GHOSTS AND LOVERS

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*Ghosts and Lovers* is a collection of short stories told from the points-of-view of four related characters. Travis is a bisexual restaurant owner who fears commitment and longs for the idealistic version of love that he remembers from his past. Ezra, his boyfriend, is an artist struggling to accept the inherent imperfections of life. Travis’s ex-girlfriend, Beth, attempts to come to terms with the life that she has chosen for herself. Her husband, Richard, deals with feelings of helplessness as he watches the events of his life unfold before him. By depicting the events of the story from multiple perspectives, the collection attempts to create a more objective view of reality than is ordinarily possible in fiction. An introductory preface examines the role of unreliable narrators and how reality is presented in fiction.
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I’ve always taken to heart the advice to “write what you know.” Many of my stories deal with things that I’ve gone through, or depict characters that are portraits of myself or people I’ve met. But the characters in my collection *Ghosts and Lovers* are not based on my own life. None of these characters are thinly veiled versions of myself. The events that they go through are based completely on my imagination, and I’ve never found myself in any of the situations I write about here. I don’t really know what it is like to be a gay man or a doctor or a woman who can’t conceive a child. But at the same time, I do feel that I am writing what I know. In some ways, this collection is the story of my life and the lives of everyone I know.

I have spent the last two years in the pursuit of my graduate degree in creative writing, a journey that has taught me more about myself than any other journey I’ve undertaken before. I’ve had my high and my low points, times when I knew I would be a success and others when I doubted my abilities. But through it all, I’ve learned a great deal about who I am and what it means to be a writer. When I say that *Ghosts and Lovers* is my own story, I refer to the underlying theme of becoming who you want to be and moving past the obstacles life throws at you. All of my characters struggle – I think it’s an inherent quality of life, this struggle – but all of them eventually come out on top. They grow and learn and
find ways of turning their confusing lives into happiness, and in that way, their stories are also my own. I’ll never know what it’s like to be those characters I write about, but I know what it is to go through that struggle because it’s something that I do everyday, something that I watch my friends and family do, something that we all must do at some point in our lives. The details may be changed, but the struggle is always the same.

So I am writing what I know. I’m writing what everyone knows at some level, and it’s on this level that I attempt to appeal to my readers. I know that most of my readers probably won’t be in my characters’ exact shoes either – these stories are meant to appeal to more than just gay men and doctors and women who can’t conceive. My challenge to myself has been to create a set of characters that people can relate to. I hope that every reader will find something of himself in these characters.

Theoretical Considerations

The stories in Ghosts and Lovers are, to some extent, a departure from my normal mode in writing. I generally seek to convey some sort of idea about the nature of life through my stories. This is one of my main goals in these stories – I explore, for example, the meaning of commitment and fidelity in relationships, the idea that we have only one true love, and the significance of motherhood in women’s lives. These are all important themes that have guided and informed my work with these stories. The things that I write about haven’t
really changed, but the way that I write about them has. This departure that I speak of is my newly developed focus on the technical aspects of writing.

Up until the last year or two, I have viewed my writing primarily as a form of art. I crafted my stories based on an innate sense of what seemed “right” or aesthetically pleasing. I chose words that seemed to best fit the story without really considering why that word fit more than any other. I let my scenes be guided by my ideas about what seemed logical and true to life. This instinctual mode of writing is one that has served me well up until this point, and I think the best writers do have a special intuition about their writing, something that guides them, beyond logic and reason. It is the artistic in writing that makes a work truly great, the quality that makes certain pieces beautiful while others seem bland and boring.

I still believe this is true of literature, but the pursuit of my graduate degree has led me to explore some more theoretical and technical approaches to my writing. My studies of literary criticism, for example, have allowed me to see the process of writing from the other side. As a writer, I am a creator of meaning, whereas when I take the role of critic, it is my job to unravel the web of symbols that the author has woven. Through this unraveling, I have seen new ways to weaving webs of my own. When I view a text as a work of art, I feel compelled to view it as a whole, without regard for the individual pieces that make it up. But when I think of the text as a technical structure made up of elements like narrator, symbols, and carefully chosen language, I am better able to look at it
critically and see how these elements combine to make an effective whole. Reading in this way has helped me learn to write in this way.

The Unreliable-Reliable Narrator

Of particular interest to me are different types of narrators. I don’t mean just first- and third-person narrators – these are very simplistic categories that barely scratch the surface of all that narrators can do, and in my view, there is very little difference between first- and third-person narrators. What I’m referring to is the different ways that narrators interact with their own fictional world and act as mediators for their readers. F.K. Stanzel describes narrators, both first- and third-person, as mediators “between the author and the reader and between the story and the reader” (13). The difference between a first- and third-person narrator, in his view, is that a first-person narrator “belongs totally to the fictional realm of the characters of the novel” (4) whereas the third-person narrator “exists on a different level of being from that of the characters” (5). Regardless of their orientation to the fictional world, all narrators are charged with the task of creating that fictional world for the reader.

This idea of narrator as mediator becomes even more interesting when we consider the possibility of unreliable narrators. Most readers can recall reading a text that made them question the reliability of the narrator for some reason. From the classical texts of Socrates to Vladimir Nabakov’s Lolita, the unreliable narrator appears in works of fiction from many different times and places. We
recognize the insane, the deluded, and the very young or old as typical unreliable narrators who cannot give readers a completely accurate version of the story they are narrating. But I would argue that all narrators, both first- and third-person, are unreliable to some extent. Some narrators, while appearing to be reliable, are actually feeding their readers false or incomplete information. I term this type of narrator an “unreliable-reliable narrator.”

Wayne Booth did not coin the term “unreliable narrator” until the 1960’s, but the idea of a narrator who could not be believed is certainly not a new one. Unreliable narration can be found even as far back as ancient literature: Christopher Planeaux argues that Socrates is an unreliable narrator in *Lysis*, presenting his readers with “a series of anomalies” that “might seem hardly worth our notice, but taken together they become intriguing” (60). The unreliable narrator became even more popular toward the turn of the twentieth century as fiction began to focus more on individual experience and “reality was increasingly located in the private, subjective consciousness of individual selves, unable to communicate the fullness of their experience to others” (Lodge 42). This inability to communicate subjective, individual experience creates the possibility for the unreliable narrator who cannot convey the reality of his fictional world. When the focus of fiction is placed upon individual experience, the possibility for unreliability is increased because of the difficulties that are inherent in presenting one’s personal thoughts and experiences.

The term “unreliable narrator” is generally used to describe a first-person
narrator that is blatantly untrustworthy. Perhaps the narrator is crazy, as in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart,” or mentally retarded, like Benjy in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. For whatever reason, the typical unreliable narrator is someone whose narration cannot be taken at face value. The reader begins to question the narrator because of textual clues and “concludes that the narrator’s words are incongruous or incomplete” (Olsen 95).

But I extend the definition of unreliability to include any narrator who presents a flawed, biased, or otherwise inaccurate view of his fictional world. Even the most convincing first-person narrators are unreliable to some extent because of the impossibility of presenting a totally unbiased, unmediated view of reality. In fact, I would argue that even third-person narrators, both limited and omniscient, display some degree of unreliability because they too are no more than human voices that are necessarily grounded in some time, place, and culture that will influence the narration. By this categorization, almost all narrators would be part of the unreliable-reliable narrator grouping.

Booth’s original definition of unreliability supports such an expansion because it encompasses more than just the patently unbelievable characters that critics have come to associate with the term. Unreliability, he says, is not “ordinarily a matter of lying, although deliberately deceptive narrators have been a major resource of some modern novelists….it is most often a matter of…inconscience; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him” (159). Booth defines a reliable narrator as
one who “speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms)” (158). In other words, a narrator is unreliable when his narration is at odds with the reality of his fictional world.

All that we as readers know about the fictional world is delivered to us through the filter of our narrator, who “narrates, records, informs, writes letters, includes documents, cites reliable informants, refers to his own narration, addresses the reader, comments on that which has been narrated” (Stanzel 144) and, in so doing, builds the fictional world. The problem is that the narrator “conveys to us a picture of the world as he experiences it, not as it really is” (Stanzel 11). Stanzel views this problem as one that is physically determined – he considers unreliability a question of the narrator’s position in the fictional world, one that forces him into a “subjective and hence only conditionally valid view of the narrated events” (89).

Like people in the real world, fictional characters are shaped by their experiences, biases, and prior knowledge. Suppose a married couple has a fight because the husband always forgets to take out the garbage. The wife might justify her anger by citing the constant prodding that is necessary to get her husband to help out in the house and describing the husband’s generally unappreciative attitude toward all the work she does in the home. The husband, on the other hand, might speak of how he is too exhausted to take out the trash when he returns home from the eighteen-hour days he must work in order to finance his wife’s expensive gambling habits. Neither of the narratives would
necessarily be false; both the husband and wife could present facts that would support their particular presentation of the situation, and we could not say that either of them was lying. Both, however, would be unreliable in their neglect of certain aspects of the reality of that fictional world. The reader would certainly be biased toward the narrating character based on the inclusions and omissions of each representation.

These two narrators would probably not be regarded as unreliable in the traditional sense. None of the textual signals that readers typically look for, such as “direct warnings,” “conflicts between fictional facts,” or “discrepancies between the values asserted in the work and those of the author in other contexts” (Olsen 95) would prompt the reader to consider unreliability, nor would there necessarily be any evidence of a difference in values from those of the implied author, as Booth speaks of in his model for unreliability. Yet there is no doubt that these two characters, like all narrators, are presenting an incomplete and biased view of reality.

Narrators are also forced into unreliability by the nature of fiction writing. It’s simply impossible to present the fictional world in its entirety; the scope of such a work would be daunting to say the least. It becomes necessary for a narrator to choose some details to leave out, some to highlight. Some characters will be emphasized, while others will be reduced to minor roles or ignored entirely. But these choices are guided by the narrator’s experiences and intended purpose, and thus, the resulting fiction is rendered unreliable. No
narrator can present a complete and unbiased view of his fictional world as it truly is; therefore, no narrator can be considered totally reliable.

There are plenty of examples of unreliable first-person characters. The narrator of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” admits that “TRUE! nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why WILL you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses, not destroyed, not dulled them” (303). These first lines prepare the reader to question the story that this narrator will relate, since he has admitted to his disease. The unreliability of this narrator is obvious. But through close examination of almost any first-person story, the biases and unreliability of the narrator will become evident.

The narrator in Raymond Carver’s story “Fat” seems, on the surface, to be fairly reliable. She relates, in minute detail, the story of a very fat man coming to eat in her restaurant. She is able to recall each item the man ate, how much bread and butter she brought him, and what co-workers had to say about him. But closer examination of the narrator reveals a layer beneath the surface that she does not readily expose to her readers. She never says outright that she is dissatisfied with her boyfriend Rudy or her friend Rita, but there is an implication of discontent in her relationships. This is partly evident through her choice of words in describing her friends. Rudy is portrayed as thoughtless and insensitive; the words “he just laughs” (italics mine) are used twice in the story (68), painting a picture of a man who takes nothing seriously and laughs at the misfortunes of others. The use of the word “just” is especially telling – it implies
that Rudy *should* have done something else, but instead he “just laughs.” The narration of the conversation between Rudy and the narrator would no doubt be different if Rudy had told it. The narrator’s dissatisfaction with her relationships and life in general colors her views and makes her an unreliable narrator that cannot present to us a view of the fictional world as it truly is.

It is not only first-person, but also third-person narrators that are subject to this type of unreliability, since “even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes” (Booth 151). This implied author is a narrator of sorts, one who, like all other narrators, is biased according to his predispositions and past. And, like all other narrators, the third-person narrator’s main function is that of a mediator, providing a connection between the world of the fiction and the world of the real. Stanzel notes that,

> while the authorial narrator and the first-person narrator can be differentiated according to their position in regard to the represented world of the characters, they cannot be distinguished according to their relationship to the apparatus of narrative transmission…They originate in that primal motivation of all narration, to make the fictional world appear as reality. (17)

In other words, although first- and third-person narrators function in different ways, they still play by the same rules, and with the same goals in mind.

The primary difference between a first- and third-person narrator is not the
presence of the first person “I,” “but rather the location of the designated person within or outside the fictional world of the characters of a novel or a story” (Stanzel 48). The third-person narrator, operating from a position outside the fictional world of his characters, will not necessarily be subject to the same limitations that a first-person narrator is. The third-person narrator is often privy to the knowledge of more than just one character, so he is able to present more than just his own thoughts. A third-person narrator of our husband and wife story, for example, would be able to present the arguments of both the husband and the wife, but this still does not mean that his presentation would be fair or unbiased. This third-person narrator, like all other narrators, would still be functioning under the biases that are inherent in his society and culture.

The idea that the authorial third-person was actually a fictional character was not actually considered until shortly before Booth wrote The Rhetoric of Fiction. It was not until the 1950s that critics began to acknowledge that “the first person narrator and the authorial third-person narrator were both fictional teller-characters and consequently similar in a very decisive point” (Stanzel 81). But Booth certainly does not exclude the possibility of an unreliable third-person narrator; his definition of unreliability is certainly one that could extend to third-person narrators of varying levels of omniscience.

The unreliable-reliable third-person narrator can be found in both limited and omniscient narrators. Since the third-person limited is often very similar to the first-person, with the “I” changed to “he” or “she,” it’s not hard to see how this
idea of unreliability would extend to the third-person limited point of view. For example, the narrator in Mary Gaitskill’s “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” is a third-person limited narrator that is concerned with the thoughts and experiences of Stew, the father of a daughter that he views as troubled. He describes his daughter Kitty as “sullen” and “morbid” (14) and is clearly disturbed and confused by her lesbianism. The main drama of the story is the publication of Kitty’s article about her relationship with her father in *Self* magazine. Stew buys a copy of the magazine and reads the article, but he only presents certain key phrases to the reader: “A few phrases stood out clearly: ‘…my father may love me but he doesn’t love the way I live.’ ‘…even more complicated because I’m gay.’ ‘…because it still hurts me’” (19). The article is presented to us through Stew’s eyes, and he may be reading it entirely out of context because of his anger with Kitty. Since we are never allowed the opportunity to read the article in its entirety, without the filter of an unreliable third-person narrator, we cannot make a valid judgment about Kitty for ourselves.

This type of unreliability is not difficult to see in third-person limited narrators, who are often just first-person narrators in disguise. But when an omniscient narrator is telling the story, it becomes more difficult to see how the narration could be biased. Many omniscient narrators tell their story with a very even hand, not presenting a bias to any one character over another. They do not necessarily invite readers to believe that one character is evil while another is good by presenting these characters in a positive or negative light (although this
is sometimes the case). But I would argue that even third-person omniscient narrators are unreliable reliable narrators because of the biases that are inherent in them, based on the culture from which they arise.

A good example of this type of narration would be Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter.” There are numerous examples throughout the text of passages and phrases that are informed by the implied narrator’s cultural and societal background – that of Puritan New England. The narrator often speaks of sin, good, and evil, terms that we would expect to hear from someone steeped in the moralistic society of the Puritans. Hawthorne also uses language that invites us to sympathize with Hester Prynne while viewing the Puritan society as judgmental and overly condemnatory. For example:

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne (1363).
The words “sinless,” “deepest sin,” and “sacred quality” all speak of the narrator’s Puritanical background, making this narrator unreliable in the sense that he is influenced by his cultural background.

The Implications of Unreliability

So if all narrators are unreliable, what does this mean for writers? Should we abandon our attempts at creating honest, believable characters if they are, in the end, just as undependable as their unreliable counterparts? Is there no possibility for truth in writing if all characters are telling lies or half-truths? On the contrary: the very unreliable nature of all narrators is what makes them most intriguing and powerful.

Typical unreliable narrators are often “fringe element” characters – those who are insane, mentally retarded, or otherwise different from what we normally experience in life. By looking at the world through these characters’ eyes, we are able to see society, culture, and life through a new lens. The use of an unreliable narrator of this sort “is precisely the complete shift of the point of view into an outsider which produces estrangement by causing the reader to see a reality which is familiar to him with entirely ‘other’ eyes” (Stanzel 10).

It’s not just typically unreliable narrators that allow us to view the world in these new and different ways; unreliable-reliable narrators provide us with the opportunity to explore the world through a different set of eyes. The inherent unreliability of fiction makes narrative more significant, considering it is a way to
bridge the “gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter” (Lodge 155). By examining how narrators are unreliable and unaware of certain aspects of their own world, we are invited to see how our own attitudes and biases affect our view of reality. Stanzel writes that the most important function that mediacy in narrative carries is “to reveal the biased nature of our experience of reality” (11). Fiction can entertain and inform, but at its most powerful, it can also change the way we see our world. One of the most obvious – and compelling – ways to do this is to force readers to see through the eyes of someone who is not like them, someone who may not always be telling the truth or seeing the world for what it is.

In *Ghosts and Lovers*, I use four different first-person narrators. We hear many of the stories from one character, only to hear them retold again from another characters’ point of view. By presenting these different points of view, I am showing readers how each narrator is unreliable in particular, subtle ways. None of these four characters is insane or otherwise untrustworthy, but they are all blinded by certain biases that they hold. Often, they don’t want to admit certain things to themselves, so the stories they tell to the reader are actually stories they are telling to themselves in order to create their world as they wish it was rather than as it really is. There are also times when the narrators simply cannot see the other person’s side of the experience. Because reality is subjective, the stories that are told, while they describe the same events, are actually drastically different.
For example, the last two stories deal with Beth and Travis’s reunion after several years of being apart. While the events that occur in the story are largely the same, right down to the dialogue that is reported, there is a very different effect on both of these characters. Travis, who is initially bothered by the fact that he’s still hung up on Beth, comes away from the experience feeling dissatisfied, realizing that she isn’t the same person he used to know and that “I’d just fucked a woman that I didn’t know at all, a woman that I would probably never know again” (145). His inability to connect with Beth leads him to return with a deepened passion to Ezra.

Beth, on the other hand, responds to this experience in a very different manner. Far from being disappointed, Beth feels awakened and renewed by her experience with Travis: “It had felt right in a way that I couldn’t understand. It had felt like waking up from a long nap and curling your toes around sand on a warm beach in the summer” (165). This same experience meant something very different for each of these characters, and even the characters’ perceptions of each other are different. Through Travis’s eyes, we see a broken, completely changed Beth that bears no resemblance to the girl he once knew. But Beth’s narration reveals that this girl is not gone; she has just been momentarily forgotten, and Beth will remember her by the end of the story.

Narrators who are unreliable because of their omission of details create another opportunity for readers to see the world in a different way. In her book *Eloquent Reticence*, Leona Toker argues that what characters *don’t* say is as
important as what they do say. According to linguistic theories, “the absence of a message is a message in its own right” (Toker 1). Narrators that omit certain details create gaps in the narrative that we as readers are forced to fill. It is in the filling of these gaps that we are able to learn more about ourselves. When we are faced with a gap in the text, we create a set of explanations that could possibly fill that gap, explanations that are “either fulfilled or thwarted by subsequent portions of the text” (Toker 7). When our ideas are proven wrong by the text, we can learn a great deal about ourselves:

The thwarting is usually a more interesting phenomenon, not only because, like everything unexpected, it carries more information, but also because it can alert us to subjective reasons for our mistakes. Then our own attitudes, formerly unconscious or taken for granted, become the object of our attention. (Toker 7)

When we fill in these gaps that are created by inherently unreliable narrators, we are writing a story ourselves – the story of our own reality. Through reading the fiction text, we are invited to also read a text of our own creation that will teach us a great deal about how we see the world and the attitudes and biases that we are not even aware that we hold.

The characters Ghosts and Lovers leave a great deal unsaid. There are things that are not discussed because to do so would be difficult or painful for the characters. For example, there is some speculation that Beth’s car accident may not have been an accident at all. The characters’ refusal to respond to this tells
us something about the way they see the world. For example, Richard refuses to deal with the possibility that Beth actually could have tried to attempt suicide. He comments:

Of course I didn’t believe that she could have run out in front of the truck on purpose. She seemed like such a nice, sweet girl. But then again, how well did I really know her? I’d only met her a couple of times. And I couldn’t help but think of the sad, hollow look her eyes sometimes had. But I dismissed these thoughts as ridiculous, and I was determined to get to know her better, if for no other reason than to dispel the idea that she could have tried to kill herself. (57)

Though she takes a generally candid and open tone as a narrator, Beth never comments on the truth behind these suspicions. When a psychiatrist tries to speak with her about the matter, she responds with hostility and sarcasm:

“I suppose you think you can come in here and I’ll tell you all about my horrible, pathetic life, about how I’m so sad about my boyfriend breaking up with me that I thought the only way to put an end to this terrible existence of mine is to throw myself dramatically in front of a speeding truck. Would that make you feel fulfilled in your role as a therapist?” (14)

While she never admits to suicidal intentions, she never denies the suspicions either, and she never again raises this issue with the reader. It is one of those
cases where what is not said is as important as what is said. Both Richard and Beth leave gaps in their narration. Did she or did she not run out in front of the truck on purpose? It is up to the reader to decide, and the way the reader responds tells as much about himself as it does about the story.

Unreliability in narrators is a powerful tool that writers should challenge themselves to experiment with and explore. There are many different kinds and degrees of unreliable narrators, but both readers and writers should recognize that all narrators, even the most seemingly reliable, are in some ways flawed. We are all products of our history and our experiences, and fictional narrators are no different. An awareness of the “unreliable-reliable narrator” will enhance the experience of both writers and readers. Writers have a valuable opportunity to use the reliability of their narrators to create more powerful and moving works of fiction. Readers, in turn, must be aware that it is necessary to read fiction with a healthy amount of skepticism and a willingness to think for themselves, beyond what they are being told by their narrators. Unreliability is inherent in our literature because of the nature of language and human thought. But rather than think of this as a weakness, readers and writers can come to understand the power and meaning that unreliability can create in narrative.

Conclusion

It has been my goal in writing the stories that make up Ghosts and Lovers to shape a collection that is both technically complex and emotionally relevant. I
have approached these stories with an awareness of the theoretical aspects of fiction writing, making a deliberate attempt to shape the building blocks of writing in a way that would create meaning in my stories and challenge readers to examine the ways they view fiction and the world. A story invites its reader into the world of the characters and allows the reader to have access to the thoughts and experiences of another person. But readers must also recognize that these thoughts and experiences are biased and subjective. They are shown a picture of a fictional world that is mediated by a narrator and is far from objective or complete. I think that readers often forget this, and that is why I have attempted to bring this inherent unreliability to the forefront by relating many different sides of the story through different narrators.

Above all, I have tried to tell stories that would be compelling and appealing to readers. I hope that my readers can sympathize with the experiences of some or all of these characters. The stories address basic human desires and needs. For all the technicality and theories that I discuss in relation to the stories, they are still, at their heart, stories about people dealing with the struggles of life as best they can. I do not write for scholars and professors who will point to the unreliability of my narrators or other technical aspects of my stories. I write for the everyday readers, whom I hope can look at these stories and learn something about themselves and life through what my characters go through.
Works Cited


1. A SLOW AND PAINFUL PROCESS

As I’m out for my evening run, I’m suddenly blinded by the flash of headlights to my right. I hear the sound of brakes being applied in a panic. I try to get out of the way, but I already know it’s too late for that. A 45-year-old electrician talking on a cell phone is about to run me down with his pickup truck, and all I can do is stand there and let it happen. In the split second before he does, I realize my life is about to change. Except right then, I don’t realize how much.

I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking this is going to be the story of how I became paralyzed from the neck down, or lost my legs but went on to run the marathon on prosthetics, or sustained a terrible head injury that made me forget the rest of the twenty-two years I’d lived to that point but helped me to find God. But, luckily for me, this isn’t that story.

This is the story of how I came to meet Richard Pierce.

It’s a strange thing, waking up in a hospital bed with your body all tangled up in a mess of tubes and wires, various appendages strung up and encased in casts, every inch of you aching and throbbing with pain like you’ve never felt before. You know when you wake up in a hotel room and you have that moment
of panic when you’re not quite sure where you are or how you got there? Take that kind of disorientation and confusion and multiply it by ten and you’ll come close to the experience of waking up from a two-day coma. It took me a moment to call back up the memory of the truck and how I’d ended up here. But the memories were all there, and that in itself was a comfort to me, oddly enough. I would much rather have to deal with the recollections of a trauma like that than to lie in that bed with no conception of how I’d gotten there.

I thought I probably ought to wait for a doctor to come in before I tried to sit up, but there seemed to be no one around. I had this fear that nothing would happen when I tried to move, that my legs would just lie there, useless, and my hands and fingers would ignore my desperate attempts to wiggle them. That moment of not knowing, of waiting to see if my life was going to change forever, was worse than any other waiting I’ve ever known. I wasn’t about to just stay still on that hospital bed and wait for a doctor to show up and tell me I was never going to walk again. So in spite of the searing pain that stabbed at me as I did it, I pushed myself up to a near-seated position against the pillows. It hurt like hell, but I was so glad to have been able to do it that I hardly cared.

That’s when I saw him standing there. I hadn’t expected to see anyone at the foot of my bed, watching me struggle with my own body, and I think it was that surprise, that catching me off guard, that made me think for a split second that it was Travis standing there. In truth, he looked nothing like Travis, who was nearly six feet tall with a mess of dark brown hair that curled a little when he let it
get too long. This man was shorter, stockier, with a lighter complexion. It would be impossible for anyone to mistake him for Travis. Later I realized that Travis probably wouldn’t have made the three-hour drive from Dallas to Austin even if someone had known to contact him about the accident. But no one would have known to contact him anyway. Why would the hospital call up an accident victim’s ex-boyfriend and ask him to come?

I almost said Travis’s name, but I saw my mistake before I spoke. I thought at first this man might have been delivering the flowers that he held in his hands. He wasn’t dressed in his scrubs or a white jacket at the time, just a pair of jeans and a polo shirt. I expected him to drop off the vase and leave, though I couldn’t think of who would be sending me flowers. My mother had been dead for three years, my father had stepped out of my life a long time ago, and I had very few close friends in Austin, where I was living at the time. My mind went to Travis again, briefly, but I knew that was too much to hope. Possibly this flower delivery guy had gotten the wrong room and had intended to send the flowers to a nice little cancer victim next door.

“Oh, you’re awake,” he told me, placing the flowers on my bedside table. “I’m Richard Pierce.” I had no idea why he was there, but I felt I ought to shake his hand, out of instinctual politeness, I guess. When I tried to lift my right hand, I realized my arm was broken and encased in a cast, so I offered my left hand instead, trying to untwist it from the tangle of medical equipment. He shook my hand as though indulging some silly feminine whim of mine and smiled at me,
patronizingly, then sat down in the chair next to my bed. “I was there at the accident scene. Do you remember what happened?”

I nodded, and he patted my left hand in a way that I knew was supposed to comfort me but actually freaked me out a little. I still felt a little dazed, and the last thing I wanted was some stranger sitting there by my bed trying to make small talk with me the minute I’d woken up from being struck by an out-of-control truck. The pain was starting to assert itself a little more strongly, and I wondered if they’d put any sort of narcotics or painkillers in the IV bag that was attached to my left arm. As a matter of principle, I was generally against any sort of drug that wasn’t natural. I just didn’t like the idea of pumping chemicals into my body when it probably already had the resources it needed to take care of itself. So the fact that I found myself desperately hoping a nurse would come in with a nice syringe full of morphine or Vicodin, or whatever it was they used for this sort of thing, should be a testament to the amount of pain that I found myself in.

“It’s so lucky that I just happened to be driving by at the time,” he said. “I’m a doctor. So I got out to see if I could help.”

I couldn’t concentrate on what he was saying. I just couldn’t. Some part of me knew that the appropriate thing to do in this situation would be to express gratitude, smile, ask him what had happened, but all I could think to do was ask him, in a voice that I could barely raise above a whisper, “Could you please get a doctor for me?”

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The flowers that Richard delivered to me that day were the first and only flowers I got during the week I spent in the hospital. They were carnations, which I happened to know are generally associated with death, but I didn’t take it personally. It became obvious to me that Richard wasn’t the kind of person that would know the symbolic or cultural associations of various flowers, or any other mundane piece of trivia like that. He was concerned with more important things, like how much medication to administer to a patient to keep her from waking up during surgery but also to prevent her from drifting off into a sleep so deep that she’d never wake up. Matters of life and death. I’m comforted by a doctor who seems a little eccentric in his manner of dress, a little odd in his bedside manner. It means he’s got his mind on what really counts. He was an anesthesiologist, not a florist, and besides, the red and pink carnations helped brighten up the room, whether they were symbolic of death or not.

While I was in the hospital, I spent a lot of the time watching CNN. My roommate, Flora, had been called after the accident, and she’d been thoughtful enough to bring up some of my things: a nightgown, my toothbrush, some books from the bookshelf in my room, my journal. She stayed only long enough to drop them off and make sure that I wasn’t going to die and leave her to pay the entire amount of next month’s rent on our two bedroom apartment. I assured her I didn’t plan on stiffing her (I don’t think she got the pun) and promised I’d write her a check as soon as I had the use of my right hand again.

