

THE SAME GREEN AND THE SAME SQUARE AND OTHER STORIES

by

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“The Same Green and The Same Square and Other Stories” is a collection of seven short stories that explore the “Why?” of human behavior and emotions—why we do the things we do, why we think the things we think, why we feel the often self-destructive things we feel. The stories and their characters are as varied as life experiences themselves, where some of the characters reach understanding slowly, through a series of painful revelations; some understand without fully knowing why they understand; and some slam into the epiphany head-first.



THE SAME GREEN AND THE SAME SQUARE AND OTHER STORIES

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by

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## The Same Green and The Same Square

The taste of blood filled her mouth. Red streaks filled the sink.

“I didn’t think they’d look so...beautiful.” Valerie stared down into the sink. She wanted to touch one. Pick it up with her fingers, run the tips over the jagged tops of the crowns. Wanted to feel the vacant spot inside her mouth. Warm flesh over bone.

But she didn’t know what Lyra would think—didn’t want to push her luck.

Valerie developed her fear of dentists about ten years previous. She had to get a tooth pulled. Her family had bad teeth. All of them had a full set of dentures by fifty. Partials and bridges before then. Valerie told Lyra the story on their first date:

“I was okay at first—a little nervous under the surface, but okay. Sitting in the waiting room reading a *National Geographic* article about the minds of animals.” Valerie straightened up, her eyes brightened. “Did you know that in the late 70s a scientist taught an African grey parrot to distinguish between different shapes and colors, including being able to identify them by name?”

Lyra sighed. “The dentist?”

“Oh, yeah. So I’m content, reading my magazine when they call me back. The dentist tells me I have a cavity in my second premolar and he’s going to have to drill. They lay back the chair, numb my tooth—which hurts Godawful by the way—and I hear the drill, feel pressure, but no pain so I start thinking about that parrot and the researcher that trained him and how awesome it must have been for them to look into each other’s eyes and understand the same green and the same square and how amazing that must have been when all of a sudden I feel this ripping pain

in my mouth—I can't quite figure out where—and smell something burning. The dentist and hygienist were freaking out, but telling me to relax, everything was fine. I tried to talk, but my tongue wouldn't work. That's when I realized what had happened." Valerie shrugged her shoulders, as if done with the story.

"What?" Lyra asked.

"He dropped the drill. Put a hole in my tongue big enough to put my pinky finger through." Valerie opened her mouth, poked the back of her tongue with her pinky finger to demonstrate. The rough, round mound of a scar like a piece of fatty tuna—a marbled bright pink.

"What happened?"

Valerie shrugged again. "I vowed to never go to the dentist again. Stopped eating sugar, started flossing and brushing after every meal. No soda. Became a lesbian."

Lyra dropped her fork. "What???"

"Like I'm ever going to have anything that remotely reminds me of a drill in my mouth again." Valerie wiped her mouth with her napkin. "I've gotta go brush. Be right back."

But Valerie's impeccable dental hygiene couldn't defeat genetics because several weeks later, she started feeling pain in her first and second molar. She tried to ignore it at first, chewed on the other side of her mouth, but before too long the pain throbbed day and night. The side of her face grew puffy.

"You've gotta do it," Valerie pleaded, opening her mouth wide. Several black and brown craters had eaten away the enamel like a cancer.

Lyra gripped the blue handle of the pliers in her sweaty palm. “You could try a different dentist...”

“No. Please. It hurts so much.”

And now they were looking at them, lying there against the grey of the stainless steel sink, not seeming as monstrous as they had in her mouth.

Lyra picked them up, cradled them gently in her palm as she washed the blood and bits of skin off with a thin stream of water.

Valerie smiled and got a juice glass out of the cabinet for Lyra to place them in and they both leaned over, chins resting on top of folded hands, and just stared. After a few moments, Valerie said: “You know, you’re my first.”

“First what?”

“Girlfriend.”

Lyra stood up. “But the tongue thing happened a decade ago.”

“I know.” Valerie brushed back a strand of Lyra’s hair. “But I’d been waiting for someone who sees the shapes and colors the same as me.”

## Unwelcomed

He makes me feel funny. Maybe the same kind of funny like Allison James. Yes, the same kind of funny. I mean, really, is there any other kind?

I met Allison freshman year in college. Alpha Delta Pi. We shared a room. She was one of those touchy-feely types. She had blonde hair that fell down in cascading waves. Total Breck Girl. All that perfection. And she liked *me*.

No, she never actually *said* it. But I could tell.

Undressed in front of me—facing me, not the wall, talking all nonchalantly the whole time. As if it weren't a big deal. As if we both didn't know she was breaking the rules.

Liked to lie on my bed while we watched *Buffy*. And not just on my bed, but under the covers. In only panties and her Sarah McLachlan t-shirt that she claimed she got at Lilith Fair, but I always suspected she really got at Hot Topic.

Always grinding on me when we went out dancing at the Power Company.

Yeah, Cole makes me feel that kind of funny.

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The first time I met Cole was at the cookout my sister threw for me for my college graduation. I stood in the corner shade of her patio next to the beer coolers. Even though it was only May, sweat puddled inside my bra, behind my knees.

“You must be Rebecca,” he said, approaching me from the crowd of people I didn't know. Somehow I'd managed to graduate from college without any friends.

“Yeah,” I said, extending my hand, “nice to meet you,” and as we shook I had a flash of us kissing. The simple no tongue, no hands, closed-mouthed kind.

At this point, I should confess that I do this with almost everyone I meet. The wrinkly 70-year-old greeter at Wal-Mart. My best friend’s mom. My best friend’s dad. The teenaged cashier at Harris Teeter. It really doesn’t matter the age, gender, race, body type, attractiveness of the individual. The image will just flash in my mind. For a second. Half a second. Almost like a war flashback or something. Totally unwelcomed and unavoidable. I don’t desire to kiss them. I don’t desire to do *anything* with them. I don’t know why I do it. I’ve been too afraid to tell my therapist about it. Afraid she’ll finally tell me I’m a whack-a-do and call in for the straightjackets. Yes, I’ve flash-imagined kissing her too.

His grasp was firm, comfortable. Like his dimples. I felt like we’d known each other forever. Grown up together.

Immediately, I felt embarrassed. Like I’d said or done something ridiculous. Like he could read the thoughts scrolling through my mind. For a distraction, I reached for a Bud Lite out of the galvanized tub with KRISTIN monogrammed in one of those excessively girly, cursive fonts.

He smiled, his brown eyes maintaining unwavering contact with mine. What’s the socially accepted rule? Four to five seconds? He was at least sex—six!—beyond that.

“So you and Kristin?” I asked, rubbing my nose.

“Um, no. She didn’t tell you?”

“No.” I picked at the label on the beer bottle, already peeling from the ice.

“I moved in next door a few weeks ago.” Cole motioned to the other half of my sister’s duplex.

“Oh.” I looked left—at nothing—then back at him, and back to the left again. “And now you two hang out all the time?”

“She’s great.” He ran his hand across his shaved head—already turning pink from the May sun—and took a long pull from his beer. “I’ve met so many people through her.”

“So you’re just friends?”

He rubbed his head again. “Yeah.”

“So, I see you’ve met my baby sister.” Kristin broke in like a rainbow or a hammer, depending on your point of view.

“Yeah,” Cole said, looking me dead in the eyes, smiling just enough to display those dimples again. “She’s something else.”

I shrugged my shoulders, blushed. Again, that kiss sped through my head.

\*\*\*

An obvious sign was when we would go shopping together. Allison would always insist we share a fitting room.

“It’s just easier,” she would say, locking the door. “That way we don’t have to bother going out there,” she indicated “out there” with a jut of her chin, “to get the other’s opinion looking like dorks in our socks or whatever.”

I laughed a little too loudly. “Oh, yeah, right.”

“I mean, what if we look *terrible*.” She stripped to her underwear as she talked. Cotton panties with pastel stripes. Powder blue bra. The scent of her body lotion filled the small space.

I stood there pretending not to notice. Or did she want me to notice? And did I want to notice? My face felt hot.

She started talking about Brad. Her boyfriend. He did or didn't do something he was or wasn't supposed to do. I tried to listen. But it was too hard to concentrate on her while trying to figure out how I should act all at the same time. Undress facing towards her or away? Or maybe just a halfway turn. Hold my limbs close to me so I wouldn't accidentally bump in to her or "accidentally" bump in to her on purpose? I felt her arm brush against my back. Ok, accidentally on purpose. But when I tried, I ended up side-swiping a boob, and while she pretended not to notice, I faced the corner to cringe.

Why are people so complicated?

\*\*\*

I saw Cole's black SUV in his driveway as soon as I turned onto Village Lane. A Yukon or Suburban or some such. Big engine. Big backseats. The opened garage door denoted the absence of my sister's Accord. I pulled onto the grassy edge, parallel to the duplex, wishing I had some excuse to knock on his door when Kristin's opened from the inside, startling me so that I dropped my keys.

"Hey." His expression was hard to read. Slight smile (coyness or politeness?). Relaxed eyes (bedroom or tired?). Slumped shoulders (aloofness or disinterest?).

"Kristin and I are going to dinner." I stood on the stoop, rocking back and forth on the balls of my feet in tight little movements, tugging at the hem of my tunic. Be still!, I yelled to

myself, involuntarily twitching my head at my own admonishment. “She told me to meet her here at 7:30.”

“Come on in.” His smile widened. He stepped back. “They’re fumigating my apartment.”

“If you’re busy, I can wait in the car.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m just watching TV.”

*CSI* was paused on the DVR. An old episode. Grissom was still supervisor.

