, not for a while (she's learned to accept more things, as good parents will).

And I didn't want to hurt my dad. He would have been very quiet if I had told him, baffled. I was too young then; was that his last year with us? I don't even know the words I would have used.

Words words words

Here, I'll try.

Time: Summer before the summer of the first time in the mountains.

Setting: Two hours away from home. Staying with a cousin to be close to the set.

Characters: Me, Her.

The Scene: An acting job. A warehouse like studio. Hair all the way down her back, strong legs that reminded me of statues. She was an extra on the set of a school violence video I was cast in. It shot for three weeks.

Film is different than theater. In theater, you live in your role constantly and even backstage is still an important and magical place. Film (or corporate industrial, as the case may be), is a lot of waiting. And waiting. Waiting while they created the world we worked in: lights, sets, cameras, make up, hair, meetings, scenes. There are holes in the creation, flaws in the existence. Magic is lost in the gaps where no one pays attention; no one watches, nothing happens.

In the waiting, waiting, I heard her loud laugh. In three thrilling and dangerous weeks I learned a lot from her when no one else was watching. When everyone else was working or waiting, we talked alone. We were innocent teachers/discoverers. It was hardly real. Playing at love. I didn't have to close my eyes. I didn't have to imagine. A long time ago.

That was a hot summer; the heat was unrelenting pushes the memory even farther away from this cold. I never told anyone all of it. It moves farther away from me now. And I'm the only one to remember it. (And if everyone forgets and there is no more memory, then it can't exist. Never existed. Right?)

On the subway, often, I would imagine I saw a man—I wouldn't call him an ex-boyfriend because I'm not sure that's right. But nevertheless, on the subway I would think I saw a man I used to know, whom I loved, and who I was probably very cruel to a

long time ago. It happened often in frightening flashes. I would step into the subway car and look up and see his face and my stomach would turn into a bowling ball, or a boulder that made me think of mountains, too heavy for my knees which would shake. The reaction was fast, uncontrollable, and always frighteningly the same.

It wouldn't actually be him, just someone who, for half of one breath of a quick glance seemed to look like him. Like I had walked into something hard. As if I had done a belly flop onto the concrete or the uneven pavement, or the murky subway tracks. I would have to catch my breath afterwards and then, still, I would have to admit that it was completely possible. I really could see-meet-find him again like that. He lived somewhere here—one person in millions and millions, but possible, inevitable even.

Before this afternoon, I had started to dream about him again. Well, I never completely stopped. He was always in my repertoire somewhere up in my subconscious mind, waiting for nighttime plays. There were the usual dreams of course: both of us intertwined, seen from the outside in the omniscient view of dreams, and sometimes seen from my own eyes again, feeling real feelings from my body fully. Other dreams were of coming across him by accident someplace painfully unordinary- a subway car, a sidewalk, a doorway, a kitchen. And he didn't recognize her. He looked through her and there was nothing, no chance. She was in her own private hell the rest of the day after dreams like those. \*

\* I mean, "*T*", "*me*". Third person is comfy. But I'll try.

But there was one dream, recently, that was different. I was in bed with him. It began beautifully: rolling together and laughing loudly on a luxuriously large bed



wrapped in white and pink. I remember the feeling of his arms around my naked waist as we moved, playing. It was a dream of true feelings, too, remembered sensations. His kisses on my shoulders raised goose bumps that he always thought were funny. He could cover me completely. It was perfectly like once upon a time. Then, suddenly, I realized our surroundings blending, shifting, changing. We were behind a bar, broken liquor bottles and glittering glass shards floating in pools of strong smelling liquid. It grew darker and closer, confined, a bar much too late at night. The bed covers melted into blood: thick, fresh, blood still hot and dense and almost sticky. And there were bugs, surrounding, covering all the space. Monstrous, Kafka like, cockroaches that wanted me, came toward me who barely tried to move, who was soon drowning in the blood red bed next to my partner who had already drowned.

I dream lucidly in colors and feelings when it's something important.

I woke up with a headache and got the flu the next day. It was ugly. I'm better now, now more flu.

We'll need a way to refer to this man who might have changed my life, whom I will write about shortly. Let's call him J which, ironically, I don't think is really pronounced in Spanish which was the only language he spoke fluently. My current boyfriend we'll call C. Not that I have much to write about him. That's not implying anything, he just doesn't especially relate to this story. Except maybe that he is out right now so I feel like I can write this. If he was here I probably wouldn't be writing. Though being here by myself is no picnic either. It's horrible and creepy with just the sounds of the keystrokes for now. Very unusual—this building is never this still. Perhaps it's

frozen. Or maybe I've finally learned to block out everything, grown accustomed. That can be helpful. We can grow accustomed to the oddest things.

I could go up to my parents for the night but they would be too satisfied. They would tell me they told me so and not want me to leave or ask me too many questions or make me mad. And all my friends moved away- all over the country and the world after college.

Or, my friends who didn't move away stopped talking to me after I moved here with C. It was their little protest. Whatever. They don't understand and there's nothing I can do about it now. They don't know how much he loves me. So I get to write. And think.

He's out with his friends. I'm talking about C now. But he'll be back tomorrow and he'll be sad and sorry and saying he loves me more than anything else in the world and all kinds of nice things to me. I can see it all like a play I've already read, imagining it onstage if I had to direct. I see him contrite and myself stolid at first and then accepting. I even know the stage directions. He'll kiss me. I don't know yet if we'll have sex, though we might, nicely. Maybe we'll go out tomorrow night. Or he will cook me dinner (the only dinner he ever cooks—chicken and rice and will still mope if I don't eat the chicken). And we'll have wine. He does that sometimes. And we'll toast to something.

It would be a boring play, predictable. But then, I've never been a good director. Or maybe the end isn't here yet. Trapped in the prologue where everything's set. Trapped in the bathroom is what I get.

Sometimes I wonder why this all started- with C. This game of pretend, well, at least on my part, pretending I'm everything he wants me to be... Pretending I lost Leah a while ago.

Well, he, the boyfriend, used to be many things at the beginning that he isn't now. Our first date he was attentive (carrying flowers behind his back, wearing an oversized suit)- drinks in midtown and an off-Broadway show (of his choosing, but based on the premise that I liked theatre). And I recognized something inside or underneath that begged for attention, discovery (help?). We talked all night and he was respectful. He didn't worry me. And he listened that night. He liked my energy. I wanted to be the center of something.

How to describe him? C is not very tall. He has black hair that he loads with gel until it is hard and he has big cheeks that remind me of how he looked as a little boy in the one picture I saw of his childhood. He was seven in the picture and looked like a dark chipmunk. When he smiles the cheeks get wider and show dimples.

I knew he needed sympathy, thought he needed understanding, love, all that. I thought he could be more. Thought my heart was big; wanted to make a difference. Lately my heart has shrunk.

I hate his stories mostly because of the pride he takes in them. He is a hero in every one. But only his hero, but I don't tell him that. He wants me to hear them, especially when he drinks.

Maybe I shouldn't believe them. It's a melodrama or an exaggerated, disjointed film with no ending that I don't understand. His mother (pregnant with him at sixteen) forced to marry his father who was always drunk and violent. Then, C's father (never

convinced that he was his father) (hated him, hates him now) had, is having, many children outside his marriage. He tells me how he got caught changing the locks before his father got home one night, while his mother was handing him the tools. And I don't connect to this, don't support this, don't want this.

"I liked you before all this, before I really knew you," I'd like to say to him. "I liked the idea of what you could have been for me"- I will never say. "Before I understood you," that's the truth.

But he still talks. Why this testimony? Why must I bear witness? Because I moved in, he says. He says, "You want this! You moved here. You need me." I let his stories wash over me. I try.

The dog is scratching again! Maybe scratching off the wood. Maybe he'll burst his way through here. Sink his teeth into me. He can smell my frustration, my panic rising. What would I do? Could I break this mirror? The window? Hold on to a shard of glass and slash him? Stop him? Why does he want to get in here so badly? What does he want from me?

I feel like scratching back from my side of the bathroom door. The paint is already coming off, it's been peeling since before I got here reminding me of things falling apart... There is some soap of there, and lotion and hair products. There are razor blades in the bathroom, of course. Wasn't there an artist, a woman, who painted with her body in blood? Did I read this or dream this? She painted pictures with her blood to show what red really looked like, or death really looked like, or life. She was uncovering, exposing, discovering. And people were sickly fascinated, and condemned her, of course,

but watched anyway, at first. It was abstract at first, metamorphosing, contemporary-modern-dada-minimalist, and then landscapes and then ocean, and historical scenes, pastoral scenes, then families, babies, celebrities, Mickey Mouse, careful close ups, sympathetic or harsh. But people got tired of it. The artist was shunned, broke, broken. Until she started painting with paint again. A series of scenes of birth, of war. Critics granted rather favorable reviews. But she was still known as the crazy woman, disturbed woman.

She died at work on a canvas. Which sold for more than anything she'd ever done except her first piece- two female figures drawn in blood. It could have been a re-imagined cave painting. The large figures made of broad sweeps with fingers and palms. Or so I imagine it. Smaller figures are around and behind them but they blend and blur and become background music. I can't remember all the details. I wonder what I could do on these walls. My own cave paintings. A bastardized version lipstick covered walls of drawings and drawings. Would I really want to prove that I'm here? Too much trouble to get up.

My sister hated C. She never really said any of the bad, overstated things everyone else did about him. It was just how she looked at him, and how she looked at me that made me not want to bring us all together anymore. It was right before she left for Africa. She hasn't said anything about him in her letter—only one so far, it takes an eternity for mail to travel, incredible.

Before she left. She told me she didn't think I'd be happy here. That I could do anything I wanted to. I hated her a lot. I hated her more than at any other time. I could

have ripped her hair out like when we were little. Handfuls of dark brown hair clinging to sticky palms afterward.

Of course I can do anything I want to.

When we were little there were mountains. Or really, they were barely hills, barely slopes in the backyard; in the front yard even the inclined driveway would work. And we would hold hands and run as fast as we could down hill. Legs pumping so hard until they felt like they would fly off in front of us, sometimes one pulling the other down and somersaulting to the bottom, screaming all the way, scary and fun.

One day I tripped and scraped my leg on a rock. It bled. I went inside the house and never ran down that hill again. She continued. The sound of her screaming and laughing and flying downhill made my leg hurt every time I heard it. Then, it started to shred my insides, my stomach. How was it possible that the game continued?

I sat inside drawing or scribbling while she ran frantically, noisily out there. She came in with red cheeks and wild eyes, feet, knees and elbows covered in mud and grass and I had to stare for a moment to recognize her. She looked different than when we left together. I wondered if I looked different to her.

This evening, when C was very mad, he tried to grab my arm when he thought I wasn't looking at him or listening. But I don't want to write that. I can see the evidence on my body.

So I can't go up to my parents' house right now, ever. Could I even get past that dog?

They even hate his dog which I once defended. I said they were being prejudiced, condemning him because of his breed. Pit-bull. I said they weren't being just, that all he needs is love. Then I got tired of loving.

Mom doesn't really come over any more but when she did C would tie up the dog in the front room before they got here, cursing the whole time saying it just wasn't right and "How would you like it if someone tied you up alone like that? Huh?"

I want to write about J, the man on the subway. The man I had imagined meeting many times before, painfully. The one whose face I had seen fleetingly in hundreds of others. I don't know if I willed it to happen, or if it was meant to happen, or just dumb luck, crazy coincidence: one out of millions and millions. Like my sister wrote in her letter—that being born a woman in America, to an educated family, is the luckiest/best/crazy thing/coincidence that ever happened to her.

She's teaching about condoms and mosquito netting. Taking months to get the men to listen and the women to trust this tall white girl, this American Jew. They might listen now, might talk, but still no action. And only trying to teach them how not to die so much.

Perhaps I'll write her narrative, no, an allegory, it will be her homecoming gift. "The Parables of Little Sister of Africa". But that, her questionable homecoming, is far away.

It's getting much darker. I can tell through the little window near the ceiling. Could I crawl through it? Drop to the ground? But then how to get out of that rocky,

weedy little yard? I don't think I could squeeze through. If I was nine; if I was ninety pounds, maybe. But I'm overgrown. I have to bend my knees with C and hunch my shoulders so that I'm not taller than him, maybe 5'7 if he stands up straight. Even laying on the bathroom floor, on my stomach, typing, I kick my legs, bent at the knees just to fit, My head almost under the sink. But if I twist a bit I can see the narrow window behind me. It gives such a funny view.

Who would have thought in this ugly neighborhood I'd be able to see the last of the season's leaves hanging from a great tree in the tiny "backyard". I can see perfectly a thin sliver of the tree with leaves way above me just barely hanging on in front of laundry on a line just barely hanging on. It's so much colder than usual for early fall without any heat. A baby is crying above me and the dog whimpers outside the door because the wind that howled probably reminds him of how sad he is. I could sit up and whimper back. We're not completely alone. A phone rings somewhere else upstairs. I remain constantly surprised and alarmed at how long it takes people in this broken building to answer phones and comfort babies.

J worked at a café bar type place only three short blocks from college-convenient. Only I didn't actually try this special little spot until the summer before junior year. I had been studious for a while. But now we had earned a break—me and a few friends— or a kind of unexpected beginning.

My especially adventurous and bouncy friend Angela nominated the little café bar as the spot to begin the night because it was close and fun and she drank for free because she knew the owners and most of the waiters. And soon I would, too.



J was a waiter at this café bar. He spoke Spanish. I had always studied French. But we never needed too many words.

I don't know at all how to write this.

No one really knew everything. My friends obviously saw me smile. Saw us laughing and standing in the corner of the bar touching fingertips together. They were happy. We were all happy and fun. We drank practically for free. The bartender from Portugal had a tricky habit of refilling our drinks as soon as we took a sip. The other waiter from Mexico told us jokes that were sometimes dirty, or funny, or strange, but usually always fun. Another one, from Puerto Rico, would sneak up behind us, suddenly twirl us around and start dancing. And my friend, J, from Colombia, would come over and smile with me. Wonderful.

Except for one night. After J and I had been sleeping together for a while and I was there by myself. I was waiting for him to close down; it was taking longer than usual. He seemed busier than normal. I was drunk. The bartender had helped me crawl across the bar and come behind it with him showing me how to make the drinks I wanted... \*Can I be forgiven for third person?

\*She was drunk. Beyond tipsy, or warm or buzzed. She is making a screwdriver now with the Bartender's arms wrapped around her; his firm hands on her unsteady one pouring the drink. The place seemed empty. Only a few waiters walked quickly around cleaning up. She was without her girlfriends but she didn't consider herself alone because she knew every person working that night. She trusted.

She is laughing and spilling a little of the drink but the music is still turned on and it's still somewhat fun while waiting for J, imagining the night to come with him- tall and broad, a soccer player in the few free moments he has- holding her tightly and brushing back her hair back that always falls into her face at this time of night, J who is somewhere around here working and finishing and getting ready to join her. Maybe he was changing back into his T-shirt and shorts and grabbing his bag to go. Maybe he was almost ready to come and get her and they would walk the three blocks back to her place together with smiles on warm faces. But even now in her haze of too many margaritas, too much to drink, she enjoys the slightly off balance room and the motion of those around her.

Then the bartender suddenly puts his mouth on her neck, changing from steadying her hand to gripping. She doesn't understand. It happens fast. She's drunk but she realizes she's on the floor and the manager who often welcomes her often with "Ciao Bella!" when she arrives, heads over in her direction. He's not quite smiling, just getting closer. They are saying something? In Portuguese? Spanish? It doesn't sound like English but it could be- they mumble under the loud music and she doesn't understand; she feels like she's under a coarse blanket, a heavy cloud, she wouldn't have understood them anyway. The three of them are all close to the floor.

It is very dark on the ground with different kinds of darkness at all angles. Little bits of light reflect off of bottles and stirrers and shiny things under the bar. Faces and bodies move above her blocking different parts of the light causing shifting shadows. It's a changing darkness. There is pressure now on her neck and hips, then her legs. Strange or not, that's what she'll remember most definitely, that and their hands that make her

immovable, still. Beneath the cloudy, soupy haze of drunkenness she knows enough to start crying.

Later she'll empty her head of all this. Memories will change forever so that if something occasionally comes back to her it will be like a scene from a movie watched a very long time ago. Even scenes from childhood, from yesterday, get swept up in the forgetting. Every day she forgets or changes or loses a little more so that trying to remember truth is like sprinting down the block against her sister, legs pumping, lungs heaving, no matter how hard she tries she'll never catch up. But losing a little truth must be a better way—so that life goes on and on and something nice might happen. Perhaps something nice might happen to correct, counteract, cure. But right now no one can tell exactly what she thinks or reasons when their hands press into her and hurt, when they break her trust and destroy her truth.

J is back. J is here. And calls her name. She can't see him. In fact, she doesn't register his voice at first because she's never heard him yell. But the bartender stands up slowly, grunting. J moves to see her and says something loudly and in Spanish; the manager isn't there anymore. J picks her up, dries her face. J takes her home carefully and makes her ok again. He can't do anything else. He can't lose this job or start a fight or deal with police or even the bartender and manager together. He is strong and handsome and in certain ways as helpless as she? So J takes her home. He doesn't do anything else.

Little sister in Africa had written that the only difference between rape in Africa and rape in America is that in Africa it is expected, in America it's nominally against the law.

That's not the story I wanted to write.

The café bar was generally a fun place with good music though I never went back after that night. I stopped passing by the place, too, crossing the street to avoid it. The weather was nice and the sidewalk café part was open and the waiters would see me and ask me to come in calling "Ciao, bella!" So I stopped walking near it. But I still saw J.

He had been in America for almost a year and knew a good amount of English but spoke with such a thick accent that I couldn't always understand. I'm not great with accents. He asked me about my parents every time he saw me. He tried to tell me about his life in Colombia; it sounded incredible, at least what I could make out of it. He never told me exactly how he got here, we probably both knew I wouldn't understand that either. He tried to ask me to marry him.

The dog is crying again. He might need to go out. C doesn't let me take the dog out. I shouldn't be here right now. There are a million places I should be before here. I could get up right now and make a mad dash for the door. But the subway is far away, and then any good destination is much farther.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

I want to write this first to get it down before I start changing things accidentally. Some things you want exactly. There are moments that need to be like that.

There are moments that can't be touched. Like the ones we used to wait for late at night after closing when J would come over and drink orange juice mixed with water and try to tell me things. I only saw him in the daylight once. He went to school during the day and worked in the afternoons through the night and played soccer and helped his landlady fix up his building. But there was one bright day when there was no school and he made some time before work and asked if he could see me.

We went to the park. And talked. He never touched me in public. Before the first time we made love he asked if I was Catholic. I had a Bible under my bed (which most likely provoked the question) but only because I was a Religion minor. It was there for citation purposes, for reference, and because it was a place to put my glass of water when I went to bed. I wonder if he believed in god after everywhere he had been, everything he had done and seen. There was a lot we never talked about.

He made me happy. But after a while I stopped taking his calls which he always made with a phone card to ask me how I was, how my parents were, how was school, how was my health, with his careful, breaking English. I stopped calling the café bar to talk to him. I stopped seeing him. I'm not sure why. He had only ever been adoring, considerate, good. But I just stopped. I remember his kind eyes and smile the most. You can't fake or lie about that. But I just stopped.

Well, there had been one thing. She had been pregnant. The baby never lived. It's something she doesn't think about now but she will later... *\*\*I will later.*

I met C and he seemed very different and exciting and I stopped thinking about school so much. I tried not to think so much at all. Thinking led down paths I didn't want to go and grew that sickening, inexplicable urge to tell things. C was very different from J and I wanted that, not to be reminded. I needed to just play along for a while—to be that quirky, funny best friend who can show up now and then with some great lines or jokes or anecdotes smiling and bouncing and then disappear. The leading lady always has to be on, always has to deal with stuff. C was funny at first, and different and exciting. It got serious fast, but that seemed ok, he seemed ok.

In the bathroom now hours are passing while I remember and tell stories. I stood up to look at myself and because my hips were hurting as they pressed into the hard floor, the towels did nothing. In the mirror my eyes look tired, not full of fire like C's, not quiet and kind like J's. The sink is stained and there is a drop of water quivering on the faucet. There is a vague but noticeable smell. I can't put my finger on it because I think of it as a million smells all swirling together. I'm thirsty and taste the water from the sink, both hands cupped to my mouth then splashing it onto my face. I taste all of the smells in this water. I lie back down. There is hair on the floor, mine and his and even the dog's. The dog gets everywhere. But he's locked out of the bathroom for now and I'm locked in. Tight and close, it feels like a subway car, like the scene of my story tonight. The one that left me here.

Coming home, I saw J on the subway. I had imagined it so many times. It was my last transfer and he was there already when I stepped on. Rain was crashing down, splashing even underground in parts of the subway station. The smells of wet people and

soaked trash and grimy boots and umbrellas were everywhere. I forgot my umbrella, or couldn't find it this morning. My straightened hair was dripping down my back and turning curly and frizzy. The day sagged like a big mess.

He was sitting diagonally from me and I saw him instantly as I looked up. I always surveyed the subway car as soon as I could, looking at everybody, a vestige of the non-native New Yorker in me. I like to look at people.

My mom actually met him, J. We walked by the café together once when she was visiting and J came out and said hello and was very excited to meet her and very polite, as always. She liked him a lot.

Later at night without shirts in my hot, tiny little summer room he would tell me about the kind of food his mother had cooked for him and how she would have liked me. He asked me to marry him, to help him stay in the country and because he loved me and he would always make me happy. He said all of this slowly and mostly in English and I pretended not to understand. We were both quiet until he left to go to a class and I went to sleep.

I never really thought of it seriously.

I mean, we more than enjoyed each other (I don't know enough about what love means to put that here). It was almost like religion. When I looked at him I could cope with the world. When I thought about him I felt energetic and driven and hopeful. Lying next to him I felt peace. This was all before my first positive home pregnancy test.

