STORIES: STRANGE MEN AND THINKING GIRLS

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What is the boundary between fiction and nonfiction? What happens if the line between the two is crossed? Can we possibly recall events in our lives exactly as they happened? In creative nonfiction, such as memoir, the audience expects the writer to recall things exactly as they happened, with no embellishments, re-ordering, additions, or subtractions. It seems as if authors of creative nonfiction are bound to be questioned about events, nitpicked on details, challenged on memories, and accused of portraying real-life people the “wrong” way. Yet when the writer creates fiction, it seems to go the other way: readers like to think there are parallels between an author and her stories. Readers congratulate themselves for finding the similarities between the two, and instead of focusing on the crafted story at hand, try to search out which parts are “true” and which are embellished. Does any of this matter, though; don’t all stories tell a kind of truth? We have an insatiable urge to classify, to “know” the truth, but truth isn’t merely a recollection of cold facts; likewise, a story isn’t any less true if it’s fiction.
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PART I

PREFACE
Fact or Fiction? It’s all True

What is the boundary between fiction and nonfiction? What happens if the line between the two is crossed? Can we possibly recall events in our lives exactly as they happened? In creative nonfiction, such as memoir, the audience expects the writer to recall things exactly as they happened, with no embellishments, re-ordering, additions, or subtractions. As a reader, I don’t want this. Such a story might read at a snail’s pace, taking too much time to arrive at significant moments. It seems as if authors of creative nonfiction are bound to be questioned about events, nitpicked on details, challenged on memories, and accused of portraying real-life people the “wrong” way. Yet when the writer creates fiction, it seems to go the other way: readers like to think there are parallels between an author and her stories. Readers congratulate themselves for finding the similarities between the two, and instead of focusing on the crafted story at hand, try to search out which parts are “true” and which are embellished. Does any of this matter, though; don’t all stories tell a kind of truth? We have an insatiable urge to classify, to “know” the truth, but truth isn’t merely a recollection of cold facts; likewise, a story isn’t any less true if it’s fiction.

Tim O’Brien acknowledges the reader’s need for a clear separation between fact and fiction, but constantly subverts this notion, making contradictory statements and telling different versions of the same story. In his collection of short stories, The Things They Carried, which, incidentally, is labeled as fiction, the copyright page’s disclaimer reads:

“This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author’s own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary.”

However, on the facing page, it reads:
“This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa.”

The names he lists are names of characters in his stories. It is in this contradiction that the readers’ definitions of “truth” or “fiction” are shaken—O’Brien does not mean to tease (in the story “Good Form”, he says, “It’s not a game”) the readers, to play with our heads. He’s positioning the readers’ preconceptions as irrelevant, even though we won’t be able to quickly dismiss our curiousness. It’s nearly impossible not to question a work of fiction that is at least partially based in autobiographical events.

In the book, the narrator, who is understood to be O’Brien, references himself as a creator of stories inside the story “Love”, when a comrade visits him years after the war. In the title story, “The Things They Carried,” we learn that Lieutenant Jimmy Cross holds onto an unrequited love because it’s the only thing that keeps him going in Vietnam. In “Love,” the narrator tells us, “I told him that I’d like to write a story about some of this,” (O’Brien 29) which we assume is the title story. Jimmy grants the narrator, O’Brien, permission. Then he says, “Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever…and do me a favor. Don’t mention anything about…” (30).

The narrator cuts him off, assuring him that he won’t. We wonder—did the narrator go back on his promise—or did he keep it? Assuming that this isn’t a made-up story about a story, O’Brien wrote about how Jimmy was not the best platoon leader—he was so caught up in the fantasy of Martha that he wasn’t on guard, and this results in a soldier’s death. But Jimmy just might be seen as the best platoon leader ever, because after the incident, a guilt-ridden, broken Jimmy vows he won’t live in his head anymore; instead, he’ll live for the men under his command. O’Brien leaves us wondering what did get left out, what great secret of Jimmy’s
wasn’t revealed. He never tells us, and this may be a testament to the author’s devotion to remain respectful of the unutterable anecdotes about his characters, or real-life people. As I read what I’ve written, I realize that I’ve also fallen into the “what if?” trap, wanting to know what was true, what was left out, if he’s making up the story about Jimmy—but it doesn’t matter, because the story touches on some human truth—people’s desire to be portrayed in certain, often classifiable ways—“brave”, selfless, unflinching. The way O’Brien describes Jimmy defies these categories, and in a way, embraces those same qualities—in a complicated, messy way, much like the composition of our lives themselves.

In Lorrie Moore’s case, her short story “People Like That are The Only People Here,” first published in the New Yorker and labeled as fiction, garnered a flux of attention from readers who needed to know if the story was autobiographical. In the story, the main character is a woman who writes and teaches (like Moore); she is referred to as The Mother. The story chronicles her child (The Baby) and the onset and treatment of his cancer, and The Husband constantly reminds the Mother to “Take notes. We are going to need the money” (Moore Birds 256). He asks her to document the time spent in the Pediatric Oncology wing so that her story will help pay for the baby’s medical needs. Moore does have a son who was once sick, but she dismisses any idea that this story is mostly autobiographical: “It was fiction…things did not happen exactly that way; I re-imagined everything. And that’s what fiction does. Fiction can come from real-life events and still be fiction” (Moore Better Blues 2).

Though real events in writers’ lives can give birth to stories, this doesn’t mean that these stories are memoirs. Readers became curious about the story because Moore, like O’Brien, refers to writing a story about the story we’re reading—a sort of metafiction. At the end of the story, after the baby’s cancer goes into remission, Moore writes, “There are the notes. Now
where is the money?” (Moore Birds 260) as a sort of demand to the publisher. Sarcastically, Moore responds to the linking of the Mother needing money for the baby with Moore herself needing money: “Everyone knows you can’t make money writing short stories, so that proves it’s fiction right there” (Moore Is Better 2). She says that even though the story talks about itself as being autobiographical, it is also “a work of fiction concerning, among other things, the subject of the transformation of life materials into fiction” (Moore Is Better 2).

The transformation she speaks of is the ability, the amazing opportunity to take an event that happened to us and to be able to embellish on it, to make ourselves perceive the situation in differently than we may have originally taken it—or even to change the preceding and following events and use our imaginations. We can add or subtract surroundings, characters, details, in order to transform a simple event into a complex story.

The mother in Moore’s story is alternately bitter, sarcastic, humorous, and confused—the story avoids the sentimentality and common coating of grief that surrounds the real-life cancer stories we read about in magazine articles or see on television. The story re-imagines itself with surrealistic detachment, punctuated by short bursts of absurd humor. The mother translates the Pediatric Oncology wing into “Peed Onk”, and characters in the hospital are referred to as “Green Hair,” “Surgeon,” and “Anesthesiologist”—characters playing set roles, almost as if the author questions their titles.

Perhaps writing about events that happen in our lives under the guise of fiction gives us the freedom to avoid blanket statements, the obvious realities of life, and allows us to let go—to describe our friends and family without fear of recourse, to imagine and create meaning when it may not otherwise be evident in a reportage or autobiography. Writing under fiction lets us become someone else, no longer hyper-vigilant about the way our descriptions and confessions
will be taken by our readers. We’re not afraid of judgment, because in fiction, it’s not ultimately about us—it’s about everyone—it’s about escape.

If Moore and O’Brien represent fiction writers who have raised questions about the autobiographical possibilities of their works, then Annie Dillard is an example of a memoirist who has been challenged on her representation of the truth. In her memoir, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she starts by recounting a pet cat: “I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest.” (Rawlins 1) At the end of the paragraph, Dillard uses the cat to evoke sinister, sensual imagery; she describes herself as “covered with bloody paw prints” and likens her body to a fleshy canvas, “painted with roses” (Rawlins 1). So, Dillard had a cat. Except she didn’t.

One of her colleagues notes that Dillard admitted she never had a cat—she’d heard this story from a graduate student, and had gotten his permission to tell the story as her own. Both readers and writers quickly criticized her choice to include a blatant falsity in her memoir (Rawlins 1). As a writer, I know that I will take stories and anecdotes told by others and try to transfer them into my own stories. In this way, writers are thieves—we don’t always stick to what we experience or imagine ourselves; rather, we see potential stories in others’ lives, stories that we mesh with our own to create meaning. Is it wrong to portray someone else’s story as your own, especially if you’re writing what others expect to be a factual account? Perhaps with the inclusion of the cat, Dillard should have labeled her work a mix of fiction and nonfiction. Did she place this cat in her memoir to give readers a better understanding of her life by couching her experiences in this ethereal imagery? If she had left out this falsity, would readers be pulled in as easily?
Writers of nonfiction do not only pull in extraneous events; they also leave things out. I’m sure that if I’d known Thoreau’s mother fed him and did his laundry (Rawlins 3) I would have read *Walden* differently, and may have even disregarded his message, seeing the contradictions. Thoreau left this fact out because he was aware that veering from self-reliance might render his opus useless.

The term Creative Nonfiction (CNF), loosely defined by the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1970s, is nonfiction that appropriates fictional elements such as dramatic tension, dialogue, shifting points of view, and attention to detail and rhythm (Abels 2). It veers from a journalistic report because the author is the central protagonist, or is at least closely bound to the main characters, and the personal essay or memoir is seen from the author’s perception, although the author might try to imagine the motivations and perceptions of surrounding characters.

In the preface of his literary journal Creative Nonfiction, editor Lee Gutkind says that he wants the essays he publishes “to strike a universal chord…to establish a special place, register an insight, moment or idea that might be shared and appreciated by a larger readership” (Gutkind The Five Rs 1). Sounds like what we expect from fiction, right? The difference between fiction and nonfiction here is creative nonfiction’s ability to make a point or truth obvious, to draw connections. Fiction doesn’t always tell us what the purpose or universal truth is; creative nonfiction seems to tell us in a more pointed way what the author wants to say, while still utilizing fiction’s techniques. Reading creative nonfiction is pleasing because it is formatted like a story and engages the reader, making subject matter less monotonous and dry. Creative nonfiction is “anti-reductionist by nature and renounces the rigid, austere language of scientific structure” (Hoeks 1). It’s like sugarcoating the truth, making the taste of truth richer and more
palatable than it would be on its own—but this is what fiction does, too; there are just different “rules”.

Gutkind says that the CNF writer is “poised to present reality in such a way that it cannot be avoided…it has teeth because it is true, and because it is true, it can change lives and shape opinion in ways that fiction has hardly been able to do” (Approach 1). I disagree with this statement; I think that fiction drawn from autobiographical events holds more power over the reader than nonfiction does, if we’re talking about books that change lives. I think the undercurrent of what Gutkind is saying is that we are drawn to true stories because we want to know others; we want to read private diaries, peer into others’ minds, and ogle car crashes and lovers’ quarrels. We are voyeurs, and when someone is willing to share something personal with us, we want to be there. When someone can make sense of a depression, sickness, or breakup, we want to understand too, to glean some of that knowledge—a different viewpoint from our own.

What then, if that story isn’t entirely true? If we take the word “nonfiction” by its definition, does it mean that CNF writers must hold certain values? As an audience, we hope that memoir or personal anecdote is true. We want the names, dates, places, and quotations to be exact and specific. We want no alterations, because we believe that we are reading something entirely true. Gutkind tells us:

   Replicate with truth and accuracy exactly what is believed to have happened, even if, in the real world, there is a possibility that it hasn’t happened in exactly the way the writer describes it or if others disagree with the interpretation.

   (Truth and Consequences 1)
Is Gutkind saying that if nobody can verify what happened in a writer’s story, then the writer can’t be caught, or does he mean that it’s all about the writer’s perception? I wonder if we can always replicate or remember something exactly as it happened, or even if stark facts, with no embellishment or imagination, will make a good CNF story.

To make this harder to understand, critics say CNF should never stray from the facts. If we need some dialogue to embellish our true story that we think the subject would have said, can we make that up? Gutkind says that good CNF writers will strive to find other aspects of the subject that are interesting instead of making up “better stuff” (Truth and Consequences 1). Since we don’t usually tote tape recorders around, how will we recall the exact dialogue of our conversations? Can you make up dialogue to fit around your story without “lying”? I would like to believe that we could, as long as we’re able to imagine the character(s) saying the words we're attributing to them, and as long as the words are as close to the truth as they can get. I’d like to think that we can imagine and write dialogue for our characters and let them speak for themselves, then see if what we’ve written rings true.

To narrow the vast field of nonfiction writing, let’s talk about the memoir. Memoir can include autobiography, travel writing, or personal essay. Memoir “often tries to capture certain highlights or meaningful moments of one’s past, often including a contemplation of the meaning of that event at the time of the writing of the memoir” (Zuwiyya 1). This genre has been criticized for its aversion to pure truth: memoirists sometimes disguise their characters or change names (if they are writing about incest, for example, they may want to protect identities), conflate time and events, create composite characters, and invent dialogue. If writers change certain truths, they often, but not always, inform the reader in a preface or disclaimer so as not to “dupe” the reader. I’m not sure whether this gives the memoir less credibility; if nothing is said
at all, and no one finds out that some things have been changed, the writer could pull off a realistic account.

Kathleen Finneran, a memoirist, lists the ways in which she and other memoirists test the line between fact and fiction. She says writers make up dialogue if they can’t remember the conversations verbatim. Writers will recall “either a central line of the dialogue or some semblance of what was said, and construct the dialogue around those words” (Finneran 3). She says that writers aim to recreate the intention or message of the conversation as truthfully as possible. Finneran also admits to conflating time and construing it to her advantage. In order to create a cohesive story, memoirists sometimes merge experience or minimize the time between events: for example, a hospital stay taking place over two years in real life can be squished into one eventful summer. In real life, important events don’t happen in a patterned, sequential fashion; you often wait for those events to happen. As readers, do we want to wait through sixty-seven days of a narrator riding the train, brushing her teeth, and washing her bras in the sink, with no defining events to tide us over? Finneran also says that memoirists “leave stuff out”: not crucial elements, but the extraneous details that add nothing to the story (2). I understand what she’s saying here: in a story I wrote about visiting California when my grandma was dying, I left out a number of relatives who were present. First, the sheer number of people in the story confused even me, and second, if I had left them in, I would merely be naming them, since they weren’t integral characters; they made no impression on the story. I’m not saying that I dislike these relatives; they just didn’t have any impact on the story I was telling. They made the story neither more nor less meaningful. The people I did include in my story are the ones who, in my head, refused to be excluded from the telling.
In her memoir, *The Kiss*, Kathryn Harrison describes the sexual and emotional intimacy shared with her father when they are reunited after twenty years of his absence. Her confession is dark, vulnerable, and does not posit itself for shock-value; rather, it is a story that she needed to tell. The reader does not doubt the veracity of Harrison’s account, but certain scenes and recurring metaphors might be embellished or even invented to add to the memoir. Take, for instance, the cockroach that a young Harrison traps on the kitchen table with a wide-rimmed glass. She tells us that she doesn’t like dealing with insects and will let someone else deal with it later, and she describes herself watching “how it must relentlessly search the seam, the tiny ridge or rill in the glass that might offer some hope of climbing, penetrating, escaping. But there is nothing about the glass that it understands” (Harrison 65). This scene takes place during the same time that Harrison is seemingly trapped in a family triangle: her father, on a previous visit, kissed her, open-mouthed, and now he is sleeping with her mother. Throughout the memoir, the readers sense a theme of entrapment, of no way out of this mess. While Harrison’s father is not aggressively manipulative, he is passively guilting Harrison into continuing the relationship. It is not until the latter part of the novel that she begins to realize that the intimacy she shares with her father is destroying her. By paralleling the cockroach in the glass with her situation, Harrison presents her relationship with her father as something unnatural, non-synthetic, and imposed by another. She also gives the reader who thinks she should have been more aware of the situation the idea that at the time, she could not fully grasp the circumstances—there is nothing about this experience with her father that she understands. If we look at these two parallels with a critical, essentialist non-fiction eye, we could posit that this cockroach scene never happened, and Harrison invented it to make this parallel more clear, or that it didn’t happen in proximity to the time frame, but she moved it here in order to illustrate her entrapment more clearly.
Another recurring motif in Harrison’s book is about eyes being opened. Harrison first describes holding a newborn kitten in her lap and “with one thumb on the upper lid, the other on the lower…carefully pull[ing] its eyes open, separating one delicate membrane of flesh from the other;” she “accomplish[es] the violation gently” (90). Her grandmother had warned her not to touch the kittens until they were older and opened their eyes, but the impatient narrator “couldn’t bear to see their always sleeping faces, their tiny eyes that never woke to [her]” (90).

Appallingly, Harrison continues to pry open the eyes of the remaining four kittens. Here we see not only her need to be seen by another living thing, but also her compulsive nature—she must finish the destructive job even though she knows it is “the worst thing [she] had ever done” (91).

Near the end of the book, we see another eye-opening scene: Harrison recalls that at the age of five, she lifted her mother’s eye mask as she slept and “tried to do the same with her eyelids” because she cannot bear for her mother to “have her eyes perpetually closed” to her (197). In both instances, Harrison is either reprimanded or overcome with guilt: the kittens form pus pockets around their eyes, and her mother wakes, telling her “Don’t ever do that!” (198).

Harrison skillfully weaves these scenes into the story, enabling readers to see the connections between what is happening with her father, her penchant for continuing to do things she knows are wrong, and her need to “be seen”—her father shows her the attention she longs for, but it’s not the “right” kind of seeing. I think that there’s a possibility Harrison has embellished, or even invented, some of these scenes, because they fit so well. She emphasizes and promotes certain points; she cuts and pastes to show us the whole truth, even if we might be able to argue that at five years old, she can’t know that she’s trying to open her mother’s sleeping eyes because she recognizes the metaphorical significance of her actions at this point. In writing her story, Harrison is recreating her past, making those bits and pieces fit together. She knows
that “truth is different from facts, and greater than facts, and not always their sum” (Roobarch 10). Even if Harrison were to admit that she invented some of these scenes, as a reader, I don’t care if she did. What matters is that the story, even if it doesn’t stick to literal facts, works.

I think that I unknowingly used some of the same techniques that Harrison did when I wrote “A Bird Story”. I started out my story intending to just tell about my birds and their strangely domestic life, complete with spousal abuse, sex, childbirth, and dead babies. When the story was workshopped, someone mentioned that I could make a parallel between the birds’ lives and my family—and ultimately, the bonds between parents and children—the fights, the separations, the penchant to take things for granted. I went back and added more to the story—I wrote more about what was happening in my life at the time, how my dad and I had problems communicating, how increasingly irresponsible I was becoming with my own life and the lives of my pet birds. I added the dream about the bird at the end of the story—after I found out about the cages in the attic, wondering if the birds were just let loose to fend for themselves. I wanted to make the story circle around itself, to emphasize those parallels between me not taking care of my pets, wanting to put them on leashes in retrospect so nothing would happen to them, and the frustration that parents feel when their child starts experiencing adolescence—the fear that with the teenager’s newfound freedom and tendency for carelessness, something will go monstrously wrong. All of the scenes—even the dream—happened in my life, but not exactly in that order. It was my job, while writing the story, to make them fit together, to re-imagine my adolescence and make those similarities less elusive than they were when I experienced them.

Some writers will admit that their memoirs are not strictly factual. Jane McDonnell wrote about her autistic son in her book News from the Border. She wrote a scene that did happen: her son laid down smack in the middle of a busy intersection, out of the blue, to the
annoyance of drivers screeching to a halt. She says that she wanted to provide a reason for her son to do this, even though he acted this way out of the blue. She anticipated her readers’ questions and “began to invent,” creating a grocery scene in which she, the harried mother, tries to push her son back down into his shopping cart seat because he’s having a tantrum (McDonnell 68). Trying to placate him, she stuffs an oversize lollipop in his mouth, making him gag and hiccup. This invented scene provides motivation for her son to let go of her hand after leaving the store and stubbornly lie in the street out of anger and frustration. McDonnell says, “I have to confess this part never happened….yet something like it did happen…in different ways, at different times” (69). She tells us that her son did throw tantrums on shopping trips and her husband did try to end their son’s crying with sweets in many instances, so it made sense to put it all together in one scene in order to lead up to the real event. She says, “…memories do have to be reexperienced…and frequently they have to be rearranged,” (69) which I find a more realistic way of looking at ways in which CNF can be written.

With memoirs and personal essays, there is also the question of writing about real-life people who recognize themselves and disagree with the way they are portrayed. Gutkind recalls an essay sent to Creative Nonfiction in which the writer recalled her affair with another female in high school. He liked the writing and wanted to publish the story, but he called the writer first to ask if the woman she wrote about was aware of the essay. The author told Gutkind that she hadn’t spoken to the woman in years, but she’d changed her name and disguised the high school in the story, so there was no chance of her finding out. The writer admitted that the woman would probably be defensive if she recognized herself. Gutkind’s attorney later told him that if the woman read the story and didn’t like the way she was presented, she could sue both the author and Gutkind’s journal. This led Gutkind to address his readers and contributors:
We feel that as editors and publishers, we have a responsibility to care about people other than writers—the people about whom the writers write—and whom the work we publish might involve: parents, relatives, employers, lovers included. (Gutkind Truth and Consequences 1)

He urged writers to ask themselves, “Even if the story is true, whose truth is it?” I wonder if Gutkind would have taken such pains if the story in question involved an affair between a man and a woman; it is not as if these two characters were married or guilty of cheating on their lovers. Is it merely the fear of potentially stigmatizing real-life people as homosexuals that Gutkind is worried about? It seems as if the events in this case are so far in the past that the woman written about would no longer be ashamed (if she ever was) of her experimental relationship.

I’m interested in the story Gutkind recalls because I wrote one about a similar experience. In “Anaheim,” I wrote about my skewed pre-adolescent experiences, and in particular, about a same-sex experience with a girl who lived across the street. When I wrote this story, I wanted to communicate the loss I felt when our friendship ended. I still don’t know if the reason we stopped communicating was due to her parents’ demands, or if she felt shame about what we were doing when we were together. Over the years, I’d grown to harbor guilt over this friendship and how what we did was ‘wrong’ in some sense; unnatural. As I got older, though, I heard similar stories from friends, and I realized that this experimentation was not abnormal or cause for embarrassment. Writing about it helped me realize this, and I was worried about what my mom would think when she read it, but she later told me that she’d known about what was going on, and she thought it would cause more harm to confront me about it when I was younger than to just let it run its course. I never feared retribution from “Dawn” if the story was
published and she recognized herself—it seemed, to me, the same as a story about a girl and a boy playing ‘doctor’ and spending the summer riding bikes and running through sprinklers. As for veracity, I think that I stayed as truthful to the story as I could have—sure, dialogue might not be word-for-word, but I didn’t add any unsavory characteristics to myself, my parents, or Dawn that weren’t there already. If you’re writing about real-life people, you can never quite transfer every complexity of their personalities onto the page. We can know our characters completely, but we can never assume to know everything about their real-life counterparts.

No matter how careful a writer is, there will always be someone involved in the story who will claim she isn’t represented truthfully or that an event never happened. How do you tell the truth when the publisher is leery of being sued? Even if you write about real-life people under the guise of fiction, they’ll still recognize themselves in character. There is such a contradiction and dilemma here—a writer can’t write about what’s true and not affect the people he or she is writing about. If it’s published as fiction, then your true story is diminished; it didn’t really happen, and you still might be in trouble with the ones you do—and don’t—love.

Personal essayist Jonathan Ames, author of *What’s Not to Love?: The Adventures of a Mildly Perverted Young Writer*, doesn’t seem to have liability issues: when asked about his aunt’s reaction to his essay that chronicled her use of infant suppositories, he responded, “She will probably claim not to have done that; people want to forget things” (Ames 1). His detached answer suggests that some writers’ families are more forgiving than others for secrets revealed. Ames says that he creates a persona in his stories, a more exaggerated version of himself. Since his essays revolve around himself, he won’t have problems with anyone who wants to verify his truths: “If I say that I had gas on a date, who’s going to check?” (2). Ames tells readers about being caught masturbating by his mother, his adolescent fears of having small genetilia, and
wearing a prosthetic vagina fashioned by an artist friend. Many of his details and thoughts make readers feel like they’re peering into a fantastic and deranged imagination. “The more sensitive pieces tend to stick closer to the truth,” he says, “but in the more outrageous ones” –I imagine he is referring to his essay on disasters with enemas—“I used a persona to entertain the reader” (2).

