

# **Candlelight Moon**

## **Short Stories**

**by**

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## Candlelight Moon

Rack and I never got together. Ever. He had a Volkswagen bus that smelled that oily heavenly smell of smoke and gasoline and some kind of vinyl---like dried old tires. That, to me, was the most comforting smell in the world. Maybe because when I was a baby, my mom would put me in the little well in the back of our maroon Volkswagen bug, bundle me up in warm blankets that my grandma had knitted for me and we would drive around New Jersey. Putt putt putt, and the smell of marijuana, and the big bubble of warm glass over the well in the back of the car, reflecting all the light and colors outside of the rear view window.

I don't know.

But, Rack was much later -twenty years later-- and his Volkswagen bus, as much as it was the real thing was refurbished, shiny and clean. Still the molded curved metal bumper but the seats all recovered in the same kind of vinyl that over time would collect grease and dirt in the little veins that run through it. We never got together...

Or did we?

Now it seemed like maybe we did. Now that I was thinking about it, I remembered some awkward night in his van, maybe after a dead show.

Either way, that wasn't what I remembered about Rack. I remembered talking to him on the phone. Almost every night for a year. And I remembered getting to know him and his sense of honor, and the gentleness about him. The way he saw the world.

I had actually started thinking about him -for some reason-- a couple of days before my college friend, Melissa had called me. I was driving my kids to school and I looked in the

rearview mirror and caught my reflection. Is this how I really look? Old? I thought to myself.

And then suddenly, the memory of Rack returned to me. The back of his VW bus. When the hell was that? That nagged at me, because maybe I had it wrong. But, it was a kind of smoke colored memory, hazy like the San Francisco Fog. And the fog hung on to me all day at work.

San Francisco. That's right. A Jefferson Airplane show in San Francisco.

But was that Rack?

So, I started thinking about him, about getting to know him back then. In the very beginning, it was an opening up. Something so tender. It was hard to imagine now. He and I had talked on the phone back then--during that time-- and his voice was expanding, to be let into someone's heart that way. You never have enough to say to each other. It just flows and flows and the liquid has a momentum. But now I believed. It could only go on for so long and then it runs out or it dries up. Just changes, really. Back then I didn't know that.

But those phone calls almost every night for a year. Even now, that's a long time. Rack's voice was like a signature. And, Rack's voice was so deep and a little, just a little gravelly...I think he had asthma as a child, so it had that kind of breathless urgency. The way his "yeah, I know what you mean," drawled and lingered like a country music star's pleading.

These were the kinds of telephone conversations where I unconsciously picked at the wallpaper or chewed on a hangnail and listened and talked and then I realized it was maybe three hours or even more that we had been on the phone. And, it seemed like I just had gotten on the phone except for my neck was sore and I had a unbearable exhausted feeling, dry eyes and mouth. I would be tired from talking so long and so only the need for sleep necessitated hanging up. But otherwise it could have gone on like that forever.

Back then there was Rob too, my boyfriend at the time. Actually, we lived together. He didn't give a shit. I had told that to Rack over and over for that whole year. "Rob's right in the next room. He just did bong hits and is listening to The Wall. He doesn't give a shit."

"Let me talk to him." Rack's sense of honor.

"Rob! Rack wants to talk to you."

"Shit," he would say and I was a kind of a smooth, slow, stoned "shiiit." His eyes slit, but, even stoned, still Rob looked so cute. Light brown hair, messy. Jeans hanging just so that below his belly button showed, and I expected to see a shadow where his pants met his belly.

"What's up Rack, dude?" he said into the phone, not phased, not unfriendly.

"Rack Dude" I mouthed into the air of our apartment. I wanted to get on the phone with Rack. Talk about philosophy and books. Talk about things that I don't ever think of anymore. One thought running in to the next. One night he had read the entire story, "diary of a madman" to me over the phone. It took no effort what so ever to listen to the words as he read them smoothly over the phone. By the time he had finished it was two in the morning. We kept cracking up, "I am the kind of Spain!" It was hysterical. Maybe because we were so tired.

"Yeah, no." Rob said and he smiled at me, lighting a match somehow with one hand, lighting a cigarette and inhaling, nodding his head as if Rack could see him.

I wanted the phone back. Instead of waiting, I went into the kitchen and made a Velveeta cheese sandwich

When I came back into the room, Rob reached for the sandwich. "No fucking way," I whispered. "Please" he said holding his hand over the phone. He cradled the phone in between his shoulder and cheek and moved closer to me. He put his hands on my waist under my t-shirt.

"Please' he mouthed pleadingly. And, he looked so cute, his square jaw and tanned skin. "Half?" he pleaded again. I held the plate out in front of me and he kept his hands on my waist for a minute and then moved them over my belly before he reached for the plate. And, a warm feeling flushed over my body.

"Give me the phone." I whispered.

"All right, all right. Hey Man, Maria wants to talk to you again. Yeah. All right, peace, man."

I took the phone from him. It smelled like his Winston cigarette smoke. I wiped it on my shirt. Rob leaned over and kissed me. "That guy's a pussy." He said into my ear and sauntered back to his room. I wondered if Rack had heard him. I watched him lift the grilled cheese and take a bite, which crunched louder than I expected. The way he walked, it looked like he was wearing slippers, but he was barefooted. Just kind of sliding down the hall almost regal, munching on my sandwich.

"What did you say to him?" I asked Rack.

"I asked him if he cared if I talked to you for hours every night."

"He doesn't own me."

"This isn't a feminist inquisition."

"Yeah it is," I said back to him. I lit one of Rob's Winston's and said, "What were we talking about?"

"You said your dad liked Vonnegut."

"Oh," I said. 'He likes all of it. He quotes it. I think its ok. I mean, actually, sort of stupid. You know what I liked? God bless you Mr. Rosewater. I thought it was so hysterical."

"I haven't read it."

"It's funny. There's this millionaire guy who is crazy and a fanatic about the fire department-anyway, its funny. It's all ironic and sarcastic. That is my dad."

"You know what I like?" I can hear him exhale into the phone and then take a sip of something.

"Are you drinking beer?"

"Yup." There was a pause, another sip. "I like Brautigan a lot. Oh my God, I love Richard Brautigan."

"I read Trout Fishing in America. I think it was kind of...um..." I wasn't sure how to say that the book seemed like it was a bunch of little stories, but didn't make up one plot. "I don't know if I liked it as just a bunch of little stories all stuck in the same book. It doesn't really seem like a novel."

"No I think its cool. It's a different way of understanding a story. Like a prism. All those guys are like that: Hunter Thompson, Keroac. I mean that is the way they do it. They all had fucked up lives." There was another long sip and then a pause where I could hear a match being struck and then a deep in hale. It was strange to know someone like that. Like a blind person knows someone. Just knowing the textures of a person though their voice. It is so intimate and I could recognize now what that time on the phone with Rack really meant.

"His mother sifted rat shit out of the flour to make watered down pancakes."

"Who?" I asked. "That's fucking disgusting."

