

There Has Never Been Anything Truly Wrong with You

by

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These stories are about obsessive, lonely people. The characters might seem insane but really, they are just lonely and maybe a bit neurotic. They are introspective characters who began life as sweet children, but grew backbones so that they could appear pitiless, heartless. All that is left then is to privately weep in despair about having become a monster. The writing is often very internal, and the style often tends away from realism. The characters struggle alone through bizarre situations and fears, the purpose of which being that absurdity throws into relief the way our natural emotions are regularly made farcical and embarrassing by a world that wants to deny them or, more often, to ignore them.

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A Thesis

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by

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For my mother and father

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No Easy Cure

Holding an ink pen as I walked through the house, I lost the tension in my hand. I felt the pen begin to slide down the length of my fingers, then tumble in midair as I bent my arm upward in reflex. I noticed a curious pause in the surroundings—in my thoughts, in the air currents in the room. In the span of a split second, I had time to ponder and decide that I most certainly wanted to catch the pen, that it was quite imperative, in fact, and so I lurched for it. As I watched, it teetered uncontrollably about my fingers and finally landed in the clutch between my thumb and index finger. I breathed a sigh of relief but was left with an unaccountable apprehension.

The next day I sat at a restaurant table hearing voices call out orders from the kitchen. One yelled, “Put that down, this one’s yours!” I looked over to a young woman as she blew an exasperated breath upward at her hair, which immediately flopped back into her face. She placed a tray burdened with three plates on the bar and turned around to pick up a different tray.

I looked away and let the words echo in my mind. Put...that...down. Why were things, when they were ‘put’, I wondered, ‘put down’? I closed my eyes and in my mind, the plates on the tray, the salt and pepper shakers and forks and knives and glasses on my table, all casually rose a couple of inches and hovered in the air. The food from the plates grazed and bumped the plates lazily from above. The tablecloth sloughed off the table and floated.

I opened my eyes again. The objects in actuality did not float. They were stacked oppressively on top of other objects, and those in turn stacked upon others. Dust upon vases upon tables upon floors. They all bore down hard, even the lightweight ones. I heard a quiet but insistent grind, the sound of a chorus of disparate objects, all groaning under a constant toil to hold up everything above them. I caught sight of a chandelier hanging effortlessly, and I felt some relief peering up at it. After I noticed the taut chain by which it was suspended, though, the chandelier too seemed tragically laden, as if all day every day, it longed to fall down.

Later, on a walk, I glanced often to the town's water tower. It reached alone above everything, and I found myself walking toward it. As I walked, I felt a heavy weight in my feet, and found it more and more laborious to lift them from the pavement. I sensed that I was being tugged down toward the ground. I kept looking to the tower which pillared up the sky, and when I finally arrived at it, I climbed up fifty feet and clung to the ladder like a sailor in a storm, hanging on a mast. If I fell to the ground, I felt, I'd crash right through it, gaining speed through the earth's crust, the rock and mineral layers, reaching the hot churning liquid at breakneck speed. In a blink, I would bypass all the things I have heard about the inferno and the underworld and the flames, then through the layers in reverse array, and burst forth from the other side.

I stayed up the tower for two hours. Even then I hesitated to come down, but the fear of being sucked through the ground was in a wane, as I had gained nerve by staying above it for a while. I told myself that I had simply had an impulse to climb, but had then found myself afraid to come down. A newfound fear of heights, possibly.

That night I dreamed I was lying peacefully in bed. All at once, my stomach lunged to my throat as I recognized the sensation of falling. Since, in the dream, I hadn't moved from under the covers, I knew that the reason I was falling was that the legs of my dream-bed were retracting into the earth. The mattress itself then broke through the floor and went down farther, to what depths I could not know, for it deposited me on the ground before instantly sealing up the hole it had rent and continuing its descent. With my face buried in the dirt, I could not lift my head. It was too heavy. I reached up to fumble for my glasses, but as I put my hand to the night table, it fell to the ground as well, its legs drawn downward from underneath. The high walls of my bedroom, too, disappeared into the earth like swords being sheathed with the utmost ease. I sensed that all the scaffolds built by men, none of which overcame any but the most pitifully short distance from the earth, were crashing down, equalizing the land to a great flatness.

As I lay with my face buried in the soil, I knew that I had lost my sight and that I was dead. Worse than dead, I had been relieved of even the experience of death, which seemed in this context a

generous favor given to all alike, a common ground for which I was jealous of my renegade mattress. It, after all, had continued on, presumably through the depths of a netherworld. I felt that my existence had been discarded.

When I woke up I feared touching the ground, regardless of whether I would crash through it or whether I would not crash through it. Either possibility brought a wave of nausea, and I made an island of my bed. I peered down at the floor. It shone back at me with a dull splendor, avowing its level-headed sturdiness. "Turncoat," I said. I lay back for a moment, meditating on the image of my desk, a stack of books atop it. It struck me as unnatural, and I became attuned to the same monotonous grinding sound I had heard earlier in the restaurant. I sat up and looked around. The grind got louder. I pulled back with a shudder as my palm, upon which I was propping my weight, began to burn. Frightened that my bones were grinding downward into each other, I lay back, splayed out, distributing my weight on the bed as equally as I could.

Oppressed by the sound and a growing panic I was trying to deny, I had the sudden conviction to hang every object in the room from the ceiling. This would at least prevent anything from grating on anything else. I resolved to run to the garage to fetch steel cable and as many hooks and tools as I could find. When I put them to the floor, my feet stung as they did when I was a child after having jumped off the too-high back deck.

When I got back, I dove headlong onto the bed, out of breath, tense and unnerved. I began my task by attaching small objects to the walls and ceiling. I glued my compact disc collection upright, tiled the corner with album covers, cases that swung open from the wall. When I was finished, lamps, stuffed animals, a computer, and a set of dainty chairs listed in the still room, suspended by cables. The bed and dresser, over-burdened with the tradition of ornately carved wood, I had discarded. I had on order a couple of porch swings and a hanging bed. As long as the ceiling's joists were reinforced, the salesman had assured me over the phone, I would have no trouble hanging a bed from it.

Nothing touched the floor. Nothing rested immediately on top of anything else. I still heard the distant humming grind, but it came only from outside my bedroom, a drone that I could ignore as one grows accustomed to a busy road outside a window.

Days passed, and I continued to despair of the oppressive downward force. I became less and less inclined to touch the floor, and my constant worry produced helpful innovations. I hung rugs tautly using weights and cable, and learned to navigate adroitly among the pendent chairs, swings, bed, and rugs. I suspended objects which I used often, such as drinking glasses and pencils, from adjustable lines. To 'put down' a pencil now meant to let go of it and allow it to linger where it would over the chair.

Wishing to see no evidence of the force exerting itself, I became concerned with making the cables inconspicuous. Calling around to various hardware stores, I asked for their strongest, clearest, thinnest cable. I studied weight distribution exercises and procured tools to divide the cables further. By suspending an array of several hundred around a single piece of furniture, it was possible to divide them so far as to make them invisible to the naked eye. I could tell that I was still actively avoiding the floor only by the feel of my body resting against objects, by proprioceptive stirrings. These seemed less and less invasive until one day a peculiar thing occurred. At this point I had not touched the floor in perhaps two months. I was lounged comfortably, reading, when I was certain for a moment that I had floated above the chair. My heart fluttered with a singular sense of achievement. The rest of the day, though, I was troubled by a foreboding for which I could not account.

As I lay in bed that night, I felt my mind in a cycle which I was powerless to stop. I lay motionless, somewhere between awake and asleep, but every few minutes my mind surfaced, lucid, shedding grogginess. Before I had a chance to stir, though, it slipped back into torpor. During each turn of clear mind, I was aware of feeling less burdened than the time before until finally, I eased into sleep. No longer was I troubled by the sense of a downward pull. Tension released and ascended into remote hollows of space. I drifted blindly into sleep, dreaming myself weightless into the air, walking over fog banks with nothing under my feet, past clouds, up and up and up. I saw evidence of life in far-flung

clusters, structures poised high and low in an endless expanse. Avenues buttressed by nothing were rushed on both sides by airy dwellings with clouds for walls and no underpinnings. They swayed unhindered. Some detached with ease from where they were docked. They drifted and lazily docked elsewhere, all with a sense of merciful impermanence.

I explored freely, enchanted by cozy nooks formed of clouds and suspended trinkets, ones made of sticks and twigs like birds' nests. What felt like hours passed as I took in the splendor. I felt no force pulling me any direction until, in the course of floating from one space to another, I became aware of a distant tug, a curious sensation that my body was tending upward where I was not willing it. It became more pronounced until it was impossible to deny that I was being pulled up along a trajectory. Leaving the structures farther and farther behind so that they began to seem a distant quaint neighborhood, faster and faster I was plunged through a featureless space. Phantom vibrations shook me, and I echoed with the starlight through a frozen vacuum. I was no longer certain from which direction I had come or how I might get back, and my body burned with the futile effort to arrest itself.

I woke up with an unvoiced shriek in my mouth, my body bucking rigidly against the covers. Disoriented, I vaulted off the bed and landed on the hardwood. Horrified when I realized I was on the floor, I scrambled back up to the bed. Once I passed the initial shock, rational thoughts began making gentle appeals. I finally admitted to myself that after two months, I had touched the floor, and that nothing had happened to me. I wondered what this could mean.

As I lay there with sensations from the dream fresh in my mind, I realized I no longer felt the threat of a force that simply pulled me downward. Instead, I felt the dawning of a new fear, one altogether more menacing. I saw myself somersaulting through space, grappling with a force infinitely more subtle and powerful in its flexibility than mere gravity. A force which could pull me any direction it willed, at any time. There was no way to prepare. Staying off the ground was like taking cough medicine when an alien plague was coming. It was senseless to stay off the ground, it was senseless to stay on the ground, it was senseless to stay anywhere in particular.

This is not to say that I immediately plunged feet-first back to the floor. Change often brings a delayed and aching discomfort, for which there is usually no easy cure. A comparison might prove helpful: One whose personal life lies in ruin because of alcoholism might quit drinking. She achieves this through the prospect of a new life, propelled by the sheer force of appeal which a novel way of living can cast. Say things go well and she is happy for months, maybe even years. She thinks this unrecognizable life fitting and slips into it like a glove, though she notes with detachment that it has forced a new pattern in her. Her new routine bears no trace of or receptacle for certain prior feelings and habits, both of mind and activity, which had once been so integral to her life. She does not miss them. Her life is surely better, regular and prescribed.

One day, though, she begins to experience troublesome twinges without knowing why, misgivings that color the world unkind and dismally unfamiliar. She does her best to ignore them and go on with her activities until one night, she wakes up in a cold sweat. She realizes that neither possibility is comforting: drinking is not appealing, but neither is not-drinking. She is stuck out in the middle of a long straight road, alone and seeing no relief in either direction.

In a similar way, taking the plunge into my former habit of walking the earth seemed counterproductive and unappealing, even gross. The prospect filled me with trepidation, an intolerable sense of trying to re-enter a world I had known before. That world was rife with an essence of meaning, and through it I had bounded and caroused. Now, though, I felt certain it would prove foreign and empty to me. On the other hand, staying cloistered in my room was no longer appealing because I felt false, as if by falling to the floor and having nothing happen, I had been shown that the reason to stay here in the thrall of my chaste compulsions was invalid and sterile.

By some internal fortitude, I resolved to leave the room, and began by timidly touching my feet to the floor. They did not sting or protest, and I sensed that my enemy was sleeping. During the next few days, I stood around the room, walked, and even began to pace the floor. Finally, I coaxed myself out of

the house for short walks. I often looked down at my feet as they brushed the ground in calm, regular sweeps. It struck me that it is strange to fear something one must constantly face.

I did not know from which direction it would come, finally. I knew that one day, possibly soon, possibly much later, someone would find a hole through a floor, split clean through to the soil, but seamless, with no indication of just where I had been pulled through. Or perhaps it would be a hole in a ceiling, or perhaps just an uncanny stillness in a backyard where I had been, moments or days before, sunning in a lawn chair. It was possible to cultivate an existence, sometimes even to forget the force which had a thrust set on me. I managed to occupy myself with other things. Only in unexpected moments, sometimes early in the morning, when butterflies fluttered by my windows, would my heart stir with wild unrest. Mostly, my mind was calm and my heart quiet. There was nothing to do but maintain the semblance of a life while waiting, waiting for the moment when I would be taken.

There Has Never Been Anything Truly Wrong with You

Herman Talks to Maria (Who Is Not There), Decides to Go North

Sometimes when I got very drunk, it was because I wanted to turn and see that I had split myself in two. I wanted this so that I would be able to keep myself and to give myself to you, too. I see people giving themselves away every day, but I never could. Giving oneself away seems to make things a lot easier, though. So I would drink whiskey and hope that I would miraculously split in two. I loved the reckless feeling of waste that being drunk gave me, yet I hated it. I wished there could be two of myself—one to get drunk and one to look solemnly on.