As an admirer of Ames’ vulnerable, confessional style of writing, I don’t mind this—and while reading the more “outrageous” pieces, I suspected that he was exaggerating, so I didn’t feel tricked. Instead, I enjoyed the flamboyance of his writing because I was able to discern when he was being sincere and when he wanted to make his readers laugh. A plausible reason why he exaggerates his persona is because he is divulging so much personal information; he senses that he might be construed as vulgar or improper, so he makes fun of himself, writing in an unabashed style.

So, in memoirs and personal essays, we see that writers will appropriate elements of fiction technique (with Ames, we could argue that ‘persona’ translates into ‘unreliable narrator’). As a writer, I have always drawn from autobiographical experiences and have stuck closely to them, although I do add stories that I’ve heard from others to glue the pieces together. I also create composite characters, choose to leave things out, and deviate from recalling scenes in the exact order they happened or in their exact time frame if doing these things will create a better story. When it comes to labeling myself as writing fiction or nonfiction, I’ll have to take on the role of a fiction writer. It has to be fiction, considering that I break some of the conventions reserved for creative nonfiction, but in the long run, it is because of two reasons. First, I write about friends and family members who, most of the time, are not cloaked in disguise, save for a change of names. Almost all of my stories include my dad as a character, and they recall my truth about my dad. To clarify, my mom agrees that his depiction is accurate. I have never let
my dad read any of my stories—he must wonder what I’m doing with my Master’s in English—because I am afraid that he will see himself. I’m not afraid that he’ll disagree with his portrayal, but that he’ll be hurt by it, even though there are equal parts sweet and undesirable in his character. I’m also leery of what he might think about the sexual content—I’m sure that most daughters wouldn’t be comfortable divulging these private details to their fathers, no matter how close their relationship. I’d love to show him what I’ve been writing all these years, and when I do, I’ll be able to say, “Dad, it’s fiction.” I guess I’m preoccupied with what should be the least of my concerns as a writer, and if I say that my stories are fiction, this takes away some of that nagging accountability of nonfiction values.

The other reason that I’m a fiction writer is this: writing stories under the cover of fiction has enabled me to explore more of my thoughts, to be ruthless and straightforward with character details and actions. If I thought that my stories might be published as nonfiction, I think I’d reign in my feelings and the stories would read like papers for a speech class, yielding self-conscious and halted writing. When writing under fiction, I am not afraid of what others may think of me (as narrator) or of my life. I have the ability to create meaning where I may not have seen it before, to re-imagine events, to make up new experiences if my memory proves faulty or if the original events were not meaningful enough to merit interesting reading—or writing. And I’d like to think that, even though my stories are not purely factual, that they, like creative nonfiction, also tell a truth—my truth.
Works Cited


<http://www.inkspell.homestead.com/memoir~ns4.html>
PART II

STORIES: STRANGE MEN AND THINKING GIRLS
Anaheim

“What are these?” I asked my mom.

She looked a little uncomfortable, but said, “Those are pictures of naked ladies. Your dad needed them when he was in the army.” She was watching Sixty Minutes and I was bored, so I had started looking through my dad’s drawers and found a stack of Playboys. Farrah Fawcett was on the cover in a beady silver leotard.

Every day after that, while my parents were at work, I’d come home from school and open his drawer, pull out a Playboy, and close the drawer, making sure to rub the carpet so there would be no foot imprints near his side of the bed. I’d take it into the bathroom and read the letters. My favorite one was from Dick, a truck driver in Cleveland who picked up a girl on the road and hung her silk underwear on his rearview mirror as a souvenir. The women in the pictures made me feel better about my body. They weren’t skinny with Barbie-doll waists; some had pot bellies and pudgy thighs. My stomach usually overflowed from my elastic waistbands like pudding.

Once an earthquake happened while I was in the bathroom reading a Playboy, and I thought it must be God punishing me. I vowed never to play with myself again, but that didn’t last.

My mom told me about sex when I was six. She and my dad always got into the spa naked. Small planes would fly by, and my mom would cover her chest and say, “Pete! Wasn’t that guy flying a little low?” When she sat me down and told me what went on in the spa, she used words like penis and vagina, and she told me that it was about making love and making babies, so I should be careful with whom I chose to do it. I thought it was neat, but I wanted to
know where people came from before they were babies, like the first people. It was like the chicken and egg question, and my parents told me that nobody knew.

I lived in Anaheim, California, and from my backyard at night I could see Disneyland’s electric parade and firework show. West Tiller was a short street, and everyone knew each other. Next door to us lived Maria and her brother Tony. Tony had purple shaved hair and rode his skateboard at three in the morning. He had Billy Idol posters above his bed, and I asked my dad for a Billy Idol tape for Christmas. I also asked him if he would paint my walls purple with the words “Madonna Rules!” in black letters for the border. He laughed at me.

Maria was my babysitter. She gave me her hand-me-downs that were considered uncool for a junior high girl. I don’t think she liked me very much, because when I came over and asked her to play, she’d stare at me like a blank piece of paper and say, “I don’t care.” It might have been because I pinched her butt every time she babysat. I had this weird stage where I’d do this to the girls at school because I was too shy to pinch the boy’s butts, and I was cast down the social network in second grade. I was down there on the totem pole with Jenny Rhodes, who was grotesquely overweight and lived in a stinky house. One of her dogs had mange.

In school, I was the freak girl because I read books for fun and got one hundreds on my spelling tests. At the beginning of second grade, I made the mistake of letting a fart escape me when I sneezed, and earned a place at the lunch table with Manuel Perez, the class pervert, who tried to pay me in bologna sandwiches to lift up my shirt for him. Girls made fun of my crimped hair and baby fat, and criticized me for not wearing makeup or shaving my legs. I wrote a love note to myself from Kevin Marcus. Kevin rode with his dad on a motorcycle because his mom was scared to drive, and he was always showing off burn marks on his shins from the exhaust. He was beautiful with his shiny brown pompadour and Quicksilver shirts. When he caught ear
of the love note he supposedly wrote, he made it very clear that I looked like the dog his uncle’s pickup truck ran over. After that, a chapter of the A.C.K. was started: the Against Claire Klub; every second grade girl, excluding Terence Rhodes and me, was an active member. When summer came, I was relieved. I wouldn’t have to sit by myself at lunch anymore while Julie Cornish and her gang threw Cool Ranch Doritos at me.

The house across the street from mine was in shambles; paint peeled from the rotting wood, and the grass was so overgrown that it was hard to see a house inside it. The family who lived there never came out, and my mom told me that some man shot himself there. That summer, whoever had lived there moved out, and the Pageant family moved in. Dawn was a year younger than I was. She introduced herself the day the moving truck left. She crossed the street without looking both ways and made her way to the side yard where I was listening to “Like a Virgin” on my little yellow radio. She was a tiny blonde girl with a fragile face and cautious eyes. Brown freckles spattered over her nose, and she wore a blue bathing suit and a fake diamond tiara on her head. Sucking on a finger, she said softly, “I’m Dawn Pageant. Do you like to play Barbies?”

From then on, we were inseparable. She made green slime with me, volcanoes out of clay and baking soda. I wasn’t allowed to cross the street, so every morning I woke up and crossed my lawn to the curb, my bare toes clutched on the curve of the concrete.

“Dawn! Come out and play!” I would yell, my hands cupped around my mouth. A few minutes later, she emerged in her blue bathing suit and torn jeans with a bobby-pin smile and skipped across the street.

We made lemonade from scratch and sat out on the front lawn with my mom’s old Avon makeup, painting each other’s faces. The Mexicans next door would whistle at us while drinking
their beers with Ski and Kelly, their heroin suppliers. The ice cream truck with its twinkly music made our adrenaline flow and we jumped up and down and screamed our lungs out at our mothers for quarters, afraid if we went inside, we would be passed by. She always got a ring pop with a red sucker like a ruby attached to the plastic. She let me share it with her, and I gave her the almonds from my drumstick.

One day we were in my mom’s sewing room, playing Barbies. For Christmas one year I got a label maker with dark green strips of sticky tape. Dawn punched out blank spaces so the tape came out without any letters, and wrapped it around Wedding Time Tracy’s thigh. I was no stranger to R-rated movies. My favorite movie was Blue Lagoon. I didn’t know trash from glazed turkey, but the whole cannibal scenario really turned me on in some weird way. I thought it would be great if a bunch of tribal native men used me as their plaything and then skinned me for slices of meat. My parents were into the Asian Mafia movies, the men with the drug rings. I remember scenes with hired prostitutes lying on the long wooden business table, the drug boss with a green bottle of champagne and an ice bucket. I remember a black bustier and breasts curving like flesh-colored cantaloupes, the ice cubes dripping down her bare skin.

I pointed to the green tape around Tracy’s plastic thigh. “She looks like a hooker.”

My mom came into the room with her eyebrows pointed into a V. “Claire, you shouldn’t say that word around Dawn.”

Dawn looked up, surprised, and smiled nonchalantly. “Oh, Mrs. Childress, that’s okay, my dad talks about them all the time!”

My mom’s eyebrows shot up into her forehead and she looked at me with her mouth hanging open. Then she slowly shut the door.

I shrugged and said to Dawn, “She should go on a date with Ken. To the pizza parlor.”
I think the only reason we played Barbies was so we could make them have sex. We folded up pillowcases into doll-sized beds and fought about which one of us was the girl. We placed Ken and Barbie on top of each other on the bed and made kissing noises with our lips, undressing blouses, opening legs.

We were in my room, and my mother came in and said to me, “Your dad and I are going swimming, so don’t come out.” Dawn looked at me and asked why we had to stay in my room. I led her to the sliding glass door facing our backyard. We could see the back of my dad’s head, my mother on top of him, her mouth making an O shape and the top of her breasts bobbing like apples out of the water. Dawn gasped, “Your parents are naked!”

I said, “Let me be Tracy.”

Right there in the living room, we acted out the parts of Ken and Tracy by ourselves. I felt a little guilty about it afterward, and so did she, but then I was Ken and she was Tracy, our legs straight and then straddling. We switched back and forth, our clothes still on. We realized that we had made a wonderful discovery. After that, instead of playing Barbies, we played each other. We were pretty shameless about it. We would lie on top of each other on my front porch, and she would say, “We have to go inside. My mom doesn’t like it when I do this.”

I think my parents might have known, but they never said anything to me about it, because when we watched movies together and a sexual scene came on, I said, “I think I’m going to draw a picture.” I went to the kitchen where my little yellow table and chairs were, gripping the edges of the table, my feet swinging, the chair creaking.

Dawn told me that her brother and her did what we did, but she said she liked it better when it was with me.
One day we were in the front yard trading Garbage Pail Kids. I was trying to persuade her to give me her Potty Scottie for my Hairy Carrie. I heard her father’s voice yelling from inside her house. Dawn looked up and focused her eyes on the windchimes above her window. Her fingers trembled around the pile of cards she was clutching. She turned to me as we heard glass shattering.

“Oh, God,” she said in a low whisper.

I looked at her blankly.

“I hate when my dad does this.”

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s throwing chairs and things. He gets mad at my mom when he drinks.”

We could hear her mom screaming things and calling Dawn’s dad an asshole. He yelled back, every word obscene, and Dawn shuddered with each of them.

“Oh, God, I hope he doesn’t hit my mom.”

“Oh, God, I hope he doesn’t hit my mom.”

“Why would he do that?” It hadn’t yet clicked for me. This was like seeing something on TV: an ape eating bananas. But I saw her eyes and how they were full of something I didn’t know, and I took her arm and brought her inside to our living room. I switched on the TV to the Snorks, but she stared at the carpet. Once in a while she got up and peered outside through the blinds and came back to the carpet. When the noises stopped, she left my house without a word and walked back into her own.

After that, she didn’t come out anymore when I called to her. I was playing at Marcus Morgan’s house one day. His mom wouldn’t let him have girls in his room, and she made him brush his teeth for five minutes in the morning, orchestrated with a miniature hourglass by the sink. I went outside to poke holes in a cardboard box so the sun would shine through and make
stars when Dawn walked up to me. She looked different; tougher, almost. Her hands on her hips and her lips pursed, she said, “You owe me a candy ring!”

“What?” I stopped stabbing the box with my scissors.

“I said, you owe me a Candy Ring!”

“No, I don’t. You shared yours with me, remember?”

I searched her face for some trace of Dawn, but she wasn’t there. She let out a defeated “Schhh” sound and flipped back around, her black tattered shoes stomping the sidewalk to her house.

The next week I saw a moving van in front of her house, and I went outside to investigate. Dawn’s mom was directing the moving men, and when she caught sight of me she glared. Her hair was tousled and black as ink, her dark eyes smudged and heavy with mascara. Dawn and her brother Dean were oblivious of me. They were holding hands and dancing around in a circle on the lawn, in the same way we used to play Ring Around the Rosie. Instead, they chanted, “We’re mo-ving, we’re mo-ving!” They jumped and fell down with joyous squeals, then started over again.

Dawn’s father was nowhere in sight. I went inside and told my mom that Dawn was moving. A minute later, someone banged on our door. I opened it, and Dawn’s mom stood there, a small witch. She wore tight cutoff jean shorts, and bruises covered her legs. There were weird marks and scabs on her arms. She looked at me as if she might kill me. I let out a shaky “Mom!” and backed away.

My mom came to the door. “What’s the problem?”

Dawn peeked her head around from behind her mother. Her hair was greasy. She squinted her eyes at me. “You have my Skipper doll!”
“You have my Tracy happy wedding dress,” I yelled back.

My mom tensed up and clutched her fingers around my wrist. “Go get Dawn’s doll,” she said in a low voice.

“But, Mom! She has my happy wedding dress!”

“I don’t care. Go get Dawn’s doll.” Her nostrils flared, so I ran to my room. I was so scared I wouldn’t be able to find Skipper underneath all of my junk and that Dawn’s mom would go berserk, but I found her there, underneath some crumpled Bonker’s wrappers. I picked her up and ran back to the front door, thrusting her in Dawn’s mother’s face.

“I want my happy wedding dress back.”

My mom’s hand was swift as she grabbed Skipper from my hand and almost threw it into her mom’s outstretched fingers. Then she slammed the door and went back to chopping onions, the knife slamming down on the cutting board in heavy strokes.

I thought I would never see her again after that, but a year later I was at the Girl’s Club, a red brick house on Katella Street. It was daycare for girls whose parents were workaholics. I was downstairs, making faces at myself in the mirrored wall and sharing blue eyeshadow with one of the older girls. I looked in the mirror, and I saw her behind me sitting at the arts and crafts table. Dawn looked so healthy, less fragile. Her hair was brushed and clean. Her bones had turned into baby fat like mine. Someone had been feeding her. She caught my eye and we both hesitated. Some bug that I remember looking like a green flying beetle flew around my head and stung me on the arm, but I could barely feel it. We sat there on opposite sides of the room as girls between us ran around and played dodge ball. She allowed herself to give me a small, close-mouthed smile, but her eyes were smiling more. Then Piper walked up to her and they started talking. Piper was one of the counselors there. She had red hair and taught a
cooking class. She was obsessed with a famous boy named James Dean and always sighed about how horrible it was that he had died. Piper offered her hand to Dawn. She took it and they crossed the room into the kitchen. I watched her leave. The hot sunlight from the window made her hair look like runny gold. She did not look at me. I went to the table where she was sitting before. I sat in the chair and picked up some crayons. I put them between my hands. I rubbed my hands back and forth so the crayons rolled like smooth wheels in my palms. The place on my arm where the beetle stung me had turned red and was starting to hurt.
Movement

I pull my mom’s big sedan up to the arched front entrance to the Bon-Secours Hospital in North Charleston. There is a Parkinson’s support group meeting today. She reaches for her cane, shaped like a bird at the neck, and struggles to get out of the car. I remember those mornings when I was a kid in California, and she would wake me up, energetic, and say, “How do you feel about going to Disneyland today? I called in sick for work.”

I remember her, probably getting tired of Peter Pan rides and the teacups, taking me to Space Mountain, the dark indoor roller coaster. Outside in the lines, I started to cry, afraid of the impending dark and not knowing where I was going.

She said, “If you don’t go on this ride, I’m taking you home.”

I believed her, and so I went, holding her hand all the way, asking teenagers with shaved heads, “Is this scary? Is this scary?” And they would laugh, shake their heads no.

I loved the ride, the blue indoor space station that made its way into the dark. There were echoes from the tracks, satellite sounds, and a breeze that smelled like rocks and salt.

After the ride, I wanted to go again, and my mom was pleased, her face red-cheeked and shining. It was about three o’clock and one of the odd times the lines were empty, and we ran, she in a bright pink shirt and faded jeans, over the blue cement sidewalks, through the line-mazes, and into the coaster, laughing and screaming. Later, when I was ten or eleven, I heard that a woman had committed suicide in Space Mountain, had somehow squeezed under her silver safety bar and fallen, then had been run over by coasters. I learned that Disney never pronounced people dead until after they removed them from the park. Bad things weren’t supposed to happen there, in that sanctity.
She shuts the car door, walks stunted with her left leg frozen up to the entrance of the hospital. I find a place to park, knowing that I will catch up with her before she reaches the glass doors. Once in awhile, I really think about what it is like for her, and I get sad and start to wallow. She lost her grace, one thing vital to a woman, I think. She can’t hoist herself up out of chairs, walks funny: she goes slow, leg cramped and rigid, then stumbles fast for a couple of steps. I know that I laugh at myself when I trip over sidewalks or slip down the stairs at some bar, due to some idiot spilling a pitcher and not bothering to ask for a rag. But those are accidents, and most of the time I’m normal. I may not like being short, having stumpy legs and cellulite.

Then I think about not being able to move like I’d like, to get up and have a bowl of cereal, to have to plan my day around how I feel that hour.

I put my mom’s car in park, the one she bought as an automatic because her reflexes can’t handle the constant movement of the stick. I get out of the car, walk fast to the entrance, which my mom is only halfway to. I catch up with her, opening the door, and take her hand. The lobby is cold with not enough plants. We go into a room on the right, filled with silver-haired people. The room is big and bare, with a chalkboard and podium at the front, snacks and bottles of soda on a table in the right corner. There are three rows of long tables, and most of the people sit at the second and third tables in beige plastic chairs. The people are all talking, laughing, and eating cookies. Most look like they’re with their spouses.

Most of the women stare at my mom and me, because we are the youngest people in the room. We take a seat at the front table, where a woman in her fifties waits behind a podium. She is slim and wears bright red lipstick: it looks as if she put the lipstick on way beyond where her normal liplines end, and I think of clowns. She starts talking, and everyone calms down.
Her name is Mary, she says. She speaks very stunted sentences, and I wonder how long we will be sitting here.

“Um. Today. We have Michael. Michael Penn, and he is from, um….he’s from the….the T’ai Chi. The T’ai Chi Center.”

My mom points to the red plastic cup the man sitting next to us is holding, so I go and get a soda from the side of the room. I come back, and she thanks me, raising the plastic cup to her lips. A fly comes and rests on her right hand, which is holding the cup, and she blows on it, trying to get it away.

“He….will show us. How to do, um.” She closes her eyes, blinks them hard, opens her mouth. After a few seconds, she says, “Michael, what is it you do?”

While Michael explains it’s some ancient form of movement, he moves to the front, then stands and lunges, moving his arms in snake charmer poses. He says that these movements help to get the energy flowing properly and will help cure the Parkinson’s stiffness. My mom whispers to me that Parkinson’s patients can’t move like that—that’s the whole point.

There are flies everywhere in the room, just buzzing lackadaisically on this summer day. One lands on the speaker’s pedestal, and while Mary is asking Michael a slow question, my mom slowly half-stands and tries to whack it with her wallet, her lips pressed together and nose scrunched in concentration. Mary jumps, and my mom looks at her, then behind her at everyone else, and laughs.

“Sorry, it’s these damn flies,” she says, and a couple of the men laugh with her.

“There are a lot of flies here today,” says one woman in the second row, and she gives me a smile. I smile back.
A man sitting next to her tries to kill a fly with his cup, but he is too slow. It’s funny, and a little ironic. It’s as if the flies know this is a Parkinson’s group, and they came in just to show that they’re too fast for these people with hand tremors and occasional nerve-misfirings.

Michael is a bald man, with crooked teeth and blue eyes. He starts asking about who drinks alcohol in the room, saying that he thinks alcoholism has something to do with causing Parkinson’s, and my mom lets out a hard breath.

“That asshole,” she whispers. “Nothing that I did caused this.”

The other patients feel the same way, and the same man who tried to kill the fly with his cup speaks up. He has a silver cowlick sticking up like Alfalfa.

“I never drank before, but now if I drink, the tremor in my left hand seems to go away,” he says. “It takes six beers. Sometimes I get aluminum cans instead of bottles, because I’m afraid I’ll knock my teeth out with this damn shake.”

The lady sitting next to him takes his hand while everyone laughs, and I presume this lady is his wife. I think about how my dad isn’t here, that he says these meetings must be a bunch of bunk, people complaining about their sorrows when there is nothing that can be done for them anyway. Sometimes I think this must be hard on him, too—even harder, maybe, like a test of love. I think about A, who I’m not over yet, once getting overzealous and asking those ridiculous questions: “Would you still love me if I was paralyzed from the neck down and had to be spoon-fed?” or “If I were in an iron lung, would you visit me and read me stories, bring pictures for me to look at?” I frowned at him when he asked—when he had a bad flu once, I brought him chicken soup and good movies to distract him from TV and his own bed-sweat, but I knew he would be back to normal soon. Love tests. You never know what will happen.
I wish my dad had come to this meeting now. He’s probably in bed, reading those stupid Michael Crichton novels, drinking stout beer from brown bottles.

After the meeting, I pick up brochures for my mom from the back of the room. Most of them are about special diets: green leafy vegetables, gluten-free foods, and all that herbalist crap my mom hates. She’s always awake at night because she sleeps through the afternoon, and she eats Marie Callender’s deluxe lasagnas, savoring little bites while me and Dad are asleep. She never goes outside, though we live on a marsh with herons and bluebirds. The bugs bite her, and she scratches at the wounds until they ooze. She cries sometimes about the bugs. “Why do they choose me? Why won’t they leave me alone?” she says.

“Because you’re so sweet,” I usually tell her, and she smiles, but I know this isn’t the answer she wants.

There is no good reason.

She tells me in the car on the way home that if she could walk, she’d just park at the edge of the lot when she needed groceries.

“I’d skip, Anne,” she says. “I’d just be swinging my arms. What I’d give to be able to do that.”

She tells me that when the FDA approves the brain surgery that’s happening in Switzerland, we will travel, just the two of us. I want this so bad, because she’s always wanting me to travel, paying for trips with her Social Security checks and asking with bright eyes how I liked it. I feel like I should have the disease, that I’ve lived more than she has. I want her to be well, and I want her to be there with me to go snorkeling, make funny “ooh” sounds under the water while feeding frozen green peas to silver fish. We could rent a convertible and drive the
winding roads, air smelling of gardenias, that smile coming to her face, both of us feeling close in youth and love, like life never gave her the short-shift.

I picture us in Kauai, lying on the sand in bright blue bathing suits. She doesn’t like to get in the water because she’s afraid of those things that sting, those things she can’t see. But I’ll have to tell her to get in the water with me or we’re going back home.
“She’s awake,” Papa says, coming from the bedroom into the living room where we’re all sitting dumbly. The TV is playing some after-school special about a teacher in Los Angeles who gets shot in the parking lot by gang members, who are also his students.

I look up from my place on the carpet. Larry, my uncle, who greeted me with half-closed eyes at the door this afternoon, is passed out on the couch. Papa tells me Larry had a time with the whiskey last night, and when Mama found out, she yelled at him the best she could. His head hangs so the warm light of the lamp shines on it. I see now all his hair has grayed. But this is the thing about Larry—it’s not just gray, it’s silver, and reminds me of aluminum crackling when you put the wrong cups in the microwave. My cousin Michael’s next to him on the couch, his hair streaked platinum blonde up front in the trendy Californian way. He’s staring at me, and I look to the floor and fumble with my toenails, trying to peel them. I never use scissors.

