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The Significance Of The Other: Stories

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OTHER:

STORIES

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Advisor: Mark Mirsky

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THE MUSIC TEACHER

His name was Ted and I was in love with him. He wore tight blue jeans and boots that were always unlaced. He had bright blue eyes and dimples you could rest pennies in. He looked exactly like Jon Bon Jovi, but with bigger hair. In fact, he knew Jon Bon Jovi, or at least he’d met him once. He showed me a picture: they stood side by side with their arms around each other like brothers; Ted was the more handsome one, of course, and his dirty blonde hair had better curls.

I waited impatiently every Tuesday afternoon for Ted to ring my doorbell and climb the stairs two at a time, carrying his Fender acoustic in a black guitar bag that hung off his back by one strap. Sometimes he wore a shirt with buttons that shifted as he climbed and if I looked at just the right moment I could see a few strands of chest hair. Sometimes I worried he would trip on one of his loose bootlaces. It made me very excited to imagine myself running to catch him if he fell. For saving his life, he’d be so grateful maybe he would even kiss me.

I wore my best heavy metal tee-shirts and I made sure my fingernails were painted, usually with sparkles. I used my most colorful picks to play scales. I was always nauseous on Tuesdays in a good, fluttery kind of way. I thought we could have made music together, but Ted had a girlfriend and I was ten years old.
One Tuesday afternoon, after he had helped me tune the strings on my three-quarter-size nylon-string acoustic, Ted called my father into the living room. “Grown-up talk,” he said, as though it was an obligation he didn’t really want to be a part of.

“I can do grown-up talk,” I said. I was wearing a tight black skirt with a layer of lace. I had begged my mother to let me get it at Macy’s after I saw Kelly Taylor wearing one like it on 90210. At first she said it was too risqué for a girl my age, but when I tried it on in the dressing room it was kind of shapeless and my mother agreed to buy it for me. While she was looking at lingerie in Women’s Intimates, I switched the miniskirt for a smaller size so it would be tighter when I wore it at home. After that, I always had to tug at the hem to keep the skirt from riding up; my mother thought I was going through a growth spurt. I hadn’t developed yet, but I was really looking forward to puberty so that I could shop in the junior’s stores at the mall.

“I know you can,” Ted said. “Just give me and your pops a few minutes and we’ll get back to business. I’ll play you the new Pearl Jam song.” I thought I was going to swoon and tumble onto the carpet. I’d never heard anyone say pops before.

I wondered if he knew Eddie Vedder. If we got married, Pearl Jam could play a song at our wedding. I had never really liked to play wedding, but my friends were into dressing our Barbie dolls in shiny gowns and marching them
down the steps of the Dream House to kiss Ken. I liked to cut my Barbies’ hair off and draw tattoos on their plastic skin with Sharpie pens.

My dad was tall and had a thick beard that made him look like a lion. He and Ted talked quietly in the corner while I stared at the cover of my songbook and pretended not to listen. I couldn’t make out most of it.

“Shall I be the one to break the news?” my father asked Ted.

“I’ll give it a try,” Ted answered. He and my father shook hands and my father patted Ted twice on the shoulder.

When my dad left the room, Ted sat across from me on the high-backed kitchen chair I dragged into the living room every Tuesday afternoon. He didn’t pick up his guitar; instead he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. There were creases in his forehead; I wondered how old he was. He looked in my eyes when he spoke and it made me feel nauseous.

Ted was getting married. She was a computer programmer and they were moving to Westchester together, so he wasn’t going to be able to come over on Tuesdays and teach me the guitar. He talked for a long time but I had trouble paying attention. Jon Bon Jovi wouldn’t marry a computer programmer. Eddie Vedder wouldn’t move to Westchester.

Ted kissed me on the forehead when he left. His girlish hair fell on my nose. I didn’t say goodbye because it didn’t seem like the grown-up thing to do. After dinner I took my favorite pick, the neon purple one that said Sam Ash
across the front, and dropped it between the strings into the hollow of the guitar. I shook and shook the body until I heard it rattle.
ALL APOLOGIES TO FRIDA KAHLO

I probably shouldn’t have touched the oil paint. I know I wasn’t supposed to. My transgression was not an attempt at defiance or destruction. I never wanted to harm the painting, but at thirteen years old, my understanding of some things was not as clear as it is now. I wanted to touch Frida’s hands, but because her hands weren’t in the painting, I touched Diego’s nose instead.

See, I didn’t want to be in Paris with my mother, who had gone mad a few days earlier in London. It had been just another rainy London morning, but my mother didn’t like the rain; it was also very hot, and my mother didn’t like the heat. We were staying at a painter’s studio in East Walthamstow, the last stop on the Victoria line, and there was no air conditioning. We’d flown to London that August because my mother needed to rest.

Before we’d left, her psychiatrist had prescribed new tranquilizers, and I’d been to my doctor to obtain medical clearance for high school in the fall. The doctor found a swollen knob in my neck, a slight imperfect bump beneath the skin. I was used to the thing – my father had a similar bump in his left arm, and my grandmother had had one too. It didn’t hurt, and I only knew it was there if I found the exact right spot. My pediatrician assured my frantic mother that it was a random hereditary deformity, ran a series of tests at her urging, and again concluded that nothing was wrong. Two days later we flew to London. It was my
first plane ride.

There was only one bedroom in the flat besides the artist’s, so my mother and I shared the room in the attic. There was a bed, which she insisted I sleep on, while she opted for the child-sized cot in the corner of the room. The morning we were to leave for a side trip to France, I was awakened at the crack of dawn by a pressing pain in my neck. Frightened, I looked across the room for my mother. The cot was empty and the sheets were pressed into crisp hospital corners. A small serrated butter knife lay in the center of the bed. I reached up to soothe the pain that pushed at my neck and felt my mother’s hand. She hovered over the bed, poking with two fingers at the undetectable knob beneath my skin.

I swatted my mother’s hand away. “What are you doing?”

She reached for my neck again. “You have a lump,” she said, “and I need to cut it out. Where is it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it!” I was used to my mother’s episodes. I took deep breaths to stay calm. “Daddy has the same thing,” I said. I had to be rational. I had to be a voice of reason.

“Daddy,” she hissed, “is not a doctor.” Then she climbed on top of me and anchored her knees on either side of my body. I struggled beneath as she pinned one wrist to the bed and grabbed the first two fingers of my other hand and pulled them toward my neck.

“You’re not a doctor either!” I screamed. My mother released the hand
that pinned me down and slapped me across the face.

I won’t burden you with any further details. What followed involved a struggle to keep a kitchen knife away from my person, and a morbid but comic escape across the bedroom, down a twisted flight of narrow red stairs, through the kitchen, and into the bathroom with my mother behind me. The loo had one of those separated toilet stalls, which I locked myself inside. The stall was three feet square. There was a window too high and too narrow to climb through. There was nothing inside the room but a can of bathroom spray, with which I reasoned I could blind my mother if she managed to get inside.

“If you’re dying I need to help you. You have a lump!” she screamed. “What if I need to pee? You can’t stay in the bathroom. What if I need to pee?” She pounded at the door. I scrunched myself down onto the floor and covered my ears with my fists until the screaming stopped.

A quiet knock came upon the door.

“Miss? Miss?”

A tall woman cop with a British face – square chin, small nose, red cheeks, you know the sort – hovered in the doorway. She asked if I was hurt. When I shook my head, she led me into the main washroom, one big hand on my bony shoulder. In the kitchen sat my mother with two officers and one hand cuffed to a kitchen chair. “I just needed to make sure the cancer was gone,” she explained.
The room didn’t have a tub, only a shower stall, so I had no place to sit while the bobby questioned me about the cancer I hoped I didn’t have. I stood still, trying not to hear my mother in the next room, and watched the inverted bell curve of the pipe below the sink collect sweat into one big fat droplet that dropped and splattered on the policewoman’s shiny shoes.

When our friend who owned the flat came home and explained to the police that my mother was simply unwell and under his care, the police left. I was sent on a walk. East Walthamstow was waking up: women in skirt suits and tennis shoes shuffled toward the tube; men in suits bought papers at the lotto shop. I bought a paper cup of tea at the Indian take-away and bakery, Pakora Palace. When I returned, it was decided that we should go to Paris as planned. “You wouldn’t want to come all this way and miss the Louvre, would you?” my mother’s friend asked. I knew from his tone that it was not a question.

We waited two hours to get inside the Louvre. We stood before the Mona Lisa with forty other tourists. I posed for two snapshots that never developed right before a security guard hustled us along. The rain had followed us from London to Paris, but it was warm, and two men whistled as I leaned over the fountain outside to touch the cool water and my new breasts spilled forward in my Miss Selfridge tank top. One of the men offered to buy a real French café for the lovely American girl and her Maman. He smiled a smile I’d only seen on soap opera villains with twirled mustaches.
“You should cover yourself up,” my mother snapped and pulled me in the direction of the Champs Elysees, where I stopped by a bench to pull on a sweater, and I wished I could cut off the pubescent breasts that bothered her so much.

We went to the Musee D’Orsay too, because my mother loved Impressionism, and she walked through the halls as if she was floating. She loved the Van Goghs and Cezannes and Monets, everything in long filmy strokes of mauve and gold and gray like pastel day dreams. My mother saw life through a filter that couldn’t sift me out. There I stuck, the bold-colored premature child grown into an adolescent a few small nips just couldn’t cut down.

“I need a coffee,” she said, and I made a snarky remark about how she should have accepted that Frenchman’s offer.

“His offer was to you. Men don’t offer those things to me anymore,” she said. My mother was older than most mothers; my friends’ parents were in their forties, highlighted their hair, and still had babies. My mother was 55; depression had made her arms twig-like and her face gaunt. She spent every morning before the mirror lamenting the gray in her hair, but she refused hair dye. “There’s a coffee shop at that intersection,” she said, pointing ahead with a pink index finger, inflamed and raw from biting at the cuticles.

As we neared the intersection I saw affixed to a signpost a large photograph of Frida Kahlo, the one with the spider monkey cradled in her left arm; beneath the photo, the word Exposition, and an arrow pointing left. I looked
down the cobble road. There was a small gallery, nothing I would have noticed otherwise. A smaller leaflet taped below the photograph announced a temporary exhibition of a private collection of paintings.

“Ma! There’s a Frida Kahlo exhibit!” I nearly jumped into a raincloud.

My mother barely moved. “So?” She touched a hand to her forehead as though testing for a fever.

“So she’s my favorite artist.” I had six biographies of Frida Kahlo and two coffee table books of prints at home. A print of Self-Portrait with Monkey was framed upon my bedroom wall. “So I didn’t even know she would be here. I have to see it.”

My mother took two slow breaths like she was smoking a cigarette. “I’m very tired.” She looked across the street at the café. “Just go,” she said. “I’ll have a cup of coffee. I don’t care.”

While my mother drank coffee and pretended to eat a chocolate crepe, I walked slowly through a gallery whose name I can’t remember and from which I’ve no souvenir or ticket stub. There was a guard at the door, but the gallery was small and quiet, and there were no visitors inside. I panicked at the possibility this was all a joke: could a Frida Kahlo exhibit really be here? And go unnoticed?

I didn’t recognize most of the paintings. Then I saw it: Diego and I, hanging eye level on the far back wall. I moved closer. I was surprised that the painting was not larger – I had seen the plates in my books and read the stated
dimensions, but I never imagined that Frida Kahlo’s face on canvas could be as small as mine in flesh. There was no glass plate between our faces. I stood there an eternity, staring at Diego Rivera’s face painted in her head, wondering how Frida could love that man who made her cry.

I knew it was against the rules to touch the paintings. I knew there was something about the oil in my fingers mingling with the oil in the paints, but I doubted I could do much harm in a moment, one touch. I wished that Frida had painted her whole body onto the canvas so I could hold her hand. I wiped my own hands on my jeans. The gallery was very quiet. In a way it seemed we were alone.

So I touched Diego right on the nose. I did!

I’m sorry, but I did. Then, like testing the handle of a cast iron frying pan, I drew my hand immediately back toward my body and shoved it into my pocket.

I looked around. The gallery was still. Staring back at me, Frida’s face was unchanged, full with sorrow and the looming threat of those three white tears; Diego’s nose had not smeared his left cheek across her forehead. I wished I were home, lying on my bed with the FM radio tuned to that low-dial station that came in clear in good weather, counting the boxes on my ceiling aloud to drown out my mother screaming from the back of the house.

I couldn’t tell which feeling weighed more heavily upon me: relief or disappointment.
I had wanted to feel what she had felt, and to know how she could reconcile an inextinguishable love for someone, so necessary, who hurt her so often. What magic mirror did Frida Kahlo have that could light fondness on bestiality, and turn brutal her own grace?

I left the gallery, and the security guard who stood out front smiled and said goodbye in English. He was more polite than I’d been told French people would be to Americans, but I’ve always wondered what he thought of the girl alone on such a dreary day with her hands jammed so tightly into her pockets. When I was a safe distance down the road, I withdrew my fingers from my pants – no paint was stained upon my fingertips. They were only white, pale and lacking circulation, having hidden in my pockets so long.

I met my mother at the coffee shop, where she sat before an uneaten crepe staring into the distance at dusky cobblestones.

“You took a long time,” she said, and flattened her frizzy hair with her hands.

That haunted gallery in Paris has become a recollection for me, more akin to déjà vu than raw experience. The violent memories of my trip to London have also faded into blurry scenes my mother would have found pleasing to look at. I have never found a mirror like the one I imagine Frida Kahlo must have looked inside when she painted her self-portrait, crying tears as white as gesso.
So you’re eighteen and you’re on a date, and you’re pretty sure it’s the first real date you’ve ever been on. You’ve just been to a Spanish restaurant – not Mexican, Spanish – where you drank Sangria, and he paid, and now you’re waiting to get into a party that’s only thrown once a year on a ship that’s long been docked on a pier on the Hudson River.

This place is already like nothing you’ve ever seen before. You can’t see the scene onboard yet, and your date won’t tell you too much about it because, he says, he wants it to be a surprise, but you had to take a cab all the way to the west side, and there’s a man six and a half feet tall wearing a shirt that says SECURITY standing before a rope, and you can hear a DJ pumping dance music from out of sight.

It doesn’t look fancy exactly, but it’s trendy, and there is both a cover charge and a line to get inside. All the girls are wearing tight tube skirts and high-heeled shoes; some are wearing cropped leather jackets; and a few kind of look like Amanda from “Melrose Place.” You’re glad you decided to wear all black. The guys are wearing sweaters, not tee-shirts, and they’ve got their arms around the skinny Melrose girls beside them, who all have long hair. Though your date doesn’t yet have his arm around you, he’s touching your elbow, which is definitely a step in the right direction.
You’re starting to feel those two glasses of Sangria, for sure, and the breeze that’s coming off the river too, and it’s a beautiful night out, just perfect. You’ve just moved to Manhattan from Brooklyn, and even though it’s just a borough away – only three stops on the subway, really – you’re living in the city now. This is a whole new universe.

When you were a kid, and your brother was your age, he played guitar and had a girlfriend with big breasts and teased red hair and you hated her more than anyone in the world because she was gorgeous and because your brother spent all his free time with her instead of with you. When he was home, he’d ruffle your hair, which you cut yourself, badly, trying to make it look like Pat Benatar’s. You’d pout and he’d say, “Oh you, oh you, you always have to be so blue.” And he’d do a little two-step tap bit until you laughed, or at least gave him a little smile. He’d been everywhere, or so you thought, and you hadn’t been anywhere but your little room in Brooklyn, where you listened to Pat and Cyndi Lauper and that Clash record he left for you when he moved away, with your feet dangling off the side of the bed, singing *I’m so bored of the U – S – A –*

Of course, you still haven’t been anywhere, but at least you’re not living at home anymore. When you lived at home, the walls of your room were painted brown, because your mother wouldn’t let you paint them black. The first thing you saw when you woke up every morning was shit.
But now, now you’re in college, and you live in Manhattan where everything happens. Well, nothing’s happened. At least not yet. But it could happen, because you’re in the place where it happens, not at home, even if the difference is only three train stops. And you’re on your own, but not exactly alone, because you’ve made some friends, and you’re dating. There was the boy with the skateboard who took you to his see his friend’s band play, but never called you again. Then there was the guy with dark hair from your freshman seminar who left you standing by the DJ booth at the Safe Sex Awareness dance, trying over and over again to request the same Salt N Pepa song – not that one, the other one – while he chatted up the leggy blonde girl who always sits in the front row of your lit class.

Standing on this line, though, those dates don’t really seem to count, because the guy with the skateboard didn’t pay for your concert ticket, and the dance was a university-sponsored social event, so it was kind of school related. But this guy, this new guy, he’s 29, and he’s good-looking, really good-looking. He’s a teacher, but he’s not your teacher, so that makes it okay. He’s wearing a gray sweater, and you can see a few hairs poking out over the collar. He has hair. On his back. He’s a man, and you’ve never been out with a man before.

Then you notice something: the guy who’s collecting the cover fee and unlatching the clasp of the rope, which, you notice now is actually velvet, red
velvet no less, and latching it again as each new guest walks inside, is checking the ID cards of each person on line with a miniature black flashlight.

You look around again. The girls on the line suddenly are women, and the boys at their sides men, who could be their husbands, or maybe their fiancés, or at least men they’ve known for longer than just one date. These TV-pretty women probably have jobs, and career goals, and cats, and cases of birth control pills in their purses. At the very least, they’re 21.

You panic.

You don’t want to panic. You try to be reasonable: at the very, very least, they have fake ID that says they’re 21, which you don’t have, because it never occurred to you that you’d even end up at the sort of party where you’d have to be 21 to get inside.

So you panic.

You don’t want to look like you’re panicking, so you pretend not to panic.

“He’s checking ID,” you whisper to the man you’re with, and you have to step up on your tiptoes to do this because he’s tall, which all night you liked but now you find very irritating.

He leans down to meet your ear, and which eases the irritation. He’s probably used to reaching toward the woman at his side, you think, which for a fleeting moment puts you ill at ease but then doesn’t because it only means he
knows women, and is courteous too, and you think perhaps you won’t find
yourself irritated with him on too many future occasions.

“He’s checking ID,” you whisper again, more insistently, this time, hoping
he understands that you haven’t got the right ID to get inside.

“Did you forget it?” he asks, loudly, like he doesn’t realize that you’re
trying to be covert here, trying not to let everyone on the line know, especially the
bouncer, who’s only three people away from you now, that you’re underage. You
shush him and look around to see if anyone’s noticed. They haven’t. You shake
your head really quickly.

“Oh,” he says, understanding, maybe surprised; you’re not really sure.
You told him you were younger, but you didn’t tell him just how much younger.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Just tell him you forgot it,” he says. You’re not
sure that’s going to work, but he doesn’t seem to think it’s going to be a problem,
so you try to calm yourself down. You look older. You must look older. Then he
leans in closer to you and very quietly asks: “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” you say, barely audibly, just as you intended, but he hears
you, and you can tell he isn’t thrilled.

“Next!” the bouncer calls. He is a big man with a big booming voice and a
tiny flashlight. “ID?” he asks you and your date. Your date presents his; it’s given
the once-over with the tiny bulb: he’s approved. Done. “ID?” the bouncer asks
you.
“I didn’t bring it,” you tell him, humbly, scrunching up your face in what you think should serve as a nonverbal apology. You hold up your purse, a tiny Alaia bag you charged almost a month ago to your mother’s credit card that she won’t know about until she gets the bill in a few days. “I couldn’t fit my wallet in my purse.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.” Twenty-one would just be too convenient.

“When were you born?” he asks.