Jim, my boss, came by a couple days after the accident and dropped off a
gaudy get well card that had been signed by everyone in the office. I could picture the scene back at the incoming call department of ATI Marketing, the card being circulated around the cubicles of the call center. Half of the people would probably ask, “Beth who?” then shrug and scribble off their signature before shoving it into the hands of their neighbor and getting back to their compelling game of Solitaire. Jim expressed his hope that I would make a speedy recovery, in a professional and entirely aloof manner, then left me alone with CNN.

I got cards from my three aunts out in California. They were my mother’s sisters, women that reminded me so much of her that it opened up the slowly healing wound of my mother’s death to even think about them. My mother had been the youngest, and Cara, her next oldest sister, bore such an uncanny resemblance to her that when she walked into the room on the day of my mother’s funeral, I thought for a minute that she actually was my mother, that it had all been a big joke and my mother hadn’t just died of breast cancer. When I realized it was actually Cara, I ran out of the room sobbing. I think up until that moment, some part of me didn’t really believe Mom was dead, some part of me that actually expected her to walk through the door any minute. It wasn’t until that moment that I understood that my mother was really dead, that I would never again see her walking into the room or sitting out on the porch in her chair or baking a cake in the kitchen or doing any of the millions of things that made her who she was.

I wasn’t close to my aunts, or any of my extended family for that matter.
They all lived together out in Los Angeles, within a few blocks of each other, a whole clan of my cousins and aunts and uncles. They all got together for cake and ice cream on every cousin’s birthday. Christmas was a huge event. But I wasn’t really part of that, hundreds of miles away in Austin. I was a stranger in my own family. It would be ridiculous to expect them to visit me in the hospital. They wouldn’t have rushed out there to be by my side, and I wouldn’t have rushed out there to be by theirs if the tables were turned. Truth be told, I hadn’t even expected to get cards from them.

Had it not been summer, when I was off of school for the semester break, there might have been more people coming by to wish me well. Professors might have come to drop off class notes or reading assignments, well-meaning classmates might have stopped by to see how I was doing, and the various acquaintances that I’d picked up during my first year of graduate school might have cared enough to send flowers or stuffed bears or chocolates or whatever. But as it was, they were all gone for the summer or occupied with their own lives. I had never become close enough to any of them that they would think of me unless I was in their immediate frame of reference. If I wasn’t seeing them at school every day or passing them on campus, I might as well not exist for them.

So the only other visitor to my room besides Flora and Jim was Richard. I thought I’d seen the end of him on that first day when he came back into the room with the doctor and nurse and muttered something about hoping I felt better soon. But he showed up again the day after that, this time with a metallic blue
balloon that read “Get Well Soon” in giant yellow letters. It was obscenely cheerful, but I thanked him and tried to look grateful as he tied it to the post of my bed. It was a nice gesture, even if it was from a total stranger who had just happened to be there when a truck ran me down and who now thought that gave him access to my personal life.

“I was just in the neighborhood,” he said, smiling as he sat down, uninvited, in the chair next to my bed. “Well, I usually am, seeing as I work in this hospital.” He laughed. “Anyway, I wanted to see how you were doing. I spoke briefly with Dr. Allen and he says you’re going to be just fine.”

“Yeah. I should be out of here in a few more days.”

“That’s great,” Richard replied. “Really great. I must say I’m rather surprised. You’re a very strong woman.”

“Surprised?” I repeated. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Seeing you there in the street like that, all that blood…I don’t know, I hoped it would all turn out okay, but I didn’t really think you would make it. You were dead, you know. I mean, you were actually dead when I showed up, not breathing, no pulse. Your blood was all over the road, just all over the place. I did CPR until the ambulance showed up, and when they put you in, your face looked so white, and your body just looked broken. They drove off, and I was talking to a police officer afterward, and I looked down at my hands, and they were covered in your blood. I had your blood all over me.”

He looked away from me, out the window to the road below, and I knew
that he would be haunted by that image of my pale, deathly face forever. I was lucky; I had missed out on the panic and the terror, the blood, the mess, all the nasty ramifications of a car crash that no one ever wants to have to see or think about. Lying unconscious and dead in the road was the easy part. It was having to be there to pick up the pieces that was the real challenge. My broken bones, my punctured lung, my battered body would all heal in time. There were drugs that worked beautifully to soothe that kind of pain. But there was nothing that would make Richard forget what it had been like to kneel over the body of a dying twenty-three year old woman whose name he didn’t even know.

I was glad Flora had thought to bring my journal. I had a huge collection of filled journals at home, all of them dog-eared and well worn from my writing down every little detail of my life and reading back over it all year after year. It wasn’t as though I had a bad memory and would forget these things if I didn’t write them down. But I had realized long ago that my current state of mind had a way of coloring the past, so that things would shift ever so subtly in my mind. Not the memory of the events themselves, but the emotions and thoughts that went along with them, would reflect more what I was thinking at the time when I recalled them then how I was actually feeling at the time. After Travis broke up with me, for example, I would never be able to understand why I’d ever been in love with him in the first place if I hadn’t written it down when we got together:
September 7, 1994

So now there’s Travis. An incredible guy I’ve been dating since August 21. Yes, only two weeks, but I feel very good about him. All this time I’ve wanted very much to believe that there was a guy out there for me, someone who embodied all the things I wanted in a guy, someone I could be myself around, someone I could trust with my heart and soul, imperfect though they may be. And even though it’s only been a short time, I feel that Travis could maybe be that someone.

I’d like to write what I think of him now at the start, so I can look back on it later. Maybe I’ll agree with it and look back fondly on the days we spent discovering each other. Maybe I’ll laugh at how spectacularly wrong my first impressions were. In any case, here goes. He seems like a very nice guy, smart, funny, and attractive. He’s majoring in math and wants to be a business consultant of some sort (this is something he’s explained to me in detail, but of course, math-impaired as I am, I mainly just nodded and smiled). He has an incredible singing voice and is a great soccer player. He grew up in a small town in West Texas, and when he gets drunk or tired, a little bit of a West Texas accent sneaks back into his voice, just enough to be sort of sexy without making him sound like a hick or a red neck. He carries a cigarette lighter with him always, even though he doesn’t smoke, and he has this odd and kind of annoying habit of constantly lighting it for no reason. He says he does this because
repetitive noise is comforting to him. I didn’t tell him that it annoys the hell out of me, but maybe someday I will.

That’s what I think of him now. We’ll see what the future holds.

Sometimes reading things like that brought back some of the old, happy feelings that I’d associated with Travis. I could momentarily forget the fact that he’d broken my heart almost a year ago, that I was lying in a hospital bed hundreds of miles away from him, and that I would probably never see his face again. Reading the happy entries sometimes took the edge of the deep sorrow I was starting to wallow in. But other times, it just made things worse, and I wondered what the hell was wrong with me that made me think it was a good idea to keep torturing myself with memories of things that were long dead.

I’d grown accustomed to the constant stream of doctors and nurses in and out of my room. They were around at all hours of the day and night, adjusting this, measuring that, taking notes and nodding to themselves. So I didn’t pay much attention when a tall, too-thin blonde woman in a white lab coat came into my room carrying my chart in her hand. I only took notice of her when she sat down in the chair next to my bed. None of the doctors had done this before, as they always seemed to be in such a hurry to get in and out and off to someone else suffering in some other room. So when this woman sat down in the chair, I stopped watching CNN and looked expectantly at her.

“Elizabeth,” she said, and I sighed inwardly again at hearing my full name
used. I’d told the nurses at least a million times that I preferred to go by “Beth,” but so far no one had bothered to make note of that fact or correct themselves. “My name is Dr. Harding. I’d like to talk to you a little bit about what happened.” Her voice sounded utterly artificial, practiced, and I instantly disliked her.

“Okay. What about it?” I had already filed a police report with two officers who had come to my room and nodded as I wrote down the details that I could remember. They ended up telling me more about the accident than I’d told them, like who the driver had been, that he’d been talking on the cell phone, and that I would probably be asked to testify in court when he went to trial for whatever charges the DA decided to file against him. So I wasn’t exactly sure what this doctor could want to know that she couldn’t find out from the police, or why it was her business anyway.

“Well, there’s been some question as to whether it was actually an accident at all,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning. “Do you mean that guy hit me on purpose?” I couldn’t understand why a perfect stranger would go out of his way to hit me as I went jogging. Perhaps he had mistaken me for someone else, maybe an ex-lover of his?

“No,” she replied, glancing down at my chart, which she held in her lap, as though she’d forgotten what she was going to say and had to see again what it was. “Actually, there’s been some suggestion that the fault may have been with you. That you may have run out in front of the truck on purpose.”
I started to laugh, but I saw that she was serious. “What?”

“Mr. Beringer, the driver of the truck, suggested that he thought you saw him coming and that you ran into the street for no reason and he couldn’t help but hit you.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I practically shouted. “Of course he’s going to say it’s my fault, so he doesn’t have to go to fucking jail.” She looked a little shocked by my choice of adjectives. Of course it had been my intention to shock her.

“It’s not only the driver,” she said. “The nurses have said you’ve had very few visitors, no family, no friends. One of them spoke with your roommate Fiona, who said that you are almost always at home or at work.”

“Her name is Flora,” I replied coolly. “And she’s my roommate, not my personal assistant. She has no idea where the fuck I spend my time.”

She paused, looking as though she was personally offended by my hostility. “Elizabeth, I’m a psychiatrist, and I’m here to talk to you about what’s going on with your life,” she said, as though speaking to a small or immensely stupid child. “According to Fion—uh, Flora, you moved in with her recently after breaking up with your boyfriend of four years. I know it has to hurt to end a long relationship like that. Have you been thinking about hurting yourself, Elizabeth?”

I would have laughed if I hadn’t been so angry. I could have kicked this ridiculous Dr. Harding, after I took care of Flora for being a nosy bitch, of course. “Of course I haven’t been thinking about hurting myself. If you want to know why I’m sitting here in this hospital bed, ask the driver of the truck why he was too
busy talking on his cell phone to pay attention to pedestrians. Don’t ask me stupid questions about my life. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“I know you must be in pain,” she said. “I know it might make you feel better to talk to me. You can tell me whatever you want, Elizabeth, and you can be assured that the police won’t be involved in this. I’m only here because the nurses, the police, and your roommate have all expressed some concern about you. But whatever you say to me is confidential.”

I rolled my eyes and muttered, “Unless I disclose to you information that may indicate that I’m about to do something to harm myself or others or that a child or elderly person is being abused.”

“What?”

“If you’re going to recite a confidentiality agreement to me, at least get it right and say the whole thing,” I replied, staring at her levelly. She shifted in her seat and pinched her lips into a forced smile. She looked as though she was about to start another speech, but I interrupted her before she could begin. “I suppose you think you can come in here and I’ll tell you all about my horrible, pathetic life, about how I’m so sad about my boyfriend breaking up with me that I thought the only way to put an end to this terrible existence of mine is to throw myself dramatically in front of a speeding truck. Would that make you feel fulfilled in your role as a therapist?”

She nodded her head and put on a sympathetic expression. “It sounds like you’re telling me that you have nothing left to live for without your boyfriend.”
I laughed. “If you’re going to try that Rogerian, person-centered reflective listening bullshit, you at least ought to try accurately reflecting what I said.” She looked a little surprised by my reference to Carl Roger’s person-centered therapy. She probably didn’t run across many clients who quoted psychological theories back to her. I guess with all her nosing around in my life, she had somehow missed the fact that I was a second-semester graduate student in psychology at the University of Texas. “Or perhaps you don’t understand the concept of sarcasm? You know, where I say something, but I actually mean the opposite?”

“You sound very hostile, Elizabeth.”

“Damn straight I’m hostile!” I replied. “I get hit by a truck and you have the audacity to come in here and suggest I made it happen on purpose because I miss some guy who cheated on me and was never really that good to me anyway? I’m actually offended by your presence. Please leave.” I turned the volume up on the television and gave CNN my full attention. She fidgeted with my chart and shifted around in her chair a couple of times. I stared straight ahead at the television, but out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw her shake her head a little. I wasn’t sure if she was annoyed or disappointed or what. She seemed about to say something a few times, and once, I heard her say quietly, “Elizabeth.” But after a few minutes, she just got up and left. I never saw her again after that.

* * *
I fully intended to give Flora a hard time about talking to some nurse about my personal life, which she really knew nothing about to begin with, but by the time I got to go home from the hospital, I was so exhausted from the whole ordeal that I didn’t bother. The last thing I wanted was to create even more tension between the two of us. It wasn’t that we didn’t get along or anything like that. It was just the kind of tension that naturally exists between two people who live together yet know nothing about each other and never bother trying to learn anything. I’d found her through a roommate locator service when I’d moved to Austin. I’d lived in Dallas for my whole life before moving, and I didn’t know a single person in Austin. I knew I couldn’t afford rent on my own while I was still in school, so I got online and managed to find Flora. The two of us had never been anything more than barely civil to each other.

That was the environment I came home to – no welcome home signs, no banners, no balloons except the half-deflated one that Richard had given me and I’d brought home, just to brighten up my room a little. The carnations had wilted and died, or I would have brought them too. I was a little lonely, shut up in my room with my broken right leg propped up on a pillow, watching bad TV movies and exhausting my small library of books, which consisted mainly of classical psychological texts – Jung, Freud, Lacan – that most people found boring and impossible to understand, but that I considered a nice bit of bedtime reading.

I hated to admit it, but I found myself missing Travis again, even though I thought I’d gotten over that months ago. It had been nine months since he had
ended things with me, suggesting that we weren’t really right for each other anymore and asking me if I wouldn’t mind please packing my things and leaving his apartment. He actually said his apartment, as if the two of us hadn’t picked it out together and split the rent halfway. There had been plenty of times that Travis hadn’t quite been able to make his half of the rent because tips hadn’t been so good that week at the restaurant where he worked, or because tuition was due, or he was behind on his car payment, or whatever excuse he came up with that week. He knew it didn’t matter what the excuse was. I would pay, because that was what I did. I had picked up after his messes for four years, in more ways than one.

These were the things I tried to think of when I felt that familiar loneliness creeping back in and taking hold of me, making the tears well up behind my eyes. It hurt my bruised and battered body to cry, an actual physical ache to go along with the deep emotional pain I was already feeling. I wanted to think about Travis the bastard, late again on his half of the rent, leaving his underwear lying on our bathroom floor, dragging me to rock concerts that I didn’t want to see, referring to my friends as stuck-up bitches, always thinking of himself before me. But no matter how hard I tried to make Travis Warner out to be the most heartless son of a bitch that had ever lived, I couldn’t keep up that image of him. Inevitably, I thought of the times that he’d brought me roses for no other reason than to say that he loved me, or taken care of me when I was sick, or let me drag him to girlie concerts that he didn’t want to see, or put up with all the shit I could
deal out. I should have been remembering the Travis that broke up with me and practically kicked me out on the street, but I was remembering the Travis that I fell in love with years before that, and it was breaking my heart.

And that’s where Richard came in.

He said he got my number from Dr. Allen, who had been my doctor while I was in the hospital. I don’t know if the two of them were friends, or whether there was just some sort of doctor code where one doctor helps out another with odd favors like giving out their patients’ home phone numbers. I never asked. Either way, it seemed a little odd, and I was surprised to hear from him. He sounded a little nervous, which made me think he could probably get in trouble if I said anything about this call.

“I hope you don’t mind my calling you at home,” he said. “I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“No, it’s fine,” I replied.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and I heard a sound like papers being shuffled or pages of a book being turned. “I know this seems a little unethical,” he began. “But since you’re not technically a patient of mine…I was wondering if you might like to go out sometime, maybe get dinner or a drink or something.”

I stared at the nearly deflated balloon in the corner of my room, drifting just a few feet off the floor by now, blowing softly back and forth in the gentle breeze
from my ceiling fan. I tried to conjure an image of Richard’s face, but I’d only seen him two times in person, and one had been right after waking up from a two-day coma, in the worst pain I’d ever experienced. The only thing I could really remember about him was that he’d seemed to be at least seven or eight years older than me. If he was a doctor, a practicing anesthesiologist, he was probably even older than that. What in the world was he thinking asking me, a twenty-three year-old grad student out on a date?

“Elizabeth?” he said. “I’m sorry, that was totally inappropriate of me. I take it back.” He sounded humiliated, and maybe a little scared that I would report him to the medical board or whoever it was that would want to deal with this kind of thing.

“What are you doing next Monday?” I asked.

June 14, 1999

I went out with this new guy Richard last night. He took me to a really nice Italian restaurant with the best spinach ravioli I’ve ever tasted and we split an entire bottle of red wine between the two of us. There’s one thing this guy has over Travis, whose idea of a nice date was taking me to Outback Steakhouse (a great place to take a vegetarian like myself) and offering to pay for my salad. Admittedly, Richard does have the advantage of being a practicing medical professional whereas Travis was just a waiter. Sure, Travis did have that restaurant he was opening, but
how can someone who can barely force himself to keep a budget ever run a successful restaurant? No more talk of Travis though!

I had to go with my leg still in a cast, which looked just great with my slinky little black dress, but Richard was cool about it, asked how I was doing and how the court case against the driver was going. Which, by the way, it isn’t – the case has been dismissed for lack of evidence. Apparently all a person has to do when they hit a defenseless pedestrian is suggest that said pedestrian was actually the cause of the accident, and the court will automatically believe them. Never mind that. Dinner was good, and afterwards he took me out on his boat on the lake. Yes, he owns a boat.

It could have been really romantic. I’m sure he thought it was. He had a stereo and put on some nice music and we sat there under the stars in this really secluded cove with the water lapping up against the side of the boat. And I knew that eventually he’d put his arms around me and try to kiss me. When he did, all I could think about was that we were there because he fell in love with me while I was technically dead. I couldn’t stop thinking about it the whole time we were making out on this incredibly nice date. It was the most emotionless make out session I’ve ever had. But maybe that’s just what I need in a guy. I don’t want to bother with messy relationships any more, but I’m lonely and I could use someone in my life again. Is it enough to let him take me out on nice dates and make
out with me and probably screw me eventually, without feeling any sort of out of control, raging passion for him? I'm beginning to think that maybe it is.

I was actually fairly close with my original estimate – Richard was thirty-two years old, just rather young looking for his age because he'd kept in shape. Like me, he was a runner, and I thought maybe this was something we would eventually do together, after the cast came off my leg. I looked forward to the day when, after the months of physical therapy that were required, the doctors would tell me that my body was as good as new.

The doctors and the physical therapists warned me that this would be a slow and painful process. There had been extensive damage done, as you would expect a runaway truck might cause a frail and helpless human body. It could have been worse, they reminded me. I had been lucky in a million ways – my neck could have broken, I could have had a head injury, or I could very well be dead if Richard hadn't come along when he did. I should thank God, the nurse told me, the religious one who was always ridiculously cheerful.

I spent hours working with the physical therapist, doing exercises that should have been easy given what I'd been able to do before. I couldn't run, but I eventually ended up swimming hundreds of laps each day. The doctors warned me that I should be careful not to overstress my body, but admitted that I'd made remarkable progress considering what I'd been through. Still, I was frustrated.
I’d been a yoga teacher for two years before coming to Austin, I’d run my first race when I was six years old, and I hadn’t missed a single day’s run in the last five years. I wasn’t used to fighting with my body, trying to coax it into doing the simple things I wanted it to do. Everyone was right - it was a slow and painful process, but not in the way they said. They were speaking of the process of reconditioning my body so that it would be good as new. But it was really a process of coming to terms with the idea that it never would be as good as new. I could feel the difference in every move I made, in every breath I took. Nothing would ever be the same for me again.

My journal entries were starting to take on the characteristic ranting format that I usually fell back on when things weren’t going my way. I wasn’t one to complain a lot, so I usually ended up writing it all down by candlelight, with some good depressing music playing.

_August 31, 1999_

_Not to sound like a whiny bitch or anything, but _why me_? Why should I have the tremendous bad luck of being run over by a truck? Maybe I should see this as a lesson or something, or maybe a warning. Maybe this is fate. Maybe there is some good that will come of me nearly being killed. Oh, fuck it all. You know there’s no reason for this. Shit happens, and there’s no sense in wallowing in it when you should be putting all your energy into your recovery._
And then, there’s also Richard to put your energy into. Maybe it was fate that he and I met. He is a nice guy, but to be honest, I don’t really know if he’s worth getting hit by a truck for. For one thing, he’s a little too old for me. He’s not bad looking, but he’s nothing spectacular. He is brilliant, but sometimes I just feel that he and I are so different that we’ll never work out in the long run. He’s so rational and down to earth, and I’m anything but. He has this sort of sensibility about him that I think came from his growing up on a farm in Iowa. It’s so different from anything I’ve ever known a guy to be, and so different from what I am. Sometimes he makes a comment about religion or politics, and his super-conservatism shows, and I have this feeling that we’ll never be able to make this work. But then again, why should a person’s political views influence his relationships? I’m fine with him being a damned Republican, Christian, Midwestern boy, but can he be fine with a slightly funky, left wing, alternative girl from Dallas? Sometimes I wonder if he sees me that way, the way I think I really am. In fact, sometimes I wonder if he even sees me at all.

I could go through the long details of how Richard and I started to date, talk about the conversations we had over dinner at fancy restaurants in downtown Austin, describe the extravagant gifts that he bought for me. I could tell you about how we came to agree that we might as well move in together, or
how good it felt to fall asleep next to a man who I knew cared about me deeply. But none of that is really that memorable. I don’t ever think about that now. When I wake up next to Richard these days, I don’t bother to reflect on how we ended up here, the path we took, the decisions that we made that led to us being together like this. It all seems so inevitable now, the logical conclusion of a path that I started down that day the truck hit me. I know there was a time when things were different, but I can’t really think of that time now.

I do remember one night very clearly though. Richard had taken me to the opera and then back to his place, where he slipped my black dress over my shoulders and led me to his bed. We made love – it wasn’t our first time, nor would it be our last, nor was it any more memorable than any other time. But as we lay stretched out beside each other in his bed after, he ran his fingers across my bare chest, over the deep scar that was one of my many permanent souvenirs of the accident.

“Do you know that you’re the only person whose life I ever saved?” he whispered. “Even though I’m a doctor. I don’t do that normally. Every day people willingly put their lives in my hands. One mistake on my part and someone never wakes up from surgery. But you – well, I’ve never brought anyone back from the dead before. I feel in some ways that I’m responsible for you now, like I need to take care of you. Would you allow me to do that, Elizabeth?”

I tried to look him in the eyes, but it was too dark in his room with the lights
off and the blinds drawn. I wanted to see how serious he was about this, how
strongly he felt about what he’d said. He moved his hands over my scar again in
the dark, tracing over the soft, bumpy ridges of skin. I never answered him, but I
don’t think it really mattered what I said anyway. In some cultures, you owe a
permanent debt to a person who saves your life. For Richard, it was the other
way around – he seemed to feel bound to me somehow, responsible for me. I
knew that if I chose to stay, he would keep me with him forever.

At one point I had the sense to write the following entry in my journal:

November 15, 1999

You think you’re happy now, but that’s not because you’re in love
with Richard Pierce. You’re in love, yes, but it’s not with Richard. It’s with
the fact that you aren’t alone anymore. What you love is having a warm
body to sleep next to, a man to take you out and show you off, someone
to hold hands with and kiss and hug. It could have been anyone, but he
just happened to be the one that saved your life and brought you flowers
when you were in the hospital. Here’s what will happen to you if you don’t
stop this right now. You will stay with him, and because he’s getting to
that crucial age, he might ask you to marry him. And you will say yes, and
you will end up spending your entire life with this man, not because you
love him, but because you don’t have the guts to be alone. Please, please
don’t do it. You don’t love him, you don’t need him, and it will only end up
I don’t like to think of Richard as someone that I settled for because I was afraid of being alone. That makes my marriage, and by extension, my life, feel like a sham. But there are still nights when I wake up and am surprised to see this older man sleeping next to me in my bed. There are still times when I fear that I will accidentally say Travis’s name while Richard and I are making love, although I know this is ridiculous. It’s been years since Travis, and I know better than to think that I might still be in love with him. But he is there nonetheless, a memory of a love that was more pure, more real, than what I have with Richard. In fact, sometimes the memory of Travis seems more real than Richard’s presence.

I sometimes think that maybe I really did die there in the street, and Richard reanimated me and took me home. If that’s true, then I’m just a zombie walking around in Richard’s house, waiting for something that’s never going to happen. Am I waiting for someone to wake me up? Or am I just waiting for someone to tell me that I’m really dead?

A zombie can never die because it’s already dead. I realize this as I sit in the kitchen of our house, mine and Richard’s. I watch the digital clocks ticking away around me, the displays glowing red on all the surfaces around me, the microwave, the coffee maker, the oven. I’m surrounded by all the things that make up a life, the things that sustain us and tell us who we are. You choose the
black stove range over the white one, you pay extra for the refrigerator with an icemaker, you purchase a coffee machine that makes espresso and lattes. These are the things that make you what you are, or at least help you forget who you’re not. It’s a slow and painful process, that forgetting, but it’s one that I’m learning to master. I hear Richard opening the door, just home from work. He’ll want dinner soon. I open the refrigerator and look inside. Chicken, beef, milk, eggs, salad dressing, vegetables. I have to make a choice. So I blindly reach for whatever my hands fall on first.
2. THE COLOR OF JEALOUSY

My boyfriend, Travis, generally came home early in the afternoon and stayed a few hours before he had to get back to the restaurant he owned for the dinner rush. Most of the time I wasn’t there in the afternoons when he came home, since I was out at my studio working on my paintings, joking with Annika – the painter that I shared a studio space with – and sipping lattes from the coffee shop on the corner that she and I both loved. But I had come home early today, and I was lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Ezra?” Travis called when he came in. He must have seen my car in the garage. I hoped he wouldn’t come in and find me here. I was feeling an intense need to be alone, something that didn’t happen often for me. I thought about all the nights I’d spent alone when I was younger, just a little younger than Travis was now, a young gay man just arrived in Dallas with nothing but the clothes on his back and a few dreams. There had been no one there for me then when I’d had twenty dollars to my name. All I had wanted then was someone to hold me and touch my face and tell me that things were going to be alright, and now, ironically, when I finally had someone to do that, all I wanted to do was push him away. Travis, I would tell him, your love is destroying my art. Could you love me a bit less? Punish me a little more? I could show you how it’s done. I’m an expert.
I heard Travis in the office down the hall, moving around, shuffling papers, straightening things up, talking to himself. He talked to himself when he was stressed out or tired, as though he was too rundown to bother keeping the thoughts in and they all just tumbled out in words that were only loud enough for him to hear. I thought about going in to see him, but I stayed where I was on the bed, staring up at the spinning blades of the ceiling fan. When I closed my eyes, I could still see the blades rotating in my head, behind the mental image of the painting I was working on – or trying to work on, anyway. This was the worst kind of torture – to see an image in my head but be unable to reproduce it on the canvas. Things were not right lately, in some way I couldn’t explain. Travis and I weren’t fighting, we weren’t having any troubles with sex, we weren’t in financial trouble. There was no reason I should feel this utterly distracted from my work. But the fact was, I was lying here on my bed at three in the afternoon when I should have been in my studio working.

I heard the beep of the computer as Travis turned it on, heard his fingers fly over the keys as he typed. Probably doing some work for the restaurant, as he was always doing. He worked too hard, but it made me proud to see him invest so much of himself into something, to accomplish what I’d known he could accomplish all along. He had doubted himself and his abilities to run the restaurant at the beginning, but I had known all along that he was destined to succeed in it. I guess I had seen some potential in him that was hidden even from himself. I rolled over onto my stomach on the bed and examined this
feeling I was having for Travis, something almost fatherly in my pride. I’d never felt that way for a lover, but then again, I’d also never had a lover as young as Travis. He and I were so different in so many ways, but somehow I knew there was something between us that I could never have with anyone else. Could I call it true love? Maybe. Could I even believe in true love? I thought of my father kissing my mother’s forehead, such a compassionate gesture, smiling at her, telling her he loved her, then smacking her across the face the next day when she made some ridiculously small mistake that annoyed him. True love. Well, I always had been a hopeless romantic.

I heard Travis shuffle some papers again in the office, then heard his chair scrape across the floor as he stood up and shut the door behind him. His car roared in the garage, and then I heard him zoom off down the street. That boy would get himself killed one day, I was sure of it. I indulged in a few minutes of ridiculous melodrama, imagining myself at Travis’s funeral, surrounded by our friends, holding hands with other weeping gay men. I had never met Travis’s parents, who had all but disowned him when he’d come out to them, but I imagined them there, too. Surely they wouldn’t be so angry with their son that they wouldn’t come to his funeral, but they would stand far away from the gay men. They would stand with Travis’s straight friends, the normal ones, and we would have to stand separately, as we always did, even when we were at the funeral of one of our own, one who had fallen. I sighed, knowing how pissed off he would be if he knew that I was turning his funeral into some gay rights thing in
my own mind. He wasn’t the type that would be bothered to hear that I was thinking about what would happen if he died, but it would really annoy him to know that I was picturing it as some great opportunity to stand up for my rights as a gay man and provoke a few straight people.