Last night, my friends came knocking at the door and I said, “I have friends?” A smile crept to my face as I saw them out there. So I unlocked the deadbolts, thirteen of them, and opened the door. Threw open the sash. The men in the party groaned as though it hurt them to see me, a man, instead of a woman. I didn’t let this bother me.

I had been doing nothing but stare at the walls and think of how I missed you and how I was probably getting depressed again, and I wished that I could be put out of my misery. On the one hand, going out with these friends who had shown up at my door was the perfect solution. On the other hand, I wished to do nothing but continue to think of how I wished to be put out of my misery. I even wished to continue to think of how I wished to be put out of my misery more than I wished to be put out of my misery, though this didn’t exactly occur to me right then.

Later, after parting with my friends, wishing I hadn’t left the house, I was walking in the dark. I wanted to veer left, I wanted a path to open up to me, with the moon over my head, looming huge. And ugly or beautiful, either one. I had a feeling the dark would only get darker and darker and darker forever. I wanted to think that my emotions were enough to cause darkness forever, so I hated the way that I thought of science instead, of the earth spinning wildly away from the sun.

Instead of veering left toward the moon, I walked by my favorite bar. I have many fond memories of going to that bar and standing in a corner on my own, drinking beer after beer until I could not see straight, then bursting through the door and saying, "Excuse me," to someone I didn't know. I would stumble up the street to my house, and in the morning wonder how I got in my bed. But right then I could not think about morning, because I was certain that the night was going to last forever. I thought of women who might hang around inside that bar and think of ways to get men to like them. They would stand around and think of how best to make you lose your mind. How best to make a man stay up very late thinking of how alone he is and how very, very not his a particular woman is. I remembered you saying once, "It makes me stressed out to be around other people, but I need one or two around to obsess over, see."

I replied, "I don't need them around to obsess over them, luckily."

I smiled at the memory. It did not make me feel upset or sad, which made me wonder again if I was getting depressed.

This afternoon, I turned on the television. I didn't get out from under the covers. I became engrossed in *Hour of the Wolf* without even wondering who on earth had chosen it to be on television. I was rapt, especially by the part when the man runs his hand slowly along a woman's naked body. The woman is supposedly dead, but then she gets up, laughing. This made me very uncomfortable because I don't like to think about people dying and I did not want to think about someone having to face that someone was dead and finally, I didn't want someone to face that someone was dead so much that he touched her. Particularly since she was naked and it was almost sexy.

When the movie was over, I noticed that the light was fading from the cotton sheers covering my window, and I simply continued to sit there until it was dark in my room. There was a bottle on my dresser that I couldn't take my eyes off. There was nothing special about it and I couldn't even remember where it had come from. But something about its shape, the roundness, the way it appeared to have swelled in places, maybe from sun exposure, held my gaze. I gathered the nerve to get up from bed and

fetch a bottle of wine from the kitchen. I counted each step I took, I guess because I was trying to minimize the number. As I rounded the corner back into my room, I thought that maybe someone was playing a trick on me. This feeling lasted for only a second and then was gone, as though I could see a chalkboard, erased, that only moments before had held a complex mathematical formula. I remembered exclaiming to you once (I do not even remember why) that I was an idiot.

“Say, rather, that you’re imprudent, Herman.”

“Why?”

“Because. It’s better to use bigger, more complex words when you’re being self-deprecating. It makes it seem less like you pity yourself and more like you’re conducting a science experiment.”

I laughed a little and looked out the window at people and wished very hard to be them. I suddenly knew this was because during my trip to the kitchen, I had become convinced that something within me had gone severely wrong, and it was only a matter of time before I would pass out of this life, graceless, straining and sweating. In pain. The thought agitated me, made me unable to concentrate. I watched several hours of terrible family television dramas and could not follow what was happening in them. I poured myself some wine but found that I could not drink it. I tried lying down but my body would not settle; I felt it protest in every position, like I was somehow hurting it, or maybe the pain of being itself against something solid was just an indication that it was already hurt. When I got up two hours later, my eyes felt like flypaper with flies stuck to it; my body felt clumsy, like it would run into a wall immediately if allowed freedom.

I know that I’ve been a hypochondriac since I was very young, but it doesn’t help much to think about those days. One day last week, before work, I was sitting in my car, waiting until the last possible minute to go in so that I wouldn’t have to talk to anybody beforehand. If I hadn’t been doing this, I wouldn’t have seen the house sitting opposite and thought of how it looked like my childhood somehow. It must have reminded me of how I, myself, look Scandinavian. High cheekbones pushing the eyes up farther on the face than they usually go, giving a fiercely vigilant, almost Neanderthal look. That

Norwegian-looking house opposite should have been my childhood home, what with its dramatically sloping roof and one high window, dark behind, that seemed so high that it must be an attic—an attic that I would have both longed to play in and been too frightened to play in. This, and a large living room downstairs, much larger than it would seem that it could be, based on how the house looked from outside. That house. Instead of this shack I lived in with my mother.

My mother is gone now, and without her here, the place seems darker, emptier. Earlier today, I found some photos in a drawer. One is of the crumbling stone wall that used to surround the backyard. The wall is gone now. I recall its look of constant struggle to keep back the high tangled grass, the advancing wilderness beyond. In the picture, the six of us sit on the wall. My mother and me, your mother, father, brother, and you. The picture is blurry, but I can make out the wild grin on my mother's face. She is gesturing to me as though to grasp me, detain me, but I'm already off. Though I can't make out her face, it does not appear that your mother is grinning wildly. She seems serene. You are tucked under her arm, but not as though you're being held back. I don't know who took this picture. I imagine that it was the tree in the yard, situated just where it seems the camera was. The tree is still there as I look out the window. I see these pictures of you, but I do not remember how to ask you questions. I cannot think anymore of the kinds of things you would know. I think of how long I have known you, Maria. If there was any doubt, this picture is evidence that I have known you since we were very small. Do you remember? I also find old letters from you in my drawer. I think I will re-read them, though I'm sure this will make me sad.

In the middle of the night, I hear the train's lovely, druggy croon. It issues through four miles of damp air, the damp distorting it, or maybe making it more potent, or maybe somehow doing both. In my murmuring half-sleep, it sounds too personal, as though confessing something deep and forgotten very loudly, for the whole city to hear. But no one listens. They do not think to pay attention, for the confession is wordless.

A Rush and a Push, The Lull Before

The next day I boarded a train. After hearing it in the night, it just felt like the thing to do. As I was standing in the ticket line, it occurred to me that I needed a destination. I thought of how maybe the trains thin out as you go farther north. Nobody wants to go that far. So I bought a ticket north. I thought of how Norway, north of a certain point, was not streaked and crisscrossed by train tracks. It was not invaded or crawled upon regularly. This was appealing—there are not many places no one passes through for days on end. I thought of my own body in comparison, how I wanted hands crawling on my body, sure. I do not want my body to be a wasteland. But the way trains crawl on big land, it would be more as if worms, not hands, were crawling on me. I shivered. I thought about worms getting in my body and all I want to do is prevent that, prevent the worms from eating me. Do not think about what you will look like after you're dead, I told myself. I must keep this body going as long as I can, and when it's dead, I must make sure it gets blown up immediately, obliterated, bombed. Exploded. This is not what I want to be thinking of, I thought, and tried to change the subject. I made a face, though, because I suddenly realized the thought had turned my stomach, and lunch was being brought around. This agitated me, because I enjoy mealtime. A woman poked at her roll with a knife and said, "What is this? It's hard. Stale."

"It's brought fresh every morning, ma'am," said the woman who had brought the food.

Another woman chimed in, "Yes, and the lemonade. It's not sweet."

I couldn't reconcile the distant secret, the majestic mystery of the train's sound in the night, with the present dull clatter as I looked around the compartment.

I looked out the window at the snow and tried to think of glaciers. Maybe I'll die on this train, I thought. I closed my eyes to curb the thoughts that would make my heart race and make me clumsy, so clumsy that I wouldn't be able to get up and go to the bathroom without bumping into something. Or worse, jarring against someone's leg, so that they might call further attention to me, call for help, maybe.

And I would have to insist that I was all right while sweat began to bead on my forehead, and I would wish for nothing so much as to get past, to seek the bathroom and lock the door, where I could put my hands against the cool porcelain of the sink.

No, I thought, as I sat trying not to think about what it would be like to die on a train. Moving, moving, your spirit would be confused. It might forever ride that train, unhappily. I thought of my theory about what happens to spirits as they die, which is that they lose certain elements of memory. They can remember occurrences, but only as a mood, or, very occasionally, with minute details of the place or circumstance. Only the minute ones. A leg, for instance. A foot, tapping, instead of a face, a mouth, speaking. Or a field—still, but with the sense that a tornado is on the way. But where was that field? And why did it have the sense of a tornado about it? What had happened in a life that gave it that feeling? And being disoriented as to the context, for a ghost, made the experience of remembering more harrowing, because all ghosts are inflicted with the sense that every bad thing was their fault, that they betrayed everyone they knew and loved, and, through their own actions, turned the world against them. And that is why all their memories seem so lonely. I took one of your letters out of my backpack and read it.

Dear Herman,

It's not nice to wish that others are different than they are. It's especially not nice to tell them you wish they are different than they are.

-M.

I couldn't remember what this was all about, but it agitated me more. I managed to close my eyes again, though, and I guess what happened is that I fell asleep. When I woke up, I no longer felt the danger of passing out or dying on this train. I found the compartment relaxed, as though the tension had been unwound with a tuning peg. The women whose sourness and clatter had assaulted me minutes

before now dozed peacefully before me, the hems of their skirts blowing slightly in the draft. The day outside was mild, and the late afternoon sun sent piercing light straight in my window, through the room and out the window opposite. When I looked at the ends of the women's hems blowing in the breeze, I raised my hand and moved my fingers back and forth through the air in imitation of the fluttering lace borders.

Herman Has Been Roughing It in Northern Norway for a While, Now

Since Herman arrived, he had embarked on a kind of quest. During the last hour of the train ride, he looked out of his window and almost saw an Indian. That is the way he described it to himself, "almost-saw". He was sure that he would soon see him again, and without the "almost." He hoped that when he saw the Indian, his spirit's rejoicing would take the form of an avalanche to prove its existence. How else to prove the existence of a spirit?

Herman was not self-conscious now, nor was he lacking in confidence. Two of the many benefits of spending time alone. He was hoping for a spiritual experience of some sort, and he woke up every morning zipped into his tent wondering if he had yet had one. He wondered how he would know. He wondered if he weren't actually too old. Sometimes he wondered if he had already had one—if either his mother dying or the wreck of his friendship with Maria had been some kind of blessing. Maybe it had been his great blessing, the great blessing of his life. That would seem strange, he admitted to the chasm that opened before him, to the left, over the side of the freezing mountain. The air met him in swirls, blowing upward. I realize either of those would be a weird blessing, he thought, but sometimes blessings are strange and come in a package you cannot understand.

Herman kept in his backpack, tied with twine, the pictures and letters from Maria that he had found in his drawer. He took a letter out of his backpack and read it:

Dear Herman,

I am sorry that I got drunk the other night and kissed you. Though—I am always hesitant to say I'm sorry, because it seems dishonest. Isn't there in every apology a tacit promise to reform? I can't reform.

Dishonesty. Maybe this is one reason I speak little—I do not want to speak in a way not at one with how I feel. You can never say anything that's inaccurate if you don't say anything at all. I sit writing letters, studying and changing the wording of a single sentence for twenty minutes. Search my mind for the right word for an hour. Other people are content to speak very imprecisely, and sometimes even to lie—to not pay attention to their words, to the tides their words create within them, enough to recognize that they are lying.

I understand, though, that words make us stay ourselves better, longer. They help us to hang onto something we think we feel and remember—something we believe is us. Without words, it would be much harder to be a self.

-M

Am I dead? Herman asked himself. He had to admit to himself that he could not tell for sure. It could have happened at any number of points. In his sleep? The other day when he had been rappelling? His foot had slipped and his heart beat out of his chest in fear that he was plunging into the ravine. My head hurts, he would tell himself, just to prove that he was alive. That proves nothing, his mind would say back to him. He stopped, sat down, and took out another of Maria's letters. This one, he remembered, she had written to him when they were in high school, after his cousins had visited.

Dear Herman,

What you said about your cousin, Victoria. Since you asked, it's true—after meeting her, I cannot stand her. She lingers in my thoughts. She sneers at me; she is not nice. She doesn't like me. I don't even long for her to like me, as I do most people who don't like me.

On the other hand, your cousin Lila—she never says anything annoying or self-important, or like she is less or more weird than you yourself are. Let me explain that: Both are offensive or uncomfortable to the very sensitive—to have someone presume they are more strange than you, and to have someone assert that you are definitely more strange than them. What a tightrope, but Lila walks it with grace.