I never seriously thought of it.

This is the first night I've thought of everything seriously. Thought about the bruises, the cut. My first grey hair on the bathroom floor! I'll have to ask Mom if she had grey hair at twenty-three. Maybe I will dye my hair some glamorous color, become a glamorous person; begin everything again. If there are thousands of possibilities in life, we should be able to have thousands of different lives. Only fair.

This cold bathroom seems to be freezing over. By morning I may see icicles hanging. My sister has a warm mud hut with a mango tree outside. She has a dog named Dog and a chicken named Chicken and lots of little skinny kids that follow her around waiting for her to do something funny.

She wrote that one of her college friends had written and asked: "Do they know how poor they are?" That had been the opening of her letter essentially...and no one ever understands who they are or what they're doing. At night my sister crowds around a small black and white television with the rest of her village and watches episodes of "Desperate Housewives" and "24" dubbed into French which the women and children and most of the men don't understand. They stay and watch the little black and white pictures because sometimes it's easier to watch other people. Sometimes when they notice something they will say "Look how lucky they are", but never "Look how we're suffering".

I'm finishing. The dog ran, barking to the window, jumping—I could hear his paws and claws, the weight of him coming down as he jumped. My chest clenched... someone else returning to someone else in the building. I could hear other footsteps running to greet them.



Maybe I could leave the door open if I go. Maybe I could give the dog a chance to escape as well. But I wouldn't do that. It would only be revenge on C and cruel to the dog. He has no place to go. Every path outside would be to death for him. He has to stay. He will bark at me through the window and I will remember that for a little while.)

I saw J on the subway after a long time of not seeing him. He was still the same, handsome, unbelievably so. Even sitting squished on a dirty, rattling subway gazing down, unmoving at the floor he was handsome. I hurt all over. It was different than when I had imagined meeting him. I wanted to scream: "I'm sorry" or "I loved you" and wanted him not to hate me. But I couldn't. I couldn't stop staring either, so he finally, slowly looked up, meeting my unmoving eyes. There was a flash of recognition that I was absurdly thankful for. His eyes came alive instantly and he stood up, walking over to me who still couldn't move.

We both held onto to the same metal pole, the subway stumbling along. I have a strange habit of not being able to remember what we say to each other. But I think he said

"Hello"

and he said my name,

"Leah".

And my chest started to hurt again. I knew how suddenly I had stopped everything. I knew how much had ended.

He asked me how I was, how my parents were. He asked me how school was and how I have been (again), smiling the whole time that kind, warm smile. He touched my arm and felt that I was soaked from the rain. He wanted to give me his umbrella. I told

him I couldn't take it. He absolutely insisted smiling, concerned. He put it in my hands. He asked me if I was alright. He asked where I was going. I'm not sure of my answers but I suppose I mumbled the truth. I only clearly remember staring and thinking: "This is real." And then, somehow the doors opened on my stop and I made a noncommittal move to exit. J asked if I wanted his new number and I know I nodded. He quickly gave it to me on a piece of paper and the doors of the subway closed with me outside on the platform of some ridiculous station far away from where I used to be.

He was again gentle and kind and good- for no reason- he didn't have to be. He must have known, have guessed that I was guilty, dirty. I was terrible. I treaded back to the apartment through sprinkle raindrops and thick black puddles.

I came back dazed clutching the new umbrella and the piece of paper in my hand. I came back and the dog hurried to me sniffing-jumping-sniffing; his nose sharp and wet. C was at home watching television but looked up at me and for once, C was observant. I was content and didn't want to talk to him asking what took me so long, where I got the umbrella, the number that I was still holding dumbly in my hand. He didn't listen to me really. And it was worse than usual because he might have already been a little drunk, or just destroyed with the usual frustration by the time I came home. I could have called the police, I could have called my parents; I could have called J. But after he grabbed me, pushed against the wall, then pushed again so I fell on my new full length mirror, yelled and kicked, I ran in here with him running behind me and the confused terror of being chased. He grabbed me again, hard, around my neck, for an instant. And then he let me go. He picked up his keys and left. With eyes closed, I could hear him picking up his keys, hear the dog barking, hear him yelling disgusting things I didn't want to hear.

In Africa they kill frogs, or maybe its lizards, because they believe when a woman goes to the bathroom it will jump inside of her and take over her soul as an evil spirit. Women are considered especially susceptible to being taking over by evil spirits. They are scared of them—the misunderstood lizards, the maligned women.

Maybe I will go to my sister and help somehow. Help the lizards and the women and the babies who die so much, all the time, and who watch American shows dubbed in French on TV and don't think about suffering, just surviving.

Time to close. The dog is running, barking at the door again.

## **October/The next letter I never sent**

Dear Evie,

~~Sometimes I don't know what to say to you. But I'm afraid of the silence that's waiting to erase everything. So I make myself write to you what I don't even know if you could/should read. You left everything so completely that I can almost pretend like you never existed, like you never lived across the hall from me for 16 years not counting the run away/backpacking/camping trips that stretched into weeks, like we never overheard the arguments downstairs when we were too young to understand the many implications many connotations of the word "fuck" (and the~~

~~concept of betrayal), that you never asked to sleep in my bed when you were nervous of the ghost that lived behind the bookcase in your room, that we didn't watch Dad leave and come back and Mom leave and come back (different, but back), that I never blamed you for everything, that you never ignored everything, that we wouldn't float past each other when we weren't in open combat over \_\_\_\_\_, that we didn't forget how to be little girls and fall into new positions, that I never taught you how to use a tampon and mascara and you never taught me how to sew and how to run, that I didn't try to tell you my secrets, that you didn't try to fathom Mom and Dad with me, that we but we go on.~~

Hi.

It's getting cool here; but it's still the good kind of cool that feels energizing when you step outside, the kind of coolness that seems to push you forward quickly and makes the fallen leaves invite your feet to move, to stomp on their crunchiness. Do you miss the seasons? I suppose you have the rainy season and dry season there; what happens then?

I stayed with Mom for a while last month but now I can stay with Angela from college, we're in a basement apartment but at least it's in

Manhattan, and in between the parks. Angela is easy to talk to or to be quiet with. Do you remember her?

At home Mom has stopped talking. She sits and knits or endlessly gardens. But doesn't talk. I remember that Dad never talked much at the end. He never talked unless he was provoked or invited. It seems they tried to out silence each other so that the dishwasher and the laundry machine are the only sounds that survived in the house. Mom stopped talking, so then the dishwasher downstairs, the laundry machine upstairs and the showers and toilets once in a while claimed the house and the house swirled with water sounds. Mom blames Dad (in part) for your leaving. Even dead, he can't escape blame. He was the adventurous one; and he probably would have cautioned you, but would secretly have been proud, excited. Mom seems sometimes to just be waiting for him to come home from work, for you to come home from school. She can somehow blame Dad and so there is silence hiding under blame and the wooshing or gurgling water. Silence stays put, hangs heavily, but water runs. Brushing my teeth last night I imagined the hidden undertow of our loud water house catching me. Of flowing down the drains and through the walls and being loud and fast... Living with them for three weeks made me yearn for the desert that borders you, the lack of

running water, the sun, the harsh heat. But you have secrets there, I'm sure.

You let the dust cover them, or is the distance enough for you?

This morning I went with mom to the doctor. I drove and Mom's head was turned towards her window. Her hands kneading the skin on her arms. I tried to talk to her! I gave:

"It's a pretty day out. I'm glad the trees still have all their leaves" and, "I should be hearing about my application for grad school soon" but nothing back. She'd lost weight, a lot of weight quickly, and she looked different. I know it's happened before, but this time she started to look very different very quickly.

No one can remember the last time she went to the doctor. 10 years ago? 15? So Aunt Abby and I wore her down with suggestions, arguments, threats, and warnings and we got her into the car. I went with Mom to the doctor. Half-way there she started with "You're driving too fast! There's no reason to drive like this ever. You don't know what all these other drivers are thinking. All these other drivers are maniacs. You never know what they're going to do on the road. You have to be defensive. Drive defensively here. Maniacs on the road. Maniacs everywhere" and then just a little bit

later, stopped at a red light so there was no driving to comment on, a red light of safe stagnation.

She looked at me, "I'm glad you're going back to school. Graduate school, more school, it's good, good for you. And I know you want to look out for me but you really don't need to. I'm still the mother." She twirled the rings on her fingers, the green one, and the garnet diamond one, her marriage bands and the engagement ring that's cloudy, with an inclusion.

She continued, gathering steam, "I really don't need to do this, to see a doctor. I'm fine. Only tired. At my age I'm supposed to be tired. You don't understand. I have good reasons to be tired. It's my business anyway. I'm worried about Eva. You don't understand that. Eva is the baby. Eva should need me. You just want to have your way, control me, make me go to the doctor when I don't want to. I'm still your mother, Leah Marie, turn this car around right now."

I didn't. Did she know something we didn't?

This afternoon I took the train to the city and met Angela, now the only college friend I have more than facebook, texting, or emailing contact with. You might remember her- tall, thin, really short brown hair she has

new tattoos of lyrics down her arms, lyrics and place names, all the places she's been- born in Australia, childhood in England, high school in Belgium, college in New York, with me, semesters abroad in France and Spain. For now, we share a room between Amsterdam and Columbus. She's the one who tempted me back into school again, putting all of my wonderings to use, I guess. I love Angela, can talk to her most of the time, but she doesn't read this.

I printed out an extra copy of my novel excerpt I used for admission. I put it in a big manila envelope and addressed it to you. Maybe I'll mail it in the warm season...

So, Angela and I took a walk down Riverside Park dodging bikers and runners and dogs and children. The sun was setting and the sky shifted and readjusted its layered colors and its clouds with each of our steps. It was nice and simply easy and I listened to the sound of the Hudson under the sound of highway traffic and thousands of people sharing our walk. It felt romantic.

"We should fall in love," I said out loud.

"With each other or different people?" Angela is playful.



"Well, we do know all the important statistics about each other already and we are in close proximity to each other. So..."

"That's not a romantic pick up line," Angela is tough.

We were walking by the baseball field and there were a couple of little boys squatting down with magnifying glasses staring at ants and whatever bugs were crawling around, the things grown-ups try not see.

"They're fascinated!" I said, pointing them out to Angela.

"They're boys," she explained and didn't look at them again.

I vaguely remember being that fascinated by the world and everything it did. My phone rang. I almost didn't look at it because Carlos had been calling and calling and calling because I don't end things well, because I try to just forget and deny and change and forget--but I promised I wouldn't write to you about Carlos. And I want to write to you. To try. Aunt Abby was on the phone. Mom is sick.

I stopped walking. We were a little bit beyond the boys crouching over the baseball field. I dropped my phone and one of the little boys ran to pick it up for me. There was a caterpillar on his sleeve, small and wriggling and alive. I didn't know there were caterpillars in NYC in October. I didn't know

our house could be taken over by water again. I didn't know Mom could get really sick. I know we don't talk. But I wish we did.

Love,

Leah.

### **November/Grad school submission/In envelope to Eva**

*She was fascinating. Young or ageless, dazzling, large eyes that changed color in the sunlight, and the lack of light, in all lights. In the darkest nights her eyes were the eyes of cats that watch things, tensed and pacing, excited. In the morning her eyes were sincere and slippery; they melted into wild tears of happiness or despair at an instant. At noon on days when sunshine filled her island and revealed everything in true, radiant colors, her eyes never closed, but narrowed into focused slits as she ran through the mountains, swam in the sea, seeing every moment. Everything fascinated her. In the afternoon she rolled through the fields and danced at the shoreline feeling the seduction of night coming on. In the evening she blinked and almost purred.*

*Once upon a time this Woman saw a ship as she danced on the shoreline. The sun lit up her eyes like a lighthouse as always. And the ship sailed into her. She stopped her dance and stood in the slimy sand as the waves licked her knees, her legs wide, watching the ship, she sang. There were others she had signaled, others who had stayed entranced, helpless and content for as long as she would have them. Others she would*

*play with at noon and then again at night. But this little ship was already sailing in her direction before her eyes caught it. And this little ship offered only one.*

*Now, this Woman was beautiful and she was loved. Her island loved her and celebrated her and she was busy. She sang for the flowers and trees and the sun and the water and was free except for the very center of the island where she would never go.*

*Everything fascinated her. This ship landed and the Woman hadn't moved. She stood with her hair standing up and her eyes staring as only one young man appeared.*

*He hailed her from the ship. His voice was stronger than the waves and she heard him as a roar. No sailor had ever spoken to her before- she signaled, they sailed, and then they slipped to her feet to be hers for a while. But this one climbed down from his little ship, Conquaerere painted on its side, splashed into her water and waded towards her. His powerful steps disturbed the shore and made the sand fly around the legs of the Woman. Her eyes blazed and she fascinated him, yet in a way that let him stride confidently towards her.*

*She fascinated everyone. No one else had ever approached her eye to eye. He was the only one. But not exactly eye to eye. He was taller by a hair's breadth and his eyes were grey and always stayed that way. It was noon when they stood knee deep in clear water confronting new possibilities. It was midnight when they made their first daughter under a tree whose branches hung so far down its leaves tickled their skin in the breeze. Between the leaves and the grass, her eyes were a glowing green that shone through the night because she kept them open.*

*The sailor enjoyed the Woman through many nights, but his enjoyment was different. It changed as her eyes did in different lights, with different thoughts. This lone*

*sailor wandered away from the Woman from time to time to explore different things, she was somewhat surprised and her eyes lit up a burning blue when she saw him alone on some mountain top or tree top, climbing, alone and in the distance. But he always returned to her, always delighted, attracted, intrigued with her. And she was fascinated, fascinating.*

*So when the sailor and the Woman had enjoyed many nights, when it was time, when she journeyed away from the shore and up the mountain, she tied her long hair around his wrists so that he would follow. Morning was just beginning as they journeyed and she glided when she walked ahead while his solid footsteps challenged the rock and rose above the island's sounds. At night, on the top of the mountain she had their first daughter. Their first daughter had her mother's hair and her mother's eyes.*

*They climbed back to the shore and lived between the ocean and the trees. But the sailor now was not always fascinated with the Woman. At sunrise he would take his ship and sail around the island. He wanted to know and to go. He wanted to go where the Woman had already gone, know what she already knew. He just went; but she always signaled him back, the Woman, letting the sun or the moon or her favorite stars light up her eyes like lighthouses. After sailing a jagged circle around the island, at night he would sail back into her, standing in the waves, would find their tree with branches that reached for the grass. And one midnight here, they made another daughter.*

*This time, before the Woman even thought about her climb up the mountain, the sailor was straying further. All day he went walking or running into the island, he found its caves, its hills, its valleys. He sang in every one of them and left his solid footprints*

*deep on the greenness. Now the Woman could not always see him to signal him back, but sent the blue birds, half as large as the sailor's ship, to guide him in at night.*

*When it was time to climb the mountain she roped her hair around his neck for in his arms he carried the daughter with her mother's eyes. She didn't glide as easily now, but his footsteps echoed in her ears.*

*At evening there was another daughter. This one grew no hair but possessed her father's footsteps because at sunrise she started to walk. At sunrise the Woman awoke to the sound of her baby's first footsteps pointed away from her. The waking Woman also found that they were alone. Her eyes flashed gold as she swept up her already walking daughter and darted down the mountain asking the beautiful blue birds to help her find her family. By noon they had guided her through jungles and hills to the center of the island where she observed the sailor holding the not yet walking daughter and staring at it, the opening, the blackness, the blankness. It was a hole in a valley. No grass grew around it. The Woman had found it a long time ago.*

*The big blue birds flew in circles above their heads, anxious and unsure. Their wings made breezes that came from every direction and their chirping was worried and quick. The gaping hole seemed to swim up, taunting, tempting.*

*One of the birds suddenly swooped down as if to push the sailor and daughter with bright eyes backward, away, towards grass and out of the trance. But the spellbound sailor thought it an attack and reached up to hit the bird. The action was quick and confused. Great birds wings the color of calm sky and the Woman's eyes in quiet times swept the sailor backwards, off balance, and to the ground. His body hitting the grassless earth seemed to shake the ground and make the hole growl. In his fall, the not*

*yet walking daughter, the one with eyes and hair like her mother's tumbled from her father's arms and rolled down the slight incline toward the gap.*

*Black eyes melting quickly, the Princess placed her new daughter on the earth behind her and flew to her first daughter rolling for the edge.*

*The sailor had grasped a part of the bluebird's wing and pulled it down in anger towards him. They rolled fighting, desperate and dusty.*

*With all of her focus and frightened breath, the Princess secured her daughter and pushed herself up and away. Through the dust kicked up by sailor and bird, through the dust that was kept swirling by the flapping of those above, with the lingering power of her birth, her skin glowing, her eyes pouring, the Princess secured her daughter and pushed up and away.*

*Through the dust kicked up by sailor and bird, through the dust that was kept swirling by the flapping of birds above, the brand new daughter found her feet and realized her freedom. Brave and innocent of the world, she stood swaying. Strong and curious about life, she started stomping forward, one solid foot after another.*

*Brave and strong, the sailor fought the bird ignorant of everything else. Feathers and blood stuck to grassless ground and no one saw the new daughter tumble. With much struggling, the sailor pinned the bird under him and slowly killed her.*

*But the new daughter had fallen. The Woman had secured her first daughter but couldn't see the other. The sailor saw only the birds that circled and confused him. He couldn't do more. No one saw the new daughter tumble.*

*After that, the Woman's eyes turned grey forever.*

*The sailor, in his angry and desperate, dusty desperation threw sticks and stones at the other birds continuously who occasionally swooped down to fight him and avenge their sister. The sailor fought the birds day and night until their end, until every bird of every type lay mangled and finished. Then he fought the other life on the island. When all of the animals lay in a heap, dead and dying, writhing and tangled in death, he turned to the trees. With boundless rage and energy he killed until there was nothing living left except for the Woman and their first daughter who had leisurely found her feet and carefully learned to walk in the quietness that came after. She was fascinated by everything and watched her mother closely to learn, but her mother's eyes were grey and now she never really glowed.*

*One day, the Woman woke to strange silence. There were no sounds of birds or animals or wind rustling leaves or flowers unfurling. Even the sound of the waves seemed softer, weaker. There was nothing left on the island. Almost nothing. Only the one tree that swept the ground and the sailor's little ship remained. The Woman grasped her now only daughter and trudged toward the center of the silence where she began to hear rustling. There was the sailor. On hand and knees, his strong legs bent under him, twisting, braiding, creating a strange and broad kind of rope. Feathers and grasses and vines and roots and fur and tails, all woven together, untamed things forced together and fixed. The rope round around and around him in spiraling circles, the rope of the island's life. They were very close to the center. The Woman watched from a distance, silently, dispassionately with her daughter with eyes of violet.*

*The sailor saw only his rope. Only saw what it would do. The sun rose and set the moon waxed and he worked while mother and daughter watched. And finally he*

*descended. Into the darkness that grabbed at him, covered him, gulped him down, the sailor descended and there was nothing. The sun rose and set, the moon waned and then the daughter kicked and struggled down from her mother's arms and walked toward the yawning blankness that the recently dead rope crept out of. The Woman followed anxiously now, curious, squinting. Her daughter knelt at the edge and peered down, eyes silver and signaling. She signaled straight down into the darkness and soon saw the sailor's hand, his arm grasping the monstrous rope, held by powerful legs, and in his other arm, the recovered daughter.*

*Black grime and sweat shining over the Sailor's skin, he gave his kicking daughter into the Woman's empty arms. Together, they stood in the sunshine that burned the unprotected island. Together, they slowly began to move toward the shore where together they dipped their feet in the cool and foamy waves. Days passed. The sailor would sometimes climb into his small ship and sail, sometimes with one of his daughters, sometimes alone. Wherever he went, sometimes he would come back and tread over the island, bits of twigs and grass and seeds stuck to the bottom of his feet. Rain fell on the island and greenness returned in places, different and timid. The sun was the same, and the moon and sometimes the Woman stood knee deep in the water, legs wide, toes curled in the slimy sand, and the breeze picked up her hair.*

*The Sailor wandered all over the island and away from it. The Woman missed the missing Sailor but worked to make her daughters sisters and years passed.*

*The daughters fought their own battles but the mystery of themselves always haunted their happily ever afters.*



## November/Lovely/Next to sleep

Beds are nice. Whoever invented beds did a very, very good job. One day, I would like to invent something as nice and helpful as a bed.

Is anything nicer than hearing the wind howl against your window from underneath covers heated by your own happy body and the sleeping body next to you? If the opposite of desire is death and we are always either in a state of creation or destruction, I'm overcome!

In the beginning there was nothingness, nothing until nothingness got bored and lonely and somehow nothing was found by something and they spun together and made music, then poetry, then they slid into each other and made bliss and emotions and wanted to share. So they gave birth to the world.

Oy.

Who am I???

I am someone who lies blissfully in a bed that is big and beautiful. Brent sleeps deeply next to me. We met about a month ago. He is more than I can tell right now.

I am someone stretching and awake in bed.

I am someone silly who can consider many things secretively.

I am someone who is thinking about sister Eva who found a dog in Africa.

Besides learning and teaching how to make charcoal out of corncobs and cassava and cement cistern construction, a dog wandered into Eva's compound. It was small. She

guessed it was a puppy but it came from out of nowhere and didn't look like any American dog she had ever seen. Eva gave it food and they bonded. This was before she had picked up the isolated language of her isolated village. Some things don't need language, just love. It was shaggy and skinny but happy, I imagine a long tail and a pink tongue wagging excitedly. So the dog named Dog grew up and grew big and stayed wild. It chased chickens- an offense that gets dogs killed no questions asked in this village- but Eva defended it. When Eva has to leave the village for training or teaching or the respite of the one underground bar in the town fifteen miles away, someone has to hold Dog so she doesn't follow. No one else will feed Dog in the village so she wanders, and Mom retells the story of Dog returning with a mouthful of zebra or goat or elephant. The animal changes every time because the story is a good one. And the point is the wildness and the adventure. Or the brave, stupid abandon.