“Would you like a beer?” He held up the can in his hand with a lopsided grin. “Kristin told me to make myself at home.”

“Sure.” I sat on the side of the sofa closest to the door. He brought me a Coors Lite. Top already popped. In a coozie. “Thanks.”

He sat right in the middle of the couch. Pressed play on the remote. Well, not right in the middle. Actually a few inches from the middle closest to me.

I couldn’t concentrate on the unfolding crime drama. My palms started to sweat. I searched my brain for something interesting to say, to break the building thickness of silence between us, but my mind assaulted me with images of touches, kisses, penises. I was about to excuse myself to the bathroom when he spoke.

“How was your day?”

*My day??? What is this guy trying to say?* “Good. It was good.”

He turned to face me. His eyes were a wide, deep, deep brown that reminded me of a baby deer.

“That’s good.”

But he kept looking at me. *He wants something. He’s expecting something.*

“Um, well,” I started. He tilted his head ever so slightly to the side. “There is one thing...”

“Yeah?” He looked at me. I mean, really *looked* at me. Like I was important. Like what I said was important. Like he wasn’t afraid of eye contact. I glanced at the television. Grissom and Catherine were squatting over the body of a naked, mutilated woman. Blood. Organs. Grey matter. But no nipples. *They never show nipples.*

“It’s hard you know. Just out of college. First real job. First real apartment.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “but don’t you have friends or a boyfriend to help you through?”

I rubbed my palms together. “Um, I’ve never really had a boyfriend or anything.”

“Really? A pretty girl like you?”

Those eyes again. So tuned on me. So untuned to everything else. “Um,” I scratched the back of my head. “Well—“

Both of our heads turned at the sound of a key in the door. Kristin. *Thank God.*

“So, what did you and Cole talk about?” she asked after we were buckled into the obliterating darkness of her car.

“We didn’t really talk at all. We just watched TV.”

After dinner with Kristin, just a little buzzed from a couple of rum and diets, I fed my cat and turned on my laptop. With Lola rubbing her arched backside in my face, I googled “acceptable personal space distance.” I found that anything less than 18 inches was considered “intimate.” I dug out the tape measure from the toolset my dad had given me as a graduation present.

Sitting on my own couch, next to the arm like I had done at Kristin's, I pulled out the measuring tape to 18 inches. He'd definitely sat within that distance. Perhaps as close as 12 inches.

But I didn't want to be rash. So next, I googled "acceptable social eye contact." I felt it was necessary to get all the facts. These findings were more ambiguous. Anywhere from 3-10 seconds of solid eye contact, I found, is acceptable in the United States. I set the timer on my iPhone and crouched down to look Lola in the eyes for 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and then 10 seconds to see if I could recreate Cole's behaviors. Was he being polite or staring? Just for scientific accuracy, I repeated my experiment three times. Lola kept running off to different areas of the apartment, but I chased her down. I wasn't going to let the reluctance of my feline participant ruin scientific accuracy. She eventually got tired of fleeing or accepted my search for truth. And after careful documentation and consideration of all data, I was certain he maintained eye contact that exceeded 10 seconds.

Closer than normal physical proximity? Eye contact above the maximum accepted time? It was obvious. Cole wanted me.

\*\*\*

When we returned from summer break, Rebecca had moved out of the sorority house—gotten an apartment off campus with her boyfriend. I quit the sorority and got a job as a waitress at a family-owned Italian restaurant. I gained ten pounds in a month because the wife of the owner was always bringing me plates of lasagna, calzones, urging me to "Eat! Eat!" I think it's because she didn't have any daughters. Just one son—David Angotti.

David had a crush on me too, just like Rebecca. David was like the statue—smooth and tall with an isolating gaze. I would often watch him cook, his eyes focused on the veal shank or garlic press, but his gaze, his attention was elsewhere. On the giant to be conquered, I guess. On those nights, when he was lost to the world around him, I would watch him, watch his lips, and those flash-kisses were some of the most intimate of my life.

I think he felt weird making a move, though, since his mother loved me so much. But every night at the beginning of my shift, he'd ask me to try a new dish or drink he'd concocted.

“Why don't you ever ask any of the other staff?” I asked one night after wiping the butter from his wild mushroom orzo from the corners of my mouth.

He just winked and said, “I know I can trust your taste buds.”

And at the end of every night he'd wave to me from the driver's window of his Mazda RX-7—one of the eternally new, high-pitched waitresses in the passenger seat—as I pushed off on my bicycle towards home.

\*\*\*

Over the next few months, Cole and I became close. I went over to Kristin's regularly in hopes of running in to him—and it seemed like he turned up on her back porch just before or after I got there, as if we were tuned in to the same frequency.

“Hey,” Cole said one afternoon. We were sitting on Kristin's back porch drinking beer—Kristin and I side-by-side on her swing and Cole across from us in a bright pink Adirondack chair. “This band Sunny Day Real Estate is playing at Local 506 this weekend. You should totally come.”

“Yeah,” we both said at the same time. I looked at Kristin to see if I got it wrong, but she just smiled and tilted her head to the side.

“Great,” Cole said, rolling his beer between the palms of his hands. “I think you’ll really like them.” He smiled in our direction, and since my sister was looking down, toeing the cement with her shoe, I knew he was smiling at me.

Some of Cole’s friends met us at the club, so I didn’t get to accidentally touch his hand or stand shoulder to shoulder in the crowd, the rhythm of the moving bodies causing us to occasionally bump hips like I had fantasized about for the last three days, but every once in a while, as the music swelled and pulsed around us, he would turn to me and smile and say, “I love this song!” so that I felt pleased for the invitation into a corner of his private world.

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“Did you know that if you leave a tooth in a glass of Coke overnight it will be completely dissolved by morning?”

“Oh,” I said, setting down the can of Coke I was drinking.

David was making *cioppino*. The tomato paste he stirred into the pot fragrant of garlic and onions and shallot and olive oil splattered onto his white chef’s jacket. I could see him through the cutaway between the kitchen and the servers’ prep area—his face was red, sweaty, urgent.

“Where did you hear that?” I asked, eyeing my still cold, sweating can of soda. A single bead of condensation snaked its way down the curved underscoring of the logo.

“You can’t trust anything,” he said, roughly chopping a head of parsley with the big butcher knife his father sharpened with the whetstone every Monday. He didn’t even bother separating the stems from the leaves.

“Nothing?”

He looked up at me, into me. Held up his hands. They were covered with bits of parsley. Truncated stems. Augmented leaves. “Nothing.”

“What’s wrong?”

He laid down the knife, wiped his hands with towel. I held my breath as he pushed through the swinging doors separating his world from mine. He cupped my chin in the palm of his hands, lifted my eyes to the embossed copper ceiling tiles so that I only saw the repeating fleur-de-lis and nothing else. I felt his lips hover over my neck, but only for a moment before he stroked my head slowly, firmly like a sister. “Nothing,” he whispered, stroking harder, almost uncomfortable. “Nothing.”

A few days later, Mrs. Angotti called me. They had too many servers and since I was last hired, well, you know.

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A week after Sunny Day Real Estate, Kristin and I were lounging on her couch watching *Boardwalk Empire* when Cole came over to invite us to a party at his house that night.

“It’s no big deal,” he said, hands in his pockets, eyes shifting between me and Kristin. “Just an excuse to drink shots and hang out with cute girls.” I swear he winked at me.

After he left, I told Kristin I needed to clean my apartment before the party, but really, I wanted to go shopping—let him know his efforts weren't in vain—he'd been dropping all the hints, probably feeling vulnerable and afraid while I'd done nothing.

The least I could do was look nice.

So I went to the mall—the big new one right off the highway that stretches out like Disney World. Or maybe Disney Land. I went to every store that sold women's clothing, sizing up all my options before choosing. My final selection was an amalgam from different stores. Khaki shorts with a one-inch cuff from the Gap. White camisole from Victoria's Secret. Sheer red peasant blouse with white polka dots from Anthropologie. Taupe lace-up wedges from Urban Outfitters. It was good. Nice without feeling too dressy. I spent so much time shopping, I had to change clothes in the mall bathroom and go to Sephora for a free makeover. I know you're supposed to buy something, but it was an emergency and I knew that if the girl understood my situation, she would have totally understood. Probably would have given me her blessing.

I didn't feel nervous at all when I pulled up in front of their shared duplex. At the last minute, I grabbed the zip-up hoodie I keep tossed in the backseat for cold-nature emergencies. I'd heard about girls "accidentally" leaving things at a guy's house so they'd have a reason to come back when he wasn't distracted by other things. I knew that was finally going to be my excuse to get him alone.

And it was a good thing I did that too, because even though the party was nice, I hardly got a chance to talk to him. Between him making shots, talking to friends, and shuffling the playlists on his iPod it seemed like he never sat still. I leaned back on the couch sipping my Royal Flush, though, knowing that patience yielded its own rewards.

The first half of Sunday, I paced my apartment, waiting for Cole to notice my coat, prompting him to send me a text inviting me to come over to get it. When my phone still lay silent by 3:00 p.m., I sent him a light and breezy text about it. At least, I hoped it sounded light and breezy. I checked my phone every ten minutes, but never did the little red 1 appear on my home screen. By 5:00 p.m., I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'll just drive by and see," I said to Lola, licking her paw on the coffee table. To see what exactly, I hadn't quite hammered out.

Luckily when I arrived my sister's garage door was down—a good sign that she was not home. I mean, I love my sister, but it seemed like she was always finding a way to butt in between me and Cole.