-M.

Herman sat for a while in the snow and thought about how, now, the great sweeps of his life did not seem so dire or personal—more like something that once happened to someone, not necessarily even himself. Then, he brought out the letter from the bottom of the stack. It did not feel immediately familiar, as the others did. The fold of the paper—even the look of the handwriting, though Maria's, was arranged in unfamiliar sentences:

Dear Herman,

I just had a daydream about you. You were walking along the ridge of a mountain, running out of air because of the altitude. But you were not struggling, because by degrees you were becoming supernatural, lessening the need for breathing. It was cold, very cold, where you were, somewhere above the Arctic Circle. You had taken over an abandoned resort—actually, it was almost as if you had caused it to be abandoned, because you had turned into an avalanche and buried it. You went around skiing at three in the morning, thinking it was the right time, because you could not use the sun to get an idea of what time it was. I've heard the sun only rises once a year and sets once a year in the Arctic. Is this true?

I hope you're well. I haven't heard from you in a while. I think I won't write to you any more until I hear from you again.

-M.

What could be the point of any of this? Herman asked himself as he turned into an avalanche. He went sliding, slowly at first, then faster and faster, down the slopes of a mountain so tall that, even after he had lost control, even after he could no longer slow himself, he remained in this position, falling, falling, for what seemed ages. Even after he had come to a precarious halt, he saw that he was still so very high up. He looked up to where he had been only moments before, and looked down to where he could have gone had this precipice not caught him. He began to chuckle. "I am, in fact, a lucky man," he said. He chuckled on until he became embarrassed at the thought that he was still unsure as to whether this meant he was a person, whole, alive or dead.

Play Hide and Seek, Forget to Come Find Me

The day after Maria had that daydream about Herman turning into an avalanche, she found a letter in her freezer, written in Herman's handwriting:

My dear Abigail,

I'm not certain at all if that is your name. In fact, I'm relatively certain it's not. But what do names matter? I know your essence as well as I can discern and describe for any witness the majesty of this country I have banished myself to, this great white country where nothing can hide, where nothing, unless it's pure itself, can seek the solace of camouflage. I am not myself pure, therefore I stick out like a sore thumb. Still, I love it, as I love you, my dear Abigail. Remember what I once told you. I'm sure that I once told you something, after all. Didn't I? I'm ashamed to say that I can't remember. Please don't think that this diminishes my love for you. I love you dearly. In fact, I have placed myself in grave danger just to write you this letter. A polar bear is slowly gaining on me, climbing the steep slope, pawing the ground gingerly before each step.

Oh! I remember what it was: When you want to disappear, they'll look right at you. Try not to let it bother you.

Maria thought the letter strange. She recalled Herman's theory that people lose the details of their memories when they die. She did not allow herself to ask if this meant Herman was dead or dying. She packed a few clothes and set out on a train due north. She wasn't sure why she was going, she only knew that she knew exactly where to find him, that someone had placed a map of where he was in her mind. She had an old letter she had written Herman but never delivered, and she stuffed it in with her things. She had no idea what she would say to him when she found him.

On the train, she thought about Herman. As they had always lived next door to each other, she and Herman had always known each other. Their families had been close, but it always seemed to Maria that her own parents had an unspoken idea that they were better than Herman and his mother. His mother was something of a loose cannon. Maria had never seen his father. She asked him once about him, but Herman just shrugged and started fiddling with a bottle on his desk that had been bloated by the sun. Herman's mother knew that the day Herman's father had left, toddler Herman had climbed into his truck, picked up that bottle, clung to it and wouldn't let go. He had kept it in his room ever since. She didn't know if Herman remembered this, and she never asked him.

His mother's boyfriends were too fierce for delicate Herman. But Maria liked Herman's mother, even if she didn't always admire her. Maria saw her the day she herself left, lit out on her own. It was months before graduation, but she had an irresistible impulse, early one morning, to leave. She never really regretted it, but she felt like she wouldn't have really regretted staying, either. She came over to see Herman, to give him the letter she had written, because she was afraid she wouldn't tell him goodbye if she didn't write it down. Herman wasn't there, but his mother was. She told Maria to keep her letter, that maybe she'd find some future occasion to give it to him in person. Herman's mother figured that it

couldn't say anything more or better than she could tell him herself: "Maria had to go. She'll be back in her own time. In the meantime, she'd like you to get on with your life."

Maria was quiet. Some people are quiet because they're not confident, but Maria's reticence tended more to bring out others' insecurity. Her quiet stare was unnerving, and people would always reveal things they didn't mean to, that she didn't mean for them to. Thus, she always had the upper hand, even when she didn't want it. This applied to Herman as well, even though he knew perfectly well what was happening when it did. Most others didn't, but Herman did, and was thrilled and mesmerized that Maria, that someone, had that effect on him. Maria became friends with him, trusted, deep friends, because she sensed he understood her and accepted her anyway. Most people either did not understand her and accepted her into their ranks for her mystery, or else they did not understand her and didn't accept her because she made them uncomfortable. Or they just plain thought it was annoying, the way she stared. Herman, though, was too sensitive to reject beauty, even if it did sometimes make a fool of him. She knew that he was in love with her, that he had never really been in love with anyone else, all through school and even after he didn't see her anymore, after she left. She just knew. She tried her best not to toy with him and did admirably well, she thought, except that time she got drunk and kissed him. She felt bad about it.

She still felt some kind of unspoken connection with him, and she knew it when his mother had died. She did not go to the funeral because she felt it was the wrong time. She thought he might need her more some other time. Besides, she had a boyfriend then who was suspicious of her every move. She knew this was bad, but possessiveness had always been a turn-on to her, each time, right up until it wasn't. When she had the daydream about Herman, she had just discovered again that it wasn't. When she found the note from Herman in the freezer, she was reaching for a tub of ice cream.

She knew that Herman had problems. He had always seemed fragile, since they were very little. He had always had a fear of sickness. Maria remembered trying to buoy him up, to not let him wallow in self-pity and paranoia and nonsense, the kind of nonsense he was likely to generate from his swarming

depths. For instance, when they were in sixth grade, he became convinced that she herself was sick, though she showed no outward sign of illness and had no inner stirrings that something might be wrong. He begged her to go to the doctor. He was so insistent that she began to worry a bit despite herself. Of course, this never came to anything. What had happened was that Maria had been walking around outside one night. She had just been enjoying the warm weather, but she saw, through Herman's basement window, Herman's mother with a new beau. She didn't know that Herman, from his bedroom window, had seen her outside. He mentioned it in passing the next day. Taken by surprise, she denied having been out there so as to not even be tempted to have to tell him about the new man. This was prompted by her protective feelings toward him, but he thought she simply didn't remember it. What with his theory that people lose memory when they're dying, he was convinced she was ill. He stayed up outside her bedroom window in case she needed him for six nights without sleep until, one day, he passed out in class. He couldn't be roused enough to stay awake for more than a few seconds at the time. His mother came in the school swearing, apparently angry with him, until she saw him, balled up and tiny, on the couch in the back of the classroom. She walked over, wrapped him up in her coat, and carried him out the door. Maria remembered how small and helpless he looked, like a sleeping kitten.

One day in high school, all the students had been piled up in the auditorium for a history seminar. A visiting speaker had come to the school, a famous historian, to cover the last 1000 years of world history. The program was actually enjoyable and lively in Maria's estimation, but Herman, she remembered, had some kind of episode. He was stuck in the middle of a high row, in the narrow seat between two large boys. With the auditorium lights overhead, it began to get hot. She was sitting two rows directly above him and so watched him as he began to squirm, then sit very still for a minute, then squirm again. He got a book out of his backpack, maybe to distract himself. Maria noticed their teacher glaring at him. He didn't seem to notice. After a few minutes, his head slumped and Maria was sure he had fainted. She got up quietly and stood at the end of his row until he came around and looked at her. She motioned to him. She knew, somehow, that if she hadn't have been the one to help, to motion to him,

he never would have made it up and waded through the knees on his row, calmly taken her arm, and allowed her to guide him out the door into the cool air of the deserted hallway.

Herman, she also remembered, was mostly very sweet to her. But he was mean sometimes. When she would bring home a boyfriend, for instance.

“It’s only because they’re not good enough for you. How could you think that boy is good enough for you? He said ‘supposably’ instead of ‘supposedly.’”

“You’re such a snob, Herman,” she said.

“I am not a snob.”

He could be mean, but he was never spiteful. Even when he was mean, he seemed vulnerable, and as such, he was not often a force with people. Yet she felt that he did have a force. Some strange, artful motivation behind his actions, almost as if he were quite consciously making a display of his life, maybe an art project out of it. She knew that he would be very angry with her and offended that she had thought this. And in one sense, she thought, if you looked at his pitiful life, it was absurd to even suggest such a thing. Yet, there the feeling was, when she thought about it. She knew, in fact, that it was one of the things that drew her to him—this combination of being vulnerable and, in many ways, desperate, yet having some brute strength from somewhere deep inside of him, that bore him through the world. The strength that it took to exist in the world as someone so strange and desperate. She was, after all, trying to track him down, and would find him in God knows what state, because he had up and gone to live in the cold, barren wilds of Norway. A rather dramatic move that must have taken an unusual kind of courage.

I Had to Forget I Understood, So I Could Understand Something Else

Looking out the window of the train, Maria had a vision of what would happen: she saw the snow billow up and burn green and blue in the night sky. Herman, the northern lights. She saw that he was not there in person, but she felt him there anyway. She arrived at the last stop and entered the bracing arctic

air. She walked half a mile in the blistering cold and stopped to look up at the lights. She heard Herman's voice. "I didn't turn into something weird, an avalanche or an aurora or anything—anything weird, until you sent me that letter, Maria. Admittedly," he said, "surveillance of misfortune has not proven fruitful, and the poison of intellect has unearthed frivolous and peculiar hypotheses. The most striking feature of our possible meanings is an ever-growing solitude, yet I was dissatisfied with the involvement of ice, of glaciers."

"I'm glad you remember my name, Herman. But speak English, please," Maria said as the lights danced above her.

"I am old," Herman said. "Many things have happened to me, not all of them good."

Maria looked up. The lights shimmered back at her.

"The worms that tried to eat me didn't care how I felt about it," Herman said. "It's terrible, terrible, to still be yourself in times of crisis."

Maria climbed up a cliff to a flat rock. Once on top, the whole sky opened before her. Herman said, "When I stretch out here, I can feel myself tingle. It's pleasant. My arms turn into thunderstorms. Snowstorms, I mean. Which is more violent? I suppose one can't have everything. Do I want the most violent transcendence imaginable or do I want to put it off, live in hiding, pitifully, a little longer? I will try to do both. For you, Maria. I always wanted to be two people, one for me and one for you. My eyes are tearing up. I'm sorry for the snow. Everything freezes immediately here."

"Come out, Herman. We've been our bodies for so long, I don't really know how to talk to you without yours."

"Talk all around, dear. To anything. From now on, I will hear everything, even when you don't want me to. I stretch out gloriously, you see. If one part of me becomes diseased, it freezes and preserves itself, away from the worms, before it is slowly carried away, as a glacier might be. So slowly that I do not notice. How wonderful to die piece by piece. There's hope for regeneration, for miracles, for getting used to a new situation."

“I know you’re afraid of dying. You’ve always been afraid.” She saw him for a moment as himself, peeking out from behind a tree, the snow reflecting light, glistening in his eyes. Then he was gone again. “But there has never been anything truly wrong with you,” she said. “You worry yourself sick.”

“Oh, yes. Some days I think I’ll never die. Saying that something will never happen usually makes me feel suspicious and wrong, but not that. It’s too big. Some things are just too big to see around. They are the worst, though, because you can’t see what you’re doing wrong. You can’t even see what you’re doing right.”

She felt him standing behind her, tickling the back of her neck. He said, “You always had a note pinned to your collar. It said ‘off-limits’.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, twirling around fast, but he was gone. “I’m not a stranger, you know.”

“Of course I know that. A flash enters my mind, and I see the wall. That wall in the picture, do you remember it? My mother is there. My mother was similar to me. Shy and stern and soft and hard and wild. She hated for people to tell her what to do.”

“Herman, you’re not stern. Nor hard.”

“Well. Only because we all go squealing into the night. Begging for mercy. My mother gasps at her own hindsight now, shrieking in an empty place. She insisted, first thing every morning, to come at me sinning. Full-on sinning.”

“Herman. What about the wall? You started to talk about it.”

“I am the wall trying to hold the wilderness back, and then I am the wilderness. Let me give you an update on what you’ve probably got wrong—my toes, I can’t feel. My body protests in even the most natural positions. I’ve sought advice from mountains, caves, glaciers, some of which I suspect do not exist. An Indian was supposed to be my tour guide.”

“A tour guide? Why do you always believe that someone else knows more than you?”

“Because. My paper nods and winces, but I can’t remember how to simply write on it. I’ve forgotten words; I don’t know how to be a self.”