Rack laughed into the phone. "Brautigan. He grew up dirt poor-- But anyway, you were saying how your dad reads Vonnegut...but what were you saying about your mom. Before Rob got on the phone."

I remembered wanting to tell him about my family and keep the conversation going. I think I also wanted to know about what he thought about Rob. Or what he thought about me. Instead, I told him about my crazy mother. "Yeah, So ok. So my dad reads Vonnegut, but then I think my mother gets jealous about it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She acts crazy. Anyway, I think in some way she tries to scare my dad because my mother said that if you read breakfast of champions it can make you go psychotic. That a lot of people have become schizophrenic by reading it. " I inhaled on my cigarette and held it in. I leaned back against the wall and traced the baseboard with my sock.

"Really?" his throaty voice asked. "What the fuck? That's totally fucking crazy. That is the craziest thing I have ever heard." I blew the smoke out slowly, silently while I waited while he inhaled a drag and let it out. Finally he finished his thought "crazy but intriguing."

"No. She's really got problems. She has really bad anxiety and there are scenes in the book where like the ground sinks and becomes like quick sand and that's what it feels lik---" Just then Rob walked into the kitchen. He stood above me and motioned with his hands as if come on come on. And then his hands were under my t-shirt again and his palms felt soft and warm somehow and it started a yearning inside of me.

'Are you there?" Rack asks.

"I got to go, Rob wants me to get off the phone." I know its ok to say that because of Rack's sense of honor.

"Oh yeah, of course. Good night."

"Night" I said into the phone.

Not long after that we were at the concert and the air was so warm and the light was just heavenly. It's the mushrooms and it was also the summer so the sky was a purplish pink and the grass looked Astroturf green. Rack was sitting next to Jasmine. That same night they first got together. She was pretty, tiny, if I remember correctly with long stringy brown hair and cute freckles on her little nose. I had my eyes closed for a minute as they brushed over the drums and played some kind of flute music. Really dreamy. The park was almost silent except for a rogue shout every now and again. When I opened my eyes again Rack was kissing Jasmine. I was so fucked up that I just stared at them and I saw their flesh kind of melt into each other. I had said, "Man you guys are one." But, I don't think anyone heard me.

When Jasmine looked up from within Rack's arms, her eyes were far away and her pupils were like big Raggedy Anne buttons, she just nodded and took a hit off of a joint. Rack was sitting cross-legged next to her and he kept brushing her hair away from her face when it fell forward when she laughed at something he had said to her. He leaned into her and either whispered into her ear or kissed her softly on her cheek and stayed there for a moment.

That's all I remembered about the Jefferson airplane concert. I remembered what was most important: that Jasmine and Rack got together and then Rob found me and he started kissing me and it was a kind of hallucinatory liquid flesh feeling just like I had seen with Rack and Jasmine's kiss. And, I liked becoming fluid and having our selves mixing like that. In a second I was as flat as the blanket and I could feel the bumps of the earth and my flesh -like a thin rubber taking the shape of the most minute contours on the ground below me. And, was I having sex with Rob right there? I don't know. I know that when I opened my eyes again it was dark and it was cooling off and there were mosquitoes everywhere and the music was still



playing and it couldn't have been that much longer and the flute was accompanied by a little squeaking instrument and it was methodic, it was the flute, I recognized it again. "Where'd Rack go?" I asked Rob. And he pointed out into the field-it was a field now where there had been an audience of thousands of people attending concert.

"Is it all over?"

I could see Rob was so fucked up, his head kind of nodded back and forth as if he were falling asleep but he was awake, sort of the little wet sits where his eyes were and his lashes all clumped together.

(We weren't always fucked up. Just on weekends. And, not too often that fucked up. I don't think.)

Then, it was later still. Darker still. I was wired, tired, but awake. Rob was asleep in the old dodge dart we had. Jasmine was wrapped in a dirty quilt and asleep on the blanket. I was walking over the lumps that were Jasmine and some bunches of clothes or something, I started walking towards the van.

"Whatcha doin'?" I knew Rack's voice in the darkness. It was that same mysterious voice on the other end of the phone line. In the darkness of my kitchen at three in the morning.

"What are you doin' up?" I asked the darkness, still not locating his voice.

"Can't sleep," he said matter of factly. "Those mushrooms fucked me up." He was under the covers with Jasmine. Had I been I having sex with Rob on the blanket? I squinted my eye and tried to squeeze out a memory. But, it was gone.

"I wanted a smoke. I'm out." The air was getting colder and my legs were freezing.

"Here," he whispered, "don't wake Jasmine." He got up from under the quilt and stood up. His jeans were hanging loose on his waist and he pulled a white t-shirt on. He leaned over to tuck the covers around Jasmine. The shirt hung loose and when he bent over, to fix the quilt, I could see his tanned back as the shirt rose up over his hips. I could feel warmth pouring through my chest, a burning, a melting. He looked handsome. At that moment, I knew exactly why Rob always said that Rack was a pussy. He was jealous of him. He was trying to make Rack something he wasn't: weak, non-threatening. Rack was naturally sexy. And, in that moment I felt foolish for all those long conversations and taking for granted who he was and what he had to offer. How close we had been.

He kind of balanced on one foot and gently made it over the blankets, when he got near me he almost lost his balance again, He caught himself and somehow got his footing. "I'll get you one of mine."

"That's where I was going," I said. "You don't have to get up."

"Don't worry about it," he whispered. It seemed like hooking up with Jasmine gave him a new kind of freedom and confidence. Not cocky. Just self-assured.

I felt a lot of things all at the same time: secretive this night time per chance rendezvous, mad, about Jasmine who somehow now had this position of higher importance with him; sisterly, we had grown so intimate through our conversations that we had earned each other's trust without question. All of it kind of curdled in my stomach-it was really all of those things and the mushrooms, but it was all there.

"Come on" he whispered.

As soon as I opened the door to the van, the smell poured out of it. The oily gasoline smell and the cold air kind made the scent stronger. He climbed into the front seat of the van and I waited outside of the passenger's door. "Come on in, its cold," he said. And I heard that familiar voice; how was it that I had talked to him hours and hours on the phone? And -in that moment-- we were only this familiar? We should be like brother and sister or boyfriend and girlfriend but not like this: just my boyfriend's friend. And at some point in the very near future, he would be known as "jasmine's boyfriend." And I guess I knew that would change things. I didn't know how elastic male/female friendships were. Rob didn't care. I think Rob liked it. Seeing me so close to someone else then having sex with me. A kind of crazy territorial act that turned Rob on.

"Shit," Rack whispered and looked at me and smiled "how did it get so cold?"

"I don't know," I said, "I was so fucked up before. I swear to fucking God, the sky was purple."

"Yeah," he said and the way he said it made it sound like something was stuck in his throat. "I don't know how long I was asleep."

He rifled around the dash and the floor feeling around in the dark for his cigarettes.

"Maybe they're in the back," he said.