Even though it wasn't dark yet, the shades at Cole's place were drawn, no lights were on, and the lawn had the quiet feeling of sleeping. It felt like everything was on pause, waiting for me. I rang the doorbell and waited. I rang it again and waited. I opened the storm door and knocked. The slab door creaked open a few inches. I looked around and pushed it open the rest of the way.

"Cole?" I called, leaning just my torso over the threshold.

I heard music from the back of the house. Where the bedrooms were.

"Cole?" I repeated a little louder, stepping all the way inside. The living room was still littered with empty beer bottles and smudged glasses from the night before.

"Uh, hey." Cole appeared in the hallway, hair tousled, boxer shorts rumpled, no shirt.

"The door was open," I said quickly, regretting coming in, regretting coming over at all.

"Oh." He looked over his shoulder, down the hallway, then back at me. "So, what's up?"

“I left my jacket here last night.” I could feel something, deep in the blackness of my mind. Like a scream slowly forming.

“Um,” he rubbed his palm over his head, “I haven’t seen it.”

I ignored the swelling soprano. Nerves. Don’t get derailed. All signs had been leading me here. “It’s gotta be either in here or the kitchen.”

“Why don’t you look in there and I’ll check in here.”

“Are you hungry?” I asked, walking towards the kitchen. “There’s a great Italian place in Five Points.” As the scream got louder, it deepened, filling my ears with a God-like urgency. I told myself to concentrate. Didn’t Winston Churchill once say something about hell and never giving up? “They have the best calamari.”

“Here it is!” Cole practically shouted.

“Are you okay?”

“This just isn’t the best time for me.” Cole shifted his weight side-to-side, occasionally looking behind him down the hall.

“Oh, okay.” I pressed my fingertips to my temples. “Maybe some other time.”

“Uh, yeah, it’s just—“

Suddenly, Kristin was beside him, wearing nothing but a long t-shirt, her hair up in a clip. “Hey.”

“What are you doing here?” I felt dumb even saying it.

They looked at me.

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

I could feel the hot, angry tears forcing their way up. I needed to leave. I needed to not look at them. “Yeah, sure, no problem.” I jerked my jacket from Cole, standing there with his mouth open like a cartoon character.

Kristin walked towards me. “You okay?”

I turned around quickly. “Yeah, sure.”

“Rebecca—”

But I had already slammed the door shut behind me. I stood on the top step for several minutes—allowing the arches of my feet to balance on the jagged corner. When I heard their footsteps recede, I sat on the front steps, the concrete biting into the back of my thighs, and finally let the tears flow freely, staining my cheeks, swelling my nose. “What an idiot,” I whispered. *How can it be so hard? Why doesn't anyone ever love me? What's wrong with me?*

Then I suddenly remembered Omar Cooper—the boy with the stutter that followed me everywhere in fourth grade. He would bring me Hello Kitty erasers and lead pencils and glittery stickers, but I would never hold his hand or let him kiss me.

“Why?” he finally asked.

“I don't know.” I clutched a plastic necklace he'd given me in my sweaty palm, toed the playground sand with my saddle shoe. “You just try so hard.”

“How can anyone try too hard? I thought trying was good.”

I couldn't remember what I had said back to him—all my mind could see now was that look on his face. The confusion in his twisted eyebrows. The hope shining in his eyes. The want plumping his lips.

I looked up, knowing I knew that look, and noticed the sun melting behind the trees, blowing them up with light and fire, and I jumped up and ran, wondering if I could get there fast enough.

## Unceremonial

Genesis almost reached out for her girlfriend's hand—for comfort—but stopped herself before it was too late. Instead, she spoke. “There must be....what? A hundred of them?”

“At least.”

They stood, slightly stooped and mostly undressed—covered in nothing but underwear, baggy t-shirts, and sleep sweat—over the squirming, slightly shifting mound of maggots. It seemed to move to its own rhythm. Heartbeat.

A repulsive heartbeat. Yet they stood, bent, staring.

“Where the hell did they come from?” Genesis broke the silence again—touched her hand to her chest, started breathing through her mouth.

“I don't know.”

Instinctively, they both looked up at the ceiling. The off-white popcorn finish stared back at them blandly, unchanged.

“Let's just get rid of them,” Jackie said.

Genesis dragged over the trashcan and Jackie scooped up the first load with the dustpan, dumping them on top of last night's take-out Chinese with an unceremonial *thop*. Genesis cleaned the spot where they'd writhed with a Clorox Clean-up while Jackie took the garbage bag out to the dumpster.

“Okay?” Jackie asked when she came back in, tracking pine straw and leaf pieces across the off-white tile. Genesis cringed.

“Okay.”

Up the stairs, single-file, heads down. Prepared for the day in silence.

Before they left for work, they exchanged dry pecks on the lips, and opened the door to another wet spring day.

“When is this rain going to stop?”

“Never.”

The hallways of the school were still mostly dark. Genesis had been getting to work early lately. Not that she had so much to do. She just liked sitting at her desk, facing the still classroom, the empty chairs, the silence humming in her ears. Sometimes she felt so small and vacant that she wanted to cry, but mostly, she just felt numb. And it had gotten to the point that she craved the numbness. It was like the absence, the abyss, was more than nothing. It was something that kept her grounded. Kept her from floating away. Or maybe from exploding. She couldn't be sure which.

She sat there watching the sunlight fill the room, shifting from bluish grey to a dirty yellow. Every morning, she did this until the clock turned to 7:33 a.m., then rose from her chair, opened her classroom door, and stood in the hallway to monitor the students as they filed in for first bell.

Hallway duty.

Watching the 11 and 12 and 13 and 14 and sometimes 15 and 16-year-olds swell the wide hallways choking the once-open space offered her a kind of relief. Most teachers actually stopped rule offenders. Cursing, hats, gum, earbuds, cell phones. But Genesis just looked at them. Not in the eye. Rarely in the eye. Instead at their full smiles, smooth cheeks, plump hands. She felt that was enough.

As Genesis stood at her post, she smoothed the front of her khaki Dickies. She had no mirror, but looking down, she surveyed the slight hump of her breasts, the flat line of her stomach down to her pelvis, the sometimes-considered-sexy bulge of her thighs, and felt that she was, as her father used to say, “Good enough for government work.” Genesis laughed out loud, breaking the sudden silence of the emptied hall.

“Something funny, Miss Bell?” Mr. Cox, her seven-foot Assistant Principal, smiled down at her.

“Oh, you know, something in my head.”

“I see,” he said, winking. “I’d like to introduce you to our newest teacher. Mr. Phillips.”

“Welcome to Mt. Pleasant Middle.” Genesis shook Mr. Phillips’ hand, smiled a congenial smile.

“Mr. Phillips is going to be your new neighbor, and I assured him that you’ll be of the utmost assistance while he acclimates himself to his new climate.”

“Of course.” Genesis widened her smile dutifully.

“Nice to meet you.” Mr. Phillips said, gripping her hand in a warm, almost sweaty handshake. Genesis could see how his longish hair and shaggy beard could have wooed the underclasswomen of his decidedly pot-embracing alma mater, probably some place in the mountains where camping was considered a date, but here in the lowlands he was just another starry-eyed graduate.

“So what’s good to do around here on the weekend?” Mr. Phillips asked after Mr. Cox had walked away.

Genesis snorted. “Here? In this town? You’re what, twenty-four?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Then your best bet is Raleigh. It’s about an hour drive, but this place is full of gray hairs and rednecks.”

“Then why do you live here?”

“I think I might be one of them.”

“Have you seen the new guy?”

Genesis felt a fleshy elbow bore into her side. She glanced left. Margie Matthieu, the school librarian. Nice, well-intentioned in a nosey, church prayer list kind of way.

“Yeah.” Genesis filled an over-sized coffee mug for the third time that day. On it was printed:

**Let’s eat Grandma**

**Let’s eat, Grandma**

*Punctuation saves lives!*

“Oh, that’s right.” Mrs. Matthieu elbowed her again. “You’re right next to him.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“He’s soooo cute!”

Genesis crinkled her eyebrows, glanced sideways at her colleague. Not only was she married and about 210 pounds, she was at least 50. At least.

“I guess if you like that kind of thing.”

“Who wouldn’t like that kind of thing?” Mrs. Matthieu laughed, then turned serious.

“You’re too pretty and too young to be single.”

“He’s too young for me.” Genesis started sidestepping towards the break room door, but Mrs. Matthieu was one of those people who either couldn’t or wouldn’t pick up on non-verbal social cues.

“Well, I understand not wanting to give away the cow, but you don’t want the milk to spoil either.”

As she drove home from work in the late afternoon, a thin rain still fell from the uniformly grey sky, an incessant little drumming. Genesis didn’t bother to turn on the radio or use turn signals. At home, she opened the blinds, filling the rooms with the murky light. She didn’t realize that she’d fallen asleep until she heard Jackie’s key in the door.

“Are you not feeling well?” Jackie asked.

“I’m going to make Hamburger Helper for dinner.”

“Work was busy. End of the month.”

They watched the news in silence as they ate. The weatherman said the rain would stay for the rest of the week.

In the morning, a new pile of maggots writhed in the middle of the kitchen floor.

“Where are they coming from?” Jackie asked.

“I don’t know.” Genesis dragged over the trashcan. They began to clean them up.

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“Can you show me how to use the copier?”

Genesis finished watching a raindrop streak slowly down the window, tracing a crooked path to its destination, before turning to see Mr. Phillips standing in her classroom door.

“Sure.”

“I tried already,” he explained as they walked down the dimly-lit hall. The county wouldn’t allow the custodians to turn all the lights on until first bell. Apparently it saved the school system thousands of dollars a year. “But I can’t figure out how to get these two pages on one sheet.”

“Duplex.”

“Huh?”