“Is there no one who can help?”

Herman laughed. “I’m not too keen on the pamphlets people pass out about these things. Once, as I passed by, a preacher said, ‘God closes doors no man can open, God opens doors no man can close.’ I don’t like this—instead of making it seem like God has a mighty plan, it makes Him seem like an absent-minded buffoon who, unbeknownst to him, makes messes for others to try to fix. No,” Herman sighed. “Climbing the slopes will not reveal God layer by layer, as some have thought. It was a good question to ask, though. Don’t feel silly.”

“I don’t feel silly.”

“Of course. I disgust myself. I’m ashamed of my frostbite. I can never return to normal, don’t you understand? I’m so glad that the Arctic treats corpses differently. Since my memories are going, I wonder if I’m dying.”

“If your memories were really going, how would you know it?”

“Here’s something I remember: I’m at a seminar. Everyone knows that seminars are the best way to cure a thousand years. I’m there and I am growing nervous. I’m reading a book, and as I read, the speaker turns to me and begins to speak the words I’m reading. A delay of half a second, as though he is slow in the head. It scares me.”

Off to the left, Maria heard a clamor, like a hammer being dropped down a well. She looked and saw the top of a mountain go rolling, slowly at first, then faster and faster, down its side. An avalanche. “Herman, don’t destroy yourself. Isn’t there any way I can help you?”

“No, no. There is nothing that’s wildly important. Just enjoy the feeling of your interest until it runs out. All night, I can hear the whistle of the arctic train, and I have no desire anymore to climb aboard. I’m trying not to fear anything. I’ve feared too much. It’s pitiful to fear such things as I have feared. When I laughed, for instance, I feared that it was a great fat hollow thing, and I wondered if it

really sounded like, 'Ha ha ha,' after all. I had a sinking feeling that it didn't. Others may fear similar things, but I never paused to wonder. Minds are astonishing for their ability to accept themselves, but I am truly an idiot, a failure at empathy. Still, it's in me always to try to describe things as others experience them. I have a boy in my mind who I pattern myself after. He's a real boy, but one I've never met."

"You're over-thinking."

"It's possible. I've thought too hard about a lot of things. Sometimes, though, I have not thought enough about something. Sometimes, I close my eyes and pray to think just the right amount about things."

"Are you lonely, Herman?"

"Yes."

"Would you know what I meant if I mentioned the paradoxical exuberance that can sometimes accompany loneliness?"

"Sure. I mean. I like the best of times, I like the worst of times, and I like it that I can't always tell which is which. So, you see, I couldn't regret anything even if I tried. I admit to brief periods of obstacles, but..." he trailed off.

"Well, I'm going to live here, until you get back to normal."

"Irrepressible Maria. Suit yourself. Above all else, suit yourself. You have a certain tedium which is granted only to the loveliest creatures. Far more light is allowed in your presence than in others', and you never even find out. You never will. Yes. Stay here with me. The cubes of our igloo would come together in joints as beautiful as Marilyn Monroe's knees. Sound and sturdy as can be. Others are not so lucky. Remember the old house by the railroad track? It shudders even when the train isn't coming through."

"Good, then it's settled."

“No. You can’t stay here. You know this. You know exactly what you must do. The Lord has made each and every one of us intuitive as hell.”

Maria took out the old letter she had written to Herman. She wanted to read it to him, but a draft of arctic air blew it out of her hands. It went swirling up toward the night sky.

“I’ll take that,” Herman said.

Maria smiled.

Herman’s voice echoed through light as he read:

Dear Herman,

I must go. A man with long black hair peeked at me last night when I was asleep, and I woke up. He did not move until I closed my eyes again. I could hear the faint swoosh of his movement. I went back to sleep, but when I woke up again, there were notes all over everything. Signs, I mean, that he had left for me. My boots were sitting at attention, ready to go. He packed my suitcase. He didn’t leave out anything important, so I do not feel sad or panicked. The reason that I know you’re not supposed to come with me is that I can see you sleeping. He opened our curtains, both mine and yours. And you are fast asleep in bed. You look so far away. I’ll miss you. I know you’ll miss me, but don’t make it too bad, so sad. I’ll see you on the flip side.

Herman’s voice made a strange turn here—wistful, almost playful, and faded as though going to some remoter sky. Maria remembered writing the words in the letter, but they were Herman’s now—as though they originated in him, not her.

After that, Maria visited home once in a while to see her parents and brothers. A calm-looking family moved into the house that Herman and his mother had lived in. Maria sometimes wandered places without fully intending to. She wandered into shops, down side streets, overtaken by a sudden impulse, an uncanny feeling that she would meet Herman around a corner. Maria remembered the look of the

Arctic just before she boarded the southbound train. The lights burned wildly, but deep down, they seemed controlled. The snow all around, underfoot and all the way up to the high peaks, was a blanket, fitted to the contours of unforgiving landscape. It rounded out the sharp with tenderness. When she half-heartedly kicked at it, though, her boot met with resistance. It was packed, frozen solid.

Wear A Body and Completely Change Your Story

Troy has a brain tumor. No one knows it, though. In fact, Troy never sees a doctor in this story. Not even once. Troy often frightens himself with how alone he is. Lately, he does not want to be frightened, so he wakes up one day and thinks that his sister, Sabrina, is his wife. So, when I am speaking from Troy's point of view, I will refer to Sabrina as his wife. I don't know how else to do it. When he wakes up this morning, he also has another problem: he cannot feel his feet. No matter how much he walks this day or any day hereafter, his feet will never wake up. He does not call the doctor. He does not tell anyone, but ends up, first thing, with his foot in the toilet. He cannot feel the water lapping against it. He loses himself in thought while staring at the bathroom wall. This is such a blank wall, he thinks.

Troy goes into the bedroom and looks at his wife's bed. She has laid out some clothes for herself. She is not here, however, and he wonders if she simply forgot to put them on and is wandering around naked. Troy thinks that maybe she lay down for a nap and disappeared right out of her clothes. He thinks of Sabrina not existing. He thinks of his 3 year-old son, Daniel, not existing. What if he made them up? Could that be possible? Certainly it could, he thinks.

Troy stumbles through the apartment, slapping at his feet and sighing. He looks at pictures of his wife and son. He resigns himself to the idea that they are figments of his imagination, though he does not understand why he would have created them. He has never, he thinks, tried to deceive himself about anything. Troy sits down at his desk and turns on the light. He takes out a tiny table and chairs from the drawer and stares at them. He has had to glue them down to a base since his son has begun to plunder, even when he is told not to. Why would I make that up, Troy thinks to himself heatedly, then realizes no one but himself is accusing him. How could I get mad at myself? He thinks tenderly. His tiny table and chairs sit under the spotlight of his desk lamp. The lamp throws a shadow of him, pointy and angular, against the wall. Feet and all, he notices with some trepidation. Daniel has touched this set of table and chairs. Troy wonders if he can, by touch, gain the essence of Daniel back off them.

Troy begins to hope that he indeed created his wife and son, because he figures he can certainly create them again. He closes his eyes and thinks hard about them. Her hair, black and curly, his fat cheeks that roll in Troy's fingers like dough. Sure, he could have made them up. But then, what was his template? He looks at his harsh shadow against the wall and shudders at the difference between it and his son's fat cheeks. Troy thinks of high school when someone told him that, even though he was the captain of the football team, no one cared. Troy thinks of himself running down the field, looking over his shoulder at the football soaring gracefully through the air toward him. Am I one-of-a-kind? Troy asks himself. Obviously not, he thinks. There are probably many, many men who played football and cannot feel their feet, and whose wife and son disappear one day. And who sit at their desks in sharp lighting, looking at their tiny models of kitchen tables and chairs.

Suddenly, he does not understand this table and chairs. "Why did I do this?" he asks.

His wife peers around the corner and says, "For good luck."

"Oh. I think my luck is running out," he says, looking at his shadow. He realizes that his wife has just spoken, and that he has been looking for her voice or her anything for the last hour. He turns to look at her in the doorway. She is not there.

"Shit, Sabrina. Where are you?"

No answer. He thinks of her galloping away from the door in order to escape his glance. He feels relieved that she is there, even if she's running away. Maybe she is playing a game, he thinks. Just as well. Games are fine, like football, and why doesn't anyone believe me when I tell them that I was good?

"You were good, I remember," says Sabrina.

"Thank you," he says. He tries to get up but when his body goes forward, his tingling feet do not. He falls flat on the floor. Sure am glad I didn't put hardwood in here, he thinks as he nuzzles the carpet.

"What's the meaning of this?" Sabrina asks. "I'm getting dinner ready, and you are wallowing on the floor. Get up."

Troy sighs and looks around. A field mouse runs by along the edge of the floor in front of him, and he tells himself to put out a trap later. He does not imagine it running over him with its tiny feet with their proper sensation. That would be madness.

When Sabrina and Troy were young, they played hide and seek outside in the fading light of dusk. About the time she turned thirteen, Sabrina began to foresee the despair to come, but it was in a shivering, feverish feeling. The feeling thrilled and warmed her, because it was different than the feel of being at home around the fireplace. She was thrilled to imagine that something different was possible. She saw despair as a sense of something real and true. She could not discern its exact nature, nor did she use the word “despair,” though she saw it in the wild, red streaks in the sky at sundown. She could smell it when she walked by someone drunk on the street. She would grin with the feverish thrill once she got past, as her mother pulled her on down the street.

After two years, though, she began to taste the bitterness of despair. What had thrilled her as it threaded across the sky at sundown, promising nighttime excitement of an unknown nature, now felt oppressive. At school, for instance, at her locker. Turning the combination seemed to manifest the feeling of trudging daily through annoyances and repetitions, boring repetitions. A series of numbers that only she knew. In between every class, she had to worry over the combination’s intricate precision, just to get in to her things, which she’d tried to hide and lock away from others. She didn’t know yet that she and everyone would just keep adding to those things they were trying to hide. Still, she sensed that something was there, and it was permanent, and it was bad.

When Sabrina began to taste this bitterness of despair, she wondered if Troy, two years her junior, was now at the point of feverish excitement. His mind was imaginative, she knew, because of the way he stared off, and because of the strange things he said when brought back to himself.

“Troy, do your homework,” their mother said one afternoon as Troy stared out the window.

“When is the mountain going to move again, Mom?” Troy asked of the mountain their town was named after, Mount Elmore.

“Mountains don’t move,” their mother said.

“I’ve seen ol’ Elmore in a different spot before,” he confessed to Sabrina later. “Sometimes, especially at night, it’s on the other side of town. It must be trying to protect us from something. Maybe it has to move around depending on where the danger goes.” He did not seem to think that he was saying anything sensational. That begs the question of why he did not say it in front of their mother, though. Sabrina didn’t think to ask him. She just figured he knew that their mother was somehow not privy to the truth, and he was trying to protect their mother from the bewilderment of having her world, as she expected it, turn strange. Troy was always considerate like that.

Sure enough, two years later, she saw a fog come over Troy as it had come over her. She saw it for the first time when they were down by the pond one night. They had settled down on the bank after a long game of tag. Though neither acknowledged it openly, they felt a tacit agreement that tag was a kids’ game, was not exactly what they wanted to be doing, but that they did it anyway out of a sense of nostalgia (which they had no name for at that time), boredom, and uncertainty as to the next step. Leap from playing tag to what? A few months later, drunk at parties, they would think endearingly of themselves now, playing tag in a mildly ironic manner, with vague thoughts of being too something to be doing this. Too old? Too knowledgeable? Too feeling-guilty-for-pretending-they-still-had-the-same-feeling-about-playing-tag-when-they-didn’t?

“Sabrina?” Troy had said.

Lying back on the grass, she had grunted in response.

“What do you think it’s like to be Grandpa?”

“I don’t know, Troy boy.”

“Do you think we’ll ever be old enough to find out?”

“Sure. You might be. I don’t know about me,” Sabrina said.

Troy looked at her in appraisal. “You’ll make it,” he said earnestly. He thought for a minute.

“Do you remember Mrs. Tew?”

“Sure,” Sabrina said.

“Did you hate her?”

Troy asked this because, earlier that day, Mrs. Tew had made Troy’s cheeks burn with embarrassment when she called on him. He had just woken up from a nap (unscheduled, he just fell asleep during class) and, though he was generally very good at math, when he got up to the board, his mind had simply gone blank as to how to simplify an algebraic expression. He stood before the class. It felt even worse to be facing the board with his back to the others instead of facing them. Mrs. Tew finally told him to sit down, with the strict reprimand that he had better learn his multiplication tables (she actually thought this was the problem). Her words, that he’d better “wake up and smell the coffee,” seemed to him comical and outdated, which only added to his humiliation and disgust.

“I felt helpless. And I got mad too. But later, when I didn’t feel mad anymore, I just felt nothing. Like I didn’t have to care anymore. That something was done to me that shouldn’t have been done, that there was nothing I could do to stop it, and that that’s just the way it is.”