The back was empty except for a mattress and coolers and all kinds of clothes and things, but there were no seats back there. Indian batik tapestry hung from the ceiling and the place smelled like incense, patchouli, weed, cigarettes and the VW oily gas smell, which despite the frequency of contact with the other aromas, was still the dominant odor.

"Here," I said, I lit my bic lighter and it made a little flame for us to see by It was enough to cause the cellophane on the cigarette pack to sparkle. There it was on the pillow of the mattress.

"Why are you guys sleeping out there?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We passed out." He handed me a cigarette and settled comfortably on to the mattress, back against the side of the van." Did you end up reading Breakfast of Champions?" he asked. It caused a kind of quick burning, almost an electric shock to hear him mention something we had talked about on the phone-almost in secret. I took a drag and looked up at the fabric on the ceiling. I shook my head, "no."

'I did." He said.

I looked at him closely. "You did?"

He nodded and smiled and it was a shy embarrassed smile and I don't know why. What was there to be embarrassed about?

"I know your mother is fucked up, but the story does mess with your head."

I smiled at him.

'Or maybe I was just stoned and our conversation planted a seed." He smiled shyly again, "I don't know."

"I don't know either," I said "I'm too afraid to read it." And I realized that when I was talking there was condensation from my breath. "It really is cold"

He lowered his voice, got serious. "I really thought I would become psychotic."

"Oh stop it," I had said. "My mom is really is mentally ill. Sometimes she thinks that she has run someone over and she pulls over to a pay phone and calls the police and waits for them

to meet us at an intersection." I had tried to make a joke out of it, but I could see in Rack's eyes that he felt really sorry for me. Really it wasn't that painful. It was more funny than anything.

"You don't you do stuff like that do you?" I asked him.

"My mother committed suicide" he said matter of factly. Then he licked his lips and bit his bottom lip. His eyes looked gray almost and were still dilated from the mushrooms. His big eyes and the faint light that came into the bus, at first scared me.

"I really like talking to you," he said. "I really like our conversations."

"Me too." I looked at him and put my hand on his arm, "I'm sorry about your mother."

"Yeah," he said. "It really sucks." He lit another cigarette and stood up and opened one of the slide down windows. He sat back down. "Richard Brautigan killed himself too."

"That's sad too." I said. "I didn't know that. I thought he was some rich kid from a prep school, like Abbie Hoffman: a rich radical."

Rack laughed and shook his head. "No. Brautigan had a really hard life." He turned and looked at me. He sat down across from me again, but closer this time. "Hey did you know there's a Brautigan library in Burlington Vermont?"

I shook my head. "Like in the abortion?"

"Yeah, it's a kind of tribute to him."

"That's so cool." I said. I slid down on the mattress and smashed my cigarette into the ashtray until it was out. "I'm so sleepy," I said. I don't know why, but I put my legs on his lap. I felt like I knew him that well. He put his hands on my calves and rubbed them gently. I started to doze off.

"Hey," He whispered. "Can I lay down next to you?"

I opened my eyes and nodded slowly. I tried to act cool; like this was no big deal can I sit next to you? "Sure."

He lay beside me on his side, put his hand under his head and watched me for a little while." I know you are sleepy," he said.

"No. I'm awake."

"I just wanted to talk."

'Ok. You can talk to me. I'm listening."

"I have a book of stories in the Brautigan library."

"Really?" I said. "One that you wrote?"

He nodded his head and smiled shyly. "Its called 'Candlelight Moon."

"Wow," I said, "I would like to read them."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You'll have to go to the Brautigan library. Its hand written. The only copy." He took one long last drag and put his cigarette out in a beer bottle that was sitting next to the cooler.

He leaned into me and he put his lips against mine. It was unexpected. They were soft and warm, I could feel the ridges. At first I felt a warmth come over me, but it was an overwhelming undertow, a wave of love that was too much. He looked deeply at me and the passion stopped. I saw inside of his eyes all of his fear and sadness and it was a wave that was way too strong for me. Maybe because of my crazy mother. Maybe because of his crazy mother. It scared me.

"Can I kiss you again?" He asked.

"I don't think so." I whispered, "You are with Jasmine now."

"No, I'm not" he said. And we both knew it was true. He was more with me than with Jasmine and I was more with him than Rob.

"Can I lay next to you then?"

"Yes."

He curled up next to me and his body seemed small. And for a minute or two I watched the shadows from the leaves on the tress outside of the bus. I listened to the silence and I wondered how horrible it must be to be so sad like Rack's mother. Like Richard Brautigan.

Soon after, that time in my life moved on and time passed.

I don't know how we stopped talking on the phone or what happened with him and Jasmine.

I didn't hear about him for a long time and then my college friend Melissa married his brother, Sam. I didn't go to the wedding because it was in Lake Tahoe and I was on the coast in New Jersey and honestly, I didn't really like Melissa any more. Still, once she married Sam, she called me from time to time to fill me in, and I suppose, gather information about me. She was the link to some other place that I didn't care about any more. She would fill me in on Rack and always made him sound like a weirdo. He had moved to the Cape and lived in an old great-aunt's house. She said he just wrote stories and one time told me there was a girl named Jill who came to visit him on the Cape. He was using her for sex.

One other time I had heard his voice. Melissa had been in New York so she came to visit me in New Jersey. Sam was on the Cape with Rack. She called over to the beach house. We were on speaker and most of the conversation it was Sam on the other end. And, then I heard a voice, "hey who you talking to." And I recognized it completely and for a moment I craved the dark

kitchen in my old apartment. The smell of saturated weed and cigarette smoke. I wanted to be young with skinny legs and bulky sports socks. I wanted to trace the baseboard or the linoleum with my sock. I wanted to have that kind of intimacy again. But, it all goes away with responsibility and commitments. Who has time to talk on the phone for hours any more?

"Maria Elders is on the phone," Melissa blurted.

"Who?" Sam asked. They didn't know my married (soon to be changed back) name.

"Maria Dupree" I said.

"Hey Maria," It was Rack. "Good to hear your voice."

I don't remember the rest of the conversation. There were plenty of things I could have said. I was just divorced then. I could have said, "We should stay in touch. I should give you my number." I could have gotten back in touch with him.

Then, Melissa called me again just the other night. "Has it been eight years since we talked?" I asked her. The kids were in bed. The house was quiet. "I can't believe we haven't spoken in so long." I said to her.

"That's is a long time when you are having babies." She said and she sounded self-righteous. I had had babies in the last eight years too. But, then her voice changed. "Sam is having a really hard time." She said softly. The phone grew quiet and I knew she was crying and trying to compose herself on the other end. Finally, she whispered, "and I don't know what to do. I know that you knew his brother really well and I don't know why but I thought you could help me..."



"Why? What kind of hard time?" I asked into the phone. Eight years. And, before that was probably another eight years. And, why did she think I was so close to Rack? That was twenty years ago.

"You knew Rack was sick?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"He was really sick. He died four months ago."

I felt myself starting to cry. "What was-what did he have?"