So one day the puppy truly becomes a dog, bigger than Eva ever expected. But Dog doesn't stop. She grows very big and continues to grow fatter. Dog has gotten herself pregnant. My sister witnesses the miracle of birth alone one night, helping Dog deliver many little puppies. It was night and I try to imagine what night sounds like without the hum of electricity, without air conditioner and water running through the walls. What does birth sound like in a small, mud hut? It is perhaps an even greater surprise than the miracle of birth that all of the puppies of this light, beige-ish colored dog come out jet black when there are no completely black dogs in the neighborhood.

Weeks later, Eva has to go into the city for a conference. She had given away the puppies but Dog kept finding them, one by one, and leading them back to Eva's house so Eva would have to keep returning the puppies to their new homes. One semi-wild dog

was enough for her. This time, when Eva returned from her conference Dog was whining and pawing at her closed door. Dog had hidden a puppy inside! Eva opened the door and an emaciated puppy rushed out and Puppy and Dog started howling and jumping around. Then they stopped and rushed off to play like nothing had happened.

The few weeks old puppy had been left alone, in the dark, without food or water for days. I can't think of many things more horrible than slowly starving to death in the dark alone, except to maybe know that your baby is slowly starving to death inches away. But when the door was opened Dog and Puppy jumped for joy and spent the next long minutes chasing each other around, licking and loving happily. No grudges, no scars, no resentment, no blame. The door opens and there is light and puppy love.

I wonder about Eva, what her night was like as she watched Dog give life to a litter of puppies, about what will happen to Dog when she leaves. But mostly, I wonder about how much easier it is to jump for joy than it is to do anything else.

Eva seemed to think this was a story of trauma. From my cozy and protected momentary space, I see hope. Recognizing the situation and moving on. Celebration. Dog and Puppy don't get traumatized. Many incidents leading up to traumas are commonplace around Eva- forced marriage, sudden death, long illness, tensions between ethnic groups, physical violence.... But they resist change because they are perfectly fine the way they are. I don't know if I've made any point or if I'll see something different and change my mind with my next breath. There are things like that. Things whose rightness or wrongness changes with the tone in our hearts or the gusts of wind outside. Very probably, I don't understand at all what Eva is trying to convey. She wrote once

more about the incredible poverty around her saying this time only that it is incredible how very little we need to survive.

I think about this a lot...and about Eva, so incomprehensibly far away but bouncing around like a beach ball in my brain, even here, even in my happiness.

What do we need to survive?

Brent sleeps deeply next to me and his calmness mocks the wintry wind screaming outside. He's the eye of the storm. The bedroom is warm and soft and large. He is... I have no words for him yet. I wish I could be a monk or a devotee that could meditate on this exciting and euphoric state of new love/lust, to understand it, make it last forever, live in it. How does one make this season last?

(What a question! What makes me think of the end at the beginning? What pokes holes in my peace?)

Brent is tall and takes up the whole length of the bed. He moves softly and regularly, his muscular chest, now relaxed, falling gently down and rising gently up with breath. His longish sandy colored hair pulls under him, caught, but he's peaceful. The lines around his eyes are only light sketch marks now. I want to touch his face, skin that is tough and handsome; he needs to shave and a I bet he will when he wakes up; but for now, I like it. His skin is tough and sure, it has been lived in for a long time. He says, "I'm happy you're here" to me across the island in the kitchen as he's stirring the risotto, eyes on me, long arms at work gripping spoon and pot, and "I want to tell you everything" in bed closely, quietly, cold toes interlocked and slowly warming up. He speaks slowly and carefully, economically. Words don't fall out of his mouth without

thought. And he thinks—he wants—to tell me everything of himself. I have no words for him, yet. Though I'll try. He makes me happy.

For moments here I can forget and forgive anything and what is ironically most obvious is the absence of things. The absence of things like guilt and regret and shame and fear over the almost baby I killed with lying thoughts, the men who I hurt and the ones who hurt me, the broken glass of my mirror, and my sister.

My sister isn't broken but she is still far away. When we were little, there were always adventures. In our neighborhood there was an enormous space, a park with a field where we played soccer and baseball. But far in the back, under the secretive shade of trees, the grass became scarcer and the ground sloped to a pond. And there were minnows that flitted. And we would stand up to our ankles, disrupting this peaceful hidden world shaded by tall trees watching the ripples in the water and the minnows darting around our intrusion. One day it began to drizzle and as the raindrops found their way through the branches and leaves that stretched above us, the surface of the water broke apart. Tiny drops making little circles running bigger and bigger made the fish dart faster until the surface fragmented so much that they couldn't be seen anymore, buried, lost.

Eva bent close to the water to try and see what was hard to see. She dropped to her hands and knees to peer into it. The drops came more quickly and getting frustrated, Eva stood again and stomped in the water, making it murky and dull. Water splashed on my legs as I stepped out of the pond, up the bank and away from the chaos. After that I could only think of squished fish and did not want to go back there. Eva stayed there so

that Mom and Dad and I had to go looking for her quickly, frantically. When we found her she was soaked and heavy and not looking for us.

Mom goes to the doctor often now with me or Aunt Abby or Aunt May. I can drive from their house to the hospital with my eyes closed, almost. It's the conversations in the car that break me down, make me want to scrunch my eyes. She blames me now.

Last Friday at a red light (she likes waiting for red lights to begin talking), "I knew we never should have went in the first place. No good comes from doctors, you hear me?"

I hear her but what is there to say? She doesn't allow for much silence and she carries on, "I knew I never should have went. But you insisted- insisted on taking me- you insist on everything and now look what it's got me." I watch different cars cross the intersection desperate for my turn to move.

"Mom, you lost twenty pounds, your hair was falling out, you always looked like you were in pain and you refused to talk to anybody. What should I have done?"

Still at the red light and she answers me quickly, "You should have been the daughter. You should have let me be the mother. I knew we shouldn't have tempted fate. I shouldn't have gone to the doctor. You should have been my daughter and listened to me. I know things."

"You think I wanted this? Any of this? You think this was my plot? My big idea in asking you to go get a check up?" Green light- go.

"Don't get emotional. Don't get excited. Don't yell. And you're driving too fast!"

"Mom! ... I'm trying.... Have you told Eva?"

“Of course not. It’s not my job to worry people. It’s your girls’ job to worry me. Let Eva do her thing now that she’s there. You’re more than enough for me. Eva’s doing important things.”

“I’m going to start teaching in the spring.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“I know! I- I just want you to get better. And to feel better.”

“Well just stop worrying about me. I’m fine.”

Another red light.

“You just never should have taken me to the doctor in the first place.”

Brent doesn’t know anything about Mom or Dad, he knows only a little about Eva because I can’t stop myself from telling about her. He doesn’t know about C whom I left quickly and completely, or J, about whom I think/dream/wonder about chronically.

Brent sleeps and doesn’t know my thoughts. He is attractive in a rough and sturdy way, he attracted me; he is calm and calming and I wonder if I will sleep next to him, in this bed, and what his thoughts are, sleeping after holding me so tightly I can still feel his hands and his kisses that I love. That I love.

What does he know about me?

Brent knows that I write and I read. That I fuck. That I like my coffee black and I don’t eat meat. Brent knows that when I’m on top I close my eyes. Brent knows I have a family but we’ve been slow to talk about details- about his family or mine. We all have details no one else can conceive of quite like we can, completely.

What does Brent know about me? What do I know about him?

He is handsome, of course, eyes like a puppy dog and long hair he has to tie back in the kitchen but even then it's sexy. He dropped out of college. Doesn't ask what I write only says he knows it's good. He lives in a big apartment taken up by space and not much furniture but everything happens in the kitchen anyway, even now, in bed I can see the edge of the kitchen table down the hallway, still feel it under me. I can still smell the warm bread and pesto we made this afternoon. Brent is like a bowl of the creamiest, most flavorful fettuccine alfredo steaming hot after being lost in a blizzard for a week. He makes me full and happy. So here I am, nothing more wonderful than a bed. Nothing more wonderful than Brent, peaceful and asleep...

Here I am, not sleeping next to him.

## **November/Counting**

Nineteen days since I got my period. Twenty-nine days since we heard from Eva. Seventeen days since I explained the miracle of Hanukah to Brent over wine and vegetarian shepherd's pie sitting at his kitchen table touching fingertips nicely. Eleven days since my teaching assignment was confirmed (and I'm really going to be an instructor next semester, and grad student, of course). Ten days since I started writing something new that won't leave me alone. Seven days since I saw Mom; her eyes were tired but beautiful (always her eyes were beautiful, hazel, sparkling, expressive). Three days since my last nightmare of Brent fighting off a bear or a dog or something, huge and fierce, foaming at the mouth, the dream barking and snarling were the worst sounds I've



ever heard. Nine days since I started planning my classes (excited for a new beginning, adventure, discovery). One day since I saw Brent, (we woke up and brushed our teeth, got dressed and went our separate ways into the cold afternoon). Two days ago we fell into each other out of exhaustion. He came home from the restaurant so late. I had waited, reading and writing, for him. But as soon as we felt our bodies pressed together we woke up, his body fitting perfectly against mine, his chest and stomach and hips pressing into me. I get to tilt my head up and reach with my neck to kiss him because he is tall, taller. His skin smelled of warm kitchens and good food and his deep, earthy smell. He makes my body come alive, makes it grow warm, makes it want, yearn, beg for him. With him here, I am perfect, I'm without past, without future, only present when I wrap arms around his neck. And pick my legs up around his waist, because he is strong, sturdy, reliable. His body like the trunk of a tree, but warm, smooth, as I squeeze him tight with arms and legs and kiss his lips that taste thick and salty and hot, like pasta water. Like a tree until he walks us over to the bed and then he's a wild fire.

### **December/I never sent this to my sister**

Eva,

I am writing a story I can't stop. A girl- a woman- no, a girl, grows up, gripped, infatuated, fixated, trapped... in herself? I don't know what it is yet. It plays out as I fall asleep and I dream it. All day I'm compelled to try

to remember, reconstruct, relate it again to myself. Last night was the first night I didn't dream it, no nightmare. Instead, I dreamt of nothing but woke up to the coldest morning we've had so far this fall. Strangely revived and confident, I jumped out of bed early and ran out to icy air. It is exciting when you're suddenly wide-awake so early that it feels like you beat the world somehow, got a head start.

Outside of Brent's apartment I walked west to the park where the trees were naked already. It was early and the sun was barely up or just coming up. I couldn't see it but it was on there or on its way and the sky was clear and glowing, gradually, brighter.

When the world is like a secret unfolding slowly, before people emerge and speed things up, the morning feels good. Even when bare, I like walking under the trees that border the park and the trees inside it. Stately skeletons. I sat on a bench and watched the early birds in sweats running and jogging and walking with weights, walking dogs, walking with coffee cups, newspapers. It was peaceful and sweet and I tucked my legs underneath me to keep my toes warm. I'd thrown on a thick sweatshirt over my t-shirt but forgot to look for anything but the flip-flops on top of the pile of shoes in the closet.

How different are the trees that I see struggling out of Manhattan's ancient rockiness from your trees, where people gather, where people consume food, pick fruit, enjoy the valuable shade?

A squirrel darts directly up a tall tree to the right of me. He hurries and knows his way. A few months ago I spotted a raccoon and an owl in this enclosed city park. Who knows where life hides...

A man not running or jogging or walking with weights or dogs or a coffee cup slowly shuffled up to a garbage can in front of me. He leisurely approached and gripped the curving metal edge with both hands as he looked down into it. Like someone fearfully looking over the edge of a well for something lost. Finally, in no hurry, he reached one long arm down, the rest of his body straining with the exertion of moving things aside and reaching the bottom. After a few moments, his arm emerged with his hand grasped around a discarded coffee cup. He wrapped both hands around it and shuffled away.

Other people become more frequent, with brief cases, high heels, ready to jump on top of their day. The pace picks up, the city's heartbeat pulses around me.

I realized for the first time that I had run out of the apartment without a bag. So happy to wake up happy, clean, without a nightmare, without nasty thoughts, I bounded out of the building without wallet or keys, anything. Lighter, or lost, sitting on a park bench for an hour with nothing, no one, could be anyone. But I had my cell phone, because after contemplating possibilities, it rang. Brent was calling me, worried and curious. I was getting cold and hungry. I hurried back to the apartment, climbed back into bed and slept easily next to him for a few nice minutes before the images and words of a nightmare crept up. I woke up when the sun was visible and clear and strong and tried to call Mom but she was sleeping. So I tried to write this letter.

I wish we could all start over, you know?

-L

## January/Story/Dream

*...Watching thin women is my favorite thing... It's not like smoking or drugs...*

*... entranced...tiny legs crossed carelessly...*

*dangled a small, shiny high-heeled shoe. Cinderella....*

*...no way*

*out....*

*...something eternally perfect...*

*...I was guilty, consumed with my strangeness...*

*The way they moved and breathed struck me....*

*One day...*

*...women would challenge me...staring back full through my eyes... violating.*

*I had nothing to prove.*

*Simply watching was my favorite thing...*

## **February/Figuring/On the train over the river and through the mountains to parents' house**

Brent is

older, mature, handsome, tall, older (condescending?), simple, strong (ignorant?), loving (cloying?), playful, dependable (boring?), nice.

Leah is

quiet!

## **March/Late night**

His keys jangle out of his pocket full of change and then the hard sounds of metal twisting into the lock. The door opens and there, the footsteps, even though I know he is trying to be quiet. Even before his keys, I swear I can feel him getting nearer. The even footsteps against deep carpet in the hallway, I sense his approach to this pretty apartment nestled on the Upper East Side, where I sometimes belong. This apartment he took me to three weeks after we met, where he cooked for me, shared with me, made me feel beautiful. I sit still and alone waiting for him.

“Hey there good-looking.” I’m always surprised at how quick he is to smile, or how genuine his smile is. For a moment, his grey eyes meet my tired ones and he steps in, letting the door slam. We’re both here and awake. The open window creates a draft when the door is open that could suck papers, clothes, anything out. But not him. He is

solid, stable, comfort. He wriggles out of his coat and throws it on the back of his desk chair. Change is scooped out of his pockets, shoes kicked inside of the hall closet, and a sigh as he drops down next to me on the couch; I know the marking. These are the sounds of safety, of contentment, of love, usually.

“What’s the news, kiddo?” He puts his hand on my knee and it somehow feels like a first date but we have been in love for five months. “I missed you at the restaurant tonight.”

“My class ended late and I wasn’t hungry. I just wanted to come home. I thought you’d be busy.” My voice sounds darker than his. I can’t tell if I’m trying. I feel the muscles of his thigh tense against mine.

“Always time for you.” I don’t know what to say to him. I get up to close the window. It’s cold. I sit in the armchair to the side of the desk forgetting the papers I was working on, scattered on the couch. His dark eyes look for mine but I stare at my knee without anything to do.

“You ok?” He tries to tempt me.

“Everything’s set for Mom’s birthday, Aunt Abby is bringing Mom, and Aunt May and Uncle Troy and the kids are coming over here. I’ll clean if you cook”. I should have gone to bed before he came home. Nothing will get settled tonight. He stretches his long legs awkwardly and gets up from the couch.

“Did you hear from Eva?” He takes out two wine glasses and the wine I like.

“Nope.” He uncorks the wine gracefully, an expert, and pours. He approaches me carefully, like a wild animal. I think it’s a bit comical. He senses this and laughs. I take the wine. He touches my face before going back to sit on the couch.

Eva won't be home for holidays or birthdays. No surprise. No need to care too much. Brent doesn't understand that yet, hasn't met her yet, maybe won't. I hunger for her sometimes but won't admit it; he flares up with curiosity and wonder. He has no living siblings, no family; he would love a large celebration. But Eva is far away and I only want him to be my family. We play house and pretend and perhaps he thinks he can see us years down the road still playing. And he has years on me, perhaps he knows. His hands remind me of my father's.

"How was your day?" I ask. Wine slips through me.

He hesitates. "Great. We put Jamie's fried parmesan encrusted ravioli on the menu. People loved it. We had a couple of loud people about the wait. But the usual. Are you hungry? Want me to make something?"

"No thanks."

"How was your day? How was school?" He swirls his wine and I watch how the colors change rushing around the glass.

"Great. Busy as usual." I'm teaching two, taking three and writing. These hours of the late night, when it has been dark already for hours and will be for a few more, these are my hours to act.

Brent wears the shirt I like, the one I helped him pick out the day we met when he walked into me coming out of the subway. It was raining or sleeting. Neither of us looked at anything. We collided on the corner. My big bag fell into a puddle at my feet and when he bent to pick it up his hat fell and for some reason, I couldn't stop laughing. Not like me, not like a reaction I would have. Surprising. He bought me coffee at the shop I was headed to. We talked about the weather and this city, both unpredictable,



endlessly surprising. We left the shop, unready to say good-bye so we stopped at the next door on the block, a store. I helped him pick out a new hat and shirt, then he invited me to lunch the next day and he went to work, I went to class.

He was charming. I wanted to be charmed. No, he was easy- put together, grown up, adult, responsible.

“Baby...you want to talk?” He is suddenly serious, watching me remember things. He wants into all of this, everything I don’t say. I know that and I love him and I’m scared.

This morning he told me he loved me again but in a different way. Waking up in bed, he said that he wanted to wake up with me every day for the rest of our lives. He said something like he couldn’t imagine not loving me and hoped that one day we might have a baby in bed with us. We could start a family...or some words to that effect. I told him I had killed a baby once, or lost a baby...something like that. I told him there would be no babies. I think I yelled. I think I hit him. I got up and dressed and left even though I was five hours early for school. He called me once before he went to work. He left a message saying he wanted me no matter what and asked me to come to the restaurant. I came home instead, but almost didn’t.

I drink the wine but think of Brent’s hand against my cheek just now. I smell the soap and steam of the kitchen he won’t leave even though the clientele ask for him constantly. He has the impossible: a consistently popular restaurant in New York City running for over ten years. Ten years...that was before I met him, before I could drive. His parents left him money and he risked his inheritance on something he loved because he thought it was worth it. Because he loved it.

**(because it comes bubbling back up now, breaking the surface,  
quick jump back to July 2007, but only for a moment)**

Because I hid from, lied to, hated myself, the night at the café bar never happened. That was a bad dream I had of lights and shadows and bottles and bars. Silly really. Except the dream left bruises and the taste of tears and chocked screams in my mouth for days. Because I didn't think it real. I had the flu. I threw up every morning. I felt like shit. I didn't talk to anyone. Wanted J who was really John and wanted not to want him. (Where was he that night anyway? How could he be anything but good? Did he cry when he walked me home that night or were those still only my tears that swam down my cheeks and I projected them onto the world? ) I drank with Angela in her room but didn't tell her much; we talked about her teaching yoga classes, the shows going up downtown. She shared a room with another girl I usually liked but was happy she went home for the summer. So we'd sit on her top bunk in the heat in pajamas or underwear and sing the songs from the shows we loved. I drank to pass out so I could finally sleep and (jackpot) sleep without dreaming. I stopped my internship. When Mom came to visit me she wanted to take me to a doctor but I fought back with the mighty tantrum of a two year old. She tried to speak to me. What stories did she have to tell me that I silenced so completely? What knowledge did she keep? Angela tried too and I kicked her away,

jumping off her bed and hitting her desk hard, the corner going into my side. This wasn't the first time any of this had happened.

After a while I remembered the birth control pills in my desk drawer. I'd gotten a few packs from friendly health services. Condoms were free and in a big bowl by the door and birth control pills were only a few dollars for us crazy coeds. One brand made me feel sick so I tried another, one had me bleeding for three weeks so I tried another, I stocked up on some packs for winter break and then again for summer when health services was closed, always forgetting how much I had stuffed into drawers all over my little room. With so much going on, taking a pill was not a daily occurrence. When I remembered them, coming back from Angela's room three floors below mine, I tripped over the clothes on my floor to get to my desk. Five half empty packs and Four full ones.

It could have been John's.

A week later my outsides felt as torn up as my insides but there was nothing left. So I cleaned my room and put on make up and started getting ready for next semester. I made dean's list. I wrote a story about a florist who goes crazy and kills all of the plants in her shop in gruesome ways.

The café was down the street.

Now I'm across town. Older. First person present. Wondering why I'm remembering this instead of fights in Queens recalled by the fight I'm in now. If this even is one. There's no breaking anything or screaming, or pushing or pulling. Instead there's wine and silence. Only broken things inside. Who is Brent? Where was he before? Could he be anything but good?

## Moment over/March and Brent continued

The wine is good; I wouldn't mind drowning in it. I think this is comical, too, and unfold myself to get up and move back to the couch next to Brent. He puts his arm around me and I move closer. If he says anything about this morning I'll leave. But he traces his hand down my side and his warmth feels good. I think of Eva who wrote about an underlying problem of communication in her village. There is no translatable story or fairy tale. She wrote about living in a polygamous society where no man ever considers himself taken and there really isn't any conception of love. This makes pretty much every princess/prince fairytale confusing. So how do *we* who grew up with fairies and tales understand? How do we share?

My father was the one who read fairy tales to Eva and me. Mom would read the chapter books, or before that, the rhyming books. By Dad would read the classics, over and over again until we all knew them by heart, word for word, detail upon lovely detail. But Eva and me, and sometimes Mom, listened for longer than most because of his voice. "Once upon a time," he'd say and we were still and silenced and eager. He held the book so we couldn't really see the pictures, but his voice calmed the room and all of our thoughts so that we were rapt together.