I recognized that this train of thought as a pointless waste of time, so I lifted myself from the bed and walked down the hallway. I went into the office where Travis had been and stood in the middle of the room, my eyes closed and my arms spread out from my body. I tried to imagine that I could feel Travis’s energy in this room, some part of him that he had left behind when he had gone. I tried to imagine that I could feel cold air in the half of the office that was mine, and that I could feel the brush of a warm breeze on my face from his half of the office. It was a nice little fantasy, but I couldn’t even fool myself into believing that I felt anything. I pulled out his desk chair and sat down in it, touching the letters on the keyboard with a gentle reverence.

I looked at the papers Travis had neatly placed around the desk. He was very organized when it came to business, though not so much when it came to organizing his laundry or doing the dishes. His papers were all very orderly, all in different stacks that probably made sense to him but didn’t mean much to me. It seemed strange to me that once, not so long ago, these types of papers, these bits of business related to the restaurant, had been my job, back when I’d been Travis’s manager. I had sat across from him at a job interview when he was just a kid still, a kid who had several thousand dollars and a dream of owning a
successful Italian restaurant, and I had still been caught up in that rut of pointless jobs in the service industry that would serve to pay the bills whereas my art never had. Once upon a time, I had known how to unravel this puzzle of receipts and orders and paychecks and schedules. It felt almost like a different lifetime to me, like the Ezra Malone who had once signed these same forms and the Ezra Malone that spent his days painting masterpieces of modern art (or trying to) could not possibly be one and the same.

But looking at these papers now, all I saw were a bunch of numbers and mazes. I knew art, not business. I knew feeling, emotion, beauty, pain; logic, rationality, and all those other savvy, intelligent characteristics were lost on me. This was Travis’s realm, and I pictured us as two halves of the same whole, one of us artistic and emotional, the other rational and level-headed. I had never felt that sense of wholeness before. I had always been something empty and lacking unto myself, searching for that other half that I could plug into my broken heart to fill all the gaps. Now that I’d finally found Travis, my perfect fit, I missed the days of searching. I should be pleased with this happiness, I thought. I should consider myself lucky that I’ve found Travis after all this time. But I wasn’t.

I ran my finger tips over Travis’s hand writing on the page, neat and tidy when he was taking his time, but a little messy when he got in a hurry. I looked at all the stacks of paper, examining the different ways he had of signing his name, sometimes making a huge T and W with the rest of his name very small, sometimes dragging the name Warner out into one long line. He wasn’t one of
those people that had a signature. I thought it was important that I have one for
my paintings, and I signed all of them the exact same way I signed everything
else, from checks to letters.

I was about to get up from the desk and go downstairs to make myself
something to eat when I spotted the little scrap of paper that had fallen almost
beneath Travis’s keyboard. I lifted it up between two fingers, glancing at what he
had written there even as I knew this was something that was not meant for my
eyes. Beth, 1467 Windy Grove, 972-948-2223. I lowered the paper back to the
desk and turned to leave the room.

As far as I knew, Travis knew only one person named Beth, the one that
he had described as his first true love, the one that he’d been living with when I
first met him, in the very first stages of the restaurant. We’d talked about her
during those long, late night discussions we sometimes had after we’d had been
drinking and we talked too openly and too much about things that had happened
to shape who we were. I remembered Beth as a short, cute brunette with a
muscular body that Travis loved to wrap his arms around. I remembered seeing
her sitting in booth 31 once, before the restaurant was open, waiting while Travis
and I had interviewed some potential wait staff. I’d seen her around other times
as well, randomly, showing up every so often, and she usually had a book with
her. She had expressive eyes, and she used her hands a lot when she talked
about something that seemed to excite her. Travis had told me she was a yoga
teacher, but she was also studying to become an anthropologist. She was smart,
accomplished, beautiful, funny, and all those other things that people always want a woman to be. When he spoke of her now, years later, Travis sometimes commented that he wasn’t really sure why he’d left her. He speculated that it was the stress of getting the restaurant opened – he had broken up with her a few weeks after we opened – but I knew it wasn’t that. It was because he loved her too much. That kind of thing scared him, and when he talked in his quiet, drunken voice about the way she’d looked doing yoga in the middle of their living room, or how she liked to run in the rain, or whatever endearing thing he was thinking of at the moment, I knew that the only reason it was me in bed next to him instead of her was that he loved her more than me.

I’d never been jealous of a woman, mainly because I’d refused to put up with any bi boys before. I thought it was impossible to love both men and women, hypocritical in some ways, but Travis seemed capable of doing both equally well. It was a strange feeling, knowing that I had to worry about both men and women that could attract my Travis away from me, made stranger now by the fact that he was trying to contact a former girlfriend of his. I didn’t quite know what to think of it. I wasn’t quite sure if I should go back to the bedroom and stare at the fan, wallowing in this feeling that felt something like choking. Maybe I should go into the kitchen and take out my anger in some Italian cooking, make some lasagna or something for dinner tonight. I could get in my car and drive around for awhile, maybe show up at the restaurant with this slip of paper in my hands and demand that Travis explain everything, make a scene in
front of all the customers and the wait staff. But I knew none of that was right. I knew there was only one thing to do. I walked over to my half of the office, pulled out my sketchbook, and closed my eyes, trying to imagine what jealousy would look like if I painted it.

Annika was still in the studio when I got back, adding some finishing touches to a painting she had just about completed. “I see you’re getting back on the saddle, my dear,” she said when I walked in and sat down in front of the easel that I’d been staring at all day, but that was, unfortunately, still totally blank. “Very good. I was beginning to think you may have given up on me.”

“I think it’s like writer’s block,” I said. “Sometimes you just need something to spur you into action.”

“And what has spurred you in the last two hours?” she asked.

I thought about the note that I’d left sitting on Travis’s desk, exactly where I’d found it, and wished I would have thought to tear it up. Of course he could have just looked her number up again, but I would have felt better about destroying it. “I found something,” I told Annika. “I found a phone number.”

“Whose number?”

“Beth Symon.”

“Who’s that?” she asked.

“Travis’s ex-girlfriend. They dated for years, and he broke up with her right before we met. Do you think he’s having an affair?”
Annika laughed. “Are you serious?” I nodded. “Ez, Travis is totally in love with you. He’s not having an affair.”

“But he looked up her number.”

“So what?” she said flippantly, gesturing with the hand that still held a brush, flinging a little splash of paint onto her work table, which she promptly wiped up with a nearby rag. “I mean, there are a million reasons why he could have wanted to reach her. Maybe he just remembered that he let her borrow his favorite sweater and she still hasn’t given it back, and now he wants it.” I laughed in spite of myself. “All I’m saying is just don’t assume the worst. You always do that. Why do you always want to create drama in your life?”

I wasn’t convinced, and I decided to ignore her comment about my creating drama. “I just have this feeling, Ani, you know?”

“Look, I’m going to tell you something, but you can’t tell Greg, okay?” she said. Greg, her husband, was a corporate lawyer who I found to be totally dull. I don’t know why she even bothered with her little caveat about telling him, because I avoided him like the plague and couldn’t imagine myself ever having a private conversation with him. But I told her I promised I wouldn’t tell, and she set down her brush and looked at me. “Right before Greg and I got married, I sort of freaked out. I mean, I loved him, you know, and he’s such a great guy for me. But I started thinking about this guy Jared who I’d been head-over-heels for before I met Greg, and I started comparing the two of them, thinking about how Jared had been better in bed, but how Greg made more money, all this bullshit. I
love Greg, don’t get me wrong, but Jared and I had been so passionate, so great
together, and I wondered if maybe it was better to marry someone you were
crazy about rather than someone who was sensible, you know, like Greg. So I
called Jared.”

“Did you have an affair with him?” I demanded. I couldn’t imagine Annika,
so sweet and honest, sneaking around behind Greg’s back, even if he was
boring as hell and probably not that good in bed.

“No. We went to lunch and I found out that we had nothing in common
anymore. It was nice to catch up with him, but going there and seeing him again
made me realize that I really wasn’t in love with him anymore. I was in love with
Greg. And maybe that’s all Travis is doing.”

I turned back to look at my canvas and thought about what she’d said. I
was crazy about Travis, and I’d even been thinking about asking him to have a
commitment ceremony with me. It wasn’t anything official, since gay marriage
wasn’t legal, but I wanted to let him and all the world know what he meant to me.
I was in love with him, like I’d never loved anyone before, passionately, madly,
totally. There wasn’t anyone from my past that I would really have wanted to
contact just to see if they measured up to Travis. I knew none of them did. But I
still couldn’t help but stop and think for a few minutes about Bill.

I wish I could say I had fond memories of him, memories of dinners we
shared, of holding hands and walks in the park, of long nights of the most
passionate love I ever made. I wish I could think of his face looking down at me
in the dark, and remember the way it felt to stroke his cheek and run my hands through his short, soft hair. All those things did happen, but that’s not really what I think of when I think of Bill.

My memories of Bill mostly take place in cheap coffee shops, in the rain, with greasy pastries and cups of stale coffee on the table between us. There had been something horrific about watching his slow decay, not because it was happening to someone I loved (or at the very least, had loved at one time), but because it was almost like watching it happen to myself, a version of myself that I could have been if the circumstances had been different. He and I had tried the heroin together the first time, lying back on the bed together with our arms around each other and getting lost in that dreamland that I found my way out of, but that he never returned from. It hadn’t been my idea to try the drug, but I’d gone along with it. I’d let him tie the elastic around my bicep and slip the needle in, and the expert way he did it made me realize that maybe this wasn’t really his first time after all. But by then, it was too late to care. I’d lost him by then.

Sometimes when he called me up, he was still close enough to his last fix of heroin that he seemed okay, or at least like he could function at a tolerable level. But other times, when the money had long since run out and he could no longer trade his ass for more of the drug, he seemed barely alive. He’d had the most beautiful blue eyes at one time, but when I saw them staring, empty, at the dirty table top in front of us, I couldn’t really believe that those were the same eyes that I’d loved to stare into, that I’d seen reflecting the lake as we watched.
the sun go down, that I’d see watching me as we kissed. He always kissed with his eyes open, because he said he loved to look at me that close up. He said it made him sure that I was his, because no one else would ever get that near to see me like that, to see me up close, without any barriers, without any pretenses.

The last time I saw him, he wasn’t even bothering to hide the track marks and scars that covered his arms. He had a jacket with him, but he didn’t wear it, even though it was cold enough outside. I had gotten a call from him the night before asking me to meet him in this coffee shop “just to talk” and he hadn’t been there at the time he’d asked me to show up. I waited an hour, sipping bad coffee and watching the heavysset waitress brushing her stringy hair out of her face, over and over and over again. She carried food to tables all over the restaurant, her heavy haunches swaying beneath her too-small, pink polyester dress. I ordered pancakes, which arrived smothered in syrup and butter, and I let them sit in front of me without touching them until Bill finally arrived, nearly an hour and fifteen minutes after he said he’d be there.

“Ezra, thanks for coming,” he said, collapsing into the booth across from me. He tossed his jacket down next to him and put his elbows up on the table, smoothing his long, tousled hair out of his face. When I looked at him, his eyes looked hollow and empty, somehow dead, as though Bill had left this body long ago, and now something else, something dark and quiet, was walking around in his skin. It was strangely comforting to see his eyes looking like that, because, in truth, I wanted to think of him as being dead. I wanted to think that Bill, the Bill I
had loved, was gone, resting peacefully somewhere else, and that this horror sitting across from me was something that had possessed his body but could not touch his soul.

“It’s good to see you,” I said, though I found it hard to speak. My throat had closed up and I was trying not to cry in the middle of this shitty diner. I could still remember my father smacking me across the face and then shoving me down when I cried, yelling at me to “Be a man!” Men didn’t cry. Men put on a tough face when this kind of thing happened to them. But I felt so unlike a man at that moment that I really didn’t care about crying. I would have done so without qualms, but in this setting, in this dirty, dingy place surrounded by these dirty, dingy people, I forced myself to hold back my tears because it seemed almost obscene to allow any sort of true emotion show in a place like this. It would be like making love in a graveyard – totally out of place, a perversion of a true emotion that would turn it into something as false and dirty as the place itself.

“I…well…” he shifted in his seat and looked down at the table. I knew what he wanted. Part of me didn’t even want to wait for him to ask, just to go ahead and hand him a few hundred bucks and spare him the humiliation of groveling to me. But I didn’t make a move. “Ezra, you know I hate to ask, but I could really use some help. I’ve been trying to find a job, you know, but it’s hard these days. I just can’t seem to get a break. If you could just help me out with a little bit of money, just a little bit to tide me over for a few weeks…”

I nodded and looked away, reaching into my back pocket to pull out my
wallet. I’d gone to the bank before I came and gotten three hundred out of my savings account, which I pushed across the table to him. Back in those days, before I had made a name for myself with the paintings, when I was still working odd jobs here and there, it was a lot of money. I’d already loaned Bill more than three thousand dollars, money that I couldn’t really spare. Every time he called me, I knew what he wanted, and I knew I’d give it to him, even though every time I did it, I always kicked myself afterward. I always vowed that I wouldn’t loan him any more money, that I’d tell him he was cut off and that I wanted my money back. I’d tell him that I didn’t care how he got it, that he could go rob a bank or rip off an old lady for all I cared, that I just wanted my three thousand back. But of course I never did that. Whenever he called me, I always handed over the cash without a word. I was doing it now, and I would do it again, if he asked.

There was a girl at the pizza place where I was currently working who I’d gotten to be friends with, and when I’d told her about the situation with Bill, she’d asked why I even cared enough to still give him the money. I told her that I guessed I still loved him a little and that I didn’t want to see him like this. She’d taken me by the hands and looked me in the eye and said, “Ezra, you need to understand that you can love someone and still be angry at them. You can love someone and still tell them no. You need to take care of yourself. You have every right to be angry with him.” I’d thought about that when Bill had called me the night before, and even though I’d really wanted to say no to him, to get angry with him and yell and call him a fucking addict, I hadn’t done it.
He didn’t smile when he took the money. I don’t think he knew how to anymore. He just picked it up and shoved it into his pocket without bothering to even look at how much it was. My heart sank a little when he stuffed it in his pocket like that, without any indication that he understood its worth, without any look to acknowledge what I’d done for him. I still loved him, even when he was sitting in front of me looking like a bum straight of the street, even when he took my money and dragged me into these situations that I would do better avoiding. I still saw him in that broken down body, as much as I wanted to think that he was gone, and I wanted to think that I could lie next to him in the dark and believe that everything could be the same. But I knew he didn’t see things that way. I knew what he cared about, and it wasn’t me. It was my money and what it could buy him.

“Ezra, you don’t know what this means to me.” He reached for my hands, like he wanted to hold them and squeeze them, but I pulled mine back quickly. I looked at his filthy hands on the table, the worn skin and the broken fingernails with dark lines of dirt under them. He had been handsome once, this man, had been charming and funny, but now he just looked like a homeless bum, like any other drug addict. He was like the ugly duckling in reverse, not a horrible creature with the potential for growth, but one that had fallen from a place of grace and beauty. I could see what he had once been, but I couldn’t see any way of him ever getting back to it.

“I really do appreciate it,” he said again. “This’ll really help me get back on
my feet. Things are going to turn around, you know?"

“Yeah,” I replied. “You just hang in there, Bill.” He did smile a little then. Maybe he really believed that things would get better, that he could come back from this. But I knew when I looked at him that it was too late. He was too far gone, and all the cash in the world couldn’t save him now. He wasn’t living anymore; he was just waiting to die.

I came home from these meetings feeling totally drained, like just being around someone like that was enough to drag me down to his level. Every time I saw how far Bill had sunk, it made me realize how dark and terrible this world can be, and I would fall into my own dark place for days. My art was all that saved me at those times. Sometimes I would call in to work for a whole week so I could spend all my days in my tiny apartment with my paints and canvases, putting all of my soul into those paintings. I lost jobs that way, but I knew there were always other shit jobs that I could take, other restaurants where I could wait tables, other buildings where I could clean toilets, other gas stations where I could work the night shift. The jobs didn’t matter. What mattered to me was preserving myself, taking care of my soul by putting what I could on to those canvases. After a week of painting, I’d have probably ten pieces to show for my effort. I didn’t know if they were all that good or not, if they’d be worth shit to anyone else, but that didn’t really matter to me. What mattered was that I’d painted myself out of my hole, that I’d found my way back to the world where the regular people lived, the happy people, and that I could once again walk around
with them even though I knew I wasn’t really one of them.

I went to eat at the restaurant that night for a late dinner, after I’d spent nearly four hours working feverishly on my latest painting, a desolate landscape done in shades of maroon. I thought maroon expressed jealousy perfectly, and I could never really understand why green was the traditional color associated with it. I brought the novel I was reading with me, in case Travis was too busy to eat with me, but he gladly joined me at my table when I arrived.

“I’m glad you stopped by,” he said. He had this annoying habit of constantly glancing around the restaurant when he sat with me, never really looking me in the eye as he always did at other times. I could understand his attention to the goings-on of his restaurant, but it was still a little obnoxious. Sometimes I wanted to wave my hands in front of him and yell, “I’m over here.”

I turned around to follow his gaze. He seemed to be watching one of the pretty, young waitresses, a girl named Lisa whom I’d hired right before I’d quit as manager of the restaurant. That had been a full year ago, and I was surprised she was still working there. She had been a graduate student at a local university, if I remembered correctly, very intelligent, but soft-spoken and shy. Actually, now that I looked at her pretty young body and her long brown hair, I realized who she kind of reminded me of. She reminded me of Beth. I thought maybe this was just my mind playing tricks on me, willing me to believe that Travis was staring at a girl who looked like his ex-girlfriend, so I looked away,
then back again, just to be sure. Yeah. She still looked like Beth.

When I turned around again, Travis had moved on to stare at something else, in the direction of the door, and I figured I was probably just being paranoid. “Good night?” I asked him.

“Mm-hmm,” he murmured. “Were you home this afternoon? I saw your car there, but I couldn’t find you.”

You didn’t look very hard, I thought to myself. I thought about telling him what I’d seen, demanding to know why Beth’s number was on his desk, but I just smiled and said, “Oh, I walked to the studio this morning. It was such a nice day, I figured I might as well.”

He nodded, and he suddenly stopped staring at the other diners and turned to look at me. “I love you,” he said.

I was kind of surprised by him saying it, caught off guard a little bit at the suddenness of it. It wasn’t as though we didn’t often tell each other that – after five years, it wasn’t really something we were shy about doing, even in public like this. But I’d been so caught up in thinking about this supposed affair he was having with Beth, an affair I’d likely dreamed up myself, that I’d somehow forgotten that Travis and I were in love. This wasn’t just some frivolous thing, two men having a fling together before they tossed each other away and moved on to the next man. I’d had enough of those relationships, and I was old enough now to know that wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted a man to settle down with, to depend on, and to depend on me. I wanted to know that I wasn’t in this on my
own. I smiled back at Travis, taking his hand, and whispered back, “I love you too.”

I realized then that whatever had happened between him and Beth was all in the past, just as the love I’d shared with Bill was gone and dead. I would never forget Bill, and Travis would never forget Beth. I didn’t know why he was contacting her, or even if he was contacting her, but I knew that it didn’t matter in the end. Travis smiled at me and slipped his hand over mine where it rested on the table, and I knew that we could live for each other, whatever happened.
I watched Elizabeth where she stood at the stove, moving the eggs she was scrambling around in the skillet. She seemed a little distracted, as though she wasn’t really looking at the eggs, but at something else entirely, something in her own mind that I could never quite get to. After a year of marriage, Elizabeth was still as inaccessible to me as ever.

Today was actually our one-year anniversary. It had been on this day last year that Elizabeth had stood next to me, radiant in a shimmering white gown, and said, “I do.” And I’d said it to. But what, in reality did it mean? What were we really agreeing to? Sometimes, when I saw her – my wife – standing in the kitchen, lying on the bed, bending over to pick up a book she’d dropped, I wondered whether I really knew this woman at all. Of course there’s that old question of how well we can ever really know anyone else. But with Elizabeth, it was something different, something else, something deeper than just a separation of our two minds. We were separate in other ways that I couldn’t quite explain to myself, but that I recognized nonetheless.

“Darling, could you make some toast please?” she asked, turning her head to glance at me over her shoulder. I nodded and stood from where I’d been sitting at the kitchen table, stopping to kiss her cheek on the way to the toaster. I grabbed the loaf of whole-wheat bread Elizabeth had set out and put a couple of
slices into the toaster. I thought fleetingly of breakfasts before Elizabeth, which had been hurried, unceremonious affairs. During medical school, I’d gotten in the habit of wolfing down my food as quickly as I could because I simply didn’t have time to waste on eating, much less cooking, with all the work I had to do. Even long after I’d graduated and started working a slightly less hectic schedule as an anesthesiologist in one of Austin’s finest hospitals, I was so used to eating on the go that I never bothered to take any time to relax with a meal. Until Elizabeth came along. She seemed to like to make breakfast for me, sometimes making pancakes, sometimes eggs, sometimes omelets, occasionally even something as extravagant as cinnamon rolls that she made by hand, from scratch. Eventually we sort of had a little breakfast schedule – Monday was scrambled eggs and bacon, Tuesday was buttermilk pancakes, and so on. I became accustomed to the routine, and she seemed to as well. It was good to have a routine, but I wondered if it made me a boring person.

The bread popped up from the toaster about the same time as Elizabeth finished cooking her eggs and bacon. She put the eggs and bacon on serving plates and brought them to the table, setting them down next to the toast I’d brought over. We sat down at the table and started to pile food onto our plates, smearing the toast with butter and strawberry jam. Eggs and bacon, and it wasn’t even Monday. It was Saturday, normally a day for cold cereal and orange juice. But Elizabeth had made this breakfast special for our anniversary.

“Happy anniversary, sweetheart,” I told her, reaching for her hand across
the table. She took my hand and squeezed it, smiling in a sincere, believable way.

“You too.” We stayed there like that for a minute, holding hands, our eyes locked on each other, and it seemed like a nice little scene between two lovers. But in some ways, that’s all it was – a scene. There was no overwhelming, crazy, and passionate love that kept us staring in to each other’s eyes. I think it was just a sense of being obligated to do these things that lovers do, to say the things we were supposed to say.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about,” I told her, after we’d gone back to munching on our breakfast. “I have some good news.”

“Really? What is it?”

“I’ve been offered a position as chief of anesthesiology.”

She grinned widely and took my hand again. “Oh, Richard,” she said. “Congratulations. I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to sound modest, when in fact I was exceedingly pleased with myself. I was thirty-four, and I hadn’t expected to make chief for at least another few years. “There’s just one thing. It’s not at a hospital here in Austin.”

“Then where?”

I paused and picked up my fork again. “Dallas.” I said it as quickly as I could, then scooped some more eggs into my mouth.

Elizabeth’s smile faded, and I saw her go inside of herself. “Dallas,” she
repeated, her voice quiet and reverent. “I haven’t been there in years.”

“If you don’t want to go,” I started, hoping that she wouldn’t say she didn’t want to. I wanted more than anything to take the position, and I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I would always resent her a little if she’d told me she didn’t want to go.

But she just smiled and seemed to come back to me from wherever her mind had been. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “Of course I want to go. I’m so proud of you, sweetheart.”

“Thank you,” I said, relieved. I’d been a little bit worried about telling her about this move because she’d lived in Dallas before she’d come to Austin, where’d we’d met. She never spoke of it, other than the random allusion to the fact that she hadn’t lived always lived in Austin. In fact, I really knew nothing about the life she’d led before she arrived here. It was as though she hadn’t existed until she’d moved here three years ago, and I really couldn’t imagine why that was, unless there was something she was running from. And whatever that was, I was leading her back to it. I wanted to protect her, but how could I, when I didn’t even know from what?

The first time I saw Elizabeth, it was pouring down rain, a bitterly cold rain, and she was out jogging in a pair of shiny black running tights and a sweatshirt that was soaked through and heavy with water. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but little tendrils that had slipped out of the rubber band clung
to her temples and the back of her neck. She kept her chin tucked under as she
pushed up the hill before her, into the biting rain, against the harsh wind.

I watched her from the comfort of my car, stopped at a traffic light, as she
crossed the intersection. She was soaked to the bone and looked thin and
exhausted, as though she’d been running for days without rest, but she was the
most beautiful thing I’d seen in a long time. I was on my way home from work,
where I’d just spent six hours watching the vital signs of a woman whose
anesthesia I’d been handling for her heart surgery. She’d come out of it all fine,
which of course was exactly what I’d expected. There was no back-slapping for
a job well done, no great stories of fantastic saves for the anesthesiologist.
There was no glory when things went right, but there was hell to pay when things
gone very wrong. Luckily for me, things had never gone very wrong yet. But even
when my patients opened their eyes and left the hospital, alive by virtue of my
diligence, I felt no pride. It had all become so mundane, so mechanical, so
exceedingly dull. I had become so boring and desperate that I was intrigued by
random women running down the street.

Of course there had been other women before, and I had friends, mostly
other doctors that I worked with. The first time I saw Elizabeth, it had been two
months since I’d broken it off with the latest in a string of meaningless girlfriends.
Tara had been a very petite nurse from the ICU, a pretty redhead who giggled all
the time and made me realize why doctors shouldn’t date nurses. Seeing
Elizabeth made me think of her again. Actually, it was less of a thought than a
feeling. Seeing Elizabeth made me feel some emotion that I’d felt for Tara, bringing back the sense of loss that I’d inexplicably felt when I realized that Tara wasn’t the one. I was getting older, and the other doctors were starting to joke that I’d never settle down. I wanted to find a woman I could love, someone I could marry and live my life with. Tara hadn’t been that woman, and neither had any of the ones before her. I was starting to wonder if that woman even existed. And then Elizabeth ran into my life.

I saw her often, running down the road that I drove home on. She seemed to jog at the same time everyday, which was generally the time that I was on my way home from work. It wasn’t that I sought her out, or made any special effort to see her. I certainly wasn’t a stalker. But it was nice to see her there every few days, when I happened to be driving down the road at the right time. On those days, it seemed like fate had brought us both to that particular time and place. I had no idea where her evening run started or what path she took once I sped by her in my car. It didn’t really matter to me where she’d come from or where she was going – just that she crossed my path once every few days, her feet hitting the pavement in the same place they had so many times before. It somehow brightened my evening, just seeing her jogging down the road like that, whether it was sunny or raining, hot or cold. I’d never met her, didn’t even know her name or anything about her, but knowing that she’d be there every day, running on and on, over and over, brought a sense of certainty to my life that calmed me and helped me trust that some force, like fate, would lead me down whatever path I
was meant to follow.

And of course it did. On the day that I met Elizabeth, I had left work early because a surgery had been canceled. Had that surgery not been canceled, had I been in that operating room as I was supposed to be, I wouldn’t have been driving down that road at 6:30 PM, and I wouldn’t have been there to save Elizabeth’s life after a truck hit and almost killed her.

I never actually saw what happened. The accident happened after I’d already passed by her. I’d smiled and watched her run, admiring the way her legs looked in those tight running shorts she wore. And then she was behind me, that part of my night over. When I heard the screech of brakes behind me, I looked in my rearview mirror and what I saw made me slam on my own brakes. It was her, in the middle of the road, a small but widening puddle of dark red blood pooling on the pavement around her. I didn’t know her name or who she was, but I’d seen her almost every day for the last three months, and I had the feeling that I had just watched her die.

I don’t like to think about how it felt to see her in the road like that, looking shattered and destroyed. One of her legs was bent at an odd angle, obviously very badly broken, and there was more blood than I’d ever seen. The whole scene was one of chaos. People had stopped their cars to help, but none of them seemed to know what to do. No one wanted to get very close because of all the blood. Several people had out cell phones, some of them talking to the police, some of them talking to friends or relatives about what they were seeing.
“I’m a doctor,” I mumbled, pushing my way through the crowd. “Let me through.” Everyone seemed to move aside, parting for me until I found myself bent down near where her body was. I knew I should have been worried about all the blood, that I shouldn’t touch her unless I had some gloves on. In fact, I shouldn’t have even touched her at all, what with the concern for lawsuits and insurance claims and all that other legal craziness. I kneeled next to her, my hands resting on my knees, but I couldn’t just stand there and watch her die. It was the closest I’d ever gotten to her, this girl who I’d been watching for nearly four months. I reached down with the gentle tenderness that I felt toward her, placing my fingers against her neck to feel for a pulse, but I got nothing. I could see, now that I was close to her, that she wasn’t breathing either. She was dead, probably killed instantly by the force of the truck that had hit her. She was such a small woman, and the pickup truck had probably been going pretty fast before the driver had slammed on his brakes. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-five years old, and it was all over for her. I felt a little embarrassed about how emotional I was getting about this woman who I didn’t even know. When you were a doctor, people that you took care of died. That was how it was. It was a fact of life. But this girl had always seemed immune to all that, so healthy and vibrant as she jogged down the road. I wasn’t prepared to admit she was dead. So I leaned over and gave her CPR, surrounded by a crowd of people who were all watching with morbid curiosity, until the ambulance showed up.

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A police officer came to talk to me about the accident a few days after it happened. He said he’d come to take my statement, as a witness of the accident, though I told him I hadn’t really seen much of it at all.

“Did you see Ms. Symon step out into the road?” the officer asked. Evidently that was her name – Symon.

“No,” I replied. “When I passed her, she was on the sidewalk. I guess she must have crossed the road after I’d already gone by.”