"Non Hodgeson's Lymphoma." She said as if the word were in my vernacular. As if I said it all the time. NHL. As if I had been in that world of terminal illness with her. "He had it for a long time...at little over three years."

Three years isn't a long time, I thought. I had only hung out with Rack for a year after college. I had only spoken with him once in twenty years. Three years is nothing. Maybe when you are dying it's a long time. And then I wished that I had called him and talked to him during those three years. That's when I remembered his face so close to mine and his eyes scanning mine. And his voice.

"Oh." I said, "I wish I had known. Did he stay at that house on Cape cod while he was sick?"

"No. He lived with his dad and step mom in Burlington."

And that's when I remembered his book in the Brautigan library. Candlelight Moon. And New Jersey isn't that far from Vermont. And I felt the urge to put the kids in the car and drive over to the library. Knock on the door in the middle of the night. They would understand. After

all, it was the Brautigan library. And, Rack would understand-he would like that ending. But then, I felt such a sadness and a darkness. And, I felt getting older was a betrayal.

"Sam kind of went crazy. You know what happened to their mother."

I had forgotten. But, then I remembered "didn't she kill herself?"

"When they were little." Melissa said. "And now I think Sam is depressed. He jumped out of a moving car when we went to the burial in Yarmouth. I was driving back from the cemetery and we turned around a corner. I was going slowly and he just opened the door and rolled out of the car. I couldn't get him to get back in." Melissa started crying. "I think he had a nervous breakdown."

After I got off the phone with Melissa I went into my kids' room and stood above them in the darkness. I bent over each one of them and held my ear close to their faces. I wanted to make sure that they were still breathing, like when they were newborns. Sidney had little silent breaths I could feel on my cheek. Pearl had her nasally, allergy snores. Tomorrow their dad would pick them up for three days and I felt almost a panic inside of me. I felt like that was a curse and that this fear was an intuition, portending doom. I was afraid I was going to lose them. Somehow they wouldn't come back. I felt an emptiness come over me as I looked at their small bedroom; and at the light of the moon, almost like candle light. I started to cry because I have never loved anyone like I loved them.

— \* —

## Caroline MacCreedy - The Invisible Fairy Fly

Caroline MacCreedy. Not even ten years old, four months shy.

The things she likes: Bugs, any variety. She likes to tell people that horseflies find sugar with their feet and that ticks can grow from the size of a grain of rice to the size of a marble. One of her favorite facts: wasps that feed on fermented juice have been known to get drunk and pass out.

"Oh shut your pie hole!" her mother sometimes says. "Holy Crap. I am sick of bugs."

Caroline. 4'5" straight dark hair bangs that just touch the top of her eyebrows. At school, for two years -since second grade-- the mean girl Marla makes all the other girls ignore her.

Finally, this year, Caroline says "I don't care about you" She pretends to bite them. When she does, Marla rolls her eyes and laughs right in the Caroline's face. "You dress like a baby."

Ya.

Ya.

Ya.

Caroline's mother tells Marla's mother, "your daughter is bullying my daughter." Marla's mother says "Everyone knows Caroline has problems with her attitude. She's a hard kid....It isn't easy for the other girls to like her. Marla tries to be nice."

Caroline finds if she walks around the playground imagining species of bugs and their characteristics, the other kids can't hurt her. About one-third of all insect species are carnivorous, and most hunt for their food rather than eating decaying meat or dung-Nobody else in this classroom knows that, Caroline thinks. Its late spring, the sun is finally outside when she is out at

recess. Walking. Thinking. She imagines a dung beetle on a steaming pile of cow poop. People aren't what they seem, she thinks. The Mexican jumping bean is really a caterpillar.

"Aspbergers" the teacher posits, "low achiever. Maybe an IEP?"

"A diagnosis" her mother says, "If I just had a diagnosis."

School is harder now. There are insects in Caroline's brain. They fly around and make her frightened. They aren't really bugs, but Caroline imagines them that way. When it is her turn to talk in class, she looks at the other girls. She feels the slugs in her throat and she can't speak.

"I'm never talking to anyone in that class again." She announces at dinner.

"Why?" her father asks.

"Because I hate it there. People are mean and the work is hard"

At school Caroline watches Marla every day and one day walks up to her at lunch and says "Marla you are a knuckle head."

Marla says back "you are weird, Caroline. A weirdo." Marla tells all the other girls the new rule is no one can talk to Caroline Mac "Wierdy." When Caroline looks for someone to sit with for reading group, all the girls turn their backs. Marla glares at Caroline, then smiles when the teacher looks over.

Caroline starts to cry at night and her mother asks, "What is wrong?"

"Marla is my arch enemy" Caroline says. "I'd like to sever her main artery with my teeth."

"We don't talk like that in our family."

"I need a diagnosis," her mother says on the phone in the morning. At night. In the evening "I don't know maybe Autism? Something has always been wrong. She isn't an easy kid to be around."

Caroline sits out in her back yard on the cement step. It is misty and cold and she doesn't care about anything. She has a secret. She is one of the insects. She is an anthropod and the colder it gets the harder the beetle shell around her body gets. Insects have been present for about 350 million years, and humans for only 130,000 years, she thinks to herself. So who cares about Marla? Who cares about people? Caroline will be around a lot longer than them anyway. She picks up a leaf and inspects it. Runs her fingers along its veins. If she were an ant, she could climb its ridges. If she were a fairy fly -the world's smallest insect, so small they are seldom noticed by humans-- she could follow the little lines of the leaf, she could understand that tiny specimen of life. It's translucent green skin; she could suck the nectar from its tender veins.

She looks more closely at the back of a leaf. The patterns that she sees are all repeating. It looks like a leaf inside of a leaf inside of a leaf. Caroline imagines that it goes on forever that way. And, she thinks for a minute that maybe that is some kind of portal, a portal into the insect world. If she could keep following it, she could get in. If she were a fairy fly, she'd be small enough to escape.

Things are quiet outside, but she can hear the vacuum cleaner running inside of the house. It is the low hum of a cloud of phantom midges over a lake in the summer time. If she closes her eyes she can be there.

She thinks of a poem in her mind:

This is what you see: a back yard

with a broken wheelbarrow in the corner.

Trees that provide shade in the rising heat of summer

You see the path that leads to the drive way

You see the car parked just beyond

You see what people see.

This is what I see:

I see the faint breeze as it barely rustles the trees

The waking larvae hiding under a pinecone

decomposing and making fresh earth

I see the trails that black ants make

as they carry fifty times their weight

I see the bark and smell its pine scent.

I see life all around me.

I see what nature sees.

— \* —

## Fortune Cookies: Gretchen and Alexander

*Monday*

*Chai Redbush Tea (no caffeine).*

*Tag reads: Open up to infinity and you become infinity.*

Gretchen's green eyes moved across the computer screen as she read and reread the ads for relationships on Craigslist. "Women Seeking Men." The air that gently entered in through the window was springtime warm just a hint of cool. The light was dappled on the green gardens in the courtyard outside of the office building; from above it looked like a palate of greens and yellows, very dark in some spots and pale almost fluorescent in others. What she wanted - undeniably passionately-was to find a partner for Alexander, her friend at work. Friend. Alexander was in the cubicle right on the other side of hers. It was like one of those exotic screens that separated young lovers, breathing can be heard, the heat of the other person's presence, known but they are kept apart for their own good.