Now, my papers are scattered on the coffee table and the dining room table. There are notes and research and stories everywhere. A letter to Eva is still on top of the printer unsent. Notebooks are full of scrawl and scribble that I should decipher and organize, but instead they are thrown into the second bedroom with boxes of books for some other day. All of this swirls and floods my mind now. Brent could be the one to pull me up or out.

I realize that I'm crying but I don't want Brent to see so I drink my wine and then turn quickly burying my head in his shirt. I rub my face dry while I straddle him. I start to kiss his neck.

He tries: "Wait a minute." And then: "I want to--"

But I don't want to wait. I don't want to talk. I want the warmth and love and security I was promised. He can't make me stop and think and talk. I kiss harder. I force my arms around and press my knees against his hips. My eyes are shut and they won't open again until morning. Finally, he carries me to the bedroom. I think of my father, my lovers, the baby, and the letters rolled up under the bed.

### **April/All You Need/Sitting outside school**

It's about love.

About love-

finding

what it does.

About...

Connections! -links-bonds-what's the word! (tell me)

About:

myths

we tell to understand-to be-to create.

This is all very vague. I'm still focusing.

### **June/I almost never wrote this/I never sent it**

Dear Mom,

I don't know what to do for you. I don't know what is possible. I want a cure, a miracle; you want us all back. Aunt Abby stays by your side now. I'm running from my life to you and then back and there and back. And what can I do about Eva?

Can I cut all my hair off and dress like her, the baggy drapes and shirts upon shirts, and be your other daughter for a moment? Deceive you for good reason when the lights are low and when you're half awake? Could I make you happy? Make you believe that way? Could I make us all different?

**July/How things end/At the doorway**

At the hospital the days stop moving and there's nothing to count. No words, nothing to say. All talked out. There's screaming, but now only inside our heads. Screaming our helplessness out at the hospital sinking into the unfair (of course), of the unfathomable, uncontrollable truth. At the hospital. Outside we're exhaustion and emptiness, and cold confusion. All of us at the hospital. All of us except for Eva. The missing daughter. Maybe coming.

"I only want us all together," Mom says and I want to kill my sister, erase her from our lives but I can't. I wouldn't. She makes the worst moments more painful and when she comes I want to throw her against a wall and melt in tears into her lap. I want her to somehow come back our savior and erase the sickness that wasn't caught until much-much-much too late because my mother was always too-too-too scared of doctors and "What I know is better than what I don't know", self-medicating pains quietly from a purse that served as a portable medicine cabinet, self medicating for years with chicken soup and strange smelling teas and focusing attention on everyone else, my mother. My sister might come back eventually, waiting for her in this hospital to come heroically through the door. I want her to bring back magic or miracles, to save something; I want to throw her against the wall and rip her apart. At the hospital. I'll bet Eva's on her way, traveling around the world not knowing how we wait.

Brent holds my hand sometimes, at home, here at that hospital. Sometimes I want to bite him. To see blood, to make pain, to watch him draw back and change.

Dad is absent. So quiet for so long; dead for so long, I can say it now. I try to remember times when we were all loud growing up, when we played games and all of that. Memories used to come and play out, spoiled possibilities, deceitful hope. But now

we're mainly quiet. What needs to be said is too much to give and the days stop moving so now feels like forever.

I wish I could ask my mother more questions, but it's almost the end.

### **July/I never sent this letter**

Eva- I have to believe you don't know what is happening, that you haven't received my letters and relayed phone calls, messages or however they are supposed to reach you. This note will probably never find you either but it's 3am and I can't sleep because my mind is raging at you: your selfishness, your immaturity, and—fills me so completely. The aunts are here. I've forgotten that there is anything else besides fluorescent lighting and unnatural smells. The aunts are here and talking. hearing your name makes me want to vomit and I'm already empty. I wanted you for so long, I waited for you. I defended you (against my judgment). I made myself believe in you. Dad isn't here. He wouldn't understand you, support this. Mom is inconsolable and I don't know what to do. Can you know this? I wish I could stop time and tear through the world to recover you, tear you away, drive you back here and compel you to do something here. You could do something. Now that my



rant has worn me out I might sleep and perhaps not dream again of you lost  
on a glacier scratching at the ice beside a polar bear. And my dreams are  
frustrations because I can't get at you. And I'm tired. -Leah

### **August/Drive to the airport and plans**

It's over.

"What time is your flight?"

"Two hours. We're fine."

"Uh-huh"

"Not that much traffic."

"I know."

The funeral was two days ago.

"You could come visit me."

"Uh-huh"

"You could"

"And you could have stayed here. You could have come back sooner."

"I came back here. Now I have to go back there."

"Why did you ask me to drive you?"

We haven't spoken since we screamed two days ago when she told me she was  
leaving.

"Why did you agree to drive me?"

Have I stumped her?

“Why don’t you ever answer my questions?”

“I wanted to talk.”

“About what?”

“Everything. About mom. About everything.”

“You give us one week out of two years and give me twenty minutes in the car with you.”

“It’s everything I have.”

“No, it’s not.”

I miss you.

Her skin is sun scorched; her hair is a different color, lighter and thinner. Her eyes are too bright and unblinking and her voice is changed, raspy and slow. She pauses before she speaks. She does not think in English anymore.

## **September/Swirling Around/A letter that I never could have sent**

Dear Brent, I don't know... If I could only  
Show you something truthfully, beautifully-  
Only bring you truly into me, we...

Dear Brent, I've never ever, ever tried  
So hard to stay here & talk & to know  
& to share & not to go, because I'd-

Dear Brent, I don't know how to do- what to  
Say. How to understand your everyday  
Love- You can teach me(?) How do I let you

### **October/Counting/In the library**

Ninety-two days since I saw Mom. She was sleeping. I held her hand, warm and relaxed, no rings or nail polish, only veins and skins. Twenty-two days since I got my period. Two days since I saw Brent. I slept early and woke up before he got home, went for a walk, went to school. Two days since I talked to Brent. I'm sliding. Don't. Want. To. Talk. He's too easy; knows nothing about this. He knows about Mom, about death, but not me exactly, or what I write.

### **November/Revising/In the library**

- Would society break down if we all told our secrets?
- If we all told our secrets, would all of our hearts disintegrate? What else do hearts do but push and pull blood in and out and hold our pieces together anyway?

- Or are they (secrets or hearts) all in our minds? And if secrets keep us sane then shouldn't they be encouraged?

The sky has been deeply white for days holding in snow. I've been camped out in the library researching and writing and flirting with the workers at the circulation desk- one of them reminds me of a wolf, the other of a lioness- me with puffy butterflies in my stomach.

Eva is far away. I'm teaching for the first time this semester, a new role, new identity. So I often sit here and look busy, play professional, in this underground part of the library where the real world goes on overhead.

But I'm still slowly, miraculously, getting work done. Well, making progress and regressing. Going back through files and USBs because I can't stop myself or stay in the present. Vicious circles or spirals running all over the place...

The lovely lioness slinks out from behind the desk to sit next to me. I've spread out on the couch, my feet up on the dirty table, my laptop overheating my legs.

"What's the distraction today?" she asks, shiny hair falling into her eyes.

I smile at her as she sits down by me. The heat is blazing in the library and I've stripped down to a T-shirt; I revel in the sensation of her next to me

"What are you looking at?" she asks again when I do nothing but continue to smile and lean into her. She tucks her knees up under her chin on the couch. She must be in her mid-twenties at least but she is long and sleek, her straight yellow hair cascading everywhere. From the back she could be any age, anything.

“I’m looking at your socks!” I say, pinching her toes. It is her lunch break and she has come over to see me before grabbing tea and a bagel at the café just outside. She’s slipped off her shoes before putting her feet on the couch. She wears Disney themed socks always. Tinkerbell stares up at me from against my knee. Eva is far away so I’m here, New York, school library, all of my thoughts and lives spread out on top of me, leaning against a woman whose name I’m not sure I remember.

“I’ll get you Pocahontas socks next Christmas”.

“Doesn’t that degrade the role of princesses?” I ask. She smells like chemically enhanced flowers and old books with bad spines.

“What?” she is trying to peek at my computer screen.

“Stuffing the image of a princess in your smelly shoes and walking on them all day.”

“Tinkerbell and Pocahontas aren’t princesses.” Her cat eyes peer into me for a moment before she turns back to my computer.

“Ah. Excuse me, shows how much I know,” I don’t stop her from looking at my screen; her head inclines towards mine; we all crave attention. Who can understand all this?

What about ironing out women’s faces and making them cookie cutter figures varying in muted shades only in the last decade? I debate whether I want to start an argument with her, to see what she would be like angry. Her shoulders are hunched up by her ears; she is focused. My phone vibrates under me and turns my thoughts. No need to look at it now. It’s early.

“Who is J?”

“What-*what*?”

“Aha. I found something” she almost sings this from deep in her throat.

“What?”

“In your essay; right here: *‘We’ll need a way to refer to this man who might have changed my life who I will write about shortly. Let’s call him J which, ironically, I don’t think is really pronounced in Spanish which was almost the only language he spoke’*. For real? That’s ridiculous. What’s going on with this?” She has stunned her prey, now she’s playing. “Huh? Huh?”

“Um, some-something I used to think-write about--”

“I don’t mean it can’t be a good story, but...a bit over the top?” I minimize the window too late. “What is it?” She asks me directly. Did I want to be caught?

“Just stories of my youth that somehow survived, I guess.”

“So this isn’t a switcheroo for Brent, right?”

“No.”

“So why the mysterious initials? Are they celebrities? Could they sue you for slander?”

“No.” I’ve stopped looking at her; I feel my cheeks get hot.

“Aren’t the initials a bit confusing, or reductive, or silly?” Her long fingers like claws grasp my knee for an instant.

“Probably,” is my answer, “I was a different person back then,” I can say this without thinking because it’s cliché.

“That’s cliché. What does that even mean anyway?” I imagine her long graceful body, her leap through the air, her teeth sinking into vulnerable places.

“It means I didn’t want to admit anything and I didn’t want to remember and when you write things down they’re more real than you, than your life.” I want her to go away and I want her to wrap herself tightly around me. If she is a lioness I am a poodle.

“Overdramatic.” She searches my blank computer screen and then me with those stealthy eyes. “Then why write things at all if it’s such a big deal?”

The phone vibrates under my leg again. The world *love* runs through my brains and I can’t get it out. What does it refer to here? ... I could love this cat-like woman (I can’t remember her name); I could sacrifice Brent on her altar, lay down and roll over next to her, start over as her devotee. Her elegance and strength would inspire me; make me love.

“So that you’ll come over here and give me a hard time about it,” I try. She gives me a half smile. Her yellow hair falls over her shoulder and brushes mine. I imagine her body hot, her torso a radiator or stove, pressing my palm against her stomach. So that someone will read it and understand something. So that I might find something. So that Eva might know. So that... “Because it’s a big deal.” I close my computer and put it on the table. Writing does nothing really and she’s only read a fragment, a fraction, that will fade in her mind. Ok.

She sighs and swings her neck. The phone vibrates-

“Who’s that?”

“What?” Might as well play dumb.

“Your phone vibrating. I can feel it through the couch.”

I start to reach for my phone but she spies my hand's trajectory and reaches across my lap to grab it. She flips it open to look, still half across my lap, only slowly straightening up.

"Two phone calls, three text messages from 'B'...you have a thing for letters."

"I'm a writer—letters help with that."

"Clever. So, is Brent jealous or needy?"

I cover her hands for a moment in taking my phone back. Brent is just as beautiful and boring as a modern day Prince Charming should be. I don't know what to say to him anymore. He's always there.

"Brent is fine."

Maybe I'll travel, go back to Hawaii where I went with Mom and Dad when Eva was at camp, maybe I'll go to visit Eva. Surprise! But my lively lioness drapes her legs across my lap and Brent will be outside soon ready to pick me up because he doesn't want me to walk alone in the dark.

"So what happened with your initial people? With C? With J?"

"I don't know. I'm figuring it out," She rolls her eyes. The moment is irresistible. "C stopped calling after a few months and J vanished. I couldn't touch J's love and C needed love I didn't understand. And now I'm here sitting with you," Done. I bat my eyelashes at her, she laughs and my phone rings again.

Why can't I hide here and amuse myself? Libraries are safe and sound and I can write and rewrite and read and re-think and play like I want. Who cares? I knew nothing about planning a funeral. I knew nothing about death, there's nothing I can do. When I



climb the stairs and leave the library there are plans and questions and family and the aftermath, justified anger at Eva, confused anger at Brent, and a contact in my phone that says “Mom” that won’t connect to anyone. I dig myself into my chair and cover my lap with books and notebooks and computer.

Why can’t I hide here and amuse myself? Play like I want?

### **November/Nightmares and what’s next/Thanksgiving**

“This is the best Thanksgiving ever!” Aunt Abby cheerfully remarks. We all know what she means. No Eva. No Mom. But the food is good—no, it’s great. The food is spectacular and amazing and almost incredible. Food is all we talk about for four hours. Brent cooks and we host Aunt Abby, her boyfriend Rob, Aunt May, Uncle Troy and their kids, my pre-teen cousins. Other Aunts and Uncles and cousins have called and the apartment has been loud with people and cooking and phones. Brent hadn’t cooked a Thanksgiving dinner in years and insisted and planned for this meticulously. He is simple. Thanksgiving is simple. Lots of food and drink and no one remembers those who aren’t here, maybe because it feels like they’re here somewhere. Mom is finishing setting the table, Eva is curled up with a book in the corner. Maybe we take them for granted. Right? Or maybe we forget the details, forget most of them, those that aren’t present. This is our present, our reality. And everyone agrees: the food is good.

I know through the couple of letters that have not be lost or never written, that Eva is hungry, usually. She eats the same thing every day. But for Chanukah this year she wrote my Aunts asking them to send her latke mixes and oil. Frying potato latkes alone in the desert between the muezzin calls to prayer.

I dream strangely every night now. I dream of flying, or jumping, and vanishing. I wake up sometimes and press my barefoot against Brent's thigh and feel his warm, sleeping body, but can't stop imagining my dreams. They stay in me even when I wake. I don't wake Brent because he will ask me what's wrong. I don't know yet. No. I don't want to say yet.

My dreams have words and they talk to me. Even waking, walking around here at this party I can't help but remember my dreams. They say:

*I love watching thin women- how they move, what they wear*

*There was no way out- I couldn't help myself so ultimately didn't try. Sometimes I would revel in it watching a slender woman bounce across the street long pants making her appear almost skeletal, or across a restaurant the fantastically slim elbows of a young woman resting on a table, they were pointy and sharp.*

*There was that something eternally perfect about them that made me start to stare.*

*Fat women mesmerized me. I stared relentlessly at every inch. Me, the criminal, the thief. I stole glances, formed ideas. My soul was dirty and underground even if I was dancing in the brightness of a studio.*

## December/Finding/Parents' house

“So now you come to clean the closet,” my dead mother’s voice speaks in my head. I see her sitting on my old bed, me kneeling at the base of a mountain of stuff.

“Why are you doing this now?” her again. “God knows I asked you to do this every weekend of your life. But why now? Can’t give yourself a break.” I’m silent because I don’t talk to myself or dead people, especially when they’re being pushy.

Her again: “I know. I know. Always have to feel like you’re doing something. Like you’re in charge. Always have to be busy. Productive.” (If I was listening to my ipod would I still be hearing her?)

Her again: “You feel responsible. No one else would think to look inside these closets or remember they’re here. A 12-room house with too much space to hold too much stuff. You know that Daddy just about only used the bed, the armchair and the microwave. Too much to stuff crammed in here. Is it because I asked you to come and help me clean out these closets almost every week of your life that you’re here now with no asking. You don’t have to do this. But I know you. And you feel guilty.”

“No, I don’t”

“Ah, so you *can* talk to your mother.”

I bite my tongue in my old bedroom whose closet has turned into storage, like the closet in my sister’s bedroom, like the closet in the guest bedroom, like the attic and the basement. This is how people stored things before USBs and CDs, this is how people proved their existence, validated their lives. Boxes and boxes of memories that cease to have meaning when their owners die and their significance is never taught to their

successors. Or maybe it transcends the explicit retelling, the overt passing along and is inherited, like big ears and long toes. Excavating history I don't know if I'm capable of recognizing. Surrounded by shoeboxes ("Be careful with those old shoes Leah Marie, you're great aunt's jewelry is deep in the toe. Robbers don't think to look there! And your grandmother's jewelry is rolled up in her woolen socks in the pocket of her housecoat. But be careful! She used those pockets as ash-trays, you know. And everything smells like vinegar because I sprinkled vinegar everywhere. Bugs don't like vinegar. Neither do robbers. You have to be smart to run a household!").

Bigger boxes have bubble wrap stretching out, papers and frames and albums are stacked and smushed together, only sometimes labeled, and a scrapbook with no pictures or words, only a ribbon, some lace, and part of an apron, then hair and a drawing of a horse, oh, and something dark like blood or mud smeared across some pages. There are precarious towers of old books (that somehow never earned space on our bookshelves) covered in writing, in the margins, between the lines, cover to cover (*The Joy of Sex* was no exception); someone was a reader, a secret writer.

"It's OK," she gives permission. Or I do.

"I don't feel guilty. I feel curious."

"I told you my stories"

"But not all of them. Not enough times--"

"Leah, Leah, always worried about leaving something out--"

"There were stories I never told you." And she is silent because a figment of your imagination has to stop sometime. She disappears and I'm alone in the house. Dad gone, gone for a while. Eva gone. Mom gone. Me here. And notebooks of writing in her handwriting- something so mundane a couple of months ago now is the key to secrets she

never thought would carry so much. Journals of writing from the years before children, existence before my creation, when she was a different person. Why am I curious?

“You’re your mother’s daughter” She’s back and speaking in platitudes.

“And you’re not here,” I can’t help but say resentfully, futilely. But my figment takes pity on me.

“You know I loved you. I always loved you. I loved my daughters.”

“Yeah,” I say, looking helplessly at albums and notebooks.

“We all leave at some time,” she tries. I don’t look up, an especially fat album on my lap. “It’s what we leave behind,” she says. More obviousness, I’m exasperated at my imaginary mother’s unoriginality. But at least, sitting on the bed, she looks healthy, content, details for which I’m grateful.

“Keep looking,” she tells me. “Keep looking.” And it’s just me. Again.

The album on my lap dates six years before I was born, eight years after they were married. They traveled the country camping and biking, they climbed mountains and went sky diving. They were in love; they had extra-marital affairs. My mother’s non-kid-approved journals attest to that (making love in nearly every continental state park, sometimes with neighbor campers); and to her surprise at life consistently not turning out as she had imagined. So, they wanted children, tried for children, didn’t get children (right away). I knew this. I knew from my mother’s stories how much they tried and wanted. What I didn’t know is that they practiced, worked, explored possibilities. Suddenly before me there are pictures of them with children, little out-dated faces, smiling and serious and my parents there holding them. Some labels: orphanages in Oregon, Canada, Mexico. Pushing children on swing sets, holding them in laps, a

different child in almost every picture. Were they playing pretend? “What if”? What were my parents doing?

The little faces are complex mixtures of hope and pain and confusion, same as the big faces. Then, there are pictures of children at home. Mysteries and confusion. Cuddling in bed, reading stories, eating dinner, having a bottle. Documents and ripped out journal pages inside this album. They were foster parents. I’m suddenly furious. Angry that there were so many stories never told. So many things I didn’t know about them, my parents. And what happened to these little faces?

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me?” I’m talking out loud. “Why keep this?” Words stupidly hanging alone in the air. Not even a whiff of her, my mother, just me.

I don’t let myself stop until I dig out the album where I appear, one I’ve explored before, many times. It’s the picture of my first birthday—zero years old—me and Mom in the hospital bed. I wish we could say we’re glowing but we look drained and dirty and pained, the trauma of starting life. Dad must be taking the pictures; there are none of him and me until we’re at home. But there is my grandmother in this picture, my grandmother who’d be dead before I was two years old, holding me and smiling. The grandmother whose forty-year-old housecoat hangs above me with pockets full of cigarette ashes and heavy jewels. In this picture, her collapsing face is spread into a smile, an intricate network of wrinkles and lines that make her eyes slits and her lips look twisted but she’s happy, not looking at the camera, but down at me. She had a heart attack over breakfast, eggs, bacon, coffee and cigarettes, dead alone in her kitchen while we were driving to Canada. Vacation.

Oh, my parents were great travelers, they just never left the continent (“Why leave land? If I was meant to go to Europe the ocean would be a lot smaller,”), the trip to Hawaii for their big anniversary was the once in a lifetime exception.

“They’re always exceptions,” her again.

I used to ask a lot of questions. But a lot is never enough. I’m fuming over the secrets, the things I never knew, the things I could have known. I want to scream but don’t, anxious of how my voice would echo and bang against the empty walls, ceilings, silent house.

“Leah Marie, don’t give me that face. How much do we ever really know?”

I can’t stand this much longer now, surrounded by clues that my mother had sides of her that escaped me completely. That I’ll never know. But then, how much of me won’t she know? How much didn’t she know? What if I had told her this, all of this? My heart changes from pounding loudly to fluttering in my chest. It hurts or I think it does.

She is not affected by my anger anymore and speaks again from the bed, watching me weep over boxes and pictures, trying to understand.

“Give yourself some credit. And don’t forget to put that album back where you found it.”

“What happened to those children? All those years? Why didn’t you adopt?” I ask. And she shrugs, unable to answer what I don’t know. My back heaves up and down and I make myself straighten up, catch my breath.

“Kept moving,” she says enigmatically, quietly. “Kept moving,” she doesn’t know. This is filler.

I want to ask why she didn’t leave- all those indiscretions, all those arguments, they were profoundly different people, Mom and Dad. Except in pictures where they are

smiling, in love, touching, except in journals that recount places, positions, climaxes, writing about sex in ways I never learned how to. In these pictures and journals they have everything, are a fairytale. Mom never writes about their separations, their other lovers, other lives, only about love, sex (could have been Danielle Steele, what a shame). (So if that is all that is left behind, is that all that ever existed/ever mattered?)