Sabrina was suddenly melancholy, no longer pleasantly exhausted from playing tag. She thought something like, Yes, Troy, that’s the way it is, forever. From then on, they talked to each other obliquely about the things that bothered them. I say obliquely because they would simply tell what happened and thus evoke feelings that generally mirrored each other’s—usually some form of humiliation caused by vanity, of guilt over vanity, of acceptance of intolerable conditions, or of the fact that their hearts continued stubbornly to beat, even through frustration and hopelessness.

Sabrina has her own fucked up problems. Today, she has woken up cold and without fervor. She wakes up and realizes it is much earlier than it usually is when she wakes up. And why is it so cold in here? Colors are muted and dull in her head when she is cold, and she wants to do nothing except curl up

in a bed and get warm. But she is in bed and she isn't warm and she is lonely. There is something specific but unnamed about lonely people that coldness captures very well. Temperature is something that you do not think about until you are uncomfortable because of it. This is the way it always is with discomfort. Even if you were uncomfortable before, you always long for the previous discomfort. It was less uncomfortable than this discomfort, surely. If only you could get back to the point where you weren't being videotaped while being embarrassed, just being embarrassed. For instance.

I will spend the rest of the day trying to get warm, she thinks, as she puts her feet to the cold floor. She immediately pulls them back up and under the covers. Do everything drunk today? she thinks. She stares out the window because she does not know what to do with herself during a time she is usually busy sleeping. This makes her upset with herself for not being more creative and entertaining. Then she starts thinking about herself. When she does this she always thinks bad things. Today, she starts by scolding herself for those times she has clutched at things, people, mostly, she did not know existed five minutes prior. I say it like this happens to her every day but it does not; it has only happened in her life a handful of times, but the memory is potent. So alive did that handful of times make her feel in comparison to other moments, she feels they define her in a remarkably succinct way, as if they are somehow her distilled essence. Maybe this is unfair of her to do, because the rest of her time consists of holding her breath and waiting, of restraining herself from acting on impulses. If she liked herself more, maybe she would allow self-discipline to seep into her self-definition.

Let me try to explain this better. In general, Sabrina sees herself as similar to the type who would say, "I am slow to get to know someone, and slow to have someone get to know me." But she has moments every now and then when she falls irrevocably for a smile or a thoughtful-seeming glance. One time, for instance, believing herself to be alone for long enough on a grocery aisle, she hiked up her skirt to a mildly indecent height in order to adjust her uncomfortable stockings. She turned and was met with a look that was almost too obscene but not quite, and as such was just right. It was equal parts curiosity and naivete (had that good-looking man never before seen a woman do that with her skirt? She

could believe right then that he hadn't). She fixed herself as primly as she could, then spastically leapt to the top shelf for a bag of chips. She nearly lost her balance. He rushed at her and said, "Careful. Steady."

"I like words like that," she said.

"Me too. Gentle is another one," he said. She looked at him. He had a sensitive or at least guarded look in his eyes.

That kind of thing. Whenever it happens, she has to resist taking him up, whoever he is, by the nape of his neck in her teeth and dragging him away to a deserted place. I don't mean to kill him, of course. But, even knowing she will never see him again unless she does something, she never does. It is not so much timidity as pride. Pride meaning this: in these moments, she loses her head and wants to tell whoever he is anything about her that he cares to know, anything that might put her in his good graces or make him love her. But this is just not the way. She isn't sure what the way is, but it is not, she knows, to disclose anything about herself. So she smiles and walks right out of wherever she is. If she liked herself more, she would congratulate herself on not killing herself at the memory of such things. At the long years that follow them all, when she has to be calm and sit on her boiling blood.

It is strange to Sabrina that she is even capable of any of this. Sometimes the reason and effort she employs in her thoughts and feelings baffles her, because it is all on a backdrop of sludge and depression. How can she get so tangled up when it all so clearly does not matter, is all just contained like garbage on a barge being taken out to sea?

From bed, Sabrina stares out the window and sees one of the neighborhood boys outside. He is digging up dirt half-heartedly with a plastic toy spade. Daniel is his name. She remembers how, last year, his mother died in a car accident. Seeing him out there listlessly trying to play, Sabrina suddenly starts to cry. Sabrina's own brother, Troy, has been a great comfort in her life, because he always seems even more depressed and alone than she does. But lately, he has gotten very weird. She is sure that he is

depressed, too, but his depression is now stranger than hers, she feels. She cannot relate to how he carries around that tiny replica of the table and chairs. She hopes that he will get back to normal soon.

Troy feels confused most of the time now. He cannot understand what is happening to him, and he does not want anyone else to know that he does not understand what is happening to him. Not understanding one's own life may be the most embarrassing thing of all, he thinks. Troy takes a BB gun out on the balcony of the apartment and shoots twice into the woods. He hopes someone will walk by and see him doing this, because it is the best action he can think of on the spot to give vent to his desperation. He thinks of turning around and seeing Sabrina there, having watched him with curiosity the whole time. That would be the best, he thinks. Everything he has done in the last two weeks that he wanted anyone to see, he wanted it to be Sabrina who saw. He is not satisfied with his gesture here with the BB gun, because no one walks by. So, he goes inside and pulls out the little table and chairs. He sits in his starkly lit study and sees shadows play across the wall. Then, he realizes it is just he himself moving. He continues to move, to see the shadows move. When he comes to himself, he realizes he is smiling. He sees his son sitting on top of the tiny table, tiny. "What are you doing there, Daniel?"

"I'm sitting. It's forbidden?" Daniel asks.

"It is forbidden. Get down off there now."

"I'm sorry, Dad. Where can I sit? I don't feel like I'm allowed to sit anywhere. Goddamnit."

"Don't cry. No, don't cry. And don't swear. Your mother doesn't like that."

Troy was a climber, Sabrina remembers. When he was a toddler, she would come into a room and sit for several minutes sometimes before she heard him moving around from atop a high bookshelf or chest of drawers. He would open the drawers in graduated succession and climb them like stairs. When he grew out of his baby booties, his shoes scratched the furniture. Their mother got testy with him at this point. She told him in words he could not yet understand to stop climbing her furniture. One day, she

came back in the house after a particularly dicey phone call with her own mother. She found him sitting on top of the kitchen table. He had knocked over the jar of tulips she had set as a centerpiece, and the wood of the table was staining with moisture. Troy sat tranquilly in the puddle. Their mother yelled at him, “What did I tell you about climbing my furniture?” and other obscenities. She pulled him off the table by his ankles and proceeded to spank him with devoted fierceness that seemed mysterious and frightening to her when she thought about it later. Troy cried. He cried and cried. But then, he stopped.

I am suggesting here that Troy, in his tumor-fevered brain, has made up Daniel as his own son, then punished him, or at least thought about punishing him, in the same way that he himself was punished. It is sad that Troy, were his brain not tumor-fevered, would immediately perceive the irony in this. Many people don't, in similar situations with their [real] children.

“My mother? She died,” Daniel says.

Though Troy feels pretty sure that this tiny Daniel isn't the real Daniel, he is thoroughly convinced by his words. He thinks maybe they are being channeled from the real Daniel. Suddenly certain that Sabrina is dead, Troy dashes the tiny table and chairs to the floor and goes barreling into the kitchen. He searches for anything to look at that does not look like Sabrina and thus hurt his feelings. Everything looks like her, though, even the knives with blades thrust out from the dish drain. A bouquet of blades. Not because she looks like them, really, but because she uses them. Or maybe she does look like them. He begins chopping peppers and tomatoes for a salad. Suddenly, he hears Sabrina singing in the shower, separated from him by only a wall. He breathes in sharply. He has sensed her presence so often lately, but this is the first time in two weeks that he is certain it is the real one. The first since he heard her gallop down the hall away from him. He does not know how this seems any more real than the other times, but it does. Louder? No. Truer? What does that mean? Clearer? Fuck, he thinks. He does not leave the counter and he does not stop chopping vegetables until he hears her coming out of the bedroom toward the kitchen. He does not want to jinx it; he feels that if he moves or pursues her in any

way, the sensation of her presence will die or get less vibrant, as it usually is. But when he hears her footsteps approaching from the hall, he glides soundlessly, knife still in hand, into the pantry and closes the door.

The shuffle of her slippers, her voice humming off-key—he stands listening to her since he cannot see her, panicking that she is going to stop being there. Sabrina cracks eggs into a skillet. Then she walks over to resume chopping the vegetables she started before her shower. She was chopping vegetables when she decided that she was shivering too hard for it to be safe, so she went and got in the hot shower.

She looks around for her knife but can't find it. She is waiting for Troy to come home and fix the heater. He is a wild one, a loose cannon, always getting hurt in bizarre ways. She worries that he will find the knife in a bad way. She suddenly stops humming when she thinks of him reaching his hand down between the stove and the counter to retrieve a marshmallow he dropped down the crack. She thinks of him slicing his finger open on the upturned knife. Troy, in the pantry, in fear and anxiety that she has disappeared because she has stopped humming, releases his grip on the knife. Without a sound, it drops down his boot and cuts a long thin slice into his ankle and foot, which, luckily, he cannot feel. His heart resumes beating when Sabrina resumes humming.

The telephone rings and Troy thinks, Good, I can see if she's really here, because she has to interact with the outside world. If she does, she's real.

Sabrina answers the phone, "Troy?"

Does she know another Troy? Troy panics.

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah. The heater's busted. Nothing. Because. Cooking. Speak up, I can barely hear you. No. So?"

Sabrina has her back turned to the stove. She hears something pop behind her and suddenly, the eggs are on fire.

"Oh, shit!" she says. "No! Fire!"

Troy closes his eyes and tries to send her a message from his mind to get out the fire extinguisher. She just squeals. He cheers her on silently. He thinks, I will not die in a pantry like this. I will not die like this. But I will if I have to. Because I'm not coming out.

But then he says, "Hang up the phone, Sabrina."

So Sabrina hangs up the phone. Troy tumbles out of the pantry, lunges at the cabinet that holds the fire extinguisher. He sprays the fire out, then says, "I've got to go get a part for the heater, I'll be back." Sabrina is confused as to why her brother has been talking to her on the phone from inside the pantry, but she is too surprised by the fire to ask.

I am not suggesting Troy has a split personality or that there are, in fact, two Troys. I am suggesting that his brain is fractured and split in pieces and pushed to the side by the growing tumor so that he can pretend to himself to be doing one thing (in this case, eavesdropping on his wife's phone conversation) while actually doing another (in this case, having a phone conversation with his wife).

Troy walks outside into the snow. You might ask how he could leave now, when he has found Sabrina after having thought he had been looking for her for two weeks. And after being convinced only minutes earlier that she was dead. Then being proven wrong about that. I don't know why, except to say that sometimes people with and without brain tumors abandon situations in which they are confronted with what they want.

When he comes back, he is without the part for the heater. He says things to Sabrina that do not make much sense. I should give you examples. He stares at the salt and pepper shaker for five minutes while he sits at the table. Then he turns and looks Sabrina right in the eye. He says, "Those two brothers—they were bashing bread." Sabrina thinks of how Troy has been weird the last couple of weeks and hopes that he will snap out of it. He has followed a progression to weird and weirder anyway, ever since they turned into teenagers. This seems like the next natural step. She figures that, somehow, in his mind, he knows just what he means. That what he says is accurate and fits the world in a way that the

world really is. She does not even ask for clarification. She just puts a plate of eggs down in front of him.

Troy gets up from the table for a minute, then comes back and sits down.

“What are you doing?” Sabrina asks, when she sees that he is holding a lit flashlight up to his ear.

He pauses for a minute as though he is listening for something, then looks at her and says, “What does it look like I’m doing?”

Sabrina shakes her head and mutters, “I don’t know.”

When Sabrina sits down beside him, he begins chattering strangely. “Just as you are a unique jar of cookies, move the chair with whom your father flirted.” His hands move as though grasping at grapes suspended in the air. Sabrina watches them.

“He threw her headlong into the moon, remember? But I want to share my heart,” he says, and places his hands, with purpose, palms down on the table. “If you expect to die, you will be disappointed. No. Relax, you are going to die,” he says, and looks gently at Sabrina. “Wish you luck with it.”

“Troy?” Sabrina says.

Troy looks away. “His death, you see, was interrupted by a last-minute change in position. Severe intellectual problems don’t respond to the usual remedies—when you die, you wear a body and completely change your story.”

Sabrina suddenly feels that she has missed something she should have noticed. That she has utterly failed her brother. The memory comes to her of the day their mother came inside and, finding Troy on the table in a puddle of tulip water, beat him until he cried and cried. Sabrina remembers that she watched Troy walk out the door after that, into the heat of a steamy July day just after it rained.

“What is the point of death?” Troy enunciates. He looks at the empty chair beside him and continues, “This is the first time I have heard you laugh since Tuesday morning, sir.”