“It’s called duplex. When it’s front and back.”

“I guess I have a whole new language to learn.” Mr. Phillips laughed. He had very straight teeth.

Mrs. Matthieu was in the workroom putting little slips of paper in all the teachers’ boxes. Probably something about over-due fees or the book fair.

“Good morning, Mrs. Matthieu.” Genesis kept her arms by her sides. “Have you met Mr. Phillips yet?”

“Well, hi, there, young fella! It’s so nice to have a fresh face ‘round here!” Mrs. Matthieu threw her arms out and for a second Genesis thought she was going to hug him, but instead she kept on talking. “I’m the head librarian, so if you need any books or videos or help with research projects for your class, you just holler. What do you teach?”

“Social studies.”

“I’ve got the whole *Liberty’s Kids* series when you get to the Revolution. It won an Emmy.”

“Great, thanks.”

“Well, I’ll let you two kids get to your work.” Mrs. Matthieu winked at Genesis as she waddled out the door.

“She means well,” Genesis said.

“You can call me Cory.”

“What?”

“Cory.” He smiled, extending his hand. Genesis took it slowly. “My name is Cory.”

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Genesis looked out over her classroom. Her students, in a rare moment of simultaneous concentration, all had their heads down, writing furtively in their reflection journals. She’d set the timer for five minutes. Usually too much time. But this time, she knew pencils would still be moving, insisting, even after the ringer. Sex, violence, and death always did get their attention.

When the timer rang, she jumped.

“Okay.” Genesis sat on the front edge of her desk, propping her feet on a wooden stool that she rescued from the dumpster. A crooked crack ran through the middle that Jackie had filled with wood putty. “Who wants to go first?”

“Those two be trippin.”

“Why’s that?”

“To kill *yourself* over some *piece* you just *met*?” Destiny pulsed her fingers as she talked, stretching her palms on each inflection. “Naw.”

“What about—“

“I liked it.”

Genesis smiled. She didn’t mind being interrupted when they were actually into it. “Tell us.”

“They had this connection, you know? They weren’t going to let anyone tell them it won’t real, you know?” Darrius glanced down, then up, and back down again. “I like that.”

“You are *slow*, boy.”

“Just because you still move your lips when you read don’t mean everybody else done bumped they head.”

“Okay. Alright.” Genesis raised her hands, palms out. “Let me ask both of you. Do you think what happened to them was fate or just a series of bad choices?”

“It was fate,” Darrius answered quickly, his face lit with a kind of Hollywood magic. “It said it in the book. ‘Star-crossed lovers.’ ”

“No, no, no.” Destiny shook her head slowly. “They were just a couple of fools with their brains in they pants instead of they heads where they belong.”

The class erupted into laughter, and Destiny had to fight to keep her expression neutral.

“All right, all right.” Genesis stood, straddling the stool. “Let’s hear from someone else?” Gazes lowered. Heads turned. “I know the rest of you have opinions too.”

“What about you?” Destiny asked.

Genesis lowered back down to her desk. “I tend to be a more free-will kind of person. I don’t believe in fate.” She swept her gaze across the room. Not directly at her students, but a few inches over their heads. “But, hey, that’s just me.”

Death Cab. Her second glass of Pinot. Tea lights. She loved ambiance. Even when she cooked. It was one of the first big compliments Jackie had ever given her. “I like how you set the mood.” That was how Jackie had put it, lying on her bed, head propped up by one hand. Genesis just smiled, blew out the match.

“You’re cooking? Like cooking, cooking?” Jackie had a right to be surprised. It had been months.

“I felt like it.”

“What are you making?”

“Mushroom orzo.”

Genesis took a shower while the pasta simmered. Jackie washed dishes.

“It smells good,” Jackie said when they sat down.

“Thanks.”

They ate quietly. Silent, but not uncomfortable. Just accustomed.

“I could use some hot sauce.” Jackie looked into her bowl.

“I got it.” Genesis stood.

Later, in bed, they fumbled with their bodies. Genesis wondered when the things they once knew had been replaced. Translated into something almost familiar, but not. The aching feeling of “If just a little bit more...” or “If just a little bit less...”

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Saturday morning a dream woke her just before seven. Immediately, it was forgotten, but the way the sleepy sun leaked in through the cracked blinds—casting a bluish light on the room, as if it were coming from within—trapped her within an aura of other-worldness. Genesis turned her head left. Jackie slept with the blanket pulled tight to her chin so she looked like a disembodied head, her forehead slightly damp.

Genesis hadn't heard her come home, but her standing Friday night poker game usually ended around 3:00 am. And even though she had been content with her quiet evening at home—a few glasses of Pinot, flickering candles, Joyce Carol Oates, and then *Amelie*—a subtle feeling had gnawed at the perimeters of her thoughts, a feeling that still lingered in the eerily beautiful glow of morning.

Loneliness.

Slowly, like a hunter, she inched out of bed, stepping wide around the footboard to avoid the floorboard that always creaked, squatted on tiptoes to pick up a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt off the floor, waiting until she was downstairs to put them on. The tile floor chilled her bare feet, and she almost walked through the kitchen in the semi-dark before remembering to turn on the light. To check. Nothing. Carefully opening and shutting doors, she warmed up a mug of water for tea in the microwave. Settling onto the couch with the steam clouding her vision, she startled a fat squirrel gorging himself in the backyard birdfeeder. Too greedy to run, he simply paused momentarily in his feast, watching her with one black eye. She watched him too. After several deciding seconds, he thrashed once more through the seed.

Sitting in a world of perfect pause, Genesis sipped her tea, the feeling of stopped time interrupted only periodically by the wind ruffling through the wind chimes and the heat pump turning on or off. The memory of their first camping trip filled her mind. When they first started dating—three years ago. Neither of them had been since they were kids, with their own families. Not long after they'd set up, it had started raining. They'd bought a waterproof tent, so they unconcernedly watched the rain fall through the screen door, drank wine, and talked. At some point, they fell asleep, and in the middle of the night, Genesis woke up with her pillow and sleeping bag sitting in an inch of water. Thinking the roof was leaking, she turned on the flashlight, but saw it was dry. The rain was leaking from the bottom up, collecting on her side from the slightly uneven ground.

“What is it, babe?” Jackie had asked, wakened from the light.

“I'm all wet.”

Jackie unzipped her bag and held out her hand. Crammed into one sleeping bag, Genesis slept with Jackie's arms around her. Tight. Cramped. Wonderful. In the morning, they made love on their little patch of dryness and went fishing. It was one of their best trips ever.

“We have nothing to eat,” Genesis said suddenly to the empty room. The squirrel—still lying in the birdfeeder—kept his head buried in the seed.

Harris Teeter was busy. It always was on Saturdays. Genesis pushed her cart slowly up and down the aisles, pausing to look at anything with a *New Item!* or a red VIC tag. Grocery shopping used to be soothing to Genesis, when she would come organized, with a list generated after pulling a few recipes, anticipating the meals she and Jackie would make. Even though the kitchen intimidated Jackie—afraid she'd mess something up despite Genesis's oft-repeated, “You learn by making mistakes”—she had loved to help. “My little sous chef,” Genesis had

affectionately called her. But they hadn't cooked together in over a year, and grocery shopping had turned to a dreaded chore. Buying the same things over and over again—soda, cheese, Doritos, boxed dinners, Triscuits, canned soup—a constant reminder of the paralysis that had infiltrated their relationship. *Where did it all go wrong?* she thought, absent mindedly picking up a can of coconut milk from the shelf, rolling it between her hands. That question came to her often—always unanswered—so that sometimes she didn't even realize she was thinking about it. A constant presence. Like a dripping faucet. She could feel the water droplets bouncing off her shoulder. *That doesn't make sense.* She scrunched her eyebrows and turned her head to see Cory Phillips leaning in to her. Yelping, she dropped the can.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.” Cory smiled at her. He wore a pair of faded jeans and a Beatles t-shirt.

“I, uh, I...” Genesis stammered as she bent to pick up the can. “I guess I was just lost in thought.”

“So, what's for dinner tonight?”

“Uh, well...” Genesis could feel her face turn red.

“Let me guess...you don't know how to cook.”

Suddenly, she felt irritated at this man. “No. I can cook.” She started pushing her cart on down the aisle, but he followed.

“Oh, yeah?” He peered into the cart. “Like what? Pop Tarts?”

“What the fuck do you care?” Immediately, Genesis regretted the tone, the words.

“Look,” Cory held his hands up. “I'm sorry. I was just joking around. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

*Damn it*, she thought before calling out: “Wait. I didn’t mean to be such an ass. I’m just having...” Genesis had to look down. She could feel the tears coming. *Please, don’t cry in front of this guy.*

“It’s okay.” She felt his hand on her arm. Assuring. Calm. “We all do.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, the bar across the street is having a special on wings and Miller Lite. It seems like you could use a get-drunk-before-noon kind of day.”

Genesis laughed in spite of herself. “What about my groceries?”

“Um, a bunch of canned and processed food? I think they’ll be okay.”

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Three hours later, Genesis banged through the front door, noisily dropping her keys on the counter, tripping over flip-flops. Jackie sat on the living room couch playing *Assassin’s Creed*.

“I’m home,” Genesis said a little too loudly, swaying on the threshold between the hallway and the living room.

“Hey,” Jackie said without taking her eyes off the game.

Genesis stood there a few moments longer—her head a jumble of words and phrases—before crawling up the stairs to take a shower and pass out.

In the morning, she quietly cleaned a new pile of maggots off the kitchen floor.

“Good morning.”