But *if* sex expresses love (a funny way to put it, I always thought, like an interpretive dance can express love, a construction paper heart can express love) her journals can be long studies of physical love, an analysis of the human body in motion, nerves and muscles and sensations. It communicates the impression of clinging to someone, wrapping around someone, possessing someone. I can't even paraphrase her. But still, why record this? Why etch these memories in stone, or yellowing notebook paper, making this what a significant part of what she leaves behind?

"Why me?" I ask starting to get tired of this game.

"Keep moving," she says. "Keep looking," her again.

Six years since Dad died. Heart attack. He was driving. No one was hurt but him, but us. But we never talked about it. We only talked about Mom, who screamed that she couldn't go on, wouldn't. She screamed and tore her hair and wouldn't eat, wouldn't sleep. Eva and I gave up on remembering Dad and tried only to make Mom remember us, come back to us. Dad was lost suddenly, yes, but also very completely. Mom hangs above us, I know, connects us, Eva and me. Because now, we're all that's left.



## January/Day dreaming/In the park

Last night I woke up and pressed my feet against Brent. He never stirred. I stayed like that for most of the night, watching the colors of the sky between the blinds shift and change. I was dreaming when I was asleep and it didn't stop when I woke up, only became clearer, louder. In the park it is bright and cold and I couldn't be farther from sleep, but here it is anyway, bright and clear and loud. It started out as images. And then the story got louder. I don't like it. But I write it. And probably will write it more. Brent is at work. Asked me to meet him at the restaurant. But I am busy.

My dream from last night making its way into today:

*Usually, I want to be little, tiny, but sometimes not.*

*Then, I want to be huge- enormous enough to scare people away- intimidating, powerful, safe and alone.*

*I can picture myself gigantic, grotesque, getting lost in my own massiveness.*

*Other people can't think like this.*

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*No body recovered. So no one found guilty. Except for our own special guilt rising and falling in quiet moments and bouts of screaming. I was always left out. No one screamed or whispered to me about this.*

*So I kept quiet.*

*I vanished like my sister if not with her because no one knew how to deal with me. No one wanted be close to that. As if what happened to our family was something*

*contagious. We were to be feared, pitied and avoided. Or, in a situation where we couldn't be avoided or tastefully ignored, then the overt niceness, the huge smiles and loud niceties they couldn't wait to dispense with. Our quite little warped family made them uncomfortable, inviting unwelcome reminders of what the world was like, what could/might/would befall any of them.*

*People looked through me so I looked at people and saw their ugliness when they didn't know and their beauty when they were oblivious and all the little things that made them naked and vulnerable and helpless and... all the little things I watched and held in my head.*

*So I kept quiet, or did.*

*But paper doesn't make a sound. It's dead already, disposable.*

## **February/Retreat/The corner**

Moving out. The apartment looks like I had never been a part of it. Brent helps me down the stairs with the last of it. I enjoy acting like a child with him and asked him not to talk to me. He would make a good father; his patience is boundless.

The air is brutal outside but I pretend to see buds on the branches and envision spring. I look up at Brent and see his exhaustion and sadness. This may have worked out if I had stopped my nightmares. Every night next to him for the longest time I dreamt I

was pregnant and miscarrying, bloody. I dreamt of Brent leaving me, of falling, fighting, drowning, being paralyzed, of attacking and being attacked. How do I explain it? Every night for months there was nothing but nightmares.

We stand on the sidewalk in silence. Brent has one bag slung over his shoulder and I have my largest purse stuffed and unbelievably heavy on my shoulder. All the rest is already over at my new apartment, my place.

I surprise myself. Instead of telling stories in my head I speak out loud, to Brent:

“I’ve been working on something... I’ve been writing something besides the poems and the novel, or compiling, I guess. It’s a collection of a lot of scenes or memories, or accounts. I thought I would give them to Eva when she was here, for the funeral, you know? But there wasn’t time and there was just too much. It would have been meaningless. And with you—if I asked you to read it sometime, would you read it?”

I’d never asked anyone this. Had I ever sounded so desperately silly?

The wind whips around us and my legs shake. I’m in my gym shorts and a sweatshirt since I half expected to simply jump into a cab. I don’t know how to react to Brent’s sadness and I feel, as I usually do with him, like a baby with nothing real to contribute. He gets tearful and there is that fearful ache in my gut like when you are very little and you see an adult cry. I look away to a scrawny tree barely taller than I am and try to will blossoms onto its pitifully bare branches.

“Yes” he says.

This has become harder than I usually let anything become. I know he’s not the reason I have nightmares, he’s not destructive and deceitful and drowning in unspoken

dialogue. I am. I used to believe he could make me different, help me forget, save me. I possessed zealous faith in him for a while, succumbed to the peace of his presence and fulfillment of his embrace. But he wouldn't save me unconditionally. He wanted to know, asked me questions, wanted me to strip so he could discover, he wanted the as yet unchanged me. I crept away from him, my apostasy a slow slide down until I could completely deny him. If anyone could pull me up or out it's Brent. If I'd let him.

“Are you sure you want to go?” he asks and I look past him at the street, scanning for cabs. I know he has more to say and more questions to ask but I won't have to hear them anymore. My purse is heavy on my right shoulder and I wonder why he put up with me, why he still wants me when I'm ready to be someone new with someone else.

I'm ready for spring and possibility and suddenly, overwhelmingly, I tell him, “I hate you.”

I rub my frozen legs together and put my hand up to hail a taxi.

## **March/I almost sent this**

Sister Dear,

I made the arrangements, I arranged, I did everything I needed to.

Your last letter arrived biting and harsh and dirty albeit about a month after being composed. So who knows what you're thinking right now or what I will be thinking by the time you get this.

Currently, I'm thinking that you know very little about real life and family and relationships—that you have little room to tell, suggest, or posit anything, let alone criticize or nitpick. If you would like to supervise or take care of things, you can make an expedition to this hemisphere and take some action. But while I am the only surviving daughter on this continent, I'll keep taking care of things.

I'm fine.

How is Africa? How is the well? How is the research?

Time flies without you. But then, time flies.

To answer your assumptions, I left Brent some time ago. Not long after you met him at the funeral. He wanted kids, quickly, I couldn't, wanted to finish my dissertation. You saw it coming. Or, your cynical perspective won a lucky break. We tried to be friends, we sometimes still are. Not everyone runs. Sooner or later you have to learn how to exist with people.

I've moved to be closer to work. I'm teaching this year with my own office (incredible) thanks to publishing my thoroughly revised thesis on the redemptive power of sleep in major existential works. You would have liked it. I worked hard.

I slept with a coworker. We started talking in a bar after work about death rituals in early earth centered religions (both religion minors in undergrad—funny to think—too, too many years ago). It was sublime in my tiny apartment; first lay since Brent. (And Brent was older, you must have noted, must have thought "old", I'm sure.) This co-worker, though, was young, strong and shameless. I thought, 'thank goodness I don't have roommates!' And then visiting his place, meeting his many roommates, and did I mention he was also a bartender? (A brooding poet when not in the bedroom) witnessing his life...It was a short stay. All of it didn't last too, too long. But we're friends, of a sort.

All of this is to let you know a little about who your sister is. We're all that's left.

My apartment looks out onto another apartment, but if you turn your head enough and stand in the corner, you can see the park, the water. Who knew? A breath of nature whispering behind every edifice. Your artwork

hangs on the wall. Your photograph of the women dancing and the drums from your first trip to that village with the gate, the dance that got you into so much trouble, the red tapestry, the masks. Your letters, with parts torn or burnt or muddy, scattered across time lay pressed inside my home desk drawer.

I'd tell some of your stories to Brent as he cooked us vegetarian lasagna. Stories I'd invented or gleaned from you, your letters, or retold through Mom. So that I might figure out your life or my thoughts through the telling and retelling. I tell my students to articulate their ideas, to try telling a friend what their thesis means: "Explain it as if you are explaining it to a young child. Anticipate questions. And you will discover what it is you really meant to say, what you really want to write about, your truth."

Over bottles of wine, going over and over stories, evaluating Brent's reaction, my thoughts reflected through his eyes. It's a web to untangle, a maze that I was fighting through wondering what's the prize?

Mom talked them out, too, your stories, stories of you. Especially when we were all waiting, waiting for you to come back. Without Mom, I'm the only one to tell your stories now.

I don't know who you are right now and I don't pretend to though you cling constantly to my apartment and my thoughts. You won't leave. I can't get you out: When I try taking down the tapestry I get cold, when I remove the masks I get lonely. I imagine the places you invoke in your letters, the events you share, whenever I walk through the city. The city you can't stand to stay in.

~~Your~~ Our ability to push people away or rip ourselves from them is monumental, the stuff of legends. It's addictive, you know, because we're in control, we've dominated the situation, right? But where does that leave us...

I've begun the novel again, still untitled, but I fictionalize the sister character enough that no one could suppose...

Where were we?

There is the picture of us from my college graduation on my bookcase. I'm in the robe, you're in grey. We're both unusually tanned. We're smiling, unusually. It's just us within the frame, without family or significant others. We were new and ignorant in the world. You were about to leave the



country. I was about to leave Manhattan. I don't forget. We talked together a little bit that night. It was nice. Is that how you remember it?

~~I'm hesitant to ask.~~

Is there anyone significant there with you? You would never tell me. But, is there someone you tell stories to, perhaps? Someone who knows about me over there? Someone who makes any difference to you?

~~You'll never tell. I'll imagine.~~

There was a picture of us at the funeral I came across. Just us, no family. You almost wouldn't suspect why we were together. We're both tan for some reason and smiling. Just us. We seem to be caught by surprise by the camera. (I can't remember who took the picture, can you?) It's almost candid but too perfect. We look decidedly more mature- not the children of the gathering anymore. We're in between. The picture caught us friendly, talking. This was before I found out when you were leaving. Before the chaos in my apartment we hid so neatly. ~~How could you?~~

I thought about framing it. It didn't seem appropriate. I enclosed a copy of it for you. In the picture, you look like Mom.

This semester is hectic, of course, already, as usual. I am writing again, only very late at night after the headache of grading papers is over. Have little time to think about the last few months. Do you? Me in the city that never sleeps versus you, in a village run by an ancient sense of time. I try to control my anger, my revulsion when I remember you, sometimes. It seethes now even on the page, thinking of the last few months of mom...

It went by quickly, I think. Flew right by. But those first days after we knew, those few minutes, seemed to stretch forever. Sometimes I find those minutes stretching into today. Sometimes I realize that they'll stretch and spread forever. Do you remember? You missed most of it, made it home for the finale, the encore, missed all the production, all the preparation. Your decision.

~~But I'm not blaming, or trying not to. I don't want to blame. Where were you then? What project, what village held you?~~

~~How can I talk to you? How can I think of you without feeling sick, without feeling like I want to hurt you or someone or something.~~

~~I'm not blaming. I can't. It's too much work now. There's too much else I want.~~

Brent was good- you saw some of it. He had dealt with this before. He was serene, peaceful. He was calm even when I wanted to kill you. He breathed quietness into me somehow so that I could talk to you at the funeral, so that oddly, we look like we're old friends, the best of sisters, catching up with good stories in that confusing little picture. He'd dealt with the deaths of his parents, and his brother. You've seen death all over the world; I was the only beginner.

Brent's younger brother went in a car accident quick and fatal. You never saw, but Brent had his brother's name and dates tattooed on his arm. Birth and death dates like on a grave separated by a blank, a dash, for the life that happened in between. Well, the more I considered it, the more silly I thought it was, and then strange.

On his arm he had a cross tattooed under the name and wore a cross around his neck, small, inconspicuous (did you notice it?). From strange, my judgment sped to fascinating, then frightening. Making love, with him on top, the cross bouncing and racing across my chest, pushing him back, on the

bottom, so that one of my hands covered the cross on his arm and the other the one around his neck, closing my eyes to shut it out, was too much. I left him very soon after the funeral. He was an older, silly man whom I couldn't understand. The walking grave marker.

He wanted more than I wanted to give him.

You've written about funerals you've seen—malnourished babies and wounded women, suffering men. You've seen animals slaughtered for rituals, all attention on the blood pouring out. Did you already know what this would look like? Did you guess what it would feel like? How are we sure of our existence when the body that made us is finished?

No more questions.

I questioned for a while how to continue and why exactly. Which also led Brent and me apart, or led me apart from Brent. He was too simple and everything was too simple to him: His brother and his parents were in heaven while the drunk driver who caused the accident was in hell and one day, vaguely, everyone would be in heaven again. That was that. At first, I thought it was cute. He truly believed this. He opened a restaurant. He talked about what he made there and who ate what. So inane and beautiful,

I stifled my giggles in the dark next to him. There were no questions, at first.

In the wild, doesn't the mother animal eat the baby that dies to recoup the loss? And everything goes on. And the surviving babies grow up and leave the mother and they never witness each other's deaths.

I'm teaching three classes this year and advising a handful of students. I hardly feel real, or qualified, but then, I feel my way along. I think about Brent and his insatiable need for children. I taunted him, tormented him, but wonder if I do really understand him, but am just not real or qualified enough yet. We still see each other sometimes, but he can't forgive me for things I've said and I can't forgive him for my thoughts.

I used to tell Mom these things. She would listen, and tell me her stories, her fairytales about love, how she found Dad, how they had us. I listened every time. I listened more than you.

Anyway, now there's Sam. He's my age but powerful, confident, proud, which makes him seem older, or greater somehow. He's quite the extrovert when he needs to be. No starving artist, deep profound soul here. He's

dynamic; he's exciting in ways I don't know how to be. He's someone who comes in after all the mistakes, after the almost-baby, after Mom so he knows nothing about that-- about the past. So he makes me new again. I was enjoying this freshness, this rebirth, when I got your last letter with nothing new in it.

I'm aware of old ties and past bitterness. I'm aware of what we were. But here's to recreation, reinvention. All this is to say that it takes too much energy to blame and question and resent. I don't know when or if you'll come back, but I don't hate you. I don't. And, I think about you every day. We were best friends once.

Is that how your remember it?

With love, Your sister. Leah.

### **April/Novel excerpt/Dream/And still untitled**

*Watching thin women is my favorite thing. I used to hate that it was my favorite thing. It seemed shameful. But when I accepted it as an obsession, my private fixation, it felt better. It's not like smoking or drugs. It's the angularity, the limbs I can encompass, encircle, possess.*

*Watching fat women, too, enralls me. The mass, the power, the substance that moves, seductively hidden and close. Oh yes, I've watched long.*

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*School had been tedious. I had fooled around with soccer and debate before joining the dance team. Mirrors and leotards everywhere, it was distractingly beautiful. A world full of girls playing at ballet, lifting legs and arms and then, the pirouette, it was dizzying.*

*Glances came first. I couldn't stare at friends and acquaintances in school like I could later at strangers. They were quick glances but enough. A fat teacher making her way down the hallway swaying from side to side like a ship in rough water, sweater and long skirt stretched and caught in places around her, shoes clacking, a storm—I wondered if she knew.*

*My dance teacher statuesque, mannequinesque, controlled and powerful; the space above her hips sunk in. That place my eyes couldn't avoid. I wondered if she knew how beautiful she was. Like the mannequins, her face was solid, immovable, like her perfect posse.*

*I wondered if she and the swaying teacher were happy, and how much the world might think if they knew my thoughts. Ideas grew sometimes. Sometimes gripped in stagnant desire, I thought I must be sick.*

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*I must have been sick or addicted.*

*Frightened that others might notice, might hear the serious thoughts that pounded my silly head, in sorry dreams I was the witch they would burn.*

*I talked as little as possible. This made me a good choice for a few friends who would divulge everything. I learned how different I was. And I thought how small and limited and pointless these wonderful whispers were that I listened to, even as I reveled in my position of trust, of confidant. And oh the warmth of trust and closeness listening to the diverse passions of these friends I saw my falseness. Then I grew suspicious that they were becoming suspicious of me. I stopped talking as much as possible without causing alarm, raising concerns.*

*Grades suffered. So what? I was safe for a while as long as I was undiscovered. I was always able to suffer privately. This is when I danced a lot, when the space above my dance teacher's hips haunted me so that I almost sobbed recalling it again and again in distressing detail in pre-algebra. It never left me alone. Finally there would be no more hiding and someone would notice my problem, my gross worries. In self imposed isolation I ached for everything.*

*To cut off my body would be best, but then the mind is left. So this will be my repository. If I've never written or spoken coherently this is my confession that might make me free.*

*I'll uncover what I buried until nothing is unexposed, ripped open like ripping the old clothes we would make into dress up costumes to play princesses and capture*



*lightening bugs in jars and then bury them in sand. Me and my sister, very young, when we were still hand in hand. I can feel it.*

*This should be no one's story.*

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*Thin women are either oblivious or know completely that they are thin and beautiful. Fat women know too much.*

*I remember especially one woman lingering in a flower shop, the bones below her collarbone, the front of the rib cage, showed above her tank top. She was older but wore the high heels and clothing of my peers at the end of their teens. She was effortless, exquisite. I wanted to be that little, petite, neat. I wanted people to look at me and think I was tiny- to disappear if I could. I wondered what that woman wanted, imagined talking to her for hours, giving her my secrets, my life, if she was like me, but I passed by gently, looking away just before she felt my stare.*

*There was a large woman that day in the flower shop who glanced at the thin woman. I caught this and smiled to myself before I felt sorry. The large woman carried many different bouquets in her arms, a warm pillar of flowers over faded blue jeans. She moved carefully, painfully self-consciously among the colorful rows and shelves. She passed me with her flowers apologizing softly, blushing.*

*I bought white roses for my mother just in time and left.*

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*I needed to leave after high school. Most people understood. I graduated, luckily. And headed to a conservatory for a dance program, a good, very good conservatory. Yes, I was lucky.*

*My parents weren't happy although they pretended to be. They hadn't been happy in years. But I was touched by how much they made believe for me.*

*It was only two hours away. I thought they would be ok, believed it would make me ok. I told myself we were all ready. It was alright.*

*Beyond the aesthetics of leotards, mirrors, and bodies together, I did learn to love ballet. I won moments of focus away from thighs and necks and moving torsos escaping into the music and the steps. There were dreams of finding myself in a field of long grasses. (Such silly, sorry dreams.) There were two of me: One said to the other, 'Let me dance and I'll be happy I'll take all the sadness out.' And then one of me danced. Like Nureyev leaping impossibly higher and longer away from the world. It felt like joy, in my dream. And the other faded away with smiles. Dreams so silly...*

*The discipline, the control suited me then. The messiness of speaking was left outside and even outside the girls usually talked about ballet or dance, at least the serious ones. There seemed to be an obsession I might share. This was a culture of comparisons, of masochism, of tangled beauty and love or hate. And I got good. Really. Very, very good.*

*After beginning pointe, I started partnering, which meant touch. I knew it was coming. I had studied Sleeping Beauty, Romeo and Juliet, Giselle, had observed older*

*young women at the studios, I was familiar with lifts, the pas-de-deux. Yet, the actuality of having a boy's hands on me felt insulting, degrading, embarrassing. The pressure of big hands around my waist, my legs, arms, back- I remember every place he had to touch- made me livid. I turned everything into my steps. My ballet was ferocious, my dance the dance of a lion who hadn't eaten in days. And people watched. Not the suspicious watching of life and school, but something in my control, like a battle I always won. They watched when and what I wanted them to. I was really very, very good.*

*In performance I'm washed in lights, different colors, bright and hot. My audience is covered in darkness, but my lights threaten their darkness so that there appears the silhouettes of people watching: tops of heads and some shoulders directed toward me, some wet and shining eyes studying me. Because I move defensively, defending my territory of the stage, they see what I want them to see. It's the only place I've ever wanted to be.*

*Yes, I got very good and I didn't stop. Every day taught me to move differently, stronger, higher, leaping out of myself. When I got good, people wanted to be close. Close to me. I talked with girls about ballet. I liked their nervous giggles. And I started to stare without shame: lips, and chins and collarbones, the curve of the shoulders down to the back: everyone lusciously different. Thin women and fat women watched me dance, watched me practice, watched me move, and wanted to talk to me. Admire me. Close in on me.*

*Boys did, too. There was one I deceived reluctantly but I never let him touch, thinking he would be a good excuse, keep the other ones away. And he was possessive, in theory, but respectful. Perhaps he was fearful, too. He suggested the conservatory. He*

*planted the possibility of ballet exclusively, completely away from home. I let him follow and talk to me. We never held hands. When I thought he was getting suspicious of me, curious, I auditioned. Why not?*

*In many ways this thing of mine was growing.*

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*When I passed all the auditions and was offered a slot in the small incoming class my first thought was of telling my dance instructor and of her elation. She might hug me. I swore that before I left I would press my hand in the space above her hipbones, the place that had taunted me for so long.*

*I told my parents quietly. They stretched their faces into smiles. I wondered if they were surprised at all. I started packing months in advance.*

*Graduation was difficult, hearing her name, the montage. It was unnecessary. They changed nothing from two years before when she would have graduated. Was that all for my benefit? I should have walked out. It started the dialogue again, everything again, my parents' exhaustion filling the auditorium. No one really considers them; they only watch the show. Ridiculous. I sat fuming, figuring out how many more days until my move.*

*The next day my quietly composed dance instructor heard the news. She was surprised enough to jump and scream which shocked me. I was caught off guard, off balance. She hugged me briefly and hard, my cheek against the muscle of her sculpted*

*shoulder. This was the first time she had hugged me, the first time in a long time I was pulled that close. I cried. For the first time in a long time. I did. My skin didn't shatter at the touch, but my soul did. I cried. It had been so long. She told me how proud and excited and how much work and how lucky, how much prestige. I cried and knew absolutely that I would give in once I was away at school.*