They were not close in the traditional sense of the word. Really. Gretchen had looked it up, googled it. Close. When Gretchen looked up "close", she was 1) surprised at the number of definitions: there were twenty-two; and 2) terribly disturbed to discover that "closed" was the past-tense verb form of close. Of all twenty-two definitions, these were the two that confirmed for Gretchen that they were not "close"

2. Being near in relationship: close relatives. They are not.
3. Bound by mutual interests, loyalties, or affections; intimate: close friends. Yes and no.

Of course, all the other definitions of the word listed were misfits too: "close supervision," "close the door" etc., but the relational definitions were what Gretchen was

concerned with. And, Ok-- there is also the sub textual -or not even sub textual-there is a connection between them. Would you say they were "bound by mutual interests, loyalties, affections?" Again, Yes and no. Not closeness, per se but a connection. Here is the thing: Gretchen is not Alexander's type. If anything, she is more like a sister to him. She knew this because in the six years that she has known him, he was 1) married once, 2) dated a woman for a year and a half and 3) fell in love one time. All three women were the same: very pretty with a kind of wealthy air. They were small frame-thus, the low heeled shoes Gretchen has taken to wearing-not completely because of Alexander, but she does like talking to him at his own level. He stands at 5'6", which is half an inch shorter than Gretchen. For a man, he's on the less tall side, and for a woman Gretchen is on the taller tall side. Anyway, his girlfriends are usually between 5'4" and 5'6" from what Gretchen could tell. Ok, his first wife was taller and made no effort whatsoever to match his height. She was likely 5'7" but always wore extravagantly high shoes, which during the divorce Alexander had told Gretchen cost usually upwards of \$700 a pair. "She could afford it, though" Alexander had chided. "Jesus, could she afford it." To which Gretchen said "hmmm" then, after a moment, "sick."

Gretchen one time had made the Amelda Marcos joke and then for months they had beat into the ground and then kept it up until they had to write an actual written contract between them to keep it dead and buried. After that, it was never referred to but Gretchen would sign her e-mails EM for a while. And, Alexander was still signing his: FC (Fidel Castro) another joke, which somehow when it was fully evolved had to do with the marketing director (Tessa)'s husband who always showed up on Thursdays with a thermos of martinis and box of fresh sushi which the two of them would eat on the balcony of the office building and laugh, laugh laugh.



He didn't even really look like Fidel Castro. It was some comment that Tessa, the marketing director had made about him and Gretchen thinks that Fidel Castro was more to irritate her, but really she can't remember. Then that disappeared along with Amelda Marcos. But not completely. Ok, but the thing about the women that Alexander fell for-more than anything else-was their dark, almost black hair and their fabulousness. It is true. In addition to practically being an heiress, his ex-wife designed clothing that she sold in shows in Los Angeles and, sometimes New York. And, whenever she had come to meet Alexander she smelled like some pretty spicy fruit that Gretchen could never identify.

Gretchen opened a listing that didn't have a picture. That's unfortunate she thought as she opened the link. She read the description and Alexander remained on her mind:

I am a 36, cute, sexy and fun. I am white, with brown hair, and blue eyes. I enjoy hiking, exploring, learning, and watching movies. I am professional female; I have a good job, and plenty of free time. I am looking for a man (duh) between the ages of 32-39. Some who is employed, and clean cut. Who likes to have some fun! Indoors and out...hehe. I am real. Send me a picture, and I will return the favor. Of course tell me something about you. I will respond.

Thanks J.

"I'm looking for a man (duh)." Duh Gretchen thinks, what's that? Hee hee? The post is annoying, but that doesn't mean the girl is annoying. She's the right age. She has a good job. That's good. Not super wealthy, family money, but someone who needs an identity because she has to have one. That would be good for Alexander: a more independent woman, less needy. Not so full of themselves. A head on her shoulders. Funny. But not emotionally needy. That was always the problem wasn't it? Needy. Yes. Gretchen thought that was.

"What are you doing?" She quickly clicked on another tab and Amazon page came up with the listing.

"Don't jump up on me like that."

"Jump up on you?" Alexander asked.

"I mean sneak up."

"Eclipse? Is that a romance novel?"

"Shut up-its for my book group-what do you want?"

She turned from her screen and looked at him. She examined him and he did look handsome: he was wearing a dark shirt and when she looked at him his cheeks are flush and his eyes flashed deep brown with sparkles towards her. Gretchen could feel an impulse, a pulse of desire, then she packaged it up neatly and packed it into one of those fed ex boxes in the copy room. She sealed it up and sent it off to someone else.

He squinted and leaned closer to her computer screen. "Is that one of those Twilight books?"

"It's a novel for my book group." He was reading over her shoulder, "very intellectual"

"Stop it!" she snapped at him.

"All right," he said, "I'm going to talk to Tessa then do you want to do burritos or salad?"

She nodded, "ok" she says, "I haven't even started the copy for the website."

He squinted and made a face "so?" he asked. Then, he nodded and here it was another one of their jokes. He made an obvious dramatic wink, "I get it." He said very slowly "we're playing the 'we have a job' and we're actually going to get some work done game today." She smiled at him. And his eyes hung on to his fake serious I get it expression. She leaned in closer

and couldn't help but smile, "I'm pretending," she mouthed without saying the words very loudly at all "for Tessa's benefit that I am actually going to meet my deadline. Then, just before it some kind of snafu will hit."

"Nice work, Lacey."

She smiled.

"Ok," he said, "I'll meet you at Tortoise Taquaria"

"Ok."

When he left, she clicked back on to the personal ad. "Why not?" she whispered. And she hit reply. And then she typed "hey, what can I tell you about myself? Pretty typical guy: work for a furniture catalogue-sounds pretty mundane, I know, but I also write plays and short stories. I'm thirty-seven. I love hanging out on a warm nights, talking and laughing over a bottle of Chianti at a patio restaurant until it closes. I love to laugh. I'm attaching my picture, if your interested return the favor. Peace."

Gretchen shuddered at writing "peace" but it was how Alexander signed his e-mails.

Peace, Fidel.

She had the picture all cropped and everything. It was one from the office party, the one where he was standing with Fidel and Tessa. Somehow his eyes were squinted just slightly and he was leaning into the picture. He looked debonair somehow, serious. Handsome. And the photograph was in color but it almost looked sepia and so that made him look timeless. He could be Don Quixote. He could be Hans Solo. She attached the file and reread the e-mail. She didn't care. He'll be mad, or-she's not really sure. Would he be mad? He seemed embarrassed when she

says she will find someone for him. But, maybe it was endearing; maybe it was sisterly. What do men think anyway?