Although Genesis recognized the smooth timbre of Cory’s voice, she didn’t turn around. *Maybe he’ll think I’m hypnotized by the copying machine. Or that I’m partially deaf.* She just needed a minute. A minute to figure out how to act. Spending all day Sunday trying to ignore the fact that she had so much fun with him on Saturday had twisted her sense of logic and reason into a jumbled mess. They talked. They laughed. They made eye contact. Little things. Little things that she didn’t realize how much she’d missed. Until...

Plus, she was scared. Scared over how she felt about Cory. Although she knew it wasn’t this way for everyone, Genesis felt like she was one of the ones that could choose, and she’d chosen women years ago. Never once missing men. Their weird-looking erections. Their excess hair. Their roughness. Their funky smells.

But then there was *this* man. Straight-laced with a dash of hippy. Clever with a bit of goofiness. Intelligent mixed with scatter-brained. It made him fun, easy to be around, undemanding.

*You can’t be thinking this.* Genesis shook her head.

“So, it’s not a good morning?”

Genesis jumped. She’d forgotten he was behind her.

“You startle easier than a thoroughbred.” Cory laughed.

“I just get so...”

“Lost in your thoughts?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe some day you could let me in on your little secret.”

“What?” Genesis almost shouted. *How does he know?*

“Calm down, Seabiscuit.” He put one of those soothing hands on her arm. She looked at it. “I just mean that maybe one day you’ll tell me these intensive thoughts you have.”

“Oh,” she said, still looking at his hand. His fingers were long and strong. His palm shaped like a square. “They’re not that intensive.”

That night Genesis cooked dinner. Not just dinner. A feast. Apricot-bourbon glazed ham. Buttered snap peas and carrots. Mashed potato au gratin. Cheese and chive biscuits. Raspberry-cream layer cake for dessert.

While the ham cooked its last hour, Genesis showered—using the expensive body wash and matching lotion that Jackie had given her for Valentine’s Day a few years ago that she saved because it was so expensive. Dressed in a black wrap-around dress, she set the table with linens. Lit candles. Put on Jackie’s favorite Michael Bublé album.

“Hey.” Jackie’s keys jangled in the door. “What smells so good?”

“I made dinner.” Genesis stood in the doorway of the kitchen, hands folded in front of her, smiling.

“Wow. Really?” Jackie kissed her on the temple as she squeezed by. She touched her finger to the glaze on the ham, then to her tongue. “You look nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Everything looks just...great.” Jackie crossed back across the kitchen, pulled Genesis to her and kissed her. Genesis felt her muscles relax, ready to bend into whatever shape Jackie wanted. “We better eat quick though.”

“Why?”

“I have that poker tournament in an hour.” Jackie looked at her watch. “That gives me about fifteen minutes before I’ve *got* to be out the door.” Genesis watched Jackie fill up her plate. “You want me to fix you one too?”

“Sure.”

“You’re not upset, are you? You know I’ve been looking forward to this for weeks. I’ve already paid my entry fee.”

“I guess...I guess I forgot.”

“It’s okay, babe.”

Twenty minutes later, with the silence of their home pressing painfully against her ears, Genesis lay on their bed and masturbated. She couldn’t quite bring herself to climax, but the balled up frustration, a marble that she felt she could control, manipulate with her middle finger, was like a kind of pleasure. And as that pleasure rolled, never cresting, the image of Cory’s sanguine eyes floated on the horizon.

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On Monday morning, Genesis didn’t dress in her normal black pants, untucked shirt, and PF Flyers (she had them in black, red, blue, and brown). Instead, she chose a black pencil skirt, a green short-sleeved cowl-necked sweater, black flats. No hose. She wore her hair in a loose bun, curly tendrils grazing the back of her neck.

“Wow. Do you have a job interview later?” Ms. Matthieu joked.

“No. I just wanted to wear something different for a change.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Genesis wanted to ask her what that was supposed to mean, but figured that with Ms. Matthieu—and pretty much everyone else on the staff—it was best to say as little as possible.

The entire day, her students remarked on her dramatic change in wardrobe.

“Ms. Bell, you look so pretty.”

“You look different.”

“You look nice today, Ms. Bell.”

“Do you have a date tonight?”

The only person that didn't seem to notice was Mr. Phillips. Cory.

As she was packing up her things at the end of the day, she heard a knock on her cracked classroom door.

“Can I come in?” It was him.

“Sure.”

He closed the door behind him. She felt her armpits moisten.

“I know this is going to sound strange, but I've been thinking about you all day.”

The strap to Genesis' lunch bag slipped from her hand. “What?”

Cory looked at the ground. “All weekend, to be honest.”

“Why?”

Cory looked up at her, smiled. “I think you've been thinking about me too.”

“What makes you say that?” Genesis felt her cheeks turn red. She fumbled to retrieve her lost lunch bag.

He nodded his head towards her, at her body, her clothes.

“This? This is nothing.”

“Really?”

“Um...” Genesis looked around the room like one of the posters of Shakespeare or Charlotte Bronte would come to her rescue.

Suddenly he was next to her, taking her hand into his. “It’s okay.”

“Well...”

“We’re both adults. There’s nothing wrong.”

“It’s just that—“

“Come have a drink with me. Just one drink.”

Genesis looked at the picture on her desk. It was of her and Jackie on the Swinging Bridge at Grandfather Mountain. Their hips were touching.

“What harm could it do?”

“Ok.”

Alcohol glowed between ice cubes. Tiny lanterns. Tea lights. Heavily polished wood. Moody music playing lowly. The kind that suggests that you’re missing out on your own life. Fingers lingering in the middle of the dark paneled booth. Eyes that lock, then look away with embarrassment. Half spoken innuendoes. Or maybe not even innuendoes at all. Just the suggestion of one. In that frame of mind, it only takes a word or three to convey a paragraph.

Then, she was in his apartment. It smelled like burnt coffee and mildew. The walls practically bare. A framed movie poster. Something foreign. A photograph of him with longer hair, beard, in the mountains, smiling with his arms around a free trade type of girl. TV on a rolling cart. Plaid couch. Somehow all these things, the impermanence of it all, was intoxicating. His hands under her shirt. Her hands inside his pants. Both of them naked in his

bed. The sheets weren't fresh. She tried not to think about how many other... Was it over? Yes, and suddenly, she was sober. Up, hopping on one foot to simultaneously get dressed and search for missing clothing. Propped on one elbow, he's grinning at her like...like...he's pleased.

Birds chirped in the growing sunlight on the drive home. Even though Jackie's car was in the driveway, as soon as Genesis opened the front door, she knew she wasn't there. In the kitchen, she found a note. It said:

*Gone to Tibbs's.*

One of her poker buddies. Genesis couldn't help but notice the proper use of punctuation.

In the morning, Jackie stood at the entrance to the kitchen when Genesis stuttered down the stairs, hair tangled, eyelashes matted.

"They're back."

Genesis looked over the shoulder of her once-lover. A fresh squirming pile of maggots. Off-white. Or maybe ochre.

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

And suddenly, Genesis was mad. "Where the fuck were you last night?" She shoved past Jackie to grab the broom and dustpan. "And where the fuck are these fucking fuckers coming from?"

"What do you mean? I left you a note."

“You and your fucking poker. It’s like it’s the three of us in a relationship.” Some of the larvae smeared as she violently crammed them into the dustpan. “Shit.”

“You knew this about me when we started dating.” Jackie still stood in the same place. Not moving. Never moving, it seemed to Genesis.

“Where the fuck are these things coming from?”

Jackie watched as Genesis threw open cabinet doors. Tossed through the bottom of the pantry. Scattered the pot lids in the skinny drawer under the stove. Then, as she stuck her head in the cabinet below the sink, clawing through cleaning supplies, she reared her head back so fast she struck the pipes hard enough to rattle the faucet above.

“Aw! That’s fucking disgusting!”

“What?”

“That *smell*. There’s got to be something *dead* down there.”

They walked outside, stood in front of the crawl space door. A misty drizzle blurred their vision.

“Who’s going to go?” Jackie asked.

Genesis crossed her arms.

“At least get me some gloves and a trash bag.”

Genesis sighed, complied.

Jackie crawled under the house, resurfacing a couple of minutes later with a badly decomposed cat lying almost restfully atop the Hefty SteelSak. The smell was even worse than under the sink. The animal no longer had eyes.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“We gotta bury it.”

They dug the grave in a misty haze. A light drizzle, but enough. Enough to be a reminder.

“I slept with Cory,” Genesis blurted.

Jackie paused in her shoveling, but only for a second. Half a second. “Who is Cory?” she finally asked.

“A new guy at work. He’s...”

Jackie kept digging. The dead cat lay on the black plastic. Regal at one angle—ears alert, whiskers straight, paw attentive. Pathetic at another—fur matted, bald in patches, flies buzzing.

“He’s what?” she asked.

“He’s nothing.”

“Okay.” But she stopped working. “Nothing?”

Genesis started to cry. “I just...I just wanted to feel something again.”

“What did you feel?”

“What?”

“When you...” Jackie closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “When you did what you did. What did you feel?”

Genesis rubbed her hands over her face. “Do you really want—“

“No, I don’t really want to. I *have* to.”

Genesis chewed on her thumbnail, trying to decide how honest she should be. “In the moment, it was nice just to feel close to someone.” She paused, glanced down at the dead cat. “But afterwards, immediately afterwards, I felt worse than before.”

They stood silent, unmoving for several minutes before Genesis spoke again. “It made me miss you even more.”

For the first time in what seemed like months, Jackie looked at Genesis. “Miss me? I’ve been right here.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“So everything’s my fault?” Jackie threw the shovel. It hit a pine tree with a jarring clang.