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*School was paradise. No one knew anything about me. We looked each other over with breathless excitement that first week of cheery orientation, the top two percent who made it. No past, no responsibility yet, we were children, incredulous. My suitemates embraced me, staring at me as I did them, large eyes sparkling. We unpacked our dance wardrobes comparing shoes and leggings. We talked in circles in hall meetings.*

*I lasted until midnight of the sixth day.*

*A girl with long straight back hair, silly and small and lovely, caught me staring and smiled. Took my hand and blew on my neck and nuzzled her nose there. We were in the park near school. It was late afternoon. I held my breath not knowing what I might do. She rested her head on my shoulder for a second and yawned before we walked back and I squeezed her hand.*

*Later, in her single room I kissed her ribs one by one from top to bottom, licked them, would have bitten them. Demons shrieked inside my throat, I pressed my mouth against her tensed skin and muffled them.*

*It was late summer, away from home. Everything was permissible. And women were easy.*

*After the first I had no trouble, no shame, no guilt. I watched them on the street, in the parks, the clubs, the bars. I drew their attention, learned how to use my body in drawing them toward me like I learned to use my body in performing ballet, or later in bed on top of them discovering every line, or every hill. I wanted to be little, perfect, minute, nothing. Or large, inescapable and imposing. It was pleasing to possess them. Circling their wrists their ankles, so tiny I could snap them, or larger women gripping, digging in flesh. I needed more and more.*

*First class came after more than a week of unbounded orientation and everyone appeared bursting with enthusiasm in the studio of our dreams, ready to work, to see how we measured up, to begin our brilliant futures.*

*I was dizzy again, too much fulfilled. Like pulling myself out of a coma. Barre was painful as it never had been. The porte-de-bras made me choke. My hips cracked with each grande battement. My toes locked with the frappes, my head jerked and snapped through the tombe. I imagined parts of me flying off as I moved them. I worried I would not come back down when we started jumps. I was weightless and sick though fallen. Lines of blood ran down my pink tights in dreams throughout my first semester. I hadn't dreamt in blood for years.*

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*Quickly, they put me on probation. I was given warnings. I was no good. They wanted me to see people- counselors and such. I don't do that. I don't talk like this out loud. This, here, is all mine.*

*My mind shrieked all day long, only contact quieted it sometimes, only skin and lips and hair. I got bad. I felt it, deliciously even in my gut. My mind shrieked all day long so I couldn't hear the music, the counts, the instructors. Lost in the studio, I couldn't spot. I turned and saw nothing.*

*When I was no good, my first girl, the lovely one with long straight black hair came to me. She tried to talk to me, figure me out, get to know me. I pushed her away, she came back, I pushed her out the door, she came back, I pushed her against the wall and stopped talking.*

*I suppose she could have been my friend or girlfriend or whatever some people call it, if I was like that, if I was that good. She seemed interested and nice, sweet and silly, usually smiling. She shouldn't have liked me.*

*I might have opened, shared myself and found something with her. We might be lying together, laughing right now. It's ludicrous, lugubrious, not worth imagining. I never opened before but I might have. I never thought of it. Why didn't that cross my mind when I pushed her and used my hands frantically everywhere, forcing her back and grabbing? I didn't think of possibility or love when she screamed. I'd like to say I thought of nothing, just blankness, a blameless blackout. Not quite. I believe I wanted something.*

*It was too much. My fingernails tore her and she screamed.*

*None of this was fair.*

*Her eyes wide with terror then scrunched tight, then wide again, then scrunched and so on.*

*No one deserved all this.*

*People were banging on the door yelling questions. Had I gotten away all along when I wanted to be caught? Pushing and pulling my lungs ached when I fell back, done. I wanted to be caught and taken away as long as they wouldn't touch me.*

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*Today I spent all day in the park, watching women thinking sympathetic thoughts in the morning then nasty thoughts in the afternoon.*

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*I was asked to leave. And I did. I felt sorry for my parents. But that wasn't me that did that, really. I haven't been me since ten or so. I've been everybody else, watching and listening. The thinking mannequin?*

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*Burying fireflies isn't all we used to do. There were fashion shows and restaurants and fairy tale castles in our backyard. There were bizarre games like nothing else, unique to us, that I can't quite remember, not all the details, so they're lost. There was a dog next door we could play with until our dad's whistle when we'd run in for dinner.*



*When I sprained my ankle she pulled me around on our toy blue wagon. She was going to teach me make up. We didn't fight too much. In junior high school she started to run track, cross country, we would race. We both started to feel competitive, growing up.*

*And we were mostly normal. Dad worked, mom stayed home, lunch was a Disney movie, a peanut butter sandwich and jello. We were as normal as our neighbors, our classmates.*

## **July/Just thinking/In bed, a moment of stillness**

Summer. Everyone's on vacation. Eva is visiting Timbuktu. Sam is visiting Miami, or some old college friends now living in Miami. I stopped writing because it leads me in circles and revisits the past that has to be the past for a reason and I haven't learned how to write the future yet.

So I read and organize the apartment and once in a while creep upstate to organize the closets, sift through the leftovers of a life, or many lives overlapping, the remains. On my own, I tip toe upstairs and sit with undecipherable trinkets and traces and breathe in dust and dead things like dried flower petals discolored and pressed between aging sheets of paper. Eva flings herself toward the distant unknown and I crawl toward musty closets. She forges trails but I find traces.

Sam doesn't know or realize this. Mr. Important is gone most weekends on business trips or friendly engagements, making himself the big power player. Good for him. I close my eyes when he kisses me good-bye and only half listen to his midnight phone calls informing me on the big events of the day. He didn't know Mom or Eva, or Dad, won't know Brent who I find myself coming back to in my dreams more and more, one I can't turn away from. But Sam is energetic, exciting even in his voice over the phone. I don't have to listen to the string of words, just that confident voice. Sam also makes- I don't have to listen to his part because he never asks for mine. He's fine just talking and, I suppose, trusting that I'm listening somewhere else.

Mostly, I play the part of Adoring Girl #1. Listening to his stories of wheeling and dealing, his eyes light up and his voice rises and he licks his lips in telling them. When we meet sometimes after work, or after his work, very late. I wait for him. And he strides through the door, taking up as much space as he can. Chin up, shoulders high and back. His demeanor changes when he sees me waiting for him. I don't know if he stops trying or if he simply relaxes, nonchalant. Still in his suit but with collar loosened and slouching powerfully he gestures grandly for me. There is always a kind of glint in his eyes, a cool sparkle that can fix itself on me for only a moment, and then it's scanning the room for what's next. Even in nonchalant mode, he sits and moves with a kind of tension, eager to grasp at something, do something. After too much of this I can almost picture him panting. A new pit bull, reveling in (my) attention. Though I don't know if he wants to be petted or feared or loved. (Sam doesn't want marriage or babies as far as I can tell, but most of all, he doesn't care about what I want. For now, at least, that's fine. A mindless romp can be fun, just what the doctor ordered, I guess. I can only imagine how he must think of me. How long can he know nothing about me?) What doesn't he tell me?

Now, it's summer and I'm vacationing in bed alone but it's ok. I'm getting used to space. Sam works and travels and visits Miami now.

Almost five months since we met, or met again. We were friends in college, off and on, for a while. He knew me before John and Carlos and the pregnancy. So when he called to invite me to friend's going away party, I accepted as the girl of three years ago, the girl he knew. We'd kept in touch once in a while, through those intervening years via email and text, the technological ways of keeping in touch without effort.

So I went to this party. It was for an old college friend of his who was an acquaintance of mine, moving to London for a job. Sam met me at the restaurant. He was different than how I'd remembered. He seemed taller this time, so self-assured, confident. He immediately put his hands on me, my arm, my back. I bristled. And he moved away, I think he liked a challenge, a mission. We got drinks and he called me the next night, and the next. And we remembered some good times of college, of parties, how we met for the first time on the steps, how we walked from Morningside Heights to Chinatown one day, got lost, found the village, and talked about the future over beer and hookah in a bar the size of my bedroom. We had been close before for a very brief time. We reclaimed, and built on memories we uncovered and made up, elaborated.

He gave me a bracelet with pink sapphires after four months partly for our four-month anniversary, partly because he had stood me up at a bar. Usually late, because of work, because of friends, because of something, one day he just forgot. Not that he admitted it, but I knew. We don't talk about the past that doesn't involve what we knew about each other in college.

But I can stretch out in bed now. Sam is in Miami and he swears I'm the only one for him, that we were meant for each other since we found each other after so long. I

don't know how he's changed since I met him on the steps outside the library, under the alma mater. He doesn't know how I've changed either. Lying in bed alone with a beautiful bracelet on my wrist, perhaps that's for the best? An opportunity? A new chance? He doesn't ask about the years or events or people in between.

I only ask questions of myself when I'm exploring...

At Mom and Dad's house I can almost relax near the closets alone, these pseudo caves, adventuring through time if not through space. But there is still a knot, deep down, inside no matter what. Because no matter what, I can only be guessing, scanning, interpreting.

In bed near dawn, I wait for the bracelet to catch the light, to sparkle, to be beautiful.

## **July/Revelations/Reading**

I'm tired of nightmares and missing people. Sam is away on business again and I am celebrating the fourth of July with Angela on a picnic blanket in Central Park. We are here a few days early because that's the only time our schedules come together, and the park is not as crowded as it usually is on gorgeous summer afternoons. We are drinking wine out of plastic cups and eating huge slices of good pizza. The day smells nice.

Angela is about to leave for a trip to India because she always wanted to go there.

"Everyone is having adventures," I muse out loud.

“You don’t have to be jealous. I invited you to come along.”

Angela is dressed to sunbathe in shorts and a halter-top. I am wearing half the contents of a bottle of SPF 50 and a hat.

“Maybe I’ll show up and surprise you. We’ll take a dip in the Ganges and find enlightenment together,” I try.

“I’m sure it’s that easy.”

“You never know. They may give you a checklist when you land- things to do to achieve Nirvana.” We finish our pizzas and lay down in the sunshine. I’m in awe of her trip and everything happening so quickly. We’re quiet for a long time and I watch all of the other people in the world throwing Frisbees and running after children and couples tangled with each other lying under the biggest trees in the city. I think about things I could say out loud.

“I’m tired of nightmares and missing people.”

Angela takes a moment, turns her head towards me. Slowly removes her sunglasses. Slowly turns over to her stomach, stares at me. She is my dramatic goddess about to shower me with words of wisdom.

“Then do something about it.” She replaces her sunglasses and adjusts her top. I’m ready to worship at her altar if she can tell me more.

“Tell me more”.

“Get up and do something.”

“Tell me more specifically.”

“Figure out what you want and get it.”

“Elaborate.”

“Calm down. I don’t know.”

“Don’t try to write a self-help book. It would fall short.”

“You write. I’ll chant.” We swat away flies and look up into the bright blue I can see between the fluffy white clouds above me. How many miles above me? How many miles away is Eva? Sam? My dream last night of guilt I’ve never spoken.

“So what do you chant about?”

“Hmmm, the divinity, love, divine love, lots of stuff.”

“So that’s what you want then? Divine love?”

“Couldn’t hurt. I mean, yes.”

“That’s true.”

Silence for a second and I can feel her energy building. She’s about to reveal things to me. No sister, no mother, Angela and I dance around the obvious, she is who I share things with, or try.

“Why don’t you just write things down? Write to figure it out. Write into the future.”

“Into the future?”

“Into the future.”

OK. Something new. So I drink up with Ange, lie back in the hot grass and think about Sam and what comes quickly to mind is his absence, my indifference to it, his indifference toward so much. For now, I let the anger rising up in me sink backwards into the tickling grass and imagine Angela’s endless plane ride.

We don’t make it until sun set, but the shading of dusk is starting to form when we pack up and leave the park, walk down the street and leave.

When I get home I break into the warm stillness of an apartment that hasn't been breathed in for hours, I make myself a drink, the solid sound of the ice cubes dropping into the bottom of the glass shockingly loud. The batteries in my remote died a few months ago so I stopped watching television. The air conditioner kicking on and off is the loudest thing in my apartment, then the sound of ice that I swirl around in my glass, then my breathing, then... my heartbeat? I don't know. So I start to put my hand to my chest to check the rhythm and think of Mom, but I'm not paying attention and drop my glass. It falls straight down and shatters just between my feet, my toes wet with cold liquid, glass and ice shards. Now that was the loudest thing in my apartment. I hear Sam calling my phone, but he wouldn't appreciate this. Instead of picking it up I kneel down on my floor and trace my fingers through the mess. It's a pretty puddle. But I shake my head and start scooping it up, scrubbing and cleaning and when there's nothing left to do I sit down in the night, in my kitchen, and write into the future...

## **August/Confession**

She took off her jewelry. Small, violent sounds resonated as the pieces slammed into polished wood. It was deliberately slow, self conscious, like peeling off the band-aids of childhood: involved in the pain and the mystery.

The lights stayed off except for the bathroom light showing as a slant on the floor- a reverse shadow- and reflected in the bedroom mirror. It caught her eye and she turned toward it watching her image remove diamond earrings: left, then right, both

hands manipulating one ear at a time, slowly. Her thin necklace slipped from her thin neck, head bowed to unclasp the delicate thing, and then that big bracelet.

Her shoes lay where she had kicked them, sideways, in the corner by the door. Her skirt had fallen, once unzipped, not far from there. Her top hung off of her shoulders, stained, ruined. The damaged woman. She smiled. Yes, the evening was returning to her now.

Here, hours before, she had carefully dressed—posing, imagining, checking the address, packing a purse. She thought how Eva would ridicule her. Eva with the messy hair, the constantly sleep deprived new mommy eyes that don't lie, that only share one truthful story, her scrubbed face and flat shoes. Eva would throw her head back and laugh at the theatrics of it all.

The phone rang. It was getting late.

“Hello?”

“Happy anniversary old lady!”

“Sam! I'm busy getting dressed. What do you want?”

“Ah, my sixth sense strikes again. I knew I should call now. What stage of dressing are you in?”

“I'm trying to get ready”

“Uh-huh. Just wanted to let you know that I didn't forget and I think you'll like the place tonight.”

“Great.”

“I'll see you tonight, Babe. Don't forget to wear that perfume.”



“Yup. Yeah. See you later. Love you.”

They hung up.

She immediately felt like calling Eva but didn't. She scrolled through the phone. There was Angela, but in her time zone she'd be asleep or putting the kids to bed. Chris would be awake but was usually disgusting on the phone. What was Brent doing? She packed the cell in her purse and focused on eyeliner. The car would be downstairs soon. She wasn't even sure what she wanted to talk about. Something hid away inside of her.

It had rained earlier in the evening and she felt the used, grimy wetness of the pavement and dark puddles splashing against her bare legs as she stepped out of her building. She had hurried past the doorman who watched her closely, frowning. He was the older one, the one who seemingly disapproved of everything or, as she often imagined, of her in particular. Always stiff, with the corners of the mouth and eyes drooping, she would sometimes glance at his wedding ring, the plain gold band, and wonder about his wife, about something or someone that he might not disapprove of, someone he might smile at honestly, touch gently.

She had packed a small purse for the night; she wouldn't see this doorman later. On the mostly empty sidewalk a man walked into her needlessly and she clutched her purse more tightly when she felt his hand graze her waist. He mumbled something she tried not to hear. It made her sad at first, and then angry. She hurried into the dark waiting car.

The city rushed along mutely, distantly outside the rain specked windows and she settled back limply into the seat. Her black skirt disappeared into the black leather of the black car and the black night, it was almost sickening. She felt the weight of everything she wore and carried and for a moment succumbed to the exhaustion of getting ready to go out. Her eyes closed and her head tilted to the left. There had been some excitement and anticipation in the morning and over the last few days, in fact, a lot of desire and anxiety. But that had dried up hours ago and it all seemed exceedingly unimportant, unnecessary now. The wild thunderstorm during the day had dwindled to a sluggish, drizzly mist that persisted into the night.

The car jerked to a stop and her head hit the window hard.

“You ok back there, gorgeous?” rasped the man up front. The driver had smelled like smoke before, when she first entered the car, but now, when he talked he exuded an old, offensive stench that could become unbearable.

She chose not to answer but moved backwards in her seat sitting up straight and straining her eyes open. Cars were fighting to cross the city, packed onto streets where lines meant nothing. Through zig-zagging and halting progress she made herself grow alert while confined in the same space with this large man behind the wheel.

More and more, she grew aware of the driver’s smell and his eyes on her through the rear view mirror, completely unnecessary, inappropriate, she thought. And she let herself imagine things... He drives out of the way, someplace extra dark and quiet and kills her in various excruciating ways. She indulges in the aftermath: the small newspaper articles listing her name, her age, her marital status, her survivors- her sister, how the blood spills and dries and stains things and then seeps into the earth or is cleaned

up and forgotten... She allowed these thoughts. Though they were gruesome, they kept her awake. And there were also the images of her killing him very justifiably, for his staring, his odor, the doorman's frowning, the man's conscious collision with her on the street. It wouldn't be nice. It would be nice. But his smell! It was insulting and devastating. She cracked her window to let in some air and so the noise and the night might rescue her mind from the images of her thoughts.

They were almost there, waiting at a stoplight for crowds to pass. People scurried across the street, some covered in plastic, herds of buffalo unawares; they were the darkest objects in the twilight of the city illuminated by human designed lights. A few girls weaved in and out of the first row of cars some of which were over the grayish white lines of the crosswalk, ready to fly. They passed by the open window of the car talking loudly against the thunderous sounds of the street and movement in rain.

“So, what did he say? Wait. Wait for me. I can't walk in these shoes! Wait!”

“Oh! He said he liked the game too much. That's it.”

They moved like penguins identical in their black boots over tight jeans under short black tops. They waddled to the corner and stepped up onto the curb. It started to rain again, harder. People shook off the first heavy drops, surprised. Some tall boys yelled as they passed the open window.

“Where's this place at? Ninth?”

“Yeah, I promise the girls there are worth it, man. You'll see.”

The rain shot down harder and harder as she remembered how John had danced with her, used to hold her, breathe on her. She couldn't. Now was the time to control

these thoughts. She banished all memories when the car stopped a few feet away from the new restaurant on the east side. The heaviness began to creep over her again, but she heroically shook it off. She was there, well, almost there. Almost to Sam and this night. An anniversary.

The driver turned around in his seat to address her but she finished their transaction and leapt from the car with all of her energy and so quickly that she forgot her umbrella.

It was rather strange. She had predicted nervousness, giddiness. But now it was late. And she felt. Tired. She exhaled powerfully and held her arms around her hair protectively, running down and across the sidewalk. Feeling the rain splash against her made her feel messy and uncomfortably awake.

The candlelit calm inside clashed with the usual chaos and clamor of the world outside; her eyes and posture adjusted. Her secret self dropped deeper inside. A well-dressed man and woman stood seriously behind a prodigious podium opposite the large doors. She made herself stand up straight and scanned the large rooms more hopefully than she had in some time. It was trendy and cozy, a new establishment and popular the way only a thing new and untried can be. This was the mysterious newness that would promote this place for another month or so until the love affair ended and the clientele returned to their usual haunts, or begin a short lived new affair. But tonight, the tuned-in patrons were ready to enjoy their night, to have a good time, to enjoy this gem and to feel special before the secret got out and it became something less. Well put-together couples lingered over tall glasses linking fingertips and leaning towards each other. The small

fires on each table were mirrored in the glasses, sparkled off the jewelry, danced in the eyes. It was intimidating and tedious. There was nothing else to do.

“You said Sam? No. It seems you are the first one here and you’re twenty minutes late. We could only hold your table for ten minutes. We’re really very busy. Hm, you can have a seat at the bar and we’ll put your name on a list if you like. It may be a while.” The hostess eyed her carefully and completely from head to toe before leading her to the bar flinging dyed and styled hair all the way.

It was a tricky walk over towards the bar meandering through tables and around freestanding and ostentatious pieces of art. The place appeared larger than before, and full of people. The expansive walls seemed to be pushing and pulling at her and the other couples staring. It was the view from a fun house mirror and it grew maddening. Finally, they arrived. And fortunately, there was one fashionable, contemporary bar stool standing vacant.

As she was, before drinking, she felt precarious, as if the room might start reeling and throw her at any moment. But the hostess left and without a leader, she took her perch on the high stool. The bar was filling up. Men sat on either side of her talking loudly to their parties, all waiting for a table. Their elbows or backs unknowingly bumped her, intruded into her space. The place at the bar turned hard and cold. To keep from slipping off her stool she let herself start feeling things.

She thought of her sister. She felt seasick. There was Eva in her mind. Far away and inside her. And there were possibilities that coalesced and turned into a bridge or a tunnel, or perhaps a ship on the ocean between them. So there was love and questions, confusions, but a kind of peace. For an instant. And there was a reason to feel.

After a moment, after a smile had played then flown across her face, finding her voice when the bartender approached and leaned over to her, she ordered a glass of pinot grigio and gripped it hungrily. The elbows and backs and loud male voices accompanying excited female voices changed her thoughts. The wine was good. The bartender was young. Yes, he was very young and he winked at her with darkly feminine eyelashes under helplessly rebellious hair. Thoughts strayed to the nice slipperiness of wine—its deep aroma of flowers or earth or something living and beautiful. She tasted it slowly, twirled the stem between cool fingers. She imagined spilling the wine, spilling it on the floor, the pleasure of throwing it in someone’s face, and then the fascination of pouring it over flesh, over the bartender’s skin, tight and lovely. The room quickly began to grow hot; she felt as if pillows, warm and soft, gradually surrounded her, might suffocate her. The elbows and backs of surrounding men intruded unconsciously so she breathed in and out deeply pushing out her arms and spreading her body, trying to claim as much space as possible. She could try calling him but there would be no answer. He answered calls on his time only.