He nodded curtly and wrote some things down. After a few more questions, he thanked me for my time, and stood to go.

“Officer,” I said, “did she die? The woman?”

“No,” he said. “It’s very lucky for her that you were around. You saved her life.”

I should have been pleased with myself about that, but I didn’t really think much about it. I was thinking about the questions he’d asked me. It had seemed that he was trying to get me to say something in particular. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like he was trying to get me to say something that would make it seem like the accident had been her fault, rather than the driver. I thought it was strange, but I didn’t think too much about it. Now that I knew she wasn’t dead, I wanted to see her again. So I went down to the hospital gift shop, bought the first bouquet of flowers that I saw, and went back upstairs to the ICU.

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I went to see her a few times while she was in the hospital, leaving small gifts with her because I felt bad. She never seemed to have any visitors – she had only two get well soon cards sitting on the table by her bed, and the only gifts were those that I had brought. When she spoke, her voice was low and quiet, as though she’d witnessed a horrible tragedy, which I guess made sense, since she had almost died. It was a strange thing for me to finally talk to her after all this time, to finally find things out about her and put a name and a personality to the face that I’d seen for so long. She seemed like a genuinely nice girl, a student in anthropology at the University of Texas in Austin. I wanted to get to know her. For some reason I couldn’t understand, I felt compelled to do what I could to keep her in my life.

Unfortunately, most of the time when I saw her, I thought about how she’d looked when she’d been lying in the road with all that blood around. I couldn’t help but remember how she’d been dead until I came and helped her, how she’d be dead right now if it hadn’t been for me. I’d had her blood on her hands, and every time I talked to her now it seemed like a miracle. It seemed like fate. I couldn’t let her just disappear from my life. She was important to me now.

So when I found out that she’d been discharged from the hospital one day when I went to see her, I did something that I knew was totally unethical. I couldn’t believe I was doing it. But I went ahead anyway and got a copy of her chart, which had her phone number and home address on it. I copied down the information, intending to call her and tell her that I’d gotten the number from her
doctor, if she asked. I was about to return the chart when I glanced down at some notes that her doctors had written. There was a note from one of the hospital psychiatrists, something about suspicions that Elizabeth had suicidal ideations, and that was why she’d run out in front of the truck. I closed her chart and put it away. Of course I didn’t believe that she could have run out in front of the truck on purpose. She seemed like such a nice, sweet girl. But then again, how well did I really know her? I’d only met her a couple of times. And I couldn’t help but think of the sad, hollow look her eyes sometimes had. But I dismissed these thoughts as ridiculous, and I was determined to get to know her better, if for no other reason than to dispel the idea that she could have tried to kill herself.

I had called her. We had gone on dates. We did all those things. We seemed to get along well, and I gradually became convinced that she was a mostly sane person who would never seriously consider suicide. I believed these things. I believed I was comfortable with her, that she and I belonged together, so one evening over a nice dinner at a fancy restaurant in downtown Austin, I asked Elizabeth to marry me.

But even now, two years later, Elizabeth was still a mystery to me. When I got out of the shower that morning, she was writing in her journal, as she did so often, and she shut it quickly when I came in, slipping it into the drawer of her nightstand. It seemed as though she always tried to hide the journal when I came around, as though it was actually some dirty magazine she was reading
and didn’t want to let me know. I thought about the things she might be writing in there and realized it could be anything. She could be writing about how much she loved me, or how much she hated me, or how she’d like to kill me in my sleep, or how she was in love with another man. I had no idea what my own wife would write about in her journal or why she’d even need to have a journal. Why couldn’t she just talk to me? She told me she’d been doing this all her life, writing in journals, hoarding away memories for later use. When we’d moved in together after getting married, she’d brought a box full of nothing but old notebooks that were completely filled with journal entries, dating back to as early as she could even write. She kept everything. I wondered why she bothered with that, since the journals stayed in their box in the hallway closet of our house, and she never took them down to look at them. What was it that she was trying to do by writing this down? I couldn’t understand.

There was so much about her that I just couldn’t understand, but that I wanted to understand. I thought after two years, I would know my wife better than anyone else. But in some ways, I didn’t know her now any better than I did when she’d just been some woman running down the street that I saw on my way home. She was just as distant, just as remote, just as unattainable as she always was. I had wanted to love a woman that would give herself to me entirely, and someone that would let me do the same, and I had thought she would be that woman. I had seen her laid out, dead, exposed as I’d never seen anyone else. I’d held her life in my hands. That should have given me some
power over her, shouldn’t it? That should have given me some sort of secret inner knowledge of her that no one else had. I felt sad when I thought of my own wife as a puzzle that I would probably never solve.

She sat on the bed, still holding the pen that she’d been using to write in her journal, and smiled at me. What could such a smile mean? I didn’t know. I tried to smile back, but there was no way I could make myself do it. I went in to our walk-in closet, hoping she would follow me, desperately needing for her to follow me. I tried to draw her in with my mind, to summon her by the power of the connection that we shared as man and wife. But there was no such connection. I stood in the closet for a few minutes before I gave up on her coming in, and when I went out into the bedroom, she wasn’t sitting on the bed any more. She’d gone downstairs, and I could hear her cleaning up the kitchen. I leaned over and opened her nightstand drawer, looking down at the purple spiral notebook she’d put there. Her journal. Her inner thoughts. Her secrets, the key to her soul and all I had ever wondered about her. It was all there within that book, right within my reach. I could pick it up and read her life.

I shut the drawer and turned my back on it, going back to the bathroom to finish getting ready.
4. LIFE IS PERFECT

If there’s one thing I can say about myself, it’s that I just don’t know how to leave well enough alone.

I had it all, really. I had a beautiful, smart, successful, younger boyfriend who was so handsome as to garner glances from both men and women when we went out, which, far from making me jealous, made me proud to have snagged such a great boy for myself. We had a gorgeous condo right in Oak Lawn, Dallas’s gay district, minutes away from downtown and in walking distance of my studio, the restaurant Travis owned, and most of our favorite stores. After more than twenty years of trying to make a name for myself in the art world, my painting had finally taken off and I was making enough money from my art to support Travis and myself, even without his substantial income from the restaurant. I was getting to the point in my career where I could finally start thinking about opening my own gallery, something I’d dreamed of for years.

For all intents and purposes, my life was perfect. I had nothing to complain about. I was so far removed from the person I had been, the man who had gone from one dead-end job to the next, the man who had tried to fill his longing with meaningless one-night stands, the man who had all but given up on love and success and happiness. I couldn’t even really remember how it felt to be that person, and these times were just distant memories that seemed a little
unreal, like a dream does when you wake up the next morning.

So yes, you could say my life was perfect. Naturally I had to go and screw it up by proposing to Travis.

Travis had brought home a bottle of red wine and a dozen white roses – my favorite – for the occasion, although when he was out picking them up for me, he had no way of knowing that there even was an occasion. I had told him that I wanted to have a special night together, just the two of us, a nice home-cooked meal that I would inevitably spend hours planning and putting together. I had asked him to pick up the wine, and I thought he’d just grab a bottle from the bar of Libreccio, his restaurant. But he’d stopped at the gourmet grocery a few blocks from our apartment to get a really good bottle, something he’d read about in a wine magazine but that the restaurant’s wine vendor didn’t carry. And when he saw the flowers, he thought about how nice they’d look in that vintage cut-glass vase we’d found together at the flea market a few weeks back. “The perfect flowers for my perfect man,” he’d told me as he came in.

I smiled to myself as I watched him trim the roses and arrange them in the vase, talking to me about some boys’ night out that he and Darren, the chef at Libreccio, had planned for the following evening. The whole thing made me feel very domesticated, so normal, so average. I felt like we had been doing this forever, though it had been just five years since we’d met and less than a year since he and I had moved in together. I knew that I could spend the rest of my life doing nothing but this – being the comfort that Travis came home to at the
end of the day, letting him be the man who brought me flowers. It had taken me forty-two years to do it, but I knew that I had finally found my soul mate.

“So do you want to come with us?” he said, sweeping the remnants of the rose stems into his hand and dumping them in the trash. “I mean, you know how Darren is. I’m sure he’ll do nothing but talk about women all night, but you know, it could be fun.”

I shrugged. Travis knew I hated Darren, a man who was the very definition of the hyper-masculine, homophobic man’s man. He constantly teased Travis about being bisexual, and when it came to me, he was outright nasty about my homosexuality. But for some reason he and Travis got along well, going to bars where Darren would pick up as many women as he could, while Travis…well, I didn’t really know what Travis did. I had never gone with them. I saw as little of Darren as was absolutely necessary. “Thanks for inviting me, but I think I’ll pass,” I told him. I turned around to check the tomato sauce that was simmering on the stove. I was making Travis’s favorite – veal parmigiana – and I wanted it to be perfect.

And it was perfect. Everything was perfect, in fact, except for the one moment that I had been so carefully planning, the one moment that this had all been leading up to. It was the moment when I started my speech asking Travis to go through a commitment ceremony with me – the gay answer to marriage in a country run by conservatives that don’t want to hear about anyone’s “alternative lifestyles” and would rather pretend there’s no such thing as men who love other
men as naturally and innocently as other men love women. Travis and I had attended two commitment ceremonies in the last year. We’d stood side by side, holding hands, while our gay friends did the marriage thing. Both of those times, I’d looked in his eyes and seen something there, some promise, some awareness that one day, this would be us. Or at least I thought I had. Now that I’d actually worked up the nerve to ask him, that look wasn’t anywhere to be found. After I gave him my little speech about loving him and knowing that he was the one I wanted to spend my life with, after I asked him to marry me, when I started to reach for the ring that I’d stashed in my pocket, the look in his eyes was more that of a deer caught in the headlights than of a man in love. I knew I’d made a mistake, but the damage was done.

After we finished dinner, I couldn’t stand to stay around the apartment. It was too awkward. I grabbed up my keys, muttered something to Travis about getting a little air, and dashed out the front door. After nearly forty-five minutes of aimless wandering, I found myself in front of the Quadrangle, an upscale dining and shopping area not far from where we lived. I looked in windows as I passed at happy couples eating in restaurants, sharing appetizers, kissing over their tables, smiling at each other. They were everywhere, walking around in pairs and holding hands while they shopped at trendy stores. I walked until I reached the liquor store at the corner and stood outside the window, staring in at the long, bottle-lined shelves. I went in partly because I didn’t want to just stand there
looking like a lost, pathetic, hopeless man, but also partly because I felt like I
might find something in there to dull the ache of rejection. I picked out a bottle of
Jack Daniels and bought it, not without a little pang at the sudden, unwanted
realization that the first shot Travis and I had ever done together, back before we
were even dating, had been Jack Daniels. I got in line behind the attractive,
young singles who were buying fancy bottles of wine and expensive liqueurs and
tried to casually hold my bottle of Jack a little behind my back, where it wasn’t so
obvious. How humiliating. It was almost embarrassing enough to make me go
put it back, but then I thought about Travis again and knew I had to buy it. I just
prayed I wouldn’t see anyone I knew.

I knew I couldn’t wander around the streets of downtown Dallas drinking
from a bottle of Jack without inviting some adverse attention, so I started heading
in the direction of my studio. I felt like a street bum out of one of those old 1950’s
movies, carrying my bottle of Jack in my unmarked brown paper bag. All I
needed was to let my clean-shaven face get a little stubbly and maybe trade in
my four hundred dollar designer jeans for a ripped-up pair of corduroy pants,
then pass out under a tree with the bottle clutched in my hands. What a way to
spend my Friday night. I was supposed to be at home basking in the joy of my
newfound marital bliss, so to speak, but instead I was contemplating my future as
a washed-up drunk under a tree in downtown Dallas.

I dug in my pockets to find my keys when I finally got to the building where
I shared a studio space with Annika, a pretty, twenty-something painter with a
taste for surrealism. I entered the main lobby of the building, dimly illuminated by the fading evening light, and made my way toward the door to my studio. The studio was dark when I opened the door, but I could barely make out the shape of Annika sitting on a stool in front of the huge canvas that she’d started working on earlier that day. Occasionally she did smaller paintings, but as a rule, Annika painted huge, larger-than-life pieces that dwarfed her tiny figure as she stood on a fold-up stepstool. It seemed strange that such a tiny person as her would be responsible for works so magnificent in size, but she had told me once that it made perfect sense. “Same reason I drive an SUV,” she told me. “The short people always try to compensate for their height, you know? Just like guys with small dicks who drive giant trucks. It’s human nature.”

She obviously hadn’t heard me when I came in, concentrating as attentively as she was on her painting. She’d been working in the dark, something I knew she liked to do, painting by feel, as she said. She told me that she had pictures in her head that she was always trying desperately to get onto the canvas, and it helped her to concentrate if she couldn’t see the canvas in front of her, distracting her from the perfect image that she had in her head. She joked that she’d like to go blind one day – she was used to painting without her eyesight anyway, sort of liked it even, and she’d probably gain some renown that she wouldn’t have otherwise. She wasn’t above using a disability in her favor, even when it was a disability she didn’t have yet.

I flipped on the light, and Annika gave a little yelp and dropped the brush
she’d been holding. It splattered a spot of deep blue paint on the tile floor.

“Goddamn, Ezra, you scared the shit out of me,” she said, slipping off the stool to pick up her brush.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her, picking up a rag from her worktable to wipe away the splash of paint.

“Working,” she said. “I had to get out of the house for a little bit. What are you doing here? And what is that?” she asked, pointing at my bag with the Jack in it.

I pulled the bottle out and showed it to her.

She frowned a little. “Hitting the hard liquor, are we? I didn’t know you liked that stuff.”

“Like it? No. But it serves its purpose. It dulls the pain, soothes the mind, whatever you want to call it.” I removed the lid and took a gulp straight from the bottle. It burned the back of my throat, but it felt good. I’d been waiting for that ever since I’d paid for the bottle back at the Quadrangle. It seemed like ages ago, like I’d been walking, parched, through the desert, just waiting for that one sip that would make everything right, though it had only been about twenty minutes.

“That sounds like a story,” she said, setting her brush and palette down on her worktable. She pulled my stool up next to hers and motioned for me to sit down. “Tell me everything.”
Travis had started to freak out as soon as I’d started the speech I’d planned. It wasn’t anything major, just a subtle little panic that I could see rising up in him, probably because he knew what was coming. In fact, anyone else probably wouldn’t have noticed it, but I knew all his tells – the way he ran his hand through his long brown hair when he got nervous, the way he’d stop meeting your eyes if you said something that bothered him although he insisted on the importance of eye contact in communication under normal circumstances, the way he drummed his fingers repeatedly against the table because for some reason he was comforted by repetitive noise. He was doing all these things by the time I got halfway through the speech, the fingers of his left hand twisted around a lock of his hair as he stared at the fingers of his right hand tapping rhythmically against the tabletop. I don’t even know why I didn’t stop myself when I saw him getting nervous. I guess I’d sort of worked up some momentum, trying to get myself ready to tell him all this, and I couldn’t stop even when I saw it wasn’t going as I’d wanted it to.

So when I finally got to the end of my little speech, when I said those words – “Travis, will you marry me?” – I knew better than to expect some enthusiastic response. Still, I hadn’t expected him to mutter, “I’ll be right back,” and then run off to the bathroom and lock himself in.

I didn’t follow him right away. I didn’t want to intrude on this private moment he was having, or make him feel like I was pressuring him to give me an answer. I was also kind of afraid that he’d gone in there to throw up because he
was so repulsed by the thought of a commitment ceremony with me, and I thought I would probably have to kill myself if I’d stood outside the bathroom door and heard the sound of him retching over the toilet. So I waited a minute before I pushed my chair back from the dining room table and slowly walked down the hall to the bathroom. I could hear the sound of water running in the tub – actually it sounded like both the tub and the sink – as I stood outside the door.

“Travis?” I knocked on the door. “Are you taking a bath?” The whole thing seemed so ridiculous. I hadn’t really pegged him for the hysterical type, running off and jumping into the bath at a time like this. When he didn’t answer, I tried the door, but it was locked. Shit, could he be trying to drown himself? I jiggled the doorknob again. “Travis?” I pictured him inside the bathroom, plunging his head into the filled tub, holding it there while his lungs filled with water. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Could you open the door so we can talk about this?”

Finally the sound of running water stopped and I heard Travis turn the lock on the door. He didn’t open it though, so I slowly, cautiously, turned the handle, half afraid that he would jump out and hit me over the head with something and drown me when I walked in. Not that he was the violent type, but obviously, he hadn’t taken this whole engagement thing very well, and there was no telling what would happen now.

But he was just sitting on the edge of the bathtub when I walked in, looking kind of like a kid that had just been scolded. I sat down next to him and put my arm around his shoulders, but I could feel him pulling away from me – not
physically withdrawing his body from me – but taking his emotions somewhere deep inside of him, somewhere I could never go. I had this horrible feeling that, far from bringing him closer to me and bridging whatever gap had existed between us so that we could become two halves of the same whole, I had driven him away. When I looked at him, sitting there on the edge of the bathtub, staring down at the floor, his hair falling into his face while he hunched in my arms as though under some oppressive weight, I feared that he was never coming back.

I’d managed to keep myself from crying as I’d wandered around after leaving the apartment. The last thing I wanted to do was behave like some stupid drama queen wandering around Oak Lawn, weeping and drawing the attention of everyone driving down the busy streets. I can barely step out of my house without seeing someone I know – one of the hazards of working and playing and living all in the same place – and it wouldn’t do much for my reputation for me to be seen bawling like a child in the street on a Friday night. But when I told my story to Annika, when I saw the empathy in her eyes, I broke down. I took a long gulp from the bottle of Jack Daniels and just let it all go.

“How could he?” I said, hearing a hint of shrillness creep into my voice. I realized I was sort of wailing and tried to tone it down a bit. “How could he do something like that? I love him so much. I thought he felt the same way.”

Annika looked at me with such a sad expression, as though her heart was breaking just listening to me, and she handed me a tissue from the box on her
worktable. “He’ll realize what a mistake he’s making,” she said, her voice quiet but firm. I’d been comforted by women before, women who were as well-meaning as Annika, but who lacked this conviction and belief in me that she had. When she said those words, she believed them, unlike those other women who had all told me what I’d wanted to hear even if they didn’t think it was true. I’d heard it in their voices, seen it in their eyes. There were plenty of times that I’d just cried even harder as some woman friend told me that it would all work out, because it was obvious that in their hearts, they knew what I knew – that it wouldn’t really work out at all. And all of those times, it hadn’t. There had been plenty of boys before Travis who had treated me badly and walked all over me, boys who I had wanted to care about but whom I’d never really let myself fall in love with. I always had plenty of female friends around to sob to, friends who were more than happy to comfort me in my time of need. But this was different. I hadn’t loved those boys, not like I loved Travis. It was good that I had Annika now, someone as sincere in her empathy for me as I was in my love for Travis.

“What if he’s not making a mistake?” I asked. “What if I’m making the mistake? Maybe I moved too fast, you know, before he was ready, and now I’ve scared him off and he’s not going to want me anymore, and…”

“Ez, honey, stop,” Annika said, putting her finger against my lips. “You know all that’s not true. You know Travis loves you, and he’s not going to leave you because you wanted to spend your life with him. Men are…well, men are freaked out by commitment. Especially men who are bi. Think about it. He can’t
even commit to one sexuality, so how can you expect him to commit to one partner without putting up a fight?” She smiled and ran her hands through my hair, and I laughed in spite of myself. It wasn’t funny, not really, because I knew that what she’d said was true in a very scary, very real way. He couldn’t commit. But when Annika said it, it seemed okay to laugh, because sometimes life is just so screwed up you can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. Sometimes it seems that life is just one huge, snarled-up knot that we have to untangle, but every time we get one thread loose, every time we think we’ve straightened it all out, we find another tangle that’s even worse than the first one.

“I have an idea,” Annika said, taking the bottle of Jack Daniels from me and downing some of it herself. She shook her head and made a cute little squeaking noise, then handed the bottle back to me. I knew she wasn’t much of a drinker, and I was shocked to see her take such a big gulp like that. “Why don’t we sit here in this studio all night and get piss drunk, just you and me and this bottle?”

“Won’t Greg be a little pissed if you come home drunk off your ass?” I asked. Greg, her husband, was nice, but very conservative and without much sense of humor. When he and Annika had told Travis and me over dinner that they were engaged, I had jokingly asked if I could be a bridesmaid at the wedding, and he asked me, very seriously, if I wouldn’t mind being an usher instead. He seemed totally wrong for spunky little Annika with her bouncy blonde ponytail and her liberal, rebellious outlook on life. But he seemed to make her
happy, and as far as I knew, he'd never done anything to hurt her, so I couldn't complain.

“Greg is out of town,” she said. “Taking a deposition in Los Angeles for some big case he has coming up. Evidently he missed his flight and couldn’t get another one until tomorrow morning.” She took another sip from the bottle, tossing it back quickly so she wouldn’t have to taste it, then handed it back to me. “What about Travis? Won’t he wonder about you? Especially after what happened.”

I took a giant gulp of Jack and shrugged. “I think he’s going out with Darren. He was on the phone with him when I left.” She nodded, knowing what that meant. I’d complained to her about Darren before. Once when he and Travis had gone out, Travis had come back with his tongue pierced, though he had no memory of having it done. He said he kind of liked it, but I convinced him that it would be totally wrong for his image as a serious businessman and he took it out. He was still so young compared to me – twenty-nine – and he could still handle these crazy nights out that I no longer had the energy or the desire for. Sometimes I worried that I was too boring for him, too old, too quiet and subdued, but when I mentioned this to him, he said that my calm and serenity was exactly what he wanted. I was the perfect complement to his busy, always-going lifestyle. The restaurant business, as I knew from personal experience, was a crazy, frenetic world of drugs, alcohol, and sex with coworkers, and I was the peace and quiet that he could come home to after all of that. I just worried
that one of these times when he went out with Darren he’d come back with a mistake that was worse – and more permanent – than the tongue piercing.

“So then it’s just you and me all night,” she said, taking the bottle from me again and throwing her head back to take a dramatic sip. Her hair fell away from her face, revealing the soft, smooth skin of her neck. She handed the bottle back to me and wiped her mouth, grinning with the look of a coy, flirtatious teenager. She was cute in a young, girlish way, with adorable little lips that she never bothered putting lipstick on and big blue eyes that seemed to sparkle with enthusiasm and life. That sounds so cliché to say. It’s so inane to use that phrase about her when it’s been used over and over again in books about characters that aren’t even real. But really there were no other words for it. Her eyes were just so alive, in a way that no one else’s were. No one I’d met had ever come close to equaling Annika’s zeal for life and passion for art. I realized, as I sat there across from her, that she was just the kind of woman that I could fall in love with if I wasn’t who I was. In a different time and place, if the circumstances were changed, if I felt that way about women, I could feel something for this woman. Sometimes, like right now, I thought she was flirting with me, but she was so subtle and insinuating about it that I could never be sure if it really was intentional or if I was just reading something into her actions.

“I didn’t realize you could drink like that,” I told her. The bottle was nearly half-empty by now, and I was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. It was nice to feel that warm relaxation creeping over me. I didn’t drink often, and I
really hadn’t intended to drink so much. When I’d bought the bottle, I’d only wanted a sip or two, intending it more as a prop than anything else. It seemed like the kind of thing I should carry around with me as I wandered desperately around the streets in the wake of rejection. But I was starting to feel very comfortable sitting there in the studio with Annika, comfortable in that way that two people can never really become until alcohol is brought into the situation to lower inhibitions and remove any sort of self-consciousness. I knew that we could say anything to each other in this kind of situation, and that if we stayed here long enough, and drank enough, we would ask each other the questions that we’d always wanted to pose but had been afraid to ask. Now that I was actually in that position, I couldn’t really think of what those questions might be, but it still felt good to be there with her, without my shields.

She smiled at me. “I used to be quite the drinker,” she said. “Back in college. I don’t do that anymore. You know, got to be the good, respectable wife and all that. Greg wants me to have a baby.”

“That’s great,” I said. She didn’t say anything, so I asked, “Right?”

“It’s okay. I guess.”

“You’d have a beautiful baby, Annika. Your eyes, Greg’s dark hair, your perfect features.” I thought about painting a picture of what Greg and Annika’s child would look like, but I don’t really tend toward realism. In fact, I prefer abstract nudes, and I thought that might be a little inappropriate for a picture of the offspring of one of my best friends. “What would you name him? Or her?”
She shrugged and took another long drink. “I don’t know. To be honest, I don’t know if I really want to have a baby.”

“Why not?” I could tell I had hit on sort of a sore subject.

“I don’t know. I’m not really sure what I want right now. In fact, I’m not really sure if I even want to stay with Greg.”

“What?” I was shocked. “But you two seem so happy together! Why?”

“We do seem happy, yes, but that doesn’t really mean we are. We fight. He’s gone all the time on trips. I think he might be having an affair or something.”

The thought of anyone hurting Annika like that made me really angry. I thought about taking a few of my larger, more macho friends with me to teach Greg a lesson about fidelity when he got home from his trip. “With who?” I asked. She just shrugged again. I said it more firmly. “With who?”

“No one in particular. I mean, I don’t have any reason to suspect him of having an affair or anything. I don’t know. Things just don’t feel right with him, you know?” I did know. I knew what she was missing – it was that feeling of wholeness, completeness, that sense of being part of something special. It was the exact feeling that I treasured in my relationship with Travis, that feeling that I wasn’t really sure we would share anymore after tonight. It was elusive, that feeling, and when you found it, you had better hold on to it if you knew what was good for you.

“Ani, if you don’t feel like you have that feeling with Greg anymore – you know that feeling – you should leave him.” I could hear myself starting to slur my
words. This was starting to border on drunken rambling, but I went on anyway.

“Life is too short to waste it on someone that you’re not totally in love with.”

“Who knows if that even exists anymore?” she asked. “Being totally in love. I mean, do you know anyone who is?”

I paused and looked down at the bottle in my hands. “I am.”

She swiveled slowly back and forth on her stool, looking a little dizzy as she did it, and I thought for a second she might pass out and fall off the stool. But she took a deep breath and said, “Travis isn’t perfect. He just broke your heart.”

“He’s not perfect. But who is? There’s a difference between being perfect and being right for someone.” I hadn’t realized this until I said it out loud, and I wished I had a tape recorder or something with me so I could have gotten it on record. I had this fear that I would be too drunk to remember any of this in the morning.

Annika took the bottle back and took a long, hard gulp from it, downing probably the equivalent of two shots, then slammed it down onto her worktable. She smiled sadly and shook her head. “I don’t think Greg is right for me.” It took me a minute to realize she was actually crying. I’d never seen Annika cry before. She’d always been so solid and reasonable, so happy with her life, so positive and optimistic. One of the sculptors who had a studio down the hall from us, a cranky, older gay man with a grating voice from the two packs a day he smoked, called her “fucking Pollyana” because she was always so cheerful about
everything. It’s a quality that’s tremendously annoying in some people, but Annika made it seem so natural, so silly to be anything less than thrilled about being alive. She’d always been the one to cheer me up when I came in to the studio down about something or in a pissy mood. I’d cried on her shoulder before, after a particularly nasty fight with Travis or when things weren’t going the way I wanted them to with my art.

To see someone so resolutely positive about everything suddenly break down and start crying in front of me shook me more than a little. I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but it felt right to put my arms around her. I felt the warm skin of her neck against mine and smelled the sweet, floral scent of her hair, though it was mostly masked by the strong smell of the alcohol on her breath. I realized she was only acting like this because she was drunk, that she would be back to the same old Annika I knew by morning, the cheerful Annika who smiled through everything and had not a care in the world. But I would never be able to believe in that Annika again because I would know that deep down inside, hidden under layers of smiles and laughter and cheerfulness, this dark version of Annika was always there, quietly sobbing and knowing that life would never be as perfect as she pretended it was.

Annika and I fell asleep on a pile of drop clothes on the studio floor at four in the morning, having finished the entire bottle of Jack Daniels between the two of us. The sun began to shine in through the windows around eight in the
morning, rousing me from my fitful sleep, a sleep disturbed by odd alcohol-induced dreams and the discomfort of sleeping on the hard floor. I woke up with my arms around Annika, her head tucked into the space between my shoulder and my neck, a peaceful look on her face. I had hesitated to suggest that we lie down there together, fearing what we might do when both of us were as drunk as we were. I didn’t want anything to happen that would make things awkward between us. But when she said she was tired and started to stagger drunkenly around the studio in search for her keys, I knew there really wasn’t any other choice. I would have had no problem stumbling the short distance home in a drunken stupor, but there was no way she could drive, and I certainly wouldn’t let her stay in the studio alone.

I tried to get up without waking Annika, but she started to stir as I extracted my arm from under her tiny body. She yawned a little and made a soft sound of contentment, a little “mmm” that sounded like an expression of utter relaxation. When she saw me looking down at her, she smiled. I wondered if she didn’t remember the sorrow of the night before, the way she’d fallen asleep with tears still wet on her cheeks. But even as she smiled, I could see it in her eyes. She remembered. That dark shadow was still there, and always would be there.

“You should go home,” she said to me, softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Travis is waiting for you.”