Papa says softly, in his voice that sounds like gravel, “You wanna see her?” I look up and he’s pulling the bib of his overalls with his thumbs. My dad, who I’ve privately been calling ‘Moody’ since adolescence, gives me a wide-eyed stare. Papa chuckles a little, and I nod. I get up and walk to the bedroom.

Moody warned me about Mama, driving me from the airport.

“She’s kind of forgetful. Last night, Larry was in there with her, and she asked why you hadn’t come in yet.”

“Really?” I said.

The reason I came was not all about Mama. The night Moody called from Ontario to tell me he got in okay, I heard noises in the background. I asked what he was doing.
“Playing ‘Stupid Bridge’,” he said.

I remembered games like Yahtzee and Go Fish, Papa’s handmade score sheets, pen tucked behind his ear. I thought about the half-dozen packages of chocolate donuts kept in the freezer, Thanksgivings and Christmases and Easters, my odd relatives. I missed my blood—and it wasn’t just Mama. She and I were never close, like other girls and their grandmothers.

I walk slowly into the room, and there she is, propped up on pillows, those pale blue eyes, almost scary because her pupils are so tiny. She’s wearing a blue housedress.

“Well, good God! There she is,” she says.

I climb on Papa’s side of the bed and take her hand. No one told me she was this skinny. Mama used to be fat. Not a healthy fat, but a fried-chicken diet kind of fat. I loved her meals: she always had things like chicken casseroles and spaghetti with heavy sausage meatballs. Her vegetables weren’t really vegetables once they were slathered with all that butter.

She used to sit in her rocking chair, puffing away on a cigarette, talking mostly about how her back and legs and arms and fingers hurt. Once I sat in her lap and she accidentally burnt the side of my pinkie finger with her cigarette. It hurt, but I think Mama was the most hurt. She cried and kissed my finger with her moist lips, declaring she was going to quit smoking because she’d hurt her dear Claire. Half an hour later, while brewing some iced tea, she lit another cigarette.

“How was your flight?”

“Hi, Mama,” I say.

“Hi, sweetheart. I’m so glad you came.”

I smile. I look down at her fingernails, thick and yellow and strangely curved like a werewolf’s.

“How was your flight?”
“Okay. I wish people would stop wearing smelly perfume on planes, though.”

She laughs, and it’s that deep kind of brutish laugh I remember, coming straight from the belly. She reminds me a bit of a man. This is comforting to me, since sometimes in the company of other girls, I feel like a boy of some sort. The frail girlish part of her is her soft blonde hair, and it’s so thin I can see her scalp beneath it. There’s a little toilet by the bed, and the TV is on mute. It’s that old black and white show with the cop who used to play Frankenstein.

“How’s your mommy?”

“She’s okay.”

“You should call her.”

“I will.”

She reaches out her arms, and I go to give her a hug. She kisses my cheek. Her legs have little stockings on them, and I can see the veins popping out of her shins. I want to press my fingers to them, push them back in.

Michael comes into the room, and I feel a little weird. I haven’t seen him in five years, and it freaks me out just a little to see he’s handsome. Even the blond streaks strike me as charming, and if I didn’t know him and saw him in a deli or something, I would probably stare at him for awhile until he noticed.

“Hi,” he says.

I say hi back, and then I ask Mama if she wants anything.

She blinks, then smiles. “I’d sure like some cantaloupe,” she tells me.

“Okay,” I say.

I leave her and Michael in the room. I go into the kitchen, and Papa’s there pouring Dr. Pepper.
“Ruth want anything?” he asks.

“Cantaloupe,” I tell him.

“I’ll bring it to her,” he says.

Moody’s frying onion rings over the stove. I foolishly swirl my finger around in the onion batter and taste it.

“Claire!” he slaps my hand. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? That’s disgusting!”

“I’m sorry,” I say, and back away.

“Go wash your hands,” he says.

I go to the sink, and as the water’s running over my hands, he says, “With soap!”

I do as he says, then dry my hands off on a paper towel, move to the stove again. He grabs my wrist tightly, and I narrow my eyebrows.

“What?” I say.

“Give me your wallet,” he whispers.

“Why?”

“Michael’s stealing money.”

I smile; I feel it’s a secret, even though Michael knows about it.

I move to get my backpack, and Moody says “Not now!”

“Okay,” I say.

He moves away, drops a battered onion into the pan. It sizzles and pops. I feel disappointed, but I feel now I can carry on a normal conversation with Michael. Moody’s back to work now, and he salts the onion rings on the paper plate, then checks on his pot. He’s cooking crab legs. I watch as he melts the butter into six glass custard cups in the microwave.
The way he cooks is very orderly. He’ll get books at the library and take the entire day to prepare a meal. He’s an expert with the knife. Everything turns out so neatly cut, into quarters and slices. I’ve tried, but things just come out damaged and pulpy. He turns away from the butter for a second and gives me a hug. His stomach pushes against mine, and I feel uncomfortable. I always feel at odds with Moody, especially when it comes to affection.

Pretty soon dinner is ready, and we all sit down at the round table next to the kitchen. One of Mama's crazy quilts serves as the tablecloth, and there are those bronze masks I remember on the wall. They’re drama faces, one happy like a jester, the other’s face twisted into some strange shape, like it’s being sucked into a tornado. I always liked that one.

Mama’s asleep in her room, and she can’t eat anything besides juice or soft foods. I feel sorry for her. I wonder if she dreams food. We’ve got crab legs and our buttered cups, onion rings, ketchup. Michael sits across from me. Larry’s finally awake, and looks like he just came out of a war. When the crab legs are passed around, I reach underneath the other ones to get the leg with the joint on it, the part with the most meat.

“Uh-uh-uuuh!” Moody makes this sound, and it’s like a slap on the wrist. His voice curves up at the end like a childhood taunt.

“What?” I say, looking at him.

“You don’t have to touch all the crab legs, Claire,” he says, obviously upset by this crab touching. “I don’t think everyone wants to eat something your hands have been on.”

I flare my nostrils at him, and Larry holds out his crab leg to me like an offering.

“Please touch mine,” he says, and I do.
After dinner, we play Stupid Bridge. I’ve never played before, and the men are trying to teach it to me. But I know I’ll learn better by playing. There’s a guy mentality here, and I know they think I won’t catch on. Moody deals fast. He used to play poker when we lived in Anaheim. I remember staying in my room, peeking out every once in awhile, to see all these men sitting around, the overhead light on their faces, eating cashew nuts and trail mix. Moody even let his friends smoke in the house during poker games. Among that group, Moody was famous for his poker face.

I’m catching on to Stupid Bridge. It’s strange, how before this game, the cards were just an assortment of strange shapes and suits; these abstract concepts coming forth from my uncle’s mouth.

“Okay, there’s eleven hands, there’s a trump card in each hand except for the eleventh. It could be a spade, a heart—and you can only play a trump if you don’t have the suit that was led. You bet the number of tricks you want to make before the game. If you make your number of tricks, you get that number squared plus ten. If you make less, you get one point. If you make more, you don’t get any points.”

I initially thought this was stupid, not to gain any points even if you were to play more tricks than you bet. Usually the more tricks you made in a card game, the better off you were, and I said this.

“That’s why it’s called ‘Stupid Bridge,’” Larry had said.

That was four hands ago.

Now it’s like some secret language has been revealed to me, a rosetta stone of sorts. The numbers all make sense, the shapes are easily distinguishable and I don’t even have to sort the cards out in a fan in my hand to make it easier. I’m doing it on my own. It’s my turn to deal,
and my hands shake because I know everyone’s sighing at how long it’s taking. I accidentally deal one of Papa’s cards to him face up. I know he doesn’t care. Moody makes a noise. It has s’s in it, it’s almost like a “shhh,” but it’s harsher.

“Claire. Let me deal. You’re messing up the game.”

Larry winks across the table at me. Moody’s busy in his shuffling now, and I make little beaks with my hands and make one bite the other. Larry squawks and makes a slight seizure movement, and I put my hands in my lap. Larry and I have the same birthday. It’s on New Year’s Eve.

“Everyone celebrates our birthday, Claire,” he used to say.

That night Moody and I have to stay in a motel, because there’s not enough room at Mama’s for everyone. It’s a Motel 8 about a mile away, and I sit on one of the beds, look out the window at the streetlights and wonder if they still have In-N-Out burgers here. Moody leaves for the liquor store, and I brush my teeth. Before, at times like this, I would have sat outside and inhaled a cigarette, but I don’t do that anymore. Cigarettes always made me depressed, because I realized when I wasn’t smoking, I didn’t feel like a real person. That shouldn’t happen.

Moody comes back with a six pack of Coronas and a bag of pork rinds. I take a beer and sit on my bed. Moody turns on the TV and gets under his covers. I remember the days he lived with us. He’d come home from work, take off his shoes, and watch the news. He ate microwave popcorn from a big silver mixing bowl. He had these black socks with gold toes, and I remember the smell of stinky feet mixed with the popcorn.

He’s watching this show about murder, much like Cops, and it’s stories about young women who were raped and strangled, left out in fields, wires wrapped around their necks. He’s
always watching things like this, or reading books about sick crimes. I don’t understand it. I want to get up and turn it to the news, the weather channel, where I feel safe.

I close my eyes. It’s cold. The narrator on TV’s talking about this girl who was reported missing in January of 1985, and then I see my uncle Larry, Papa, Moody and Michael underneath the overhead lamp, sitting at the table, their faces illuminated. They’re all staring at me impatiently, waiting for me to throw my card, and I’m trying to arrange the numbers in ascending order, trying to put all the hearts next to each other.

We fall asleep to the music and flicker of crime shows.

The next morning I’m in the backyard with Michael by the lemon tree. Mama’s asleep again. Michael’s eating this fluorescent pink goo that looks like cake icing. It’s eight o’clock. I’m eating more frozen chocolate donuts. He’s telling me how he went to Africa this summer with his church group, and they put on plays about Jesus.

“What is that?” I say, pointing at his bowl.

“It’s cottage cheese with raspberry juice,” he says, holding out a spoonful. “Mama used to make it for me all the time.”

I wave the spoon away. I almost feel diminished by this—some other grandkid has a special food associated with this house. Then I realize there are probably a lot of things about this family I don’t know, and instead I feel familiar, like an old rock.

Later, Michael gives me his senior year school picture with his address written on back. I tell him thank you and put it in Moody’s wallet where the bills are.
Today Moody reads the *New York Times*, the paper frozen in front of his face. Larry sleeps on the couch, and Michael sits next to him reading an issue of *Road & Track*. For awhile we’re all awake in the living room, and Papa puts a tape in the VCR. It’s a history of a shaving cream called “BurmaShave” and the slogans used to advertise. A woman’s voice keeps calling out the BurmaShave jingles. “Hey you boys, if you want a kiss—be real coy and shave your chins! BurmaShave!” Michael and I laugh at it, but we try not to offend Papa, who thinks it’s a vital piece of history. He turns around in his easy chair the first couple of times he hears us snicker, and I feel awful because he looks kind of hurt, like he doesn’t understand us. Then he turns around and watches, and he doesn’t look back at us again.

Mama’s awake for a short time, so I visit her. She asks me if I’d like some more of her music boxes, and I don’t know what to say, because I’ve sold the ones she’s already given me. She has this collection of them; when she was younger, she picked one up in each place she visited. She’d given me two small cardboard boxes full of them last time. Moody said he wasn’t going to keep them and lug my stuff around for the rest of his life, and I don’t have room for much in my apartment.

Mama knows I’m leaving at three, and this is her giving-away period.

“I’ve got a bunch of books in the bathroom,” she says. “Take all you want, honey, because Papa’ll just give it to Goodwill.”

I go to the bathroom down the hallway and open the cupboard by the mirror. Instead of using the cupboard for towels, she’s chosen to stuff it with books. I look at the titles; Alfred Hitchcock mysteries and Readers Digests. I find “Haunted Stories of the West” and an old copy of *The Stranger*. The cover shows five Arabian-looking men with white powder on their faces,
wearing these crazy tall hats and striped stockings. I pick the book up and smell it; it’s musty and it kind of stinks.

When she caught cancer, the doctor told her to quit smoking. I remember peeking in the cabinets like girls do, in this pink bathroom, and smelling cigarette smoke. I saw her in my mind, locking the bathroom door, pushing down her sock to get the cigarette, lighting it. She probably took one drag and then puffed it out into the cabinet, then closed it shut, at the same time throwing the butt in the toilet and flushing it. She’s got rose petal air-freshener.

“Honey,” she calls to me from the bedroom, “go into the spare room and get the blue box in the cedar chest. There’s some things in there I think you might like.”

I nod to myself in the bathroom, then go down the hallway across from Mama’s room. The spare room is where Michael slept last night. The bed isn’t made—it looks like he had a bad night, because the sheets are twisted up into one long strand. There’s a pair of green boxers on the floor, and I move to the cedar chest on the other side of the bed. I open it, and I find the box easily. I take it into her room, sitting on the bed. She’s taking a pill with a sip of water, and she puts down the cup.

“Open it,” she says.

It’s full of oddball things. There are pictures on top, but underneath I see things like metal badges and bow ties, a stuffed animal cat, and some pearl and rhinestone necklaces. I look through the pictures first. I find one of Mama, and she looks like me. She’s got these dark, thin lipsticked lips.

Moody’s building snowmen in some of these pictures. He’s got fuzzy hair on top of his head, like a small bird, and he’s smiling. He looks like a little rascal. I don’t remember when I last saw him smile, except for company.
Mama tells me two of her daughters died when they were my age, one while she was sleeping and the other in a pool. I remember hearing this a long time ago from Moody, who mentioned it briefly. I picture a girl, some sort of Ophelia creature, and only see the end result of the drowning—she’s lying on her back in a black pond, hair tangled with leaves. I wonder if she would have liked me. Mama tells me about her dad, who was hanged for murder.

“He was a mean man,” she says. She shows me a picture. I’ve seen it before; when I was in seventh grade, I had to do a family tree project. I asked Moody to help me, and he had opened his file cabinet and pulled out this picture from a manila envelope. The photograph is black and white, glossy. It’s a public hanging, and his body looks like a ghost at the moment of hanging. He’s stretched and blurry, and I wonder if she watched.

Mama tells me some things twice, and I pretend like I’ve heard them for the first time. She’s taken morphine, and she’s drifting in and out. She tells me she likes to fall asleep to the television, because then all she can hear is the dialogue, and she makes up scenes in her head that set up her dreams. I love this.

I pull out a pair of shoes from the blue box. They’re red silk and maybe three inches long, the ends pointed cruelly. She tells me she bought them off an old woman’s feet in India.

“Footbinding,” she says.

“Yes, I know,” I say. She starts telling me about the ritual and I start to cry, but I’m thinking she can’t see too well and it’s okay if I start in this early.

“They take your feet and wrap the toes under, they tie everything shut with rope, so you can never grow,” she says.

I look at Mama and her eyes are scared, and I get this horrible feeling. She has this pained expression on her face now, and I feel like we’re animals locked in some small room.
Take a Number

“Go away, wasps.”

Sue sat on the white picket fence of her back porch, eyeing the terrorist bugs. It was almost one-thirty. She had ten minutes before she had to go. The pickets poking into her butt were a kind of self-inflicted punishment for her smoking habit. She had some cranberry-grape juice in a bottle, and now she sipped it, making sea sounds. Sue thought the juice was what sweet vampire blood tasted like, though she’d never tried it. She tried to close her eyes, but they opened as soon as she did that. She felt a little jumpy. Today she was going to get her blood drawn. She hated needles. Once, a doctor tried to find out whether she was anemic and pricked her finger. While he was explaining to her that the blood should float in the water, or maybe he said it should sink, she passed out.

The sky looked like someone had slammed it into a wall. It was a bruised gray, and the pavement in the driveway looked like a river of black ink. She felt tiny drops of rain fall on her arm, so she turned her face up and felt it washing the sweat off her face. She remembered a scene from a Fairy Tale Theater episode, the one where Aladdin is trapped inside an underground cave and the trees are this vivid green, like glowing seaweed, and he picks rubies and diamond pears from the branches.

Sue looked at the backyard. This was where her landlord kept all of his junk—paint cans, ladders, sponges, bikes with their chains missing, a boat with a lipstick blot painted on it, “Lack of Etiquette” written beneath in cursive. Behind it sat an ivory hearse, mostly rusted, half covered in a blue tarp. She wondered if her landlord would give her the keys, because right now she really wanted to crawl inside the car and go to sleep.
Sue knew it was time to go. She took a last drag of her cigarette and remembered how her girlfriend Emily smoked—she held the smoke in defiantly and then spoke while letting the smoke go. It always sounded as if she had a cold, because the first word was stuffed-up and slightly baby-like. She threw the cigarette to the gravel, jumped from the fence, and went inside. She kicked the back door to get it shut. Grabbing her backpack and drink, she went outside and spotted Scott in his car right across Percival Road. He smiled and she smiled and got in. He had nothing to worry about. He was getting tested too, but he’d been brought up Catholic and had fewer girls than most boys. They were all virgin girls.

“Hi,” he said sweetly, reaching over to give her a hug. Sue didn’t say anything. She just nuzzled her nose between his neck and shoulder, taking in his smell: the oil soap he used to clean his floors with, and baby shampoo.

“Are you ready?” He looked concerned. She could tell he was nervous, but not for himself.

“Mm-hmm.”

Scott turned the ignition, and the car let out a roar. Sue put her Cranes tape into the deck. The singer had a voice like a little girl, but she sang to dark music. When she tried to sound mean, she just sounded sweeter, which made Sue feel at home. She put her feet up on the dashboard. The windows were cracked open, and the mugginess of the air seeped its way in. She wondered if Scott would play Chopin for her afterward, if she could lie underneath the piano and feel its vibrations.

She remembered the reason she was going to this place. It was this one time last November. Sue found out that this boy she had been intrigued with for an entire year had a crush on her as well. She’d imagined him sitting on his balcony, growing purple violets and reading
J.D. Salinger or Camus. Instead, he only talked about amphetamines and how many vodka shots he could down in one night. He wore black mesh shirts with leather pants and read bad science fiction books. He wanted to be a British pop star, but he was not British. He sang with a British accent and wanted to make love to his cat. She knew it was all over when he told her he hated chocolate and did not eat. He existed on beer and peanut butter. How could she be with someone who didn’t understand the Joy of Food?

Still, she hung around him because she was lonely. She’d been in Nevada for a year and a half and still had no friends to call her own. One night she lost her head. In one stupid, foolish moment, they had sex. Later, she tried to scale up her morality, counting lovers on her fingers. He didn’t count, Sue reasoned. After all, it was only ten seconds before they both had weird feelings and pushed each other away. There was no love involved. It made her sick. She pictured slippery thighs and silence whenever she thought of it, and she’d known even then she’d exposed herself to an entire web of people. “Promiscuous people sleep with promiscuous people who’ve slept with promiscuous people.” This thought ran through her head at least once a day.

“Do you know where this place is?” Scott looked puzzled. They were driving around the hospital district. The buildings were all red brick, four stories. Emxofacial surgery. Trauma Center. Cardiovascular services.

“Oh, God, no,” Sue moaned. She had to pee. It was one-forty. Their appointment was in five minutes.

“Um, I think I forgot to eat,” Scott said. He looked at Sue hesitantly, his mouth slightly open.

Sue felt a sudden surge of anger. She turned her head to Jacob, felt her voice shaking.

“What do you mean, you forgot to eat?”
“I had a piano recital at eight this morning. I didn’t even think about it.”

“You didn’t eat anything?”

“No. The last thing I had was a banana last night. And two beers.”

Sue sighed. “Scott, you have to eat. What the hell are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. We have to find this place first.”

Didn’t they serve orange juice and cookies after you got your blood taken? No. That was for the Red Cross. That was when you got pints or quarts of blood drawn, and then you sat and watched stupid soap operas while your blood was draining away in a plastic tube.

Sue remembered staying at her grandma’s house one summer, and this show came on television. Some lady was shopping at the grocery store, and when she left her cart in the middle of the aisle to get some macaroni, this creepy guy went up to it and injected something into her ground beef package through a syringe. The next scene showed the lady about to eat her beef at home, and while her fork was poised in the air, the weird guy was looking through the window, cackling to himself, saying, “Oh, my little lamb, my little lamb…” over and over. Sue’s grandma came in at that moment and went crazy. She said, “You’re watching a soap? What the hell are you doing? Don’t be watching soaps in this house!” and grabbed the remote, turning off the television. Sue didn’t even know what a soap was.

The roads were so confusing; they were all one-ways and turn-only lanes. Scott turned the car around and they pulled into the circular driveway of some hospital center. A makeshift Chick-Fil-A stand stood on the sidewalk, a tent with the logo and two boys underneath it. Sue laughed. Scott’s eyes widened.

“Is that really a Chick-Fil-A?” he asked.

“I don’t know. That would be really weird.”
“Ask them.”

“Ask them what?”

“Ask them if they sell chicken.”

Sue smiled, leaned out the window and yelled, “Hey! Do you guys sell chicken?”

“Yes,” one of the boys said, looking at her as if she was retarded.

She turned back to Scott and he fumbled for his wallet. He gave her a ten dollar bill and she got out, bought two sandwiches, hers without pickles, and threw the packets of mustard and ketchup into the bag. They decided to park in the first parking garage they could find and walk around to find the Health Center. While devouring their sandwiches, they stepped into the glass elevator and looked at each other, cheeks poking out as though they were stuffed with tissues.

They walked out of the elevator at the first floor, stepped out, and directly in front of them stood a building with “Health Services” written on it in gold lettering. This means something, Sue thought. This and the Chick-Fil-A must mean something.

They walked in and noticed a doctor’s scale by the door. To relieve some tension, Sue stepped on. She got off and then Scott got on. They weighed the same. One hundred thirty eight.

“Come on,” Scott said, and took her hand, pushed through the double doors. They walked down a long hallway and posted on the second door to the right was a bright yellow card. STD clinic, it read.


Sue smiled.

They went inside. An older black woman sat behind the desk, wearing a sky blue shirt with butterflies on it. Scott did all the talking because Sue was nervous and busy biting her
fingernails down to where it hurt. She left the fingernail remnants in her mouth and chewed them with her two front teeth.

The lady gave them small cards with numbers written on them. They sat in a tiny waiting room off to the side, shielded from the main door. The room was white with a small television that wasn’t turned on. Magazines lay scattered on the chairs. They were all the same magazine—*Straight Talk*. On the front was a collage of pictures of adolescents from all walks of life. There were the typical Christian youth group boys wearing silver crosses and baseball caps, preppy girls with Abercrombie and Fitch shirts and perfect skin; one had a picture of a punk rock girl sitting down, writing in a notebook. She had spiky pink hair, dark black eyebrows, and a nose ring. It looked as if the photographer had just said, “Hey!” because her eyes were squinted and she had a horrible “Go to Hell” look on her face. Sue pointed at the girl.

“She’s pretty,” she said.

Scott looked and made a silly face. “I hate facial piercings.”

Sue scowled back.

A tall black boy wearing army fatigue pants walked in. He looked embarrassed. He sat down across from them. He had these dark blue eyes, and Sue wondered if they were contacts. It didn’t matter. They were beautiful eyes.

She kicked her feet back and forth and looked at the floor to the crumbled-up wads of paper lying there. She picked one up. “Genital warts,” it read. “What do I do if I have genital warts? What are genital warts? Are they curable? How long should I wait before having sex with my partner again? Should I tell my partner?” Sue folded up the paper into a miniature fortune teller, like the kind she used to make in grade school. She told Scott to pick a word.

“Um…do you want vaginal, sores, recurring, or yeasty?”
Scott laughed and looked at the boy sitting across from them. “We’re not weird, I swear,” he said.

The boy seemed to loosen up a little. While they played the fortune game, they heard a peppy woman’s voice.

“The Silverstein Health Clinic is a new installation in Collin County. They provide free AIDS testing and all STD testing for a small fee!”

“Cut!” a man’s voice said.

They all looked at each other incredulously. What the hell was a TV news crew doing in the STD clinic?

“I’ll sue,” the boy said, covering his face up with a *Straight Talk*.

Sue and Scott edged into the corner of the room, trying to hide themselves.

“My mom would kill me,” Scott said.