“No. It’s my fault too. I’ve been...” Genesis looked up at the sky. A little bit of blue was trying to push itself through the grey. “I’ve been waiting for you to rescue me. Us.”

“Rescue you from what?”

Genesis pointed to the cat. “That.”

“What? Death? Decay?” Jackie stopped. “Oh.” She looked at the animal, seemed to study it for some answer. “I don’t think it’s right for you to put all that on me,” she finally said, her voice soft.

“I know.”

Jackie walked over to the shovel, picked it up. “Let’s finish this.” Her voice was still low, her movements careful.

They buried the cat. Packed his grave good with dark, solid earth. Kneeling down, Genesis wished they’d known him. Knew they would have taken better care of him.

As they stood there looking down at the fresh mound, Jackie reached out, took Genesis’s hand in her own.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Then, as the drizzle turned to a real rain, they kissed—clothes sticking wet to their skin, skin sticking wet to one another, so that only the ground beneath them remained dry.

## Break Away

I'm at Lakeview Health Center sitting in a circle on a grey plastic folding chair staring down at the grey patchwork carpet telling my group that I'm going to stop. "I promise I'm going to stop," I say, but I think they can tell I don't mean it.

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I pray for the day that I will have the courage to leave. I've thought about it hundreds of times, threatened to do it dozens of times—a suitcase or two packed, tearful phone calls to friends who offered up refuge, I even scheduled movers once—but my resolve never lasts more than 48 hours. As much as she makes me miserable, as much as I have cried, as much as we have screamed, I just cannot bring myself to break away.

Perhaps it's because I'm afraid no one will ever love me again.

Perhaps it's because I'm afraid that no one will ever love me again like she does.

Perhaps it's because with someone else, I'd have to give up the pills. She's okay with it because she takes them too. We joke all the time about being addicted. "Two addicts in love," she likes to say when the skies are blue.

We make love a lot. One night, afterwards, we took a bath, lying in the hot water facing each other. The water barely covered my round belly. I've put on a little weight. CJ doesn't care. She smiled, rubbed my belly and I didn't even care that it's not flat anymore.

We fight a lot. My first girlfriend, Jamie, sent me a text on my birthday. "Happy birthday," it said. CJ saw it a couple of days later and flipped. "Why didn't you show it to me? You normally tell me every *little* fucking thing. You still want Jamie, don't you? Why don't you just go fucking eat Jamie!" I sat there, quiet for awhile, my fingers intertwined, staring at the moons of my nails. But I could only take it for so long before I was screaming back. Key words I remember: trapped, controlled, puppet, slave.

She looks at me more intently than anyone I've ever been with. She looks at me like I'm a miracle or a mirage. I look at myself in the mirror and try to see what she sees. Sometimes, after a pill—or three—I almost can.

She touches me with such tenderness that I can feel it on the back of my tongue. She makes love to me with such precision that makes me high—a kite without a string.

\*\*\*

Two days ago, I woke up feeling dark inside, so I took a couple of Percocets—a rainbow against the impending storm clouds. CJ and I watched *Cast Away* on the couch, not touching, not speaking. The silence, the distance made my insides thunder, so I swallowed some more—two, three?—with a couple glasses of wine. But the clouds still wouldn't part. *Just two more*, I told

myself, pushing and turning the prescription bottle lid. But watching Tom Hanks run his hands over the maps and charts on Helen Hunt's dining room table made me want to cry, so I dumped a few more into the palm of my hand. Soon, a heaviness came over me—like the weight of one of those lead aprons at the dentist's office, but it made me feel comforted, contained. I don't remember closing my eyes, but I must have, because now I'm somewhere strange. Itchy white sheets, medicine smells, persistent beeping. I try to sit up, but my head won't allow it. "Be still," CJ whispers. "You're sick. You're in the hospital."

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CJ works nights. A desk clerk at a hotel. "I wish you worked days," I told her. "We'd be able to see each other more often." We were at the Olive Garden. CJ started listing the potential negatives about going back to a day job: "Stress, I'd have to buy office clothes, more stupid people to deal with." I listened. "Why aren't you saying anything?" she asked. "I'm listening." "You're sitting there with that ugly look on your face." "I'm just listening to you." "I hate that ugly look on your face." "I didn't do anything." "I know you hate me." "I don't hate you. I love you." As I spoke, I slipped my hand into my purse, wrapped my fingers around the cool, plastic bottle.

I have the empty pill bottles lined up in my desk drawer. When I'm out—waiting to hear from our dealer—it comforts me to crack open the drawer and see them standing there. Standing there waiting for me. Waiting for me to pay attention to them again. They're so patient and orderly. Everything I wish my life could be.

Not many people know I was married before. I don't really like to tell people. Whenever they find out, I can see the questions scrolling through their eyes like a slot machine—while I pray they don't land on Triple 7s. Triple 7s means they'll ask. "So, when did you know you were gay?" or "So, that means you're bisexual?" or "So, what does that mean, exactly?" Labels are very important to people.

Anyway, Marty was great. He loved me. Kind of worshiped me like ancient Egyptians worshiped cats. We didn't have any cats. He was patient, tender, kind, selfless, hard-working. I say these things in the past tense like he'd dead. He's not dead. He's remarried.

Anyway, all those things—those nice things I can say about him now—drove me crazy when we were together. Like he was *too* patient, *too* tender, *too* kind, *too* selfless, *too* hard-working. I believed that he did these things to make me look bad. To highlight all my flaws—my evil brain, my slothful limbs—in bright yellow.

He would tell me all the time—in a loving, generous voice—"Sloan, I'm not out to get you." At the time, I didn't believe him. Now, I see. Now that he's remarried with three kids and a stay-at-home wife who loves Jesus and a fenced-in backyard and a big dog.

When CJ is mad at me, she likes to drive around. I don't know where. She tells me it's her time. I should give her her time. I close my mouth, nod my head. But when she's gone and I don't know where, I pull apart a paperclip and dig it into the flesh of my thigh. It hurts. It feels good.

Sometimes I make little patterns. Like stars. Or smiley faces. Sometimes I just watch the blood ooze. Then I take a pill.

This is how she gets me: she'll act so uninterested in me all day. Watching TV or updating her lottery spreadsheet, and she won't even notice if I sit close to her, my hand on her thigh or baiting her for attention with playful comments like, "You have the cutest nose." But, then, when I'm naked—getting in or out of the shower or changing for bed—she'll get so excited. She *loves* my body. This is amazing to me, because I *hate* my body. "You have a great ass," she'll say, grabbing me from behind. Or, "You have such a great shape," pulling me onto the bed, into outer space gliding on the dusty trails of constellations.

I think I might be addicted to CJ. Addiction can be good, sometimes, right? I must remember to research this one day...

This is how she gets me: we'll be talking, usually about nothing important—our plans for the weekend, some dumb work story—and she'll look at me for a long time, lean forward like she's finally going to say something really important, the thing that I know is gnawing on her mind, but she'll lean back after a few seconds and say something like, "I'm getting sleepy." That drives me crazy. It makes me want a Percocet. Or a bottle of wine. Or, better yet, both.

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Two weeks later, CJ visits me. They allow us to walk the sandy path that runs next to the namesake body of water that is really just a large pond. Leaves from the oak and maple trees litter the water. Canada geese swim across the rippled grey surface. We move stiffly down the path, several feet apart. “You used to talk to me about everything,” CJ says. I sigh. “Talking just got so exhausting.” We are quiet again. The geese start honking and suddenly lift from the water in a simultaneous, splashing flurry. We watch them as the cold air bites at our skin, but I don’t mind. “I still think about Marty sometimes.” CJ is silent, kicks a pebble with her shoe. “I had a dream about him a few weeks ago. He wasn’t the same in the dream. He was changed, but I couldn’t be sure exactly how.” “Maybe you’re the one that has changed.” Wet leaves rustle around us. “Maybe.”

\*\*\*

The nights that my depression is at its worst, when all the feel-sorry-for-myselfs creep out of the dark shadows of my brain, I wonder why I didn’t love him like I should have. No, during these moments I’m not rational enough to recognize it’s because I love women. That I love CJ. Depression trumps logic each and every time.

I love CJ the way I’m supposed to. Sometimes, I think too much. That’s why it’s so confusing. Why we can’t seem to behave better. Why we allow our evil brains and slothful limbs to take control. My mother says it’s because we’re too much alike. Stubborn. Prideful. Determined to be “right” at all costs. They say that the first step to solving a problem is to identify the problem. That’s a bunch of horseshit.

I hate myself for being so dependent, so needy of her affections.

I hate myself for being so dependent, so needy of the Percocets.

I just hate myself.

CJ is kind of like a cat. Silently moody. Stealthily quiet. Lavishing affection one day and distant and aloof the next. Never saying much, and what she does say needs to be decoded with a Little Orphan Annie secret decoder ring, which, sadly, I don't own. But other days, she leans up against me and purrs and I feel like the most important person in the world. A feeling like that can be dangerous. It's addictive. Like Percocet. When you have them, they're a comfort. Just shaking the bottle, hearing the pills rattle, is soothing. But when they're gone and it's still two weeks before your connection is going to get more, you can feel their absence scratching beneath your skin, monopolizing every cell in your brain, and you really start to think that going down to the hood and paying \$7 a pill isn't such a crazy idea.

Sometimes, I'll wake up earlier than she and sit in the living room with the cats sleeping on either side of me—we have cats—listening to nothing but the hum of the refrigerator, and I'll cry. I'll cry for all the things about myself I can't seem to change. I'll cry for all the things about CJ I can't seem to accept. I'll cry because I can't ever seem to be satisfied. I'll cry and wonder if I knew then what I realize now, if I would have ever left Marty, trading stability and

emotional comfort for passion and physical comfort. Sometimes, that doesn't seem like a bad trade-off. Sometimes.