*Tuesday After Work*

*Quote, Day-by-Day Literary Calendar, Tuesday, May 18, 2007:*

*Soul meets soul on lover's lips.*

*~ by Percy Bysshe Shelly ~*

The night air was crazy warm and Gretchen had loosened her two braids that she somehow clipped together in the back and managed to look like a 1930s communist revolutionary (Alexander's description). Now it was loose blonde waves down her back and she was comfortably drunk. The air from the bay was warm and the lights looked yellow and pretty, as the evening turned almost dark now. Across the bay you could see San Francisco and it was all blue up until Alcatraz and then there was a cottony fog where the city met the water. A bug lamp zapped and she felt comfortable. Her legs were up on the chair across from her and Alexander was sitting right next to her. There was still a warm impression from when his hand had rested on her arm while he had spoken to the waiter. It was unconscious. Alexander was wearing a dark shirt with a tight weave, probably a casual Banana Republic shirt, and now that his top two buttons were loose, Gretchen could see that he was wearing a t-shirt underneath.

"Are you wearing a t-shirt?" she asked him and leaned closer to him and pretended to look inside of his shirt.

"Why?" he asked and then he leaned back and looked at her and smiled. He reached over and picked up the package of Marlboro lights and shook one out of the pack. He put one in his

mouth and held it there and smiled at Gretchen for a long moment and then he took the cigarette out of his mouth and leaned over, put his head in his hands and started laughing.

"What?" she asked and hit him on the arm. "What are you laughing at?"

"That was so fucking ridiculous today...oh my God," he said and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Oh shit."

He was drunk.

"What?" now Gretchen was laughing too.

She was drunk too.

"Oh my God." He said and he held his hands over his eyes to stop the humor. "When you were saying all that shit about pretending to work."

"Oh my God," she said "are you fucking serious?" now she copied the same gesture and puts her hands over her eyes. She looked up at Alexander again, "Tessa was like...'I guess its funny to shirk responsibility.'"

Alexander scrunched his face up funny and said slowly "shirk." He rolled his eyes and squinted. Now he lit the cigarette and looked at Gretchen, "what kind of word is that, again?"

"What 'shwrik?'" She realized she pronounced it wrong and tried again "swir-what did I say? What was the word? How do you say it?"

He was laughing so hard that he just kept looking down. He took a deep breath and then said slowly "shirk."

"That doesn't even sound like a word any more does it?"

He said it again "shirk" he took a drag and then looked into the night sky thinking about it. "That is like when you write something-a word-then it looks completely wrong on paper."

"Shirk," she said again. And then she picked up a cigarette and lit one too. She looked around and her golden hair moved across her shoulders. "That is a fucked up word."

He can't help but laugh again. "A fucked up word? What does that mean?"

She kind of said sarcastically using the word in a sentence, "such a shirker. I'm starting to hate that word." She laughed and took a deep breath. She held the cigarette in front of her lips before taking a drag. "I got to go." She said. "I'm drunk."

"Can I ask you something?" he asked. His face turned serious. And, he blurted, "do you like me?" It was hard to tell what he was really asking her.

She looked into his eyes deeply and there was a sudden drop in her stomach, like defying gravity or the strange levitation of centrifugal force. "I adore you." She said glibly.

He took a drag from his cigarette and the lines in his face grew long when he looked at her. He was transformed into someone who was whispering secrets to her somehow. It was off putting almost causing pain in her solar plexus-but just tightness. The clamor of the restaurant rose around them. "What are you doing? She asked, and this time it was softly.

"I think you are so pretty," he said almost inaudibly. He looked down at the ashtray and snuffed out his cigarette.

*Wednesday*

*ASTROLOGY.COM, RE: YOUR FREE DAILY HOROSCOPE. GEMINI: You feel temporarily blocked now. Resistance and challenges from others or from outside situations suggest this is not a good time to try to force your will and desires onto the world, as friction is the only likely result. Relations with men can be especially tense.*

An ocean of drunkenness can swallow almost anything and even precious gems can sink to the bottom. I think you are so pretty.

Alexander was completely himself again at work. "What are you drinking? More of that yogi tea?"

"A hangover remedy." Gretchen said without looking up from her computer screen.

He was standing behind her looking at her monitor. "What does it say today?"

"It says that 'relations with men can be especially tense.'" She didn't feel friendly towards him, but somehow her body and mind were automatically friendly. Her feelings were becoming transparent and she tried to cover up, but she couldn't think of funny things to say. It was amazing, she thought that they have been best work friends for years and yet there are these little bleeps on the radar-when something erupts in her. She took a sip of her "calming" tea and waited for it to subside. "Anyway," I have a lot of work to do."

He leaned into her and started the joke; He winked "oh I get it-"

"Ok" she said seriously, "I really do."

He stood stunned then his face changed expressions and he turned serious. In that moment, she had the desire to fix it, to smooth it over and go back. It will go back, but not this second. I think you are pretty. Then, even that phrase seemed fictional. It is just what the horoscope said.

"Ok," he said and walked back around the fabric cubicle screen. She could feel his every move and she could hear the tapping of his computer keys. The tapping stopped and she listened for a moment.

"Are you mad at me for some reason?" he asked from the other side of the fabric barrier.

She typed "no" into an IM and sent it over to him. Then, she typed, "let me get my work done." She heard him laugh quietly. Then she typed "for once." He laughed again and she typed "for God Sake!"

A few minutes passed and both of them were hitting the keys and all you could hear was the sound of little plastic keys hitting plastic pads in a kind of unrecognizable rhythm. His were more forceful chicken pecks; hers were the sound of smooth taps then dramatic clicks from the space bar.

A second later a message came on to her screen "So, you aren't mad at me about anything, right?"

Her fingers typed "so you'll support me when I lose my job?" but then she backspaced and deleted the words. And then she thought about it. Instead she typed, "I'm not mad."

"Where are we going to lunch?" popped up on her screen.

She felt as if she is in a meat grinder and her insides were being churned and pulverized. She closed her eyes-too strong an image. She took a deep breath.

"I think we should just chill." The second she hit send a searing shame came over her. She could feel herself growing red and hot. What in the hell was she thinking? "We should just chill." As if there was a we and if something was happening between them that should be chilled. She couldn't even concentrate on anything now and she heard his keyboard slide across his desk and in a second he was standing behind her and she couldn't turn around. All she felt was the desire to cry.

He walked to the side of her chair and stood there without saying anything. She didn't look up.



"What's the matter? Did I say something that upset you last night?"

She turned slowly and looked at him and she hadn't realized it until this moment. He was God-awful handsome and for so long she had been hiding in this little sister friendship with him talking with him about his gorgeous girlfriends and fabulous ex-wives and reading his short stories and now, suddenly she realized that she was a surrogate or a ... a what?

"A friend," he said, "we're friends right?"

"Why did you say that?" she asked him.

"Because. We're friends. Why are you acting like this?"