You do the math really quickly in your head: “May first, 1972,” you pronounce, confident in your arithmetic. You keep a poker face, and try not to watch the bouncer’s face for any reaction either.

“OK, five bucks each,” he says. Your date pays for both of you, which is good, because otherwise you’d have to reach for your money, which is in your wallet, which is in your purse. Then the bouncer opens the rope, the red velvet rope, and lets you inside, and you try not to breathe the huge sigh of relief one can only breathe after nearly experiencing intense rejection and humiliation in front of a gaggle of girls who look like Heather Locklear and a 29-year-old man in a gray sweater who has hair on his back.

You look at your date, expecting him to start the inevitable awkward conversation about your age, which you really don’t want to have right now, not
here, because you’re here, right now, and that’s what matters, and you just want to have a good time.

But he doesn’t. Instead he winks at you, and not the kind of wink you get from guys who make a pass on the street; it’s one of those conspiratorial winks, the kind that make you feel you’re sharing something really important. He nods toward the bar: “You want a cup of apple juice?”

You laugh like this is an inside joke you’ve both known forever and head over to the bar. “I’ll have an Absolut and tonic,” you tell the bartender, because it’s a smart-sounding drink, even though you don’t really drink anything but beer, and for the first time tonight, Sangria. “And he’s buying,” you add, and you purse your lips and raise your eyebrows at your date, as if to say *So there.*
ABSTRACTIONS

The boy doesn’t believe in words like soul. They are abstractions, he says, spitting the word like the idea is toxic, and poor approximations of the truths we too easily label feelings, concepts, ideas, understanding. He lists these on his fingers and shakes his head, sips his whiskey and puckers his lips. The girl waits for him to smile or at least glance back at her but his eyes are focused loosely on the watermark his glass has left on the bar top. She is quiet as she remembers something from long ago. A boy was involved, and a humid, enigmatic summer night, like this one.

The girl agrees with him – about soul, definitely; not as much about the others – so they talk about this and other trivialities with sincerity and false import until the bartender, bar rag in hand, urges them to make their way home.

She wonders later: what if that was not the way they met? What if they instead had met at work, if they had dropped their papers at the same time and bent to scoop them from the carpet? They might have said hello to the top of the other’s head as they scrambled to gather their belongings before turning back to their respective cubicles. She might have turned back once to smile, and then, not immediately, but a few days later, he might have invited her to lunch. This is the normal course of affairs, the girl thinks.
This is how the couples she knows met each other, like her newlywed college roommate, Jennifer, who met her husband in their university’s cafeteria by spilling a lukewarm cup of coffee on his expensive new trousers. They ran into each two days later, also in the cafeteria – he was wearing cheap old blue jeans and a tee shirt. He’d been dressed up the first time they met, he joked in his speech at their wedding reception, because he had a job interview. *He got the job,* Jennifer interjected, *stains on his pants and all.* Jennifer and her new husband laughed and kissed politely as the room toasted their champagne glasses to the happy couple. The girl felt lonely, and wished to fall in love that way.

It would have been better if she had met this boy in a romantic, comical way, if they had a story they could tell. If they had left the bar separately and not exchanged numbers, but met again some days later, unknowing the other would be there. That would have seemed like *fate* to the girl, or coincidence to him. They would have smiled, touched hands, kissed their first kiss in the bar, laughing at their good fortune, instead of sloppily falling into each other on the street outside, sweat rising at the nape of her neck and between their crushed foreheads.

She is tipsy this first night, but not drunk. It’s pleasant, gentle, the way he places his fingers between her legs, touching first her knee, then her thigh, awaiting her permission.
The girl is young, no younger than the boy but still young. She has yet to find her way in the world, her father often says vaguely on their long-distance telephone calls.

*I am lost,* she confesses to her father each Tuesday night when he calls. Now this too is abstract, she thinks.

*Don’t worry,* he always says, *you’ll get there.* Her father is supportive but nonspecific. The week she meets the boy, she doesn’t unburden herself when he calls.

She begins to take note of the abstractions in the world, now that the boy has pointed out their abundance: *confusion; fulfillment; hunger.* What is she hungry for? she must now ask herself. It is not enough to claim she is hungry at dinnertime. *I want Chinese food,* she must say. *I want vegetable lo mein. I want two egg rolls with duck sauce.*

Sometimes, though, she likes the impreciseness of things, the potential duality of language. Sometimes, she thinks, the abstractions are most beautiful.

Where the girl is from – not far from here, but far enough that the differences are distinct – life is linear and carefully plotted. Girls marry boys they meet in high school. They go to good schools and they get good jobs or they stay home and have babies young. They eventually buy houses close by the homes where they grew up.
*Good girls do not quit school*, her mother scolded when she left, *to gallivant in New York City with nothing to their names.*

Her father is more understanding and sends her money from time to time. In between, for rent, the girl works half days in a small, crowded office where the rest of the staff is male. She answers phones and impatiently taps her feet beneath her desk, a book hidden in her lap.

She knows few people in New York. There is Jennifer, the married girl who comes into the city to meet for cappuccino from time to time. Jennifer lives outside the city; she works hard and will have a child soon. The girl knows that when that happens, they won’t see each other often.

The girl is polite at work, friendly at times, but is never invited to happy hour with the boys. Often they flirt with her and she coolly smiles or raises an eyebrow in a given direction, but she thinks it is a game: they are intrigued by her bare legs beneath her proper skirts, the long hair she ties back, her quiet voice when she answers the phone. They think she is mysterious.

The boy is different, as are all the boys who really matter. He is from the city and a college graduate. His family has money and a townhouse on the East Side but he rents a studio uptown alone, close by the apartment she shares with two roommates she barely sees. He works from home, writing things like
instructional manuals and medical copy. He is a writer, but he explains that these are not the things he wants to write. He hasn’t shown the girl his stories.

A few nights after they first meet, they sit in his bedroom and listen to jazz. He owns a vintage record player; it makes her think of something out of a movie her father might have watched.

“Listen to that trumpet,” he instructs. The walls of his bedroom are cluttered with big music posters, small unframed paintings, and a tapestry that looks hand-woven. She closes her eyes and tries to focus on the simplicity of the single horn, the complication of a cymbal pulsing in the background.

“What is this?” the girl asks.

“Miles Davis. Listen,” he says again. When the record is finished he turns it over to hear the B side. They listen to the entire record twice. She can feel him watching her. She wants to know the titles of each piece; she wants to know what they mean. The boy tells her she can hear it in the notes if she listens carefully enough. They make love on top of his blanket, slowly this time, with his breath in one of her ears and a slow, sad trumpet in the other.

She knows the boy isn’t beautiful. His hair is too coarse, his cheeks too narrow, his lips set straight, perpetually ornery. He is striking, a word her mother might have used to describe a man in an old film. It is better to leave an impression than to only be pleasing to the eye. There are parts of him that excite
her: his eyes are blue and cold; they catch light when he stares at her. If she could, she would take them in her fingers and hold them up to the sun like prisms, to watch its beams dance across their surfaces. He is slight, unlike the boys she knew as a teenager, all gym rats and athletes, who liked to carry her over their shoulders, kicking and screaming, laughing, because she was small and they had the power. This boy’s weight on hers does not press down, does not suffocate. Most, she loves his hands; they grasp hers tightly, with necessity, with terror of letting go.

The girl complains about her job. She is bored, she tells him; they don’t respect her. Maybe she should go back to school.

“I can help you out,” he says one evening when she cries spontaneously upon walking through his door.

“My mother was right,” she spits between sobs, his hand on her back, guiding her to sit. “I can’t take care of myself.”

He wipes her face with a tissue.

“I can help,” he says. She knows what he means by this. She wants to say, No, I don’t need your money, I am a grown woman, I can do it myself. She shakes her head bitterly but says nothing. He kisses her forehead like he would a child’s.

She spends August on the edge of quitting. Each day, she arrives at work by noon, prepared to give her notice. Each day at one, she loses her courage.
The first Friday in September, the men at work talk amongst themselves about happy hour. She feels lonelier than ever before and she doesn’t come into work on Monday. On Tuesday she gives her resignation. No one seems surprised as she packs up her desk, tucking into her purse a few books and magazines, her favorite pen, an umbrella and a pair of high heeled shoes.

The boy pays her rent this month. “Take your time and figure out what you want to do.”

She reads a lot of books and searches the internet for job postings until she can no longer pay her cable bill. She wants a job where she can talk to people. It seems so romantic to be a bartender or a restaurant hostess, for example – to speak with people all night at work, earn tips by being friendly.

“Do you think I could be a bartender?” she whispers to the boy one evening over beers. The bartender, a bulky young man in a sleeveless tee shirt, daintily tops a martini with a toothpick of olives and places it gently before an older woman at the other end of the bar.

The boy is taken aback, briefly. “But you’re so quiet,” he says. He reaches out to touch her cheek; his hand is beer-moist and cold. “Plus, you’re smart. You should do something that requires some intelligence.”

When he takes a sip of his beer, the girl looks down toward the bartender – he is smiling, taking an order from a young couple who’ve just walks in. He doesn’t seem unhappy.
Before she dropped out, she did really well in her history classes and in English literature. But what could she do with that? She never wanted to be a schoolteacher, like most of the girls she knew in school. She enjoyed the theatre, too, the history classes and the performance. She’s never told the boy this – for some reason she is embarrassed – but when she was on stage, she spoke, loudly, confidently. She wasn’t shy at all. She felt like a completely different person.

She calls one of the City University campuses and gets a transfer application for next fall. That will give her time to collect herself first, to get a job and figure out what to do with her apartment, before she goes back to school.

She spends little time at her apartment, and almost all of her time with the boy. They go often to the cinema, to shows off-Broadway (which he always pays for), and to tiny new restaurants far downtown. They try the most exotic foods on the menus: she develops a taste for Indian curried eggplant; he becomes enamored of Moroccan merguez. They take cab rides back uptown, lying low in the backseat touching, sucking the taste of cumin from each other’s mouths.

They don’t socialize. The boy has almost as few friends as the girl has. She wonders if he is lonely – he seems sometimes that he is so deprived of contact, his limbs could break apart if she held too hard. Now that she is not working, she spends her days in his studio, watching him work on a typewriter. He is a poor typist – he makes frequent errors and sends piles of paper to the
wastebasket – but he doesn’t own a computer. He wants to feel what he is writing, he says.

One afternoon, while she is propped upon a stack of pillows reading Henry Miller, a book of his suggestion, he curses aloud, crumples a sheet of paper and hurls it at the closed window.

“I can help you,” she offers, meekly, careful not to insinuate that he needs the help.

“You want to type for me?” he asks. He turns in his chair. His teeth suck petulantly at his bottom lip; he looks like a child. He tries to smile. “It’s fine,” he says. “You should read.” He turns back and reloads a sheet of white paper into the typewriter. “I should learn to do it myself anyway.”

He wants it to be difficult, she realizes, and she cannot fathom why.

By November, her friend Jennifer is seven months pregnant. She has a co-ed baby shower, as people do these days, and encourages the girl to bring a guest. On the phone, Jennifer talks nonstop about the baby books she’s reading, the room her husband has painted genderless in green and yellow, and the names she has come up with for a boy or a girl. Jennifer makes her promise to bring the boy to the party.

The girl is quiet on the phone. She has mentioned the boy to her friend, if only to say that there is a boy she knows, but she speaks little about their
relationship – how does one use words to express such feelings? Jennifer is so at ease with them, but her explanations of the ins and outs of pregnancy and the excitement of impending parenthood do little to explain to the girl what she is feeling. The girl has no idea what pregnancy is like; words, she thinks while Jennifer rambles, symbols that they are, cannot convey experience.

When she arrives at his apartment later in the day, he is fumbling with the record player. “Keeps stalling out,” he says, as though it were a run-down truck. “I’ve been trying all day to listen to this record.” Charlie Parker’s face stares up at her from the table. The boy gets fed up and shoves the record back into the cabinet. He grabs her wrists and kisses her hard hello. Once released, she sinks her nose into his shoulder; his tee shirt smells like alcohol. She wraps her arms around his waist. He kisses deep into her hair.

A bottle of whiskey is set beside the computer.

“Hard day,” he says. He pours her a drink and pours himself another. They rest on the bed pillows and he strokes her arm with his fingertips.

She sits upright and faces him. Why, she wonders, is it so hard to talk? Since she learned the importance of choosing the right words, she has nearly become a mute.

“I would like you to come with me someplace,” she begins. Be specific, she tells herself. “To a party. A baby shower, actually. My friend is having a baby
and she wants us to be there.” She watches for a reaction on his face. “I want you to come,” she adds.

He sips his whiskey. “A baby shower?” he asks.

“She is having a baby. Yes. Please.”

“I don’t know. I don’t like those things.”

“What things?” she asks. He runs his hand over his hair. “Be specific,” she tells him.

He laughs a sharp single chuckle. “I’ll think about it,” he says. He kisses her on the forehead and she pulls away. “I’ll think about it,” he says again. “I have some work to do. Shall we go to dinner later?”

She nods and he returns to his desk. He types furiously for a while, then sits motionless for a while, then types again and discards the paper. Watching his back, she grows bored.

She should go home, she thinks. When she was actively looking for a job, she spent afternoons at her own apartment, working on her resume and calling the numbers she saw in the want ads. Now she only goes to her apartment to shower and change her clothes. She doesn’t keep a wardrobe in the boy’s studio, and he hasn’t suggested she share his closet. *Your place is right nearby,* he said the one time she complained that she had nothing to change into for dinner. *You might as well use it for something.*
Her apartment is cluttered, her bed a hamper of worn and crumpled clothes. Her roommates have their own quarters and they both have jobs, so their paths don’t cross hers. When she first moved to New York, she was excited about having her own place, even if it was a share. The apartment had two bathrooms, so, for a little extra money, she had her own standing shower that smelled like her favorite apple shampoo. Because the three girls shared a common kitchen and living room, she thought they might share meals or watch television together, but the other girls were rarely home. When they were, they each spent their evenings alone. On the first of each month, she left her part of the rent on the kitchen counter before leaving for work and it was always paid by the time she came home. Living with people only seemed to make the girl feel lonely.

She scans the records in the boy’s cabinet and fiddles with the phonograph. She clears dust from the needle and places a classic rock album she bought for him in the summer but hasn’t yet listened to on the turntable. The boy hates music with lyrics; words, he says, just cloud the meaning.

While he wrestles with his typewriter she closes her eyes, lies back on the bed; she listens to the singer’s voice and wonders what he means.

The week before Christmas she buys a roundtrip rail ticket to visit her parents. She doesn’t ask the boy to come with her. She’ll call him when she’s
back, she says. He looks her over in the doorway as she’s leaving. He kisses her
long and hard enough that she gasps.

“I might never see you again,” he says softly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says. She holds his hand tenuously then lets it

go.

Her parents meet her on the train platform, both smiling. Her mother
greets her more kindly than she has imagined but does not once ask what her
daughter is doing in New York, if she has friends, a partner, if she likes her work.

Before dinner, her mother pulls from beneath the tree a small wrapped gift
box. It is a pair of earrings, small and delicate, womanly and adult. She hugs her
mother gently. She has brought her mother a set of drinking glasses, voluptuous
and playful, with cursive scrawled across the bowl of each: *Cheers, Salud, Le
Chiam*. Her mother cooks a hearty meal and they serve red wine in the new
glasses. Her parents clink their glasses with hers once, a silent toast, and while she
lifts to drink, across the table her parents touch glasses once again and share a kiss
before taking their wine. They smile so calmly she feels like a spy, voyeuristic
and intrusive.

She offers to help with the dishes but her mother refuses. She sits in the
living room with her father, her toes curled beneath her on the sofa, her father
beside her in the leather armchair.
What does it mean to be at peace? She wants to ask. *Happiness* is the grossest abstraction she knows, nothing more than a blob of sounds unattainable in practice. The pinnacle is impossible to reach if it is never identified on the map. 

“I am lost,” she tells her father, laying her head against the arm of his chair. He caresses her hair. She wants to sob. She wants to hide beneath the sofa cushions and only come out when she is older, much, much older.

“You’re not lost,” her father says. “You know exactly who you are.”

Late in the winter, she runs into the boy on the street one evening as she makes her way from the subway station home. They stop on the concrete before the bar where first they talked, too long, then touched, too briefly. 

“Work clothes,” he says, not a question. It is shortly past seven p.m.

“It’s a job,” she says, “it’s not my passion.” She is self-conscious now. Her shoes are too tight. “But I like it,” she quickly adds.

He opens his lips twice but closes them. Between them, a palpable distance, a phone cord’s length of air, impassible.
THE BEE

In sixth grade, I lost my school’s geography bee by one question to an eighth grader named Miguel. The bee was held in the main auditorium. Attendance wasn’t mandatory, so the only people in the audience were six members of the geography club, three teachers, and Miguel’s parents. I hadn’t told my parents because I didn’t see anything particularly notable about the Geography Bee. I wasn’t even sure how I’d wound up there, except that we’d filled out a questionnaire in homeroom and I had been given the option of doing this in place of Social Studies and Biology. I knew nothing about geography. All I knew was that I wanted to travel everywhere in the world someday and that sometimes I liked to spin globes until I got dizzy.

For the occasion I wore my least favorite denim miniskirt, a hand-me-down Pearl Jam tee shirt, and lipstick I’d stolen from my mother’s makeup bag when I started junior high because I was sure that the girls in junior high school all wore lipstick. I stood on one side of the stage and Miguel stood on the other, and we both had microphones propped on metal poles in front of our faces. The Principal Mr. Morgan played moderator. He was a tall balding man who wore a red bowtie and asked each question very seriously, like Alex Trebek on Jeopardy!, which I watched every night and enjoyed much more.
Miguel answered a question about the prime meridian correctly. It was my turn.

Mr. Morgan narrowed his eyes at me, then back at the audience, then at me again.

“Which city,” he said into his microphone. He paused.

I was bored out of my mind. I bit my lips and ate the wax of my mother’s Lancome. I remembered reading somewhere that over the course of her life, the average American woman would accidentally consume the equivalent of an entire tube of lipstick. My mother’s lipstick tasted the way my Aunt Mary’s potpourri sachets smelled, like flowers and plastic.

“What?” I finally asked. The microphone crackled. Mr. Morgan looked unhappy.

“Which city,” Mr. Morgan began again. He coughed. Mrs. Mitchell, the French teacher, laughed in the second row. “Which city has a larger Spanish-speaking population: Miami, Florida or Baton Rouge, Louisiana?”

I knew that busted flat in Baton Rouge was the first line of “Me & Bobby McGee,” which I played at home on vinyl all the time, and to which I had the sheet music because when I turned eight my father decided I should learn to play an instrument and bought me a guitar. Baton Rouge made me think of guitars. Guitars made me think of the Mexican men in sequined sombreros who serenaded me at my favorite restaurant on my tenth birthday. I think they were singing
“Happy Birthday” but all the words were in Spanish. My parents also played a lot of Spanish protest music because my grandfather fought against the fascists in 1936, even though he was Russian.

I’d heard of Miami, but I’d never been to Florida. My parents prided themselves on being the only Eastern European Jews in Brooklyn who never went to Miami Beach to visit half-dead relatives. Our relatives were all already dead and we went to Vermont every summer to stare at cows.

“Baton Rouge,” I said. A lot of Spanish men sat on little stools and played flamenco guitar while dark-haired Russian women who looked like my mother danced around my head. I was pretty confident with my answer.
In the seventh grade, my parents were called into Mr. Morgan’s office because I’d gotten into a fight with some girls who threw gum in my hair. We all received a three-day suspension, although I was the only one who had to get a haircut. From a high-backed leather roller, with his legs up on his empty desk, Mr. Morgan sat my folks down on metal chairs to explain what happened. I thought it was all pretty obvious, considering the wad of bright red Bubble Yum clumped in the middle of my long yellow hair.