She was enjoying the first sip of her second glass of wine when a man grabbed her around the waist.

“Hey baby,” that deep voice that tugged on her ear.

“Sam!” This was a sudden note of surprise tinged with antagonism—surprising, new.

Placing a large hand on each of her shoulders he drew her into him quickly, kissing her twice with heavy lips. He didn’t shave that morning. He grazed her face with

his. It felt like sand paper and hurt. His eyes closed when he kissed her but opened quickly and winked. He still looked good.

“Sorry I’m late...you know how work is now...” Smiling, smirking a little. He was trying to be jovial, trying for something... His eyes always busy as he talked. His eyes searched for someone, for their table and for their food and their night. “Where’s that fucking hostess?”

They were seated and drinking quickly. She stared at everything around him, restless. She watched the waiters hurry by, graceful, elegant, purposeful. Men and women, all young, all attractive in the sleek, healthy glowing kind of way. They all wore the same pressed clothes and all looked the same, ageless, genderless. They moved effortlessly, they were easy to watch.

She and Sam hadn’t spoken since they found their seats. She still daydreamed too much to look at him. It was easier and more entertaining. But she cleared her throat and focused her attention on the table, on him. It was exhausting.

“You look beautiful tonight, you know?” His eyes stayed on her, serious.

“Thank you. You look very handsome.” She glanced at him. She tried a smile. It was never this hard before.

They ordered food that they decided was magnificent, and dessert. They finished the decadent chocolate soufflé and sat in silence for a little while, the candle still flickering between them magnified in their wine glasses under their thoughts. It must have been very, very late, time for something to happen. Looking away, she tried to disguise a yawn.

The evening had been too much to be just another evening, how many more times could she--

“I have something for you.” He reached into his pocket.

She brushed back her hair.

He took out a small velvet box and smiled charmingly at her.

She fixed her eyes on him finally.

Like a mischievous boy, he placed the box on her plate and waited. His eyes crinkled; his lips curled up in an unexpected way.

She thought about going to the ladies room, going home, forgetting her years with Sam and everything about him.

“Open it.”

She didn't want to. She reached out her hand and held the small box, knew what it was, opened, saw, closed it, put it down.

“I love you...I want to be with you. Let's get engaged, baby. That's what I want.” The unusual smile frozen on his face began to thaw. She stared at him. He looked strange. Moments of nothing passed.

“I don't want to.” She faltered. This couldn't be true. Her hands retreated to her lap under the table.

His lips were still turned up oddly and opened to ask: “Are you ok?” And then quickly: “What the hell is the matter?” His eyes changed, questioning, unbelieving. He never questioned before.

Without hearing the words in her head she heard them exiting her mouth “I love you but I need space’, ‘I like what we have. Let's keep it that way’, ‘I can love you when



I'm with you and when I'm not with you', 'Sometimes I just need my silence.'" The room expanded and compressed, it was amazing the candles didn't blow out. She filled her lungs and exhaled, quoting their history, quoting him. "I'm just not ready". She tried to recall the energies lost on jealousy, suspicion, frustration, but all that felt far away, at the bottom of the ocean, energy that was forever swept out to sea. She tapped her shoes on the floor beneath them. Anyway, he didn't want her, knew nothing about her.

He reached for the sad velvet box abandoned in the middle of the table. He fingered it softly and spoke gently. He loved her audience, her attention. He loved the idea of wanting her, of her wanting him.

He opened his hands and spoke gently: "That's not how I feel anymore, baby. I thought about it. I want-I mean- I want... This is yours. I want you to have this. This is..." He indicated the box with the ring in it and lost his words. She hadn't seen him nervous in a very long time; she had never seen him without words. He was nervous or scared or about to be angry. She didn't bother to try and figure him out this time. "This is yours and I want to make you mine." His eyes searched her for something he'd never questioned before.

Her hands passed from her lap to the table. She picked up the box again cautiously, opened it. She felt the swirl and movement of life everywhere else. There was the voice of memory and the memory of desire and dreams. Sam saw her silence and entered it with both hands taking the ring from the box and pushing it onto her finger. Claiming her, he tried to relax. "There, see? Beautiful, isn't it? You like it?" Some silence and then: "Talk to me."

The candle's flicker caught the ring on her finger and it sparkled for a moment like she had anticipated some times, years ago, days ago. Sam continued to watch, trying to recover her. But dread had struck her after the sparkle, before he could find her, and spread its way around. She vaguely grabbed for her wine glass with her left hand, for time, escape, for a drink, to win control. Wine spilled on the way to her mouth. It fell onto her shirt. It seeped through her nice clothes, to undergarments, to hidden skin that suddenly came alive. Her mind woke up and something ascended inside of her.

Sam saw the spill and laughed nervously at how sadly this was all unraveling. "Look at you, you're drunk!" He tried to joke or menace in a hoarse whisper. He floundered, lost without being the one on top of things. Everything he didn't know, didn't ask, didn't figure out cursed him now.

The ring was perfect and not hers. It, at that moment, ownership, revolted her. Her right hand removed it smoothly and with one long movement dropped it into his water glass and pushed herself away from the table and up. Sam, still lost without control, lost his reaction. Was he fearful? Was he sorry? Sam grabbed her hand as she was standing, as she turned to leave but she did not speak or turn or move toward him. He did nothing. Nothing. She easily wriggled her hand free from his confused grip and walked out into the cooling, breezy air.

Penance was walking home through the thick, black puddles in heels that made her feet feel like crying. It was penance for things she had done to herself, let others do to her, years she had let fall down and years she had torn down herself. There were truths

and dreams she let slip away and ones she threw. She clacked across the avenues and composed poems and letters and possibilities in her head.

Disgust and anger melted with her painful steps so that she was clear by the time her bracelet came off in her own bedroom. She smiled at her own apartment, appreciating it with all of her heart. It earned loved for sheltering her, holding her inside and all that was necessary, that was hers. She walked to each room briefly, seeing the quiet envelop her familiar things.

Her shoes were the first things she kicked off, especially conscious, careful of her self, as if a lover was watching. Masks peered from cluttered walls of pictures, book filled bookcases, tapestries, mirrors. Undressed and comfortable now, she bounced onto her bed and looked at her bare feet, bare legs, fingers, arms, tangled hair. And she laughed at her evening, at her silliness.

\*

Relaxed and at home. I breathed gently and thought.

I stopped waiting for that a long time ago. I stopped waiting for him. It was all myself I was waiting for all those stupid years hiding from everybody, for nothing. What difference? What difference? It's enough. I lay back onto my own luxurious bed and began to coax up and out my own splendid soul.

## **August/Declaration/I meant to send this**

Dear Eva- I am coming to visit you. Please send me explicit directions about everything I need to do. I can stay a month during the winter recess. I can see the caves and the desert and your garden and your compound and the drummers and the food, and the stories and the people and everything.

You've told me that you've learned more about things you didn't know existed and there was no way to describe (how tantalizingly implicit!). I'll come to see for myself, and to see if we can live together without killing each other. Perhaps heat exceeding a hundred degrees will subdue our differences. I have faith. And I am excited. I've learned a lot, too. Looking forward. -Leah\*

\*I meant this, I did. I meant to send this. It rested on my desk for a month while Sam and I parted ways easily- more easily than anything I could have dreamt. Oh yes, he was insulted and smirking but I remained coolly calm, as cool as a cucumber, perhaps because I at least had some perspective. I saw the universe, or at least Sam, crystally clear. He was no match, nothing real, a pretender to the throne. I recognized this; it was done.

But the next day there was the note and then Eva and then Brent.

## **August/Surprise**

*DEAR LEAH- I am coming to visit you. I'll be at your apartment next month. I miss you, too. Love, Eva.*

## **October with memories of Aug-Sept/Everything you have**

Eva arrived early in September, just as the trees were full and heavy with their signs of autumn. Some warmth left over from August met a taunting wind that was just starting to explore the city and hint at fall when Eva stood shivering in my doorway. She looked like a ghost tired of haunting, defeated by malaria, exhaustion, loneliness, malnutrition, frustration, heat rash.... All the things she had fought off for months and months. But like any good group of enemies, they eventually ganged up and beat her

down. And she had to retreat. Is this safety for her? Is this home base? Who am I to her? No time for quiet questions, now there is Eva in my doorway.

I grabbed her shoulder bag that probably weighed almost as much as she did. We made it back from the airport quickly if not comfortably in a cab. After waiting for her flight with anticipation twinged with dread- there were so many connections and layovers and different busses and planes, that her arrival became a question- I was almost as exhausted as she was. After landing, customs, retrieving luggage, clumsy hellos and the taxi line, it was almost ten o'clock when we reach my living room. The aunts come over in the morning, that will be nice, and then we'll get Eva to the doctor, check up, family gathering, the fun begins.

She has muttered many things about going back, about not quitting and not being sick. What secrets does she contain? For now, I lug a torn suitcase, a long shoulder bag and a sick sister over to my couch.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask, backing up to stand midway between couch and kitchen. Standing without holding anything self-consciously; standing empty next to her.

"Um, water, thanks," she says hoarsely. Sounds like I dragged her from a long sojourn in the desert. Ok, water. I turn away from her wondering if she'll disappear before I get back, if a part of her might disappear. What parts of her (that I might know) are left?

I flip on the lights as I walk down the hallway. It feels much later than it is. Funny how time grows and shrinks and I shuffle away from the couch thinking about crushed or cubed ice. Trying to snap out of the superficial- shouldn't this mean something?

When we were younger we would make up plays. They would take place in the entrance hall and all of our stuffed animals would line up carefully on the front stairs to watch. I would talk out a script but Evie would always veer off track and start dancing or singing or acting crazily. Sometimes I would get annoyed- I was supposed to be running the show- director, producer, lead actress, everything! But sometimes she made me laugh so hard I that forgot all my roles I had to play.

Right now I'm playing sister and mother for someone I don't know but someone I (surprisingly) haven't given up on, someone I refuse to lose. We're all that's left. I think she knows this, too.

"Your masks are staring at me," says Evie, huddled under a blanket on the couch. She sent them to all of us, Mom, the aunts, me, for the holidays. They are large and imposing, and I've gotten so used to them that I would feel naked if their eyes were not on me as I live in my living room. I sit down folding my legs under me on the other side. A pillow and blankets are set up on her side and she sinks into them. I want to make her comfortable, make her better, discover her.

"They stare at me all the time... You gave me the angry mask after mom's funeral, remember?" It's an elaborately painted dark wood mask just larger than a human head. The eyes are slits of menace and possibility and I always wondered what human eyes might look like behind it, and who made it.

She smirks. "Yeah."

I think there will be silence but she says with a smile "Can we think of it as a satiric peace offering?"

I laugh and notice the dirt from thousands of miles away under her fingernails. And everything seems to zoom in, or to shrivel quickly- the anger/fear/resentment I won't admit to, my anticipation/nervousness of the last month. Everything gets smaller and smaller or larger and larger until I'm dizzy and until I only see the world here on my couch.

"Your fingernails are dirty," I inform her.

She laughs, "Yup... You don't want to know where they've been."

At the funeral I spoke, Eva didn't. I don't think I really wanted to but it seemed like something I should do, another part to play, an obligation. The day was a blur even as it was lived but picture-like moments stuck. I was angry at Dad and Eva and Brent and made it a point not to look at any of them. I took them for granted, looked through them. I was also angry at Mom.

"Are you happy to be back for a little bit?" I ask so stupidly- where did that come from? Of course she's not. She's sick and weak and had to come home. Her life is somewhere else. She doesn't care or remember us.

"Yeah. I am." She smiles again and I see mom's smile because it's sincere. This echoes in my head, through my apartment, and then resounds again on this couch as if she keeps saying it. Saying it for me.

At the funeral I was suddenly embarrassed by Brent, his age, his religiousness, his wanting to always hold my hand. When I had clung to him before I was afraid he might learn too much about me. But at the funeral I began to push. At the funeral I pushed at Eva. I wanted her back on my terms, wanted her to act according to my script. But she



didn't. Now, tonight, this was an alien in my sister's body, a body that had already changed with blisters and burns and rashes. This was not my sister, not mine.

"How's your dog?" I ask.

"Dead or wild. They won't feed her." She drinks her water and shivers under the blanket pulled up around her neck.

At the funeral perhaps we all did our best. At the funeral I held so much anger because I didn't know how to own that small, weak verb, love. I didn't know how to consent.

Perhaps if I wrote poetry I would have figured this out sooner.

"How's school?" She looks at her glass of water. It's stilted and reasonable at the same time- our dialogue. It's understandable, face-to-face for the first time in how long? When all I can think about is being face-to-face and her saying "yeah. I am." Happy to be back.

"It keeps me busy... It's good."

"Your letters were short. But nice. I liked them."

She hasn't seen all of this. Won't. I wrote her much, sent her little, when I had to. Almost nothing. But now we're speaking.

"Ah. Thanks."

Her dirty fingernails trace the edge of her glass and slowly put it down on my coffee table. It's repulsive and I have an urge to snatch this glass away from her, make her get up off of my clean couch that has never been in a mud hut, never been dirty or stained. And Eva seems to be one big stain. I want to take this glass away from her, I want to push her away. She sees my revulsion. She breathes deeply and looks at me and

says, “Leah...” My heart thumps hard inside of me, I can’t help it. I repent my revulsion. We have nothing to go on. We’ll try. Eva has things to tell me.

“It’s not my fault,” she says and I wait for the next part to come crashing down.

She says, “I couldn’t stay to keep Mom ok. That’s why you blame me, but that’s not why she died.” I knew that Eva would be the one to do this, could see myself forcefully, desperately shutting her up, stopping this, but what can I do when we’re almost cuddling on my couch and it takes all of her strength to hold a water glass, to keep her eyes open? What can I do? She breathes deeply again and stares at me. “You know when Mom changed,” she says.

“Yup. I do. Ok.” I acknowledge. I know what happened with Mom, or at least what I could observe, what happened with all of us.

After retiring from the navy he got into real estate. September 2001. We didn’t live in the city but Dad had business there. He was at a meeting in the city, lower Manhattan. Mom was at home doing what? Gardening? Painting? Housework? Eva and I were at school. We knew Mom’s tendencies by then.

But we’d also heard stories of her from before. She was fun, the life of the party, adventurous, a budding artist. Then Dad. The handsome officer who swept her off of her feet and out of art school. I knew they traveled around the world before us, led a romantic, adventurous life I’ll never know, all before us. Then wars, or cold wars. Dad on cruises for weeks or months at a time, no contact. Mom never knew how to be alone. She got nervous. Different countries, different states, constantly. Then, finally, shockingly, miraculously, children. Us. Precious children after more than a decade of trying, crying, praying, waiting. She was neurotic. Ok, some mothers get that way. It happens. Eva

would play outside a bit too often or wander off a bit too far and Mom might scream, might rip her hair, she was anxious. Dad would be late coming home, meetings in the city, meetings with people. Mom would wait in the dining room, lights off, silent, sometimes pacing sometimes sitting, until car headlights would illuminate her and he'd be home. And I don't know all of this. I was little. Then Tuesday.

We were lucky. Of course. So lucky. Dad was fine. Came home hours and hours and hours later but he came home in one piece, after seeing horrific things with his own eyes, feeling the terror in his own body, but he came home in one piece. Mom watched television and gave up. That was the end of the world she had been anticipating.

Years before us she traveled. I've read her notebooks, thirty-two planes trips in a year, pictures of all of Europe the way it was thirty years ago. The Middle East and England and islands...paintings and sketches, mementos, and everything possible. Perhaps she was in steady decline for some time and we tiptoed and went about our business anyway. But that Tuesday threw her down. She locked herself in her room, crying so that it seemed to shake the house, saying things no daughter should hear, and then, after all the noise, she gave us silence, and sometimes apologies, but she never got back up. It took years for us to try and pull her out of her rubble. Then Dad died, not from an accident or a mistake, just the surprise of his own body stopping. We didn't try to understand. Understand what?

We left for college, not too far away. Eva left early and left completely.

And Eva left us for a desert. Left Mom when we just didn't know what would come next. We thought Mom would break when Eva left.

“It wasn’t my fault Mom changed and it wasn’t my job to stay. Cancer wasn’t my fault either. She never went to a doctor for herself after she had us...” we catch our breath and drink our waters.

“She had fertility treatment trauma. No one paid attention...” we rest in the stillness of my apartment, thinking that breaks are necessary.

“Look, I wish a lot of things. That a lot of things had been different, but we did what we thought we should...” her has been getting stronger now, it’s a great effort but she strains for this.

“I felt like I could see what was happening better where I was. Better than you here: I knew mom knew I loved her and death isn’t fair and we’d be ok. Leah, ...we had a nice childhood, nice life with our parents, ok? I was out doing other work- important work. I know you wanted me home and I feel like I should say I’m sorry...” she catches her breath again and shivers under the blanket.

“But this happened. It’s not all about you or mom or me. And I’m not sorry.”

There was another pause. I didn’t know if she was done. It took her a long time and a lot of energy to say these things. Another pause. My heart thuds inside and I want to rip this blanket off of her, yank it so that she falls to the ground, imagine the heavy masks falling on top of her, my broad bookcases tumbling onto her. There is no sorry, there is nothing. I want to stuff that nothing deep under these things because I don’t know what to do with it.

“Ok,” I say. I get up to get myself some water. She’s veered from the script again, stolen the show. Clear water comes out of my faucet, water I never wonder about or die from. I think about ice. There was no sorry, but there was recognition.

The kitchen is the same. It's clean from when I scrubbed everything a few hours ago...many hours ago, before I saw Eva appear at that airport, before I learned about her not being sorry, after I opened my phone to the calendar screen and counted how many days its been since the last time at the airport, since the hospital. Faint pinkish light comes in from streetlights and other apartment buildings. I lean against the counter with a heavy glass in my hand and close my eyes for a second. We never talked about how Mom changed before. I hate her for this and she knows nothing. If she wasn't discolored and on my couch too weak to stand up... I can imagine the battle. I can imagine a lot of things. But she was open, she was struggling, she was here.

With a tall glass of cubed ice floating in my clear water, I sit back down and ask, "How are you feeling?"

"Tired." She is sipping her water; the glass is still mostly full. Remnants of the desert clinging to her fingers, her hair. Even her skin is different- different colors and different colors in different places, it looks raw and used and then tender.

"Fine. You should sleep."

"No, well, I want to tell you something else first." She opens her mouth wide to yawn or grasp more air, her chapped lips cracking around peeling skin.

"Yeah?" I ask, fingernails tapping on the sides of my cold glass. Toes wiggling beneath the blanket, tucking themselves in between the couch cushions.

"There is someone in Africa. I met someone. We're..." She trails off and her thought stays unfinished, or at least, unspoken.

"Why didn't you tell anyone about him?" I ask half smiling despite myself, but this is no surprise.

“Why don’t I tell anyone anything?” She counters, vaguely defensive, then falters.

She says, “I didn’t know anything... I didn’t understand it so reasoned no one else would understand it either. I was busy a lot during the first few months. And then we were starting to talk to each other while getting dysentery, malaria, sunburn. You have no idea—“

“You’re in love?” I interrupt because I’ve never heard Eva sound or look like this before.

“I guess,” she answers smiling a little. But we’ve breached something. I think of Brent, remember Brent, and can’t help smiling broadly.

“Ok. Wow.” We start to giggle absurdly, me more so. I remember Brent and me, our first time, our first dinner, suddenly things flash back, rise up, and I feel lovely. On the couch with my sister, sharing.

“He’s planning on going to school when we’re done. He’s going to be a doctor and then we’ll go back- probably to my village- together. I don’t really know. But that’s ok. We figure things out.”

“You’re going to tell the family?”

“Mmm... Maybe tomorrow.”

“I can’t believe it,” I sigh, but something already feels easier. She’s still half-smiling at me.

“Maybe because I never told you.” Like a heat wave has broken and drops of rain start plopping down, like a fog has lifted. The air in my apartment is breathable again. I could swear the masks are smiling.

“I’m glad you did. It’s good news. You’re in love?”

There's a gap and I can feel it tightening again. I look down and back up. She's still here, real. Tomorrow we'll see the aunts and we'll be little kids again. There'll be doctor's visits and she'll get better, and she'll be gone. So I'm honest, I observe:

"I never would have thought that you'd be—"

"I know."

"I mean, I never thought you'd be talking about—"

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I just mean, I never thought- never thought we'd be talking like this."

"Why not?" she twists her face into a laugh which makes this easier.

"I don't know." (Because you left so early and so much. Because you help the world and everyone else but your family. Because you don't know what this was like.)

Then I breathe. I make my brain breathe, understanding where we are.

I don't know what her years were like. How do we ever know anything? Eva is on my couch and my toes are on top of hers. I don't know what to say but it's ok. Eva is yawning and then says, "I didn't even think in terms of love for a long time. I didn't have time or energy to give people. And then I started talking to Alex. We built a well together so I had to give him time and energy. It's hard to build a well with just two people. Or, two people and a village watching and talking around you. But anyway, then we just kept talking. And it worked out- nothing crazy or shocking. He helped the night Dog had her puppies and then when one of the puppies fell down the well... and it was simple. He made things simple and clear."

“So that’s what it is” I marvel. And we both drank our waters and Eva’s eyelids started to flutter. “Those puppies had a rough start, huh?”

“Yup.”

I let her sleep.

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Then Brent. I called him. And we talked. I sent him this, yes, all of this. But by then, our first phone call after some time, I had already promised him everything.

“Do you remember when I left and we were standing on the corner and it was cold. Before I got into the cab?”

“Yeah,” I can hear his breathing through the phone, it sounds like his breath waking up, when he turns over and buries his head in my neck and breathes deeply, heavily, before he opens his eyes.

“Do you remember when I asked if you would read something?”

“Yes.” He’s interested, as if he’s been waiting for this.