Last month, I told my dealer, "This is the last time I'm buying pills." He just smiled at me.

I've been to a therapist. Several, actually. They all say the same thing: that I need to develop a better sense of self-esteem. "How does a person go about doing that," I would ask. "Find something that you enjoy. Something that makes you happy." But what if what makes me happy is her paying attention to me?

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"How do you feel?" the rehab doctor asks me. She is tall with tired eyes and wears red lipstick that makes her teeth look yellow.

"I feel fine."

"Do you think about them?"

*Yes.* "No."

"Not at all?"

"I want to be healthy. Normal."

"What is normal?"

"You know—not fucked up."

"Are you going to use again when you get out?"

I look at the plastic fern hanging by the window. Its leaves are shiny and waxy. I think that someone must take the time to dust those leaves—hold each leaf flat in the palm of her hand and carefully wipe it from stem to tip with a cloth dozens and dozens of times.

“No,” I say and I believe myself.

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When she’s not home, I’ll talk to the cats. I’ll say things like, “You know your mammas love you, right? We love you very much.” They’ll just fold into themselves, legs tucked neatly under their bodies and look at me and blink real slow. I read somewhere once that’s a cat’s way of saying, “Hello.”

CJ’s best friends are having a commitment ceremony. I’m excited—I love weddings—carefully choosing my outfit, fixing my hair, putting on make-up. I’m applying mascara and with my head tilted back I can see one of those white hangers-on in my nose. I dig it out with a tissue. As I’m wadding it up to throw in the trashcan, I see CJ standing behind me, her mouth formed into a lopsided grin, her eyes shining. “What is it?” I ask. “You’re just so beautiful.”

We had tickets to see Florence + The Machine. My favorite band. I love Florence’s bright red hair, pale, pale skin. I woke up that morning with the uncontrollable giddiness of a middle schooler. CJ watched *House* reruns on the couch. I swallowed a pill. I could feel excited by myself. But as much as I tried to be quiet, the itching wouldn’t go away. I couldn’t stop myself from hopping on her like a kitten. “Aren’t you excited?” She shrugged, “Yeah.” I thought

about how many pills I had left, how many days left in the month. “I thought you like Florence.” I straddled her lap. She kissed my forehead, never taking her eyes off the TV. “Sure.” My upper body slumped along with my excitement. “Do you not want to go?” “Whatever you want.” “You never want to do anything.” “What are you talking about? I told you I’d go with you.” “I want you to be excited about it.” “How can I be excited? It’s your thing. But I told you I’d go with you. What the hell do you want from me?” “Nothing,” I said, and swallowed another one.

Sometimes—when I’m off work—I don’t brush my teeth until 4:00 p.m.

Sometimes when I take a shower, I turn the water so hot my skin splotches red and my lungs feel tight like they can’t expand all the way.

Sometimes I don’t shave my legs for weeks.

I told her that I was so afraid that she was going to leave me, that we’d been through so much shit. That she was finally going to realize I was a terrible girlfriend and find someone better. She said: “Yeah, we’ve been through some shit, but that doesn’t mean it has to define us.” That night, we made love in the backyard underneath the spinning stars. Today, we got in a fight because I didn’t say “Bye” before hanging up the phone.

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They discharged me today. Let me lose back into the world that I didn't understand. Still don't understand. But I think I understand something about myself. How my selfish love was like a cancer eating at both our relationship and my own insides. Sometimes they don't cure cancer the first time around. Sometimes, they don't cure it at all.

CJ was waiting for me in the parking lot, leaning against her car, smoking a cigarette like James Dean or something. She didn't see me at first, so I watched her watch the traffic go by. Even though it was still cold, the sun was out, shining down on her head, making her blonde hair glimmer like hope. "CJ!" I called out, suddenly feeling like crying. She turned, and smiled. She wrapped her arms around me, and said, "Welcome back, baby." I wrapped my arms around her, felt the strength in her heart, felt it vibrate through to my heart, as the tears drained from my eyes.

## And Then I Opened My Eyes

I feel the loneliness most in the little places. I miss how she sat on the stool in my bathroom and talked to me while I got ready. How she always drove. How she touched me whenever possible.

I refuse to call her though. My pride swollen like wood in the summer.

I move about my day. Brush my teeth, drive to work, sort laundry with a certain type of numbness. Heavy with it, but refusing to recognize it.

Except in the shower. Because in the shower, my mind goes limp, relaxes into an opening portal, allowing all the things I've managed to block out to rush into me. An assault of awareness.

That's when the emptiness pushes against me, almost knocking me over with its strength.

I start avoiding the shower. Skip days. In a row. That way I can avoid seeing those flashes of her standing in front of me, head hanging down.

\*\*\*

"Cora. I'm sorry," Aubrey had said, exhaling smoke, smashing the red-orange ember with her boot heel.

We'd been arguing all day. My ex was going to be in town from Seattle. We'd made plans to have dinner together.

"Why do you need to see her?" Aubrey asked.

"She's my friend."

"I'm coming with you then."

"I don't need a chaperone."

“Why don’t you want to me go?”

“Because the only reason you want to go is to keep tabs on me. Not because you have any interest in meeting my friend. Being nice to her. Talking to her.”

“You got that right.”

“There you go.”

“If you don’t want me to go, you must be hiding something.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She lives on the other side of the country.”

“Are you picking her up at her hotel or meeting her at the restaurant?”

“I’m going to pick her up.”

“She wants to fuck you.”

“Aubrey.”

“You’re not disagreeing with me.”

“Because you’re being irrational.”

“Do you want to fuck her?”

“I’m going to pretend you just didn’t ask me that.”

“You do! You do want to fuck her! Just admit it!” Her pale skin turned a splotchy red.

I hated her when she looked like that.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I? We both know what a slut you are. Tried to get me in bed the first night we met.”

“Get the fuck out of my apartment.”

She grabbed her keys off the coffee table, looked at me with cold blue eyes, drawn-in lips. “Truth hurts, doesn’t it.”

“FUCK. YOU!” I screamed at the slamming door.

Hours later, she showed back up at my apartment full of regret for the things she’d said, the way she’d acted. I looked at her, arms crossed over my chest, hip cocked.

Aubrey kept her head down, was silent. Waiting for me to say something.

“What are you sorry for?” I finally asked.

“For all the things I said. For how I acted.”

“That’s all I get?”

“Why do you always have to do this?”

“Do what?”

“Make me crawl on my hands and knees.”

“I’m not making you do anything.”

“Then why can’t you just accept my apology?”

“Because the words ‘I’m sorry’ don’t fix anything.”

“Whenever you apologize, I always accept it immediately. You never do.”

“You have a convenient memory.”

“Dammit, Cora, you think you’re so goddamn perfect.”

“At least I can articulate my mistakes beyond ‘I’m sorry’ platitudes.”

“I fucking hate it when you talk like that.”

“This is how I talk.”

“You know what?” Aubrey stepped close to me. The movement, her proximity reminded me that I no longer had to manufacture my dreams, no longer had to imagine the type of lover, partner I wanted. Since we’d met, I had fallen asleep to dreams of her. In them, we’re together. We’re happy. We’re naked.

“Do what you want.” Her cigarette-laced breath touched the back of my tongue, ripping me back to the coldness of the present. “You always do.”

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I’ve started going to bed in my bathrobe. Putting it on as soon as I come home from work, then lying on the couch watching *Law & Order* on Netflix. Sometimes reading Alice Munro. I don’t want to talk to my friends. Or my family. They’d just tell me it was for the best.

I go to the movies by myself. *A Serious Man*. We’d talked about going to it together. Ticket for one. Small bag of popcorn. Standing in line with my eyes on my shoes pretending not to notice people noticing me for my solitude. Somehow, though, I like it. Makes me feel real, like not just a shadow.

I sit in the middle of an empty row. There aren’t many people here. A middle-aged couple towards the front. A group of teenagers in the back. Three people who don’t seem to know each other well sitting to my right. I slide down in my seat, rest my feet on the armrest in front of me. Eat popcorn one piece at a time.

The lights dim. Previews. One for a formula rom-com followed by a remake of *Clash of the Titans*. I remember how my dad had taken me to see the original in 1981. I was six and Calibos and Medusa scared me. I started crying. Dad took me home before it was over, angry at my fear. He thought I was too old to be acting the way I did. I saw the movie again in my twenties, expecting the same reaction of irrationality, but the jerky movements of the special effects made me laugh. I couldn’t understand my former fear either.

I turn, smiling, to tell Aubrey the story, but there is nothing but the empty seat.

\*\*\*

I cannot see my future. And the only pieces of the past I can recall are the mistakes I've made. I am raw, uninsulated. Yesterday, I snapped at my mother for her inability to understand the difference between WiFi and cellular service. A couple of weeks ago, my sister's boyfriend inspected my car for free on his lunch break. I bitched about having to wait 30 minutes. I have no patience for my colleagues either. Their laziness, their unoriginality. I glare at the old ladies in front of me at the grocery store writing checks.

A dream wakes me in the night. I am standing in the middle of a deserted city. Darkness, silence surrounds me. I'm not afraid. I have no questions. I just don't care. Something tries to call out to me. A flash of white to the far left. A brief glimmer above my head.

I do not look. I do not blink my eyes.