“Your daughter, shall I say, provoked a group of girls –” he began.

“That’s not true!” I yelled, and looked at my parents, who were looking at my hair. “Look at my hair!”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Morgan said, and cleared his throat. “It is not your turn. I am talking to your parents now. I am not talking to you.”

“You’re not talking to me?” I asked. “Fuck you, you’re not talking to me!”

I felt great. I felt like Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver*. I was suspended for six days.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OTHER

On Tuesday morning Leah wakes up in an unfurnished Soho loft where Max’s father used to show his work. She rises quietly and dresses while he sleeps, but because he’s been nice, and also because she can’t find her purse, she doesn’t leave right away. With her skirt pulled on and her feet hovering over the edge of the bed, she lies like a wooden plank and waits for Max to wake.

When he does, he blinks a few times and turns on his side to face in her direction. The blanket that had covered him falls away and Leah bristles at his nudity, which for reasons of which she is unsure, takes her by surprise.

“Good morning, Leah,” he says too formally.

Leah doesn’t smile. “Hey.”

He looks her up and down. She’s dressed, down to the pumps she wore last night. “You’re dressed,” he notes. “Have you been awake long?”

“Not really,” she says. She has no idea how long she’s been lying here, though it feels like it’s been hours. With her eyes she has scanned every corner in the loft for her bag, all to no avail.

“I hope you slept okay,” Max says. “I don’t have much in the way of comforts, as you can probably see…” He begins talking about the mattress. In part Leah listens but mostly she counts the ceiling tiles. She considers inquiring as to where her purse has vanished but doesn’t bother. Instead she lets him talk; stray
words fall by like dust sanded from misshapen bricks. *Fun* is one of those words, and serves as Max’s bland description of whatever it is they’ve just had together.

Leah and Max had attended the same college a few years back, but the last she’d heard he had left New York to attend graduate school. She didn’t know until last night in fact that he was living again in New York City. He was drinking alone at the Shanty, where Leah often drank alone, and because she didn’t want to be alone this particular evening, she let him buy her a drink when he sat beside her at the bar. That drink led to another and then another, which more or less led her here, listening to Max’s awkward attempt to give closure to their night together. It has all been a mistake.

Max can’t believe that he has woken naked beside Leah Brooks.

He had lived three doors down from Leah in the coed dormitory at Benton University, and though they had been friendly enough to say hello when passing and once or twice share pleasantries in the elevator, they had never been friends. They had certainly not, much to Max’s chagrin, become romantically or sexually involved. Leah had always been with Samuel, though their relationship had a turbulence Max would have found disconcerting. Benton was a small school, and the parts of their relationship not otherwise evident quickly grew to be common knowledge. Both Leah and Samuel had had numerous lovers, many of whom were thrown in one another’s face. Neither Leah nor Samuel saw a need to be
discreet with their dalliances, their disputes, or fights. They had become part of the Benton University landscape, could be heard throughout Teagan Hall.

Like many Benton students, Max moved onto graduate school and profitable work outside of New York; from what he’d heard through mutual acquaintances, Leah and Samuel had stayed in the city, together in their usual off-and-on fashion. Though he never imagined he would see her again, Leah remained a fond memory for him, distant as she was. When his father passed, Max moved back to New York City. He found work at an architectural firm not far from the Shanty Bar.

Had Leah not been alone, Max isn’t sure he would have ever had the courage to approach her. But she was indeed alone, peeling the label from a Hoegaarden beer bottle and reading a thick book whose title he couldn’t make out in the dark. Occasionally she looked up and spoke to the bartender or glanced at the television above the bar, but mostly she focused on the book before her. If she was reading, she did so slowly and rarely turned the pages.

He had recognized her hair first, a thick auburn sheet that fell to mid back and wrapped around her shoulders like a prayer shawl. She turned around once and seemed to notice him, and he saw those eyes, deep brown circles that focused on everything and nothing all at once, and he knew it was Leah. Max walked over, atypically self-assured, and offered to buy her another Hoegaarden, although she hadn’t yet finished the one she was toying with.
“Max,” he said. “Morovsky. Benton University.” He waited for her to make the connection.

“Max! College. Yes. Sit.” He sat. She turned to the bartender. “I went to this college with this guy. He studied some sort of art. He’s going to get me a drink.”

He bought her a martini and they spoke about graduate school, the firm he’d worked for in Chicago, and his recent relocation to New York. She spoke little except to say that she wrote briefs for a show business trade paper that didn’t pay much. He’d heard about the accident, but he didn’t mention it right away. Samuel’s attack was common knowledge in New York City, particularly among Benton alumni, and he figured it would come up in conversation without his urging.

Max wanted to reach out to Leah, to offer her his shoulder, but after nearly an hour of fluid conversation, he hadn’t found an opportunity. When Leah crossed her leg beneath the barstool and brushed her calf against his knee, he said quietly: “I’m sorry about Samuel.”

Leah froze with drink in hand, and looked at him with eyes so blank Max wasn’t sure she’d heard.

“Leah,” he began. He looked away from her face.

Leah set her martini on the bar with a crack; Max thought for a moment that the glass might break. He watched the little vodka that was left swish from
side to side inside the bowl. By the time the liquid settled, Leah had climbed halfway off the barstool and was gathering her purse and coat.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.

Max now notices that the clock on the wall reads half past eleven; he never sleeps so late. He moves off the side of the bed and begins pulling on a pair of dark blue jeans as Leah rolls over onto her belly and props herself up on her elbows. She wants to leave, but she isn’t sure where to go.

“Do you work today?” Max asks, reaching over her for a tee-shirt that had fallen between the bed and the wall. The vintage shirt features a worn screen print of one of Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* and Leah can’t believe she let herself go to bed with a man who walks around with tomato soup on his chest.

“What day is today?”

“It’s Tuesday.”

“No,” she says. “I only work Fridays.” On Fridays, Leah goes into the office where the paper she writes for is edited and meets with her managing editor, a tall man with slumped shoulders who gives her a list of topics to cover in back page briefs this week. On good weeks, he gives her tickets for a play she is to review. Most of the productions are sophomoric at best but they give her something to do for two hours, even if she doesn’t have someone to whom to give the second ticket.
“That’s a nice schedule,” Max says.

Leah sighs and looks down at the pillow. Did she hang her purse on the doorknob when they first came in last night? She hates small talk. In fact, she hates all kinds of conversation these days: small talk bores her, and discussion of anything more meaningful than mundane poses a near-inevitable threat of sending her into hysterics. Most everything gets her thinking about Samuel.

Any contact with a friend or acquaintance she hasn’t seen in a while inevitably leads to an offering of condolences. Most people did not address Samuel’s condition directly, as though mention of it were a hex akin to saying “MacBeth” aloud backstage. Her mother calling still whispers the word “coma” the way a character might whisper “cancer” in a Woody Allen movie. Perhaps some of her friends think Leah is too fragile for the discussion; Leah believes, though, that people refrain from direct discussion for their own sakes. They don’t want to hear the gruesome facts anymore than they have to. She thinks it cowardly, but she understands, and she never burdens her friends with unnecessary details of either Samuel’s or her own suffering. The only bit that really irritates her is when people refer to it as an accident. Three thugs kicking one man’s head into the pavement is no accident.

“It’s an okay schedule,” she replies, looking up at last. More than anything, she wishes she had something to do or somewhere to go or someone to see that would keep her sufficiently occupied. She has two weekly sessions with
Dr. Becker, Valium prescribed *as needed*, and a stool at Shantytown Bar dented with the marks of her sitbones, but if she’s made any progress, if she is indeed moving on, she wouldn’t know how to identify the signs.

“I have some work to do,” Max says, “but you can stay here.”

Leah doesn’t seem to be considering this. Her face registers little when he speaks to her; she looks not vacant but otherwise occupied, and her eyes possess a weary quality usually reserved for the abjectly poor and seriously ill. She is attractive, but the sexuality Max first saw in her has transmuted overnight in his eyes into something more serene. Her skin appears no longer porcelain but paper fair in striking contrast with her dark shapeless hair, and her cheeks look gaunt and sunken in.

Leah, to Max’s recollection, had been a passionate, if somewhat unbridled woman, and men, Samuel included, were drawn to her by a gravity she was at least in part aware was her own to control. In college she had had a penchant – one might even say a fondness – for throwing breakable objects down the corridor when Samuel left her room.

Once, following an especially loud disagreement, Leah had thrown a large bottle of perfume across the hallway that smashed against the wall just beside Max’s bedroom door. She then leaned defiantly against the wall, a spiteful glare
in her eyes, and said to Samuel, who was halfway down the hall: “Fuck your Chanel Number Five.” Then she smiled.

Max had been exiting the men’s room at the time, but instead of crossing Leah and Samuel’s battlefield, he stood in the common area down the hall and watched as Samuel walked back to where Leah was standing. They stood glaring at one another a moment and then they both knelt to the floor. Together, they picked up the pieces of broken glass that lay scattered there; leaving a puddle of perfume behind, they carried the fragments to Leah’s room and closed the door.

For weeks afterward, Max’s bedroom smelled like Leah.

He can’t imagine that the Leah he saw from afar in school was the same Leah now reclining in his bed, and though he would prefer she still have that passion he had so admired he cannot help but be grateful for his present good fortune. A thought enters his mind that he quickly pushes past: just as he is thankful for his good luck, he is equally grateful for Samuel’s misfortune. Had Samuel not been hurt, Leah would never have given him the time of day, let alone the hours of night. He lingers on the thought longer than makes him comfortable: if Leah is only here because Samuel is not, might he be taking advantage of her present vulnerability?

"Sure," Leah says. "I have a book in my purse I can read."

*I am not forcing her,* Max thinks. *She is making the choice to stay.*
“We can go for supper later,” he says quickly. He wants to prolong their encounter as long as possible. Besides, though he’s always had a thing for skinny girls, the sharp corners of Leah’s hips – which are poking through her tight dress like congruent equilateral triangles – worry him. From her broad shoulders and large breasts, which to his recollection used to be even larger, often on full display in low-cut blouses that tortured as much as delighted him back in school, he is sure she is built to be a larger woman. Her present slightness, though lovely in its fragility, looks sickly. He wants to feed her, care for her, satiate her in a way a sneaking inner voice he tries to ignores warns him he cannot. “There’s a really nice Greek place on the corner. It’s family-run, authentic. They know me there. I love the place. The owner, the woman, she’s a funny lady –” He knows he’s rambling but he can’t stop himself – “and she wants to marry me off to the youngest daughter, but the daughter, she’s still fifteen.” He takes a much-needed breath. “And she has a mustache.”

Leah doesn’t even smile.

“Maybe you shouldn’t take me there then,” she says quietly, to Max’s disappointment. He looks away and notices for the first time that there are cracks in the paint on the far right wall. “They might not like it,” Leah adds dryly. “Arranged marriage and all.” When Max looks at Leah he sees that she has cracked a smile which, because he doesn’t know is forced, eases the worry in his forehead.
Leah can’t understand why she has just agreed to spend the day in this bare, boring loft. She does have a book she can read, and the truth of it is that she hasn’t anyplace else to go. She saw Dr. Becker yesterday, and at the end of the session was advised to keep herself occupied any way possible – avoiding of course any substances not medicinally distributed. She doesn’t see Dr. Becker again until Thursday, so she hasn’t anything to do today but pass time.

She used to visit Samuel in the hospital on Tuesdays, because on Tuesdays, his mother took an aerobics class that she valued above all else, so Leah was free to sit with Samuel unguarded. After four months in what the neurologists called a semi-comatose state – his brain showed signs of function, but his body was frozen, as though he were trapped beneath a plane of glass – few doctors, even specialists, were willing to offer a definitive prognosis. It was possible he would regain motor function; it was also possible, and perhaps more likely, that he would remain this way, unmoving, for an indefinite period of time. This diagnostic ambiguity Leah found particularly hard to take, and she found herself, week after week, by his bedside in a perpetual state of waiting, hoping this would be the day.

She talked to him about everything, which once he was gone, was not much at all. She gossiped about mutual friends she only rarely saw. She complained about her mother, and sometimes also his, though only in whispers. She described the plays she’d seen, down to the types of seats in the house and the
shoes the actors wore with their period costumes. She poked fun at all the Shakespeare revivals she’d seen, even though she loved Shakespeare, because Samuel had hated all things Shakespeare, and she wanted to be on the same page as him now. She sometimes imagined he would rise from his bed and say, “Yeah, you’re right, and who in their right mind says ‘thou’ these days?” She had many such fantasies sitting at his bedside.

A few times, he kicked his right leg out suddenly and spasmodically, in response to nothing in particular.

The first time Leah had jumped out her chair and pressed the little red button for the doctor at once. “His leg!” she’d cried. “His leg jumped.”

The doctors performed a series of tests, but were unable to duplicate the action at will. It happened a few more times over the course of a month, but no one could tell Leah for certain whether the movement was one of attempt and awareness or simply a physical reflex. For a while after that Samuel began blinking in response to doctor’s questions – one blink for yes, two blinks no – but the accuracy of the answers he supplied was too inconsistent to definitively mark as progress.

The last time Leah had gone to visit was the worst – Samuel had screamed, a high-pitched wail akin to a hyena’s cry that only subsided when a nurse pulled her out into the hallway, where she sat, shaking on the slippery waxed floor, while a sedative drip was injected into Samuel’s IV. By that visit,
Samuel weighed 98 pounds. A feeding tube protruded from his concave belly; a breathing apparatus was lodged inside his throat between the sharp sticks of his collarbone, and something called a Texas catheter – a noninvasive catchall involving a latex condom with a hole punctured in the tip – poked from beneath the thin hospital sheet.

Throughout the day, Leah moves silently through Max’s apartment like an apparition, seemingly without purpose. She takes note of open cabinets but does not close them. One of the slats in the kitchen blinds is bent; the only piece of furniture aside from the futon bed is a round coffee table built of a filmy glass that looks dirty but Leah assumes is designed to only appear so. Everything in Max's apartment looks intentional, as though the entire room had been fully furnished and then emptied, one piece at a time, until it achieved the perfect level of sparseness. On the left wall hang three paintings as tall as windows: one is an androgynous face depicted in a sort of cubist fashion; one is a series of brown and tan lines like tiger stripes. Only the third, the rightmost painting, closest to the door, strikes Leah as powerful – a large blue square covers most of the canvas; beneath the square lies a small green ellipse, and inside the square, in the bottom left corner, three small red circles, almost as an afterthought. Leah cannot identify what it is that draws her in about this composition – is it the color of the square
perhaps, a blue so vivid she must squint her eyes, or is it merely its enormity, the sheer amount of space it occupies?

Max, meanwhile, sits upon the floor with his blueprints laid out on the coffee table. He makes an occasional correction to his sketches but mostly he waits for Leah to need something from him, which she never does. She paces the apartment as though she will soon find whatever it is she doesn’t know she has been looking for. More than once, only when he hears the lock of the bathroom door catch does Max realize she has crossed the room behind him.

When she asks him about the paintings, he stands behind her and tells her about his father, who had been a marginally successful painter not long before Max was born.

“This one,” he says, pointing to the piece with the huge blue square in the center, “was supposed to represent colonization. American dominance, I suppose. He said the square was a U.S. Navy ship and the little green oval was the ocean.” Leah doesn’t say anything, so he keeps talking. “He meant to show that we thought we were so powerful we could displace the ocean. The red dots, I guess, would be communism. He never said that, but it’s a rather obvious symbol, even for my dad…”

Max’s father was Russian by birth and never grew accustomed to living here. Max tells Leah that he lived by the principles of art – if it was beautiful, it
was important. If it possessed a meaning that could not be determined at first

    glance, it was all the more worthwhile.

    “He taught me to paint,” Max says. “He also taught me to draw and one
time even to papier-mâché. He told me I showed promise, but I was more
interested in Frank Lloyd Wright than Pablo Picasso.” He looks over to Leah, still
staring at the square. “When I told my father I was planning to study architecture,
the old man asked me, ‘Where is the room for art with all those particulars?’”

Leah doesn’t move.

    “The art is the particulars,” she says. “The particulars are the art.”

    “That’s what I think, too. My father didn’t think much of architecture,” he
tells Leah. “He liked places like this. Empty. Open.” He gestures unnecessarily
around the room in the manner of a salesman showing his wares.

    “Lots of negative space,” Leah adds. She closes her eyes and the blue
square still swims behind her eyelids.

Leah hates this apartment. She wants to clutter it up with furniture and
knickknacks, bookshelves lined up side to side along each wall, and she wants to
throw things in here too, décor pillows and dartboard darts and big glass bowls
and giant sprays of paint across the walls. The one time she and Samuel lived
together, for three months in Spanish Harlem, the double bed was wedged into a
space that also fit a set of dresser drawers, a shelf of books, and a bedside table
that was always piled too high; there wasn’t a free foot of space and nothing
matched, and Leah was very comfortable. The walls were gray when she and Samuel rented the place, but they repainted themselves the weekend they moved in. Leah chose some shade of off-white – ecru or eggshell, she thinks it was called – because they both thought white too harsh.

They hadn’t assembled the bed yet, nor the dresser, but there were books stacked on the bookshelf; on top of the shelf, an aluminum tray sat filled with purple paint. Leah was standing on a stepladder holding a brush edged in violet to do the trim along the ceiling. It was one of those old buildings that had moldings bordering the floors and ceilings along four walls, as though every room was a uniquely decorated diorama, singular and sequestered from the room next door. With worn beach towels spread across the floor as drop cloths, they had unofficially split the room so that Leah would paint the half beside the window that peered across a small galley at the apartment building next door, while Samuel painted the right side. The moldings on her side were half finished when she looked over at Samuel, kneeling in a corner, where they’d later cram a nightstand, second-coating a line of trim along the floor, and for some reason Leah wrapped her fist around the wet paintbrush then glued her sticky purple palm to the freshly painted ochre wall.

The thud of her hand was louder than she might have anticipated and Samuel snapped his head in her direction.
“What the hell is that?” he asked. He pointed a narrow paintbrush in the air.

Leah held her purple hand to Samuel like a Stop sign. She looked at the fresh handprint she’d stamped upon the wall, which now seemed the distant whorls of a foreign language. Then she looked back at Samuel, whose face was pinched in such puzzlement he reminded her of a hamster. “It’s our first apartment and I want to be inside the walls.” Samuel’s eyebrows were in danger of meeting in the middle of his face. Leah laughed. “I can paint over it, I suppose.”

Feeling suddenly sheepish, she wiped her purple hand on the old tee shirt she wore and shook her head as Samuel’s face unwrinkled. “Leave it.” Samuel shrugged his shoulders and smiled a wan, crooked smile. “I like it,” he said, and returned to painting purple curlicues along the wall.

They made love that night on the stained beach towels coated in each other’s sweat and peeling paint. Leah slept soundly with Samuel’s arm wrapped around her body. She woke happy the next morning in her own apartment amid the smell of salt and lacquer, and saw her hand, apropos of nothing, floating in a wall of ecru.

When she didn’t live there anymore, when they’d made it past another one of their break-ups, that room was still the only place where Leah felt at home. She stayed over most nights, and when she was sure Samuel was asleep, she tiptoed
across the bed and onto the dresser to press her palm against her own stained handprint on the wall. Each time she wondered, though she never dared to ask, how many women who’d been in Samuel’s single bed had tried to fit their fingers inside her hand.