“Hi, Mom,” she muttered.

“Number 12,” the nurse said, coming into the doorway.

Sue tucked her hair behind her ears and looked blankly at the nurse, then at Scott.

“Go,” he said. “Good luck.” He kissed her on the cheek.

She was led into another room, in it a cushioned table with stirrups at the end. The door closed, and she was alone. Oh God, how she hated this part. Sue hoped the doctor was a woman. She didn’t feel comfortable being examined by a man who made his living looking at girls’ most private parts. There was a bulletin board above the table, tacked to it a blue piece of paper. A cartoonish man with hair springing out of his head like the Wild Man of Borneo was drawn on it. His veiny eyes rolled back into his head, sweat in teardrop shapes flying off him,
his hands clinging to his temples. “Dear Lord,” it read, “Please tell me again how lucky I am to be working here!” Lucky was crossed out, and “Blessed” was written over it instead. Three times.

A knock on the door. Another nurse, younger than the first, peeked her head around and then came in. “Hi, Sue. My name is Laura. How are you today?”

Laura looked like the kind of girl Sue would want for a sister. Sue wanted to tell her how scared she was.

“I’m fine,” she said.

Laura sat down in a chair. “How many sexual partners have you had in the last two years?”

“Two,” she said.

“And how many in the last six months?”

“One.”

“How many times have you used protection?”

“Almost all the time.”

Laura smiled at her. “With the ones you have not used protection with, did you know their sexual history?”

“Yes,” said Sue, “but he lied.”

They went through the examination. Laura took some blood in a test tube. It wasn’t so bad, except Sue had to cling to the edge of the sink while the needle went in. She wanted to hold Laura’s hand, but she didn’t ask. She stared at the overhead light, cringing, when she had the other examination done.

“Now, these are my hands,” Laura said soothingly.
Sue found this funny, and closed her mouth tight so she wouldn’t laugh. Who else’s would they be? she thought. She tried to imagine some secret midget man hiding underneath the table, replacing the nurse’s hands with his.

When the exam was done, Sue made an appointment for the next week to find out her test results. Scott waited outside. He clutched a paper bag in his hand.

“What’s this?” she said coyly.

He reached inside and pulled out a handful of condoms. Sue looked in the bag. There must have been well over fifty in there.

“She asked if we were having sex,” said Scott. “I said no, and she said, ‘Well, just incase you do,’ and handed me this.”

Sue let out a breath. At first it offended her; she was sure the nurse thought she was dirty and probably infected and that was why she gave Scott the condoms. Then she laughed at her paranoia. She felt the condoms were like someone handing them a license to drive. She wanted this to be different, though.

They drove back, and when they got to his room, Tom was lying asleep in Scott bed in his black and white checkered pants. Tom was a culinary arts major. He wanted to cook cat stew as soon as he found a stray, and he slept with heavily hair-sprayed married women. Sue tiptoed to the bed and rained some condoms on Tom, then placed the bag in his open hand.

Sue made some spaghetti sauce later and called Emily, who lived in Arizona. Emily told her she’d been tested in January and it came back “non-reactive.” Sue liked that term better than HIV-negative. Sue was relieved, since Emily had been with more lovers than she could count on both hands, twice. If Emily can get through this, I can, she thought. While Sue chopped onions, Emily read to her from a book she was reading for Anthropology. She told her
about the finger-chopping rituals of young girls in Papua New Guinea. When their fathers died, girls’ fingers were hacked off and buried with the body. Sue listened to this as she smashed garlic cloves and browned the beef.
Hair Story One

I was sitting at the airport, waiting for my plane, my mother seeing me off, reading a Better Home and Gardens magazine. A girl who looked about twenty, with long, bushy brown hair sat next to me. She was chubby and smelled like cigarettes. She turned to me and started telling me about how her plane was two hours late to Atlanta, said, “They had to use jumper cables on the plane, twice!” I said, “My God!” and then my mother tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, “She’s pulling your leg, Claire. Planes don’t have jumper cables.”

I turned back to the girl on my left, and she was picking a romance book from her Adidas duffel bag, you know- the ones that say, “he parted the leaves from her secret garden”—and she was smirking to herself. And then I felt silly but a little upset because I felt like she got some secret laugh out of the joke. She put her book on her lap and leaned forward, hair covering the side of her face, and got a brush from the side pocket. She straightened up and started brushing her hair, and I heard the crackling and snapping of tangled hair being pulled out of her scalp. She used the brush like it was the brush that was part of her, and not the hair. I cringed and looked to my mom, who raised her eyebrows. I looked back to the girl, who kept brushing, her head moving down with the movement of the brush. She paused then to pull clumps of hair out of the brush, then glanced at me and held the hair clump up, then let it fall to the ground.
Bones

Sue glances at the Love’s Truck Stop signs as she passes them on the highway, advertising gas or showers. She remembers going into a trucker’s restaurant and convenience store on a trip some time ago to use the bathroom. Walking by the phones, she scowled at T-shirts above the cigarette machine with “Don’t Trust Anything that Bleeds for a Week and Doesn’t Die!” written on them. In the bathroom she eyed the silver dispenser with raspberry flavored condoms, the cock rings.

She puts an unlabeled tape in the deck. She hears “turning, turning blue all over the windows and the floors” and then she takes a deep breath, ejects the tape. This Cure album was hers and his. It reminds her of almond tea under the dining room table, and she doesn’t like it.

She remembers how he refused to pee in public bathrooms; how he’d make her pull over in some wooded area behind a Wal-Mart and turn his back to her, facing a tree. She remembers how they met: he followed her for several weeks until she noticed. She and a friend were eating avocado sushi by the bay window, facing King Street. A lanky boy kept walking by, glancing in the window. He had buttery black hair and a stalkish look to him: the type who looked like he thought even when he was on the toilet.

“I think he likes you,” her friend had said, and gestured with her chopsticks.

Sue clumsily dropped her sushi on the wooden block.

“No, I don’t think so. Maybe he’s looking for his friends,” she said.

He came by the window again, this time riding on a yellow city bike, his forehead wrinkling as he looked in, a chunk of hair curtaining one eye. He looked at Sue with an angry eye. Then he didn’t pass by anymore.
Sue thought about how so far, she didn’t like any of the boys she’d met at college. First, there was Jordan, who was good-looking in a big-lipped way; his kisses were nice, but then after they’d been together a week, Valentine’s day came, and he gave her an old, torn-apart purse made of green faux velvet, saying that it was his sister’s and she didn’t want it anymore. That wasn’t the breaking point: later that night, a girl changed her shirt inside a bar bathroom, and Sue looked at her in the mirror, gasping at how Rubenesque she was. She told Jordan about how she’d thought the girl attractive, and he’d sputtered, “How can you like girls? I can’t be with you if you might be a lesbian.” It was his ignorance and society-strict mindset that made her avoid him for the rest of the night, and after she didn’t call him for a couple of weeks, he got the message. Her friends expressed disbelief at how she could dump a man with such luscious lips. Later she’d been set up with a guitar player named Scot, and every girl besides her thought he was gorgeous. He smoked too much pot, and she’d always declined, because she felt paranoid and like a heart attack was about to kill her. He took her to a concert at the only music venue in Charleston, which was headlined by a big black man wearing gray dreadlocks and trinkets in his hair. She looked down at the college kids from her place on the balcony, and saw them jumping up and down, twirling in circles. She found the music incredibly boring; she despised jam bands, because it seemed the only way that other people enjoyed such music was by savoring LSD stickers on their tongues. She didn’t like the way that her friends in the dormitory split between two groups: spacey, complacent hippies and sharp-dressed sorority girls. She couldn’t relate to either; the sorority girls had wall-banging sex every night and thought the Christmas lights strung up in her room were strange. She thought that some of the boys they brought home were cute and considerate, but they always cut the conversation short to go to some bar where sexy dress was preferred. She’d eventually set up the hippie guitar player with her hippie roommate, and
they were thriving; he broke his nose when a baseball hit him after he pitched it, and the hippies were playing sick-in-bed, eating ramen and cheese quesadillas made in his cheese-splattered microwave.

Now this boy; she found him a little scary, but in a good way. She could see herself pushing that hair back from his face. The next day she went to the park over on Mary Drive, sitting there with her Barthelme book, her back against a tree. She read a story about a man named Rick who watched girls working at the Estee Lauder counters. Rick quietly watched their long legs and intricate faces. Rick was endearing to Sue, and not scary like he should be. He’d sit next to the piano player in the department store on a swivel-stool, peeking over the piano lid at the girls. One of the shopgirls had just introduced herself to Rick when something caught Sue’s eye.

It was him, the King Street boy, wearing a black peacoat over his clothes, carrying a notebook. He sat on a bench to the side of her, far enough away so they seemed like strangers. Startled, Sue looked down, pretending to read, but the words were something in the way.

A tourist carriage came down the street next to the park, and the man with the horse whip said something about two college students on leisure time. She turned to her right, looking over at him, and slowly raised her hand in the air, five fingers splayed. He looked like he’d just breathed in some water. Then he got up and walked over to her. It was the kind of walk that knew it was being watched: it said he couldn’t make up his mind between slouching and straightening. He sat Indian-style next to her.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello,” she said.
He picked up a dead leaf from the ground, crunching it in his hand. “I’ve wanted to talk to you for awhile.”

She picked up an acorn and tried to take off its top.

“I have to go home and clean my room,” she said. She was scared, and she didn’t know why. She looked at him. He reminded her of a character in one of her Japanese erotic comic books. He had dark, shifting Kyoto eyes.

“Do you like cream soda?” he said.

“I think so. Why?” she said.

“We could have one.”

She smiled. He got up and held out his hand, and she took it. They walked to a pizza joint some four blocks away, all the while sneaking looks; she imagined they were like cats, sniffing around each other. It was getting near dark, and as they reached the pizza place, she pulled open the door, gesturing for him to go in. He reached in the see-through fridge by the door, taking out two brown glass bottles. He handed one to her, put a bill on the counter, then sat at one of the booths. The red candle on the table gave him some kind of light that made her fingers clutch the empty air at her sides while he stared at her. He sat on the other side of the table, edging the cap of his bottle against the corner. Then he brought down his fist upon it, hard, and the open bottle fizzled with cold. He took a long gulp, then sighed. He picked up the matchbook on the table, lit a match, watching it go. She’d like to know what his room looked like, where he was from, what he did when no one was there to watch. She turned to the last page in her Barthelme book and wrote, “If you could have just one sense, which would it be?” She passed the book to him. He read what she wrote, then smirked, took the pencil from her
hand and scribbled something. He slid the book back to her. “Is this one of those psychological tests?” it read. “I won’t answer that. You can’t be sneaky with me.”

She covered up what he’d written with one hand, then looked up at him.

“Okay. So what do you want?” She said. She took a drink from the cream soda bottle, her eyes staying on him the whole time. It tasted like winter.

“I want you,” he said.

Something went ‘bam’ inside her. Sue felt the corner of her mouth turn up, and she put her thumb and first finger in her mouth, her thumbnail feeling in between the grooves of her crooked bottom teeth. She wouldn’t normally do this.

It was him, though. It was something she was giving in to. Something simple and strange had shown itself, and she decided to take it.

He took her hand and out they went, walking to his place, their paces melting together. She was anxious to get there: to be in his cave, with him.

He lived on the second floor of a yellow house, its paint peeling, the first floor with stains on the carpet, smelling of spilled beer. When he opened the door to his place, she smelled the oil paint. It wasn’t the fresh type, but the kind that came from old paintings, curdling into the atmosphere, changing into something warm. She knew this smell: it was like her grandfather’s violin studio, full of wood and turpentine.

He took her into his room, dark until she heard him stumble around and switch on a lamp. It was a small room with white walls and high ceilings, almost like what she imagined solitary confinement might look like. Some canvases were turned so the paintings faced the wall. Random black and blue streaks of paint were smeared on the walls, like he’d had some on his
hand and didn’t have a towel. A mattress lay on the floor, a few uncapped paint tubes on the carpet. Metal mixing tools and unwashed paintbrushes lay in the sheets of his bed.

“You should wash those,” she said. “They’ll get dried up and you’ll have to throw them away.” She took a seat on the bed, and he put something in the stereo.

She recognized it as a Cure song, but she didn’t know which.

“Which Cure is this?”

“‘Speak My Language.’” He sat next to her. Robert Smith did a lot of meowing in the song.

He turned to her and got this look on his face like he’d made up his mind about something, then moved to kiss her, his hands on her hips.

She let him. She felt his hair, his hands on her play-dough stomach, and he was soft. She twisted him around, and they were on each other like something pent-up had just been released.

She felt everything was new. He was new skin. Things like unbuttoning and pushing and pulling went on.

She remembered something this woman had written about virgins being like white bread. The lady had likened herself to barley bread, the wheat being mashed up and made into sugar cake. It made Sue feel better about not waiting.

Sue left that night with the feeling of something dark and warm. Something hers.

It was like that for awhile. He made her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They prettied up alley walls by painting them; he claimed he was abducted by aliens at the age of twelve, so he wrote these strange symbols on the walls, telling her it was the alphabet he had learned in the ship. Sue wasn’t sure if she believed him, but she figured she’d let it pass. They
did a lot of staring and making out. He painted her portrait once with his oil paints, she lying on
his bed, him looking, cocking his head. He used pinks and purples, scraping the canvas with his
metal tool, rag in one hand to wipe off the paint.

“Keep your eyes closed,” he said, but she opened them. He held a tube of white paint in
the other hand. He squeezed the tube and took a dollop of paint on his finger, then put it in his
mouth and swirled it with his tongue.

“Did you just eat that?” she said.

He looked at her, the corners of his mouth white with paint.

“No.”

“Yes, you did! Isn’t that toxic?”

“No. It’s Titanium White. It’s just charred animal bones,” he told her, wiping his mouth
with the rag. She smiled, not knowing what to say. He told her to try it; he said it involved him
in the process of painting. He put some paint on her tongue; she thought it tasted oily and
feathery, and like some concoction that had no origin. She remembered a horror show episode
where a chef claimed to know every ingredient in a presented dish, but he was stumped on a
particular bisque. His palette could not distinguish these foreign ingredients, and he found out,
right before the chef killed him with an axe and put him in the butcher cooler, that the ingredient
was human flesh.

When he was finished, he turned the canvas to her and put his hand on her back. Sue
thought the girl in the painting looked like a sea-monster of some sort. It didn’t look like her at
all; in fact, she was a bit leery of the creature on the canvas. She loved it.

“It’s like water,” she said.
As they lay in his mattress that night, he told her how he’d had his eye on her since her hair was long, which was almost a year ago. He told her that he saw her and thought that she was the most perfect girl, until he saw that she’d taken up with Jordan, the big-lipped guy, who he’d gone to high school with. “He’s so stupid and jockish,” he said. She looked at him apologetically, tracing the tiny mole on his lower right cheek, and said, “I know.” At two in the morning, she woke, craving chocolate. She told him about the Sunday morning donut routine she had as a kid, when she and her parents would drive to Winchell’s and she’d order three donuts: maple bar, chocolate glazed, and mocha cake. He smiled sleepily, and they went back to sleep. In the morning, he slapped her butt with a spatula, waking her up. He told her that he was fixing something called Cocoa Gravy, which was a mixture of powdered cocoa, condensed milk, and sugar, spooned over buttered pieces of toast. They ate it in their pajamas, which they’d purchased a couple days before at the Salvation Army; they looked like mental patients’ outfits—loosely collared, long-sleeved shirts coupled with elastic-waistband pants. Hers were mint-colored, and his were pale yellow. After breakfast, they typed letters to each other on his Smith-Corona typewriter, which they had termed male because of its black keys and very prominent “P” key, which stuck out more than the other letters.

Later he gave her a painting he’d done of himself, of his face. It embodied him completely. Her roommates were scared of it, and they told her to take it out of the living room. The eyes in the painting stared out like something desperate. The lips of him were black and thickly textured. She’d take her finger and trace around the lips every night, pushing in the places where the black was raised, and there would always be a fresh, wet layer of paint that came out of the dry casing. This reassured her. She used to stare at the lips and their roly-poly
texture, then look at her finger, black and oily. She just wiped it on her sheets, because water and soap made it messier.

Once he took down a jar of absinthe he’d steeped from his closet shelf, and they shared it in purple wine glasses. He’d gotten the recipe, which involved anise and wormwood, from some underground person. It tasted like licorice, and she’d always been the one to take the leftover black jellybeans. That night he dressed her up in his suit, tie, and suspenders. He took in a deep breath as he fastened the suspenders on her shoulders, and then took her blue dress off the floor and put it on. Their absinthe gone, he made almond tea, and they drank it in tiny cups under his dining room table. It reminded her of when she was little, in the pool, blowing all the air out through her nose so she sank, trying to sit on the scratchy, batter-like bottom of the pool. She used to hold imaginary cups and saucers, hosting a private tea party underwater.

Later that night, he withdrew to his bathroom, the door closed, typing on his Smith-Corona. When she knocked, he didn’t reply, and she opened the door. He had put some kind of white powder on his face, or perhaps it was the titanium white, and smeared it so that he looked ghostlike. It was all in his hair, too. He looked up, disoriented, and told her to go away. His eyes were lined with black eyeliner, which he must have borrowed from her makeup bag. It was then that she decided to counter his strangeness; she closed the door and went to the kitchen, where a goldfish swam in an old glass vase. She smiled, made her way to the bathroom, and opened the door. He stopped typing and looked at her, his eyebrows raised. She started the water in the bath, took off the suit, and stepped into the paint-peeled, claw-footed tub. He turned around, smiling, and laughed when he saw the goldfish trailing through the water, spiraling around the tub, tickling her legs and stomach as it swam.
She remembered how he dropped India ink on her stomach and then blew on it, making haiku-like designs. He used to get so dizzy from all that breath he’d collapse on top of her, and she’d comb his hair with her fingers.

She thought maybe now she wanted to know more about him; not just that he used Pantene conditioner, ate paint, drank absinthe and acted strangely on occasion.

“She said, looking at his feet.

“‘I don’t like to talk,’” he said, looking at his feet.

“But don’t you want to know about me?’” She cupped her hand and poured some milk into it.

“I know you,” he said, and she let the milk dribble between her fingers onto the ground.

Maybe he was right; it seemed like they knew each other on a much more significant level than she’d experienced with other boys. But was it so bad that she wanted to know the details, his thoughts, instead of guessing and thinking she was right?

Parking her car in a pay-garage one day, she spied him, crouching, petting a cat. He was scratching its head, concentrating, biting his lip. She came closer, and gasped when she saw the blood on the cat’s face and neck. She asked him what he was doing.
“Cat has scabs,” he said. “I’m just trying to help him; scabs get itchy, and it’s hard for them to scratch.”

She nodded, thinking about how sick this was. But then she remembered something about herself: when she was in preschool, she would pick her friends’ scabs, or when they got cut, she would push the skin together to make the wound bleed. Her friends often told her to stop, or worse, screamed for the teacher on the playground, but she couldn’t stop. She had to keep squeezing, couldn’t stop picking. She thought about how this wasn’t much different from picking the cat’s scabs. She told him about this, and he smiled, stood up, and put his hands on her hips, kissing her. These strange personal compulsions that they shared made her feel like someone knew who she was, what she was about.

Later she opened her eyes while they kissed. She wanted to see if his eyebrows furrowed as he kissed her; she thought this was a sign of passion. When she opened her eyes, his were open, staring blankly at her. She jerked away, unnerved.

“How do you always keep your eyes open when we kiss?” she said.

“Yeah, so?”

“It’s weird,” she said. “Makes me feel like you’re not there, or maybe too much there.”

He shrugged. “I’ll close them,” he said, and he bit her lip softly. But he didn’t close his eyes, so she kept hers crossed to show him how it was. He pulled away.

“Stop that,” he said.

One Saturday evening, he told her he wanted to take her to a place.

“What kind of place?” she asked.
“It’s a magic club.”

“You mean the rabbit and the hat and all that?”

“Yeah,” he said. “This guy and his wife run the place. He’s supposed to have a show tonight.”

Sue looked at him, smiled a little.

“Let’s go,” he said.

She nodded.

The club was off 35, about forty minutes away. She drove. She looked at the highway signs for Kenworth Motors and Love’s Truck Stop. He sang Dead Kennedys, took her Swiss Army knife and whittled away at a Jimi Hendrix sticker on the windshield, transforming him into a man wearing a hooded sweatshirt and spiky hair. She didn’t stop him.

When she pulled into the place, something got a hold of her. The place had a black front, very modern and stark, and seemed out of place in these deep woods. The sign was lit up, not as bright as neon, but dimmer, in smoky red lettering. “Puff’s,” it read, a red outlined dragon blowing smoke next to it.

She turned to him. “Puff’s? As in Puff the Magic Dragon?”

“Yeah,” he said.

She remembered hearing about something more sinister in that childhood story, but she didn’t know what it was now. Something about suicide, or loneliness, and the feeling she got once when she sat, looking out the window of a plane, and saw the sun’s falling light hitting the clouds, making the sky look like a world on fire.

She pulled on the door handle and got out, her shoes hitting the gravel. She went in first. The place was very open, spacious—but it was closed in, she thought, at the same time. There
was a stage right in front of her, steps leading up to it, its crimson curtains closed. She heard
glasses clinking to her left, and saw a red-haired woman behind the bar, mixing a drink. Two
men sat on the other side of the bar in sleek business pants and striped shirts, laughing. The rest
of the place was deserted. It smelled musty, like her aunt’s house, the one who kept all the dogs;
and spicy, like cigar smoke.

“Hey.”

She looked over at him, and he gestured toward a plush black couch in front of the stage,
in the pit. She followed him, and they sat there together, not saying anything, not touching.

“That lady over there, that’s the magic guy’s wife,” he said.

“Does she always bartend?”

“Yes. She makes amazing bloody marys.”

She picked up a city paper off the table in front of them, turning to the personals. She
liked to read the “I Missed You” section—the ones about missed connections, people seeing
each other at a gas station, but being too shy to introduce themselves, later hoping to God their
crush reads the personals. “Girl in baby blue sweater, I saw you at Little Chef. You ordered a
feta cheese omelet. You looked over at me and smiled. I was too frozen in my seat to smile
back. Please call,” one read.

“What, you looking for someone else?” He poked her, looking at the paper in her hands.

“No,” she said. “I just like reading them,” she said.

He nodded. “You know, it’s supposed to be really romantic when a guy writes in to one
of those things and lists all the qualities his girlfriend has.”

“Really?” she said.
“Yeah. I’ve heard of people doing that,” he said.

She looked back at the paper. She didn’t see him doing that for her. She knew he prided himself on being original, showing his love for her by doing things that required deliberation on her part; he would never open himself by declaring love. He wanted to be interpreted like a work of art or a book of Dada puzzles. He hated transparency. He never read the paper, anyhow.

“You wanna get a drink?” he said.

“Sure.” She folded the paper back up and put it in between the cushions of the couch.

They walked over to the bar and sat down on tall swivel stools. The redheaded lady smiled at him.

“How’ve you been doing?” she said.

“Good, good. Can I have one of those bloody marys?”

“Of course,” she said. “Anything for you?” She looked at Sue.

“Yeah, I’ll have the same with lots of pepper, please.”

The lady nodded, turned around, and started mixing the celery and bloody mary in the blender.

“So when’s the show supposed to start?” Sue asked.

“Oh, he’s not coming,” one of the businessmen said. “Cindy says he had some stuff to do.”

Sue felt herself becoming a little angry. Now this night was empty.

Cindy turned around, their bloody marys in each hand, setting Sue’s down and grinding the pepper into her drink.

“Thanks,” she said, looking at the candle in front of her. It was trailing
a puddle of hot wax around the wick.

“Hey,” the same businessman said. “I saved a woman from getting raped today.”

Sue took a drink and raised her eyebrows.

Everyone turned to him, murmuring, “Yeah? How?”

He paused, looking at his audience. “I changed my mind,” he said, smiling.