***
He was waiting for me at the dining room table, with a cup of coffee and an untouched bowl of cereal in front of him. He had the newspaper spread out in front of him, but I could tell he hadn’t been reading it – the pages weren’t shuffled.

“Where have you been?” he asked, standing up as I walked into the dining room. “I’ve been worried about you. You haven’t been answering your cell phone.”

“I didn’t have it with me,” I said, realizing I’d forgotten to take it with me last night when I’d fled the apartment. “I was at my studio.”

“Your studio?” he repeated. “Doing what?”

“Talking to Annika.”

“About what happened last night?”

“Yes.”

“Does she hate me for what I did?”

“No.”

He sat down again and took a sip of his coffee, then glanced up at me cautiously. “Do you?”

I walked to him and put my hands in his hair, stroking his head softly and feeling the touch of his cheek against my chest. “No. I love you. Whatever you do.”

“Ez, I’m sorry,” he said. “You just have to understand, I freaked out, thinking about forever.”
“I know,” I replied. “You don’t have to explain. I don’t need any commitment ceremony or a ring or a certificate or any other stupid thing to tell me that we love each other.” I bent over to kiss his forehead, and as I stood up again, he smiled up at me. It wasn’t gone, that feeling. Maybe it never would be. But I started to realize in that moment that life isn’t perfect – it never is – although sometimes it can come pretty close.
5. SECOND BEST

“Which one are you staring at?” Darren asked, nudging me and handing me another beer that he’d brought back from the bar. “The blonde?”

I took a gulp of the beer and set it down on the table. Actually, it was the brunette I’d been eyeing, the one wearing the short black skirt and the knee-high boots. I’d once been in love with a girl named Beth who’d had a pair of knee-high boots. Lots of girls had them, I guess, but I couldn’t help drawing these connections sometimes. This girl wasn’t as pretty or as thin as her blonde-headed friend, the one who had caught Darren’s eye. I guess she was just sort of average looking, not ugly by any means but not really anything to get too excited about. Her blonde friend was laughing at something that some guy had just said to her, but the brunette wasn’t even smiling. She was tapping her beer bottle with her fingernails, her gaze cast down at the table. She didn’t look sad exactly, not lonely, but somehow alone, even in a bar that was overflowing with people and the sounds of laughter and rock music. She looked like the tragic, quiet kind of girl I’d fall in love with if I was still available to fall in love with people.

“You know I don’t swing that way,” I told Darren.

Darren laughed. “I don’t care if you’re gay or not. That piece of ass has to do something for you.” He grabbed the wrist of a passing cocktail waitress, nearly causing her to drop the tray of empty beer bottles she was carrying. “Four
shots of Jager,” he told her, and she nodded. “You’d better finish that before the next ones come,” he said to me, indicating the shot of Jagermeister that was still sitting in from of me. I really didn’t like Jager all that much, but Darren had this habit of egging me on whenever we went out, buying me drink after drink and calling me a fag or a pussy when I told him I’d had enough. He was thin as a rail himself, probably from all the coke he did, but he could outdrink anyone I knew, and with the people I knew, that was saying quite a lot. People in the food service industry like we were – Darren was the head chef at Libreccio, the Italian restaurant I owned – were notorious drinkers and users. Darren more than lived up to the stereotype, but my tolerance was pretty low, so I usually ended up getting trashed when I drank with Darren. I’d had several beers in addition to three shots of Jager, and with two more on the way, I had a feeling I was in for a very nasty hangover in the morning.

“I think you should go ask her for her number,” Darren said, jerking his head in the direction of the girl. He lit another cigarette and offered me one, but I shook my head.

“Don’t you think Ezra might be a little pissed if I started picking up women at bars?”

Darren shrugged. “Fuck, who said he’d have to know? I wouldn’t tell him, and I’m pretty damn sure you wouldn’t. Besides, if he found out, you could just tell him I made you do it. He already hates me anyway.” He was right about that. From what he told me, Ezra had hated Darren since the moment the two
had met. I’d hired Darren on first thing, before I’d hired Ezra as general manager of the restaurant. Ezra had hinted that the reason he left his position at Libreccio was because of Darren. But I knew he had better reasons. He wanted to devote more time to his art, now that he had the luxury of doing so – the money I made at the restaurant would support us even if he wasn’t successful. Besides, I think he knew I was a little uncomfortable being involved with my general manager.

I think part of the reason why Ezra disliked Darren so much was that Darren was one of those hyper-masculine, macho, man’s-man type of guys. He smoked a lot, drank way more than was good for him, spent a small fortune on cocaine, and slept with a different woman every week. He liked football and had never used a pore-shrinking moisturizer. He was foul-mouthed, honest to the point of bluntness, and coarse. Basically, he was everything that Ezra thought of as the worst in men, everything that he strived to not be, everything that he hoped to avoid in a lover. If I’d met Darren under different circumstances, I probably would have liked him anyway, but the fact that Ezra hated him so much made friendship with Darren all the more intriguing for me. I liked hanging out with him when all of Ezra’s dramatics got to be a little too much for me, partly because I knew it pissed Ezra off, but also because sometimes I just needed a night out with the guys. This night was one of them.

The waitress brought our shots, and Darren slid two of them across the table to me. “To getting beautiful women’s numbers,” he toasted, raising his glass and winking at me. “To taking chances in life and not letting your boyfriend
turn you into as much of a pussy as he is.”

I probably should have said something to defend Ezra, but I just tapped my glass against Darren’s and tossed back the shot, shaking my head a little as the Jager burned the back of my throat. I had realized long ago that there was nothing good I could say about Ezra that Darren would believe, just as my breath would be wasted if I’d tried to sing Darren’s praises to Ezra. Some people will never get along with each other no matter how hard anyone else tries to make them. I knew this was one of those cases.

“Look, you need to go ask that girl for her number,” Darren said. “If you don’t, I will.”

“I don’t want the blonde,” I said. I could hear myself slurring my words a little bit, and I knew I was well on my way to being totally wasted. “I want the brunette.”

Darren turned and glanced over his shoulder at her. “Not bad,” he said. “A better choice for you anyway. That blonde looks a little slutty for you. Best leave a whore like that for a real man like myself. I’m not sure you could handle a little slut like that.”

“You might be surprised. I’ve handled a few in my life. I haven’t always been gay, you know.” I realized I had reached that drunken state where I just said things without really thinking about them. I’d really only been with two women in my life, and neither of them had been sluts or whores. I’d just said that because it sounded good and it was the first thing to come to my mind. I pushed
the other shot of Jager back and forth between my two hands, contemplating drinking it.

“I know,” Darren said. “I remember that girl you used to date when you first opened Libreccio. Beth, wasn’t it? Now that girl was fucking hot.”

“Yeah. She used to have some knee-high boots.”

“That’s why I think you should go ask that girl for her number,” Darren said. “You know, maybe she could straighten you out, know what I mean?”

“Straighten…” I frowned when I realized what he meant. “That’s fucking stupid, man. That’s just dumb. That’s not how it is.”

“Look, I’m just saying…you could probably have any crazy ass chick in here if you wanted to. And you can’t tell me you wouldn’t enjoy banging that girl.”

“I don’t want any crazy ass chick,” I said. “I already have someone.” I thought about Ezra at home, holding a palette and a brush in his hand, staring at a blank canvas that he was too distracted to fill. He knew where I’d gone, whom I’d gone with, probably knew what I had in mind for this evening. This is something you learn when you love someone long enough – the solaces they take, the refuges they seek. He knew I’d be here, just as I knew that he’d be in his study with that blank canvas. I sighed and started moving all the empty beer bottles around, trying to find one that still had some beer in it.

“Bullshit. You let Ezra fuck with your head, and look where it’s gotten you. You can’t even go ask a hot girl in a bar for her number. Shit, you can’t even admit to yourself that you want her number. You know you do.”
“Screw you,” I said. I repeated it, relishing the way the words sounded coming out of my mouth. I was talking loudly, kind of yelling a little bit, but Darren just stared at me with a blank look on his face, shaking his head as though I’d disappointed him. I said it again, feeling my lips and tongue slowly move into position to form the different sounds. My lips sometimes get a little numb when I get drunk, and that’s how it was then. It felt strange, but good to have something physical and real that I could focus on to distract me from how angry I was getting at Darren. “I don’t want her number.”

He just shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

I stood up suddenly, knocking my chair over and bumping into a girl next to me. She gave me a dirty look and kicked my chair a little so it wasn’t in her way. Darren watched me with the expression of a person who is ignoring a child’s temper tantrum in the hopes that he’ll be quiet. I hated people who could keep their cool in an argument. I didn’t really know what to say to him, and I felt stupid just standing there having a staring contest with him, so I shoved my way through the crowd to the men’s room and pushed open the door, stumbling into the filthy bathroom. I stood near the sink for a minute, swaying as I held one hand to the wall. I glanced over at the toilets and gave some serious consideration to the prospect of puking my guts out, but the feeling passed and I leaned over to splash some water on my face in the sink. When I glanced up and saw my tired, haggard-looking reflection, I realized that I was getting way too old for this shit.
I’d been splashing water on my face earlier that evening, but not because I was drunk. I was locked in the master bathroom of the apartment that I shared with Ezra, which was where I’d fled after being proposed to for the second time in my life.

“Travis?” Ezra called, knocking gently at the door. “Are you taking a bath?” He tried the doorknob; I could barely hear it rattling with all the noise the water was making in the sink, but he’d definitely jiggled it, trying to get in. At first I was appalled at this intended intrusion on my privacy, but this really was, after all, Ezra’s place – he paid most of the rent, and though I’d gone to pick out the furniture with him when we moved in together last May, Ezra was the one who had pulled out his wallet after we made our final selections. It wasn’t that I didn’t have the money to pay for the rent. Far from it – I was probably making at least as much money from the restaurant as Ezra was making with his paintings, if not more. At one point, when Ezra had first quit the restaurant business to devote his time entirely to art, I had been paying the rent. But Ezra seemed to deal in the material – he loved to buy me presents for no reason, to take me out to extravagant dinners and make a big show of paying for it all in cash. I guess it was his way of showing that he loved me, but sometimes it all got to be a little much, and it made me feel like a whore, like my love was being bought.

“Travis?”

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath as I turned off the sink faucet.
“Look, I didn’t mean to…upset you,” Ezra said. I could hear the sorrow in Ezra’s voice even through the door. That was how things were with Ezra – all cards on the table. “Can we just talk about this?”

I unlocked the door but didn’t open it, and sat down on the edge of the bathtub. I knew Ezra would come in without being invited, which of course he did, and sat beside me. He put his arms around my shoulders, and I couldn’t help but stiffen my body under his touch. It wasn’t that my feelings for Ezra had changed. But things had suddenly stopped being as fun as they had been, which really wasn’t saying that much anyway, and had taken a turn into the dead serious when Ezra uttered those four terrifying words – “will you marry me?”

“Look, I wasn’t really serious,” Ezra began, shaking his head so that a strand of his dark, curly hair bounced into his face. He had to loosen his grip on my shoulders to brush it away. “I mean, I was serious, but I didn’t mean like, right now. I just meant, maybe it’s something to think about, when we’re ready.”

This was a lie. Not only was Ezra babbling like an idiot, which he often did when lying, but there was also the ring in the pocket of his jacket. I had seen the box when he pulled it out to present to me, and had also seen him shove it back into his pocket when I started freaking out and ran for the bathroom. This was something that Ezra had been planning, in that vague and random way Ezra planned things.

I could actually see it all very clearly now that I looked back on it. Ezra had been acting kind of nervous the past few days, and he’d specifically asked
me to be there for dinner that night. He was going to make his veal marsala, a
favorite of mine, with homemade tiramisu for dessert. When I’d caught him
slipping my old high school class ring back into my sock drawer where I usually
kept it, he’d muttered some lame excuse about wanting to see it because he’d
never had a class ring himself. I’d written it off as typical Ezra sentimental
bullshit at the time, but I realized now that he must have swiped it to get it
measured so he’d know what size of engagement ring to buy. It all seemed
perfectly obvious in hindsight.

“I don’t want to force you into anything you’re not ready for,” Ezra
whispered, twirling his finger in a lock of my hair. “It’s just that I love you so
much…well, it’s just a formality anyway, this civil union thing. It’s not even a real
marriage. But I don’t need a piece of paper to know we love each other.”

I nodded, and I knew this would be the last we spoke of it for some time.
Ezra was hypersensitive to rejection of any sort, and you couldn’t get much more
explicit in your rejection of a wedding proposal than running screaming into the
bathroom and locking the door behind you. I had obviously hurt his feelings, and
I knew how awkward things would be between us. Every time we had a fight it
was like that for days, with Ezra either pouting like a thirteen-year-old girl or
acting as ecstatic as a cheerleader on speed.

“Well, our dinner’s in there getting cold,” Ezra said, grinning like an idiot.
So it was cheerleader on speed this time around. “And I would love another
glass of wine. Are you still hungry?”
“For your veal marsala?” I replied, trying to mimic Ezra's happiness.

“Always.”

When I came out of the men’s room, the girl was watching her friend make out with the guy that had been talking to her earlier. The brunette glanced at the two of them and looked as though she was about to say something, but then she looked away and fished a pack of cigarettes out of her purse, lifting one to her lips and lighting it daintily. She took a deep breath and blew out a long, slow puff of smoke. In general, I thought smoking was something that made women look a little trashy, a little unattractive, but this girl made it look sexy. I couldn’t really place my finger on exactly what it was; some people just look good with a cigarette, and this girl was one of them.

I saw that Darren had moved over to the bar and had his arm around the shoulders of a lanky, bone-thin blonde who was holding a glass of red wine. He always went for the really skinny ones, which he explained by saying that he looked for girls that were thinner than he was. This one certainly fit the bill. I thought briefly about joining him at the bar, but decided I’d leave him to his little endeavor. My brunette was still smoking her cigarette and watching her friend practically get her shirt ripped off by the guy. She looked bored and lonely, so I figured she could probably use some company. I wasn’t really looking to impress her or get her number as Darren had suggested. I would just go talk to her for a little bit, compliment her on her boots, maybe buy her a drink or two. I stopped at
the bar and bought myself another shot and a beer. I took the shot quickly, then carried my beer over to her table.

I hadn’t approached a woman in a bar in quite awhile, although the pressure was somewhat lessened now that I wasn’t really trying to hook up with this girl. Still, I couldn’t help but feel totally self-conscious as I found myself standing before her, watching her stare at me expectantly. I knew I must look like an idiot, but then I figured, what should a man in a committed relationship care if some random woman in a bar rejects him, especially when that man is in a committed relationship with another man? She wasn’t just random, though. I knew that. We hadn’t even said a word to each other yet, but I knew that there was something special about this girl, something that would make me want to ask her for her number after all, something that would make me so crazy about her that I would have to go ahead and call that number even though I knew I would feel guilty about it later. I was still thinking a little bit about Ezra in his study trying to paint, but I tried to dismiss the image of his big, sad, blue eyes staring not at the blank canvas, but through it, stuck in a continuous mental replay of the way I’d turned on my heels and rushed down the hall to the bathroom when he’d pulled out the ring.

The girl was still staring at me expectantly. “Uh, can I help you?” she finally asked, when I still hadn’t quite gotten the nerve to introduce myself yet.

“Oh, I just saw you sitting over here by yourself and thought you could use some company.” I smiled and nodded a little, feeling the last shot of Jager I’d
just done hitting my brain hard, fogging it up and making the room spin around me.

“Isn’t by myself,” the girl said. She glanced over at her friend and the man she was still making out with, then looked back at me with a smile that seemed almost apologetic.

“My name is Travis,” I told her. “What’s yours?” I pulled up a chair and sat down at her table without being invited. The truth was, I was so drunk by that point that I was getting worried about my ability to stand up on my own. I’d never be able to get over it if I’d approached a pretty girl in a bar and then passed out in a drunken stupor at her feet.

“Kimberly,” she replied. She exhaled, blowing smoke right in my face, though whether by accident or on purpose, I wasn’t sure.

“That’s a very pretty name,” I said. “And you’re very pretty as well.” I thought I was being really smooth, but I don’t think she was impressed. She just smiled and took another drag from her cigarette. “Can I buy you a drink?”

She shrugged. “I guess so.”

I ordered us another round of drinks and sipped my beer quickly so I’d be done by the time the next round arrived. “My name is Travis,” I said, but I realized as soon as the words were out of my mouth that I’d already told her that.

“I own a restaurant. We serve Italian food. It’s called Libreccio.”

“I’ve heard of it,” she said. She stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and seemed to really look at me for the first time. I was aware of her eyes
passing over my face, my hair, taking in my nice clothes, noticing my Italian leather shoes. I imagined she must be either wondering what a guy like me was doing in a place like that, or else deciding whether she could take advantage of me and use me for her own ends. The waitress brought our drinks over, and we both grabbed our bottles and started drinking. Kimberly looked at her friend, who now had the guy’s hand creeping slowly up her shirt.

She turned back to me, put down her beer, and leaned toward me and said, “Come over here for a second.” She stood up and started to walk across the bar, back toward the restrooms. I followed unsteadily, crashing into people who were milling about and dancing to the loud rock music that was blaring out of the speakers. I had to keep my eyes on her bright red halter top for balance, following it like a beacon through the crowd. When I finally reached her, she grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and shoved me into the women’s room.

She threw open the door of one of the stalls and pushed me inside, ripping a button off my shirt as she pulled it open. I heard her slam the door of the stall shut behind us as she pressed her lips roughly against mine, desperately kissing me as though she was trying to chew my tongue off. Her fingers fumbled with my belt, flinging it off when she finally got it unhooked, then pulling at the zipper and pushing my pants down onto the floor around my ankles. I could hardly keep my balance, between my drunkenness and her practically throwing herself at me, so I sank down to sit on the toilet.

It only took her a minute to reach into her purse, pull out a condom, rip it
open, and slide it onto me. The deft and efficient way she did it made me think that this probably wasn’t the first time something like this had happened to her. It made me feel kind of dirty, like I was being used, but I forgot all about that when she dropped into my lap, straddling my legs, and I discovered she wasn’t wearing any underwear beneath her black skirt. How utterly surreal, I thought to myself, then realized that what I meant was sublime. Not that it mattered much at that point.

She shoved her pelvis against mine so that her hips ground into me and her thighs slapped noisily against my legs. I was too drunk to really concentrate on any one thing, and what I was thinking about right then was that this was the first time in nearly four years that I’d had sex with a woman. I was too busy thinking about how strange that was to remember to pay attention to whether I liked it or not. Sex with Ezra was good, in its own way, but there was nothing like the gentle touch of a woman. Women are softer than men, more yielding, more giving. They have long hair to stroke, and smooth skin. Ezra took good care of himself and was very muscular; his body was about as far from a woman’s as you could get. Considering how feminine and emotional he was in all other things, it never failed to surprise me how rough he was during sex, how demanding and greedy. He talked a great deal about his needs and wants, as though the two were interchangeable, and I had learned early on that where sex was concerned, there wasn’t much room for compromise with Ezra. He was not the first man I’d ever been with, but I knew that he had molded me into what he
wanted from a lover.

But I shouldn’t let myself be distracted by thoughts of Ezra, I told myself as the girl bounced athletically in my lap. I let out a little moan, mainly for effect, because I thought she might get off on that. She bounced harder, faster, beginning to moan herself. “Oh, Beth,” I said, the words escaping from between my lips almost unconsciously.

“Kimberly,” she corrected, shoving hard against me. At first I wasn’t sure what she was talking about, but then I realized what I’d done, calling her by the name of the only woman I’d ever really been in love with, the one with the knee high boots and the brown hair and the gentle smile, the one who would have turned up her nose at a cigarette and would have never even considered having sex with a stranger in a bathroom. This girl was certainly no Beth.

The girl moaned again and tossed her head back so that her hair fell limply over her shoulders, the muscles of her neck tensed so that I could see the veins pulsing beneath her pale skin. I felt her body stiffen, and she seemed to hold her breath, and then she went limp, leaning over to rest against the side of the stall. After a moment, she picked herself up and carefully extricated herself from my lap, pulling her skirt back down and smoothing it. She pushed open the stall door and started to walk out. I was still sitting on the toilet, my pants down around my ankles, shirt ripped open, condom still on. She looked at me with an expression of disgust, as though she hadn’t just had sex with me.

“Next time,” she said, staring at me with cold, hard eyes, “try to call the girl
you’re fucking by the right name, asshole.” She slammed the stall door shut, and I heard her walk out of the bathroom. A couple more girls came in, giggling, and I stood up, pulling the condom off and tossing it into the toilet. She had finished before I even got close to being done myself, but I didn’t much care. I hadn’t really wanted to have sex with her in the first place. I had just wanted to keep her company because she’d looked bored and lonely, maybe talk to her about Ezra and get her opinion on what I should do about the situation.

I pulled my pants back up and buttoned my shirt, but I noticed that the top button had gotten lost when the girl had ripped it off. What kind of person, I wondered, would take a man into the women’s room, destroy his shirt, and then leave him there? I wanted her to have helped me get dressed again, holding me up as I stepped with shaky legs into my pants, pulling my shirt back on and looking around on the dirty bathroom floor for the missing button. I wanted her to have shown some kindness, to have taken care of me when I was drunk and unable to take care of myself. It would have felt comfortable, being taken care of like that, when I was usually the one that was taking care of people. All day at the restaurant, I had to take care of complaining customers, irritable waitstaff, and a crew of cooks that were almost as difficult as Darren, their ringleader. When I finally got home, there was no break – I had Ezra to concern myself with, and there was always a great deal to think about when it came to him. Did he have a good day, how was his latest painting going, were his allergies acting up today, what kind of mood was he in? I had to remember all this from day to day
and ask the proper questions that would make it seem like I was paying attention to him when he rambled on about finding just the right shade of red or how obnoxious someone had been to him for two seconds at the grocery store. These were things of monumental importance to Ezra, and by extension, to me. Or they were supposed to be anyway. I always knew the right thing to say, but how often did Ezra ever ask me how my day was, or offer to rub my back after I got down with a long twelve-hour shift on my feet all day at the restaurant? I felt like crying there in the women's restroom of that bar, but I caught myself. I wasn't so drunk that I couldn't realize this was the alcohol having its effect on me, that I really loved Ezra and that he took good care of me. But when I tried to think of an example of him doing so in the last few days, I couldn't really come up with anything.

I knew it would have been ridiculous for me to expect this girl to clean me up after such a random encounter, especially since I'd called her Beth. I tried to tell myself that it was only because I was so drunk that I'd said her name, but I knew better than that. I'd called her Beth because in some ways, I'd wished she was Beth. She'd looked a little like Beth, but not nearly so pretty, and she had those knee high boots that reminded me of Beth, who had worn her boots when we would go out to clubs or shows, or even sometimes to school, under a long black skirt. They didn't really show when she wore them with a long skirt like that, but she told me that even if no one else saw them, she knew they were there, and it made her feel sexier and more confident. She could tell the
difference in the way she acted when she wore those boots, although she didn’t really wear them that often. In fact, I hadn’t even really remembered that she had them until I’d seen the girl in the bar wearing them. It’s strange how the mind works sometimes.

But the truth was, I’d been having these déjà vu moments a lot lately, thinking of Beth at random times, reminded of her by common, everyday occurrences. A song might come on the radio that we had listened to together, or I would run across a movie on television that Beth and I had seen in the theater. It had been four years since I’d last seen her, but I was starting to miss her lately, even more than I had when we first broke up.

I still had dreams sometimes about Beth. The dream might be going along perfectly normally, me doing some random weird dream shit, when all of a sudden, there she’d be. She would look just the way she did the day I’d asked her to leave, her raven-colored hair grown out to halfway down her back, her legs athletic and slender in her short denim skirt, her tight purple tank top clinging to her perfect tits. They weren’t huge tits, but they were perfect in their own little perky way. The only thing different about how she came to me in the dreams and how she’d actually been that day was that her blue eyes weren’t brimming over with tears in my dreams. Sometimes in the dreams she’d start giving me a blowjob, just out of nowhere. Other times we’d be back in our bed at our old apartment having the best sex ever. But often, she would just sit down and start talking to me, and in truth, those were my favorite dreams.
Ezra had told me, and Beth had mentioned it before him, that I talked in my sleep. I worried that one night while I was having a conversation with dream-Beth, or worse yet, while I was having wild and crazy sex with her, that I would say her name out loud and Ezra would hear me. When I woke up in the morning after having one of those dreams, I’d always watch my step around him and wait for the moment when he’d break down in sobs and ask why I was still moaning in my sleep the name of a girl I’d broken up with years ago.

I’d have to be especially careful tonight, with Beth as prominent in my mind as she was, which was partially Ezra’s fault for reminding me of her when he proposed. She had proposed to me once too, except she had been on her knees in the botanical gardens on a cool spring day after a picnic lunch. Of course her proposal had been much more carefully planned than Ezra’s, much more romantic, because that was how she was. Nothing was left to chance with her. She wanted to know exactly how everything would turn out before it happened. I’m sure it shocked the hell out of her when I said no.

It wasn’t long after that day that I asked her to leave. I’d helped her pack up her things and haul them out of the apartment we’d shared for the better part of three years. It wasn’t that I didn’t love her. When she asked me to marry her, I told her I’d have to think about it, and every day after that, she always seemed to be expecting something from me, some answer to the question that remained unanswered between us. I think we both knew the answer even though I refused to say it. I couldn’t give myself to Beth, or anyone, for that matter. I couldn’t give
myself to Ezra, either, but that was different. I wanted more than anything to think that I could spend my life with Beth. But Ezra, I knew from the beginning, was just a momentary, fleeting step in a string of diversions. It broke my heart that he couldn’t see that. But it would have broken my heart even more to tell him outright.

I knew I would dream of Beth tonight, knew it as surely as I knew the sun would rise in the morning and Ezra would go on smiling like a drugged psychotic even when it was becoming impossible to ignore the fact that things were unraveling between us. That was why I’d called Darren after Ezra and I finished our tense dinner, after Ezra had left to go for a walk. I had considered not coming home that night at all so I wouldn’t have to worry about speaking Beth’s name in Ezra’s hearing, but I knew it would be too cruel to leave Ezra asleep alone in our giant king size bed when he was feeling as shitty as he probably was feeling after this evening. I would crawl back to his side that night and wrap my arms around his sturdy, muscular shoulders, so unlike Beth’s bony, angular body. But I hoped that I could get drunk enough with Darren that I would fall into too deep a sleep to dream, that I could dull my senses enough so that Beth wouldn’t torment me tonight, when all I really wanted was to have her there to hold me.

“Hot damn,” Darren said, whistling, as I stumbled back over to where he was sitting at the bar. “You just got laid.”
“No, I didn’t.”

“Bro, you’ve got her fucking red lipstick all over your face,” he said, laughing. I wiped frantically at my lips, trying to erase any trace of her, but I realized it was kind of pointless. It was obvious, what I’d just done. My shirt was wrinkled, the button was missing, and I had forgotten to zip up my pants. “Well, I hope the little slut showed you a good time.”

“She’s not a slut,” I muttered.

“She just screwed a guy she’d never met before in a bar restroom,” Darren said. “I don’t know how much more slutty you can get.”

I asked the bartender for another drink, half-expecting he wouldn’t give it to me because I was so obviously intoxicated, but I soon had another beer in front of me. It felt so good to be drunk right then, so good to be out of control of my body in the way that I was. I could say or do anything without knowing for sure that I’d remember it in the morning. That kind of freedom made me feel both relieved and saddened. I wondered if I’d remember fucking that girl in the bathroom, kind of hoping I wouldn’t, but knowing full well that I would.

“I’m proud of you, Travis,” Darren said. “You’ve proved that you’re still a man. Let’s drink to that.” He held up his beer, and I grabbed the beer the bartender had just set in front of me, but I stopped before I got it all the way to my lips.

“I’m still a man even if I don’t want to fuck women,” I said, watching Darren chug his beer. He stopped and stared at me, shaking his head.
“Don’t tell me you’re going to start with that fucking gay rights bullshit
Ezra’s always going on about,” he said.

“It’s not bullshit,” I replied, finding it difficult to focus my eyes on
Darren’s face. I looked down instead. “There’s more to being a man. I don’t need a
woman. I don’t. I’m still a man. Gay rights or whatever you call it, I don’t know.”

I shut my mouth and stared sullenly at the floor of the bar. I couldn’t argue
with Darren when I was this drunk; I was too incoherent to form any sort of logical
line of reasoning. Besides, he was right – the gay pride thing was Ezra’s
soapbox, not mine. I really could care less what it meant to be a man. I would
be happy to fuck women or men or both, as long as they wanted to show me a
good time and were willing to open themselves up to me. But I went to the gay
pride parades anyway, the rallies, the movie festivals, stood by Ezra’s side, held
his hand in public in spite of the stares from some of the more closed-minded
Texas folk. I did all of this for him, because I knew he wanted me too, because I
cared what he thought. Because I loved him. I loved the way he twisted his long
hair around his finger when he was concentrating on something, how sexy he
looked when he was in the kitchen cooking something he loved, the vulnerable
look on his face when he slept and didn’t worry about putting on masks for an
outside world that had often been cruel to him. I didn’t want to be cruel to him. I
wanted to love him and be there for him, and even take care of him, if that was
what he needed, regardless of whether it exhausted me or not.