“Samuel paints.” Leah pauses and with her lips pressed tightly together rethinks this. “He used to paint,” she corrects. Her therapist has warned her against referring to Samuel in the present tense, as though he still occupied a constant immeasurable space in her life. Referring to him in this way, Dr. Becker says, keeps her stationary when she should be focused on forward movement. Standing with Max now, before his father’s blue abstraction of a ship, she wonders if perhaps she shouldn’t have mentioned Samuel at all. “I mean, he dabbled. It was a hobby more than anything else.”

Max nods and doesn’t shift his gaze from the navy square. “What did he paint?”

Leah breathes deeply and speaks slowly. “Portraits mostly. Acrylics. Nothing fancy; he never studied it; he just picked up a few tubes one day. He was an accountant, for God’s sake. I think painting allowed him a certain distance from the world.” Another breath. Another exhalation. “He painted me once.”

Samuel’s portrait of her had been a bold colored rendering in the elegant, overtly sexualized style of a Modigliani. Her neck was sketched long and her hair
swept up into a French knot. She sat for only one day while Samuel sketched her form and then he did the rest by memory. Today, Leah is sure she more closely resembles a Frida Kahlo portrait, a woman’s face with the face of a man painted above the brow. She wears a widow’s brand upon her forehead, though she has never been a wife, and Samuel has not died.

“You’d be a wonderful muse, Leah,” Max says. “I’d love to see the painting.”

“Samuel has the painting.” When the painting was completed, Samuel kept it in the Harlem apartment, though only sometimes hung it on the wall. She supposed the painting represented the state of their relationship – if the painting were visible, they were stable. Were the painting set aside, Samuel was hinting that he needed space, or else she had hinted so, and he was avoiding anything that bore her likeness.

Leah raises her eyes at Max with what looks to be the weight of the universe upon her brow. “Do you know where I left my purse?” she asks. “I’d like to read now.”

Leah hasn’t seen Samuel in nearly two months.

Her visits are ill-advised by doctors in his camp and her own: for her, they keep her soldered to the past, unable to move forward with a life alone. For his sake, if he can in fact comprehend his surroundings, a matter on which the doctors are still unsure, there is the possibility her presence could arise in him
overwhelming emotions which, whether negative or positive, might be too much for a man in his delicate condition to safely process. Leah recites this doctor-speak when she unintentionally finds herself on Madison Avenue, right outside the hospital. She repeats the warnings while staring through glass doors at the security desk until she turns around and heads downtown.

When she was first informed of the decision to keep her out of his room at the hospital – made by a team of doctors and Samuel’s mother – Leah’s first reaction was anger. The surprising part, at least to Leah, was that her first wave of anger was directed at Samuel himself, for in all of eight years never once having asked her to marry him. If they had been married, she reasoned, she could not have been prevented from visiting his bedside.

The painting of her is still in his apartment, likely stacked with all the other unframed canvases aside his desk, where she cannot see her likeness or Samuel’s handiwork. She is furious, but at a man who cannot move or speak, who may never know her hostility or be able to respond to it, a man who, most all, she only wants to crawl into bed beside and fall asleep as though six months have never passed.

Until the sun sets Tuesday, Leah sits on a bare loft floor downtown and tries to read a book by Nabakov, because Samuel always liked Nabakov, but finds herself for hours stuck on the same page.
Eventually, Max stops pretending to work on his blueprints and asks Leah if she wants to eat. She shrugs. They have a late dinner at the Greek restaurant, where Max orders Moussaka and also Spanakopites, and Ouzo to start for the both of them. They then order a bottle of red wine, and by the time the bottle is half empty, Leah appears to Max much more the gregarious woman he so fondly remembers. She is animated as they discuss a play she has recently reviewed, and a movie they have both seen in the theater, a poor remake of a classic thriller that Leah had loved.

She doesn’t talk about Samuel, so neither does Max.

He notes with concern that Leah only picks at the salad she has ordered, and never once touches the warm basket of toasted bread at the center of the table.

This is the first time Leah has had dinner with a man since Samuel was attacked, and all she can think about is the Greek restaurant in Astoria he had taken her shortly before the accident.

The night of the attack, they’d had plans to go to some upscale lounge for a party Samuel’s boss had organized, but they had had one of their fights, which, they both had noted with pleasure not long before, had become far less frequent in recent months. At the very last minute, Leah had decided not to accompany Samuel to the party. This decision involved a stream of curses, a stated preference to eat a box of rusted nails rather than go out with you, and a beer bottle thrown
at the door and broken, but when Leah stormed out in her red dress and heels, it
didn’t feel as though anything too out of the ordinary had happened.

    Samuel would go to the silly work thing himself, get bored, drink too
much, pay too much money for a cab uptown, and call Leah in the morning to
apologize. It was a typical fight in the Leah-Samuel repertoire, and she was sure
they would quickly resolve matters. When the phone rang at a quarter past four in
the morning, she figured it was Samuel, drunk, ready to make up a few hours
ahead of schedule.

    Max asks Leah if she’s enjoying her salad.

    She smiles a crooked and purposely melodramatic smile, which Max
doesn’t identify as insincere. “I love grapes,” she says, and pours herself another
glass of wine.

    She was supposed to be at the bar that night. Had she been at the bar,
Samuel wouldn’t have spent all his money at the bar. He wouldn’t have found
himself with none left over for a cab home. He wouldn’t have been walking from
the train alone at half past three in his best suit with those silver cufflinks Leah
had bought for him shining through his French cuffs like flashing target signs. As
long as Samuel’s in purgatory, then so too is she.
Leah goes home with Max again; she’s drunk and she doesn’t want to go home alone. She knows that if she does, she’ll sit on her twin bed in the dark but for the glow of the television, and think about Samuel.

Max seems to want to please her, so she lets him, and he tries, and tries, and she keeps her eyes closed and pictures Samuel’s face. She comes at some point, but it’s not like anything, let alone pleasure; it’s just nothing, more and more nothing building up into so much nothing there is nothing more to bear, nothing to avoid, and that’s kind of like coming. She has a memory of pleasure, and maybe that is what she feels as orgasm.

The pulse between her legs subsides slowly, like a throbbing headache finally eased by a double dose of aspirin. She watches Max’s moist lips curl into a cocky smile and wonders if she might be getting a migraine. While conjuring a small white ball of light rolling across her brow bone, melting away any pain that might accumulate there, she lets her eyes lose focus toward the ceiling and inhales a series of deep yogic breaths, as her doctors have suggested she do in times of stress. Every moment is a time of stress. The white light settles in the cavity behind the pinched bridge of her nose, and with each inhalation doubles in size so that by the time she has completed ten breaths, a brilliant white translucence has spread throughout her body.

Her eyes drift shut for a moment and when she opens them she is disappointed to see that Max’s grin has only grown wider.
“You’ve blinked,” he says. He watches her like a specimen inside a Petri dish. She imagines her body covered by a blanket of white light. “You’ve been staring at the ceiling so long I thought you might have fallen asleep. I could have fit coins in your eyeballs.”

Max’s own eyes are light brown, on the small side, and not unkind.

“I feel suspended.” Her body is the white light.

“Suspended? In what?” He looks at her with a genuine, if overbearing, curiosity. He isn’t her type at all. He’s pale, and he’s a substantial guy – not tall but thick in the arms and shoulders. Even before she met Samuel, she was drawn to men who had height but lacked width, and all the men she’d had while seeing Samuel – men she took home to make Samuel jealous or else to convince herself she didn’t care – also resembled Samuel.

“I don’t know.” Her eyes are burning and she closes them. “I suppose in time. Monkey bars.” She coughs a weary laugh.

“Monkey bars?” Max doesn’t get it.

“Forget it.”

“What do you want, Leah?”

Leah turns around so that her face is buried in the pillow and her dry mouth, sucking at the cotton, tastes likes alcohol and salt. She wants to sleep. She wants to wake up somewhere else. She wants it to be tomorrow. She wants it to be yesterday.
“Forgiveness,” she says to the pillowcase.

When she was a child, she played inside the jungle gym for hours each day, weaving in and out of the metal rungs like a skier down a slalom slope. Often she dangled upside down by her bent knees from the highest bar, long tied hair flopping at the ground, until her legs began to chafe and blood pooled red in her cheeks, and her mother, sitting with all the mothers on the long side bench, began to worry about her circulation. When she flipped off the bar and landed on her feet, Leah always assured her mother she wasn’t dizzy, not at all, but every time she stumbled her first few steps.
A YOUNGER GIRL

After dinner, which Ben has cooked to welcome us into his home, while his wife Francesca pours the second bottle of wine, we sit around the table and talk about drugs, because none of us do drugs anymore, and talking is what we’ve got left.

My boyfriend Samuel tells the story of a mushroom trip in college when he realized that the answers to the universe weren’t in the words of the books he was reading, but in the books themselves. “I was taking some philosophy class,” he says. “It was a Plato book. I think I woke up the next morning and felt guilty that I tore the pages out.” I remember this: he called me and told me it was good that books were rectangular, and then he hung up the phone.

“I took about an eighth once that kicked in right as I got to my apartment building, which was a walk-up, of course,” I say. “For an hour or so, I’m going up and down this endless staircase… it was like getting lost inside an M.C. Escher painting.” I remember now that, once the stairs were navigated, I stared out the window in solitude at what I later learned were not stars but Christmas lights.

Francesca tells us that when she changed high schools as a teenager, she tried to impress her new friends by bringing pot to a party. Her connect was a clown who did parties at the children’s center where she worked after school, and
he gave her what seemed a reasonable price. The pot turned out to be a baggie of oregano.

For a moment the table’s attention turns to Shannon. She shakes her head. She has freckles and frizzy pale hair that doesn’t move when her head moves.

She is teetotal, a vegetarian, and a personal trainer by occupation. Despite the fact that Vermont has plenty of options in the way of organic and vegetarian foods, Shannon has chosen not to dine with us on most occasions. Instead, she has carried with her a very large bag of cashew nuts. This is not for monetary reasons, as I first believed – at one point, she and her boyfriend Terry went to the green market to purchase basil leaves, cumin seed, chamomile flowers, and, yes, more cashew nuts. They boasted that the bill came to $106.

Shannon is also a good deal younger than the rest of us, 20 or 21 years old at most, the girlfriend of Samuel’s best friend, who has opted out of dinner after our afternoon hike left him with more mosquito bites than appetite. Shannon chose to join the group and, commendably, left her bag of cashew nuts in the car. She and Ben’s wife found some common ground temporarily (Francesca is a graduate student studying herbal medicine) but by the time we’ve finished our meal, Shannon’s voice has disappeared from conversation entirely.

“I’ve never done an illegal drug in my life,” she asserts as vigorously as a witness swearing testimony into record.

“Nothing?” Francesca asks.
Shannon’s mouth is sealed and she is sucking at her teeth as though she can barely tolerate the notion.

I asked her, on the first day of the vacation, why she didn’t drink. We were in a convenience store, picking out a single bottle of beer to have with dinner, because the people we stayed with that first night didn’t drink, and I wasn’t having any fun.

“I don’t like it,” she said.

“The taste of the liquor or the way it makes you feel?” I asked, as I scanned the refrigerator shelves of beer. I like a good IPA, the way the bubbles melt into the bitterness; there are no pleasantries to an IPA. It presents itself to you for what it is and doesn’t hide behind a sweet exterior.

“Both, I suppose,” she said. I didn’t buy this. I have tried to live my life by a don’t knock it till ya try it kind of policy, as though there were a curious cat sitting on my shoulder where, in classic TV comedies, a shrunken red devil might be.

“Have you ever been drunk?” I pressed.

“Once or twice. I didn’t like myself much,” she said. I didn’t press further. Then she asked me why I did drink.

“I like the taste of it,” I said, “and I like the way it makes me feel.”
I do not understand this girl. When I was 20 years old, I wanted to eat the world as though utensils had never been invented, and here she sits while a 2005 bottle of Chateau Fontbernaud Bordeaux is passed around the table with a supersized bottle of Fiji water.

“Well, I’ve experimented with just about everything,” Ben says to change the subject.

I’ve liked Ben from the moment we walked in the door. Maybe it’s because he’s cooked up vegetarian fajitas with grilled zucchini and red bell peppers and a side of long grain yellow rice and pinto beans; maybe it’s because the first and the last time I met him, five years ago at home in New York City, he had white rasta dreadlocks, and asked me for directions to the Nuyorican Poet’s Cafe; I can’t say. I sense that he’s a kindred.

“Except for acid,” Ben adds. “I won’t drop acid.”

“Why not?” asks my boyfriend, who has dropped acid more times than he can remember, and Francesca, Ben’s wife, rolls her eyes, as though she’s heard this whole deal before.

“So you know,” he starts, and Francesca sighs melodramatically and throws her head of big brown curls into in her hand, her other hand careful not to tip the Burgundy. “It’s true!” Ben cries at her right ear, and ruffles her hair with his hand. He looks back at my boyfriend and me. “I’m not making it up, look it up, it’s true,” Ben says, “if you’ve tripped more than 7 times –”
“You can be certified as legally insane!” I conclude.

“Yes!” Ben says, jumping out of his seat.

“Exactly!” I say, jumping out of my seat. I turn to Samuel. “See?”

Ben looks at Francesca, who’s lifted her head at the excitement. “See?”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Shannon says, and slips out of the room.

“It’s just too much of a risk,” Ben says, when we have all settled down. “I have too many other concerns, shall I call them, to fuck with it at this point in my life.”

“They say that seven people in a thousand will suffer permanent damage from a bad trip,” I say. “The odds are slim, but it depends on what you’re bringing to the table, doesn’t it?”

“What’s the deal with the number seven?” Francesca asks. “Seven times. Seven in a thousand.”

“Good point,” my boyfriend says. “Is it coincidence that all the warnings have the number seven in them? Seven is a lucky number.” He pauses for a moment with the wine an inch from his lips and raises one eyebrow, looking far into the air, like a caricature of a philosopher contemplating the great questions of the universe.

This is our first vacation since Samuel’s accident, his first respite from the daily routine of physical and cognitive rehabilitation, and mine too, the first time since he was hurt that I haven’t been reminded of the circumstances, and the
aftermath, on a daily basis. I know the layouts of three New York City hospitals like I know every scar on Samuel’s body, like I remember the face of every doctor who told me that he might not make it through the night.

Samuel shrugs his shoulders and takes a sip of wine. “I’d take it as a good sign,” he pronounces finally.

“Here, here,” says Francesca, and toasts the air with her glass, then signals to Ben to top her off. He refills our glasses, his own last, finishing off the bottle. “Where’s Terry’s girlfriend?” she asks. We look around the table.

“Her Fiji water is gone,” my boyfriend notes, and my hand jumps to my mouth to cover a laugh.

“I thought she went to the bathroom,” I say. I assumed she was bulimic, that maybe that was her thing, the reason she’s always carrying those cashews and the giant bottle of water around. Francesca tilts her chair backward, because from her seat she can see through her house. She snaps it back up. We all look at her expectantly.

“She’s on the couch,” Francesca says. She lowers her head to the table again, this time so we can gossip more discreetly. “What’s her problem?”

I shrug. “I can’t figure it out. We’re just talking about drugs now. It’s not like Ben offered to grill some ‘shrooms in her fajita.” Before we agreed to dinner with my boyfriend’s friends, Shannon asked that he call ahead to make sure no
one was going to be smoking cigarettes or marijuana in her presence. I thought it remarkably presumptuous, but as I was also a guest, I chose not to say anything.

“Maybe she just didn’t know who M.C. Escher was,” Francesca says.

“Damn,” Ben says. “Women are mean about other women.”

“You don’t think it’s strange?” Francesca asks.

“I think it’s rude,” I say, but I also wonder if perhaps she had an alcoholic father who beat her, or a junkie uncle who liked to stick his hand up her skirt, or if maybe, like I did, she once watched her friend overdose on what would otherwise have been an ordinary Wednesday summer night.

Samuel groans. “Just forget it. If she wants to sit on the couch, let her sit on the couch. She’s choosing not to be a part of anything. That’s her right as much as anything else.”

“See that, hon?” Ben asks Francesca. “Men are just naturally more accepting of other people’s foibles.”

“Nah,” Samuel says. “I think all the acid I’ve done just left a big hole where annoyance would normally be.”

Samuel used to work for one of the world’s top financial accounting firms. If there was a single hole in his head, which endless CAT scans and MRIs and the latest in neurological imaging technology have assured us there is not, he could calculate its diameter, depth, and the exact percentage of his potential lifetime earnings it has swallowed up without the use of pen and paper.
“In all seriousness,” Ben says, “I just worry that I might be one of those seven people.”

“But if you’ve done everything else,” Francesca protests, “it just seems pretty arbitrary.”

“Maybe,” Ben says, looking at the table, “but I don’t think I’m in a place right now where I want to take the risk.”

“I might have done it at eighteen,” I say, “but not now.”

*Now* is a state of mind for me, a concept more than an age. I’m sure time and the passage thereof has something to do with it, though the word *wisdom* turns my stomach, and I am loath to say that I have grown better, like Roquefort cheese or the expensive wine of which we’re all so enamored. The idea of dropping a tab of acid now is frightening to me, fraught with bad trip hallucinations of endless falls down endless staircases or eternal walks through hospital corridors. This fear is new to me, and it’s washed its way across my life.

I fear missing meals.

I fear missing a dose of the little white pill, the big gray pill, the bigger orange pill, or the two little yellow pills.

I fear that every staircase has a loose step on which I might lose my footing. I imagine the fall before I take the step sometimes.

I can’t reconcile all my fears with all my stories. For me at least, the good old days, or whatever they were, *were* good, because I was interested in
everything, fumbling through a world of portents with no boundaries, living by my senses instead of by head. If my yearning for a feeling past is nostalgia, then we are all guilty of the same, sitting around a country kitchen table, imagining synesthesia.

Someone mentions that the wine is finished; I offer to clear up the dishes; Francesca refuses on the grounds that guests in her house needn’t work. Ben clears the table.

“A woman’s work is never done,” he teases Francesca.

“I’m going to see what Shannon is up to,” I tell Samuel, who gives me a particularly quizzical look and helps Francesca put up a pot of tea with a pinch of the fresh chamomile leaves Shannon brought over.

Shannon is sitting in the living room with her legs up on a mauve-colored couch, tucked to one side beneath her buttocks. Her hand is wrapped around her water bottle, and she’s watching the front door with unwavering intent, like a fish looking up from a dinner plate.

I plop myself down into the fat armchair a few feet from the sofa. “I’m getting spoiled from all these home-cooked veggies,” I say, and place the hand that isn’t holding the wine glass on the space just below my ribcage, where my meal sits, pleasant and uncomfortable. I’m vegetarian too, but I don’t preach about it, in part because it seems like an uphill battle, and in part because I
stopped caring a long time ago whether the people around me ate hamburgers in my presence, as long as Samuel doesn’t try to kiss me with the taste of dead cow in his mouth. “But I think Samuel’s about ready to put his life on the line for a side of bacon.”

“The break from animal products will be good for him,” Shannon says. “Maybe he’ll notice how much better he feels after a few days.”

Shannon hasn’t yet seemed to tire of espousing the health and morality of a meat-free lifestyle, a discourse I’m pretty sure has eaten away at approximately 412 hours of my own life thus far. What little common ground she and I share has not made conversation flow any more easily between us, nor has it acted as a balm to ease the immense irritation most of what comes out of her mouth arises in me.