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I'm in my living room. Lying on the couch. My Blackberry is resting on the cushion behind my bent knees. I'm leaning on one of the pillows, crying, feeling both artificial and genuine. *Am I upset enough? Am I upset too much?*

I wonder how upset she is. If she is. If she's wondering if I'm wondering if she's wondering. Nicole Reynolds plays on my iPod. My refrigerator hums loudly, at sporadic, off-tempo beats. I look at my phone. Again. It hates me. I hate it.

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A new month has etched into the year. The signs of winter are already contorting the landscape. Bare limbs. Dark mornings. Cold sun. Her voice has become a ghost. Her face, a fading dream.

It would have been our one-year anniversary.

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I go through life like a movie. I see images of me doing things. Grocery shopping, making lunch, getting gas. But I don't feel the moments, don't have a sensory memory of them.

This morning, I wake up craving an egg sandwich. I've craved one before, but have never given in because it used to be our weekend ritual. When I reach for a bowl to beat the eggs in, I realize I had forgotten. Forgotten she isn't there. Forgotten we aren't going to watch *Lost* after making love. *Leave the dishes in the sink. They can wait.*

The place my mind is slipping to scares me. Adapting to life without her.

I throw the eggs in the trash.

\*\*\*

I'm almost getting too drunk again. Too drunk and too high. I can crest up to a point, then after that, I don't even know who I am anymore. I have no control over my thoughts, words, memory. Especially memory. But up until the break, my mind is so clear. I see everything. Then I pour

another glass or pack another bowl for intensity, to feel it deeper, see it clearer. But constantly adjusting the focus, the lens breaks. Nothing but fuzziness.

\*\*\*

When I was in high school, my family went to England. Mom traced the bright yellows of the tourist map to all the museums. We followed her through the maze of soot-covered limestone; the Gothic buildings rising up into the grey clouds made us small. Most of the exhibits did not interest me. You could tell it wasn't the good stuff. Leftover scraps from the Louvre or the Met. I felt left out of some inside joke. Then we saw a collection of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner at Tate Modern. In all of them, the colors hurt my eyes, the sharp lines made me nauseous. When my dad came back for me, I held my hands to my head.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“These paintings.”

“Don’t look at them.”

I followed his advice. Everything felt better.

\*\*\*

The blackness has a taste. Cheap wine. It also has a smell. Stale smoke and damp skin. But maybe it’s not fair to call it the “blackness,” since my blind eyes do see swirling colors. Nauseating swirling colors. It’s best to just drink until I pass out. That way the sickness stops sooner.

My boss sent me home for the rest of the week. I stop at the grocery store on the way home. Load up the cart. I throw a carton of cigarettes on top of the bottles. I don't know why. I guess to be more like her.

\*\*\*

Work. The windowless offices of the purchasing department, the fluorescent lighting purposefully designed to blot out any remembrance of the outside world.

I slide one of those giant vertical filing cabinets closed with my hip, and I don't know why, but I suddenly remember our trip to the beach last summer. We dug one of those 9' striped umbrellas into the hot sand, sat in matching beach chairs, holding hands across the armrests, and alternated between watching the waves and reading our paperbacks. We didn't say much. There wasn't any need. The sea did all the talking. We just listened, sweat glistening in our sunscreen, gulls crying overhead. It was one of the best days of my life.

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Some kind of crud was going around. That's what people said. "I was sick with the crud." "I hope you're not coming down with the crud." But I did. The last weekend in January. The doctor at Urgent Care said to drink lots of hot tea, rest, and it would extinguish itself, a destructive rejuvenation like crop burning. He said that taking decongestants stimulated mucus production. I tried to be tough. A warrior of homeopathies, but after spending Friday night sleepless because my face felt packed full of nickels, nostrils closed with Super Glue, I found

myself shuffling through CVS for a sinus Roto-Rooter. Swaying in the aisle like a drunk person, searching for the one with the most aggressive list of features, I noticed a rush of movement in my peripheral vision. Coming towards me. I jumped. Turned my head.

“Can I talk to you?” Aubrey grabbed my arm.

My mouth opened, soundless.

“Please?” she asked.

I nodded. She led me outside by the elbow. Like I might break.

It was cold outside, burning my already red nose. I pulled the hood of my grey sweatshirt over my head, kept my eyes focused on the ground.

“I’m not angry any more.” She touched my shoulder. A gentle, calm touch.

I waited. Held my breath to see how long she’d let the silence stretch. Finally she hugged me. We stood there like that, on the edge of the drugstore parking lot, people walking past, the automatic doors wheezing open and shut, for a long time. I closed my eyes. Inhaled her scent of Twilight Woods and Marlboro Lights. It felt so good inside her arms—full of sense and meaning. A little kid bumped into us. Instinctively our arms dropped. Aubrey smiled. It was crooked, as if admitting to some irony.

Then she kissed me on the forehead and walked away.

\*\*\*

The next day she called me.

“I’d like to talk to you.” Her voice sounded delicate, fragile. So unlike her exterior, so like her interior.

“Okay.”

“Can you come over?”

“Okay.”

I drove over slowly. Taking each turn carefully. Hovering just below the speed limit. Her front door was open. A yellow gold light filled the hallway. Everything was very still.

I opened the storm door. “Hello?”

“In here.” Her voice came from the living room.

She stood as I came around the corner.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey.”

We stood there silently for a few moments. Messages conveyed. Doubts reassured. I think we both stepped forward at the same time, crossed the small space, the distance of a lifetime. I folded into her. Her arms, so thin, but so strong. The earth moved around us.

Slowly, our hands slid down, pausing on shoulders, elbows, waists. We smiled shyly at each other, touched faces. Cheeks. Nose. Chin.

“Do you want to watch *Lost*?” she asked. “I haven’t watched any without you.”

“Sure.” Her eyes were the bluest I’d ever seen them. “I just gotta go to the bathroom first.”

I went to the half bath, adjacent to the living room. I smiled at the familiar tiles covering the floor up to the bottom third of the wall. I ran my hand over the small squares, closed my eyes, inhaled the laundry scent from the can of Febreze that sat on the counter. I lifted my head up, traced the line of the molding, soothed by the little splotches of rosy-brown paint on the

white ceiling, down to the same red hand towel draped by the sink. Nothing had changed. She'd been waiting for me too.

When I came out, she was sitting on the couch. I sat next to her.

“How was your date with what's-her-name?” she asked, staring straight ahead.

“It wasn't a date and I didn't go.”

“Why not?”

“Does it even matter any more?”

She said nothing, pressed “Play” on the remote. We both sat upright on the edge of the cushion as the DVD player searched for the perfect groove. I wanted to touch her—put my hand on her leg or the back of her neck, yet I felt paralyzed. I could feel that she did too. But as the “previously ons” started, we both relaxed, reminded of what we had missed, I could feel the waxing moon of our hearts.

## Weightless

Madeline is driving along the slushy roads of north Charlotte, taking her mother to her weekly hair appointment, but she's not seeing the road or the stoplights or even the other cars. She's seeing the stars and galaxies floating around her in a quiet, calming vastness, a game she used to play with herself when she was a little girl lying in bed—she'd close her eyes and stretch out her arms and she'd be falling, flying, floating through space, through the world beyond her world. Guided by light, traveling across the dusty dreams of the universe, she felt, feels, safe, free.

“We're all so proud of you,” her mother says, dropping Madeline from her celestial cruise back down into the car. “Your father brags about you all the time. He tells his friends he knows which daughter will be able to take care of us when we're old and in diapers.” Her mother laughs, and even though Madeline knows it's a joke, her gut tightens, as if she's been punched.

She tries to think of something funny, lighthearted to say, but is distracted when she sees him as they pull up to a red light. A bum, a homeless man holding a sign made from a ripped piece of cardboard. She has heard people claim that most of the bums aren't really bums at all, but people living decent lives, making decent (tax free) money just pretending to be bums, but this guy doesn't look like a fake. His skin, hair, jeans, shirt are exceedingly dirty, like he's spent a whole afternoon digging a ditch then curled up to sleep behind a dumpster for several days and nights in a row.

Immediately, she feels guilty for her SUV, golf course house, straight teeth. Her mom must share her guilt because the car is filled with the intense silence earmarked by naked consciousness or building conflict. Madeline knows both she and her mother are trying to decide if they should give him any money as he shivers in the cold, holding his pathetic little sign.

What if he tries to attack them? Steal the car? Steal her? What would she do? Nothing. Yet, how could she not reach out to this human being? A human whose only flaw—as far as she knows—is being less fortunate than her? Even if he is a drug addict or alcoholic, doesn't he deserve compassion too? Doesn't she owe him some kind of restitution for having a good life? For being so blessed? Isn't it her moral and religious obligation to share some of her abundance with him? So what if he uses it to buy crack or Mad Dog? Maybe that is what he is supposed to be doing. Maybe that is the part that he is supposed to be playing in the chess game of the universe. *Okay, I'm going to do it*, she thinks, but the words are still visible on her mind when her mother reaches into her own purse, taking out a dollar.

“Here,” she says, passing the crumpled bill to her daughter.

Madeline stares at the money for several seconds—feels her body swirling into space—before looking back up at the guy. He must sense her gaze because he returns her look almost immediately. She nods her head lightly, and he understands, walking quickly over to the car as she rolls down the window. “God bless you,” he says. His eyes are brown with little flecks of green and gold. They are not sad eyes, not eyes in need of pity. She leans forward slightly, extending her hand further. He looks right into her, so unburdened by obligation, self-consciousness, fear. “Weightless,” she whispers. He smiles as he slides the money out of her fingers, rubbing his thumb purposefully, firmly across the back of her hand. He turns, walking back to his spot, and she turns her hand over, expecting to see a red trail of his touch. And although she cannot see anything, she feels a burning sensation across her hand, where his flesh has seared her own.