“I want to send you everything. I’m going to send you everything I never sent my sister. Everything I wrote.”

“I remember when you left and what you said... I’d be happy to read it.”

I smile but he can’t see it.

“Do you remember the first time you cooked for me?” I ask.



“Yes. Do you remember the first time you cooked for me?” he asks. I can hear him smiling on the other end. I laugh. What kept me from him the first time? So many things...so many things that might be better now.

“Yes. Do you remember...”

So later that night, I took everything I’d collected, collected everything I’d written, and thought, and hidden, and sent it, the manila envelope full and heavy and bulging with my words and years.

To: Brent. From: Leah, THANK YOU.

September and I’m scrambling. Every path frighteningly and brilliantly exposed. I catch myself riding the waves of memories of course but less often I’m pulled into the undertow. Less often I’m drowned. Sometimes memories toss me farther and deeper than I anticipate, but perhaps I’ve grown into my own lifeguard. What am I thinking about in my office surrounded with materials that need to be organized, photocopied, recycled? Sometimes now the waves keep me close to shore and throw me up against the beach farther than I anticipate, into the future. It’s a funny species that can continue life in the present but play time machine in their heads. OK, squirrels gather nuts for the winter and so enact their future plan, and elephants remember watering holes from past journeys. So these waves are instinct and necessary and carry us through. Or perhaps more than carry us through! We survive through instinct- we gain from instinctual action. What do I gain here? Busy in my office in sunny September, what do I do?

In my office I have terrible reception, but I take the call. “Can I see you?” The voice is surprising to me and thrilling.

“I have terrible reception in my office. Can I call you back?” I tilt my head trying to figure out when I can call back.

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. But I want to see you- I, I mean that-” Grabbing my keys I close the door speed walk down a hallway and outdoors. “I mean that, I got your stories and read them.” My throat clamps shut. Why does this sound like devastating news? I jog to the steps and plop down. My sunglasses, still perched on my head from how long ago, I drop down to my eyes.

He sounds good, he sounds like he’s at home? Some place quiet? He’s not at the restaurant and it’s almost dinnertime. I try to picture him and where he might be. I sit on the steps in front of the imposing building, before the statue. Students sit out here as well. It’s sunny and the big fluffy clouds remind me of snow, remind me of times with him.

“Yeah?” I prompt.

“Yeah. Um, I saw your email last night. I just finished reading it. Where are you?”

“School.” That email took how many months? And where are we now? “Where are you?”

“Home...Um, can I see you? —To talk about what you wrote?” What did I write? What did I write about him? Trying to remember. What truths slipped out? What truths did he gather? Did he interpret? A former student recognized me in my sunglasses, messy hair and sneakers. I smiled and waved and felt sick and excited. Why did I send to him? Why did I wait to send this to him for so long?

“Sure. Um, tonight?” I was going to meet Aunt Abby, going to go through the closets. But I don’t have to.

“Yeah. Where can I meet you?”

“My place... 8?”

“Yes. I mean, great.”

After sitting for a moment more on the steps where no other instructors sat, I got up, gathered some things and ran home. Copies could wait until tomorrow I had to shower. I hummed to myself on the subway, I skipped down my block. It was only when I got home that I realized butterflies were in my stomach and maybe I was happy.

So Brent would see my apartment for the first time. My space, my territory, my world. And then it hit: He's read this. He knows my head. Everything I hid in secret words and covered reflection is revealed, laid bare. I don't have anything else to cover me up. The phone rang. My doorman called up. Brent is here. Yes, send him up, please. Yes, he's on my territory, and now he's in my thoughts.

Eva is at the hospital overnight for observation. When we went to get her examined, the doctors were puzzled, needed more information, wanted to keep her. She is sleeping heavily and I will go over in the morning.

He stepped into my apartment and seemed to bring our relationship back with him-- not the part I messed up, not the part I was in the process of messing up, but what was possible. Or maybe it was just the hot and heavy smell of eggplant parmesan and fresh bread he carried with him. He brought dinner in the containers and bag of his restaurant. But he always smelled like that- like good food, like home, like comfort. Did part of me know the ending here, already?

“Hi, thanks for letting me come over.” His hair is tied back and he’s standing up so straight. He’s not smiling. His lips are pressed together hard. He’s nervous. “I like your building. It’s a nice place.”

“Thanks. Come in. Not too much to see. Not like your place,” I smile. He waits for me to move forward, show him around. I lead him to the living room. He looks.

“I like it. I like the colors.” He isn’t looking at me yet, not the way I realize I want him to. I laugh because I’m nervous as well. He’s read my thoughts, been inside.

“Let’s sit down.” I offer, not moving. He chooses the table instead of the couch. We sit down. I don’t think he hates what I sent him, or that I sent it to him. And he must know I’ve never hated him.

“It’s good to see you.” He smiles and I want to say that I’m sorry.

“I’m glad you read my stuff,” I confess, “You’re the only one.”

“I thought you would give it to Eva.”

“I thought I would, maybe once. But I haven’t, not all of it at least... don’t really know why I would now. I think I just needed to see some things in writing.”

“To figure things out?”

“You got me.”

“But it’s not all truth.” There’s a silence.

“You... caught me. But it’s truthful enough. My truth?”

“I thought so. I see you in it.”

I feel naked in this conversation. I can sense my cheeks getting hot and I look down, stroke the plastic bag on the table.

“Experience kills or cures us.”

“Yeah” He got it right.

“That one part, about the island, the powerful women. They were all the same. Only at different times.” I’m speechless, wordless. “And the dancer story, the ballerina...” he waits for me, for acknowledgment, response.

“Yes?” I comply.

“The attraction to women, it’s... it’s searching for what’s lost....It’s truth that’s not admitted.” He pauses and breathes and works so hard on this, for us.

“Yes.”

He’s right, so I tell him everything. I fill in the details and reveal as much as I can remember. He becomes the only one who has heard it all. The only one who heard fragments and got it right, proved himself and me. So he has earned it, or taught me how to tell it. So I tell him, talking evenly, jumping through time, through dreams, through conversations and novels and imaginings. I get to everything. And he listens, and talks, and even as we’re coming to the end of it, like to the end of a good book that has taken you places and opened up ideas to you, that you don’t want to end, that you savor and respect, I feel this closing, pages slipping from my fingertips from one side to the other. I think of Eva, exhausted and deeply asleep. I watched her try to talk to me from her hospital bed, try to tell keep her eyes open, and then sleep overwhelming her. I will see her in a few hours now. Only a few blocks away. And Brent now, in front of me.

“Oh, I brought dinner. I hope you still like eggplant.” We’re saved, on to the next chapter, the next dinner, and it feels so good.

“I missed you.” I make this known, let it drop in front of us on the table. Something he must have known, but something we needed to hear. Feeling naked and

speaking uncontrollably, “I’m sorry,” I sigh. This is ridiculous- I feel my face pulsing red and hot-

“It’s ok... I like you a lot, kiddo.” He’s treading carefully. Unsure. We’ve covered volumes tonight.

“No, I mean, I’m sorry about other things.” He starts to say something but I grab his hand lying on the table not far from mine. We’ve been outside of time for a while now and I have to stop him. I know he’s sorry I ended it, he’s sorry about mom, I already know, he’s sorry about Eva, he’s sorry about the things I kept silent, hid from him, I know, I know, he’s sorry about the things I’ve said, the things I threw at him, he’s sorry because he used to feel sorry for me, he’s sorry because he knows I knew. But now he knows everything. Now is different. Now is new. He knows everything now except that I’m not afraid right now and that now I can forgive.

“I mean it. I’m sorry.” I repeat, fantasies undarkening, dreams untwisting, realizing the suddenly easy sense of things clearing. Desperate that he sense this, too.

He rubs my fingers between his. Consciously footsteps from my bedroom but I can’t say anything else. We sit at the table for a long time sunk in memories and stuck at possibilities. Finally, I rise from the table, our bubble of thoughts, to get up to go to the kitchen. Brent follows me. I wanted to get down two plates, to share the food, to keep enjoying this nice night. To do something besides remember and imagine. The kitchen is dim, only the light above the stove remains on so my stove looks holy. As I reach up for the plates, on my tiptoes- my cabinets are so high- Brent wraps his arms around me. “I love you”, I don’t know who says it. I don’t care. Many people love many things. “Love” is a small, weak verb. Love doesn’t know what this is. I’m not myself tonight, or I’m

happy. I perch on the counter as he buries his head in my neck, nuzzling my hair out of the way to kiss the spot he likes to kiss first. He's lived a lifetime before me that I'll never comprehend, Eva boarded a plane to another world that I'll never know. But Brent stands over me accepts.

The sky is purplish dark outside my small kitchen window and seems to creep in here as well; I don't know what time it is and I want to stay this person. We make love and whisper secrets to each other, secrets we kept from each other and from ourselves, things we don't say out loud, and its like the heavens have broken and everything wonderful comes spilling out and down to us and then we share dinner. Brent sleeps over in my bed, my head on his chest, arms wrapped around. I even tell him about my once potential trip to Africa, the letter resting on my printer tray.

### **October/Revival/On the way**

Twenty-four days since Eva came home. Twenty days since Brent read everything and came over. Nineteen days since the hospital and Eva's mysterious sickness. Fifteen days since she started feeling better. Fifteen days since the family reunion. Ten days since she started feeling worse. Nine days since Aunt Abby came over, told me she was proud of me, loved me, hugged me. We were content. Eight days since Brent's unrelenting love made me break down, made me say it over and over again, that I loved him. We stayed in bed all day and cooked dinner together at night. Four days since I finished my novel,

or at least since I saved it and closed my computer to reread, revisit, and edit later. Forty-one days since I got my period.

It's nice out. I'm sure the sidewalk café will be open. Eva is at her doctor's appointment. With old friends and family there, I reason there are enough eager audience members around and I should take the afternoon off. She's been home almost a month, staying with me, Aunt Abby, Aunt May, even some of our family friends have claimed her for a night or two, to show her off, to feed her, to try to share stories with her. The initiation back into the family.

She's been doing better and worse. The doctors don't know exactly what's wrong, she has pains in weird places and shivers and shakes and faints sometimes, but they run tests and she's mostly out of the hospital, just back for appointments, hopefully. Brent came over with dinner the night after Eva returned. I have lessons to plan and copies to make, my office needs organizing and my apartment is a mess. When Eva opened her luggage-already falling apart and dusty, a frightening aroma escaped. But instead of copying, cleaning or organizing, instead of any of this, I'm walking toward Brent's restaurant. It's been a quite a while since I've visited him there; I've never surprised him like this. Today's a bright blue kind of day, cool and energizing and there is a lot to do. Fall again.

It's the kind of day you think you could walk forever, across the island and up and down it. I could cover Manhattan with my footsteps and see and know everyone. Central Park was on the way, bursting out of its borders, leaves all kinds of colors stretching



towards me. I zigzagged between the park and the river feeling the sunshine peek through the trees and the buildings. I carry my usual large black bag full of practical things, notebooks, and books, a bottle of water, an umbrella, and something unique today, a thin plastic bag with a cardboard box containing a drugstore test. The block of the restaurant is a very nice one. Large trees overhang the streets and flowers do their best to sprout up from window boxes and planters. It is not too crowded, late afternoon on a weekday. Franco, one of the waiters, smiles and walks out to the carefully set up sidewalk café. He is dressed in all black and steps into a ray of sunlight, standing with hands on his hips. “Lovely Leah!” he calls even though I’m still half a block away.

“Fabulous Franco!” I call, getting closer. My destination within reach, I realize that I am excited, a bit off balance, dizzy with excitement. I scan the space that I can see for Brent.

“It’s been a while!”

“I know. I know. But the place looks the same and you look good.” And I’m looking all about. “Is Brent around?” I hadn’t told him I was stopping by. I wasn’t completely sure I was going to until this morning when I woke up from a nightmare and threw up. Oh my messy apartment!

I had dreamt that Eva was falling from a tree. It was strange. Usually in falling dreams, I’m the one who falls. But here, I clung to leaves, stretched out on my stomach on the branch of an enormous tree. I held Eva’s hand in mine, dangling below the branch. She was smaller than real life. Like a doll, a baby doll. There were no words in my dream; I just tried to hold on to her and the tree. The tree was spectacular; I saw it from all perspectives as you only can in dreams. It looked like the baobab trees from

Evie's pictures, but even larger, more majestic, this tree was larger than my building, larger than these skyscrapers. The tree was so large and bright green, it would have been wonderful to relax and sit in its branches if Eva wasn't hanging there. So I strained and tried so hard to keep my grip, but Eva slipped. She fell. In my dream, I watched her fall from above, but I also felt it, the sensation, or dream sensation, as if I was falling, watched from my sturdy, comfortable branch. She fell and fell forever until she splashed into water- an ocean- finally resurfaced, and swam away. I woke up feeling strange and jumped out of bed. I threw up in the bathroom and then went to check on Eva, still sleeping under a pile of blankets on my couch.

So today I step into Brent's charming restaurant for the first time in a long time clutching my big black bag like I never have before. My bag with the test in the cardboard box from the drugstore inside of it.

"Oh, Brent left a while ago but he said he'd be back for dinner." This slows me down a bit, but it's ok. I wobble like someone sprinting on a treadmill who suddenly jumps off. Running on adrenaline and momentum.

"Hmmm, alright. I think I'll try waiting around for a bit." I sit at a corner table inside and rest my bag on my lap. I smile at familiar faces I haven't seen in a while, ages. What do they remember about me?

"What can I get you?" Franco asks. I'm getting hungry but don't feel like I can eat anything, not yet.

"Um, just water. I'll eat with Brent. I'm gonna call him...or, actually, maybe the cheesecake." I dig out my phone and start to call Brent before I stop. The restaurant is

completely open. The glass doors are pulled to the sides and a cold breeze meanders through the place and rustles my hair. How many more days like this will there be?

My hand finds the plastic bag within my big black bag and I sit without pressing the buttons on my phone and think.

“I’ll be right back,” I say half to Franco looking at me curiously, half to myself.

In the ladies’ room, I don’t need to read the directions. I’ve done this before, though never like this. So I wait the three minutes listening to the music piped into the restrooms, listening to the waiters I know talking outside the door, the sound of plates and silverware, rushing water, splashing water, soapy water, and people moving. It’s such a nice day outside I can almost feel it in here. I gauge the time by my phone’s clock, digital lit up numbers stubbornly slow to change even though I shake it, squeeze it in my hand.

It’s done. I pack up and head back outside. That was that and this is this. I recognize how different I am; I recognize my happiness, a happiness that for this moment is all mine.

Back at the table my cheesecake waits for me. I’m not sure how to tell Brent, if I should call him now, exactly what I would say, if I could trust my voice or his voice. So I eat and wait, looking out into the sunshine. Franco comes over to talk to me, which is nice, but I can’t keep my mind on anything until he says, “There’s your man” as he spots Brent walking down the block.

Butterflies punch the inside of my stomach. It’s an eternity before he reaches my table and kisses me. He’s a little confused to find me here. That’s reasonable. I was never this surprising, or at least this pleasantly surprising before. He wears a black shirt and

dark jeans, walking quickly. He kisses me and sits down, asks how long I've been there, why I didn't call.

"I've been here a while. I wanted to surprise you."

"You did," he admits. I hadn't seen him in three days. We think about that first night after so long, after those months, that night in my kitchen after sitting at my table, before lying in my bed. We didn't discuss or decide anything. We seemed to know. He came to my apartment again after that and then I went over to his place, a little curious as to how that would feel. I remembered all the confusion and frustration of the end of our relationship there, but it didn't do anything, it didn't win. Still no place to hide because it's all shared. Still naked which, of course, was still new. So it was good, I remained a little preoccupied with Eva's arrival and stay, but it was good.

"The cheesecake was great," I tell him.

"I'm glad. Everything ok?" I kick my bag further under my feet. No more plastic bag or cardboard box or drugstore test in it. A feel my cheeks strain from smiling and my neck blush red.

"Yeah," he's curious and surprised and I have a lot to tell him. It suddenly feels so early to be doing this; so dangerous to break what's good.

"How's Eva?"

"She's good, I think. Well, exhausted and sick. She's at the doctor to see how sick she is. But she's in love. And she's good...Are you free on Friday night? We're having a family dinner. You should come, if you want."

"Of course. Let me know where. Hope she's feeling better by then." He rubs my hand.

“She’s tough. I think she’ll be ok. And I’d like you to meet her at a saner moment, you know? I’ll let you know how it goes.” I rubbed my foot against his leg.

The place was starting to fill up. Franco came over with a question for Brent. He leaned down to ask him quickly. I wondered what news Eva was getting at the hospital, when Aunt Abby would call, when I would go meet them all. I had thought I needed to put a hold on my connection to Brent so as to focus on Eva until I found she didn’t need so much focusing. She’s tough enough to save the world and battle anything that gets in the way and soft enough to cuddle on my couch and let me know her thoughts. Before, in my mind, she was my possession who stole herself away. I was the one robbed, aggrieved. But today it’s nice out and I feel differently.

“Just a minute babe. I’ll be right back.” Brent went back to the kitchen with Franco to answer whatever question or problem that had come up. He was thinking that was all I had to tell him. I want to follow him back to the kitchen immersing myself in real, solid food and welcoming smells, want to somehow transport us to my kitchen at home, want to step back into a world of just us before it shifts radically. Then it hits me. I can’t wait to tell Brent. I just can’t. So I jump up quickly to follow him back into the kitchen, maybe I trip over my big bag I’d been kicking under my feet, and everything goes black.

I’m on the floor.

Franco and Brent are over me. I see shadows and shiny things that twinkle underneath the bar and more shadows there. A knot jumps to my throat for a moment. Only a moment. There is blurriness as I rub my eyes. Franco and Brent are over me. It’s ok because Brent is holding me and they both look worried.

“Are you ok? What happened?” they both ask together.

“I just got dizzy I guess. I’m fine.” Brent helps me up. “I just need water I think. I haven’t had anything to drink”

The early dinner crowd stares at us. Franco goes to get me water and I sit up against Brent who kisses my head until I have to laugh.

“I’m really fine. Just embarrassed now! Here, help me up”.

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah.” I get to my feet and Franco hands me a glass of water. Leaning against the bar, I feel as though I’m drunk but I’m not. I smile to reassure the worried crowd.

“So, what happened?” Brent asks again. In his worried face I see everything.

Drinking my water, I think how to say it, how to do this, my second chance, my great opportunity. My phone rings in my purse still on the floor. Brent hands it to me. I answer. It’s Eva calling from the hospital. She has to spend the night there. She says she’s fine and she’s glad we’ve been able to talk since she’s been back. As of now, the party’s still on. Brent is coming. Good. See you at the hospital in a bit. Love you.

I look at the trees eager to start changing colors and feel the breeze starting to blow cooler and think it’s very nice out. This city is the most beautiful place in the world and right now, it holds everyone I love and the memory of every one I’ve ever loved. I do know Eva will get better and move far away and I will probably move yet again myself, hopping around this rocky island. And Brent stands here looking down at me in wonder, grey eyes smiling and wide.

I put the phone down on the bar and look up at Brent, so much taller, still concerned, grasping me protectively. “Do you want to go to the hospital with me?” I ask.

### **Sisters/Daughters. Backwards and forwards. October 2011.**

She left before I knew what to say. Then she came back and I met her. In moments and seasons and months our lives changed completely, they keep changing, through our own volition, decisions, choices, and through turns we never would have chosen or wanted or expected. That’s what happens. I’m speaking beyond the collection now but not as any wise old lady person. I pieced this together for me, and all the people that walk through this.

How many days since Eva left? How many days since she’s been back? How many days lived with Brent? How many days lived without him? Not even one day since the test, but perhaps longer since I knew, this thing that’s growing and all mine, mine until it’s ours, until I tell Brent. Soon. Perhaps today.

So that’s it. Some idea of what came before. You who are nothing right now, nothing I can visualize or imagine, just something to compose/collect these letters to, in

my head, in this quiet waiting room. Some idea. But whose idea? Right now the entire make up of my body is changing, and manipulates my mind.

I can't say this is all truth or all truthful. It is a story, what happened before Eva and I met again, before we recognized the human in each other, what is shared; it's a story from my perspective, inherently biased and personal; a story of what is central, unchangeable. Digging through letters and months and years and memories, not reclaiming but reinventing. No, inventing.

We only have so much time.

Brent waits and watches with me in this place where we lost saw Mom. Brent sits beside me who sits beside strangers also waiting and watching and whatever we find out next will take us in a new direction. We sigh, and we're ready, because that's all we can be.

I could say more.

But I can't help but let myself imagine Daddy here, in this hospital with us; in my memory he looks good, calm, and content. I imagine him calling us down the hall. If he had lived, his short hair would have more white hairs than black, he would be older, but in my mind I can erase the creases in his skin streaking his forehead, reaching from his eyes. I try to erase the years and the weight and see him in the pictures I've uncovered in closets and taken with me to hoard in closets of my own. One lies in my purse, pressed flat inside a notebook. They are pictures of him and Mom smiling big and goofy, thrilled, and eager to start the lives before them. I imagine my Dad standing softly



calling us down the hallway. His glasses on, and looking at us calmly, with great appreciation, and with love.

Brent holds my hand in the waiting room and taps his foot, nervously, anxious. But his body next to mine does so much. We only have so much time to understand and I know I'm stronger than last year, stronger than I'd admit, or at least I've accepted more than I thought. He reaches over and tickles my side and I can't wait to tell him. His head leans into mine for a moment and its peaceful.

I still wonder what made my mother, my sister live the lives they chose or fell into. What their unread letters and thoughts might look like, their secrets and their discovered strength. Maybe it's my job to be the dreamer, the guesser, the one that works to piece together the fragments and artifacts from closets and letters and details of masks on my walls, thanking the constant, wonderful wonder and curiosity that keeps moving forwards and backwards. Trying.