It seemed so obvious to her now. As it must have been all along. And, all she was wondering was what are the magic words to smooth over this truth that was becoming revealed. There was no solution.

"Why are you mad at me? Don't be mad at me. Last night you said you adored me."

Then it appeared: this perfect excuse. This lie that would transcend the humiliating revelations of the last few moments. "Its not you." She said, "I had a big fight with my mom this morning."

His whole face softened. Now he felt stupid. Now she could see that all of that vulnerability, the mistaken assumptions about her feelings had all fallen back on him. And, whatever confidence had carried him over to her was now gone.

"Oh God," he said to her. "Ok. Well let me know if you need anything."

"Ok." She said, "I'll probably call her back during lunch and try to smooth it over."

"Ok." He said and walked back over to his cubicle. And there was a shift in mood in the office. An atmosphere like after an electrical storm. Nothing in the air but a neutral, ozone kind of smell and a calm. She listened for a moment and heard the tapping of his keys.

She looked at the tag on her tea bag Our intuition lies in our innocence.

She opened her e-mail and she saw a reply from the Craigslist ad. She had forgotten all about it and now that so much had happened-nothing at all really but so much nonetheless-now that so much had happened, a searing regret rested inside of her stomach. Gretchen looked at the fabric wall between them. She opened the message and it opened to a picture of a woman. The woman has long straight dark hair. The kind of straight hair that is perfectly shining and soft looking. Her eyebrows had strong gorgeous arches. Gretchen looked at the picture closely and a horrible feeling of jealousy and regret surfaced. Gretchen examined her further. Her features were perfectly sculpted, lips with a slight smirk... a plum lipstick.

This was the perfect woman for Alexander. This was the woman that he was going to fall in love with. Marry. Have children with. Gretchen could feel it and she felt as if this was some Greek tragedy and she had secured her own fate.

My own fate? She thought. What does that mean? Why am I feeling this? And, in a split second, Gretchen wished that she had a boyfriend or a date. Someone to compete with this goddess on the screen. And, the next thought was I am totally losing my mind. She had the strong urge to just delete the reply. To bury it and then to just return to work. To start typing copy for the website. But, she knew exactly how long it would take to complete the assignment...not long at all. She had all the time in the world. She sat frozen alternating between looking at the fabric screen between them and this picture on her computer. In a way, she almost wanted to give

him this gift. This beautiful gorgeous woman. I think you are so pretty. And, she could also ask to talk to him. Ask him why he said that. Why those words redefined everything they had said to each other up until that point. But, she knew that he would say that he was just drunk.

"Do you want to get lunch with me?" she heard him say through the screen. Was he talking to her?

"I said I have to call my mother."

His head popped over the screen. "You are mad at me. You might as well just go to lunch and continue to be my friend. You didn't have a fight with your Goddamned mother."

She bit her lip and smiled. "Who said I wasn't your friend.?" She looked at him intently. Ok. So this was going to be the relationship. Ok. She could find a way to package these feelings back up. To move them to a file cabinet in the archive room. Why not? She didn't even know if they'd been there all along.

"This is total harassment in the work place," she said. And, just at that moment Tessa walked by carrying a large box that looked like a cake box. "What's that?" Alexander asked. She gave him a quizzical look. "Personal" she said dryly and passed by.

"Hmm" he said to Gretchen. "You're not getting married are you? That looked an awful lot like a cake box."

"Harassment," she said again and sat back down at her computer.

"So should we get Chinese food?"

She looked back up at him. "Fine."

"Fine" he said back and she heard the tapping of the keys again.

When Gretchen looked back down at her computer, she was startled to see the picture of the woman on her screen again. It was like a magic mirror. A comparison. She was about to hit delete but she read the e-mail. "What are you doing, Alex? You are fucking crazy -I still adore you, I am just exploring my options, of course I am not abandoning our thing (until we have exhausted ourselves-at least physically)..."

Gretchen was frozen. "Oh shit" she whispered. She felt like a little sister, peeking into the living room. Relegated to an innocent witness. She listened expecting Alexander to make a comment. "Oh shit" she moved her lips but no sound came out. She bit her lip and tried to think of something. This woman obviously knew Alexander. "Obviously" she moved her lips again. And in a slow panicky voice in her mind she thought, oh my God he is having sex with her. Exhaust themselves physically. That was disgusting. Now, the whole thing was disgusting. This woman. Gretchen felt not only a kind of nauseousness, but also a cool emotionless relief. This new information about Alexander had completely neutralized the You are so pretty or whatever he said -she can't even remember the words. It sobered her up. She closed the e-mail and would think of something later to write or nothing at all. She felt a kind of power -the power of reality she thought. She picked up the phone and dialed her friend Tara's work number.

"Hey," she said into the phone. Her new confidence was energizing. Last winter, she had kind of abandoned Tara and her regular end-of-the-week soirées, but now she was free. A kind of emancipation had happened. All of this in the matter of three moments.

It was jealousy. But she didn't recognize it.

It was anger. But she didn't acknowledge it.

All of it, completely irrational. This she knew.

"Are you still having a party after work on Friday?" To which Tara of course says she was. "Is that lawyer guy, Michael, going to be there? The one I talked to at the New Years thing?" To which Tara says she could call him and invite him or just give Gretchen his e-mail or number?

"No...if he's there great."

Before she could hang up the phone Alexander's face appeared over the cubical wall. Gretchen hung up the phone. "What was that about?" he asked.

"What's What?" she said to him.

"That lawyer guy. You said he was an asshole."

"You can't always tell who is an asshole and who isn't." she said and then looked back down at her computer and started typing. She would just finish the copy now and get it done and over with.

Wednesday - lunch

Fortune cookie fortune: The one you love is closer than you think.

"Do you have a new girlfriend?" Gretchen asked as she poured another cup of tea into the small white ceramic cup. Lunch was all done and their plates were sitting empty with brown Chinese sauce and a noodle or a piece of onion sitting cold and limp on the plate.

Alexander shook his head and blew on the tea. He put the cup back down forgetting to take a sip. "No." But he didn't look back up at her.

She nodded.

"Why are you acting so weird?" he asked. And in that moment, she felt as if she had made up and imagined the whole thing. That this really was a special friendship and that so what

if he said she was pretty. So what? Hadn't she touched his shirt when she made a comment about his t-shirt? That certainly could have been construed as intimate, but it wasn't. Why was she ascribing this new meaning on to these familiar exchanges? And, it all seemed like something she was imagining and if something had gone wrong with her now. Like she was completely crazy and living in an alternate reality. But last night his hand was on her arm while he ordered drinks from the waiter. Had he asked her if she liked him? She couldn't remember. It was something like that. "Do you like me?" She couldn't remember. She had been so drunk. Wasn't there seriousness to their conversation last night?