Before we set out on our hike today, I swallowed two antihistamine tablets without water. Shannon offered me some water from her Fiji bottle and once I’d accepted and taken a sip, while the bottle was still in my hand, she said, “Those things are terrible for you, you know.” She went on to explain that she too had once had allergies but through time and strength of will became immune to them. “If you’re not up to that,” she added, as though this task might be too arduous for those of us not equipped with both will and free hours to dedicate to overcoming hay fever, “you can always try something homeopathic.”
“Well,” I began, taking a moment to collect myself and muster a reaction that would not involve throwing the bottle at her oh so sober head, “I think everything is okay, as long as it’s done in moderation.” I returned her water bottle peacefully. “Except heroin. Don’t do heroin, Shannon.”

As sick as I am of Shannon, I am sicker still of the turns that have brought me here, perplexed and annoyed by a twenty-year-old girl for being twenty and unconsumed by the debaucheries I enjoyed in my own adolescence. I drink because, of the few pleasures I still allow myself and am still capable of experiencing guilt free, a cold, bitter hoppy beer is one of them, dissolving slowly on the back of my tongue, like the tab of acid I plan to drop one day, maybe on my fiftieth birthday, if I haven’t yet gone crazy.

I have more than once stifled the urge to tell Shannon that she is just a child who knows nothing of the world and should keep her judgments to herself, but out of respect for Samuel and his friend I have, for the most part, kept my mouth shut. Besides, I have to travel with her for four more days in one small car, and in my experience, travel is not fun when half the parties ignore one another.

I resort to desperate measures, and the smallest of small talk:

“That’s a nice bag,” I say, gesturing with one disdainful pinky finger toward the shapeless green cotton tote that lies crumpled at the foot of the sofa, its long strap hooked around one of Shannon’s folded knees, like you see sometimes on the subway, as though she’s afraid one of us will run off with it. I hate the tote.
In the three days I’ve watched her stuff it with organic tea leaves and flaxseed and vitamin B12 supplements and cashew nuts, I’ve never seen fit to comment on it, but I have run out of things to say that will provoke neither debate nor judgment.

“Thanks,” she says. This could be an easy, vapid conversation. She picks up the bag and holds it in her lap. “I bought it at Bhakti. It’s an Indian shop on Sixth Avenue; everything is completely unique and hand-woven. This is supposed to be a representation of the absolute of existence, the need to be present at every moment. See?” She displays to me the front of the bag, which features a classic maroon Om symbol in the center of a circle of black tribal curlicues that look like the silly tattoos girls I knew in high school had stamped on their backs in the dents right above their asses. The bag does not look hand-woven, let alone of a kind. I do not tell Shannon that I’ve seen fifteen of the exact same tote at Fortune, the new eyesore Korean wholesaler on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn whose neon green awning shines through Samuel’s back window and keeps me awake at night.

I smile and nod and Shannon talks about Hinduism and something about a chakra and I smile and nod some more, which seems to be working. I take another sip of wine and sink farther into the recliner. It’s a huge chair; two of me could fit in side to side. The fabric is soft and comfortable and has a lot of give – it’s that velveteen plush that teddy bears are made of, the kind that gathers and changes its hue when you apply pressure. I push my palm forward up the arm and the cloth is
deep brown; I pull my palm inward and the fabric is gold. I’m surprised at how comfortable I am.

This morning, while Shannon and Terry brewed tea from fresh chamomile leaves, after I gave up my futile search through our host’s pantry for some sort of coffee, even instant, I sat on the patio outside in the sun and I listened to a hornet drone around me, the sound like metal scraping metal. It was a sound that would normally wind me up tight, but the sun burning through the two tall cool maple trees made it okay somehow, even if I could hear, through the closed screen door, Shannon inside the kitchen, telling our host about her Chinese Medicine Healer.

Today was the first morning I forgot everything.

Shannon is staring at me like she’s been trying to get my attention for a while.

“Hm?”

“Do you know the place?” she asks. “Bhakti?” I smile and shake my head no.

“It’s on Sixth, by the train. Right next door to Lucia’s.”

“Lucia’s?” Now that’s a name I know. “The piercing place?” I ask. I have stumbled into Lucia’s on many a drunken occasion, but the place two doors down was cheaper, and the guy who worked the graveyard shift a lot better looking, so I always wound up there eventually.
“Yeah, you know it?”

“I’ve walked in, but I got everything done by the guy at Kingdom,” I say.

“Lucia’s is great. Totally clean and gentle,” Shannon says. I pull myself up straighter in the enormous chair by digging my elbows into the arms. This might be the first time Shannon has genuinely piqued my interest. Does clean, herbal Shannon have a piercing, a perfect little piece of self mutilation penetrating her organic, pesticide-free existence? I lift my glass to my mouth to conceal a grin I can feel coming on.

“You don’t say,” I murmur into the wine. My breath sloshes the liquid inside the bowl and I take a long sip. I figure she’ll continue talking if I let her, just as she did when I feigned interest in her supposed Sanskrit circles. Unfortunately, she doesn’t say.

“What do you have pierced?” she asks me instead.

“I’ve taken most of them out. I used to have a lot.” I push the plate of conversation to her side of the table. “You?”

“What did you have?” she asks. This is not working.

“Well,” I sigh. I’m beginning to forget why I came into the living room to talk to Shannon at all. I start pointing at my body – eyebrow, navel, nipple, nipple – like I’m genuflecting. “One time or another, I had everything above the waist,” I begin. “When we were in college, my friend Kim and I, the one who OD’ed, we used to get drunk and wander around the village and get matching piercings. It
was especially fun because, you know – well, you don’t drink, so maybe you
don’t know – but alcohol is a blood thinner, so when you drink, you bleed. When
I pierced my eyebrow, I was a total mess; we went back to the bar – that place
downstairs, across the street from Lucia’s, Down the Hatch, and I didn’t even
know I was bleeding until I saw it dripping into my pint of Sam Adams
Oktoberfest.” Shannon’s pale skin is turning green; her freckles seem to have
grown darker. It’s wonderful. “So what do you have pierced?”

She pauses. I stare at her. Her freckles threaten to jump off her face. Very
satisfied, and very dry-mouthed, I lift my glass to finish it off.

“My clit,” Shannon says finally. I manage somehow to swallow the wine
without spitting it all over Ben and Francesca’s comfy recliner.

Apparently, I am squirming. I don’t realize it until Shannon asks, “Are
you okay?” She’s grinning now, a small, thin-lipped smirk.

I think I laugh, but it might be a cough. “Did it hurt?” I ask.

“Nope,” she says, and twirls a finger around a frizzy colorless bunch of
hair. “It felt good.”
A PUBLIC TRAUMA

In May of 2008, two weeks before his college graduation, a twenty-two-year-old SUNY Binghamton student was beaten into the concrete outside a crowded downtown bar until his skull fractured. It was past midnight, early Saturday, and by the end of the weekend, he was administered Diprivan to induce a medical coma and prevent further brain damage.

For a while, the case stagnated. The attackers were arrested and held in Broome County, New York. The victim, Bryan Steinhauer, an accounting major who had already secured a post-graduate position with one of the country’s leading firms, was granted special circumstances and awarded his degree. His parents and close friends sat vigil at his bedside. It was a quiet, personal tragedy.

A month later, for those of us involved, the silence was shattered.

On June 6, the ringleader of the attack, a Serbian-born college basketball player named Miladin Kovacevic, surrendered his passport and was released, despite anguished pleas from the victim’s parents, on $100,000 bail. Three days later, with a passport provided by a family friend, a diplomat, Kovacevic returned to Serbia. Despite the charges against him in New York, he could not be extradited.

Overnight, the story grew from a small-town bar fight to an international scandal, and Bryan Steinhauer’s face was plastered across the cover of the Daily
News. Then-U.S. Senators Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer demanded a change in foreign extradition policies. Throughout the summer, with lawyers and politicians by their side, the boy’s parents spoke at press conferences, legal proceedings, and on CNN, to the necessity of getting justice for their son. Steinhauer himself still lay in a comatose state, unable to move or communicate.

In May of 2008, I had just graduated from college in New York City with a prestigious degree and no job prospects. I lived in Brooklyn, on the dangerous side of Prospect Park, in a two-bedroom apartment with roaches and two roommates I never saw. I hadn’t seen Bryan since pulling my car out of his driveway after our last breakup, one year earlier, while he watched, expressionless, from his back porch. I had driven 198 miles to break up with him and afterward I drove 198 miles home alone.

We’d been together three years, off and on, and every few months one of us would grow tired of the arrangement and call it quits. I was the one to end things the last time around but it hadn’t been on good terms, and though I hadn’t regretted it at the time, later I would. I had always believed that eventually, Bryan and I would move past our uneven, destructive relationship and make things work. After college, we would be more mature, living in the same city, and ready to settle down. I’d been trying to reconnect with him in those last weeks before he was hurt – I placed a couple of calls, unanswered; I sent a birthday card that may
or may not have been received. I had not succeeded in making amends, however, and found out about the attack from a random online news item, almost a week after the fact.

Immediately I couldn’t breathe. I remembered the time Bryan had cut his palm on a piece of glass and blood sprayed in one thin line across my bedroom wall. By the time we noticed the splatter, the blood had congealed and we hadn’t been able to scrape it off. Had his blood now stained the pavement? How long would it take for the color to wash away? All night my mind threw questions at me to which I didn’t want the answers. What was Bryan thinking as they crushed his head into the ground? Was he thinking now, or dreaming? There was something heavy in my stomach then, stuck beneath my ribs.

When I contacted Bryan’s best friend Theo the next day, he briefed me and coolly told me there was nothing to do but pray. He thanked me for my concern.

My concern, I thought bitterly, as though I were a colleague who’d cordially signed my name to a sympathy card, and not someone who had slept beside him. I knew that he smelled like Grey Flannel cologne behind his ears and that his lips always tasted like salt and Werther’s caramels. I knew that when something upset him he tightened his mouth as though that would keep it from leaving his lips. I knew what the stubble on his cheeks felt like, but I hadn’t
touched his skin in more than a year. I hadn’t celebrated his last birthday. As hard as I tried to remember, I had already forgotten the sound of his voice.

I understood: this was not my tragedy.

By the summer, Bryan’s attack had become a New York City tragedy. Each day brought a new development in the hunt for Kovacevic and Senator Schumer seemed to be everywhere, calling for a halt to all relations with Serbia if the fugitive was not promptly returned to stand trial.

I didn’t take the news blitz well.

I stopped eating, for one thing. When the papers reported that Bryan, who had always been thin, had shrunk to 98 pounds, I saw a challenge. There was a picture of him in his hospital bed, his body bent and pale, tubes protruding everywhere. He was so frail he barely looked human. If Bryan was small, I wanted to be invisible. I would prove that I could live as a comatose man with a feeding tube, shrouded and unconscious, on only liquids and will power. The closer my skin stuck to my skeleton the closer I became to that boy whose ribs I used to count in bed, whose limbs were no longer supported by his brain.

One night my mother insisted we eat dinner together. She picked me up at my apartment and we drove to a diner we’d always liked for its cheap grilled cheese sandwiches and greasy French fries. There was a television above the wait station. We sat in a booth close to the door and drank bitter-tasting water with ice
and lemon. As the waitress approached to take our orders, the ten o’clock newscast came on, promising an update on the case of the Brooklyn student brutally attacked by a Serbian basketball player. Just above her left shoulder a picture of Bryan filled the screen.

“Excuse me.” I grabbed my purse, stood on the steps outside, and smoked two cigarettes. When I returned I called the waitress over and ordered a whiskey sour. My mother ordered two sandwiches anyway, one of which sat before me until the cheese congealed and I insisted she take me home.

I rarely spoke about what happened. Half of me didn’t want the consolation and the other half felt I no longer had the right to be in pain. When I did unburden myself, usually while drinking, no one knew precisely what to say.

“Why do you even care?” asked one of the friends in whom I’d had the courage to confide. “He’s not your boyfriend anymore.”

A few of my friends nodded and said they’d already heard. They’d read it in the paper. I began to hope some other innocent New Yorker would suffer a tragedy that could displace Bryan’s name from the headlines or the lead story of the evening news.

One afternoon, I bought all the daily papers from the newsstand on my corner and heaped them in the trash outside my building. Immediately afterward I ran into my apartment, drank a beer, and called Bryan’s friend Theo. “I can’t be on the outside anymore. I want to see him.”
“I don’t think you want to see him like this.”

“No,” I said. “It’s like it’s real and it’s not real at the same time. I need to see him.”

He sighed and said my name the way a parent comforts a crying child. He would talk to Bryan’s mother; if she agreed, he would go with me to the hospital. This wasn’t something to do alone. When Bryan’s mother Marlene called me later in the week, we agreed to get a drink the next day to talk things over.

We met in Union Square before 11 a.m. Marlene wanted a martini, but Blue Water Grill hadn’t opened yet, so we stepped into Coffee Shop for breakfast.

“I have forty minutes and then I have to get back to the hospital,” she said as the hostess walked us to our table. “We’ll eat quick and we’ll talk.” I was too terrified to respond.

Marlene had never liked me, for three major reasons: she had rarely seen her son when I was around; I have a tattoo; and Bryan and I had spent half of our relationship fighting. Once, I’d slammed the door of her house so hard the windows shook. The next time I visited Bryan’s house, his mother scowled as she passed through the hallway.

“Here,” Marlene said, patting the booth that faced the window. “You sit here. I won’t be able to see you with that sun in my eyes.” She threw her bag on
the seat across from me. We ordered coffee and eggs and talked with our sunglasses on.

Marlene was chattier than I’d imagined she would be. First she talked about the weather, the crowd in Union Square, and the food we’d ordered – she’d ordered her eggs with salad instead of potatoes because she was on a diet; I’d chosen potatoes but hadn’t touched them. Then she asked about my roommates and told me about the commune she’d shared with four friends and a lover in Ibiza, years before she married Bryan’s father. She asked if I’d been seeing anyone.

In the year Bryan and I were apart, I dated a lot of other men, partly out of curiosity and partly of spite. I’d had half a dozen lovers in the first few months alone, and in the spring I’d broken up with an attentive but boring man to date an inattentive, aloof college dropout who stopped calling the day after I told him about Bryan’s attack.

“I’m not too good at relationships,” I told Marlene.

She asked if I had any idea what to do with my degree. “Education?” she asked.

“Creative Writing.”

She made a vague, disdainful sound. “You cut your hair,” she said.

I hadn’t cut my hair.
Marlene’s hair had grown past her shoulders and a few inches of gray were visible at the root. She drew her hand to her face and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I haven’t gotten around to coloring it,” she said. “I’ve got meetings, appointments, and I’m at the hospital most of the day; what good it all does, I don’t know.” She pressed her lips together and sighed. “I go back and forth. You can’t sit still in a place like that; you go crazy.” Marlene flagged the waitress by shaking her coffee cup.

My mug was more than half full of flat black coffee when the waitress warmed our cups then disappeared. I took a long sip and left lipstick prints on the rim. I’d spent an hour getting ready in the morning, brushing the frizz out of my hair, choosing the most appropriate clothes I could find: black leggings and a short-sleeved gray sweater that didn’t show skin. I’d applied pink lipstick instead of red, and around my neck I wore a silver pendant Bryan had given me for my birthday two years earlier; he’d said that Marlene had helped him pick it out.

“I’ve got it down,” Marlene said, gulping her refill. “I run in half hour intervals. I’m here; I’m there. Quick. I’ve become very efficient.” She took three hefty forkfuls of egg white.

She and Bryan’s father were furious about the interview they’d done with CNN a month before. They’d been told, she explained, that the piece would be a call for Serbia to return the man who’d attacked Bryan and destroyed their lives. Instead, reporters spliced footage of Bryan’s parents with footage of Kovacevic’s
mother, claiming that her son was innocent and that the case was as hard on her as it was on Marlene. “It’s one thing to be fair, objective, whatever,” Marlene said. Her voice rose: “But they flat out lied to us. That’s the last time I talk to the reporters. You bet after that we got us a lawyer. Now they talk to people. I’ve got enough to deal with.”

I bit into a cold potato that tasted like cardboard and salt. I’d seen the interview but I didn’t care just then about the reporters or the lawyers. I wanted to know what the doctors had said; if Bryan’s mother thought he would live; how she coped with the possibility he might not. I also wanted to know if Bryan had a new girlfriend; if he’d been happy without me; if he’d forgiven me for leaving him.

“I always liked you,” Marlene said as she finished her third cup of coffee, “but I never thought you’d be together forever. It doesn’t usually work that way. Now we don’t know when he’ll wake up, or what it will take. But –” Marlene put the mug down and folded her hands. “I know you cared about him. Maybe it will help for you to see him.”

“I love him,” I said. I must have said something polite and ineffectual next: anything I can do to help or whatever you think is right. I felt sick. My head was swimming and the coffee was making me nauseous.

“Maybe he’ll know your voice,” she said. “Your touch, your smell, you know. Three years together, he’d know you better than anyone.”
Marlene finished her eggs in silence and I stared into the sun outside the window and told myself not to cry in front of Bryan’s mother.

I waited for Marlene’s phone call, but it never came.

*

I moved through the next two months like a zombie. I woke up every morning leaden and disappointed, and I went to sleep at night with ghosts.

A therapist I saw a few times told me to direct my focus elsewhere. She encouraged me to look for a job and figure out what I wanted in my life. She suggested I drink less and eat three square meals a day.

Food, I argued, was for the living. I wanted to be with Bryan, where time stood still and calories had no weight.

It would be best, the therapist advised, to view Bryan’s injuries as death – there was no way to know if or when he would emerge from coma; to sustain myself I should prepare for the worst and mourn accordingly.

You have to compartmentalize, she said. You have to grieve and then move on. Take this hurt and put it in a box; put a lid on the box and seal it tight; then hide the box where you can’t see but where you’ll be able to find it if you ever need to pull out the pieces and have a good cry.
On August 3, without warning, Bryan opened his eyes and spoke in his hospital bed. He smiled and thanked the aide who was changing his diapers. I found out from Theo, via email, early in the morning, and I couldn’t think at all that day, unaccustomed and numbed by something close to happiness.

When I called his mother, she told me his doctors thought it a bad idea for me to visit. He was progressing steadily, but because of the nature of our relationship and breakup, Bryan might not be able to handle the emotional weight of my presence. Traumatic Brain Injury patients typically have less gray area in their emotions and less ability to discern the intensity of a situation. It was too risky for him to see me. He would be okay, Marlene promised me, but I wouldn’t be a part of it.

Through weekly updates from his best friend I learned that Bryan was relearning how to speak. He could get around in a wheelchair and would soon learn to walk again. He’d lost some of the hearing in his left ear but would have surgery to repair the canal. Though Bryan had no memory of the incident — or much of the year prior — he displayed no anger and no signs of permanent brain damage. The doctors were floored by what they called a miracle. They were honest now: they’d never anticipated this kind of recovery. Theo’s updates were impersonal — they’d been sent to some 200 of Bryan’s acquaintances — but they
contrasted sharply with the reports in the newspapers, which stated that Bryan was still in a coma. I was relieved to have a closer resource than the *Daily News.*

By November, I had a steady job I hated, answering phones and typing emails for a wealthy real estate broker, and I was sharing an apartment in a lovelier, less convenient section of Brooklyn with a roommate I would later learn had been stealing my paychecks. My attempts to move on had resulted in two drunken one night stands, one blind date, and an awkward set-up with a handsome, successful doctor I ended with a warning that I was screwed up and unavailable.

Marlene called me in the afternoon on a Friday.

“Is this a good time?” she asked. I stepped out of the office and ducked into the shared bathroom down the hall.

“Look,” she said. “I’ll just put it out there, it’s up to you. We’ve talked it over. He’d like to see you.”

We decided on Monday. I waited ten minutes in the hallway then returned to my office. I cried silently at my desk and no one said a word.