Everyone broke out in quick laughter, even the woman behind the bar, perhaps because they were drunk, except for Sue. Bewildered, Sue turned to her boy, expecting a deadpan look on his face, a “that’s not funny,” but he was laughing as well, silly and high pitched. After that died down, the conversation drifted to a movie about golfing, with Adam Sandler. Cindy and he and the businessmen were all talking it up, citing scenes they liked, but she’d never seen the movie before. She was surprised that he loved such a publicized, common movie; his sense of humor was subtler, more questionable. She put her fingers in the candle wax. It hurt at first, but the wax molded to her fingers and she flicked the finger molds into the ashtray. She finished her bloody mary and got up. He didn’t notice.

She wandered around the empty place, feeling alone. She took the steps up to the stage, and when she was up there, she turned around and looked down at the bar. They were all laughing, oblivious, and she heard him ordering some Kahlua drink now. She turned around again to the curtains, felt the fabric. It was velvet and reminded her of caterpillar skin. She felt for the opening, found it, and pulled back a little space, walking in. The curtain fell closed behind her. A light to the side cast a glowing swatch on the stage, and she followed it.

She found herself in an office of sorts—maybe the room where the magic guy got ready. She looked around, saw some colored handkerchiefs, small golden balls, silver hoops. Her eyes
fell on the desk, and there lay a book. “How to Make the Most of Your Divorce,” it read. She stood there, feeling something catch inside her.

The red-haired lady walked in and looked at Sue.

“What are you doing in here?” she said, her face tense.

“Um…I don’t know. I just walked-“

“You’re not supposed to be in here.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Sue turned and found her way back to the stage, getting through the curtains. She sat on the edge of the stage and put her head in her hands. She felt her face making that contortion before the cry.

“You better go talk to your girlfriend,” she heard Cindy say. “I think she’s having some problems.”

She knew when he sat down next to her, but she said nothing.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

She shook her head.

“Say,” he said, putting his hand on her knee.

She told him about being where she wasn’t supposed to be, finding that divorce book.

“But they’re fine!” he said. “He had some stuff to do. She just told me about how they got back from a second honeymoon.”

She thought about his strangeness, how she had been attracted to it initially, and how she related, in some small way. She remembered walking in the woods with him, and how they came upon a skeleton of a dog, which still had a collar with a chain tied to it, wrapped around a tree. She had expressed anger for an owner who would leave a dog there to die, trapped, with no food, birds pecking at its malnourished body. He didn’t react except to take his pocket knife from
his corduroy pants, cut the collar, and hoist up the bones from the ground, the bones knocking together like some crude woodchime. He carried the bones back to the car, and told her that he would add it to his collection of turtle shells and an actual human skull that his father had found while he was planting trees on his property. He joked that he had eaten cereal from the skull, slurping up the cheerios and milk from the skull bowl, saying that in some cultures, drinking from the skull of one’s enemy was a guarantee of supernatural powers. She’d thought he was joking, but she was unnerved by this confession; knowing him, or rather, not knowing him, she thought that this might be something that wasn’t a black-humored lie.

She got up from the stage, made the walk back to the magic guy’s room. She didn’t care if she got caught again. She followed the swatch of light, and stopped at the door of the office. A pudgy man in a crisp, white shirt and dingy boxer shorts stood in front of the full-length mirror at the end of the room, shuffling a deck of cards. She stood watching him for a moment; his bald head looking down at the cards, his lips moving silently. He fanned out the cards, then mumbled, “one-two-three-four-five-six-seven,” quickly like that, and with a flourish, quickly snatched a single card out of the deck. He held it up to the mirror to see, and his jaw went slack. He closed his eyes for longer than a blink, took a deep breath, and opened them. He immediately caught sight of her, but he didn’t seem surprised. He kept her in his stare for longer than it would normally be comfortable, but she wasn’t uneasy. She returned the stare, and then he slowly turned around.

“It’s not working,” he said, tiredly lifting his hands, palms up, to the sides.

“I know,” she said.
Leave-Taking

Tomorrow I’m going to Australia for school. Twenty-seven hours, Savannah to Chicago to L.A. to Sydney. I’ve brought two Camo-Army bags with me, not knowing what to pack for six months. I’ve never been on a trip this long before, and I’ve been thinking about it every day while working at the snooty Décor De Lile, where rich ladies buy tiny porcelain cats with tutus for hundreds of dollars. I thought I would like working full-time while I was off from school, but I found out I was always busy—-not the kind of busy where it’s easy to daydream, like when you make waffle cones or lick envelopes, but the kind where I was constantly picking up scraps of fabric the designer women would toss around carelessly, like I was a fetch dog. I spent my days folding countless yards of embroidered fabric back together and shelving them into color-coordinated stacks, only to have them messed up again an hour later. Yesterday was my last day, and I thanked God when NPR’s “All Things Considered” came on over the speakers—-that meant it was time to vacuum, being careful not to suck up the fringes on the expensive rugs—and go home. I ate my mom’s famous spaghetti with red clam sauce, and watched Australian movies like Muriel’s Wedding and Crocodile Dundee to get an idea of what kind of places and people I’ll meet.

My dad, in his stubbornness, refused to buy me a plane ticket to Savannah, where my flight began. Instead, we drove there and stayed at the Hyatt on the water, the most plush of Savannah shelters. My dad is that way: grimaces at the cost of a plane ticket, but then spends a whole lot more money on the hotel.

On the three-hour drive to Savannah, my father has stomach problems, grimacing in the mirror and white-knuckling the wheel. His stomachache leads to anger, which causes him to
give dirty looks to all the drivers, speeding past them at rates which, if I were driving, would cause him to scream at me, like he did once while I was cutting through an almost-empty parking lot, “What the hell are you doing? You’re a fucking madwoman! Pull over!”

Once he passes his enemies, he slows to twenty miles an hour, proving his point, whatever it is. My mom’s right hand reaches back for mine through the mess of her seatbelt, squeezing mine in our secret agreement that said, “Your father’s an Idiot.”

We pass a sign that says “U.S. Vegetable Laboratory.” I picture bushy little broccoli growing in fish-like aquariums, being monitored by scientists who stuff carrots in their coat pockets for quick eating. I see a blue pool off the two-lane highway in a trailer park community. It’s February, and the water looks like the blue paint of water park rides. I look lazily out the left window, and a huge mother cow rests in a green field, licking herself.

My dad pulls out a bag from the CVS Pharmacy with thin chocolate mints in it. He is all over the road—his hands are full of mints and the barbecue chips from the bag resting in the console. Usually, Mom’s elbow rests on it along with his, and no matter what kind of stupid argument he’s making, I see those two elbows as a sign of unity, that they’re really in love. Even if it’s just while they’re in this car.

My mind wanders, and I think about how I need this trip so badly—to leave Charleston, because there are traces of him everywhere. The year before, I’d had a too-intense relationship with a boy named Andy, who had dark hair curtaining one eye and a mouth that kept biting his lips. He was constantly depressed, saying, “Oh…I just had the worst feeling come over me,” and wanted me to hang around and wallow in it with him. He never meant to hurt me, but it was just too much—too romantic, like the night we drank absinthe he’d steeped in a large maraschino cherry container and typed notes to each other on his new Smith-Corona, loving the “fwap”
sound of the keys and the imprints they made, the “S” that would never work. Later we switched clothes (he thought I looked so sexy in his suit and tie) and drank almond tea under his dining-room table. It reminded me of holding tea-parties at the bottom of the pool when I was a kid, grasping imaginary glasses and feeling the plaster at the bottom like scratchy cake-batter, wincing at the feel of it. He told me about how he wanted to set up rope from the rafters of his house and make cats perform tightrope tricks on them. Anyway, what we had was incredible sex, and what we lacked was normal communication. He made me feel like an interloper, trying to get into his thoughts—and now, what I think happened is that he transferred all his depression and hopelessness onto me. At lunch break, I always sat on the bench in the King Street graveyard, the air thick, staring at the grave of “Little Octavious,” who we joked would come and kill us if we stepped on it while smoking cigarettes and drinking cream soda. I had that kind of nostalgia that you know you shouldn’t have when you’re only twenty, but I really don’t think I was being too dramatic. It felt like I’d lost something, though I could only remember these sensual things and not the frustration of only knowing his little quirks and not his real feelings. I wanted to get out of Charleston so I would stop wishing for that surreal, quiet, dark time to come back again, because I knew it never would, and it wouldn’t have been good for me anyway.

My dad decides to try and please me, turning up the radio when an eighties classic he remembers me liking in middle school, “Tainted Love,” comes on. He turns it so loud I turn my head sideways to my shoulder and scrunch my face up, but he is nearly deaf and smiles at me in the rearview, winking, and snaps his fingers to the chorus to be silly. I think about a pet Cockateil I used to have, who would sit on top of his cage and move his head up and down to the beat of the radio music playing in my mom’s sewing room while she and I cut out patterns. He would open his wings a little from his body and sway back and forth, making a clicking noise.
We arrive in Savannah, driving across the blue bridge. We pull up, my dad tipping the valet, and get our bags out. My mom has trouble walking because the multiple sclerosis is getting worse, so she’s relieved when the elevator is right inside the door. We’re led to our room on the twelfth floor by a young Mexican. The room has one nice canopy bed and deep red carpet. When the boy leaves, I wonder if I should look at the fire escape route on the door. I’ve waited this long to fly to the other side of the world, and if it’s not a plane crash, it will be a hotel fire. Since this depression has set in, I’ve had these terrifying moments of panic—when I go to the movie theatre, I’m afraid someone is just going to shoot me in the back of the head, out of nowhere. I wish these feelings of impending doom would stop. Maybe it’s just because I’m remembering too much of him. I think if I go away, away from everything I know, knowing nobody—maybe I’ll have new things to learn, new memories.

My parents left the MGM Grand in Las Vegas the day before the massive fire that lit up the city better than any neon ever could. My mom told me this story when I was young, and soon after I watched the Poseidon Adventure. I thought I had an idea of what the fire was like, though the element was different. It was the image of banding together, trying to survive something, but inevitably getting annoyed with those people you had to spend your last moments with. I remember a scene with a handsome man urging old Shelley Winters, all white foofy hair piled in starched curls on top of her head, to swim toward him as the room filled quickly to the brim. I may be remembering this wrong, but I think she died. She was the nagging type and the man wasn’t all too sad, because the beautiful woman was still left for him.

In the room, we have a balcony, and I slide open the glass door, stepping out. Down below are dozens of foodstaff in their blacks and whites, scurrying around. I hear the clinks of plates and wineglasses, the sounds of silverware to signify the eating of a delicate meal. Wooden
tables are covered with tablecloth, then plates, glasses, silverware—one after the other. I marvel at this scene—I feel as if I’m watching the unfolding of a rose, the progression of time as shown by science shows and long-term photography, blue sky rolling with clouds, turning to orange, dark, pink again. The tables come together now—the last touch is candles put on the black marble tables, and the waiters are fastidiously going back to check that the settings are perfectly aligned.

“Dad, look at this, isn’t it strange?” I call back into the room, pointing to the black dots of people and tables.

My dad comes out, unbuttoning the top of his shirt, and says, “Yes, that’s neat, isn’t it?” He steps back, unpacking his bag of toiletries and shaving tools.

I can’t help but think that Andy would have stared at this with me, his eyes concentrating and lips twitching. He would have turned to me and smiled, then taken my hand.

“I’m hungry,” my mom says, her voice both heavy and melodic on the “hungry.” She is sitting on a paisley-patterned chaise lounge, stretching her legs and curling a piece of her bobbed black hair around her index finger.

“Well, I guess we should eat then, shouldn’t we?” My dad grins. The smile looks misplaced on his face, but I’m glad it’s there. In addition to his strange smiles, he has two kinds of chuckles. There is one that he emits when he is truly relaxed and in the mood to joke around, which happened less and less as I grew up. Since I’m about to leave for Australia, though, he’s let loose a little. We were on our way back from the emergency room the other day—after midnight, I woke up, gasping for air, in one of my panic throes, my lips going numb. He never sighed when the doctors said there was nothing wrong, she’s not having a heart attack—I think he understood what was happening to me. I think he’s been depressed his whole life—I asked
him about it once, and he denied it. “Why do you sit in front of the TV all day, Dad?” I asked.
“I’m just tired, is all,” he said, downing his beer. But I really think he knows because he’s been
there.

Anyway, driving back, we were behind a slow-moving truck that had a sign, “DO NOT
PUSH,” on its rear trailer doors. After a bit of silence, Dad looked at me and said, “Well, I was
thinking about pushing that truck, but I guess I’m not really allowed to.” I laughed, seeing the
stony look on his face, and he chuckled. I was so grateful that he didn’t complain about me
overreacting, about the hospital bill. He could have easily said, “Get your shit together, Cara.
Calm down. Life isn’t so bad,” but he didn’t. He just made me laugh in the silence of that car in
the morning.

The other kind of chuckle, though, is for company. He could be brooding over something
I have no idea about, sitting in his chair in front of the TV, waiting for me to read his mind.
Perhaps I did something like forget to put ketchup on his sandwich, and he won’t talk to me.
When a friend from work calls, though, he’ll brighten up, at least in voice, and chuckle at
everything the person says. It’s an exaggerated chuckle, false and shallow, and I’ll want to
punch him because he hasn’t been nice to me for the last two hours.

“Okay, wait a minute so I can get my leg brace on,” my mom says, reaching for her
overnight bag. She moves slowly, and I turn away. I can hear the Velcro as she puts on the
plastic brace.

“I hate this damn thing,” she says. It hurts her, makes her stiffer from the already harsh
Parkinson’s, but it’s the only thing that helps her walk, along with her dark wooden cane with a
Carolina bird’s head for a handle, long bill and green glass eye.
On the way to the elevator, Dad holds her hand and they shuffle slowly down the red carpet. I want to hold her hand too, but she waves me away, smiling. “Go ahead,” she says. I think about how she must not feel like such a woman anymore—she’s lost her grace, which I think is so vital. She can’t hoist herself up out of chairs, walks funny: she goes slow, leg cramped and rigid, then stumbles fast for a couple of steps. Once in awhile, I really think about what it is like for her, and I get really sad and start to wallow more than usual. It makes me wonder if I’d rather have a mental or physical ailment, and I can’t decide which is worse.

We go to a place called The Red Bull for dinner on the Riverfront. The restaurant is up a small incline filled with cobblestones, and my mom finds it hard to manage.

“Geez,” she says, stopping in between steps, hesitant. “Cobblestones are nice, but they sure are annoying.”

At dinner, we have bread and butter, and order white wine. They drink wine all the time, my mom especially to help her muscles relax before sleep. She raises her glass.

“To your travels and experiences, Sweetie. We love you. You’re going to have so much fun.” She smiles, shiny lips parting to little fragile teeth. We all clink, and I say thank you. My dad orders veal, and I think if I can ever remember a time he didn’t order veal at a restaurant. I think of calves locked up in boxes, and don’t want to taste it when he offers it to me, thinking it might be too buttery and soft like I imagine a baby’s head to be. This is the first meal in a very long time that we’ve all been at the table. Usually my dad takes his plate to his lap, chomping down and watching some stupid movie on TV with girls screaming and flirting with cowboys or undercover cops. I sit at the table with my mother, reading a book or People magazine, spilling food on the pages, and my mother oversees it all, usually looking at me and smiling, and I catch her doing it when I look up.
My mom and I talk about what I’m going to see and do.

“‘The Opera House. Honey, you’ve got to see a show there.’”

I nod, a piece of feta cheese on my fork, and look to my dad, who is again withdrawn and silent, not contributing anything, yet sulking because nothing is offered up to him.

After dinner, we walk around the waterfront a bit. The light is silvery, the night cool, and there are families and teenagers milling around the sidewalks and ice-cream shops. I feel sad and hold my mom’s hand, my dad looking at the watercolor paintings in a gallery. We’re just inside the door, and she puts a hand up to her head, grimacing a little, letting out a puff of small breath.

“Are you okay?” I say, smoothing hair from her face.

“Yeah, I just feel it’s my ‘off’ time now. I feel like laying down.”

“Okay, well, let’s go back,” I say, looking for my dad in the din of tourists milling in the gallery.

“No, no, you and Dad go look around some more. I’ll just find a bench,” she says, and I don’t want her to do that. I whistle for my dad, two notes, the first higher, and he wanders around the corner, raises his eyebrows.

“Mom’s not feeling good,” I say, and he walks to us, puts his hand on her shoulder.

“Okay,” he says, “I’m feeling tired too.”

We walk outside, helping her to walk, taking her weight around our shoulders like she’s drunk too much, and I hold the cane in my right hand. I like this cane; I feel it’s been a friend of ours for a while. A group of laughing kids my age, wearing punky clothes and messy hair, walk by. One girl is holding a pinwheel. As she walks past, she squeals and I turn, see the sparkly wheel flying off.
At the hotel, Mom plops facedown on the bed, and I take her shoes and brace off, putting her under the covers. Dad goes to the bathroom and my mom whispers “Thanks, Sweetheart.”

“Mom, do I say goodbye now or will I see you in the morning?”

She opens her eyes. “Um, wake me up when you and Dad leave, okay? I’ll wake up.”

I kiss her cheek and she says, “Goodnight,” turning over into the pillow.

Dad comes out and gives me a pillow and sheets for the cot by the balcony.

“How much time do you need in the morning?”

“Um…thirty minutes,” I say, thinking of a shower and the coffeepot by the bathroom sink.

“Are you sure? Because I’m not gonna wait for you. We can’t be late.”

“Fuddy duddy, you can’t leave without me,” I say, giving him a hug.

He smiles, pulls away and sets the alarm. “Four-thirty,” he warns, pointing at me. “If you don’t get out of bed, I’m going to get mad and kick you.”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” I say, settling down under the covers.

I fall asleep, the back walls of my eyes flickering to the television. At two, I wake up to hear moaning and groans coming from another room. I’m not sure what it is for a while, and the moans grow to peals of growls, rough half-laughter and a woman’s high scream of final resolution. I think about how after Andy, I’ve been yearning so much for human touch, and I’ve had a few opportunities, but it just isn’t right. Nothing seems right if it’s not him; it just feels like a farce, like passing time.

My mom whispers from the side of the room, “Geez, someone’s having a good time,” and jolted from my sadness, I burst out laughing, glad to have such a weird family, glad to have such observant and wacky people around me. Dad’s either asleep or pretending he didn’t hear.
In the morning we hurry out the door, Mom lying in bed with a magazine, looking up restaurants for breakfast later.

“Bye, honey,” she says as I lean over her, kissing her on the cheek. “I’ll miss you. Call when you get there, or if you have any problems, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, lugging my bags like bodies out the door, my dad with a map and his keys.

On the way to the airport, the road is empty and the highway lulling me asleep and awake. It sounds as if it is made up of tiny smooth beads, and the lines glow yellow like tigers racing to some other land. We’re silent, my dad and I, and I feel we know something nobody else does, out here in the dark morning, with only the sound of the road and body movements, Dad itching his nose or me shifting my feet in hiking boots.

He turns to me and clicks his tongue once, shuts his eyes for a second, then opens them and smiles, close-mouthed. He takes my left hand in his and squeezes it, other hand on the wheel.
At my high school, I’m known as the gigolo. I’m a real charmer; I’ve heard the rumors. It’s true: I’ve got this baby face and dimples even a femi-nazi can’t resist. I’ve slept with nine girls so far, and I’m only a sophomore. I think that’s a pretty good track record. It doesn’t count that the girls weren’t all too cute. My best friend Matt is always cutting me down for that, saying they were ugly.

One of them was this girl named Joy. She wears lots of makeup and her eyelashes look like clumps of goopy twigs. Once, I asked her who taught her the fine art of applying makeup, but she just told me to fuck off, pushed her tube top back down over her grabbable breasts, and got out of my Olds. She didn’t have anywhere to go, though. We were right in the middle of the Colony. It’s just a highway. I laughed and turned up Jimmy Buffett, lit a menthol, and drove up to her.

“Hey baby,” I said, “where do you think you’re going?”

“Fuck you,” she said.

This girl was hardcore kinky. This guy Tony said he could fit two hands in her, and once she started humping the stick shift of Brad Sloan’s Porsche.

“Where do you think you’re gonna go, hon? There’s nothing for miles.”

Joy sighed, and then leaned in through the open passenger window, giving me a scowl with her charcoal eyes. I could see the sloping of her breasts. I wanted her so bad.

“Jim, you always do this shit. I don’t have to sleep with you. I can have anyone I want. You can be such an asshole sometimes.”
“I’m sorry, baby. I was just kidding. You look so sexy when you’re pissed off. I was just trying to get a reaction. You really turn me on.”

Joy narrowed her eyes. She stood up then, looked around the highway. I leaned my head forward, against the wheel, scrunching down and watching her. She took out her little makeup mirror from her purse, got a tube of lipstick, and ignored me. I watched her put it on in the dark, then rub her lips against each other. She put her stuff back and leaned back in. She raised her eyebrows at me, then opened the door.

“Don’t do it again.”

Another time, I was with this married lady, Zana. Older, probably in her early forties. She was married to this guy who was in the Pepsi Company, and always had lots of money. All she did with that money was buy herself boob jobs and liposuction. She and I went to rodeos and smoked Swisher cigars, the kind with sugar coating. We had some crazy sex—in this nice private room once at the top of the stadium, while we watched the Cowboy game. Zana was cross-eyed, and I guess that’s why she got all that stuff done. I don’t know why she never got an eye operation. Eventually her husband got transferred to New York, and she gave me this cowboy belt as a goodbye present, with “Stallion” engraved in the big silver buckle.

None of these chicks ever wanted a relationship with me, and that was fine. I didn’t care. Then the most amazing girl came along. Her name was Esther.

I was sitting at the cafeteria table with Diana and her friends. Diana is Matt’s girlfriend. She’s tall with blonde hair, not really much to look at except for her legs. She’s got these moles all over her back and neck. I mean, I guess she’s kind of attractive, except when she opens her mouth. She’s always talking about girls, berating them. I think she’s jealous.
Diana’s got a pretty sweet body. Those legs get me. Her boobs are kind of small, though. Either way, when Matt’s done with her, I’d like to mess around.

Anyway, here we were. Diana was jabbering her mouth about something dumb.

“She just took one of these chairs and threw it at Tiffany. Tiffany called her a dyke, I think…so they’re down there in the orchestra pit, and everyone’s egging them on, and then Tiff takes the mashed potatoes off someone’s tray and smashes it in Hannah’s face. It was so” --- and I remember, she snorted here --- “fucking hilarious.”

Her nostrils flared up and she grinned, looked around the table at the girls there, waiting for a laugh of approval, and she got it.

This girl had come up to the table, kind of shyly, like she was afraid Diana might cuss her out or tell her to leave. You could tell she was nervous. She had this black hair, and she was short, curvy. The thing was her skin. It glowed. I’d never seen a girl with skin like that. A picture came into my head of us lying in a bed, and I was touching her, her skin like a baby’s, and her eyes closed, a half-smile on her lips.

Diana hadn’t seen her yet. The girl was behind her, and Diana started talking about the other night, when she got a D.W.I. The girl looked nervously around, her eyebrows furrowed in this weird way. She bit her lips.

She looked at me really quick, gave me a little smile without opening her mouth. Her eyes were this mossy green that reminded me of the trees in Maryland. I grew up there, and used to watch the ships go in and out of port. Merchant Marine, that’s what I want to be. I’m gonna travel the world. Then we got transplanted to stupid Plano, and I had to meet new people, stand out, otherwise I’d be part of the drek at the bottom of the fishbowl. I was always getting teased
‘cause I had these chipmunk cheeks, real innocent looking. I used to be in boy scouts, but never told anyone.

Seeing this girl made me kind of flustered, so I took one someone’s Sunchip bag and took one out, fiddling with it, breaking it into pieces. Then the girl tapped Diana on the shoulder, very softly. Diana rolled her eyes because someone had just interrupted her rant. She turned, saw her, and said nicely, “Hey, Esther.”

The girl spoke. “Hey, do you guys have any room? I’m kind of sick of sitting over there.” She had a soft, pure voice, like a lamb, or something.

She looked over at the direction of the table. We all looked. I saw these preppy girls, dressed in white button-up shirts with big collars. They all carry the same kinds of purses. One of them was Jami Cornish. She’s pretty boring. She never has much to say. She’s just like everyone else here. Sometimes I tease her and walk by her with my wrists up against my chest, flapping them.

“I’m one of Jami’s Kids,” I’ll say, acting disabled and retarded. It usually gets her pretty mad.