“You just screwed that girl,” Darren said. “That has to prove you’re not
gay."

“It doesn’t prove anything,” I said. I couldn’t understand why there were still some people who wanted to believe so much that I wasn’t gay. Here was Darren trying to get me to have sex in a bar with a random girl just to convince me that I shouldn’t be with Ezra. I thought of my mother laughing because she thought I was joking when I told her I was dating a man, then throwing a vase at the wall when she realized I was serious and grabbing me by the shoulders, screaming at me that I ought to be ashamed of myself and that my father would be devastated when he found out that his only son was a queer. I had put up with a lot of grief from people for being with Ezra, and I knew Ezra had to have seen it. How could he question my love for him, with all I’d gone through to be with him? Why did he have to demand some stupid commitment ceremony when it was already blatantly obvious that I was committed to him?

Sure, there was the matter of Beth, but he never needed to know about her, or that I was still, in some ways, in love with her. I remembered a conversation I’d once had about love and fate with Beth.

“I think that for every single person in the world, there is another person out there that they are meant to be with,” she said.

“Only one?” I asked.

“Yeah, just one. Some people spend their entire lives looking for that one person, and some people never find them. Others find them, but they don’t realize it and they let that person go, and then they spend the rest of their life
alone."

“Do you think you’ve found that one person?”

“Do you mean do I think you’re that one person?” She smiled and kissed my cheek. “Yeah, I think you are.”

It had scared me when she’d said that because I didn’t want to think that I was going to have to spend the rest of my life with her, without ever knowing for sure that there wasn’t someone out there who might be better for me. I was twenty-three years old then, young and in love, but I still foolishly believed that you can always do better than the one you’re with. Beth had faults. I could list them. At the time, I convinced myself that I could find a girl who didn’t have such faults, or at least had faults that I could deal with more easily than Beth’s. But I realize now how stupid that is. I had something great in Beth, and I let it go because I was too scared.

I thought what Beth said about having only one person that is meant for you was ridiculous when she said it, but as time went on, I began to suspect that maybe she was right, that maybe Beth really was it for me and that now my life would never be fulfilled because I would never be with the one true love that was meant for me. It was stupid and sentimental, and I had to kick myself every time I thought about it, but in some ways, I couldn’t help but believe in it. I had something so special, so real, with her, something that could never be repeated no matter how hard I tried or who I loved. In the end, any relationship I had after Beth would always be second best. But maybe second best was good enough.
Maybe settling for second best is the greatest a person can hope to do.

I sipped at my beer, hearing Darren talk about reasons why I ought to leave Ezra, but I wasn’t really listening to him. I was thinking about Ezra painting, and Beth sitting in a coffee shop wearing knee high boots under a long black skirt. I thought of Beth painting, but I knew Beth had never painted in her life – that was just the alcohol swirling my thoughts and messing everything up.

I knew that when I got home, I would lie down in bed next to Ezra and fall asleep. In the morning I would wake up, sick and hung over, but I would get up and go to work, and the world would go on much as it had up until that moment when Ezra proposed to me. Things would be the same for the rest of the world, but things would be different for me. And I knew that when I got home from work that night, I would tell Ezra that I loved him and would be happy to marry him. At least that’s what I’d like to think I would do.

But I also knew that on my desk, under a stack of papers and books, there was a tiny slip of paper that I’d written Beth’s name and phone number on weeks ago, when I’d looked it up in an online phone directory. And I knew that there was always the possibility that I could call it at any time.
6. BENJAMIN, EMMA, MICHAEL, CLAIRE

Elizabeth calls me the sensible one of the two of us, but I found that sense and reason go out the window when you wake up to the sound of your pregnant wife sobbing in the bathroom at four in the morning. Any last shred of logic you may have been holding on to dissolves into utter panic when you see the dark red splash of blood seeping through her cotton nightgown. At least that’s how it was for me when Elizabeth had her first miscarriage.

I wish I could say that I kept my wits about me, that I stayed professional as a doctor should. But I found out that night that when it comes to the people I love, especially Elizabeth, I stop being a doctor. When I saw all that blood, I started being the scared-shitless husband who had absolutely no idea what was happening to his wife or what he could do to stop it. I’m an anesthesiologist, a far cry from an obstetrician, and whatever I may have learned about miscarriages in med school years ago was useless to me as I stood in the doorway of the bathroom staring at Elizabeth’s blood-soaked nightgown. She was sitting on the floor, her back resting against the bathtub, with her knees pulled up to her chest, and the blood was starting to spill out over the white tile floor. Her hands were covered in blood, and she unknowingly spread a smear of crimson across her deathly pale cheek when she moved to wipe the tears from her eyes. If it had been a boy, his name would have been Benjamin, and if it had been a girl, her name would have been Emma.
I remember that night now as a handful of blurry recollections, some moving in slow motion, others going by so quickly as to nearly be forgotten, all of them seen through a haze of shock and panic. I don’t really remember carrying Elizabeth in my arms to our car in the garage, but I do remember the high-speed drive over nearly empty roads to the hospital. And I remember vividly the long wait in the emergency room once we finally did arrive at the hospital. I sat on the uncomfortable plastic chair and realized how hard it was to be on the other side of those emergency room doors. I was usually part of that bustling, efficient team that took care of the patient and pushed hysterical family members out those swinging doors as sympathetically as possible. It was hard enough to see Elizabeth suffering as she was; to make matters worse, I was totally powerless to help her, not even free to be at her side and hold her hand. I was shut out.

I tried not to think about the fact that none of the nurses had come out to get me. Someone would have come if Elizabeth had asked them to. She could have stopped the nurse who came over to take her blood pressure and said, “Please will you get my husband?” She could have asked any number of the people that would no doubt be attending to her. But the fact that I was still sitting alone in the waiting room could only mean that she hadn’t asked.

Not that I had really expected her to want me at her side. It probably wouldn’t have even occurred to her, not because she didn’t love me, but because that was how Elizabeth was. I tried not to let it hurt my feelings. It seemed completely selfish to think of Elizabeth as inconsiderate to shut me out at a time
like this. I should be playing the part of the caring husband, because surely Elizabeth would need my support, even if that meant staying out of her way while she dealt with this in whatever way she thought she needed to.

Elizabeth seemed to brush it off as though nothing had happened. She became very quiet when anyone brought it up, but I don’t think that was because she was bothered by it. Then again, I could never be quite sure with Elizabeth. Even when she said something directly, there was no guarantee that it was what she was really thinking. I’d never met another woman as cryptic as her, but that was part of what drew me to her.

Of course it also drove me crazy at times, like when she was lying in bed next to me one night, quietly listening to what I had to say, wearing her best poker face that gave absolutely nothing away. It was late at night (or early in the morning, rather), dark in our room except for the moonlight slipping in between the blinds we’d forgotten to shut, but neither of us was sleeping. When I heard her sighing sleeplessly next to me and realized she was as wide awake as I was, I told her I wanted to talk seriously about trying to have another baby. The doctors had told us it would be okay to try again as early as a month after the miscarriage and by now it had been nearly a year since our last attempt.

“Are you afraid?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “Not really.”

“I mean, are you afraid it will happen again?”
“No. It happens sometimes. But that doesn’t really mean anything for this time.”

This was the type of game that we’d been playing since she came home from the hospital, dancing our way around words like “pregnancy” and “miscarriage.” Any time we discussed the subject, we made heavy use of the pronoun “it.”

“Elizabeth, do you want to try to have a baby again?”

“Do you?”

“I’d like to have a child, yes. But I’m asking what you want.”

“I want it, too,” she replied. She kissed me and ran her fingers through my hair. “Let’s try again.”

After we made love, lying next to each other in the dark at three in the morning, we took turns suggesting baby names. It was probably a bit premature to be discussing names half an hour after sex. But there was no question in my mind that we had made a baby that night. It was something I could feel, something about the way Elizabeth’s body had felt against mine. So it didn’t seem presumptuous for me to ask Elizabeth if she liked the name Mia for a baby girl. She didn’t like Mia, but we eventually agreed on Michael and Claire.

Benjamin and Emma were not mentioned by either of us.

We were out to dinner at a nice Italian restaurant with a few friends – another anesthesiologist from my department and her husband – the second
time it happened. Elizabeth was sipping ice tea and staring longingly at the bottle of red wine that the other three of us were sharing. As early as it was into the pregnancy, no doubt a glass of wine wouldn’t have caused any damage, but Elizabeth was taking every precaution she could. She’d even taken to eating meat after being a strict vegetarian for the last ten years because she had read that vegetarian women often lack the nutrients and vitamins necessary to support a growing fetus, even if they take supplements.

“A few cows and chickens can die if that’s what it takes to make a healthy baby,” she had said one evening as she poked skeptically at the grilled chicken I’d cooked for her. I was actually moved by the fact that she was forcing herself to eat whatever I placed in front of her. She had explained to me before how disgusted she was by the idea of eating the flesh of animals, how barbaric it seemed to her, how she didn’t want to put into her body anything that was produced by such a violent and callous commercialized industry. I knew, with every bite of meat that she took, that this baby meant more to her than I could possibly understand.

Actually she was eating eggplant parmigiana that night. I remember it specifically because she’d been trying to decide between the eggplant and the veal parmigiana, and she would later comment that maybe if she’d gone with the meat, things would have turned out better. It was stupid reasoning, as we both knew, but this was the kind of thing she would torture herself with. *What if I had eaten a little meat? Did I forget a dose of my vitamins? Should I have noticed*
something wrong earlier so they could have stopped this in time?

She had noticed the cramps, for example, earlier that day. Clearly, she said, she should have done something about it that morning when the pain first started in her lower back. How could she have been so stupid as to wait until the pain got so bad that she ended up doubled over in her chair, tiny trails of blood starting to run down her legs and pool in her black patent leather pumps? I told her not to be so hard on herself, and they said the same thing at the hospital when we got there. But Elizabeth was a glutton for self-punishment. Perhaps she would never forgive herself for ignoring some mild cramps, and this was a guilt that she would carry until the day she died. I wouldn't put it past her.

The next day we had our first appointment with Dr. Martin Hemler, whom I had attended medical school with. We still played golf on the weekends, with a cardiologist and a surgeon, but now he was acting the part of the professional with my wife and I sitting across from his huge pine desk in his posh obstetrics office.

“Neither of you is at fault here,” Martin said. He was looking through Elizabeth’s chart at the results of all the tests they’d run on both of us.

“Elizabeth, you’re physically capable of bearing children, and everything is fine on Richard’s end as well. It’s simply a question of genetics. Every cell in the human body carries a set of specific genetic markers, including egg and sperm cells, which then pass those markers onto the fetus. When partners share a certain number of genetic markers in common, the woman’s body can sometimes
mistake the fetus for a foreign invader and trigger an immune response against it resorting in a spontaneous abortion.”

“I've never heard of anything like that,” Elizabeth said, looking skeptically at Martin. I could almost hear the thoughts running through her head – we need a second opinion…just because this guy plays golf on the weekends with Richard doesn’t mean he knows a thing about obstetrics…we’ll find someone else. But I had heard of what he was talking about, vaguely recalled hearing something about it in med school, and I knew he was one of the best obstetricians in the Dallas area. He had taken the time to be thorough in our case, and I knew that if that was what he said the problem was, he was most likely right.

“It’s quite rare,” he replied. “The chances of a man and woman sharing the same genetic markers are slim, but it does happen. And that’s what has happened in your case.”

Elizabeth shook her head and stared out the window at the landscaped garden behind Martin’s office. “I want a second opinion.”

We got a second opinion, and a third, and fourth. Six separate doctors within the space of five months told us the same thing – by some cruel trick of nature or fate or whatever you want to call it, Elizabeth would almost certainly be unable to bear my child by natural means. There were drugs, the doctors told us, precautions we could take, things we could do. But even then, the chances of
Elizabeth carrying our pregnancy to term were slim.

Elizabeth had always had this kind of fierce determination that she could outwit anything her body tried to stump her with. She had told me about the way she used to run when she’d been younger, running on for miles in all types of extreme weather as a challenge to herself. Any sort of weakness was unacceptable; every time she found herself wanting to stop, she ran twice as hard, twice as far. But when she had been hit by a truck while out jogging, her body had been left a broken mess, a ravaged version of the super fit athlete’s body she had possessed up until that one fateful moment. The doctors had said then that she should forget about ever running or doing yoga again; she ought to be thankful that she could even walk with all the damage that had been done. That wasn’t acceptable for Elizabeth, who proceeded to prove everyone wrong by reaching nearly the level of fitness she’d been at before the accident.

I could tell at the beginning of this pregnancy ordeal that Elizabeth had ideas about proving these doctors wrong as well. She’d done it before, hadn’t she? And besides, this whole genetic problem was actually a sort of controversial, new idea that a great deal of doctors did subscribe to, but not all, by any means. I could tell by the way she took a deep breath and lifted her chin in defiance whenever one of the doctors started the all too familiar speech – “I’m sorry Mrs. Pierce, but…” – as though they were offering her a personal challenge.

But after a month of hearing that speech over and over again, it eventually
started to wear on Elizabeth. I could see that the spark had gone out of her eyes. When the sixth and final doctor we spoke to gave her the speech, she didn’t even look up from the floor. The challenge was over. Elizabeth’s body had finally gotten the better of her.

“We’ll try again,” I told her as we left the doctor’s office. “We’ll just keep trying until this works out for us.” I tried to sound as optimistic as possible, like I really believed that we would eventually succeed.

“Of course,” she replied brusquely. “No reason we shouldn’t. It has to work out eventually.” We stared at each other in the silence of the car, her cool blue eyes locked on mine. She sighed as I ran my fingers through her hair and leaned close to kiss her.

“Let’s go home and make a baby,” I said.

She nodded and smiled, but she looked about as skeptical as I felt.

“I want to take you out on a date,” Elizabeth told me over the phone. It was around eleven in the morning, and I was about to go into surgery. My mind was on all the pre-op things I needed to take care of, too distracted by my work to really hear what Elizabeth was saying. She took me out to one of our favorite restaurants that night, and we went for a walk in the nearby park afterward, even though it was January and freezing cold. We both had giant coats on that made us look like polar bears waddling around the dead lawns at the park. I couldn’t wait to get out of there and back to our nice warm home, maybe have a nice stiff
drink to help warm me up from the inside, but I could tell Elizabeth had something she wanted to tell me, so I continued to follow her down the winding path.

She took a small piece of plastic out of her pocket as we rounded the bend in the path and ended up on a bridge over the little creek that runs through the park. She held it out to me without any explanation, and when I took it from her, I saw that it was one of the drug store pregnancy tests. Blue. I already knew what that meant. We’d gone through this scene before, the one where Elizabeth takes me out and then shows me her positive pregnancy test and we both get excited and congratulate each other and bring up names but always stop short because we’re afraid of jinxing it by naming the baby before it’s arrived. “This is great news,” I told her.

She nodded, shoving her gloved hands back into the pockets of her jacket. I looked at the piece of white plastic I held in my hand, the end of it dyed blue, and started to think about names I could suggest to her, even though I knew she’d tell me not to talk about these things. All I could really think of, though, was seeing Elizabeth on the bathroom floor late at night, in the Italian restaurant with blood running down her legs, in a hospital bed sleeping from the drugs the doctors have given her.

I hugged her as best I could in my huge awkward coat, and I could feel her trembling in my arms from the cold. “This is a good thing, right?” I asked. “You’re happy, right?”
“Aren’t you?”

“I’m very happy.”

“Then so am I.” She smiled and took the pregnancy test back from me, tossing it into a trash can that we passed by. She had kept the others until the miscarriages, saying that she wanted them for a baby book, in which she’d put souvenirs of all the pertinent events of our baby’s life. This baby would never have the opportunity to see the pregnancy test that proved his or her conception. I almost complained to her about it, and I thought about making her turn around so I could go back to the trash can and fish the pregnancy test out of it for us to save. But I was so cold that the last thing I wanted to do was dig through the trash in a Dallas public park looking for the pregnancy test that confirmed the presence of a fetus that probably wouldn’t last more than a month. All I could think about was getting out of the cold, so I left the pregnancy test where Elizabeth had dropped it in the trash.

It was raining when I came home, a harsh, cold rain that the meteorologists were predicting would turn into sleet and snow during the late hours of the night. I imagined waking up to a world covered over by ice, quiet, still, peaceful. It was already March, but it was colder than usual, with a raw, biting wind blowing from the north. Still, I should have known better than to listen to the weather forecaster. It doesn’t snow in Texas in March, not that I know of anyway, and it didn’t that night either.
The stereo was playing downstairs, some rock band that Elizabeth was fond of but that I couldn’t stand. It was one of those little reminders that she was still only twenty-seven, eleven years younger than me. Still a child almost. She listened to her CDs as loud as she could stand them while I was away at work. I didn’t see how she could possibly concentrate on reading with music playing at that volume, but that was evidently what she’d been doing – a novel was lying face down on the coffee table next to a half empty cup of tea, but Elizabeth was nowhere in sight. I reached for the stereo remote control and turned the loud music off, then called Elizabeth’s name, but got no answer. I checked the empty kitchen, then headed for the stairs. That was where I noticed the blood – a few drops of it, not much, but enough to draw my attention against the stark white of our marble floors.

I knew instantly what had happened. I realized, staring down at the blood on the floor, that I was actually surprised it hadn’t come sooner. This, Elizabeth’s third pregnancy, had lasted almost a full trimester, longer than either of the first two by several weeks. I think in a way we’d both been holding our breaths, counting each passing day that nothing bad happened. Every day that she carried the baby without any sign of trouble gave us a little more hope that it would all work out this time. Things would be different with this one. Third time’s the charm.

Even though I’d tried to be positive about it and believe with conviction that I would be holding my own baby in my arms at this time next year, some part
of me couldn’t be convinced. That was probably why neither Elizabeth nor I had ever brought up the question of naming this baby. During her other pregnancies, we would refer to the baby by the names we’d chosen, sometimes calling it by the boy name, other times by the girl name. But this baby had been nameless, faceless, something we didn’t want ourselves to get too attached to because we knew that in the end we’d probably lose it.

She was in the bathtub upstairs, sunk down so low in the tub so that only her head and neck were above the water. A pair of her jeans and her underwear were in the sink, soaking in blood-stained water, and I realized the water she was lying in had the pale pink tinge of blood as well. She was staring up at the ceiling, her head resting against the back of the tub, and she focused her eyes on me when I came in without moving the rest of her body.

“Hi,” she said in a soft voice.

It took me a minute before I was able to respond. I simply stood there staring at her dumbly for literally a minute or two before I could figure out what to do. “My god, Elizabeth,” I whispered.

“Don’t talk about god to me,” she replied, shifting her gaze back to the ceiling.

“Come on, we need to go to the hospital,” I said. When she didn’t move, I stepped forward and reached into the tub to pull her out, plunging my hands into the tepid water. Either she’d run the bath cold or she’d been there long enough for the water to cool down to the lukewarm temperature it was then. I had a
feeling it was probably the latter.

I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks as I slipped my arms under her body and lifted her out of the tub. She was motionless, a dead weight in my arms, dripping water on my shoes and soaking the front of my scrubs. I thought about the times I’d made love to her in that tub, with candles lit all around us, lying under her in the water she had scented with lavender bath salts that settled into the bottom of the tub and got stuck in the backs of my legs as she moved her hips rhythmically against mine. I wasn’t exactly sure because I hadn’t bothered to keep track of the dates, but I liked to think that was where this, our third baby, had been conceived. And, I realized as I carried Elizabeth into the bedroom, that was where the baby had died as well.

I set Elizabeth carefully on the bed, expecting her to sit up and allow me to help her get dressed, but she remained motionless, lying there where I’d dropped her. “Darling, sit up so I can help you put your clothes on. We need to go to the hospital.”

“Why? What’s the point?” Her voice sounded dead and hollow, as though part of her soul had bled out of her into the bathwater along with our child. “It’s over.”

I turned away from her, on the pretense of retrieving something to dress her in. Actually I didn’t want her to see me crying, and I swallowed hard to keep myself from sobbing out loud. Some part of me knew that I had to be strong for her; it was all I could really do, the only thing I had to offer her. I bit hard against
my lip as I slipped her motionless legs into a pair of sweatpants and tugged a t-shirt over her head after I’d pulled her up into a seated position. There would be time for crying later, I told myself. This wasn’t about me. Right then I had to find it in myself to put aside what I was feeling so that I could take care of Elizabeth. As I carried her downstairs to the car and pulled out into the cold, driving rain, I repeated over and over to myself, you have to be there for Elizabeth. But I started to cry after all when I glanced over at her, saw her empty eyes staring emotionlessly out the window, and realized that she wasn’t even there herself.

I drove Elizabeth home from the hospital the next day, after the doctors had shaken their heads sadly and said in their most sympathetic tones that they were very sorry but that there was nothing they could do. Neither of us spoke a word the whole way. There had been a time when we’d had that special kind of relationship in which we could share a silence without having to worry about filling it with words. But this wasn’t that kind of silence. I felt an uncomfortable rift between us, and even though I wanted to reach out to her, to say something, anything, I couldn’t find the words to bridge the gap that was so evident in our excruciating silence.

I knew this wasn’t something that had come up over night. It had been brewing between us for some time now, looming inevitably on the horizon, and the miscarriage had just hastened its arrival. I’d always thought that having a child with Elizabeth would fix the problems that had come up between us. I
pictured us happily peering over the side of the crib at our newborn baby, saw Elizabeth smiling the way she hadn’t smiled since we first met, imagined her sharing an emotional connection with the child we’d created, and by extension, with me as well. I couldn’t think of a more selfish reason for having a child. But I loved her so much that I would have done whatever it took to revive what we’d once had together. If a child is created out of a love that strong, how can that be wrong?

Elizabeth got out of the car as soon as I’d pulled into the garage and headed straight to the upstairs bathroom. I’d come home the night before, as she slept under the influence of the sedatives the doctor had given her, and cleaned everything up so that there would be no evidence of what had transpired there. It had taken me nearly an hour of scrubbing to get the tub and the sink clean. Her jeans and underwear were stained beyond repair; I had brought them with me in the car and tossed them into a dumpster on my way back to the hospital. The bathmat, too, had been stained so completely that I’d had to discard it. I stood in the doorway and watched Elizabeth stand where the mat should have been, looking down at her socked feet on the bare tile floor as though she was confused by its absence.

She looked up at me, tears welling up in her eyes, and shook her head. “Why do we bother?” she whispered.

“We’ll try again,” I replied. “It’ll work out this time. It will work out.” I repeated it like a mantra, a prayer, as though saying it enough times would make
it true. “It will work out.” Elizabeth shook her head again. I stepped into the bathroom and wrapped my arms around her. She stiffened against my embrace, her body unyielding and rigid against me as I pulled her closer. I felt the soft swell of her stomach, still slightly rounded from the pregnancy, and I buried my face in her sweet smelling hair.

My lips brushed against her hair as I said quietly, “It will work out. It has to.”
7. GHOSTS AND LOVERS

I can still picture her when I close my eyes – Beth, as she was the day we met. I can recall with perfect clarity the way her long, brown, pony-tailed hair bounced against her shoulders as she walked into the classroom where we would be sitting next to each other every Tuesday and Thursday for the next few months. She’d been wearing jeans and a t-shirt – I’ll admit my memory is faulty here, since I can’t really remember which t-shirt it was. She owned so many, and now my memory shifts and changes the shirt into whatever t-shirt I’m currently associating with her. When I think of her tenacious, athletic side, I imagine it’s a shirt from one of those 5k and 10k races she was always running in. When I think of her artistic side, I picture the shirt as one of the slightly funky pastel-colored ones that she’d dyed herself after reading how to do it online. When I think of her as fun-loving party Beth (my personal favorite, though admittedly one that didn’t appear all that often) I’m convinced it must have been one of the band t-shirts that she purchased at every concert she went to. She was really into souvenirs like that. I’d never met anyone who collected quite as much stuff as she did. When we’d lived together, I’d begged her to throw some of that shit away, threatened to do it myself even, but she’d insisted that there was not a single shred of it that could go. These were her memories, she said. Not only did she have random pieces of memorabilia, she also had more journals than
anyone I knew, notebook after notebook filled with her thoughts and ideas. She’d been keeping them since she’d known how to write, she told me, and she never threw one away. For someone with as impeccable a memory as she had – she didn’t like to talk about it, for fear of sounding like she was bragging, but she’d explained to me once that she had a photographic memory – she sure needed a lot of things to remind her of the experiences she’d gone through.

Sometimes when I think about those piles of journals and the boxes filled almost to overflowing with all that random crap, I wonder what sort of memories she keeps of me. Does she still have the bear I won for her at the Texas State Fair? Has she framed any of the photos we took together, the ones where we were smiling at each other as though we weren’t even aware the camera was there, just lost in each other’s eyes, totally in love? What has she written about me in those journals she kept? I never had the audacity to intrude on her private thoughts like that, but now I wonder sometimes.

Actually, I’ve started to wonder a lot lately. There are certain triggers that will bring a memory of Beth back to me, for no reason, at the most awkward of times. One evening as Ezra, my boyfriend of five years, was lying next to me in bed and stroking my hair, I suddenly remembered how Beth and I had sometimes been in this exact same position, although it had been I who had been doing the hair-stroking. I couldn’t really lie there with him anymore after that because his hands felt so uncomfortably manly in my hair, so rough and sturdy, so unlike Beth’s would have felt. At moments like that, I felt like a traitor
to Ezra. I loved him with all of my heart – all of it, anyway, that wasn’t still hung up on Beth, inexplicably, even all these years after she and I had said goodbye.

Things with Ezra were good, for the most part, but lately, I’d found myself thinking of Beth more and more. What was she doing? Did she look the same? Had she gotten married, had kids, been divorced? She’d been so smart and had so many things she wanted to do that I knew she could be anywhere right now, with anyone. I knew the chances of my finding her were slim at this point, and that my sudden reappearance in her life after five years would probably be totally unwelcome. But at the same time, I knew that there would be no way I’d stop thinking about her unless I knew for sure.

I was sitting in my office at home, going over some financial reports from Libreccio, the restaurant I owned, when I finally got up the nerve to do it, to go ahead and look her up. I knew Ezra wasn’t at home – he was in his studio, working on his paintings, the ones that were selling so well now but that I still had to pretend to like. I’d never seen anything that interesting in the abstract nudes he did. They all looked the same to me – just paint smeared on the canvas in the shape of a nude man, although one might be purple rather than red, or the man might be sitting instead of standing. For some reason, though, they were becoming tremendously popular. I figured it was a fad and decided I’d wait till it was over and Ezra moved onto some other odd artistic endeavor.

Thinking of Ezra and his passionate art reminded me of Beth again. In some ways, his writhing, wiry nudes reminded me of her. There was so much
frenetic energy in those paintings, which I guess is one of the reasons people liked them so much, and that same energy had always flowed through Beth’s veins. She seemed sustained by some force that burned within her, something too powerful and strong to try to understand. Maybe that was what I had loved about her. Maybe the reason I still thought about her was that she’d actually had that sort of energy and Ezra could only paint it. I wasn’t sure. But I had to know.
So I stopped what I was doing and opened my web browser, surfed over to an online telephone directory, and slowly, meticulously, typed in the name “Beth Symon.”

The last time I had seen Beth had been five years before that. She had been in the middle of her yoga practice when I came over. I should have known. It was 5:30, the designated yoga hour every day in Beth’s world. That unwavering devotion to “the plan” was something about Beth that I never could understand. It was one of the best excuses that I gave myself for breaking up with her when the real reasons were too hard to think about. How could a guy like me – spontaneous, impulsive, crazy – ever make it with a girl like her, one who took pleasure in planning, one who was forever obsessed with the details that I was only too happy to overlook? It probably would have been a good enough reason in and of itself to leave her.

When she opened the door, I could hear the sounds of slow, deep chanting coming from her stereo. She had on a tank top and a pair of workout
pants, and she shivered as the cold November air came rushing into her apartment.

“Hurry up and get in here before I freeze my ass off,” she said, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me in, slamming the door behind me. She didn’t look at all surprised to see me. I’d kind of hoped I would catch her off guard so I could finally see her get all emotional about the breakup. I should have known better. She would never give me that pleasure. Her guard was always up, her defenses always ready to prevent an intruder like me. That was, after all, what I was now – an intruder, no longer a welcome tourist in the mind and heart of Beth Symon.

She stepped back onto the purple yoga mat that she’d rolled out in the middle of her living room, the coffee table that normally occupied the space pushed up against the wall. I sat down on her couch. As though I wasn’t even there, she resumed her yoga practice, taking a deep breath before lifting her leg behind her and arching her back, hands reaching over her head to grab her foot. She looked like a dancer or a figure skater, almost obscenely flexible. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen her in this pose; I had inevitably been around sometimes when five o’clock rolled around and I’d seen her run through her little routine. But I couldn’t help but wonder now if she was doing this particular pose for my benefit, to make me jealous or sorry that her lithe little body wasn’t mine anymore. She had to know how sexy she looked with her tits shoved out like that, balancing perfectly on one strong, slender leg.

She released her foot and lowered it back to the ground, then kicked up
the other leg and did the same thing with that side. I watched her chest slowly rise and fall with each long, deep breath. She looked completely serene, at peace with herself and everything around her. I wondered how much of that was an act. No one could possibly be that calm, least of all Beth. There was too much going on in her head all the time.