I left work early Monday afternoon. My friend Paulina met me on 98th Street and Madison in front of Mount Sinai Hospital. I couldn’t go alone.
“He’s not like you remember,” Marlene had warned me when we spoke on the phone that morning. “He’s in there somewhere, but he’s not the boy you knew.”

In my head Bryan was nineteen years old, cocky and sarcastic, and I feared he had become a cripple. I hadn’t even let myself imagine how he might have changed.

Bryan was sitting up in an adjustable bed, watching television. He held the remote in his right hand. His left hand curled inward and his left shoulder sloped downward. His left leg was bent at a near right angle; once a week doctors stretched and casted the leg to straighten it as his brain could not.

Instead of the sharp features and disheveled half-beard he wore the morning I left him, Bryan was soft and round-cheeked. There was something almost natal about his features: the fluid, misshapen curve of his cheekbone, his smile sloppy and crooked where his muscles hadn’t yet relearned to provide support. Though his laugh was awkward and his speech stilted, his smile was warm and his eyes hadn’t changed. He said he was happy to see me and sorry he’d made me wait so long. He would tell me later that he couldn’t have me see him in diapers.

There was a large-screen TV in his room and we watched a Dave Chappelle stand-up hour. When he laughed and turned in my direction, I wanted to crawl into bed with him.
Paulina and I left at seven, when an aide brought Bryan his dinner.

“I was watching him the whole time you were talking,” Paulina said when we made it out onto Madison Avenue. “That whole time, he was watching you.”

I stopped walking and lit a cigarette.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Paulina said, then saw me to the subway, where I waited, very still, for my train to come.

We spoke on the phone every day after that first visit. Our conversations were awkward – Bryan’s speech was even more difficult to understand than in person, and he often handed the phone to his father when there was a word that needed translating. Bryan’s parents kept his cell phone and supervised the calls he made. TBI patients have less of a verbal filter, if you will. No one could predict what he would say if unmonitored. I was silent when he told me loved me, quickly, the time his father briefly stepped out of the room.

I brought cookies to the hospital for our second visit. I went alone, and Marlene walked down to the cafeteria when I arrived. Bryan devoured the cookies in less than five minutes.

In his presence I felt weak, and small, frailer than he had ever been. When he woke from the coma, he said, he was so, so hungry. His withered body ached for fuel. The innocence of this desire, particularly in light of my inability to eat more than a container of yogurt and two slices of bread a day, made my head feel
heavy and my eyes water. I was suddenly conscious of my narrow wrists, my sharp collarbone, and the gauntness in my eyes when I moved to the mirror in the morning, still groggy, expecting to see the face I used to wear. My breasts had shrunk and my spine pressed against the chair beneath me. Bryan had changed, and I was no longer the same person he had loved.

We spoke for an hour. He didn’t remember much about the year we spent apart, or how we’d broken up, and I didn’t tell him. Talking there, it felt like nothing had ever changed. I had to stop myself from leaning in too close, from reaching out to place my hand on his. Bryan raised the adjustable bed. Supporting his weight with his elbows, he shifted to the left side. He patted the hospital sheet, and I fit myself in the space beside him, curled upon his good arm.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s not that I didn’t love you.” It sounded silly in the empty air and I waited in the silence for the walls to echo.

“I always knew you’d come back,” Bryan said.

*

After Bryan was released from the hospital in December, we began what under normal circumstances I might have called dating. We went to dinner, though only to restaurants nearby, walking slowly with his arm in mine for
balance, and in the restaurants I always ordered because strangers could rarely understand Bryan’s speech. I was scared and shaking the first time we kissed.

When my lease expired, I moved out of my apartment and into Bryan’s parents’ house. I was so stunned by our sudden, new life together that I didn’t mind the lack of privacy or the role I quickly assumed as Bryan’s advocate. The people in Bryan’s life dealt with the grief of almost losing him in a number of ways: his father pretended nothing had happened and except for emergencies treated Bryan like an adult trying to regain his footing in life. Marlene doted on her son as though he were a child. She drank at noon each day and set her sights on getting revenge against his attackers, a goal Bryan himself considered futile. Many nights I played interference between Bryan and his parents.

For his first birthday after the attack, his parents arranged a large family dinner without his permission. The restaurant was crowded and the service poor. Bryan couldn’t hear the table conversation and his relatives, unable to understand his stilted speech, asked him to repeat everything he said. Less than halfway through dinner he stopped talking, and as dessert was served he stood up and walked out. When Bryan’s parents followed and demanded that he return, Bryan refused and asked me to explain to his family that the dinner was too much for him. While the rest of the party hurried to finish eating, I stood on Fifth Avenue with Bryan, trying to calm him down and staring through the picture window at the bustle of a festive Saturday night inside.
Bryan was determined to recover, but he was easily overwhelmed by external forces. When stimuli became too great, his brain seemed to be unable to process. I never quite knew what would set him off – would he notice that the waitress watched him while he struggled to rise from his chair? Would he be angry if I wanted to go to a party or take a walk outside alone?

But at night I lay in bed beside him, overwhelmed by the impossibility of his very existence. I traced his eyebrows with my fingers while he slept; I placed my palm against his cheek as though if I let go he might simply slip away. I listened to his breath in awe. I was living inside a fantasy, a tragic melodrama with a happy ending that almost didn’t happen.

When I wanted to move forward, it seemed that the rest of world was fixated on the early morning of May 4, 2008. In June, a little more than a year after the attack, ESPN contacted Bryan to do a segment on *E:60*, a *Sports Center-meets-60 Minutes* news show. The piece would feature at its center the extraordinary recovery of an ordinary man, while calling attention to the irresponsible recruiting practices that could bring violent men like Miladin Kovacevic into the world of college basketball. Reporters and photographers followed Bryan for five days, during which time I stayed at my parents’ house so that they wouldn’t catch me on film. There were law suits pending; Bryan
couldn’t look too healthy. “How bad can life be,” read an email from one of Bryan’s publicists, “with a pretty blonde girlfriend by his side?”

We drove up to Binghamton at the end of the month; it was the first time Bryan had been there since the attack. ESPN had set up a meeting at Wilson Memorial Medical Center in nearby Johnson City with the neurosurgeon who was on call the night that Bryan was admitted. Bryan would meet the doctor who had stopped his brain from hemorrhaging and ESPN would get every emotional moment on film.

“It might be best if you didn’t come in,” I was told, because of the cameras and my blonde hair and all. “We’ll call you when the reporters leave.”

The hospital cafeteria had not yet opened, and there were no shops except for a CVS and a self-serve gas station. I entertained the idea of running along Main Street and flagging down a driver to take me back to the city. Instead I wandered around the drugstore for an hour until my phone rang: I could come back to the hospital now and meet the man who saved my boyfriend’s life.

_E: 60_ aired a few months later. Bryan was disappointed with the segment, which emphasized the difficulties he’d endured instead of the progress he’d made. He watched the show three times, analyzing every word and photograph. I left the room after the first viewing, unable to handle the pictures of Bryan in his hospital bed and the somber narrative that insisted Bryan was forever changed. Bryan couldn’t understand why I was crying when he was not. “I’m here,” he said.
“You’re here.” I had tried to treat Bryan as though nothing had happened to him, but his recovery had become the focal point of our lives.

The politicians were another part of the problem. If the cameramen were vultures, the politicos were opportunistic talking heads who used Bryan to forward their agendas. He was my boyfriend, and they were all over the place, usurping my pain.

During the Seventh Heaven street fair in Park Slope, I ran into Chuck Schumer. For all his grandeur and television appearances demanding Kovacevic’s extradition, he had never once spoken to Bryan or inquired about his welfare. I introduced myself.

“You spoke a lot about Bryan Steinhauer last year.” He nodded, distracted.

“I was wondering,” I asked politely, “if you’d kept up to date on his progress?” Schumer told me that, as far as he knew, Bryan was improving rapidly and that I should not worry.

“I’m not worried. I speak to him everyday actually.” I felt venomous; I faked a smile. “Maybe one of these days you should call him. That might look good.”

I walked away, angry and grinning. The feeling of victory lasted fifteen minutes. Directing my anger outward never relieved my anger because the person I was angriest with was me.
If I admitted how hard it was to be both Bryan’s girlfriend and his part-time caregiver, I would have to also admit that I might not be up to the task. While Bryan was touted publicly as a man of tremendous strength and determination, I considered myself a failure. More grateful for his recovery than for anything else in my life, I couldn’t face the truth: I was not happy.

My own concerns, petty as they were, began to eat at me. The things I needed from Bryan as a man were often incompatible with the things he needed in recovery. I missed my friends, working, and living on my own; I resented the attention Bryan received, both from the public and from those of us who were his intimates. He got better, but he had become used to being cared for and I had gotten used to spoiling him.

I had quit my job to apply to graduate school. Most of my time, though, was spent accompanying Bryan to speech therapy, to the gym, and to speaking engagements. He volunteered with an outreach program and gave speeches to at-risk teens and young adults. He spoke of perseverance and fortitude in the face of adversity. I drove Bryan to meetings and sat in the back of the room with his coat in my lap while he expressed his gratitude for the support of those who’d helped him in recovery. He thanked his parents for staying by his bedside and his best friend for connecting him to the world outside his hospital room. He never once thanked me. On one occasion, when Bryan opened the floor to questions, a teenage girl asked if I was his speech therapist.
“I’m sorry,” he apologized afterward, “but when I first woke up, you weren’t there.”

“I’m here now,” I said.

I had let myself sink into a supporting role in someone else’s life and couldn’t find the way up to the surface. Sometimes it seemed I was the one who would never get over what happened, and I had no idea where to turn for help.

Few support networks exist for the wives and girlfriends of Traumatic Brain Injury survivors. There are a handful of websites and hotlines that offer resources for the families of soldiers with TBI, but I found no such services for civilians. Caregiver support groups were geared toward the elderly, the husbands and wives of Alzheimer’s victims. At twenty-four years old and unmarried, I couldn’t imagine they would provide me anything but a pessimistic glimpse into what my future might hold.

I returned to one-on-one therapy, but the doctors I met with refused to look past my weight. How long have you been anorexic? was more than once the first question out of the psychologist’s mouth. The term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which has been batted around since, never came up. Considering the public nature of Bryan’s attack, I was loath to mention him by name. One therapist, after I explained my situation in the vaguest terms possible, nodded in recognition of the basic facts of the case.
“And how is he doing these days?” he asked, and spent the next fifteen minutes inquiring as to the extent of Bryan’s psychological damage.

I never felt comfortable telling these doctors the truth: I couldn’t look at the face of the person I loved without being reminded of the single most painful thing that had ever happened in my life. When he spoke I heard the broken words, the struggle to place his tongue to teeth. When he smiled I saw the changes in his lips, the loosening that should have been a smirk. The harder Bryan struggled to rebuild his life, the more devastated I became by the ruins that were left.

Besides, grief counseling is geared toward those whose loved ones have passed, and I felt like a fraud for even considering it. I was one of the lucky ones, wasn’t I?

*

Just last month my friend Paulina called to talk about a couple she knew. They were young, both under thirty, and the man had recently been diagnosed with cancer. His prognosis, she told me, was bleak.

“I can’t stop thinking about his wife,” Paulina began, “and how hard this must be on her.” She paused, inhaled. “I’m sorry I never said the right thing to you. You had to be really strong and no one knew what to do. I guess I want to apologize for that.”
I thanked Paulina and told her that if her friend needed to talk to someone who’d been there, I was available. The conversation ended quickly. Though Paulina was one of my greatest sources of support, she was right: no one had ever said the right thing, because there was nothing right to say. Polite gestures aside, I had no advice to offer on how to pull a relationship through tragedy, because ultimately, I was unable to do it.

My relationship with Bryan ended not because the injuries he suffered but in spite of them. I thought his tragedy would save us. By pushing through the hardest of times together, we would learn to tolerate the comparatively minor problems that had doomed our relationship in its first go round: my boredom; his pride; our mutual disdain for the other’s professional ambitions. When I was finally able to admit to being unhappy, I also had to admit that some of the reasons for my unhappiness had been there long before Bryan was injured.

I have spoken to Bryan only a handful of times since I moved out of his parents’ house last summer. He gave a press conference acknowledging the final sentencing of Miladin Kovacevic; he called to warn me that his face would be in the news again. He’s begun the job that had been reserved for him at KPMG; the E:60 feature won an Emmy. I don’t know how much Bryan’s speech still slurs, or if his left arm still curls in his sleep, or if he’s happy in the life he’s rebuilt for himself. My own life now bears little resemblance to the one we shared or to the life I feared I would live without him.
On occasion the memory sneaks in like a flash recollection of an image from last night’s dream: while eating a meal I have cooked in my own apartment, smiling across the table at the man I now share my life with, I’ll realize suddenly that the tragedy that once consumed me feels so long past it may as well have happened to another woman, in another lifetime. That life has become as encapsulated and compartmentalized as a movie you’ve seen twenty times and almost believe is real.

I have built my life today around choices Bryan never had the opportunity to make. As much as I wished at the time for a different outcome, there are problems that cannot be fixed by miracles. Some fairy tales don’t have happy endings.
In a shabby hotel room on the fourth floor below Montmartre, Nick asked me why I hadn’t kissed him yet. He’d filled the tray with four cigarette butts and the room smelled like the toilet stall across the foyer. His red-stained lips looked like Bordeaux when I was thirsty, but now I needed sleep and quiet on the sheets.

Our first two weeks away I played documentarian, the photographic illustrator of his travelogue. In Brussels he kissed the cheek of a pale plastic mannequin, clad in neon spandex and propped against a retail window. In Bruges he posed at the edge of a water fountain beside a bronze mermaid in repose, thin streams of water spouting from her breasts. He held a foreign penny between his teeth like a proverbial bullet. Outside the train station at Bern, he dangled a new Swiss Army knife from one hand and a lit cigarette from the other. His back was rounded, as though he’d thought to lean but changed his mind, and one foot was propped upon his knapsack on the ground. The sharp gray lines of the sliding doors, the heavy ashcan, and the der Ausgang etched in the architecture looked so prim, so clean, so German behind his four-day beard and pilled black tee shirt. In those pictures he reminded me of my father: my father was very tall, like Nick, and he always looked like he didn’t give a damn.

Nick’s letter arrived the day before my dad came home from the hospital, less than a week before I quit the part-time job I’d held since abandoning my
degree halfway through graduate school. I’d made just enough under the table to maintain my rent and leave a little left over after happy hour to put in the bank. I’d been saving up for something, but with my dad’s recurring illness, I hadn’t put much thought into what that might be. Looking back I think I joined Nick in Europe because I didn’t exist anywhere else. I was single; my career was going nowhere; and my father, the only tie to New York City I cared was confined to a sickbed in a dim Brooklyn bedroom with one window that was never open. I didn’t buy a return ticket.

Nick had been on the road for eight months already and by the time we got to Paris I was finally starting to feel like a companion and not a temporary tagalong. The morning we arrived it was pouring in sheets. When he called the hostel where he’d reserved our beds, they couldn’t find his name on file.

“I planned it perfectly,” he muttered and slammed the pay phone down. We stood beneath the entrance to the railway station; he cursed and stamped out a cigarette with his worn black sneakers. I couldn’t light my cigarette in the wind and the rain so he cupped his hand around a half-soaked pack of matches and on the third try he passed me the cigarette he’d lit in his mouth.

Out of options, we ducked into a small hotel in the red light district, with a marbled lobby floor and a concierge desk no wider than a telephone booth. Behind the desk a middle-aged woman sat on a stool. She wore a plain blue dress with an apron tied about the waist, and the boy who stood beside her, chewing on
a ballpoint pen cap, wore pleated khaki pants and a crinkled polo shirt. His face was very serious. He couldn’t have been more than eleven years old. The woman lifted her head when we walked in and spoke in hurried French to the boy.

He rushed around to the front of the desk and with fumbling fingers pulled my backpack from my shoulders and placed it on the ground by my feet. Nick laughed at the boy’s eagerness then he dropped his bag and pulled the hood of his sweatshirt from his head. Water dripped around our feet.

“One room,” he said. “We need a room. Two beds, two nights.” The woman furrowed her brow.

“Parlez-vous anglais?” I asked. She shook her head. “Italien?” I tried. My Italian was much better than my French and the only French Nick knew was merde. She shook her head again.

“Je parle francais,” she said. “Michel,” she called to the boy, who was now lugging my backpack toward a sofa in the center of the lobby. He ran back to us, wiping his hands on his pants.

“Due letti?” I tried. “Duex lit?”

“Duex lit,” he repeated. “Two beds, yes?”

“Yes,” I said. The boy spoke in French to the woman and she spoke in French back and Nick shrugged his shoulders at me. His hair was matted to his head and I worried my own hair had turned to frizz and static from the rain. I
reached my hand above my ear. My hair was fuzzy and damp. I wished there was a mirror somewhere and at the same time I was grateful there was not.

“Only one bed,” the boy said. “This is the only we have left. My mother thinks you are couple, yes?”

“No,” Nick and I both said. The boy reported to his mother who replied in haste.

“You are brother and sister then,” he said. That one I could buy. We appeared to have been built the same, long-limbed and a little too thin, and there was a familiarity to our features: the angular noses and cheekbones; Nick’s square jaw and my pointed chin; his pale Aryan hair and my peroxide blonde.

“Yes,” we said in unison.

“Then you can share the bed,” the boy reasoned. It sounded logical enough, so we laid fifty Euro each on the desktop and then the boy dragged my knapsack to the elevator.

We had dinner Friday night in a narrow café that was painted bluer than the blue of the Pacific Ocean. We shared a bottle of wine – one of the best on the menu, the waiter promised. “Le meilleur que nous ayons.” He punctuated his speech by pressing his forefinger to his thumb and kissing the air. In English he told us that in 2005, the grapes on the vines were as red and ripe as beautiful young women, and the second he walked away I pulled out my purse and scribbled the simile in the back page of my notebook. A pretty young peddler
approached with a bunch of single roses. Nick didn’t buy me one, but he smiled wanly at the dark-haired girl with flowers in her arms.

When the waiter returned, he poured a taste into Nick’s glass and Nick raised his eyes sarcastically at me before downing it in one shot.

“Perfect,” he said.

“Parfait,” I corrected. “Merci.” The waiter filled two glasses, mine first.

“You think you know everything.” Nick pointed his finger at me. His arm tensed and the thick black bands tattooed around his forearm contracted with his muscle and curved like waves. His thin blond hairs stood up defiantly, poking through the ink like spokes of grass through dead brown earth.

“A Parée.” I tilted my wine glass and clinked the air.

“Salud,” he said, and I didn’t correct him. We took our meal slowly, savoring and drinking, laughing from the corners of our mouths at the couples who kissed across their tables. An accordion player was making the rounds.

“I hate dinner musicians,” I whispered.

“Music is for lovers,” Nick announced when the musician approached our table. He drew his hand like a knife across his throat. The musician nodded and squeezed his accordion twice before he moved on to the next table.

While I broke the crème brûlée with a baby spoon, Nick poured the rest of the bottle. “My man was right,” he said, grinning cockily and finishing his glass.
“Ripe young women.” He licked his lips. “Write down the name,” he said, so I did.

As we were walking out he paused by the door and scanned the room.

“Paris is probably better when you’re with someone you love.” Then he pushed the door and left ahead of me.

The rest of the weekend, he decided, he didn’t want to go out on Pigalle.

“I thought you’d like it here,” I said, pulling on a pair of high-heeled sandals and buckling the straps. I sat at the edge of the bed and was planning to walk by Place Blanche to see the Moulin Rouge. “It’s the Moulin Rouge,” I urged and flipped my head over my shoulder to look at Nick. He was leaning against a pillow with his legs beneath the blanket. “It’s Saturday night,” I said, “and there are girls, girls, girls.” I cocked a smile, a weapon of persuasion. He ran one hand across his head and looked inside his palm for shed hairs.