The difference between the girls at that table and Diana’s was that one of the tables was full of prudes, and the other, sexual creatures.

Diana smiled, proud that someone was eager to join her ranks.

“Sure,” she said, and edged over so that Esther could share her seat.

Esther looked at me again and smiled, then looked down at her hands in her lap.

Diana looked at me and smirked, knowing I was dying for an introduction.

“Oh, Jim. This is Esther. She’s in Mrs. Clark’s horrid English class with me. She helps me with all those shitty books that make no sense.”
“Hey,” I say, hoping she’ll smile at me again.

“Hi,” she says, grabbing one of the Sunchips.

Later, Diana calls me.

“Jim. Esther asked about you.”

I look up from my copy of *Nude Celebrities* and take a breath.

“Really. What did she say?”

“That she heard about you, and wanted to know if the rumors were true.”

“Uh-huh. So what’d you tell her?”

She laughs. “Not to judge a book by its cover.”

I sigh. “Thanks.”

“I asked her if she wanted to come over to Alison’s this weekend to the party, and she said maybe, if she can get her parents to relax.”

“How? What’s wrong with her parents?”

“She’s green, Jim. Fresh out of the cradle or something. She doesn’t go out that much, just baby-sits. She says her dad’s really protective.”

I think. “Well, just get her to come. Please.”

“I’ll try. Um, Jim?”

“Yeah.”

“How long will this one last? I don’t think she’s had a boyfriend before.”

This turns something inside me. It turns me on.

“Uh, I don’t know. Probably a week,” I say, lying. I want it to last longer, but I know Diana won’t understand this, coming from me.
“Okay. Matt’s lying here with a cucumber, looking at me. I’ve gotta go.”

I snicker, looking at my ceiling. “Bye.” I hang up.

On Friday, I show up at Alison’s, just two streets away from my house, off Independence. My parents don’t care where I’m going. Mom’s always drunk, and Dad is off seducing some woman, I bet. I don’t like to be there when Mom starts whining about his escapades.

I sit on the couch in the living room, sort of watching Pretty Woman with Alison and her girlfriends. I wonder what’s the deal with this movie, why all girls love it. It’s a stupid story. I guess I can wine and dine, but I’ve never needed to.

I’m opening my seventh Corona, and I put the lime in, squirting the beer at Alison, who’s painting her toenails black. She giggles, and the boy she’s with eyes me. I shrug and smile. Julie is sitting Indian-style on the floor, and is totally engaged in the movie. I can see the blue glow on her face from the screen. Matt and Diana are in the bathroom together, making it—as usual.

Someone knocks at the door, and I know it’s her, because everyone else just comes right in. The girls scream a chorus of “Come in!” and the door opens.

When Esther comes in, I feel my heart thumping. I wish it would stop. She’s wearing this fuzzy green top and a long black skirt. Her hair is loose again, and looks a little unkempt, like she just woke up.

“Hey, Esther!” Diana calls, as she comes out of the bathroom, Matt walking slowly behind her, rubbing his neck.

“Hi,” she says, sitting on the couch next to me.
“Who dropped you off? Do you need me to act nice for your Dad or something?” Diana offers.

“I walked here. It’s such a cool night, you know?” She smiles, then says, “The leaves are falling off the trees. I kept one that I liked.”

She pulls out a book from a big blue bag she’s carrying, and thumbs through the pages until it falls open on a red maple leaf. She shows it around. I can see the girls are surprised: they aren’t used to this kind of show and tell. Matt and the other guy just look at her dumbly, but the girls smile, take the leaf, hold it up to the light, and finger its papery veins.

When the leaf comes back to her, I touch it, touching her hand at the same time. She doesn’t pull away, and looks at me, real close. She looks like she wants to ask me something or find out what kind of person I am. I smile, and then can’t stand it. It’s too intense, and I look away.

“Hey, Diana, when you gonna bring out the booze?” I say.

“When you gonna give me the money?” she mocks me, eyes big.

I get up, swat her playfully where she’s standing, and she says, “In the fridge. You wanted the Kahlua and milk, right?” She winks at me.

“No, man, it’s Vodka for me.”

I pull out my Harley Davidson cigarette pack from my jacket pocket, slide one out. There’s barely a filter on it. I show it to Esther.

“Gonna kill myself with these,” I say. “Want one?”

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke,” she says, not showing any embarrassment.

“Oh,” I say, feeling rejected.
We break out the hard liquor and play a game of “Asshole” at the kitchen table. Every time you lose a hand, you have to drink, and you have to drink what the whole group dictates. Usually it’s a couple of shots. It gets you pretty smashed, real fast.

Alison’s parents are the strangest Coke memorabilia collectors on the planet. The kitchen is filled with Coke signs, red with women smiling and holding up the drink. There is a Coke clock, a Coke machine dispensing bottles, and a Coke lamp on the table.

Esther’s sipping at her vodka and orange juice. I’m feeling pretty buzzed already. The table is spinning a little, and I see Diana’s mouth, wide open and laughing.

We play the game awhile. I’m the Asshole a few times, and they make me drink shots of tequila, vodka, and Schnapps. I’m kind of embarrassed at my skills. I never learned to play cards. Guys should know how to play cards.

Somehow Esther’s never Asshole. She plays her cards right.

“Hey,” I say, seeing her in soft focus, “where’d you learn?”

She says that her brother was an excellent card player, had a good poker face, even went to championships and won money.

I’m pretty rocked. I feel like dancing, but I can’t get up.

What I need is a cigarette. I ask for a light. I never carry one so I can ask girls to light my cigarette. There’s this saying in high school that if a girl agrees to light your smoke, it means she wants to fuck you.

I put my cigarette in my mouth, sway my head, and close my eyes. I make a show of opening and closing my hands, pretending that I’m grasping for a lighter.

“Fire, fire, who’s got the fire?” I say, slurring my words.
Alison tosses me something from the top of the counter. I can’t believe it. It’s a fuckin’ Coke lighter. I take the lighter, hold it up.

“Ya know,” I say, “all this Coke stuff reminds me of this girl I used to date. Her husband works for Pepsi-Cola.”

I look around, at the bored faces at the table who’ve heard it all before. I decide to tell some crazy shit, just to get their boats rocking.

“Once her husband came home and got pissed. He threatened to smash my head on the diving board. I convinced him to have a foursome if I brought another chick over, and yeah. We were doin’ it all night.”

Diana and Matt burst out laughing. They’re used to these antics. I like making people laugh. It’s shock value, too, I guess.

I look at Esther, who I suddenly see clearly now. She looks back at me, her green eyes sad. I look down, tap the lighter on the table.

“Yeah,” I say, and then start whistling a halfhearted tune.

People start talking again. After a little bit, Esther picks her cards back up, determined to keep winning her hands. I light my cigarette and take a long, sucking drag.
“Do you want any coffee? We have this vanilla milk sweetener. Fresh strawberries, too.” Nicole looks at me, her small fingers working, twirling her tiny braids. She’s spent practically the whole night braiding her dishwater-colored hair, mostly while we watched The Breakfast Club and Clockwork Orange. Now she closes up her plastic bead box, full of rubber bands that she once used for her braces.

“Yes, please,” I say. Sterling Babb and my boyfriend David are sitting outside at the table by the pool, smoking cigarettes and reading “News of the Weird” from the Dallas Observer.

She smiles and gets two blue mugs from the cabinet. She doesn’t even have to heat the water: it comes out of the sink, boiling, in a separate faucet. I almost burned my skin off once. Nicole’s dad is an optometrist, and makes so much money he can afford to give poor people free operations, but it’s also from his giving nature, which he’s passed on to Nicole. Nicole lives in a modern white house with those glass bricks for decoration that you can’t see through.

“Hello,” says a voice from behind me. I tense.

“Hi, Mom. What are you doing up?” Nicole says.

Her mom scares me. She’s this very dignified Jewish woman. She looks a lot like Nicole, those eyelids framing her eyes like small walnut shells, the little nose, and wise puckered lips. She has an accent of some kind, and I can never place it, but I bet it’s just what Jewish people sound like. I feel like she’s judging me whenever I talk to her.

“Oh, I just wanted some tea,” she says now. “Are you going to be up
much longer?” Nicole’s mom moves to the stove, by the glass fruit bowl with fake fruit—they’re not the plastic kind, but glass—blue apples and green bananas. Nicole’s face gets this adult look whenever her mom addresses her.

“Um, no, I think we’re just going to talk outside for awhile, then David and Sterling are going home.”

Nicole’s mom raises her thin, dark eyebrows and pours hot water into a white porcelain cup.

“Okay, Nicole, but remember, you must get up early for Sabbath tomorrow. I don’t want you staying up too late.” She turns to me.

“You too, Claire.”

I smile. I’m going to temple with their family tomorrow. I watched a movie about a girl who converted to Judaism, and earlier that night we had some sort of Jewish dinner, and I sat in a chair at the table. Nicole’s mom said, “Claire, you may not want to sit there. That’s Mr. Lipton’s chair. See? It’s the only one with armrests.”

I felt embarrassed, like I’d done something taboo. I felt the blood rushing to my head. The lights in the dining room were fluorescent white, and bright light always makes me feel skittish. They had three taper candles lit, so I didn’t understand why they hadn’t turned the lights out.

Nicole rolls her eyes at me while her mom rummages in the pantry.

“Mom. Okay.”

Mrs. Lipton comes out with a teabag and smiles.

“Okay, then. Goodnight, girls.”
She smiles at me, and I can see the little wrinkles around the corners of her mouth. I make a brief wish that I will be that dignified, like a strong queen, when I age. Sometimes the things that I fear are the very things I admire.

She leaves the kitchen, and Nicole goes into the pantry. She uses the same kind of coffee I do--the powdered General Foods kind. We always joke about their commercials, where a man and woman lounge on their swinging bench on the porch, a screaming fiesta of colors in their garden, the ocean in front of them. The ocean in commercials makes me itch to jump into blue, blue water. The man takes a sip of the Viennese chocolate coffee, then closes his eyes and savors it in his mouth.

When he talks, he says, “This reminds me of that time we went to Vienna,” and she tenderly puts her hand on his. He says wistfully, “It makes me want to be…”

She stiffens comically and looks him in the eye.

“Where?” she demands, teasing. He looks back at her, smiling.

“Right….here,” he says, and she softly relaxes, pleased he is still in love with her and their domestic life near the ocean.

They seem to have their life so well together, know each other so well. That is how television goes, I think. I don’t envy them, though. I’m not even sure I want that kind of life. It seems like a front for something sinister. I might want to live in a shack with someone I love, and it won’t matter if we don’t have any money or powdered coffee to relish.

While Nicole’s getting cups and coffee ready, I look at a painting above the sink that Nicole’s parents have collected. It’s an oil painting, almost as tall as me, mostly pastels. It’s a wedding scene, and on the left are these debutante types, all geometrical like the period Picasso went through--the one I never learned to like. They’re white, dressed in short pink dresses or
stiff pantsuits, holding champagne glasses that look indestructible, not the kind you can throw off balconies to shatter and make statements of frustration. Their feet, I notice, morph into the black and white checkered floor, so you can’t tell where stiletto heel ends and tile begins.

On the right are the bride and groom, backs turned on these snobs, holding hands, leaving. They’re darker skinned and have more substance, more flesh and curve. The bride wears a ghostly ivory gown, and the artist has placed real lace in the dress. Her hair is black and blowing, and it nearly slaps the elitists’ faces as she and her Indian lover elope. There is something above the couple’s head---in the light, I can see that someone took a paintbrush handle and carved out two tiny hearts, hardly noticeable. I look to the left, and above the geometrical people, only scribbles are etched, like fuzz or static on scrambled TV screens. I like this painting because I feel like an outsider, even with my friends. I don’t know how to get out of it, though, because I can never voice my own fears or ideas out loud, and I’m really not sure what they are, anyway.

I hear Nicole’s feet padding behind me. I look down to see her tan sandals next to my bare feet.

“Who painted this?” I ask her, thinking she probably likes it too, if it’s in her house. Maybe it gives her the same feeling.

“Mmm? Oh, I’m not sure. My dad got it at some art gallery in New Mexico. When he brought it home, I gagged. It’s just too modern, I think. Why?”

My mind stops for a minute; I hold my breath and don’t say anything.

“Hey, guys, are you coming out or not?” Sterling stands by the glass slide door, beer in hand.
“Hold your horses,” Nicole says, and grabs my hand, leading me out. I can see her bra underneath the gauzy white shirt she wears. Sterling smiles at me and winks.

I met Sterling in school one day in English class. I was reading Beautiful Losers, sitting at my desk. I was only on the first chapter. Suddenly, two hands slammed down on my desk, gripping both sides, and I looked up. A boy with a dark blue denim hat that looked like a cross between a beret and baseball cap stared at me, and then took my hands in his.

“Make love to me tonight,” he’d said, and it was so intense I nearly peed my pants. I didn’t understand until he told me Beautiful Losers was his personal Bible, and when he saw I was reading it, he just lost control, thinking he’d found the One or something. We went on a date, but when I put my Joni Mitchell tape in, he started singing “Case of You” louder than I was singing it, and in such a high, girlish voice that I got a bit disgusted.

Anyway, he is no longer sexy to me, but I love his dramas, if only for the entertainment value, and the four of us get along well. Nicole turns off the kitchen light as we walk outside and down to the lake in her backyard, and David puts his arm around my shoulder. He grins, one of his front teeth gray from hitting it on the bottom of the pool when he was younger. Nicole’s house has steps that lead down to a kind of man-made community lake; grass all around for us to sit on.

I love these kinds of nights—usually we’ll sit and talk, just Nicole and I, and she’ll play songs like Bob Dylan’s “Lay Lady Lay” and stuff from her flamenco collection on her radio. Once she played Leonard Cohen’s “You Know Who I Am” and told me she heard it one night while she was in a closet by herself at a party. She withdrew there after getting a little anxious from being around everybody (when she told me this, I felt like hugging her), found a tape recorder inside, and pushed play. She said it made her cry; it was that emotional. I felt the same
when she played it for me a couple of weeks ago, us out by the water at two in the morning, watching her gently drawing on her cigarette. It got to the point where I was really tired a couple of hours later, and she wanted to stay a bit longer, so I got up and hugged her from behind, saying goodnight. I accidentally kissed her on the mouth because she tilted her face when I tried for her cheek, and I laughed nervously and said, “um, goodnight.” I felt like she thought I was weird, like maybe I meant to kiss her on the lips. I remember lying in bed in her brother’s old bedroom that night, biting my lips and tasting the almonds from the balm she always put on with her pinkie finger straight from the little plastic container. I felt so anxious and afraid that she would think I meant to kiss her that I didn’t fall asleep until hours later.

She always brings candles and champa incense, prismacolor pencils, drawing pads and plush blankets. Usually on these fall nights, the candles blow out before long and we just lay swathed in blankets, silent and listening. Sometimes I don’t feel anything at all, and Nicole doesn’t know that, but that’s how I like it.

Nicole spreads some blankets out, and Sterling grabs the ends, pulling them down. We sit in a loose circle, the full moon lonely and shining on the lake and our bodies. Nicole takes her pipe out. She got it from Jerusalem, and it’s supposedly for opium. I’ve never tried opium, because I’ve always been afraid I’ll end up asking stupid questions like the caterpillar on the mushroom. The pot is good enough, though, because Nicole’s little pipe makes the smoke seem magical, like a small genie lamp. It has water in it, and makes a little gurgling sound like a stream. The mouthpiece reminds me of those cigarette ends they sell in Deep Ellum downtown, the plastic ones you attach to your smoke, and wha-la!---you’re some girl from the twenties with cat-eyes and a beauty mark by your mouth.

“Strange to think we’ll be graduating in the spring,” she says, packing the tiny
bowl with green from a plastic baggie.

“Yeah,” I say, sipping my coffee. It tastes like Ireland, sweet.

“Man, I wanna get out of Plano,” David says, Indian-styled, leaning forward to catch words.

“Did you see Rueben yesterday?” Sterling smiles, revealing a gold-outlined tooth, the one that I call a fang.

“During the bomb threat, I walked around the parking lot, and he was drinking a beer from a huge green bottle, while the cops were checking underneath the cars for bombs.”

“Rueben’s hair is so funny,” I say, picturing it. “How does he keep it up like that?”

“Aw, it’s fucking gelatin. That’s so disgusting, animal bones in your hair,” David growls, shaking his head. He’s really against cruelty to animals, he says, though he has a good filet mignon every now and then, when his dad comes home from working out-of-state. David usually eats fried jalapeno peppers and cheese that comes from the freezer boxes. He has a tiny Chihuahua named Sugar, who yips and shakes her little butt whenever he comes home.

Sterling hands the pipe to me, blowing out smoke along and grinning. I light the bowl, inhaling. The pipe makes the smoke go down smooth, like warm steam.

David is combing one hand through his close-shaved head of black hair when I hand him the pipe. He has a widow’s peak and deep-set eyes, and likes having these physical attributes. For last week’s Psychology project, he had to put a picture of himself on a sheet of paper and describe his qualities, likes, and dislikes---all those things that make school seem more play than work. I was lying in his bed as he searched for pictures of himself, and he found the one of us three months ago at the Dallas Museum of Art, our first sort of date, if you want to call it that.
We were in front of the huge mosaic of the story of Genesis, in the creation stage, with rainbows and fertile trees behind us. He’d taken the picture of us close, one hand reached out, pointing the camera. My lower lip was cut off, but his entire face made it onto the picture.

He found this picture and cut himself out. Then he cut my eyes out of the picture and put his picture behind the eyeholes. I looked really stupid, trollish, and it reminded me of times when you look at someone from upside-down and all their features distort, scaring you if you look too long.

I remember that David had laughed and said, “Holy shit, you look like an idiot!”

He rolled over on the bed, laughing like no tomorrow, holding his hands crossed to his chest. I laughed for a second, but I was mostly hurt. To cut this picture apart, then to distort it…but I didn’t say anything, and I didn’t know how. David saw I’d stopped laughing and calmed himself, studying his picture.

“My eyes don’t fit on you. I have Navajo eyes,” he said, and pulled out one of his UFO books. He believes he was abducted as a child, and spends all his time telling me about Roswell history. I think it’s interesting, and sometimes I come close to believing some of what he says because it’s something magical, something else to think about when everything else seems too much. Or perhaps too little.

Now David is telling Sterling about our friend Aaron, who says he was commingled with aliens and has their DNA. Frankly, Aaron does look like an alien, and I don’t mean in a joking sense. His head is shaped like a smooth upside-down triangle, wider on top, a long nose, little chapped lips, and eyes magnified by magnum-strength glasses. David and Aaron met through me---David drew some weird “alien language” on my backpack one day in his signature silver
paint pen marker, and Aaron saw it while passing me in the hall a month later and pulled me aside afterward to inquire. So that was that.

“Man, when I’m in the car with him, and we go under a fucking streetlight, it goes out—“ David snaps his fingers.“—Just like that.”

Sterling smiles, fingering his cigarette, and winks at me while David isn’t looking. I look down at my feet, which get numb sometimes when I sit Indian-style. I hate when they get numb, because then I get that tickly feeling and I feel like I have to pee in the worst way.

“Are you doing okay?” Nicole asks softly, taking my hand. I look at her hand and turn it over. She has old woman’s hands, with lines like a tree when it’s cut open.

“Claire?”

“Hmm?”

“You all right?”

“Yeah.” I look at her, think how she always knows me, and lets me be if I don’t want to talk.

She moves her other hand and opens it. It’s a dandelion, yellow and weedy looking, not to the point of a white ball to be blown away from the mouth of a wisher yet. I take it and smell it, though I know it won’t smell of anything but lawn, and put it behind my ear. She gives me a pillow, and I thank her, lie down.

“Want some lavender?” she says. She’s always got these strange homeopathic ideas. I smile, and she takes a little brown bottle from her coat pocket, puts her finger on top while turning it upside down, and rubs it on my pillow.

“It’ll help you relax,” she says. “You’ll probably fall asleep.” She moves closer to David and Sterling, patting my head while shuffling on her knees.
I close my eyes, hearing the conversation going on around me. Sterling is talking about this new girl he met who likes Danzig and drives a black pickup truck.

“Lovely lips, lovely lips, yesss,” he sings.

I think about how I was so anxious about that mistaken kiss on the mouth this summer. I wonder if she’s forgotten about it. That’s what I wanted her to do, but now, lying here, I hope she hasn’t.
The Nude Model

She had large hips, milk-white skin, and thick curvy legs easing down to thin calves and bony ankles that did not seem like they could support that kind of heft. She wasn’t ugly—just not the kind of girl you’d see on the pages of Playboy or a Seventeen magazine. She had a chin that reminded me of a bubble, and some acne on her forehead. When she disrobed, she did it casually, and I watched the boys for signs of recognition, but they just held their charcoal pencils and sort of hid behind their easels, pretending not to notice the naked girl. The radio played P.J. Harvey, with jerky beats and a woman’s voice screaming, “You leave me dry,” and the girl stood there, all the light of the afternoon on her, along with studio lights. I could see the dimples on her thighs, the way some of the extra fat rolled around her sides, and I realized my body was not all that different or abnormal.

I wondered what was in her mind as I drew her. She stared into a spot on the wall above my head, and I focused on her stomach, seeming almost pregnant with its girth. At one point, some strange man came up to the studio door and tried to sit down with the group, but the instructor noticed he had no drawing pads and told him to leave. The man smiled, and he had crooked, British-like teeth. The girl’s expression didn’t change.

I’ve seen male models, too—they just aren’t as pleasant to draw. The only curve is in their genitalia, and there’s really no beauty in that. Once I talked to a tattooed man during his stretch break, and asked him whether or not he was ever nervous.

“God, no,” he said, smiling. “I’ve done this so many times, I’ve gotten used to it.”

During the next drawing, he faced me directly, legs wide apart, leaning back into the plastic chair, showing me his limpness in all its raw glory. He had a smirk on his face and stared at me. I couldn’t concentrate and instead wrote nasty comments in the free margin space.
Another guy walked into the class once, in a red silk robe. He did a double take, laughing, and the girl he was looking at laughed too.

“Joe?” she said, turning red. It seems they were on the same baseball team. I wasn’t sure whether it was better being nude in front of strangers, acquaintances, or friends. I guess she got over it, though, and he probably enjoyed being able to share his body with her—the male ego and its mysteries.

The model I didn’t like was a girl with stark black hair. During breaks, she just left the room. She had no interest in seeing how people drew her, and came back smelling of cigarette smoke. She was just there for the job, I suppose. Her boyfriend came during the last five minutes of the class, sitting there and smiling, and she joked with him, trying to stay still. I wanted to think of these models as solitary, as having no other attachments, and seeing this boy there demystified her, made her more real. When the session was over, she didn’t put her robe on and change elsewhere. She started putting her underwear and jeans on while she was talking to her boyfriend, topless, breasts wide open and staring. The image of her half-clothed struck me as pornographic. She broke the idea that I tried to uphold for nude models.

Elizabeth, though, was the last model we drew. I remember her the most. She had short, shaggy blonde hair, and she was slender. She wore a silver nose stud that glinted in the right light. The first day she modeled for us, I could see the lines from her string bikini. I imagined her lying on a pink towel, drawing starfish in the sand with her fingers, falling asleep. She was burnt, and almost looked clothed because of the white outline of the swimsuit. I loved to draw her breasts, because her nipples were always erect (the room was Icelandic). I loved the entire shape of her breasts, the end of the nipple always sharp, looking strong but almost like a piece of her would break off. I tried drawing her face, but never got it quite right. She had a nose that
tipped up a bit, with unmade blue eyes. At one point, she closed her eyes, and I said, “Hey, can you please open your eyes? I’m trying to draw them.”

She laughed, and opened them, looking at me. I didn’t want her to look at me, though. That’s not what I meant. That was too close, I felt. Too intimate for me, and I felt my pencil slipping, messing up the almond shape of her eye.

After class, as she was walking out the door, I said, “Um, thanks for letting us use your body.”

She looked back and smiled, said, “No problem.”

We had Elizabeth for a few more sessions, and one day during break I talked to her. Most of the people left the room, avoiding her, not being able to face the girl who they’d seen naked so many times before. I asked her why she modeled, if she had any motives.