Sabrina can remember it now: She saw a report on television later that evening of a crop dusting plane unloading all of its contents because the pilot thought it was about to crash. She can imagine it now: baby Troy, excited to be outside and away from the madness of what he did not understand, the kind of madness that he would grow up and accept: bewildering jabs at every turn. Undeserved, but also unheeded. He giggled.

“Drive me down the sidewalk. Stalk my hair. Drive me down the social worker,” Troy says, looking at Sabrina and nodding with a look of humorous complicity. Then he looks down and takes back up his reflective tone. “I’m not saying I’m not sad. I am very sad. Then I opened my eyes and it was Wednesday.”

Sabrina can imagine it. Troy giggled when hot steam rose off the pond and off deep, deep puddles everywhere on the ground (the rain had been torrential). Steam, ethereal and wispy, a flexible dancer who lengthened and contracted and lengthened again, then disappeared into air. He giggled as he romped clumsily in the steam, tried to grasp it between his tiny fingers. He giggled when it was so sticky and humid that he could not tell whether the steam dissipated or whether it stuck to his fingers. He thought, to his delight, that maybe it somehow did both.

“I saw him. He took her to the sidewalk and followed his hair. One humiliation after another. False smiles move my chair,” Troy says, and picks up the salt shaker. He salts his iced tea. “Facing the wall almost all the time. Agree that it’s an ugly likeness,” he says, and hands Sabrina the salt shaker. He puts it in her hand and holds it there with his other hand, looking into her eyes. “Agree? The most terrible suffering. I’m flying around inside the sofa. You have to stay dead to understand. It’s infinitely more natural. It is, after all, easier not to breathe than to breathe.” He chuckles.

Sabrina can imagine it. Troy giggled as he squinted up into the burning sun. He did not realize that the temperature outside was 97 degrees. He giggled as he looked up at the airplane, which he pointed to and said, “Bird.” And he giggled as a cloud of pesticide descended. It mingled with the steam rising from the ground, conjuring a hybrid fog that sat poised and very still. It did not dissipate, but was

absorbed into tiny giggling Troy's fingers and his arms and his eyes and ears and nose and mouth, and stole deeper and deeper inside as he breathed.

"Since you were last born, I cried in the bedroom. The Troy controls a different function of your body," Troy says. He looks at Sabrina, pleading. "His lonely rattled noisily on his plate. The Troy. The Troy inside the sofa eats. Someone killed the re-awakening, see? It is happening to someone else, the ability to vibrate faster than before. If you are lucky or not, vomiting feels better. It is happening to someone else often mimics luck." Troy sighs and looks out the window again. "The mountain," he says, pointing, "is severely confused."

Sabrina herself had heard the airplane cross over the house. She heard it stall and stutter. She thought of what it would be like for the plane to crash through the roof, bringing down the light fixture and the ceiling, leaving a gaping hole through which to watch the silent blue sky. When Troy came back inside forty-five minutes later, his eyelashes gleamed with beads of viscous liquid that sparkled clear as diamonds. His hair was matted to his head. His clothes were soaked through and clung to his tiny body.

"Pain spoken easier, more comfortable. I want the opportunity to panic as I step up to the plate. I was born in 1972, 1977, and 1980, hut!" Troy says. Sabrina looks at him and looks away. She can barely stand to look at him, to look at his eyes. They are still earnest, but the exit of her Troy, who made good sense, breaks her insides.

"Hey. When it's your time, you may accept it or not," he says, and strokes her arm gently. It seems to her right now that he has come back, that he is trying to help her. And so she gets up, takes his hand, and tries to coax him up. He looks up at her as she pulls on his arm. He says, "You are a journey the last one hundred and fifty years. I have learned so much. You are a black liquor hustle. Hustle." She keeps pulling on his arm and finally, he gets up. "One humiliation mimics another. The excitement tells us who we are?" He looks at her as though he expects an answer.

"It does?" she asks. He still looks at her. "Excitement?"

"Yeah," he nods. "My chairs, my table."

She says, "Yes." She knows she is taking him to the hospital, but she does not know that she knows. As she struggles to buckle him in the passenger seat of her car (it is backward from buckling herself), he says, "Sabrina, the only thing you do utterly is happen to someone else. The knife is not your body," he says, shaking his head fervently. "It's not. I have been thinking all day about this." She catches his hand, which is tentatively brushing her face and neck. She holds it in both her hands and kisses it. She goes around the car, gets into the driver's seat, and buckles herself in.

Anticipate the Opening Door

There was one little boy who approached me because he had heard that my mat for nap time was exceptional, and he thought that if he had some of my fabric, the fabric I had made my mat out of, he could make an exceptional mat too. This is a mistake that so many make as children, thinking that copying somebody will lead to knowing what the hell you're doing forever. And it's such a sweet and innocent notion, too. It is not yet corrupted by years of guilt in longing for others' rewards. It's just strategy at that point, like the wonder of abstract math.

So the kid (I was a little sweet on him anyway) approached and asked me if he could have some of my fabric. And I said, "No." I didn't offer the explanation that I had already given the rest away. I just said, "No," my voice a haughty lilt. He scuttled away and I called to him after it hit me three seconds later that I could not live in a world so brutal. When I called to him, I said, "I don't have any left!" and smiled with my teeth.

He, though, brave and true lad that he was, lived from second to second and allowed nothing that wasn't genuine to cross his lips or, for all I know, his mind. He glanced almost back to me, uttered not a word, and continued on. I was miserable and tried to catch his eye for the rest of the day. I offered him my banana at lunch. He didn't seem to understand why. He just said, "No thanks."

That was in second grade and at least it made sense. I'm grown up now, and my town is a bewildering place. It is set in a valley between mountains, and there are pockets in these parts where gravity does not work the same because some pockets of air are lower than others. You might begin to float. Last week I saw my love jump off a cliff, or fall or float off a cliff, I don't know which. My love, who, for the last week had not even seemed to know I was alive, who had forgotten about me not because he had amnesia or anything like that but because this is also what happens in this town. I don't know enough about why weird things happen. No one seems to. There is no reason for me to mention it except

to give you a sense of the puzzling nature of things. I have read books about this town and about science but I still can't figure out why things happen, and every time something does, I take it personally. I don't want to take it personally, but I can't help it.

So last week I saw my love, David. I saw him and I waved, I almost waved. I saw him walk right past me. I followed him to the corner and I said, "David, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to sleep," he said. He looked at me and the blues of his eyes churned like weather. I don't think he recognized me. He turned away so I turned away and saw three people walking toward me on the sidewalk, talking to each other. I stepped off into the wet grass to avoid the contact, muddying my shoes but not minding. I got into the car and honked the horn for no reason and then became quite afraid that people may or may not look to see what caused the horn to honk. I wandered off down the street in the car. It meandered on rusty squeaky wheels like a shopping cart, one of whose wheels spins wildly even as the cart maintains a semblance of a straight path. I thought of how much I wanted everything and of how impossible everything seemed. Then I hit a pocket of no gravity and the car lifted off. I could never figure out if this happened to other people, too. Though I often read in farmers' almanacs that it was common in these parts, I had never seen anyone else suffer as I did. I looked around even now and could not see another soul.

The car touched back down. The feeling of settling hard and certain back onto the ground was somehow the confirmation of not getting what I wanted, of how my heart would beat so hard and I would hyperventilate at the thought of David knowing everything that I knew and so much more, of his mind containing mine whole, yet at the edges, where mine did not reach, it remained playful and mysterious with the wisdom that twenty generations had passed to it, the wisdom of not taking itself too seriously, of knowing when to stop and of how not to shoot itself in the foot. I thought of the starry nights that my mind could spend forever nestled within his mind, but then it all came to me that my mind was just alone and cut off from everything in his mind. "That's a weird thing to think," I thought; "Jeez, Alice, what the hell." I made a face out of frustration. Then I realized that no one was watching, so I continued making

the face. “What the hell ever,” I said. “Oh, how I long,” I said. “Oh, how hopeless,” I said. “Oh, how the streets mock me,” I said.

I stopped with the face because I remembered that I had decided one day last week to be slower and to notice what it’s like to be alive from minute to minute without having some kind of self-imposed crisis, and so I did this for an hour but I got bored, really bored. It’s really boring to spend too long pondering what other people are talking about, what other people are thinking. It is also boring to not talk to everyone you see about what exactly is bothering you. To separate internally when you go in public is too difficult—to separate your problems from what you are supposed to be discussing publicly. And anyway, you have not spent any time preparing anything to say publicly. And it’s not, you realize, that you believe that others do this, it’s just that you believe that others are naturally attuned in general to what exists outside of themselves, to the newspaper at least. Say, for instance, that the whole time on the train you are thinking of how your friend told you the other night that you are not adventurous. You have heard that people like bubbly people, so you think that maybe you would have done a lot better to say, “Well, let’s go on an adventure right now, please,” with a bold yet sweet and not overbearing little smile, teasing, instead of giving him a sour look and getting up abruptly from the table and walking out the door. You were still thinking of how you always cry on the way home out of regret when you got off the train and arrived at the doctor’s. And since that friend hasn’t talked to you since, and other friends have just been busy, you ended up making your visit to the doctor into much more of a social call than it ought to have been. Doctors are often friendly by nature, but that does not mean that you should, you can admit now, from the cold stark reality of your floating car, mistake it to mean that they would hang out with you, or that they in any way meant to give you the impression that you would be someone they would be kind to on the street, or buy a drink or offer to share their umbrella with. It especially doesn’t mean that while they check your glands, the glands in your neck, that you should accidentally close your eyes and begin to nuzzle their hand.

I realized that I needed to stop by the grocery store because I was not prepared for the feeling of hunger welling up in me. I decided to buy only fruit and vegetables because if my body was going to mutiny, get sick, I was resolved that it wasn't going to be my fault. I pulled in to the parking lot and got out and was suddenly taken by my unexpected orientation toward the highest mountain peak. It was about two miles away as the crow flies from my eyes right then and all I could do was stare as the wind began to whip around my head. "Something weird's about to happen," I said. A tower blinked on and off at the top of the mountain, though I knew that this was impossible, as there had never been anyone brave enough to climb mountains. Who could have put a tower there? Had someone relied on a pocket of no gravity in order to pick up the tower whole, float or fly up to the top and plant it there? Could you begin to really fly, with direction and poise and speed? How would you train yourself to fly with control and not just float, when the spells came on unplanned and lasted only seconds? I remembered that I had never observed anyone besides myself having these spells anyway. Had I, in some moment, not remembering, floated up and planted that tower there? The tower blinked at me and I blinked back in a moment of animalistic or mechanical mother- or brotherhood.

I walked toward the corner of the store where the doors were. People were straggling in from other directions of the parking lot. They had their scarves and dingy sweatpants wrapped around their aging bodies. I walked up to the door and, approaching, anticipated the strong sudden sideways jerk of the doors. When they did not open, I had a wordless thought that approximated "how?" or "impossible." It didn't help that I panicked. I stepped back because I didn't want anyone to see that I had not, by my sufficiently heavy step, been able to enact the motion that opened the doors. No one noticed my backward steps, no one noticed that I stared in wonder and horror as the doors opened for them. Horror because, in the moment, the possibility, among others, had entered my mind that maybe it was a malfunction on the part of the store's, that maybe they had turned off the door or the battery was dead. That was a small possibility in my mind's collection of possibilities, but still, that possibility was the one that held the most

promise for my continuing to act as a normal citizen without problems, irresolvable problems. But apparently this was not the case.

I walked back toward the car but not in a straight path, because I half-consciously took a trajectory that would arc me back to the door, where I would see, I felt confident, that the door opened for me too. I ended up back there without coming closer in my mind to an explanation or solution, and the door still did not open. My stomach lurched as I stepped to the side and began, for appearances, to inspect the potted plants and the garden swing. I looked over them with appraising eyes, the best appraising eyes I had from watching others appraise, as I glanced back to people walking through the doors. I sat down hard on the swing, trying to keep a neutral face. The idea as I did this was to go now from appearing to appraise the swing to appearing to simply sit on it, waiting lackadaisically for someone to drive around and pick me up. I sighed with my whole body like a spoiled girl who demanded to be picked up this way, all the while glancing furtively at straggler after straggler for whom the door opened.

Finally I decided to leave, to seek the quiet refuge of my apartment, even though I was, I realized, so very hungry with nothing there to eat. I put on an air of exasperation as though my driver were taking too long, so I would just seek him out in the parking lot and get in the car myself. I got up from the swing and, in a crooked path to my car, took a detour to the mats before the automatic doors to see if all had been imagined and that they would, in fact, open. They did not, and I hurried to my car. I looked to the blinking tower, then around at the stragglers who did not see me. I thought of my love who had jumped or fallen off a cliff to what I now realized was his death or at least what mostly seemed like his death, and on the way home I tried very hard not to cry, but I did not succeed.