He’d complained that his hair was thinning the week before, standing beside me before a mirror in an old wood tavern in Belgium that claimed to sell 1,001 different ales. We’d had no luck in Bruges, where he’d hoped to pick up a girl who spoke Flemish. Every girl he approached eyed me with wariness and each man who approached me soon assumed that I already had an escort. So we drank alone in the back of the pub, by the wall-length mirror, and from across the room we counted the beer bottles in the fridge behind the bar. I was on my fifth abbey ale by the time I counted to 462 and gave up.
“I’ll be bald before I’m thirty-five,” he said, standing by the table and raking his fingers across his scalp. Though frail and halfway into his seventies, my father still had a full head of dark brown hair. I turned to face the mirror and I thought for a moment that my hair looked like his, thick and wavy and frayed at the ends.

“Looking good,” Nick said to the mirror. He looked at me expectantly.

“Me?” I thought he’d been talking to himself. When I was younger I had thought I was pretty, but I was no longer comfortable in my own skin. My father had always told me I should put on a few pounds. With some more curves, I’d look more like my mother, who had heavy breasts and a tiny waist, and had only gained ten pounds when she was pregnant with me. With no photographic evidence to the contrary, for many years as a child I believed I’d been adopted. My father swore up and down this wasn’t true, and instructed my mother, who claimed to be modest and needed convincing, to show me the scars of her Cesarean as proof. I could never understand how I came out of her body. I was always skinny, but over the two months my father was in the hospital, I’d lost more than ten pounds. In the mirror at the bar in Belgium, my shoulders were too angular and my hip bones jutted out above my jeans. My eyes looked sunken.

“You’re very pretty,” Nick said. “You have such sad eyes.”

I thought I looked almost pretty and I was excited Saturday night when Nick said, “Let’s just get a bottle of that wine and stay in,” pushing the blankets
from his feet and pulling on a pair of sweats over his shorts. He, too, was thinner than I remembered. His skin was stretched across his ribcage and his old sunburst tattoo lay flat over his chest. He ran his hand through his hair once more and rubbed two fingers over the side of the bed, like sifting sand between his knuckles. It was strange and sweet and self-conscious and not what I’d expect.

I didn’t relish the idea of going to the Moulin Rouge alone at night, so I followed Nick, in my dancing shoes, to the corner bon marche, where he paid for two bottles of wine and a pack of cigarettes. At the hotel I changed into a souvenir tee shirt and pajama shorts and left my strappy heels by the side of the bed.

The room was the size of a prison cell but the walls were yellow and there were flowered paper borders just below the ceiling. The bed occupied most of the room. To its left stood a small nightstand with no drawer, and just past it, extending from the corner of the room, a shower stall and a child-size sink.

“We’re living it up,” I’d said when the French boy first showed us to our room the night before. I wondered how old the hotel was but the boy didn’t know and I couldn’t remember how to ask his mother in French. I turned the faucet; the water ran brown and then trickled into a stream of color not dissimilar to clear.

“This is nothing, Leah,” Nick said. “You should have seen Bangladesh.” With his sweatshirt on the pillow he claimed the left side of the bed. I crossed the room to what was now my side of the bed. There was a window on most of the right wall. I preferred to sleep beneath the window.
“What was Bangladesh like?”

“Nothing like this,” he said.

An uncle he’d met once had died in the fall and left him an inheritance. He wouldn’t tell me how much it was worth, but per his calculations on the back of a cocktail napkin one night at our neighborhood bar in New York, he determined he would be able to live for almost a year abroad. He would stay in backpacker’s hostels in Europe and huts in third world countries. He would get a job as a bartender somewhere. “A mixed drink is the same anywhere you pour,” he said. He was going to discover himself and drink absinthe with artists in Paris. I remember wondering if he was joking. What he really wanted was to finish the novel he’d started in graduate school, but by the time he asked me to join him in his travels the book was going nowhere and his inspiration had faded.

As my father’s health declined, I found myself thinking sometimes that when he died he wouldn’t leave me anything, except for arrangements to make and a gnawing pain that had already begun like an ulcer in my stomach, irritated by sour well liquor and chain-smoked cigarettes. He would leave me my mother, too, but she was better left invisible. At times it was all I could conjure of the future. So when, at the same time as my father came home, Nick said he was returning to Europe after a stint in central Asia, I wrote almost immediately: “I’m having a quarter life crisis. I’ll be there soon.”
Now Nick missed his girlfriend. He missed her red hair and her green eyes and the way she reminded him of a kitten, which he told me late Saturday night while we sat in bed and looked at photographs of the life he’d left back home. He played a Dolly Parton song for me, “Jolene,” and narrated above her warble that the song reminded him of the red-haired girl and the girls before her, the ones he left, the one who needed him more.

“I’m not naïve,” Nick said. “I know why I love her.” He played on his computer a short home video of the red-haired girl, rolling her eyes and telling him to turn the camera off. She’d come to Austria to visit him, he said, but that was in the winter and she hadn’t written since. He loved her because she was the only girl he’d known who never needed him. He closed the computer. He looked lonely and I wanted to reach for him, to touch the fading black tattoo that pulsed, but I stopped myself in time to remember who I was. We lay on our backs and looked at the ceiling. A small chandelier with crystal beads hung over the center of the bed like a baby’s mobile.

I’d left no one back at home. I’d had one long-term lover and a string of one-night-stands when that relationship ended, not long after my father was hospitalized the last time. Men I’d once been friends with, men who knew my father was ill, never missed an opportunity to place their hands on the small of my back or a palm face down on my thigh, and whisper close to my ear how awful and unnecessary it would be to grieve alone. I liked Nick for the same reason he
loved his girlfriend – because in the three years I had known him, he’d never once reached out for me.

“She’s a bitch,” he said. We were already a third of the way into the second bottle of Bourgogne. “Not a bitch. That’s not what I mean.” He never spoke that way when he was sober. “She’s seeing someone else. I mean we have an understanding. Because I’m away.” He tossed the photographs onto the floor by the bed. “She should have written by now.”

“Maybe she just needs to know you’re missing her.” That’s what I would have wanted.

I’d met Nick’s girlfriend only once, not long before he left for Europe. A group of us were drinking after work when she came by the bar. On the back page of my journal, Nick had been mapping out for me the course he had planned across the Eastern Bloc, and when his girlfriend came in he directed her to the empty chair across from me and pulled his chair around to sit beside her. She wasn’t a drinker. She was small and plain and quiet and I couldn’t understand what he saw in her.

After the eighth or ninth round, it began to feel like one of those nights when anything could happen. The first thing that happened was that Nick slipped with the knife he was using to cut the steak he’d ordered before the kitchen closed. I noticed the blood on his palm before he did. When I pointed it out, his girlfriend turned grey and worried and tried to wrap Nick’s hand with a paper
napkin. He laughed and claimed the alcohol had immunized him from the pain. He told the rest of us to try it and see if we felt anything.

It felt innocent, like we were children, and there rose in me a desperate need I’d never recognized before, to have blood brothers. Curious, I pressed the tip of the knife into my fingertip. There wasn’t much resistance and it didn’t hurt. A small red bubble rose to the surface and spread into the crevices of my fingerprint. I stuck my finger in my mouth and as I tasted metal I watched Nick’s lips curl into a grin.

I looked at Nick’s girlfriend. Nick was holding her elbow with the hand that hadn’t bled.

“I don’t trust myself to do it,” she said. Nick shrugged and kissed her forehead.

“You don’t have to,” he said, but it seemed like she did. It was just one of those nights.

“You do it,” she said. She held her hand out, palm up, to Nick.

“Are you sure?” he asked and she closed her eyes very tightly and gripped the edge of the table with the other hand. With the point of the steak knife he pierced the fleshy part of her thumb. She cringed as the tip went in and opened her eyes in time to watch the blood rise. When Nick put the knife back in his plate, he grabbed her by the wrist and kissed her, hard. I felt compelled to watch as she gave over to him. Though his eyes were closed now, Nick’s hand moved so
naturally up to her face to cradle her jaw it hurt to watch. When I looked down at
the circle of blood that had congealed on my fingertip like the accusatory point of
a laser, I thought: there are some people who are meant to be alone.

It was a cautionary feeling I hadn’t been able to shake, even in Paris, even
next to Nick in that claustrophobic hotel room. The song he’d played for me
faintly echoed in my head as I lay still beside him, wondering what it would be
like to trust someone enough to bleed.

“Why is it we’ve never kissed?” Nick asked. “I’m not talking sex, just
kissing. I mean, kissing isn’t much.”

“Then why do it?” I asked. My hands and feet were going numb. I wanted
to be the girl he’d bleed for. I wanted to be a song in his collection.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Because I’m lying. Because
kissing’s everything. I don’t know. You came all the way out here. We’re in
Paris.” We were too much alike back then, far away and lonely, unwilling to
admit as much. All I wanted at that moment was to know he’d miss me if I was
gone.

“Kissing you would be the same as kissing myself,” I said. “I couldn’t
handle the exponential power of my tongue.” He laughed and it made me sad.
“Besides,” I added. “Your teeth are purple.”

I pointed with my chin to the bottle of wine. He’d easily drunk more than
twice what I had.
“If I brush my teeth, will you kiss me then?” The answer still was no and I knew it would be no as long as I imagined his lips would taste like mine. He’d never want me if he knew I needed him.

“I know you don’t want to go home,” he said. I closed my eyes. They burned in the corners. I could see the prisms of the light fixture like sunspots on my eyelids.

“It’s all starting to look the same here, Leah.” My name sounded vague in his mouth, a single slur of wine and comfort. I knew his eyes were closed now too, the way they always were when he began to confuse thinking with speaking. If I said nothing, I knew he’d continue, and he’d tell me something that he might not have said if he’d seen me listening. “Hostels, hotels. These little fucking quaint hotels. They’re so European. The cities all look the same. And the countries, the third-world places, they’re like little dioramas of another world built up just for tourists. There’s nothing real here, Leah. I can’t remember the last time I saw something real.” He was drunk but I knew what he was talking about.

“I need to sleep,” I said.

“Let’s sleep,” Nick agreed.

I curled into a ball on my side of the bed. I was thinking of my father. My father had never made it to Paris, and I knew then that he probably wouldn’t. For a while in the ICU, when it looked like he might die, I was relieved, not because he’d been in pain, which he had, or because his quality of life was near to zero. I
was relieved because I didn’t think I could watch him wither anymore, in the
mornings clinging defiantly to a life of intravenous tubes and wet bed sheets, and
in the night, trying desperately to let it go.

“I can’t go back to all those ghosts,” I said. Nick was already asleep. I was
glad he hadn’t heard me. It was foolish, maybe – no one had died – or maybe it
was honest, and that wasn’t something I was prepared to be.

I didn’t want to go back to New York.

The morning I told my father I was leaving, he smiled up from his bed and
covered my hand with his. When he drifted back to sleep, my mother spiked her
coffee with a nip of vodka. I rode the train alone to my apartment, where I sat and
stared at the crumpled sheets I never remembered to change. My bedroom always
smelled of salt. That was the first night my mother didn’t claim to need me. That
was the first night she didn’t call to ask me why I wasn’t home, why I wasn’t by
my father’s bedside, why I’d put her in the position of taking care of him alone.
Even across the bed from Nick, tucked into a corner more than three thousand
miles away, I could picture my mother smiling, holding court with four of her
friends over highball glasses at the bar two blocks from where my father lay,
groggy and pale, maybe dying, every so often waking up to ask me a question I
couldn’t answer, or to say hello, or say goodbye.

I had always thought my parents loved each other with a force that
excluded me. My father disappeared to please my mother, subjugated his desires
until they became invisible to her. He didn't like to be a bother, he said. She in
turn never refused him anything outright, but when my father was sickest she
couldn't even look at him. My mother possessed a skill for leaving that I envied,
and I hated her for giving me only half of that inheritance. I saw it in Nick too: he
was the kind of person who would let someone get close, but when he had to or
when he wanted to, he knew how to walk away.

“You never really talk to me.”

Nick was awake. The bed shifted. I turned and he was on one elbow
leaning toward me. My skin turned into gooseflesh. My eyelashes stuck to my
lower lids. He’d never seen me cry.

“I know you ran away,” he said, and it sounded so silly and so true I
almost laughed. He reached one hand to brush my hair from my forehead, the way
my father had when I was a little girl and wore bangs that perpetually fell into my
eyes. Nick’s eyes were very pale blue and his hand was soft, not rough like I’d
imagined. It occurred to me I’d never felt his skin before. I was curious what his
lips felt like, if they were soft too. He was very pale up close but his lips were
wine-dark. I wondered if his lips would really taste like mine and if I’d be able to
tell whose tongue tasted more like cigarettes. My mouth never felt sweet inside
and I always bit the fleshy insides of my lips when I was nervous.
I gave into myself. I lifted my hand and covered his, and his hand was warm in mine. I closed my eyes as I leaned in toward him. He smelled like wine and hotel soap. And then I heard his breath catch.

I opened my eyes as Nick dropped his hand and sighed.

“The money’s gone,” he said. He turned away and reached toward the table on his side of the bed. I connected the freckles on his shoulder blades with imaginary ink – there were very few and I was sure he weren’t born with them. They must have grown on a beach in Bali or when he was walking through an Eastern desert. He sent me a postcard once – he was barefoot in India – and I thought for a moment that there must be freckles on his toes. I wanted to look but his feet were covered by the bed sheets. He turned back with the wine in his arm, cradled against his chest. He took a swig and swallowed slowly.

Then I got it.

“The money’s gone,” I said. Nick offered the wine. I tilted the bottle once then handed it back, and he returned it to the nightstand.

“It will be.” I settled on my back, and though I listened for him to continue, he didn’t.

“When?”

He sighed. We were sharing the pillow now, again. “A couple weeks. A month if I’m lucky. I’m holding enough for a ticket back home. When the rest runs out, I’ll cash in the ticket.”
We were supposed to go to London next.

“Where are you flying out of?” I asked. I had family in London, an uncle I hadn’t seen in years who’d let me stay awhile if I needed.

“Heathrow,” he said after a very long moment. I closed my eyes and I imagined his lips moving. I could see the scar where he once had pierced a silver ring, curled around his bottom lip like smoke. In my head he was always smoking and pouting his lips the way an insolent child does when he knows he’s in trouble and won’t admit it. If he left, I thought right then, that’s how I’d remember him.

“I think my father’s going to die,” I said softly.

“I know,” I heard.

“If my father dies, I’ll be left with my mother.” I was never able to walk away, to extract myself from a quicksand situation, or tear my eyes from the bloody accident on the side of the road. When my mother beckoned I went, shameful and angry, and I didn’t think I’d ever learn how not to.

“I’m sorry.” The room was silent. “I won’t leave before we get to London,” Nick said and I was afraid I’d imagined it.

“London,” I repeated, just to check, as though I’d been dreaming and needed once to pinch myself.

“London.” I felt his breath, close to my cheek and very warm. “If you want, I’ll go to London.”
“Yes. Yes, I’d like that.” His leg collided with mine beneath the blanket. His hand dropped from his side and landed not on the bed but on the outside of my hip as though he’d meant for it to be there. My bones rose to meet his palm. By the time my breathing slowed, his breaths were short and shallow, just a shade past conscious.

Then I slid away, before he could realize what he’d done. The hotel room was quiet but for the sound of exhalation. The clock on the wall didn’t tick. Outside the window, a red neon light shone in the near distance, and I wondered if it was the Moulin Rouge. Below, as though a ways away, along the Rue Pigalle, high pitches giggled and spoke rapidly in fuzzy French. A car horn sounded, echo-like and delicate. My hair was sweat-stuck to the side of my neck, just beneath my ear. I’d forgotten we were deep into the summer. My ears had clogged, like I’d been sitting underwater, forcing myself to sink only briefly enough I wouldn’t implode.

“Do you know what I was thinking of,” Nick murmured, groggy, from the middle of the bed. I thought of facing him and of maybe thinking what he was thinking, if those two trains still ran parallel.

“What are you thinking of?” I sunk my front teeth into my lower lip and watched out the window as the red light flickered and went black.

“That song from the nineties,” he said. I waited. The sky was empty. “The Smashing Pumpkins song. About tonight. What was that called?”
“Tonight, Tonight?”

“That’s the one. I was just thinking about tonight. And I thought of that song.”

“I loved the music video,” I said. I remembered vividly that men and women the size of munchkins wore Victorian suits and hoop skirt ball gowns. They drifted up and down onscreen from paper stars to a paper moon while violins and rock drums swelled. “I’ve always wanted to float to the moon,” I said into the pillow. The pillow smelled sweet and fruity and a little like vinegar.

“It’s good you didn’t kiss me,” Nick sighed. My spine was stuck to the back of my tee shirt. “Because then tonight would be different. It wouldn’t be tonight,” he said, and again I waited for him to say more but when I finally turned to face him, his lips were closed and he’d already fallen asleep.
“It was 1958,” he says, “the year my dad owned Marcelle’s Jewelry Store on Mermaid Avenue in Coney Island. You should have seen this place. I wish there were pictures now, but who would have taken pictures of some shoddy storefront on Mermaid Avenue? Displayed in one window were all the pieces of costume jewelry my dad had made himself. The good pieces weren’t on display. He never even kept them in the store. This was all junk, but bright-colored junk that was popular those days. In the other window he hung crosses.

“Now you’ve gotta realize that no one ever shopped on Mermaid Avenue. The store was one block away from the boardwalk, one block down from Nathan’s, but no one ever walked in that direction. Why would they? The only signs of life were the Italian pork store and my dad’s ridiculous little shop with a hundred shiny crosses in the window.

“One time toward the end of winter, my parents wanted to go on vacation, but my dad was concerned about leaving Marcelle’s unattended. You know, because there were so many customers.

“I’m not sure why my sister didn’t watch the shop. She might have been married already or maybe she went on vacation with them. I didn’t pay attention to my sister when I was twenty years old. Did I tell you that when I was four and we lived on Alabama Avenue, I sat under the kitchen table for two whole days
when they told me my mom was bringing a girl home from the hospital? I wouldn’t even look at her for months, until we moved from Brownsville to Sheepshead Bay, where my grandma Lena kept live chickens in the basement to kill for soup.

“Where was I? Yes, I was in the jewelry store on Mermaid Avenue.

“See, I wasn’t doing anything with my life. I’d finished a degree in merchandising and I quit working at my uncle Al’s electronics place because I hated electronics and I hated merchandising. I didn’t do much then but ride the bus back and forth across Brooklyn all day. I was thinking a lot, though, which didn’t seem to get me anywhere, so I said sure, I’ll run the shop. Maybe run is not the right word; it was more of a crawl. So my parents said goodbye and then they up and went.

“For two straight weeks, I was there from ten in the morning till six at night. I had a three-legged chair about the height of a barstool, and next to the chair I kept a pile of books I was reading. We didn’t keep the heat running in the store ’cause my dad didn’t want to waste money, so I sat there on my stool in one of my bomber jackets and read books all day. Once or twice some middle aged woman would come in and I’d take down the trays of crosses from the display case and show them off but no one ever bought them.

“Jackie the Dog-Faced Boy, from the freak show in Coney Island, he came over a few times a week and sat with me. Some of the others too. Really good
people, especially Jackie. Up close he didn’t even have too much of a deformity, some sort of birth defect. I barely noticed it, just that his cheeks and forehead were too wide and his nose sunk sort of inward, and he always looked cold. I didn’t care if people came in or not, but it was nice to talk to Jackie when he stopped by.