“Do you think you could turn that off?” I asked, nodding my head toward the stereo. The Sanskrit chanting was beginning to get to me. Joti, joti, joti, joti. Damn annoying.

Beth opened one eye and glanced at me coolly, but her perfect one-footed balance didn’t waver. “If I’m not mistaken, you came over here and interrupted me.” She dropped her foot to the ground and turned to fully face me, hands on her hips. “Don’t you think it’s a little rude to burst in on someone’s yoga practice and demand they turn off their spiritual chant?” I couldn’t tell whether she was being serious or just giving me a hard time because I’d interrupted her yoga, so I didn’t say anything.

She stared at me for one more moment, then turned around and pressed the power button on her stereo, stopping the chanter in mid-sentence, or at least what sounded like a sentence to me. At first I thought she was going to ask me to leave; she seemed to be in an odd mood, maybe because she’d been forced to stop her yoga practice halfway through and now she was feeling karmically off balance from the universe or something. But she finally sat down next to me, pulling her feet up under her into the lotus position that looked so painful but that
she swore was the most comfortable way for her to sit.

“I wish you’d come around more,” she said. She pulled the barrette out of her long brown hair, shaking it out onto her shoulders. Good. That was how I liked it, loose, flowing around her shoulders like she was a Venus in some Renaissance painting. I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out and running my hand through a lock of it, feeling each strand of hair soft and smooth between my fingers. She didn’t move or seem to be bothered by it. It probably felt as comfortable for her as it did for me. But I lowered my hand quickly to my lap. The physical part of the relationship had never been a problem between us. It would be stupid to let my body take over now and open up wounds that had just started to heal in both of us.

“Well,” I said slowly, watching her twist a strand of hair around her fingers, “I’ve been busy, you know, with work and all. Things are just starting to take off.” It had been a few months since I’d opened Libreccio with my business partner, Chad, and business was just starting to pick up.

“Congratulations. I really do need to come eat there sometime.” She seemed sincere about it, smiling and patting my knee. I bit my lip when she touched me. God, I loved her in a tank top. I should have remembered the yoga thing, should have had the foresight to come over at night when she would have been wearing an old pair of boxers and a t-shirt that would have tempted me less. Still would have tempted me, but really there was nothing sexy about flannel and t-shirts. At least that would have been manageable. Tight purple
Lycra clinging to each curve of her perfect body was not.

“Well, it’s hard work, but it’s worth it,” I replied, swallowing hard. “Beth?”

“Yeah?”

I wanted to ask her if it would be alright if I touched her, or kissed her, or
maybe even made love to her. I couldn’t get my mouth to form the words, but, as
though she could read my mind, she leaned forward and pressed her lips softly
to mine. My hands found her face, her hair, her bony shoulders under soft, sleek
material. I heard her half moan, half sigh, and I knew exactly what she was
feeling, because I felt it too. It had only been three weeks since I’d last kissed
Beth, but touching her again felt like coming home after a long travel in an
unfamiliar country. Everything about her was so comfortable, every curve of her
body fit into mine with such ease that it was obvious that we were meant to be
together like this. It felt so right that I had to stop her, but how could I?

“Beth,” I whispered softly. Our lips were still so close that they brushed
each other when I spoke. It was torture to have her so close that I could feel
every beat of her heart and to know that the only way this could end was with me
walking out the door again. “Beth, I can’t.”

She slid out of my lap and back onto the couch, biting her lip and smiling
at me with a look of embarrassment. “Sorry. I thought you wanted to.”

“I just, uh…” I looked away from her searching eyes. The last time she’d
looked at me like that had been in the botanical gardens months before that,
when she’d asked me to marry her, when the silence that followed her question

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had hung heavy around us like a shadow. “It was a stupid idea for me to have come here.”

“No,” she protested. “I told you that I wanted to still hang out with you. I still want to be friends. You mean too much to me to just shut you out of my life. Trite as that sounds. I’m serious.”

“Beth, I’m seeing someone else.”

She laughed. I don’t know if she thought I wasn’t serious at first, or if it was just some sort of sudden reaction to something she couldn’t deal with. But when she saw the look on my face, she stopped as abruptly as if I’d punched her in the stomach. She bit her lip and looked down at the floor. I thought for a moment that she might finally cry, that I’d finally broken through and would get to see Beth’s ever well-hidden sorrow. But at that point I realized I really didn’t want to. What pleasure could I take in seeing someone I still cared about weeping, especially when I was the cause?

But she didn’t cry. It took her a moment to regain her composure, but she did look back up at me without so much as a single tear in her icy blue eyes.

“Someone else.”

“Yes.”

“Someone I know?” she asked. She looked away, started playing with the fringe on the afghan that was draped over the sofa, the one she’d made herself during the long winter the year before. Her voice sounded too high pitched, too forced. She was trying to sound cheerful when what she really wanted was to
burst into tears. At that point I wanted nothing more than to leave her sitting there on the couch and never again see that anguished look on her face. But I had started this, and there was nothing left but to finish it.

“No, you’ve never met him. I know him from work.”

She stopped twisting the yarn around her fingers and looked up. “Did you just say him?”

“Yes.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No.”

“But you’re not…gay,” she said, spitting the word out as though horrified at the thought. She was far from homophobic – she had several gay friends, and she often joked that she was the only woman in her Feminist Action group that wasn’t a lesbian. I knew it wasn’t the idea of homosexuality that bothered her. It was the idea that I, Travis, her former lover, could be gay that was bringing that look of dismay to her face.

“Well, bisexual,” I replied. “He’s not the first man I’ve been with. Before you…” She looked at me with the most appalled look I’d ever seen, not even bothering to hide her horror. “I thought I should be the one to tell you, before you found out about it from someone else.” That was a lie. It wasn’t as if we shared that many mutual friends. The only way Beth would find out about this was if I told her myself. There really was no need to have come tell her this now, when things with Ezra were just beginning to warm up, when I was just starting to get
comfortable with the idea of him, and I really wasn't sure how things would turn out. He could be gone next week for all I knew. I hated to admit it even to myself, but I'd come now because I knew enough time had passed that Beth would not be so angry as to yell at me or attempt to do me any physical harm (all that yoga made her stronger than I liked to admit) but still vulnerable enough that the news would affect her. It was perverse, really. What had she ever done to me to make me want to see her suffer so much? Perverse was absolutely the only word for it.

“That’s thoughtful of you,” she said, her voice utterly flat and numb. She stared out the window, though I knew she wasn’t looking at the flock of birds in the oak tree, or at the children playing soccer in the parking lot of the apartment complex. She wasn’t seeing any of that.

“His name is Ezra,” I told her, because I could think of nothing better to say. “He’s one of the managers at the restaurant.”

“Well, it seems a little foolish to be dating your employees, doesn’t it, but I’m sure you’ll be very happy together,” she said, choking a little on the words and on the tears that threatened to burst forth from that place deep inside of her where she always kept them hidden. But I knew she wouldn’t cry in front of me. Not now, not like this. She would save that for later, when the early morning hours ticked by and the darkness swallowed the sound of her sobs, and the only creature around to hear her was the stuffed dog she had slept with since she was five years old. I would be long gone by the time that dam finally burst.
The search I’d done on the Internet phone directory had brought up a listing for “Pierce, Richard and Elizabeth Symon.” I copied the address down and kept it for awhile before I did anything with it. I was waiting for the right time. I wasn’t exactly sure when it would be, but I figured I’d know it when it happened.

I kept thinking about the slip of paper that I’d hidden under a pile of papers on my desk so that Ezra wouldn’t see it. So she was Elizabeth Symon-Pierce now. She’d always hated the name Elizabeth. She said it was too formal for her, that it didn’t suit her at all. But when I did finally drive up to the address I had copied down from the directory, when I stood in the rain in front of the huge, fancy, Highland Park mansion that she now called home, I could see that a great deal more than just her name had changed.

I had to ring twice before she answered the door. I was just about to give up and turn around when the door was flung open before me and I found myself staring into the eyes of the woman who had once been the love of my life. She didn’t seem to recognize me at first, but then she quietly said, “Travis?” She was wearing a ratty pair of gray sweatpants that I thought I’d seen her wear before, when we were still together. Her t-shirt had a small stain on the front of it, and her hair, now much shorter than it had been, hung limply around her face. I was shocked for a moment at her appearance, but of course I couldn’t let her see that. I smiled and stuck my hand out for her to shake, feeling ridiculous. I hadn’t come here to make a business deal. Why was I trying to shake her hand?
“Yes, it’s me,” I said. “My God, Beth, it’s been so long.” Something flashed in her eyes, like recognition, like the expression of a person who is just waking up from a long sleep and catching a glimpse of something they hadn’t expected to see.

“Well, come in out of the rain,” she said, smiling like the rich wife hostess she’d evidently become. “I was just about to have a cup of coffee.”

I followed her into the kitchen and watched her pour coffee for us in a brisk and efficient way that made me think “housewife” even though I really didn’t want to. It looked as though she’d put on a few pounds – it probably wasn’t enough for anyone else to notice, but to someone who’d once known every curve of her body by heart, it was obvious. Plus she was wearing that pair of disgusting, old, gray sweatpants that made her hips look bigger than I suspected they really were. She’d had the pants for as long as I’d known her, and I hated them now as much as I’d hated them back then. I felt a sudden urge to tease her about them the way I’d done years ago, but I stopped myself. This woman was a stranger to me now.

She handed my coffee to me and offered me some milk for it. I was surprised that she would remember these little quirks, like taking milk in my coffee, but that was Beth. She probably knew things about my life that I’d forgotten, could probably recall any number of stories from the treasure trove of memories she had locked away in that remarkable mind of hers. Barring that, she could have pulled out her journals and photo albums and reminded me with
those. I sipped my coffee and smiled, thinking about how comfortable it was to
be around a person with whom you shared a long and intimate past, someone
who had known you before you were the person that you are now, someone who
could see past all the bullshit because they knew the real you. It had been
awhile since I’d been with anyone who knew me like that, I thought to myself. I
thought it before I realized what I was really thinking, and it caught me off guard.
Didn’t Ezra know me like that? Didn’t we know each other well enough to know
what the other was thinking, or finish each other’s sentences? I couldn’t recall
having ever done so.

I followed her into the living room. She sat on a big, overstuffed couch
that I’m sure was even more expensive than it looked. For a split second, I was
about to plop down right next to her on the couch, set my coffee on the end table,
and wrap my arm around her shoulder, maybe lean back all the way and gently
pull her toward me so that her body was pressed close against mine. We used
to sit that way and watch TV in our apartment. A lot of the time it was shows I
didn’t even like; she was into weird shit like documentaries about how advertising
was keeping women down, or those programs that showed real surgeries. We
saw breast reductions, open-heart surgery, brain surgery, all sorts of stuff that
she found interesting, though I never saw why. Disgusting. I just agreed to it
because it meant spending time with her. Imagine my shock when, at age
twenty-four, I suddenly realized I’d become one of those guys, the ones who
allowed their girlfriends to drag them to malls and chick flicks. Except Beth
wasn’t into malls and chick flics. It was gruesome surgeries and feminist diatribes that she subjected me to.

“You can sit down,” she said. I felt like an idiot when I realized I’d been standing there staring at her and thinking about open-heart surgery. But I also realized that I couldn’t sit next to her on the couch. The temptation would be too great with her within my reach like that, her slender little waist close enough that all I’d have to do would be to extend my hand and wrap her up in my arms. I sat down in a nearby armchair instead. These thoughts were unnerving me. I’d warned myself before I came that I might feel like this, but somehow I’d expected it wouldn’t be a big deal. It was turning out to be a bigger deal than I thought.

We stared at each other, both of us feeling how strange this moment had turned. I had been naïve to think that I could come here and nothing would be different between us, when in reality, everything was different. Beth was married. I was considering marriage, or at least the gay equivalent of it. It had been five years since we’d last seen each other, and I’d somehow expected that she would jump into my arms like we hadn’t been apart so long, like I’d never broken her heart. I knew that I didn’t really love her anymore, and I guess I knew that she didn’t love me, but I wanted to think that some part of her was still desperately in need of whatever it was that I’d fulfilled for her. I at least wanted to think that I’d fulfilled something.

I cleared my throat and looked away, letting my gaze fall on her fireplace so I wouldn’t have to look at her anymore. “Well, I should be going.”
“No,” she said quickly. Maybe more quickly than she would have liked, I gathered, from the surprised look on her face. “I mean, you went to all this trouble, finding me and driving out here and everything. You can’t just leave. We could go to lunch.”

“We could. If you want to.”

She nodded. “I do. Let me run upstairs and change before we do anything, though.” She stood up and walked across the entryway, pausing at the foot of the stairs to look back at me. “Well, are you coming, or are you just going to sit there?”

I waited on the corner of Beth’s bed while she stood in her huge walk-in closet, flipping through all the clothes she owned. I couldn’t believe it. Her wardrobe when I knew her before had been a fraction of what she owned now. Neither of us had had much money back then, and she always said she had better things to spend her money on than clothes. She said as long as there were naked, starving children in Third World countries, she couldn’t in good conscience go around wearing expensive clothing. From the look of things now, either the children had been fed, or Beth had changed her mind about that vow.

She left the door to the closet open a little, and I could see her moving around inside, slipping out of her ugly sweatpants. I couldn’t see everything through the opening, but what I could see looked good. She hadn’t really put on as much weight as I’d initially thought. Must have been the sweatpants distorting
my view. I watched her step into a pair of black pants, zip them up, look down appraisingly, then change her mind and pull them off again. She hung them back up and selected a floral print skirt. It looked like something a fourth grade teacher would wear, not a skirt that my stylish, hip Beth would be caught dead in. Her wardrobe hadn’t been huge in those days, but she’d had a way of looking as though she’d stepped out of a fashion magazine even when she was wearing a $5 t-shirt and a pair of beat-up Levi’s. Maybe it had been the way she carried herself, the strange air of confidence she always had no matter what the situation. Well, whatever it was, it wasn’t there now, and this skirt just wasn’t doing it for me. I was relieved when she pulled it off and tossed it onto the floor. I didn’t want to think of Beth as a woman sliding inevitably into middle age—especially considering that she was two years younger than I was.

As she slipped into yet another pair of black pants, this one more fitted than the first, the material hugging close against her skin, she glanced up and saw me watching her. She knew I was staring at her as she undressed and didn’t care. In fact, it occurred to me that she’d probably left the door open that way on purpose. I stood up from the bed, the bed where Beth slept with her husband, and turned away from the closet, instead directing my attention to the window. Pushing aside the curtains, I stared out the window at a pair of squirrels running around Beth’s front yard. It looked like one of them had a nut and the other was trying desperately to get it from him. I heard Beth shut the closet door and, a moment later, I felt her hand on my shoulder.
“Are you ready to go?” I asked her, looking into her pale blue eyes. God, I remembered thinking that I could have stared into those eyes for days, remembered how they had been able to look right through me and get past all the shit that I had tried to disguise my true feelings with.

But I was shocked to see her gazing at me with a look of desperation that was so plain and apparent in her eyes that I think she must not have even realized it herself. It was as though she’d been living with this unbearable sorrow, whatever it was, for so long now that she didn’t even bother to hide it anymore. In fact, it was so obvious to me now that I wondered how I hadn’t noticed it before, when she’d opened the door. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close enough that I could feel her heart beating against mine, without thinking about whether this was appropriate or acceptable between two people who were in some ways no more than strangers. She offered no resistance at all, folding herself into my embrace like an infant in her mother’s arms.

“My god, Beth,” I whispered. “What is it?”

She didn’t say anything, but she pushed her face harder into my shoulder. I felt oddly comforted by the weight of her head on my shoulder. She was the one that was starting to cry softly, her body shaking gently in my arms, but at the same time, I felt that just being in her presence erased some of the unrest that had been weighing on me since Ezra’s proposal. Longer than that even. The last few months, maybe longer, that dread had been creeping up on me without
my even realizing it until it hit me full force when Ezra had proposed to me. I let
my own face drop forward toward Beth’s, nestling my face into her hair. It was as
smooth and thick as it had ever been, and it smelled faintly of a light floral scent.
I wondered idly if she still used that organic shampoo made with lavender and
mint, the one she had to order on the Internet from a company that specialized in
the type of vegan, organic, all-natural products that Beth always insisted on.

“I’m sorry, Beth,” I whispered into her hair. I didn’t know why I was saying
it, since I really had nothing to be sorry for that I knew of, but it seemed right.
She probably couldn’t tell what I’d said anyway, with my voice muffled like that,
but she pulled me closer anyway, wrapping her arms around me and finally
letting the tears come. I could feel the dampness soaking into my shirt as the
tears poured from her, her tiny body shaking in my arms. It was the first time
she’d ever cried in front of me, and it was exactly as I’d thought it would be all
this time. The perfect façade she always kept up had to drop sometime. When
we were dating, whenever we had a fight, I would imagine her like this alone, at
night, wrapping her arms around her pillow and sobbing into it. I have no idea
whether she did or not, but it seemed unnatural to me to run across a girl who
had never cried. Finally I was getting to see the imperfect, the human, in her.

I didn’t want to see it though. Clearly she’d been suffering for some time.
Certainly it was good for her to slowly release her grip on the sorrow she’d been
holding on to for so long. But I knew that even if I held her all afternoon, let her
cry until she was completely spent and collapsed in my arms, there was nothing I
could do to change whatever it was that she was going through. Nothing that I would do to change it, anyway. I wanted to comfort her, to make everything all right for her, but at the same time, some part of me felt that this woman I was holding wasn’t really the Beth I’d known. She felt like a stranger, really, and I couldn’t imagine myself sacrificing anything for her even if she’d asked. When I’d rung that doorbell, I’d imagined we might pick things up where we’d left off, that she might be able to remind me of what it was that had made things between us so good, when they’d been good. But this Beth, this broken version of her, probably knew nothing about that. The only way I’d be able to find out was if I asked her to dig out the journals to help me figure it out, to show me the scrapbooks and the photo albums, to look for what it was in our eyes when we’d smiled at each other in those permanently frozen moments. Even then, they were just pictures. Maybe they wouldn’t tell me anything at all. Maybe there wasn’t anything to tell.

She took a deep breath and turned her face up to look at me. Her eyes were red and moist, her mascara smeared around the lids, which reminded me of the girls who waited tables at Libreccio, the ones who were still young and naïve enough to think that wearing a lot of makeup would make them look sexy and earn them better tips. But the look in her eyes was nothing like those girls’. Beth looked utterly exhausted, defeated, lost. Seeing her that way made my breath catch in my throat for a moment. I knew if I didn’t do something, I’d start crying myself. I was trying to think of something to say, something I could do, but
before I came up with anything, she leaned close to me and started to kiss me.

She still kissed the same way she had when we were dating, gently, almost tentatively. If I hadn’t known better, hadn’t been accustomed to her soft, hesitant kisses, I would have thought she was doubtful about what we were doing. Actually, she seemed more sure about than I was, pulling my shirt out of my pants and sliding her hands up my back, then finally pulling away from my lips long enough to unbutton the shirt. I found myself pulling her blouse over her head, letting my other hand glide up her skirt and over her soft, smooth legs. It was almost surreal. If I hadn’t been there I wouldn’t believe it could have happened that way. But at the same time, it was the most natural thing for us to do. After all this time, my body still responded to hers, even if my heart and soul didn’t. I thought fleetingly of Ezra, of the horrified look that would cross his face if he knew what I was doing, but we’d gone too far to stop now.

I expected Beth to be slow and tentative about it. After all, we were lying on the bed where Beth slept next to her husband. It was probably also the only place they made love (somehow I just couldn’t see Beth making wild, crazy love to her sensible doctor husband on their lavish kitchen counter). The more I thought about it, the more it made me feel kind of odd about being there. But Beth shared none of my uncertainty. She began to kiss me harder, almost too hard, her teeth knocking against mine a little as she moved to straddle my body. Her hands fumbled with my belt buckle, finally loosening it, and she pulled the belt off with a flourish, flinging it over her shoulder. I felt more like a teenager
about to lose his virginity than a twenty-nine year old man who had fucked more than his fair share of both women and men. My hands were shaking as I ran them over her body, I guess because I was nervous, but maybe because I was a little excited too. I hated to admit it, but I wanted this.

I thought that after we’d finished, after I’d let myself come inside of her, when we were lying on the bed that we’d never bothered to open up, that I would finally hear the full story. I figured she would tell me what it was that had brought all that about, the tears, the kissing, the eventual outcome. We were both on our backs staring up at her ceiling fan, my arm wrapped protectively around her. What I really needed now was a cigarette to complete this scene. I didn’t even smoke that much anymore. It just seemed that in this scene, a cigarette would have been appropriate. I could picture myself smoking a nice Camel Turkish Gold while I half-listened to Beth tell me all about whatever it was that had been bothering her so much.

But she just stayed there, silent, without a word of explanation about what had happened. After a few minutes, she sat up and began to look around for her clothing, which was still scattered around from our earlier haste to get our hands on each other’s bodies. She leaned over the edge of the bed to retrieve her panties, and I admired the graceful, curving lines of her body. “We should probably get dressed,” she said quietly, looking over her shoulder at me.

“You still do yoga?” I asked suddenly.
She laughed. “No. Not in years.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Other things came up. I’ve been busy.”

I felt a sudden twinge of sadness as I watched her slip back into her clothes, ones that seemed so unfitting of what I thought I knew of her. Had five years really changed her that much? It occurred to me that I had no idea what she’d really done with her life since the time I’d stepped out of her apartment and into Ezra’s bed. She’d graduated, sure, probably gotten a job, somehow met and married her husband, and somewhere along the line gained a few pounds and bought a lot of mildly frumpy clothes. But what had happened that had brought her to this point where she no longer practiced yoga, and stopped working even though she’d always been so insistent on the importance of women working for themselves, and lived in a big house that she would have called materialistic once?

Now fully dressed, she looked back at me expectantly, holding out my underwear to me after retrieving them from the top of a lamp near the bed. “Travis?” She was asking me to get up, get dressed, and leave. I swallowed hard and took the underwear. I had slept with a lot of people before, but for the most part, I’d tried to avoid sleeping with random strangers, unless I was really drunk and couldn’t help it. But I had the sense now that I’d just fucked a woman that I didn’t know at all, a woman that I would probably never know again.

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I had planned to go to work after seeing Beth, but I didn’t really feel like it after the afternoon I’d had. We had never gotten around to going to lunch, and the sex we’d had seemed to have taken a lot out of me, so I was feeling ravenous when I left her house. I drove around her neighborhood for a little while, looking at the restaurants and stores in the area and trying to imagine Beth walking around in these places, but I couldn’t really picture her at all. I’d seen her no more than an hour ago, but I couldn’t seem to recall her face.

Eventually, I found my way back to the highway and started heading for home. I had decided to stop in at one of my favorite Thai places for a late lunch. Ezra and I liked to go there sometimes for dinner. They had a fantastic curry that I liked, and Ezra always asked for a bite when I ordered it, even though he knew that it would always be too spicy for him. “You like it hot,” he would say as he gulped down water. And I would smile and nod. “Yes, I do, my dear.”

I told the hostess at the front of the restaurant that I’d like a table for one, and she started to lead me to a small booth in the back corner, but as we walked, I saw Ezra eating with Annika, the painter he shared his studio space with.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I asked as I passed them. The hostess stopped and looked at me with an expression of annoyance, but I ignored her.

“Trav!” Ezra exclaimed, looking up with an expression of genuine happiness. “How great to run into you here! Annika and I were just talking about how long it’s been since we’ve all had lunch together. Come on, join us.”

I slid into the booth next to Ezra and kissed him on the cheek. He put his
arm around my waist and pulled me close to him. “I’m glad I ran into you guys,” I said. It was the kind of thing that people say to each other in situations like this whether they mean it or not, but I really was glad to see them.

Annika smiled and said, “I hear things are going really great at Libreccio. I read the review in the *Dallas Morning News* the other day.”

“It was a good review,” I agreed. “We were pretty happy about it.” I didn’t really know exactly who I meant by “we” – the managers and I, the staff and I, Ezra and I? There were so many “we's” that I was part of these days that I couldn’t really specify which one I meant. I leaned my head against Ezra’s shoulder and smiled. I liked being a “we” with him. It felt good. It felt comfortable.

In that moment, just half an hour after I’d left the arms of Beth, a woman who I had loved, a woman whose memory had haunted me for years, I wasn’t thinking about her at all. I was just thinking about how good it felt to be here in this restaurant with the man I loved, with his sweet painter friend, laughing with them, giving Ezra a taste of my curry and hugging him when he coughed and choked and said it was way too spicy for him. It felt good to be alive in the moment like that. Beth was back in my past, where she belonged, and I kissed Ezra on the cheek, knowing that he was my present and future.
I sat on the edge of the bathtub, staring at the little plastic stick in my hands with a feeling of déjà vu. I guess it wasn’t really déjà vu so much as it was reminiscence, because I really had sat here in this exact position three times before this. And three times, I had watched the little strip at the end of the pregnancy test turn a pale shade of blue, the exact shade of blue it was turning now. Except somehow, something was different, in a way that I couldn’t exactly explain or even understand myself.

I stood up and took the test over to the sink, closer to the lights, holding it up and turning it at various different angles to see if it really was blue. Maybe it had just been a trick of the light, or perhaps wishful thinking on my part. But it was unmistakable. Blue. Positive.

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry or smile or break things or what. Nothing in my past experience had prepared me for this moment. I thought about the first time I’d sat there staring at the blue strip, holding it in my shaking hands, realizing that my life was about to change. My thoughts had instantly turned to how exciting it would be to tell Richard, to shop for baby clothes, to stare in fascination at ultrasound pictures even though I wouldn’t be able to tell exactly what I was looking at. I even thought it wouldn’t be so bad to watch my
stomach swell so that I had to go buy lots of frumpy maternity dresses. I had started thinking about whether or not I wanted an epidural during labor before an hour had even passed. I had chosen names: Benjamin if it was a boy, Caitlin if it was a girl, although Richard would later convince me that Emma was a better choice for a baby girl. Benjamin Pierce. Emma Pierce. I tried them out often, whispering the names to myself as I mopped the kitchen floor or sat daydreaming at my desk at work.

Richard took me shopping for baby things, and we set up a nursery in the bedroom next to ours. We had stood together in that empty room when we first bought the house, not saying a word to each other, but both knowing that this was where our family would start. The room was empty now, but we knew it was only a matter of time before it would be filled with diapers and baby toys. We could see our future there in the bare white walls of that room, and for the first time, I stopped wondering if I’d made a mistake in marrying a man who was so much older than me, who I had never really felt madly in love with. Standing there with him in that empty room, things suddenly felt right. I felt as though I’d found my place. I felt comfortable with the gentle security that had always characterized my relationship with Richard. I felt like we were starting down some new road that would take us to places that we had always wanted to go together. When the pregnancy test turned blue that first time, it had seemed like the fulfillment of a destiny that I’d always been headed for though I’d never understood it.
I still held out hope during the second pregnancy, but by the third, I knew better than to expect I’d be holding a baby in my arms at the end of nine months. I hadn’t decided yet which of the three was the worst. The first one had been the most terrifying because I didn’t know what was happening when the blood started to spill out of me. By the time I’d reached my third pregnancy, I was already dreading the hour when the cramps would start, signaling the beginning of the end. In spite of the obviously hollow reassurances of the doctors, I’d known it was only a matter of time before my third and final baby was spit unceremoniously out of my body.

I had started to think of it as the third and final baby as soon as I’d found out we’d conceived again. There would be no further attempts after this, no more botched efforts that ended in blood, tears, and sorrow. Richard had assured me after I lost that one too, as he kept reassuring me nearly every day, that we’d try again, that next time it would work out for sure. There were other doctors we could try, new medicines coming out every day, and certainly there were precautions we could take to ensure it would turn out this time. But I’d heard the statistics. The chance of having another miscarriage rises to 43% by the time you’ve had your third. There would be nothing different this time or any other time, and I couldn’t bear the thought of going through it all again, feeling the muscles of my back tense up in preparation to get rid of the worthless fetus, seeing that red stain in my underwear, having my hand patted by well-meaning nurses with soft voices and sad smiles. They were obstetrics nurses, not used to
this kind of death and loss. Normally they were the ones that stood by, beaming, as the happy mother pushed and grunted a new life into the world. It seemed almost shocking to them, somehow shameful, and they always averted their eyes when the doctor uttered the words “spontaneous abortion.”

After consultations with all the best doctors in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, test after test, each of them telling us the same thing that we so dreaded to hear yet again, Richard and I still hadn’t openly resigned ourselves to the fact that we wouldn’t ever have a child. What all of them told us, with the strongest and most sincere apologies possible, was that Richard and I were both completely healthy, but that certain genetic markers in our DNA were too similar, causing my body to view our growing baby as a foreign intruder, one that it had to destroy and get rid of. It was rare, but not unheard of, they told us. Of course we’d never heard of it, so we went to another doctor. And another. And another. And they all told us the exact same thing – chances were slim that I would ever be able to carry a child of Richard’s to term. It was not impossible, they said. But it wasn’t very likely.