“Well,” she said, looking at my drawing of her, “I’m a bit of an exhibitionist anyway, so it’s not a big stretch for me. I’m really not too nervous being naked.”

I nodded, thinking of the times in my childhood when I would dance in a blue leotard for parents’ friends to Kim Carnes’s “Voyeur” in the backyard, doing handstands and pointing my toes, then jumping into the pool in a mock swan dive for the finale. I remember on weekend mornings, when my dad washed his old orange and brown Ford Pinto, I would take all my clothes off and run out the front door, running for the car door and shutting myself in. I did it for the rush, I think—all the neighbors were outside drinking coffee or walking their dogs, and that gave me some sort of satisfaction. My dad would just laugh, shake his head, and spray the closed window with the garden hose. If neighbors gave us questioning looks, my dad would just shrug, and I would climb all over the seats, smiling, until I was ready to rush back in the house.
“The only thing,” Elizabeth continued, “is that my body image is sort of whacked. I look in the mirror sometimes and think, ‘gross,’ and I don’t like what I see. A friend who models told me that this helped, and it really does.”

She walked around the room with me, pointing at the sketches. “I see this, and I think, ‘That’s really me,’ and I realize I’m not so bad. It really gives you perspective.”

“I think I’m going to do it,” I said. “I’ve always wanted to. The funny thing is, I’m terrified of speaking in front of groups, but to be naked and not have to open your mouth in front of people—that seems like it would be so much more enjoyable.”

I was kidding myself, though. Since I had grown boobs and curves, I couldn’t picture myself running naked into full view of the neighborhood. With my father, I’d grown incredibly self-conscious and uncomfortable, shaking my head “no” when he patted his lap for me to sit with him on his easy chair while watching The Wonder Years as I grew older. I was afraid of feeling a bump in his lap, so close together. I didn’t even like to hug my dad because I had mounds where it used to be flat, and thought of all that teeming sexuality that I didn’t want to acknowledge, and didn’t want to share with my dad.

Elizabeth smiled and said, “You should do it. It’s not so bad, and the money is good.”

At the end of the semester, I got Elizabeth’s phone number, thinking maybe we could talk and go to bars and movies. Still, I never called her—I didn’t want to think of her as being real outside that class. I wanted to remember her as the nude model.

I put in my name at the college and the Gibbes Studio, and they said they had enough models already for the summer. I was secretly relieved, and went to see my parents in Texas.

We were going out to dinner one night at one of our favorite Cajun restaurants, and my mom was wearing white pants, looking nice. I wore a dress that I had to wear a bra with,
because if I bent over, the fabric was loose enough to reveal my chest. My dad refused to leave until I changed, telling me I looked tacky, like some loose girl. I argued with him for awhile, then changed. As we were walking to the car parked outside, my dad said to my mom, “Is that what you’re wearing?” Confused, she looked at him. “Yes, is there something wrong?” He chuckled, looked at me, and said, “Mom’s butt looks like a big white clam.” I immediately felt sad that my dad was like this, insulting the woman he loved, hurting her just because he was preoccupied with her body and its faults. My mom burst into tears.

“What?” He looked at me, sheepish. “What did I say? Cara, did I say something wrong?”

I just glared at him. After an hour of my mom crying on the couch and him trying to apologize, she complied and tied a black sweater around her waist. The dinner was somber, and my dad ordered an extra-extra hot gumbo. He liked to boast about his ability to eat spicy food. The soup came, and he took one slurp and gasped, eyes tearing. He reached for his water, gulped it down, then grabbed mine. My mom and I smiled.

I had forgotten about putting my name in to model until three months later, when a woman from the Gibbes called up and said their male model for that night’s sketch class had “wiggled” out of the deal. I thought it was fitting that she use that word to describe it.

“Can you model for us tonight from six to nine?” she said.

I felt it all coming down, and I felt my heart beating. I decided to just do it.

“Yes,” I said.
The studio was small, off Queen Street, and there were about fifteen students there, made up of middle-aged men and women and a few college kids. The instructor was a small blonde woman.

“I set up a sort of chaise lounge for you over there,” she said. I had changed into my soft gray robe in the bathroom downstairs and set my skirt and shoes by the studio door.

“First we’re going to do some quick drawings,” she said, and I nodded. Nobody knew it was my first time.

It was time, though, and all the students were looking at me, waiting. They seemed friendly enough. I imagined disrobing as some kind of queenly gesture, tossing it off. It didn’t happen that way. I just untied the waist and pulled it off one shoulder, letting it drop at my feet. Here it was: I was naked in front of fifteen strangers. Nobody said “Eew.” Nobody chuckled. The instructor set the lights on me, positioned like photographer’s studio lights. They weren’t fluorescent, but warm dramatic lights that felt warm on my skin. I knew how to do gesture drawings: two minute fast sketches in different poses. The most awkward part, I think, was having to change poses. I didn’t want it to seem that I was posing, so I crouched on the floor for one, laid down in a catlike position for the next. Standing up, there’s only so much you can do, and I felt that putting my hands on my hips would be too pretentious.

The next pose was a long one, so I got on the chaise lounge and curled up my legs a bit, put a hand behind my head. I felt like some kind of star, lying on this mattress with pink silk and green velvet blankets. I heard the scratch of charcoal, the stirring of paintbrushes in water.

I didn’t look down. I didn’t want to see white skin and the fat I saw in the mirror. When the instructor told me I could get up, I was numb from being in one position. I struggled to get up quickly, because there was a difference in staying still, being drawn, and the point where that
drawing ended and I moved. I was now a real person, and the people around me knew it. I got up slowly and bent down to pick up my robe. The robe felt soft and oversized, like I was wearing a tall man’s nightshirt.

I moved around and looked at the drawings. I was surprised—I had expected a potbelly stomach and cellulite dimples. The girl in the drawings was me, and I looked like a woman, not just some girl. The woman on the paper looked serene and curled up into her body, all classical like those old paintings of ladies lying on couches.

A short-haired girl came up to me and said, “How are you doing? God, my neck hurts just looking at you.”

I thought about Elizabeth, how I was the one to talk to her first on her breaks.

I smiled. I looked over at the other artists, and a woman smiled from the other side of the room, looking curious. Some others eavesdropped with ears cocked.

“Yeah, that hurt a bit, but I think I’ll be okay. This is my first time, actually. It’s kind of weird, but I like it.”

A woman next to me remarked, “Your first time? Wow. You’re doing great. You’re like a natural,” and gestured to her painting. I couldn’t believe it. It was like she had captured me, all my feelings, and the best parts of me that I can never seem to get out. My skin was made of ten different tones of flesh and rose. I wanted this painting. I wanted to ask the class if anyone wanted to give me a painting as a souvenir of my first time, a sort of celebration of freedom.

I told the woman I loved her painting, and she said, “I’ll tell you what. You model for me a couple of times, and I’ll give you one.”

I smiled, and a couple of other people tiptoed up, asked for my number so I could model privately.
I gave out my number, feeling like someone special and prized. It wasn’t like I felt like a possession or someone selling their body. It was the whole atmosphere—so normal, like being naked and drawn was one of the most courageous and blessed things a person could offer. It wasn’t sexual, and I didn’t feel like my body was being judged by the men. There were older men there, ones who could have been my dad, and I didn’t feel weird when they changed their positions, taking seats right in front of me.

When the session was over, I changed into my cream-colored skirt and black tank, walked down King street. I passed a family eating ice cream cones, the mother big-boned and weathered, the father reminding me of mine, wearing glasses and Dockers. His daughters were young, one about eight, holding a poodle by its leash, and the other, adolescent, with unruly hair that curled around her face. She probably felt ugly in her changing body, and was leaning away from her father’s arm, which was wrapped tightly around her shoulder.
Someone’s Diary

It finally got cold around here. The sun still pours down like honey, on our lady of the harbor…the sun feels like marmalade. I’m sitting on a bench by the waterfront, and old women are in jogging outfits. I am wearing all brown, a chocolate girl, with flip flops and no nail polish on my toes. I saw two punks with camouflage pants on as I was driving down here. A lady pedestrian turned to me and mouthed, “It says walk!” and I was already letting her walk, so I think she was being a bit silly. An adventure sightseeing bus just went by with a woman who looks like my mother, curly brown hair, looking out to the ocean. Gnats are eating me up, but I want the golden light before winter closes in completely. I was so restless for it, and now it comes. A small man walks two big, elegant-looking dogs. I never know any breeds except Cocker Spaniel. He walks like a prince, like he is escorting two kings, but maybe they escort him. The sea is moving left to right. There is a teal-colored car and the sun makes it iridescent, like a small green beetle. I like the color of my hair in this sun. It is like the gold brass bars they find in the sea. Maybe not anymore.
That summer, I was living in the sky blue house on 20 Pitt Street. After class, I’d walk home with my paint box, flip-flops coming apart, stepping on soft fruit fallen from the trees. A little orange cat would meet me along a chain-link fence, meowing for me to pet him. He had a small, squashed face, and strange half-ears that looked like bites had been taken out of them, battle scars. I sat on my front porch steps scratching his head until my roommate stepped out and told me to stop.

“That cat will think he can come in, and I’m sure as hell not getting fined for cat pee on the carpet,” she said.

I was taking an art class full of girls. On breaks, which I took liberally, I opened the window and sat on the ledge three stories up, smoking cigarettes. My boyfriend, Andy, would pick me up at 5 p.m. in my car, which he borrowed because he liked the stick shift. I often brought my drawing pads with me and held them on my lap. Andy, an artist who worked with oils, never asked me to show him my papers scribbled with contay. He seemed disinterested in me as well, unlike six months before, when he wanted to move in together and talked excitedly about making a tile mosaic together on the shower wall.

There was this girl named Ginny in my art class. She had an angular face—a little mannish, but more movie star, like Sharon Stone, and short black hair. During lunch, we ran down the stairs, scraping our hands along the way to make charcoal stains on the walls. One night, she asked me to go to the Arcade with her to dance. I’d never been there, but I found out soon enough it was a lesbian club. It didn’t bother me one bit—it felt nice to have that attention, even if it was from other women. I hadn’t been the object of someone’s affection in a long time.
Ginny bought drinks, and since I was only nineteen, we fit ourselves into the bathroom stall and faced each other, giggling. I drank the cranberry juice and vodka from her cup with one of those skinny mixer straws.

On the black-and-white checkered dance floor, she stayed close to me, and I was spinning a little. I looked to see her face tilted, looking at me. She smiled, then placed her hand on my cheek and slid it away. I felt happy, but more goofy. I couldn’t picture myself kissing her. I’d probably feel strange, knowing she was a full-fledged lesbian, like she knew all the tricks and I didn’t. I felt I could hurt her by walking out at any time. I wasn’t too sure about girl sex. All I wanted was a girl to be friends with, to talk to about souring relationships and aloneness. A girl to take me away from all that.

It was last month that Andy began to tell me things that made me turn green, made my stomach do little falls. First I had given him a Burroughs book to read, *The Soft Machine*. He told me he couldn’t even read it in the science hallways without getting an erection. The passage in question was about a gay heroin addict who had to pay for his drugs by soliciting a gigolo—in the shower, with slippery soap, and all kinds of penetration.

“Maybe I’m gay,” he said, and then he told me. In eighth grade, he and his guy friends had rented a porno. They sat around the living room, lights off, watching. Inevitably, they got turned on. They took off their clothes, unzipped pants, and put things into their mouths, crouching on the floor.

I couldn’t get this out of my head. Young, soft-skinned boys, pouncing on each other like small tigers, in the soft fluorescent glow of the television.

We stopped sleeping together. It wasn’t my decision, because it was magic with him—the first time I’d been on top, and the first time I really understood. In his bathroom with the
mirror across from the shower, I looked at him from the corner of my eye, saw my body and his, all soapy. I recognized his look as either disgust or disinterest as I pulled back his hair.

I watched him watch other boys around campus, ones with wire-rimmed glasses and lanky bodies. I started to dress in gauzy, thin dresses, using redder lipstick, but he never said anything.

I thought I would get some revenge by kissing Ginny, but after class in her apartment one night, she put her hand under my shirt, and all I could picture was my boy, fucking other boys, when he should be saving it for me.

After art class the next week, Andy wasn’t there to pick me up. I sighed, walking home, wiping sweat from my upper lip. I thought about how I hadn’t seen my orange cat with the smooshed face in a long time, and I wondered about cars.

About a block from the house, I saw a shiny black cat perched like a gargoyle on a brick wall. I meowed, he talked back, and I ran home to fetch a can of tuna I saved for an occasion like this. I opened it, ran back to the cat. He sniffed it, then started eating. I noticed he had no collar.

I picked him up and started walking home, ready to make him mine. Andy came careening around a corner, and I hailed him down. I got in the car.

“What’s going on?” he said. He was listening to the Dead Kennedys. It bugged me, all the screaming. He told me they had important issues in the songs. It still didn’t make me feel anything. It wasn’t something I could listen to, driving down the freeway.

He looked at the cat in my lap, who was getting antsy, trying to get out of my hands.

“I found him on Smith,” I said. “No collar. I’m gonna keep him.” Andy raised his eyebrows at me.
“What?” I said.

“Nothing.”

He circled around Calhoun Street. The air conditioning was full on, and the cat was panicking, ready to escape my grasp. He climbed onto the dashboard.

Andy kept driving, looking from the road to the cat, whose hair was now flying all over the car.

I sneezed and scratched my nose. I tried to placate Mr. Cat by petting his head.

“Claire, I think that’s somebody’s cat,” he said, smiling a little.

“No, it’s not. Who would let their cat roam around without a collar?”

“Lots of people,” he said, looking at me like I was a little girl. “Lots of people would.”

I didn’t say anything for awhile. I held my breath and looked at the cat, who was pawing against the front window and crying loudly.

“Shit,” I said. “I guess so.”

I told him to pull over on Smith, and then closed my eyes. I felt the cat bump into me as he finished his rampage around the car.

The car stopped. I opened my eyes, and then the car door. The cat jumped right out, running fast for about a block. Then he slowed, turned around, and looked back at the car for a second.

I stared after him until he turned again and continued on his way.

I turned to Andy. He looked out the driver’s window, shaking his head slowly.

He stayed like that, silent, for another minute.

“Why aren’t we moving?” I said.
A Bird Story

I keep having dreams about my old pet cockateils. I see them in their cages without food, empty seeds in the feeder and mildew growing in the water tube, and feel so sad when they look at me, all bony and weak.

When I was twelve, I got my albino boy, Chipper, from Magnolia Bird Farms, a huge outside aviary with forty different breeds of bird. He had a bright yellow crest that came up all the way when he was scared. When he wanted you to scratch his head, it curled up at the back like a little alfalfa sprout hairdo. Cockateils have these fluorescent-like orange spots on each cheek, but later I found out that was the ear.

I used to take Chipper into the bathroom so he could look into the mirror. He thought it was somebody else and whistled to himself, bowing and flirting. Once, he shook his tail back and forth while perched on my finger, and made these strange, scratchy noises in his throat. He left a little hot droplet on my hand, and I knew that it wasn’t poop. It was yellowish-white, clear, and reminded me of the lemon salad dressing my mom would bring home from the Italian restaurant. I felt embarrassed, like I’d been involved in intercourse with my bird, or that I was invading his private sexual thoughts by being there with him. I quietly put him back in his big white cage, adorned with shaped white wire. It looked like a mansion.

When I was fourteen, I started to feel bad for him, and I asked my mom if we could get him a wife. She told me that Chipper wouldn’t be nice to me anymore, no longer my pet, and he would only pay attention to the girl. I didn’t really listen, just thought about alleviating his hormones, and imagined two birds were better than one.
We got Fawn at the same place, and when we brought her home, my mom stuck her hand in the box and pushed her index finger against the bird’s chest (that’s how you’re supposed to pick them up, because they have nowhere left to go but that finger.) Fawn greeted her by biting that finger through the nail and clinging on while my mom screamed, waving her hand with that flurry of wings around the living room.

My dad yelled, “Just put her down, and she’ll let go,” and he was right. We put her in with Chipper and shut the cage door hard. We got Mom some ice, and wrapped a washcloth around it.

My mom spent the rest of the day telling neighbors who came to gossip or borrow sugar that the new bird “bit me so hard, she drew blood!” I glared at Fawn, who fluffed up haughtily on the perch while Chipper walked back and forth, all excited and looking at her like she was some hot hooker in a red dress and stiletto heels.

The next day, I woke to strange sounds in my room, the same scratchy voice Chipper had used in front of the mirror that one day, mixed with Fawn screaming like a thin, broken record. I looked over to the mansion, and Chipper was on top of Fawn, her hovering down, almost flat, he with his wings apart from his body, his tail bending awkwardly and unnaturally down to the spot underneath her tail.

“Mom!” I yelled. “They’re doing acrobatics!”

My mom came in with her coffee and laughed.

“They’re making boom-boom,” she said, with her eyebrows raised. That was the way she referred to sex when some scene came on Showtime late at night, and my dad would stare placidly at the screen, beer in hand. It would be some scene in a movie like Blue Lagoon where Brooke Shields and the boy start kissing in the water, Brooke saying, “I feel funny,” because
they’re starting to get turned on. My mom and I would ritually turn to one another and make our faces long by stretching out our chins and the space between our nose and top lip, like this was something new we shouldn’t be watching.

I was delighted. My birds were having sex. Chipper was cured of his lust, and they were going to have babies.

I just didn’t know how many. In the end, they had eleven, although four would die. I remember coming home from school and there was a note from my mom, left on her lunch break from the bank. It sat next to something wrapped in a napkin, and said, “I’m sorry, honey- this one just didn’t want to live. Maybe this is just a bad batch.” I unwrapped the napkin and found the little bird, so pink with its needle-like feathers. I loved to help clean them of their waxy shells and see the new feathers emerge. He was stiff, no longer soft and warm and making an awful, hoarselike cry for food. His claws curled under in some kind of secret sign language, toes splayed in awkward directions.

We gave most of the birds away---my grandparents got Sunny, a not-so-nice girl from school, Zoe, got Coca-Cola; and my mom’s friend from the bank got Quaker, who was always shivering (he came in the fourth batch, and wasn’t quite right). I kept the firstborn for myself, and named him Kudo, after the chocolate candy bar. There were several others given away, but I just can’t remember.

So we all lived, birds and family, in the Anaheim house. We had small earthquakes now and then, and the walls in the corner of my room where the birds lived were splattered with blood from their wings flapping so violently, wondering what the hell was going on. My mom and I would clip their feathers every now and then, except for Fawn’s, because we hadn’t touched her since the day we brought her home. We had to cut the feathers so they wouldn’t fly
away when we let them have run of the house or the sewing room—tragedy struck my grandparents when Sunny flew out the back door, only to be supped up by their dog. I cried when I heard, and haven’t liked dogs since.

Once, I held Kudo’s wing out while my mom cut with the little scissors. I have never found anything more artistic or familiar than the span of a bird’s wing, the fragile underside where the wing connects to the body. I hated to see those feathers go, only two long feathers left on the outside, the blood feathers. If you cut the blood feathers, you cut the lifeline to the bird, and then you’d have problems: blood flowing, infection, and a very hurt bird. I was always afraid we’d slip up and cut one of those feathers.

By the time I was fourteen, Chipper was starting to look a little rough, color fading, and when I picked him up, he would nibble at me, but not hard enough. He was so light compared to Kudo, and it was almost like holding a handful of feathers, not a body with heart and organs. I don’t know why we didn’t do anything about it. I guess I thought he was okay, since he had degenerated to domestic abuse, always pretending like he was going to scratch Fawn’s head with his beak. When she bent down, he’d scratch it a little, then find a crest feather and pluck it out. "Uawk!" she would scream, and he’d turn away, fiddling away with the prize, little black pellet tongue working, eventually dropping it to the newspaper below. I started to feel sorry for Fawn, but never separated them, because I wanted her to stand up for herself. It was her life, and I shouldn’t interfere. But I had: I’d put them here together.

I started growing up, meeting boys, going to high school. My dad was never home, on business trips, and I missed him sometimes. When he would come home twice a month, I would find typed letters on my bed telling me how I’d better get my act together and my grades up. I
remember thinking how incredibly impersonal a typed letter from my dad was, and wondering why he couldn’t just talk to me.

The birds moved to my mom’s sewing room, and I forgot about them, only going in now and then to see Kudo sway to music as my mom cut out dress patterns. They kind of became her birds, and she would tell me, “You know, Kudo needs love, and you never play with him. Birds are not like cats. Birds really get depressed if they’re alone all the time, I saw a show on the Discovery Channel.”

Once, when I was fifteen, I got home from school and made myself a bloody mary from the bar. Someone knocked on the door and I answered, delighted to see a flower arrangement in my face, daisies and purple irises. I signed for it, and read the card. “See you in May,” it said. “Love, Dave.” It was scrawled in messy handwriting from the florist’s, and I jumped up and down. Dave was a boy I liked in school who played guitar in a band called Pen 15, and he had a girlfriend. He was always telling my friend Katy, who would then tell me, that his girlfriend was bitchy and he was going to break up with her soon. Dave and I shared an interest in Pink Floyd and pot.

I construed this message to mean that Dave was going to break up with his girlfriend in May (it was April) and that he was letting me know that he wanted me when he was single. I called all my friends, telling them that Dave sent me flowers, blushing and spirited. The next day, Katy and Dave came to my house, and Katy said, “Who sent you flowers?” I looked at Dave, and then her, confused. My eyes locked on Dave. “You did?” He shook his head, and then I felt my face go red. I showed them the note and the flowers to let them know I wasn’t lying, and then shooed them out the door, crying on my bed.
My dad called that night. “Did you get my flowers?” he said, we figured out that some idiot up at the florist’s had found a new spelling for Dad. He laughed, but I was mad at my dad for sending the flowers and embarrassing me. I wouldn’t have expected a gift from my Dad after not talking for so long, and I don’t remember thanking him.

I went on with my high-school life, going to backyard parties by the pool with lawn chairs and joints, and tried to forget about my embarrassment with Dave. I never told anyone that my dad had been the sender; it was pathetic. Instead, I talked with people who asked, dismissing the sender as some “secret admirer,” wanting to be thought of as a girl who someone wanted.

My mom took to feeding the birds now, changing the cuttlebones and water, but told me they were mine, and I should do it. I always forgot, and she would come in my room while I was watching Seinfeld, holding up their water capsule with the red lip, saying, “This is empty. How long has it been empty? Those birds will die of thirst, and you won’t even know.” She would make me go into the bathroom and fill it, change out the newspaper, the gravel. It wasn’t such a chore, but I was stupid. I made a mess of my room, didn’t help with dinner, lied to my mom about where I spent the night, and now I was starving my birds.

This went on for a couple of months. My mom always came to the birds’ rescue, and I suppose I just didn’t care. One morning, I went into the sewing room to get the tank top my mom had ironed for me, tried it on, didn’t want to wear that for school, and tossed it to the floor. Then I noticed the empty corner, the familiar blood spatters on the walls, and called my mom at work.

“Your dad got rid of them,” she said coolly.

“Where did he take them?” I asked.
“I don’t know,” she said. “He might have just let them go.”

“What, you mean he just threw them outside?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Probably to a pet store, I don’t know.”

I hung up, feeling shock and emptiness. I never asked my dad about it, figuring he would probably yell at me for an hour if I brought it up or was visibly sad about the birds. He would tell me it was all my fault, and that I was selfish. I knew all this.

Weeks later, when I took to locking myself in the attic to smoke my cigarettes, I found the cages in a corner, lonely white wire mansions. I wondered how my dad could have taken the birds to the pet store---in paper bags? I felt horror, imagining him just thrusting them up in the air, leaving them in the smog and L.A. traffic to fend for themselves, but I thought they’d most likely be eaten first.

I have dreams about them now, years later. In my dreams, they talk to me. I always find them in their cages with no food, no water, held captive and hoping that I will remember to look and see the empty seeds. Fawn lays two eggs in the nesting box, and then they’re both sitting on the perch, passing time. I try to get Chipper to sit on the eggs, because they need to be warm to hatch, but he won’t. I take him out of the cage, and he flies underneath the kitchen cabinet. I hear Fawn pecking at something, and open the nesting box to see her destroying the eggs, making them soft. I try to find Chipper, and when I touch him again, he shrivels up to the size of my thumbnail, a small and pathetic copy of himself, only he’s dead now, and I’m so scared. I go to the pet store and pick out another one, just like Chipper, albino and calm, curled crest. I talk to him, and say,
“First, I want to apologize. I don’t want to keep you in a cage, seeing as you’re a bird. But I think that being with me is better than in a pet store, and I promise I’ll take such good care of you.”