“Every day for lunch I went next door to the salumeria and ordered a roast pork sandwich that I ate at one of the folding tables. I never locked the door when I left the shop. There was nothing in the store worth burgling and there were never any customers, so there wasn’t any money in the cash register.

“Most days my friend Boksembaum came by in this huge van called the Bookmobile. He was working for the New York Public Library and they had a van with hundreds of books inside that would go to neighborhoods that where there were no real libraries. So Boks lent me books, because I was going pretty quickly through the stack beside me. Usually he brought this guy with him, Victor San Miro. I can’t believe I remember that name. Day I met him he asked me if I smoked grass and if I liked bop. This guy Victor, he was into the music scene, knew some real good jazz musicians. So every night after I closed the store at six, the three of us drove up in the bookmobile to Harlem to buy dope and go to the jazz clubs. I always waited till six o’clock ’cause I felt guilty leaving before then.
“On the fourteenth day my folks were away, when the weather was starting to get warm, this woman in her thirties comes in, very determined, the kind who knew exactly what she wanted. I was very confused by this attitude, you see, because whatever she wanted, I didn’t think Marcelle’s was the place to find it. All we had were plastic crosses.

“Is Mr. Marcelle here?” she asked. People thought my dad’s name was Marcelle and he never wanted to correct a potential customer.

“I put a marker in the book I was reading and walked over to the counter and said, ‘No, but can I help you with something?’

“She pointed to the display case. ‘I want that amulet,’ she said, and then she pointed to another bracelet, ‘but I want it with that chain.’ So I took down the display cases and because my dad was the one who knew how to work the silver pliers, it took me about fifteen minutes to pry the amulet from the one bracelet, then remove the charm that dangled from the other bracelet, and switch the two and then snap it on the woman’s wrist. I was so pleased. I wanted my dad to be proud when he got back.

“I made a dollar.

“About an hour after that, Boks and the new guy, Victor, came by in the Bookmobile. Boks let a few kids look around at the picture books while Victor and I went over to the salumeria and bought three roast pork sandwiches, and a container of those big green Italian olives and some toothpicks to eat them with.
At six I locked up the store and we headed uptown in the Bookmobile to buy some grass. I don’t realize till later at the music joint that I’d left my bomber jacket in the store, on top of my stack of books.

“When I went to open the store in the morning, my dad was already there, rearranging the pendants in the window.

“‘Different chain,’ he said. They’d come back early in the morning and the first thing he wanted to do was check on the store. My mom, who thought my dad was crazy, was sleeping at home.

“‘A woman wanted the other one,’ I said.

“‘You use the pliers?’

“I nodded and my dad smiled. I emptied the register in front of him, even though he hadn’t asked how much we made while he was gone. He was very happy, he said, that we made a dollar, and did I read any good books while he was gone? I pointed to the stack. My jacket was gone.

“‘Where’s my bomber?’ I asked.

“‘Ahhhh,’ my dad said, nodding his head very slowly. ‘I give it to Jackie this morning.’

“I was instantly furious. Two weeks of sitting on that damn chair with a stack of books and just one customer, and my dad gives away my favorite jacket. ‘What did you do that for?’

“My dad shrugged and closed the register. ‘He need it more than you.’
“There was nothing I could say, so I helped my dad pull up the metal gate in front of the shop. Then he flipped the plaque on the door so it said OPEN. He pulled the stool over to the counter and he patted it twice with his hand.

“‘Here,’ he said. ‘You sit. We wait for a customer.’ I sat and watched my dad fiddle with the pendants in the display case.

“‘Dad,’ I asked, ‘why do you keep this place?’

“I’d always wanted to ask that before but there’d never been a good time. I don’t think a single month had passed when he made the rent in sales, let alone, you know, a profit. But he could afford the hundred bucks a month it cost to rent, and I’m sure now, thinking back, that he was wholly honest when he finally answered me, because my dad was always honest, even if he didn’t make much sense.

“‘I always wanted to have my own store,’ he said. And that made sense to me.”
TO AND FROM BROOKLYN

I make the trip every weekend from the top of Manhattan, where my boyfriend and I share a studio, to the southern tip of Brooklyn to visit a woman I wasn’t speaking to this time last year and to whom I never said “I love you” while my father was alive.

As I pass beneath the Verrazano on the Belt, I could fall into the far end of the bay, change directions, and swim back home. When I was a child I stood on that pier, leaning over the water, longing for the Manhattan that was then a world away. The amusement park in Coney Island is lit bright tonight: the Wonder Wheel still turning, the Cyclone roller coaster a kinetic if rickety landmark. Then, the train yard below; the high-rises in the distance ahead.

It feels so quiet when I make the drive here alone, weekends when my boyfriend is working. From Inwood to the bridge, I turn the radio up to drown out the traffic and the silence, to drown my own head. Once I cross into Brooklyn I quiet the music, open the window and wait for the sticky salt smell to seep in from the bay.

The air chills as I pull off the Belt Parkway. I rest my arm on the window and little hairs jump to lick the breeze.

I think my mother should sell the house.
My mother is still living in South Brooklyn, ten blocks from Sheepshead Bay, in the house my father’s family bought at the end of the Great Depression. It is the house I was raised in and the house my father was hoping to sell when he died. Her street is a quiet one-way, wider than most; the houses are duplexes built for two families. Each shares a wall with one other beside it. On the other side is a driveway. The gardens are fenced-in patches of concrete, some, like my mother’s, with a lone tree inside it, overgrown and blocking the first-floor windows.

Backyards are for barbeques, occasionally, or garage sales (less often). Most are simply empty spaces, weeds sprouting from the cracks between the concrete squares.

I’m going to talk to her about selling the house, I decide as I pull up in front.

My parents, in the year before my father died, had been preparing to put the house up for sale. They began to clean out the basement, a storage container of the past, collecting and discarding seventy years and four generations of clothing, furniture, papers, antiques. Because my father’s health did not permit him to bend or stand at length, my mother was forced to do his work: on her toes she reached to clear the high back corners of the closet shelves, retrieving decades-old gentleman’s hats, brass tackle boxes and shoe shine kits, single lost gloves. On hands and knees she tucked herself into the crawl spaces and pulled
out the crates of newspaper clippings and four boxes stuffed with 1960s copies of “Playboy” magazine and first-editions in German. In just a few months, she unearthed and bagged the contents of the deep closet, which she then drove over to the Salvation Army. My father called dealers and pawn shops while my mother packed the books and collectibles they’d decided to keep into cardboard boxes my father labeled in black marker: THEATRE BOOKS; PLAYBILLS; GLASSWARE.

My father helped as he could but he tired easily, and wanted to hire someone to scrap the remainder of the junk in the basement. My mother wanted to go over every piece of jewelry, every item of clothing, every sheet of paper. The moving process stagnated. In his study, from the leather recliner in which he spent most hours of his life, my father cleaned out his desk, looked over the filing cabinet, and worked his way through the bookcase. He saved the family photographs in envelopes and shoeboxes but he emptied the study of the remnants of his career.

My father was sick of living in Brooklyn, so close to New York City but so far from its center. In his condition, trains were not an option, and he was no longer able to drive himself. On long car rides he squirmed uncomfortably in the passenger seat before he even reached his destination. When my mother took him to a plays on Broadway or Sunday brunches on Cornelia Street, he was usually too tired by the time they got there to enjoy it.
My father always wanted to be where things were happening. When he was my age, he briefly tired of New York and hopped on a bus cross-country. He stayed in San Francisco for a year before he began to miss the city. When my parents first married, they lived on Sullivan Street and spent evenings out at the Village jazz clubs. My father told me he and his friends lived at the Half Note, which had closed before I was even born.

“You can’t imagine,” he would say wistfully. “We’d sit there all night, ten feet from Miles, Charlie Parker, Mingus. The greats. And afterward, they’d come over and have a drink with us. That was music. Not this concert stadium noise.”

My father hated that it had become so expensive to live in Manhattan, that Broadway was accessible to tourists and the wealthy, instead of the starving actors who appreciated it, and that the intimate all-night jazz club had turned into a thing of the past. Even more, he hated that he was alone in New York. My mother’s family was all in Brooklyn, but most had summer houses elsewhere. My father hadn’t been able to go to Vermont in nearly a decade. His family was gone, and his friends, all fed up with what was happening in New York, had moved to North Carolina, New Hampshire, and London.

I, on the other hand, moved to Manhattan.

Still on shaky terms with my mother, I visited rarely and hadn’t much helped with the cleaning process. One of the last times I visited while my father
was alive, I had come down to clean out my childhood bedroom, which, more than seven years since I’d slept there, had become just another storage closet. My mother opened the door for me and I said a cordial, cold hello, which she returned in kind.

“Where’s my dad?” I asked, as impersonally as I could. My mother’s emotional instability during my childhood had resulted in abuse both physical and psychological. It left me with a deep resentment that I had not resolved, despite the improvement in my mother’s mental health over the last few years. In her presence, it was hard to maintain my anger toward my mother, but in my own life, apart from my parents, I held it close to my chest like a shield.

“His room,” she said. This meant my father’s study, the same room that had been his bedroom as a little boy. He had always done his work in there: graded students’ papers, marked tests, blocked out stage movements. Once he was ill, he spent much of his day in there, watching television and rereading every book Jack Kerouac had written. When I was small, I wasn’t allowed to go into the study without knocking. (Even now that my father is gone, I feel too uncomfortable to sit in his favorite chair without squirming.)

The television was audible through the door when I knocked. I had to knock twice before my father heard me.

He was leaning forward in his recliner with the wastebasket beside him. The drawers of his desk were flung open. Piles of papers were laid out on the twin
bed that had served as a sofa when we used to watch television together. My father looked up at me and smiled. He had crooked teeth but his smile was wide and he was handsome. Though his mustache and beard had turned half gray, the hair on his hair was dark and growing long. He muted the television and motioned for me to come close. I leaned over to give my father a hug and sank into his wide belly. In most of my baby pictures with my father, I am laid lengthwise across the expanse of his chest, half the size of his torso. When I was a child, I thought my father was a lion.

“What is this?” In the garbage can lay a stack of my father’s actor’s headshots. They were clearly from the early days; he was unwrinkled, his cheeks full, no glasses on his eyes. “You can’t throw out your headshots,” I said.

“What would I possibly do with them?” he asked. “There are hundreds.”

“They’re your picture!” I pulled the stack from the can and rifled through the photos, all duplicates of the top photo.

“It’s not like I’m using them,” he said. The papers on the bed were copies of his actor’s resume and professor’s CV; color playbills from plays he’d directed; highlighted scripts from his work as an actor. I piled a few scripts and made room for myself to sit. I held the scripts in my lap, and on top of them, the pictures of my father’s face in black and white, his eyebrow raised as though he knew I was looking at him.
“You can keep them if you want,” he said. “Here, look what I found.” My father cleared some knickknacks from the desk and picked up a framed 5-by-7 photograph. He handed the picture to me: it was at least twenty years old, a color snapshot taken in front of the lake by our summer house in Vermont. My father was thinner than usual and wore dark sunglasses and a neon baseball cap. My mother too was thin, as always, wearing a slinky teal swimsuit and smiling broadly. I sat on her hip, holding half an ice cream cone in one hand, the other reaching outward to wrap around my father’s neck.

“That’s a nice picture,” I said. “I remember that.” I looked down at my bony, pale knees beneath my shorts. I was tanned and bright-haired as a kid, always in the sun, always active. Looking back, I think I might have looked happy then.

“I remember that too,” he said. I was maybe six years old when that photo was taken. That was before the first of my mother’s many “episodes” and before my father got cancer; before I grew old enough to move out and quit speaking with my mother; before my father’s kidneys stopped working; before he shut the door to the world outside his boyhood bedroom.

My father hated that my relationship with my mother was broken. He was angry that he hadn’t seen or admitted how she treated me when I was a child and he was hurt that I hadn’t found a way, if not to forgive her, at least to move
forward. I was kinder to my mother in my father’s presence, but the fracture was always evident.

He replaced the photo and we talked awhile about my work, the new man I was dating, and a few movies my father had seen on TV recently.

“I suppose I should clean out my old room now,” I said, when the conversation turned to his dialysis treatments and the silences grew heavy.

“That would be a good idea,” said my father. “I’ll get back to this stuff.” He gestured about the workspace.

“I’ll keep your pictures,” I added, before I left my father’s room. I had no idea what to do with them but I hated the idea of his headshots going in the trash. Save for my mother and me, it seemed my father had tucked away his entire life.

My mother is sitting on the stoop. She’s wearing a short-sleeved tee-shirt and dark blue jeans, a rip at one knee. Her feet are bare. Her face lights when she sees me pull up in the car, and her smile is forced though not disingenuous.

I come up the stairs with two packages – one, a change of clothes to stay the night; the other a bag of leftovers cased in Tupperware. My mother used to cook for my father but rarely now will she cook alone. I hand her the container as we walk up the stairs. My father’s chairlift, the one they had installed two years ago after surgery left him debilitated, is folded up, still plugged in, at the foot of the stairs. My mother wiggles her way past it. Her hips are wider now but she is in

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good shape and my whole life, no one has been able to accurately guess her age. Its only signs are the deep lines etched in the corners of her eyes and the gray-white hair in shocks about her face.

“I need a haircut,” she tells me later in the kitchen, as we are peeling potatoes for dinner. We talk like girlfriends now, or at least close acquaintances. She doesn’t divulge of outward emotion when I am around but we gossip easily about work and friends; we share recipes; and twice we have gone shopping together on my weekend visits. Every so often conversation comes round to my father; hesitant as we are with one another, talk stops short a moment before we switch to a safer topic.

“So get a haircut,” I say, tossing a heap of peels into a plastic garbage bag.

“I don’t want to go there,” my mother says. Peeler in hand, she brushes the hair from her forehead with a forearm. “I can’t face Margi.” Margi is the hairdresser we both saw when I lived in Brooklyn.

“Is your hair that bad?” I joke. Her hair is that bad, piles of frizz splayed out in all directions, half a ponytail at the back. She clearly hasn’t seen Margi in a long time.

My mother finishes with the peeler.

“I haven’t seen her since your father… I don’t want to have to tell her.” She braces her hands on the edge of the sink and grips tightly with her eyes
closed. She gulps in a breath and lets it out slowly. It looks like a therapeutic technique, something she’s been taught. I don’t know what to do with myself.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I hate the words: in the week following my father’s death, all anyone said was *I’m sorry*. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry until it is nothing but meaningless filler. “I could go with you if you want,” I add.

My mother takes another, slower breath. “Maybe I’ll just find another hairdresser,” she says and uses a dish towel to wipe her eyes. She picks up a potato and begins to slice.

I cook mashed potatoes with spicy horseradish and sour cream because I saw them on a menu at a pub a few days ago. My mother decides she’ll eat vegetarian tonight, for me, and instead of frying chicken cutlets – her go-to dish on nights she worked late when I was a child – she helps me fry zucchini patties. Cooking, for me, is a wonderful distraction: with hot oil on the stove, I can’t afford to be concerned with anything else. I used to bring food home for my father; when everything else was difficult or painful, taste was still a comfort.

I roll a ball of batter in my palm and place in the skillet. Moisture makes the oil sizzle.

I open the cabinet above the sink but the stack of dishes always kept there are gone.
“Where are the plates?” I ask my mother. “I need to put the zucchini on something.” I look around the kitchen. My mother is pulling silverware from the top drawer.

“Oh! I forgot.” She disappears into the hallway. I flip a zucchini patty that has browned on the underside. My mother emerges with a stack of thin, rectangular plates. These are not the plates I was looking for.

“They came today,” she says. “This morning. I haven’t put them out yet.” She rushes to the sink and plops a few plates in. “I’ll wash them,” she adds. She turns on the water and holds one plate up to me – it is white, stark and square, and in one corner is a dainty yellow flower. The stem stretches a delicate line across the diagonal.

I feel ill suddenly, a violent urge to retch that has tangled between my ribcage. Why has my mother bought new plates?

“You hate flowers,” I say. The plate looks trendy, like something out of a yuppie catalogue.

“I know,” my mother says. “But these are so different.” She looks crestfallen as she turns to wash the dishes.

The old plates were my parents’ plates, a set they chose together. My mother liked the bright colored squares around the border and my father liked their sturdiness and solid lines. They weren’t chintzy, the word both of my parents
attached to most home furnishings, the likes of which one might find at Crate & Barrel or Ikea.

“I like the plates,” I lie, and my mother smiles with half her mouth. “I’m glad you found plates you like.”

She thanks me and the other half of her mouth rises. She is proud of herself, I think. My mother is settling in now, refurnishing, set to establish herself anew in this old house.

In the late morning, after coffee, my mother goes out for bagels, the only food I miss more than my father’s wok-fried Chinese vegetables, which she buys for me every time I come to Brooklyn. It is a sweet, simple gesture, more than what I have ever expected from my mother.

While she is gone I curl up in the giant chair in my father’s study for as long as I can bear. My mother doesn’t like the study, but I like it because it still smells like my father. When I hear the door open downstairs, I wonder how long I’ve been staring at my father’s pictures on the wall. His degrees are displayed on plaques above the desk; there’s a childhood photograph in his mother’s arms; a few costume stills from his performances; my yearbook pictures. And in the corner of the desk, that twenty-year-old photograph of all three of us in Vermont, my arms stretched out to touch my father.
I hate the idea of my mother staying here. She will spend every day staring at the walls that once protected her family. At night she will eat dinner out with friends because she isn’t comfortable eating alone at the big kitchen table; eventually, maybe sometime soon, she will begin cooking again. She will make my father’s favorite recipes and stop herself from crying over the kitchen sink. She will sleep on the couch at night to avoid the bedroom they shared. She will tiptoe in the mornings toward his study, tentatively cracking the door ajar and peering in to make sure he is still gone.

Despite my volatile relationship with my mother, I know her well. I understand her motivations, though I don’t agree with her. My mother stuck, like many first-generation Americans, to the only place that felt permanent, as concrete as the foundation her house was built upon. She grew up in the now-notorious Marlboro Project when a housing project was a step up for a poor Jewish family of five. Each day her parents travelled two hours to a factory in New Jersey and every night they travelled two hours back home. In Russia, her father had escaped the pogroms by hiding on rooftops.

No one, she said, would make her leave the home she’d made.

I decide not to mention selling the house to my mother.
After breakfast, she helps me downstairs with my overnight bag and a bagful of my own Tupperware leftovers. My mom stops suddenly when we reach the sidewalk.

“What?” I ask. She grabs me quickly into a hug. My chest tightens.

“I love you,” she whispers to my back.

“I love you too,” I say before I realize the words have left my mouth. She squeezes me hard and releases. I walk to the car without looking back. My father would have been happy to hear me say that to my mother. I wonder if it’s true.

There is no traffic on the way home. The day is clear and as I pass beneath the Verrazano again, I realize that it is not toward home I wish to swim, but somewhere else entirely. I want to dive into another body of water; I want to float beneath a sky I have never seen before.

Manhattan sits off to my left, patient and somehow less majestic than I envisioned as a child. The Freedom Tower looming up ahead now unnerves me even more than the emptiness in the West Side skyline has these past ten years. Everything that has been destroyed, this city attempts to rebuild. To me it feels spiteful, the new marker only a nagging reminder of what was lost.

My father said there was no place like New York, but he wanted to get out. It was lonely here and he had never been one for staying still too long. When I think about my father now, I can only think about his absence, the abundance around me of negative space.
I want to leave New York. There is nothing but a hole here, the size of which once fit an entire city, now gaping open and eager to swallow.