At the last appointment, the last doctor we visited, Richard had sat across from her and angrily demanded the facts. “What percentage are we talking here? What are the chances that we could have a baby?” he asked, almost accusingly, of the doctor as she stared at him, her brows a little furrowed, her lips pursed. At first I thought she was annoyed by his outburst, or maybe even a little frightened of him, but then I realized it was an expression of pity.
“A slim chance,” she said.

He shook his head. “Don’t give me that ‘slim chance.’ I want numbers here, statistics. This is science, not divination.”

She looked away from him, closing the file folder on her desk as she did. It was a gesture of finality. “I would give you a five, maybe ten, percent chance of ever having a child naturally.”

Richard, who had been leaning forward, slumped back in his chair as though she had dealt him an actual physical blow. He shook his head, looking like he was unable to comprehend what he’d just been told, but I knew he understood. He just didn’t want to believe it. But I didn’t even flinch. It had already sunk in for me. I had the real physical memories of how it felt to miscarry, the physical pain to back up what all these doctors were telling us.

I knew I couldn’t go through that again. I knew that Richard understood that, too, and I could see it tearing at him, the conflict between his desire to have a family and his concern for my well-being. I wondered what he would say when I told him I was pregnant again. I suspected he would act happy but would quietly worry the whole time, would watch me for signs of trouble, emotional or physical. He would be more nervous than I was, fearing every day that he might come home and find me drenched in the blood of another dead baby. He would be terrified because he wouldn’t know what I understood with near certainty—that this time, things really would be different. He wouldn’t know, and I would never tell him, that this wasn’t his baby I was carrying.
I’d quit my job the day after the third miscarriage. That had been two weeks ago. Everyone told me it was a mistake. You should try to keep going, stick with your schedule, try to keep things normal in your life, they told me. What you need right now is routine, things you’re used to. You’re already going through a shock, and another huge life change like quitting your job isn’t good for you. I had quietly thanked them for their concern and packed up my things from my desk. I’d worked in public relations at the American Heart Association for three years. It had been a job I’d gotten merely to pass time – I wasn’t all that interested in public relations, and Richard and I certainly didn’t need the money. My degree was in anthropology, and I had worked my way through college teaching yoga for five years, a job I loved. A friend of mine – actually she wasn’t really my friend, but the wife of one of Richard’s colleagues who thought she was my friend because we often saw each other at the various dinners and functions that both our husbands were professionally obligated to attend – who worked at the AHA told me about the job and insisted I’d be perfect for it. A week later, I found myself sitting behind my very own desk. I hadn’t really been looking for a job, but it was kind of nice in the beginning. I was used to working, as I’d had a job almost constantly since I was fourteen, and I was bored sitting around the house all day. I made some friends at the office, women who I went to lunch with at trendy downtown Dallas restaurants. Now even the thought of going to lunch with them was enough to exhaust me. Getting up, finding something to wear,
putting on makeup, trying to look like I was coping – it was all more than I could handle in the wake of my own personal tragedy.

But the days had been so long since I’d quit my job. Unbearably long. There were always things to do; in this big house, there were so many things to dust, to put away, to sweep up. There were places I could go, plenty of people I could see, and of course there was always the possibility of finding a new job, as Richard had been not-so-subtly suggesting I do for the last week. But I couldn’t really bring myself to do any of it. My latest pastime was lying in bed watching TV all morning. Most of the time it was The Learning Channel. In the last two weeks, I’d seen fourteen births, fourteen marriages, seven lousy blind dates, two tummy tucks, the liposuction of a horribly obese woman, and a gay Jewish club promoter from New York who got a nose job to improve his “visage” as he called it, so he could feel better about himself. I had actually cried along with him when they unveiled his new nose. He was crying out of sheer joy at his new face, but I was just crying out of sheer defeat. I wanted the Learning Channel to come knock at my door, pick me up, and take me to a hospital, where I’d go into a room for a few hours and come out brand new, better-than-ever, a happy new Elizabeth that would be better than the old one. I wished things were that easy.

February 5, 2002

It’s raining. It’s been raining for weeks. It’s 7:00 AM. Richard is getting ready for work. I’m lying in bed. I’m wearing wool socks, a pair of
gray sweatpants, and a Race for the Cure t-shirt. In five minutes, I will go downstairs and cook breakfast for Richard and myself. Today is Tuesday, which is the day we eat buttermilk pancakes that I make from scratch because Richard hates the kind from the box. He says they’re chalky. I hope I remembered to buy maple syrup.

I slammed my journal shut and stuck it in the drawer of my nightstand. I was annoyed at myself for making entries like this. My journals had once been a receptacle for all my emotion and creativity, a place where I could write whatever I wanted without worrying about anyone judging me or making fun of my silly thoughts and ideas. But for the past few months, I’d had nothing to say, and the entries I made were all as pointless as this one. They consisted mainly of random recounts of meals I’d eaten without any sort of pleasure, weather that I barely noticed because I usually didn’t go outside, and episodes of shows that I watched to ease the passing of the minutes that seemed to tick on interminably.

I was about to go downstairs to start making the pancakes, but I stopped as I passed the window. Outside, five boys and two girls stood on the corner of our street, waiting for the school bus. They were usually loud and rowdy, the boys shoving each other around while the girls looked on with disdain, but it was raining today, so they all huddled under umbrellas and waited in subdued silence for the bus to come whisk them out of the cool, damp morning air. On days like this, I wanted to invite them all in for hot chocolate and fresh cookies. It would be nice to hear the sounds of kids running around on the hard wood floor that I
polished once a week and to hear the youthful voices echoing around the vaulted ceilings. But I didn’t know these children, even though they lived in the neighborhood. We’d been in this house for a year and I still knew only one or two of the neighbors, and even them I rarely saw. It was convenient to have someone next door that I could borrow a cup of sugar from or ask to watch the house if Richard and I had to take a trip to some anesthesiology conference. This was about the limit of any contact we had with our neighbors.

“Elizabeth,” Richard called from the bathroom, “I thought we could go get an early dinner tonight. I’ll be home from work by four. Why don’t we try that new Thai restaurant they just opened across from the mall?”

“Okay.” Actually the restaurant wasn’t that new. It had been there for nearly three months, and I’d already been there for dinner on my own, probably about a month ago on a night when Richard had been working late at the hospital. It was during my “try to keep active by doing and experiencing” phase, during which I’d gone out to dinner, to movies, to museums, and other such activities in an attempt to keep some sort of momentum going in my life. I hadn’t quit my job then, but I knew it was coming. I had gone to the Thai restaurant after watching a depressing art film that took place in a prison and involved sexual assault. But I’d liked the food, so I didn’t say anything to Richard about having gone. It would be nice to watch Richard try the spring rolls or the pad thai and discover for himself that it was a good restaurant, and he would be pleased to be able to claim that he’d found it. This, I reminded myself, was the kind of
little thing a dutiful wife did.

The bus came and all the children clamored to be the first to get on. One of the girls screamed when a boy shook his wet umbrella at her, spraying her clothes with water. Richard came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, and I jumped a little, not expecting him. He rested his chin on my shoulder and we watched the children get on the bus. I knew what he was thinking. I was thinking the same thing. We would never be able to watch one of our children get on this bus, because we’d never be able to have one. I watched the bus pull away, and Richard released me.

“Elizabeth, it’s been three weeks,” Richard began, a familiar, patronizing tone creeping into his voice. It was his doctor’s voice, the one he used with his patients to reassure them that he was a capable professional, but he only used it with me when he was trying to tell me what was best for me or what I ought to do.

“Two,” I corrected. It had actually been two weeks, three days, and seven hours, but I knew better than to say that to him. He would get that concerned look on his face and accuse me of obsessing and say I really ought to see someone. He would be more than happy to find a good therapist for me. He knew several. He’d even make the appointment. I’d already turned him down on this offer several times now.

“Two, three, whatever,” he said. “I think you should get out of the house. Go shopping, go have lunch with some of your friends, do something. Why don’t
you find another job?"

"Why? It’s not like we need the money."

"We could always use the money." It was a stupid thing for him to say. We both knew that his ridiculously extravagant anesthesiologist's salary was enough to keep us living like royalty for years. I couldn’t understand why we went through these conversations over and over again when they were so obviously irrelevant and artificial. “At least it would give you something to do rather than sit around here all day.”

“I don’t sit around all day.” I crossed my arms across my chest, feeling very contrary. I didn’t want to participate in this sort of stupid, pointless conversation anymore. We both knew our lines, since we’d said them before, but I didn’t want to say them again. So instead I said, “I clean the house, I cook dinner for you. But maybe you don’t appreciate it. Maybe I should stop doing that.”

Richard sighed. “You know I appreciate it and you know that’s not what I’m saying. I just think you need to get out of this house for awhile.”

“Why? You think things are different outside the house? Like I’ll get out there and I’ll forget all this happened?” We both stared quietly at each other for a moment. There were certain words we couldn’t speak to each other, certain things that were better left unsaid, even too dangerous to hint at. This was one of them.

“No…just…”Richard stared at me with a look of complete helplessness.
“Just what?” I asked. He kept staring at me. I thought maybe he was trying to hypnotize me or something, by staring at me with this inscrutable expression on his face. “Just what?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “I’m going to the hospital.” He retreated with his shoulders a little stooped. I heard him go downstairs and out into the garage, and I watched out the window as he pulled out and sped down the street, off to work. I pulled the blinds shut and slipped back into bed. I realized I hadn’t made him breakfast, that he’d gone to work without having eaten, that I had probably driven him out. But I didn’t care. I pulled the covers up around my head and closed my eyes, letting myself fall back into a restless, unquiet sleep.

I was awakened an hour later by the sound of the trash trucks coming through the neighborhood, and I rolled over in bed and made a loud moaning sound. I really wanted to scream, just to get it out, but I was afraid the neighbors might hear and call the police or something, so I restrained myself. I tried to go back to sleep, but I was too awake by then, so I threw off the covers and went downstairs to get some breakfast. I wasn’t hungry, but at least it was something to do.

I wandered around the kitchen, peeking into the pantry and standing for several minutes in front of the open refrigerator. Nothing really seemed that appealing to me. I thought there was probably something that I would eat, if I had it in front of me, but I really couldn’t figure out what that was. I picked up a
loaf of bread and started to open it so I could make some toast, but I put it back in the breadbox and went to the pantry for some oatmeal. I had started to measure it out when I decided that really wasn’t what I wanted either, so I poured it back in the box. At least I could settle on coffee, so I scooped some out and started the machine.

The coffee was brewing, trickling slowly down into the pot, when the doorbell rang. At first I was so caught off guard that I didn’t know what it was. I couldn’t recall anyone having ever rung the doorbell at the house before. We didn’t receive packages, generally, and door-to-door salesman and advertisers weren’t allowed in our gated community. Even children knew better than to come by here with whatever overpriced crap they were selling to raise money for their school or organization. So who could be at my door? I didn’t really want to answer, dressed as I was in my sweatpants and t-shirt, but I went to the entryway anyway, my curiosity overpowering my sense of modesty.

The doorbell sounded again when I was halfway to the door, and I called out, “I’m coming!” I twisted the dead bolt and pulled the door open. A tall, slender, dark-haired man stood on the stoop, well-dressed in a tailored black suit and a nice tie. I started to ask him what I could do for him when I suddenly realized who it was.

“Travis?” I asked tentatively. I felt stupid as soon as the name was out of my mouth. It couldn’t be Travis. After all, how could my college boyfriend, the first love of my life, whom I hadn’t seen in five years, be standing here on my
“Yes, it’s me,” he said, smiling. He extended his hand, and I shook it, too dazed by his sudden appearance to think about how awkward a greeting a handshake was between two people who had once exchanged passionate kisses upon seeing each other. “My God, Beth, it’s been so long.” I flinched a little when he called me Beth. I didn’t know a single person anymore who still knew me as Beth, a shortening of my name that I had used up until I graduated from college and started going by Elizabeth, even though I preferred Beth. It had been partly because I felt that Elizabeth sounded more professional and suited for a college graduate, but also because Richard had always called me Elizabeth and I’d never bothered to correct him.

“Well, come in out of the rain,” I said, opening the door wider for him, wondering what he could possibly be doing there and somehow not caring at the same time.

Over coffee, on my couch he told me that he’d found my address on the Internet, under the name Elizabeth Symon-Pierce, and I told him about getting married to Richard. He told me I had a beautiful house, and I thanked him. The whole time we were talking, I could feel his eyes on me, taking me in, noting the changes, and I sensed disapproval from him. I could tell what he was thinking, had always been able to; I knew him that well. I could tell he was thinking I had really let myself go. I had been a yoga teacher when he and I dated, super-
active, an avid runner, a strict vegetarian, a stylish dresser. Now I was just an unkept, unshowered woman in sweatpants who was slowly, but surely, creeping into middle age. I was only twenty-seven, but I felt years older when he looked at me.

I barely listened as he told me about his job, his life and the people in it, the restaurant that he owned. I knew vaguely about these things – he’d just opened the restaurant before he and I broke up, and I’d heard about its wild success in restaurant reviews in local papers and magazines. I also knew, though he didn’t mention it, that he was still with the man he’d fallen in love with after we’d broken up. It had been so strange to find out, after four years of dating someone, that he had actually been bisexual since his teens and just hadn’t told me about it. There were lots of things like that with Travis, things that went unmentioned between us because he didn’t want to have to explain himself to me. He had always followed the path of least resistance when it came to relationships, even if that meant lying or stretching the truth sometimes. I realized that after he was gone. It was definitely a fault, but even though I recognized it (and all his other faults), I still missed him.

He told me that he’d been thinking about me lately, and I said nothing. I wanted to say that I hadn’t thought about him in years, but in truth, I’d be lying. I thought about him on occasion, when I was lying next to Richard in bed and wondering what had happened to the passion that I’d once felt for making love. But I realized that was passion I’d felt with Travis, never with Richard, and
nothing was really lost at all.

Sometimes the memory of Travis would come, unbidden, as I passed by certain streets where we’d once driven, certain stores or restaurants we’d gone to together. I once ended up at a dinner party with Richard in a neighborhood not far from where Travis and I had lived together for a few years, and we’d driven by our old apartment building on the way. I’d bit my lip and said nothing when Richard commented on how odd it was, this juxtaposition of old, rundown apartments and million-dollar homes. There had been times when I tried to remember his face, but couldn’t really come up with a mental image of it, so I’d pull down my old photo albums and leaf through them to find pictures of his smiling face. And now here he was in front of me.

He was sitting stiffly, holding his coffee cup tightly in his hands, and kind of staring around the living room as though he wanted to look anywhere but at me. I felt my cheeks flushing red as I imagined what he must be thinking. I was ashamed of everything I’d become, of the way I’d let myself change into this boring, flabby, washed-out housewife. He cleared his throat and stared down at the floor. “Well, I should be going.”

“No,” I said, without realizing the word had come out of my mouth. I don’t know why I said it. I could tell he was uncomfortable being here, and he probably regretted having come, and now that he was trying to extract himself as painlessly as possible from a bad situation, I was just making things worse. I tried to think of what I should say next. “I mean, you went to all this trouble,
finding me and driving out here and everything, you can't just leave like that. We
could go to lunch.”

I expected him to say no, give some reason not to come that we both
knew was an excuse. But instead he smiled and said, “We could, if you want to.”

I shrugged. “Sure. Let me run upstairs and change.” I stood up and
started to walk up the stairs. I turned around when I was at the foot of the stairs,
just to be sure that he really was sitting there, that I wasn’t hallucinating or
dreaming this. He was, sitting stiffly on my couch with his coffee cup still in his
hands, looking like he was torn between following me upstairs and staying there
to wait. “You can come if you want,” I said, expecting him to say he’d rather wait,
but he put his coffee mug on the table and followed me up the stairs.

March 5, 2002

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I just fucked Travis Warner. I’m married and I
just had sex with my ex-boyfriend who I haven’t seen in five years. What
was I thinking? I don’t even know how it happened. One minute I was
changing to go to lunch with him, the next I’m crying on his shoulder like a
little girl, and before I know it, we’re having sex on the bed where I sleep
with my husband. Shit. I know I should feel bad about this, but I don’t.
Just really shocked and not sure why I let it happen. Actually I guess I
kind of started it. Whatever. I’m just totally not sure what to think about
this. I haven’t seen this guy in years, and he randomly shows up to my
door and I just make love to him, no questions asked? What the hell? I mean, we didn’t even use a condom...what if he has AIDS or something?

Okay, I know he doesn’t have AIDS or anything like that, but still...what the hell?

I tossed my journal down onto my bed and shook my hand, which was starting to cramp up from writing so quickly. Travis had left a few minutes ago, and I was trying to get this all down before I thought too much about it and changed my perceptions of it. I felt that I needed to put this down on paper if I ever wanted to understand what had happened. But as I looked down at my messily scrawled handwriting, I slowly closed the journal and returned it to my nightstand. This could wait. I wouldn’t forget what that had felt like.

It had felt right in a way that I couldn’t understand. It had felt like waking up from a long nap and curling your toes around sand on a warm beach in the summer. I looked out the window at the gray sky and tried to imagine what it would look like if stopped raining and the clouds drifted away. It wasn’t that I didn’t know what blue skies looked like, or even that I’d forgotten. It had just been so long since it had stopped raining that I’d begun to wonder if the sun would ever come out again. But I knew that it would. In fact, the clouds already seemed to be clearing up a little, and it seemed brighter than it had a few hours ago.

It was around 3:45. On most days, I would be getting ready to watch Oprah at 4:00. I recalled the preview for today’s show that they had played
yesterday – what every mother needs to know about teenage dating abuse. If I didn’t watch the show, I was taking the chance that I might not recognize the signs that my teenage daughter was being abused by her worthless boyfriend. But I wouldn’t be watching it today. I figured I could afford to chance it. It would be better to actually have a live baby before I worried about her teenage years.

Of course on most days I would absolutely eat that sort of thing up. But today the thought of staring blankly at the TV for another couple hours until Richard came home seemed unspeakably boring. It just seemed like a huge waste of time, but it had been so long since I’d spent my afternoons doing anything else that I wasn’t really sure what to do with myself. I decided to start by running a bath for myself in the sunken whirlpool tub. As the water splashed into the tub, I poured in some chamomile bubble bath and pulled out a couple dust-covered candles that I hadn’t lit in ages. I pulled off my clothes and was about to step into the tub, but I decided to get a book to read while I soaked. I turned off the water, then went down the hall to Richard’s study, with its bookshelf-lined walls.

I scanned the titles in search of something frivolous to read, something that would require little or no thought on my part, but what caught my attention was my dog-eared copy of Light on Yoga. Years ago, almost a lifetime ago it seemed, after my first yoga teacher had referred to it as the Bible of yoga, I’d bought it and read it immediately. I’d referred to it frequently when I became a yoga teacher myself, but it had been years since I’d picked it up. I flipped
through the pages, glancing at the black and white photos of the Indian man twisted into positions that most people would never dream of. At one point in my life, I’d been able to do most of them.

Travis had seemed surprised, even dismayed, when he heard I wasn’t practicing yoga anymore. At first I didn’t understand what the big deal was, but I realized that it had been such an integral part of the girl he’d known, little Beth Symon who could wrap her legs behind her head and stand on her hands for minutes at a time. Admitting that I’d given it up was like telling him that the Beth he knew was gone. And in most ways, she was. I couldn’t be sure whether I felt sorry about that or not.

I set the book down on Richard’s desk and propped it open to a page with a fairly easy pose, one I thought I should probably be able to do even after all this time. The instructions were simple to follow, and after a few quick movements, my body was in the same position as the yogi in the picture, my body twisting into eagle pose. My arms interlocked with each other across my chest and I wound my legs around each other as I balanced on one leg so that my whole body was a tight, compact little package. I wobbled a little at first, but I quickly caught my balance and took a few deep breaths, exhaling serenely through my lips. I could feel the bare skin of my inner thighs pressed against each other tightly, my chest slowly rising and falling against my arms.

“Elizabeth? What in God’s name are you doing?”

I quickly released my body from the pose and turned around to face
Richard, still in his scrubs, staring at me with an expression of both amusement and perplexity. Obviously he hadn’t expected to come home and find his wife naked in the study bending her body into odd yoga poses.

“You’re home early,” I replied inanely, crossing my arms as though in an attempt to hide my bare chest from him, though he’d seen it plenty of times before, as he was my husband. Still, I felt incredibly exposed standing there naked in front of him while he was completely dressed, as though I’d been caught doing something I shouldn’t have. I could feel myself blushing. “So how was work?”

“Fine,” he replied, obviously distracted. “What are you doing? I thought you’d be up in the bedroom. I saw you’d run a bath, but you weren’t around.”

“I was about to take a bath and I came in here for a book,” I began to explain, but I realized how ridiculous it sounded. I came in here for a book and ended up doing yoga in the nude because I wanted to see if I still could after my ex-boyfriend, who I just slept with by the way, expressed disappointment that I’d given it up years ago. Right. That sounded perfectly reasonable. I picked up the yoga book from the desk and tossed it to Richard. “I happened to run across this one and thought I’d see if I could still do some of that stuff.”

“And I see you could,” he replied. I could feel his gaze traveling the lengths of my body, exploring with his eyes the territory that by now he certainly knew by touch. Perhaps it turned him on, the idea of his wife at home, doing bizarre things with her naked body in the room where he often spent his evenings.
catching up on work or his reading. He moved toward me, setting the book down on the table again, and slipped his hand around my waist, pulling me in toward him. “You’ve got a perfectly good bath all ready in there, and I would hate to see it go to waste. Why don’t we go in there, the two of us?”

I felt a brief, unexplainable surge of panic. I knew that it wasn’t plain and simple bathing that Richard had in mind. The bathtub was one of Richard’s favorite places to make love, our entwined bodies floating together in the bubbly, sudsy water. He liked the two of us to soak in each other’s arms for long periods of time so that our fingers and toes had turned to prunes by the time we finally got around to making love. I thought I’d read somewhere that soaking in hot water would lower sperm count, but Richard liked the baths too much for me to say anything. Besides, he had never been our problem. It was my body that was refusing to cooperate.

I couldn’t remember the last time we’d made love. Even though it was a generally accepted fact that it was safe to have sex up until the end of the second trimester, we had decided to abstain, just to be sure, until the baby was born. We always optimistically said “until the baby was born” but what we both really meant was “until the next miscarriage.” After it had finally happened, I’d been too depressed to even think about sex. In my mind, it was first and foremost an act that could potentially bring about another aborted fetus. I knew it wasn’t exactly fair to Richard, this suddenly non-existent sex life, so I’d vowed to myself that I’d go to the doctor and get on the pill, when I had the energy. I just
hadn’t had the energy to do it yet. Besides, I was afraid Richard would find out somehow, and I knew how angry he would be if he did.

So when Richard suggested the bath, I knew what was coming. And although it bothered me for a moment, and I worried about what might happen, the feeling passed, and I felt a sense of release. It was as though something that had been knotted up and twisted around my insides had finally come undone. I let Richard take me upstairs and slip into the bathtub next to me, and, for the first time in a long time, I didn’t think about any sort of passion that I’d once shared with Travis. I closed my eyes and let myself relax in Richard’s arms, feeling the warm bath water wash over me as he slowly, gently, made love to me.

I woke up early the next morning with an uncharacteristic sense of purpose and energy. Richard was still sleeping next to me, snoring a little, with his mouth hanging open. I watched him with a strange feeling of detachment. I wondered if he’d wake up if I reached over and tried to close his mouth; the snoring was getting to me. I decided he probably would, so I got out of bed, carefully so as not to wake him, and went downstairs.

The clock on the coffee machine in the kitchen showed almost five-thirty in the morning. I measured out some coffee and started brewing it, trying to remember the last time I’d gotten up this early. It had been years, probably, but there had been a time when I used to get up at five in the morning every single day, even Saturday and Sunday, and run five miles before I did an hour of yoga.
and then started my day. That was the old me, Beth Symon, a person I’d all but
gotten over the years. I poured myself a cup of coffee and stood at the kitchen
counter, watching the birds outside the window. They were not more than three
feet from where I was standing, on the bird feeder that Richard had put up
outside this window, but they didn’t seem to be frightened by my presence or
even to notice me at all. It was beginning to be spring, and they were returning
from wherever it was they stayed all winter. They were hungry, almost frantic to
get at the food, chirping with annoyance and pecking at each other as they all
jostled for a space at the bird feeder.

I heard the alarm clock upstairs going off around five forty-five, the
insistent beeping continuing for a few moments before Richard finally got up and
turned it off. I could see him fumbling around with the clock as he always did in
those groggy moments before he was always awake, then turning to kiss me
good morning before he went to shower. Only this morning, I wouldn’t be there.

“Elizabeth?” I heard him call. I sipped my coffee and looked down at the
marble countertop under my coffee cup. He called for me again, a little louder
this time.

“Down here,” I replied. I heard his footsteps on the stairs, and I grabbed
another coffee mug from the cabinet for him. He peeked his head into the
kitchen as I was pouring him a cup, and I handed it to him.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “Why are
you up so early?”
“No reason. Just woke up.”

“Well, I’m going to jump in the shower,” he said, setting his coffee down on the counter. He hadn’t had any of it, but I didn’t really care. I hadn’t made it for him anyway. He kissed me again and went back upstairs.

I followed him out of the kitchen, and when he was halfway up the stairs, I said, “Richard?” He turned and looked back at me, his hand on the railing of the curved staircase, his hair mussed and disheveled from sleep. He still seemed a little groggy as he stood there, looking down at me expectantly. I gripped my coffee cup in my hand and stared back up at him, trying to think of the words that I wanted to say, the things that he needed to be told. But how could I tell him about things that I didn’t understand myself, things that had only started to become clear to me, ideas that were still hazy and half-formed in my head? I wanted to tell him that he didn’t have to worry about me anymore, and that everything would be alright, but he’d want to know what made me say that, and I didn’t have any explanation.

“Well, what is it?” he finally asked, a little impatiently.

I smiled and shook my head. “Nothing. I love you.”

His gaze softened and he smiled back. “I love you too, Elizabeth.”

It was a month before I allowed myself to have any serious thoughts of pregnancy, even though some part of me had known since the moment I’d watched Travis leave. I went out and bought the test two weeks after my period
should have come, and as I sat there on the bathtub and watched it turn blue, I felt some sense of closure, as though I’d finally come to peace with something that I hadn’t even known was haunting me.

I couldn’t be sure then that it was Travis’s baby. It was entirely possible that it was Richard’s, from when we were together in the bathtub, that it was another ticking time bomb just waiting to explode out of my belly and bring new sorrow and pain to my life. But I had a feeling. Maybe it was just silly, immature superstition on my part. Maybe I just wanted to believe that it was Travis’s baby and not Richard’s. There had been a time when I hadn’t shared Richard’s cynical distrust of unfounded speculation, when I hadn’t needed to see proof of everything before I believed it. I had believed that there was some mysterious force at work in the world, be it fate or karma or destiny or whatever you wanted to call it.

I set the positive pregnancy test down on the bathroom counter and looked at myself in the mirror, staring deep into my own eyes. I was going to be a mother. I knew it this time. I felt different than I’d felt before, with all those other pregnancies, and I knew that at this time next year, I’d be a whole person again, not broken anymore by things that were never meant to be. I’d be holding my own baby, looking down into its eyes and feeling that sense of completeness that I thought I’d lost forever.

I didn’t feel that I should be ashamed of what I’d done with Travis, because I didn’t feel like I’d cheated or done anything wrong. He had come to
my door for his own reasons, reasons that had nothing to do with me and that I
would probably never know. Although we’d exchanged pleasantries when he
left, saying how we should keep in touch now that he’d found me again, I’d
known that we wouldn’t see each other again after that. His part in my life was
done, and I finally felt free of him in a way that I never had, even after I’d met and
married Richard, even after I’d started a new life that put physical distance
between Travis and me but never managed to erase him from my thoughts.

I thought about what would happen if the baby were born with Travis’s
dark brown hair rather than the brownish-blond that both Richard and I had.
Would it be obvious to anyone but me that it was not a union of Richard’s and my
features? Would I see Travis’s eyes when I looked into my baby’s face? I didn’t
really know. But I knew that whoever the father was, the baby would breathe life
into a house that had been dead for a long time, and there wasn’t any reason to
fear that.

I went to my bedroom and pulled on a pair of black sweatpants and a fitted
tank top to wear to yoga class. I smiled when I realized that in a few months, I
wouldn’t be able to wear these clothes, and I would have to be careful about
which yoga poses I did. I had found a yoga studio in the phone book, the day
after I’d seen Travis, and I’d gone the next day. I met the owner of the studio, a
young redhead who had hired me to teach two classes a week as a sort of trial
period, since it had been so long since I’d taught any classes. I smiled as I
realized I would have to talk to her about running a prenatal class now.
I started to get into my car to drive to yoga, but I decided I would walk the two miles to the studio. It was a beautiful April morning, with a blue and cloudless sky, and I had plenty of time. I walked down the road, feeling ridiculous because I couldn’t stop smiling, but I couldn’t help but feel happy and alive. Flowers were blooming in everyone’s front yards, and the grass had begun to turn a lush green with the frequent rain showers of the last month. It was so hard to believe that just a month ago, everything had been gray and brown and dead. Things were changing, and I smiled as I walked along, feeling the life in and around me.