The bird looks at me, his black, trusting eyes like beads.

“I would like to set you free on your eighteenth birthday, but not until then. I want us to have a happy, short life together,” I tell him, and he nods.

I bring him home, and I always put his cage outside so he can see what it’s like out there, basking in the sun. He preens and scratches his head with his leg, and he looks like he’s enjoying himself.

Sometimes I take him out of the cage and put him on a leash like he’s a tiny dog, put him in my lap--- but when I wake up, I don’t feel any better.
I wake up to talk radio with Ann Carlo at six-thirty in the morning, cringing at his voice, which sounds like an aggressive car-salesman, because this is the same station I listen to at night, when “Coast to Coast with Art Bell” is on, and all the nuts call in, talking about shadow people, time warps, and UFOs. I remember a lady calling in last night who sounded anxious, telling Art about the time when she went to the train station, and she got trampled by the crowd getting off the train, making her right eyeball pop right out of her head. “My retina shot out like a trampoline, and blood was shooting everywhere. I yelled for help, and instead of assistance, two blonde children came towards me, smiling, and threw fireworks…what are those called? The ones that pop on the ground? Right next to my ears. Then one of them took out some scissors, kneeled beside me, and cut a lock of my hair. I have reason to believe, because of events that are taking place in my life right now, that I am the victim of a curse. How do I make it stop?” She’d said. Art offered no assistance; he made some glib joke about a recent emergence of demonic children, and then took the next caller. Now, the next morning, I wonder about that woman, and what will happen to her. Is this something new, or is this just one out of a series of regular fantastic occurrences in her life?

I’ve met crazy people before; working at a used bookstore, they were usually the ones selling books for drugs. They accused me of knowing about their lives because my job included looking through the books they offered. A lady once asked me if I was talking about her, after I asked my manager if the store bought food utensils. The woman had handed me a cookbook with a kit of epicurean products, complete with a lemon zester, egg poacher, and orange rind peeler, and I opened the box, curious and repelled by the long black hairs curled around the utensils. When I offered her a dollar for the only viable item in her bag, Conversations with
God, she told her companion, a skinny, jittery black man, “This isn’t going to be enough to buy white shirts.” She then turned to me and said, “We need white shirts. Do you understand? White shirts. What else can you give me? We need bus fare. Do you have any change?” I was aware of the quarters left over from my lunch at Taco Bell in my back pocket, but I shook my head. I never knew if they were going to take to me, and what else they’d ask if they decided they liked me.

This morning, I drag myself out of bed at seven, because being up this early makes me feel calm and accomplished, even though I will take a four-hour nap at noon. I walk ten steps into the kitchen to feed the cat, who never eats the food from the bottom of the bowl. He likes to hear the sound of new dry food clinking when I grab a handful from the bag and drop it in. I’m getting used to the fact that he’s not like people: my boyfriend thinks it’s strange that I wipe his butt with a paper towel after he uses the litter box. I just don’t want remnants smeared all over my comforter; I’ve ruined everything in my house already, mostly done during the first week I moved in, when I had no electricity. I lit candles that night and opened the windows. It was July; I moved candles from the living room into the small bedroom and spilled wax all over the cheap carpet. Then I smelled something that I thought might be the rubber from the shower curtain, but it was from the stupidly placed candle on the shelf, which burned the plastic fiber of the shelf above it. I worried about cancer fumes, then decided it was silly, since it was more likely I was giving myself emphysema by smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, which were cheaper and gave me the illusion of doing illicit drugs, something I didn’t do anymore.

I remember the callers from last night, how they’re all curious but misguided, and they remind me of my mindset in high school, when my boyfriend at the time believed he was abducted by aliens at the age of ten, and wrote in a coded language he claimed was handed down
to him. I went to parks during lunch, smoked a lot of pot, dropped out of my honors English class, and took regular, remedial English, and coated myself with sandalwood oil to mask the smell of the smoke. I made an A in this class; I didn’t even have to think. My mom was upset because the Honors teacher, whose son was my first awkward kiss on a summer camp rafting trip, called her and expressed her concern for my apparent spaciness and disregard for paper topics, my diatribes about the hands reaching out from the bushes while I was on acid at the lake and the lyrics of Jim Morrison. I look back at these papers; I’m an English teacher now. I realize that my writing was laughable, pretentious, adolescent, and nothing new. Recently, I wrote on one of my students’ papers, “Are you kidding?” when he said that in times of distress, he liked to use his magic shield to protect himself from the “evil trolls” of society. His shield consisted of drinking herbal tea, listening to Enya, and reading from “the book of wisdom.” I realize that I’ve become hardened, not recognizing myself in these kids, and I erase the comment, but tell him to please make more sense and stop philosophizing in his personal essays.

My phone rings, and I hesitate; I’ve been plagued by solicitors in the past week, and now my message says, “This is Claire. If you are trying to sell me something, hang up now. Otherwise, go ahead.” They don’t pay attention. They leave the messages anyway, gleefully talking about satellite TV offers. The beep sounds. It’s my dad, telling me that I’m taking too few classes for a graduate student. He got the bill and saw I signed up for three classes, and he wonders how much longer I’ll be in school. I pick up. “Dad,” I say. “I’ll be happy to have the graduate office call you and tell you what they told me: I’ll lose my hair if I take any more classes.” “Bullshit,” he says. “I got my MBA in Austin, and I took six classes. You’re really pushing it, kid.” Wow, I think. There’s no arguing with this man. I say goodbye and hang up, but I’m not going to sign up for more: I’m already supposed to read twelve books this semester,
and besides that, I’m grading fifty essays a week, taking the time to comment and correct punctuation and grammar.

I remember the one time I thought my father had gone ballistic: he and my mom were moving from their house, and I arrived in the morning to help them out. He’d thrown all the food away because he liked to save money and had cancelled the electricity. He did, however, have his bottles of stout brown ale stashed in the iced red cooler, and I noticed five empties on the kitchen counter. I was hungry, and volunteered to go out to Doe’s Pita to get some sandwiches. He gave me two twenties, told me what he and my mom wanted, then told me to ask the two movers if they wanted anything, so I went outside and asked the driver. “I’ve already eaten today, but thanks,” he said. His assistant wanted salami on rye, so off I went with the list. My parents lived in a gated neighborhood where nobody talked to one another, far from any shopping center. It took me an hour to get the sandwiches and drive back. I’d ordered a tuna pita with extra sprouts; my mouth watered at the thought of eating it. When I got back, I placed the bag of food on the kitchen counter, and then went to the bathroom to pee. I came back to find the bag empty, and my dad stood there and asked, “Didn’t you get one?” He was stuffing his mouth, chewing with his mouth open. “Yeah, mine was the tuna with extra sprouts,” I said. “Oh. I gave it to the driver,” he told me, and shrugged. He told me to eat his, but I didn’t like cashews, turkey, or cranberry sauce, and I gave him a look that probably seemed to him like he had just killed my best friend. I turned, and then climbed upstairs to sulk on my old stripped bed. I knew that I would take the remaining money from the sandwiches and go to McDonald’s; anywhere, really—I just couldn’t believe that the driver had accepted the sandwich, and that my dad had offered it. I heard my dad shout, “Where are the keys to the car? I’ll go buy your stupid sandwich with extra sprouts.” I felt my stomach sink; my dad got in this mindset sometimes, and
he was so stubborn that I couldn’t change his mind. I came out to the landing, looked down at my dad, who was woozy and sweating visibly, and told him, “Dad, it’s okay. I’ve got money still; I’ll go and get something.” He threw his hands up. “Toss me the keys,” he insisted, and I shook my head. If he drives, he’ll drive drunk, I think, and besides that, he’ll be in a mood for the rest of the day if he has to get me another sandwich. “Jesus, Claire. I’ll go get you another sandwich. Give me the keys!” I came down the stairs, attempted to hug him. “No, dad. I’ll get it. It’s okay.” He shook me off, pushing me away so hard I fell on the soft carpet. “Damn it, give me the fucking keys!” I heard my mom call from another part of the house, her voice breaking. “You guys, please stop fighting, please,” she said, and I could tell that she was close to crying. The sound of her voice made this situation more dramatic for some reason, and I pleaded with my dad to forget about it, but I realized that my initial sulking had upset him; he thought I’d acted like a baby, and now he would punish me for it by acting out this way. It went on like this, back and forth, until my dad finally said, “Fine. I’ll walk then,” and walked out the front door. I ran after him, where across the street, neighbors were moving in, staring at father and daughter. He was ahead of me. I said, “Here’s the fucking keys,” and threw them at him. He kept walking, so I stood there, looked over at the new neighbors, and shrugged. I walked up to where the keys dropped and picked them up. It was two miles to get out of the damn neighborhood itself, and then another three miles down the highway. He wasn’t going to get anywhere. I walked back up the driveway to where the movers stood, drinking bottled water, eyes shifting away when I met them. My mom stood in the kitchen, and she said, “Let him walk it off.” She handed me a Snickers bar, and I took it. Three hours later, my dad walked in, sweaty and red-faced, hands empty. I told him I was sorry, because I knew of no other way to fix this, even if I wasn’t feeling apologetic. He put his hands on my shoulders and said, “I know
you’re sorry, sweetie. And even though I’m mad at you, you know I still love you.” He hugged me, and I took it. What else could I do? Later, this scene will become laughable, and I would recount it to people I met. It’s just the way he is, and after all, he’s my dad—I can’t hate him for long.

There are other people, however, who I don’t have to stay friendly with, even when they act like a dysfunctional family member. I remember my time at the bookstore, how I used to venture over to the children’s section, where Emily worked, after customers complained about what was “going on in the kid’s corner.” I peeked around the corner of True Crime, and saw Emily and Johnny kissing, grabbing each other’s butts, laughing. I hated Johnny. He wore shirts with the phrases “Bullshit Detector” and “Customer Service, My Ass.” The manager was sweet on him because she used to take heroin with him in the late eighties. She just made him cover up the offensive words with the sticky labeling tape that employees used to designate genres on the shelves. He once commented on my hand-rolled cigarettes, which was a habit that I acquired after a solo-backpacking trip to Spain. “That’s pretty eccentric of you, to roll your own cigarettes,” he said. “It makes you seem kind of special, you know?” I wished I had a magic wand to make him disappear; the tone of his voice was so arrogant and condescending. I just rolled my eyes, tossed my special cigarette into the parking lot, and walked inside.

I’d known Emily since my senior year of high school. She was an artist; her specialty was collage. The first time we hung out, I went to pick her up at her house. I walked up to the door, and a blonde guy sat in the entryway, tugging at Emily’s pant leg, crying. She looked at me, beckoned me close, and whispered in my ear, “I just need a couple of minutes, here.” I nodded, turned around, and tried not to laugh. Later, over plates of fries and ranch sauce at Denny’s, she exhaled the smoke from her cigarette. The first couple of words after she exhaled
sounded baby like. “I like someone else, and Gabe couldn’t accept it,” she said. She was
entranced with a boy named Randy, who wore knee-high, black rubber boots and carried a
midnight blue shawl around his shoulders. I started going out to lunch with them, where he
spoke in fragmented sentences that I couldn’t understand while she smiled and nodded. Years
later, I run into him at a record store, and he speaks legibly; I question his schizophrenic
personality in high school, and he admits it was all an act. I spent nights at her house, smoking
cigarettes on the curb, where she talked about dreams and dragons and the ritual spells she cast.
I talked about boys, ghosts, and love. I left for college in a state one thousand miles away, and I
rushed to my college mailbox every day, where packages from Emily waited for me. I have a
box of more than five hundred letters from this girl; the girl I thought was going to be my best
friend, my bridesmaid. We both talked about living in a house together while our husbands lived
next door. She visited, I visited, we both went camping, carrying the tent through the campsite
after we discovered bees in the ground where we first set camp, buzzing angrily against the
fabric where we were going to sleep. I gathered shells and rocks from the seaside town where I
lived, she sent valentines in the mail. She sent me audiotapes of her life; she quit high school
two weeks before graduation because she had a fight with her art teacher. Now she worked at
Hobby Lobby, arranging flowers and making homecoming mums for high school football
players. She had a brief identity crisis, confessed she might be a lesbian, and I listened on my
walkman while sitting in the college’s wooded Cistern, watching people greet each other,
making connections. She wrote of a dream she had about tornadoes on pink paper, and I read it,
growing nervous at the words, “I had a dream we kissed. No, really kissed.” She asked if we
could kiss the next time I visited her. I knew without a doubt I loved the hipbones of skinny,
lanky boys who sat in my Psychology class, and I didn’t answer for a while. Eventually, I
visited, and the entire week went by without mentioning the pink letter. On the last day, I told her, “I’ve told everyone about the letter, so I guess we’d better, because when I get back, they’ll ask.” She laughed and pulled me close, and I opened my mouth, shivering. Her mouth was soft, but I didn’t feel the same spark that I felt with boys at college whom I brought into my dorm room, where we’d listen to Neil Young and kiss all night, booting them out when I was wet and afraid to go further; I was convinced that I wanted monogamy, and these boys would balk at the mention of it. It was a short, sweet kiss; I pulled away, and she seemed satisfied. We both giggled, then lit cigarettes, changing the subject.

She had a boyfriend at the time; they’d been together a year. Jacob was obsessed with online role-playing games, had formed a medieval knight’s guild with real people all over the United States. For her birthday, he bought her the game and paid for a few months of online service. It was there, in an imaginary, cartoonish world, that she met a knight named Talath-Dirnin, who brought her flowers and fish from the graphically created ocean when Jacob wasn’t present. She mailed me letters that said she had fallen in love with this man, who lived in Wisconsin. They talked on the phone, mailed pictures; he looked old and a little dangerous, with bulging biceps. She decided to quit college, which she had just enrolled for, and move to Wisconsin to be with him. I felt for Jacob; what luck! He called me, because we were both appalled by her behavior—who was this guy? Why was she dropping everything to be with him? Jacob told me that he had grabbed onto her leg when she dropped the bomb on him, and he wouldn’t let go. She tried to walk out of his house, but he kept his weight on her, and she swatted her arms at him, laboriously got in her car, and started the ignition. He had to let go when the car started to roll backwards.
We still kept in touch when she got her apartment in Wisconsin; she told me that she and her lover went on hikes through Indian burial grounds and shot targets. He owned four guns and belonged to the NRA, and I asked her if he had a temper. She said yes; he drove like an asshole, seventy miles an hour, and called people Spics and Chinks. She said he had been hurt in the past; he was engaged four years before, and his fiancée left him for another man. He took his belongings and drove across three state lines to live at his mother’s house, stopping at a Burger King drive-through at the beginning of his journey. He ordered twenty burgers and placed them on his dashboard, not wanting to stop driving to sleep or rest, and ate them intermittently. She began researching folk mythology, claiming that he took the form of a wolf at night. She told me that they were royalty in Egypt in a past life, that this was true love. I shook my head and kept on with my studies, feeling practical, stable, compared to her pick-up-and-leave philosophy.

Two years later, I’d finished college, moved back home, and took a job at the bookstore. She came down to visit, and told me she was thinking about leaving the Wisconsin man. Two months later, she cancelled her plane ticket. She didn’t call him to say she wasn’t coming back; she sent her parents with a U-Haul to Wisconsin to retrieve her furniture and her cat. I wondered what she had told her parents to make them deal with her personal business with such eagerness. I couldn’t imagine what he would think when, opening his door on a Sunday morning, expecting her, he instead saw this girl’s parents, and learned she wasn’t returning. It seemed irresponsible to me, careless, unfeeling. Nevertheless, I was glad she was back to stay, because I missed her, and felt that some part of me was missing during those three years she spent with him, holed-up in an apartment with mountains of snow falling outside.

I offered to get her a job at the bookstore, and she delighted. I assured my boss that she was responsible, hip, and friendly. She met Johnny there, this forty-year old aging rock star with
a dyed-black Mohawk. I’d known him for about a month, but avoided him because he seemed full of pretense and would occasionally yell at customers if they upset him.

I go to a show downtown with Johnny, because she has to baby-sit her younger brother. During the show, he moves behind me, clasping his arms around my stomach, and whispers in my ear, “I think we could have something here.” I make a face, pry his hands off my body, and tell him, “I don’t think so.” Later, when Johnny and Emily start having sex, she tells the boy I’m dating that the reason I don’t like Johnny is because I’m in love with him, but he likes her instead. I shake my head, incredulous—what right does she have to tell the person I’m with these things? Does she really believe this? I don’t mention it to her, but instead try to keep her friendship, because I’m hoping it will get back to where it was, when we used to take naps together, dance around to Siouxsie and the Banshees in her bedroom, do each other’s hair and makeup.

One night, I go to a Karaoke bar with Johnny and Emily. A girl named Iris has come from New York, and she is in love with Johnny. He hasn’t told her that he’s with Emily, and he doesn’t dissuade her from visiting. He ignores her all night, snaps at her when she tries to hug him, and she takes shots of Goldschlagger at the bar, confused and trying not to care. I watch as Johnny sings a Gary Numan song into the standing microphone, taking his numchucks out of his coat pocket, demonstrating his abilities. I laugh along with Emily, because I understand her attraction to strange behavior, and I am simultaneously putting my arm around Iris, who isn’t smiling, who has tears running down her face. After the performance, all of us drive back to Johnny’s apartment, which is a disgusting mess of trash, *Penthouse* centerfolds, and cigarette butts. Emily takes a hit from his bong, and I am bewildered, because she has never smoked pot before. Johnny puts on his swimsuit, and Iris is doubled over on the couch, slurring her words. I
feel for her; I’m angry with Johnny for bringing her here when it’s obvious that he doesn’t want her. “Come on downstairs,” he says, his sloppy mouth curving into a smile. “No,” I say, “I’m going to stay with Iris.” He says to Iris, “Oh, this is Claire’s specialty. She’s really good with making girls feel better.” I look at him, curious, because I know what he’s trying to imply. I take her into the bathroom, which is coated with dirt and toothpaste grime, and turn on the bath faucet. I think the sound of running water will make her want to throw up all the stuff that’s making her feel like her life is shit. I hear the door slam; Emily and Johnny have gone downstairs for their late-night swim. She kneels by the toilet; I rub her back. She says, “Why is he being like this?” I don’t answer. Emily comes back, opens the door, and says, “We need to leave, now.” I tell her that I can’t leave Iris here alone; Emily sighs and leaves again. I gather Iris’s long hair into a rubber band that’s lying on the floor. Emily comes back and yanks me by the hand. “Now,” she says. Iris slumps, lying on the bathroom floor. I gather my stuff, not understanding what the rush is. We both walk out the door, and pass by the pool. Johnny is on the far side, in the water, resting his elbows on the pavement, his back to us. When we get in the car, she says, “Johnny was raving; I wanted you to leave because I think he wants to hurt you. He was talking about how you were hitting on Iris, and he was pissed that you were trying to steal her.” I open my eyes wide, turn to her. “What the fuck? What is wrong with him? What does he care, anyway? He treated her like she wasn’t there!” She is silent, driving, just shaking her head. Wow, I think. The gall of this idiot: to assume, and voice the opinion, that I am some kind of crafty lesbian, just because I don’t like him, I’m not attracted to him. I fume about this all night, after Emily drops me off and goes back to his place. I barely sleep.

At work the next day, he sees me pricing cookbooks, and says, “Hey, Claire.” I ignore him. He walks off. Later in the day, he comes up to me, puts his hands up, palms up, in a
supplicating gesture. “Dude, I’m sorry I acted like an asshole last night. I drank way too much.” It’s his use of “dude” that puts me over the edge; who says that anymore? I don’t care if I alienate myself from Emily by rejecting him anymore; she’s completely lost to me now. I take a deep breath and look up into his eyes, the skin around them marred by crow’s feet, black underneath like a zombie’s. “Whatever, Johnny—I’ve seen you act like this so many times before, and I don’t care if it’s drink; it’s bullshit. I’m not going to say it’s all okay the next day, because it’s not. I really don’t want to talk to you any more.” He stares blankly, is quiet for a while. Then he smiles, says, “Right on,” and walks away, hunched over. I figure he didn’t expect this; this makes me feel good. I’m done.

Not long after all this, Emily and Johnny are fired by the usually easy-going manager for neglecting their work and making out in the kid’s section. I’m glad to have their presence removed from my day, but Emily still calls me and tells me to quit; she calls the manager a bitch. I don’t say anything. She calls me to go out to lunch with her on my day off. She picks me up in her battered Honda, and we drive to Greenville Avenue. She insists that we sit at the bar. I order soup, but she doesn’t eat anything. Instead, she orders shots from the bar and smokes incessantly, talks about Johnny and how much they’re in love. “This is nice,” she says. “We should do this more often.” I feel sad; I slurp my chicken gumbo from the oversized spoon. I take her keys and drive her home; she wobbles out of the car. I call my mom to come pick me up.

Later, I talk to Jacob, who has become a dear friend to me. This person whom we once knew to be our friend links us both. He says that she’s spreading rumors about me, that I’m a lesbian. I’m not surprised, but I call her anyway. I’ve been her friend for seven years, and I want to end this amicably. I’m the type of person who wants closure; I also want to get some
things off my chest, but doubt I can do it without cussing. I call her on her cell phone; she sounds distant. She laughs. “Um, can I call you later?” she says. “I’m a little drunk, and I’m driving home with Johnny. I need to concentrate.” Before she hangs up, I ask her if we can set up a time to meet tomorrow. She says yes; she’ll call me in the afternoon.

The next day, I wait until seven p.m. I recall that she has issues with confrontation, evident by her incident with the Wisconsin man. I can’t deal with not being able to call her on her shit, so I call her, leave a message. I can’t quite recall what I said word for word, but it includes the phrases, “seven years,” “alcoholic,” “dependent,” and “bitch.” I feel a bit better, but I still want to see her reaction. I feel like hitting her. A message shows up on my phone—my stupid phone that doesn’t give notice of a new message until sometimes days later, and it’s from her, saying she’ll meet me at her house. I gasp; I’ve messed it all up. I still want to spout more, so I drive up to Plano to talk to her. As I get into her neighborhood, I see her car rounding the corner, and I stop in front of her, honking. She looks at me, one hand holding a cigarette, and swerves around me. She’s heard my message. It’s too late for resolution, for my wish at a conclusion to be granted. But I still think I can do it. I back up, turn around, and follow her down the street, but not too closely. When I stop at a stoplight behind her, I look away, not wanting to seem crazy. I look at the shopping center on the corner; fiddle with my radio stations. The light turns green, I start up again, and I follow her onto the tollway. She doesn’t have a toll tag, so she has to go slowly through the change lanes. I realize I have no change. I follow her anyway, the electronic sensors beeping madly at me as I go through without paying. I drive, trying to keep up with her, wondering what I think I’m doing. I know that this is crazy, but I think that I deserve a conversation, a battle match, whatever it may be. Just something. She pulls off the toll road, turns into an apartment complex, where Johnny is waiting. She’s called
him, probably to tell him that crazy Claire is trying to run her down. He glances at me through my windshield, and then gets in her car, sitting in the passenger seat. I know now that it’s hopeless. I peel off, around her car, muttering obscenities under my breath. I pull back onto the street, fuming, and start to cry, heading home.

I’m upset by this incident for a number of months, and my dad tells me that he’s worried about me. He tells me that I might need therapy. He tells me to check with the bookstore to see if insurance covers this. I feel like I am finally one of those crazy people I’ve come in contact with in the past; I know that my feelings are viable and not without cause, but the fact that my dad, who is himself a little off-kilter, is recommending I see a specialist, makes me feel a little nuts.

Years later, making coffee in my kitchen and listening to talk radio, I am glad I never went to therapy, because everybody needs to realize they’re off-balance sometimes. I’ve met worse nuts in my life since, and I’m over it, but sometimes I think about when Emily and I loved each other, and I want to call her. I don’t, because I know things won’t be the same, and my just have to chalk it up and move on.