I lay down on the bed and cried some more, though I did not really understand why. I thought of David asking me a long time ago for fabric with which to make an exceptional mat. I thought of Halloween ten years after that, of an old long tall hallway that lacked electrical wiring, so we walked around it in the daytime and were terrified of it at night. We carried our candles that flickered and threw long and monstrous unidentifiable shadows on the walls, ones that seemed to dance a little too slowly for

how fast the candle was flickering, so that the whole thing seemed like black magic. I thought of David looking at me with a face the color of fresh hay, asking, “Do you want to go this way?” and how I just grabbed his hand to hold myself back from saying, “I would follow you anywhere.”

I got up from the bed crying and went out the door to walk around the neighbors’ houses. I was sad. I was walking and it started to get a little cold and that just made me sadder and then I started thinking about David’s brother and David’s nephew, and before I knew it I was noticing that they didn’t really remind me of David as much as I thought they did and then I thought, Well I wish they did remind me more of David or better yet I wish I knew somebody else who reminded me more of David, and then I just realized that I wished that he who is him was there. I walked back inside and fell on the bed crying and thought about getting up to wash my hands, to take a shower. I thought, this is the first time I’ve washed my hands, the first time I’ve washed my hair, the first load of laundry I’ve done, the first time I’ve flicked this light switch since he fell off that cliff, and something about it—maybe I should not do any of it. Maybe if I don’t do any of it, there is still a chance to bring him back, but once I’ve done it all and gone on like everything is okay, the universe will take its cue from me and continue to carry him farther away.

Maybe it’s not even that, maybe it’s just that I think of all the things I must do as usual and I want to go ahead and get through with those first things so that showering or turning on a light after that will no longer seem like breaking a strange and terrible spell.

I wanted to walk outside and up a mountain in the moonlight but I dared not. I had to lie here and cry while wishing that I were doing anything else. Which was strange, I knew, because I used to love crying. It is sad, so sad, to hate doing something you love because of terrible conditions, because of the terrible condition of your mind and emotions, I thought.

Finally I eased softly off the back deck and went down into the yard and squatted down first to my knees, then down on all fours, then pushed my feet back so that I was belly down on the ground, then buried my face forward into the dirt. This is what I deserve, I thought without trying. A voice explained

that I did not deserve such, but I didn't listen. I didn't understand its language, for someone had screwed up the understandings. You have to listen especially for a language that you will understand. You have to listen only for ideas that you will understand. That is the nature of the universe and it makes those who are watching feel very sad sometimes. Very sad and helpless.

I kept my face buried in the dirt, though, and shortly heard my language and realized a lot of things and could not bear being myself anymore, so I talk like I am someone else watching: She realized that no pockets of no gravity existed, that every grocery store door had always opened for her, that she was not the only one brave enough to climb a mountain, that she hadn't in fact been the one to float the tower up to the mountaintop and plant it there, and that David was dead. David had fallen off a cliff in his normal car and now he was dead. She woke up the next morning with her face still buried in the dirt and every morning thereafter, woke only to see if it were still the case that David was dead.

Dennis and Probably Everyone Else Thinks It's Best if You Don't Live in the Past, Drucilla

Drucilla worked at an insurance company transcribing minutes for the meetings. Everything had to be recorded—every cough, sneeze, and off-color joke. That's not true—she had to be judicious about what to omit, what sounds and what private conversations to allow to trip through her mind without filtering the words through her fingers and into the uniform code of clack clack on the keys. One day at a lunch meeting, her concentration faltered. Her fingers hesitated over the keys. She kept thinking of her hair falling out in clumps. It had never done that, but she couldn't stop imagining it. She pictured her hands lifting it out in tangled knots, even as she looked down at her hands typing. As she imagined the clumps coming out in her hands, she felt a strange invisible line connecting her hands with her head, which she felt as the center, as where she herself was, probably because that's where her eyes and ears and brain were. Could she be thinking with her feet, brain in feet, yet still have this feeling of being located in her head? She didn't know; maybe it only had to do with the eyes. Don't be so silly, she thought, after she realized she had missed an entire joke.

“—and then blamed the whole thing on me!” was all she heard, then peals of laughter. She watched one man, the inside of his mouth with shriveled-up bits of lettuce stuck to the sides like wet discarded pages of a newspaper plastered to the side of the Grand Canyon. Instead of typing, “and then blamed the whole thing on me,” she typed, “shriveled-up bits of lettuce stuck to the sides like wet discarded pages of a newspaper plastered to the side of the Grand Canyon.” She looked at what she had typed, then felt her hands drop to her lap. She coughed wildly, stood up, picked up the whole typewriter, and walked towards the door. Feigning a coughing fit, she waved at the meeting-goers and made indicative gestures toward her throat.

That night, Drucilla had a dream wherein she was typing minutes for an accident that she had seen on the interstate on July 17, 1979, in which a car ran a young man on a motorcycle off the road and

into a road sign. He and the motorcycle had twirled elegantly through the air like pizza dough. He flew, still elegantly, off the motorcycle when it clanged the sign. Then he bounced over the ground as though it were a trampoline. She took minutes for the young man as he lost control, “Oh shit.” She took minutes for the people in cars around him, “Oh shit, look at that.” She looked at the page that read:

“Oh shit.”

“Oh shit, look at that.”

and was unconvinced that anyone could recognize it as that particular accident, so she recorded the context: “Accident that I saw on the interstate on July 17, 1979, in which a car ran a motorcycle off the road and into a road sign.”

Then she recorded her present thoughts: “That was the first time I watched someone die. So far, it has held up as the most dramatic.”

She woke up with a start with this in her mind, which she typed onto a piece of scrap paper:

Two things that must be recorded in addition to recording what is happening right now:

1. All that has already happened, that I have not yet recorded
2. Reflections and digressions that my mind makes while recording what has happened/what is happening

That night after work, Drucilla walked home along the dark street and thought of Bailey, her daughter. She thought of the failures of Bailey and also the successes, and was more overcome emotionally by the successes than the failures. She wondered if this was natural. She wished she had a camera so she could snap a picture of a square of grass that looked especially green. She wanted it. It glowed emerald because of a light that shone from a porch. The effect made her stomach feel as though

held up on stilts, sloshing like the ocean. But weightless, unlike the ocean. She wanted to get closer, but she didn't dare walk into a neighbor's yard. She just kept to her own. Her own body.

As she walked on, she saw a middle-aged man in his yard doing calisthenics in the dark.

"Nice night," he said when she was almost by him.

"Yeah," she said.

"It's dark, how do you see where you're going?" he asked.

"I don't know. How do you see what you're doing?"

"I don't, but I can feel it. Can't you feel what your body is doing?"

She laughed mildly and kept walking.

"I like your shawl," he said. It was a shawl that Bailey had made in home economics class just before Drucilla, Bailey, and Bailey's father had taken a train trip to Washington, DC.

"Thank you." She stopped and looked down at herself.

"I can't really see it. I'm Dennis," he said. "And you are?"

"Drucilla."

"Oh. Two D's," he said.

"No, two L's."

"I mean both our names start with a 'D'."

"Oh. Oh. So what are you doing out here?" she asked.

"Training."

"For what?"

"Marathon."

Drucilla looked at him.

"I'm not actually running in it, I'm just training for it," he said.

"I don't understand."

"I guess I just think it's funny to train for something I don't plan to attempt."

Drucilla was very sad but did not always know it. Her daughter Bailey had drowned in the ocean seven years earlier. For many years after, Drucilla had sat at dinner tables with friends or family eating cake and laughing heartily at jokes she either didn't listen to or didn't understand. She kept looking around and thinking there was someone missing. This did not always end up in a defined feeling of loss, for it sometimes ebbed before she got to the part of understanding who it was. Instead of listening to the chatter, she would listen to sounds from other parts of the house that would tell her whether it was safe for her to travel out of the room and into the next room, on the pretense of fetching a sweater or going to the restroom. She found she did not want others afoot. She wanted everyone contained in one room while she was floating aimlessly around the other rooms.

She slept alone. In her room, in her house, she slept alone. The wind called to her from outside, but usually, she didn't answer. She could tell by the sound when it was one of those days the wind blows the clouds very fast across the sky. Funny that they don't much change shape or become garbled, she thought; they're just like a film strip slipping by across the blue. The wind kicks up then dies down, it kicks up then dies down. She imagined that someone was angry, and this was the reason for it. Could weather, could wind, really be the result of someone's anger? Sure, she thought. It's about as likely as anything else. One day, she was lying in bed and thinking of how she was not afraid of anything, not really. Then something creaked and she was terrified. She said, "What was that?"

"Nothing, don't be silly."

"Who said that?"

"Are you afraid? I thought you said you were not afraid of anything."

Drucilla didn't say anything.

"You can't say something that's not true and then regret saying it," the voice said.

"I beg to differ," she said.

But she was not usually afraid. She was not afraid of dead things, dead people, the possibility of ghosts, or the death of her own self. Scary things to most people. They cheered her right up sometimes. That's not true either. They just seemed unspeakably sad, mostly. Which was why they weren't scary, which was why she woke up, looked into the sun, and said, "Why?"

Dennis was out in his yard every night Drucilla walked home after that. They always stopped to talk. One day, Dennis invited Drucilla on a real walk. So, Dennis and Drucilla were walking in the park in the blinding sun, and they had an awkward conversation about the past. The sun in her eyes made Drucilla unable to see very well, so she couldn't look directly into Dennis's face or into anyone's face who was passing by. This made her want to tell things she didn't normally tell, so she told him that her daughter Bailey had drowned in the ocean. She did not seem to want to elaborate, though, which Dennis both understood and was sad about. She also told him that, following Bailey's death, she and Bailey's father had gotten divorced. She did not seem to want to elaborate on that either, which Dennis both understood and silently resented. After this conversation that seemed reminiscent of a confession, in a setting that may have seemed reminiscent of a torture chamber because of the blinding hot sun, Dennis had gotten into the groove of psychological discomfort. He told Drucilla about his own experiences with divorce and death. For him, though, death had visited only as close as a cousin. For Drucilla's sake and in the name of empathy, he almost regretted this.

Drucilla was walking with Dennis many days later. Dennis said, "I'll be right back," and peeled off to the right into a building, the sign on the door of which read "Forbidden." Drucilla stood to the side and began to wait. She thought after a minute that she was really waiting. After five minutes, she knew that what she had been doing four minutes before was merely gearing up to wait. Now, she was really waiting. She waited at least three more minutes before she stomped her foot. The first outward sign of frustration, and it had escaped her before she knew it. She looked down and smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt. She began to mouth Dennis's name until, finally, it came out as a whisper. She clamped her hand over her mouth and felt a thrill come over her body like wind over wheat.

“Dennis,” she whispered. “Dennis,” she said with her voice. She looked into the doorway, the darkness of the turning corridor. What was he doing in there? Was she going to have to go in after him? “Dennis?”

No answer.

Well, this is absurd, she thought. There’s nowhere else for him to go.

“Come in here,” he suddenly said.

“No, I’m out here.”

“Yes. So come in here.”

“Why don’t you come out here?” she asked.

“Because I’m in here.”

“Oh,” she said, and shook her head at having accepted that. When she walked inside and turned the corner, he kissed her. When he stopped, she said, “I wish I could just have fun and that’s it.”

“Kissing is fun,” he said.

“Yeah. Sometimes it seems like kissing is all that’s fun.”

“I just thought of how fortunate I am to be having fun. Most people don’t, especially when they get old. They can’t even think of anybody they’d like to kiss, much less anyone feasible.”

“Oh my God. People are sad,” she said.

“Yeah. They’re beautiful and wonderful and strange, too, though,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“What?” he said.

“Don’t say that to me as though I don’t know it. It makes me so angry when you say things like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Like that. You tell it like you’re telling me something I don’t know. Something that’s over my head, that I don’t have a hope of understanding. Something that I haven’t even considered, but that you

see every day, all around, that allows you to fall in love and that allows others to fall in love with you. That I simply cannot see. I see beauty. I see wonder and strangeness. I see it all.”

Dennis laughed. “You’re so weird, Drucilla. Not five minutes ago, I saw you shyly mouth my name to yourself seventeen times like an autistic child, and now you find it in yourself to be so bold.”

“You were watching me?”

Dennis laughed again.

“Take me home.”

Sometimes Drucilla remembered a conversation she had had with Bailey and sat at her typewriter to type it. One day she typed this:

“How’s Derek?”

“He’s—” Bailey said, “well okay, late last night I was pretending to be asleep in his bed. I hate doing that. Don’t ever do that. Your clothes get all bunched up and you smear makeup all over your face and the pillows.”

[Laughter]

“Plus,” Bailey continued, “when I’m pretending to be asleep but really waiting for him to come to bed, I’m either waiting to see whether he’s going to come in there at all or how long he’s going to take or pretending to be drunker than I am so that maybe when he does get in there, it’ll seem more natural and excusable for me to flirt and act like a slut. Ma are you listening?”

“Your mom isn’t listening.”

“Sometimes I’m not even waiting for him, I’m just resting for as long as I can before I have to attempt to make any decisions, which usually end up being whether and when I should drive. I can never anticipate that that’s going to be the decision I have to make, though, and usually end up driving way too soon,” Bailey said.

“Oh Bailey, so full of life,” Drucilla cried.

“Or either I’m anticipating having to pretend I’m not as drunk as I am. That happens when I get mad at him for not being there quicker, and what is he doing out there? Who is he on the phone with? Oh no, someone else he knows is having a crisis? That’s too bad, get in here now,” Bailey said.

“Brad does that, too. You know what you have to do then: Just get up and walk right out of the house like you’re not coming back.”

Drucilla realized after she typed this that she had, in fact, heard this by eavesdropping on Bailey’s phone conversation. Her exclamation of “Oh Bailey, so full of life,” was not remembered but interjected from now.

Thinking of all the meaningless minutes she had taken for insurance company meetings, it suddenly occurred to Drucilla that she could take minutes for things that meant something to her, and that this could be a way for her to feel better. She could relive everything that she had lived before; she could sit at her typewriter and type everything she had ever said or heard. That night, she had a dream about it. In the dream, she came into a room and saw herself from behind. She was sitting at a desk before a typewriter, typing, with a sign over her head that read January 24, 2005. She knew as she watched herself typing that she was typing the conversation she had had with her friend Mary Jo on January 24, 2005, about her own divorce, which had just been finalized:

“You’ll meet somebody new. You’ll be fine,” Mary Jo said.

“It’s hard enough to love someone you know. It’s even harder to trust that you could love someone you don’t know,” Drucilla said.

“Yeah. I guess it can be.”

“I hate that I still love him.”

“It’s understandable. I think we’re all low on gratitude sometimes, though,” said Mary Jo, Drucilla’s staggeringly optimistic friend.

“Gratitude?”

“Yeah. Sometimes, even if something doesn’t work out—and God knows nothing ever works out—sometimes I’m just thankful that someone exists who I love, who I can feel this way about.”

Drucilla remembers hating Mary Jo right then and also admiring her. This hideous, secret brew of feelings drove her down further, because she could not manage to feel better because of what Mary Jo had suggested.

Drucilla woke up and didn’t move but cried a little. She tried to pay strict attention to how the sheets felt on her skin. She moved her hand up just a little so she could twirl a finger around the spiraling iron decorating her headboard. She opened her eyes, closed them back, and prayed to the ceiling, “Please let me remember something from my past that comforts me.”

When she finally got up three hours later, she had resolved to make a project out of this. She rifled through things until she found the piece of scrap paper she had typed about the two things that must be recorded in addition to recording what is happening right now. She read it over twice, then wrote this, which she titled “The Minutefesto” (she was a terrible sucker for puns):

“It is not enough just to listen or to look, you have to mingle listening and looking with memory. Then, you have to record it. Like taking minutes. That’s all you have to do. For one half of your life, you go about experiencing things, and for the other half, you come back inside and record it. You have to record it, because experience without reflection is meaningless. That is not to say that I have artistic aspirations. It is just like recording the minutes. Word for word. No embellishing. But then, the question arises of what you are experiencing when you are typing something that has already happened—at some point, you are going to be typing about what it’s like to be sitting down typing something. Well—that will only

happen if you record at a faster-than-one-to-one time ratio. If you start recording when you're fifty, for instance, and die when you're a hundred, if you record at a one-to-one time ratio, you will only be able to cover your life from ages zero to fifty, so what of the ages fifty to a hundred, when you were experiencing it all for a second time through the recording of it? The only option, in order to catch up with yourself in the first place, is to give yourself one minute to record every two minutes you have experienced. Even then, you will only just break even with the recording of what happened, to say nothing of what you thought of what happened. What of the echoes, the déjà vus, the strange reminiscences that your mind tries to make but, confined by time, must curtail? So then, maybe the rule becomes to give yourself one-half of the minute to record every two minutes that you experience, and use the other half-minute to record reflections and natural digressions of the mind. This will give you one-fourth of a minute to record what happens over the duration of the present minute, one-fourth of a minute as a make-up to record what happened over the duration of a minute from the past during which you were not recording, and one-half of a minute to record reflection and digressions that result from either or both the present and past minute you have just recorded. The mind can do this; it works much faster than time does."

Drucilla didn't see Dennis until twelve days later. He called many times, got no answer, then came over and knocked on the door. He went away and came back, went away and came back. He was about to knock on the twelfth day when she opened the door with a bag of garbage in her hand.

"Hey," he said.

She looked up at him, surprised.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I've just been in here working."

"On what? What about your job?"

"Oh, that's not important. I just need to—I don't have time to explain," she said, and tried to move past him.

“Just do it fast. Try.”

“I’m just—I’m trying to record things.”

“Things? What things?”

“Everything,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Oh.”

“Well, it’s harder than it sounds,” she said.

“It sounds hard enough.”

“I mean—you begin to have to record even aborted thoughts,” she said.

“Aborted thoughts?”

Drucilla shook her head and tried to move past him again. “I don’t have time.”

“Wait. Wait, you started talking. That means you want to. Tell me what you mean by ‘recording aborted thoughts.’”

She looked at him and sighed.

“Come on,” he said. “I’m worried about you.”

“Okay. I mean thoughts that you can’t finish, like the one I had while ago about how I think I remember that, from the ages of fourteen to sixteen, I believed in God. And that this is a funny thing to remember because of the idea that something like that can turn on and then turn off within someone, and no one would know if she didn’t talk about it. Usually, you hear people proclaiming that they’ve found religion or that they’ve lost religion, but most people, I think, just go about with private conversions and reversions and all sorts of religious hopes and disappointments that they are embarrassed of because they either momentarily believed something in spite of themselves or momentarily disbelieved something in spite of themselves. So they don’t share it.”

“Okay—I understood that. And I agree. What was so hard about that?”

“Well, that’s not all. All of that reminded me then of how seductive religion can be. For instance, say you tried to live in such a way that you could have a good opinion of yourself, tried to be unselfish with others and true to yourself, too, so that when you thought of the phrase ‘human dignity,’ you could think of treating everyone with respect, but also, equally important, you could expect to be treated with respect in return. And this is just how you went along living and thinking of the nature of things. But what if you found out one day that it’s just not true that you are, and everyone is, worthy of being treated with dignity and respect. That nothing that you do makes you deserving of dignity and respect, because nobody deserves dignity or respect, even if they try really hard to be good. And the idea of God in that situation is comforting. Rather than having nothing to turn to to get a grip, you turn to God. And I want to record this thought, but I don’t feel capable of recording it, because there is something I can’t quite get, something very hard to explain, about the notions of dignity and respect, and about the reason why everyone expects for it to work in a give-and-take kind of way, that makes it nearly impossible to convey all of what it would mean to suddenly find out that no one deserves dignity or respect, no matter what. So then I want nothing more than to stop thinking about it. But, first, I have to record my unfinished version of it and record why I couldn’t finish it, which is that I felt inadequate and incapable of recording it completely and faithfully. By that time, I am fed up and exhausted and feel as though this record is going to be useless, because, not only is no one going to feel the pure experience of moral fear that I was trying to record, they’re also not going to understand or appreciate my attempt to explain my frustration at being unable to capture it. So, I have thoughts of a camera, of—can I take a picture of what I am thinking? Can I instead record it with a camera and have a photo album instead of a typed sheet of paper?”

Dennis stared at her.

“No?” she asked. “So then I begin to have dreams of tossing the whole typewriter into the clean water of a dark pool. I dream for the gods to discard my mind, wherever it exists, for them to root it out and take it to the metaphysical graveyard that vanishes as soon as you walk in the gate, and everyone

breathes a huge sigh of relief. That is what I need, a metaphysical graveyard. I need to rest. Oh, how I need to rest. It's become so exhausting that I've holed myself up in my apartment and hate every stray noise that comes from the outside, because it starts me off thinking about something else. Blindfolds, exercises to clear my mind so that I won't have dreams so that I won't have to record them when I wake up. I ignore knocks on the door. I know you knocked on the door. Please, Dennis. You are nice but I can't deal with the stimulation."

"Stimulation?"

"Yes. How am I supposed to record everything you say and do, along with what I am thinking of everything you say and do, along with whatever side glances I am giving to the images and naughty thoughts that spring up in my mind, that seem completely separate from whatever you were saying or doing. How can I then try to record an explanation of the inexplicable connection those naughty thoughts in my mind have to whatever you were saying or doing? If I were to remember you talking about Emerson the other night, for instance, I would remember how I was thinking I should mention that my favorite image of Emerson's is the one about how no man can violate his nature because all the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being, as the inequalities of the Andes and Himmaleh are insignificant in the curve of the sphere. I would remember thinking about how I wanted to mention that to you when you stopped talking but then I'd remember suddenly becoming aware that my legs were crossed, which had put a sexy pressure on my parts, and that I looked into your eyes as you said, "Emerson is most a weirdo when he refers to the 'nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner'," then you laughed and I saw the boy you used to be, as he smiled tautly behind your wrinkles. Suddenly, I was thinking of myself, sitting cross-legged on top of your dinner table while you ate off it. That's it, nothing more erotic than that, but the point is that—how am I supposed to record all that? Which took place over the course of maybe two minutes, which means that I can give it only thirty seconds of time to record it all and then maybe thirty more seconds to record what I thought of during the time I was recording it, during which, maybe I could not help but for things to progress to something sexier than my simply

sitting on top of your dinner table. But why? How am I to have time to analyze why my thoughts just get sexier and sexier, plus have time to record them? Do you see what I am saying? It's so stressful. I need to sit in the dark and pray earnestly that no thoughts occur to me rather than upset myself so that I overstep my time boundaries and then end up having to record a whole year's worth of happenings from the 1980's in only a day. It's impossible. I'm going to slip!"

"Are you on drugs?"

Drucilla tried to push him out the door.

"Wait, wait. Who on earth told you that you have to record everything?" he asked.

"A dream."

"A dream?"

"It was a god, in a dream," she said.

"A god."

"A goddess? Don't look at me like that. It's not as if I'm so weak as to do what gods tell me to do. A dream just showed me what I was already starting to do."

"Why don't you just stop doing it?"

"That's a thought, I'll just stop," she said and slammed the door in Dennis's face. Then, she opened it and said, "Let's just be friends," and slammed it again. Then, she opened it and kissed him full on the mouth, grunted and shook her head, and slammed it again.

She opened it back up and said, "You know, you're not better than me. You get yourself all ready to do things and then don't do them."

"I told you, I do that because it's funny. At least I don't involve myself in weird projects wherein I tell everyone I spend half my time recording the present and half my time recording the past, but really, I just want to spend all my time recording the past."

"It's not funny," she said.

"Yes, it is."

“And why would you even say that? You think I’m stuck in the past? Have I given you some reason to think that?” she asked.

“You just said you had some kind of panic attack at the thought of having only one day to record a year from the ‘80s. Who gives a shit about the ‘80s?”

“Well. I’m glad you understand me. I’m glad we understand each other so well,” she said and tried to shut the door.

Pushing it back, he said, “I’m trying to help you.”

“Oh you are?”

“I can’t help you, you are unhelpable,” he said.

“You mean helpless?”

“No, helpless means that you can’t help yourself. You’re capable of helping yourself.”

“Of course I am,” she said.

“Then why won’t you?”

She squirmed and tried to push the door shut.

“Stop,” he said, pushing the door open and drawing his face closer to hers. “Answer the question.”

“Because I hate myself?”

“I don’t want to hear that. It hurts me to hear that.”

“Well, it’s not true. I surely don’t hate myself as much as I hate everyone else,” she said. “How about that?”

“That’s—“ he paused and looked up at the sky, and she slammed the door, “better, I guess.”

Drucilla sat down at her desk and glowered. She looked at the typewriter. She thought of Dennis, of the notebook he carried around with him. She thought of how she wanted to know what he wrote in that notebook; she thought of herself asking him.

“Please Dennis, can I see that?” she could see herself saying, draped over his legs as he sat on a park bench. He would surrender it, but she found that in her stomach right now she did not want to see. She did not want to think of having later to record, word for word, everything that he had written there and also her experience with it, what she had thought in response to things he had written. It was just too exhausting. So, it was in this way that she put down her curiosity.

It was more than that, though. She didn’t want to invade him that way, even if he would grudgingly allow it. That was Dennis’s, she thought. That was Dennis’s notebook, and those were his thoughts that he wrote in there. Whatever his reason to carry it around was his own reason, born from the fertile plains of his own mind. She wanted it to stay that way. She wanted it to be his, because everyone ought to have things that are only his. That’s what makes a person himself and, finally, she thought, what makes another person want him. She wanted him. She looked at the clock, picked up the phone, and stared at it. She put it back down and stared at it and picked it up again and stared at it until, finally, she dialed his number.