"All right, I am thinking that I am going to die if I have to sit through the staff meeting tomorrow. I say we construct some elaborate..." But Gretchen could not hear his words or his joke. She had this inside information on him and it coincided with his break from their friendship last night. And, she realized as she is looking at him... him joking and looking for her to conspire, to re-connect and for the two of them to laugh again...he wanted things to be the same, but all she can see is all of this information that has mounted. "...It would be really subtle, an expression like this" he stops talking for a moment and takes on a dramatic, serious expression. "Just nod like this and then we say 'yes. Yes. Go on' It is so subtle and you could-"

"I did something really stupid," she said. And these words were not even her own. They were independent of a thought or a plan. They had intentions all of their own.

"What?" now he couldn't tell if she is adding on to the joke. He looked at Gretchen's face then, he stopped. He raised his eyebrows and stared at her. "Really? Since last night? What did you do?"

The way she said it was like she was going to announce that she was pregnant or that there was a warrant out for her arrest.

"What did you do?"

She felt herself growing red, nervous. "Listen. I wanted you to find another-someone. A girlfriend. I don't now why. It's been like three weeks and I've been combing the want ads. I don't know why-it became a passion. Do you mind?"

He raised his eyebrows and he smiled and when he did his perfectly straight teeth showed just a little and they were perfectly white. He nodded slowly holding back a smile. "I don't know. What did you do?" and he didn't seem mad in the slightest. He smiled sweetly and looked at her, "that's really sweet. Did you find a match for me?"

"Do you already have a girlfriend?" The way Gretchen said it was almost accusing.

His expression changed. "What is with you?"

She started to tell him and then the waiter showed up with the change and a few more fortune cookies. "We already got some," she said. The man shrugged and smiled at her.

Alexander reached for a cookie, cracked it open and slowly pulled the paper fortune from within it. He stared at it, folded it and put it into his shirt pocket. "So what were you saying?" he popped the cookie in his mouth.

"OK. I'm just going to tell you and then we can kind of go back to how things were."

"Were? What has changed?"

She looked at him for a long moment. Did he not remember what he had said last night? The way they were together. If she hadn't taken a cab by herself, she was sure they would have kissed, maybe even gone home together. He was so close to her, last night, walking out of the

restaurant, walking down the pier towards the road. He had said, "wait wait" taken a handful of hair and gently held it in a lump at the back of her head. He stood close to her-in front of her-close enough to kiss her, inspecting her. "You do look like a communist. Like a woman from the 1920s-a Weimar Communist."

"Do you remember what you said to me last night?"

He kind of frowned and then shook his head. "Not really."

She took a deep breath. "You said you thought I was pretty."

She thought these words were going to land on the table between them like an uncooked fish that had somehow jumped from the tank. Dead. Limp. She thought that something so mythically unusual would happen. That he would freak out or profess his love or something.

"You are." He said. "You are really pretty."

She felt an elation, a sort of confirmation of something they had been doing together for a long time, but not admitting. Not even really knowing.

"You are not my type but you are really, really pretty." He added. Ok. Firstly did he just say that? Yes. He just said you are not my type but you are really, really pretty as if taking the words from their meaning and then just proclaiming them ordinary. You don't just say someone is pretty.

He fiddled with the little plate of cookies, took one into his hand and without looking up cracked another fortune cooking and pulling the wrapper slowly from the shell. He held it in front of him and read it. Even though he was acting calm, Gretchen could tell he was tense. The muscle in his jaw tightened and he scratched his neck, but he didn't look back up. He started folding the paper fortune neatly in a tiny little rectangle.



"What does it say?" she asked.

He looked up at her and she could tell that he felt guilty or something.

"I mean," he said, "you know you are pretty, right?"

Gretchen thought, now he is taking full ownership over the meaning of the words and then handing it back to her in a completely different way. That was not how he said it last night.

"Well, I thought that last night the way you said. I don't know. I-" and she was mumbling and rambling quickly and now she didn't even know if her feelings or her assumptions belonged in this conversation. She didn't even know if all along she had felt this way or this new meaning she had just constructed because of some alchemy last night under the warm light, the blue water on the bay. And he is handsome -of course he is-but her knowing him is the same as some good friend. You can admire looks without falling in love with someone.

"All right," she said gathering up her things. "This is too fucking weird."

"Well, wait," he said, "What were you saying about the girlfriend thing and the Internet stuff."

"Oh" she shook her head. She really didn't even care any more. "It was so stupid. I replied to a personal ad and sent your picture. I pretended to be you." She stood up and started to turn for the door. "I'll see you at the office later. I have to call my mom."

Again his hand was on her arm and there was that warm impression as if his hands were radioactive like a superhero and it sent a buzzing energy into her skin just where he touched. And, her arm was bare because it was warm out and she hadn't put her cardigan back on. She just had on her linen tank shirt with a pretty cotton skirt and the outfit made her feel ethereal and with

this new energy between them and his hand on her arm and his dark eyes, his deep eyes examining her with both anger and urgency his hands felt even more intimate. Seductive.

"What?" he said in an almost inaudible, gruff whisper "what did you do?"

"It is so stupid. And, apparently you already know the woman."

His eyes closed slightly as he brought her face into sharper focus, looking for meaning.

"What are you talking about?"

She pulled away from him and he released his arm. "Oh come on. Don't be mad. At least I am telling you the truth. It's stupid. It's no big deal. A joke."

"This is a total breach of trust." He said. "Who was it? You can't misrepresent me."

And, suddenly now there was a serious between them. It was the beginning of a feud. A gulf.

"I don't know," she said and released herself from his touch. Unconsciously, she brushed her flesh with her hand and she wiped his warm impression from her arm and made her way out the door.

#### *Thursday Morning*

*SF CHRONICLE NEWSPAPER HOROSCOPE, GEMINI: How long has it been since you slept late or had breakfast in bed? This could be the perfect day for the comforts that make you feel nurtured, safe and protected. Go ahead and baby yourself--you deserve it.*

Gretchen was at home today. She had called in sick to work and she was sitting at the couch with the Chronicle and a cup of strong, English breakfast tea. She was afraid to read the quote on the tea bag tag, so she left it hanging on the side of her mug, osmotically absorbing the orange tea color. Her laptop was opened beside her and since she has been up this morning she had checked her in box for an e-mail from Alexander, but there was none. And, there was not

another one from the Craigslist beauty. He must have talked to her or she must have talked to him...now Gretchen felt even more foolish and jealous. That was his personal life, it hadn't belonged to her. And even though nothing really came of it and probably the two of them just had a good laugh over her, she felt childish and small and she wished she could just delete all of the events of the past few days. And, then another part of her was glad that it happened. She looked around her flat and stood up and walked over to the window. A nice light came in, a light that can only be found in san Francisco-a deep blue and bright yellow that enhanced the hues of all of the colors. She looked across the street at the pretty Victorian houses painted pinks and reds and royal blue. Flower were erupting from large pots and hanging boxes. She unlatched the window and the big pane of glass opened outward horizontally letting a rush of cool, cleansing air into the living room. She adjusted her robe and walked back over to the coffee table. She reloaded the page and she saw an e-mail from Tessa. RE: New Submission Protocols. She clicked on the e-mail and it was to Gretchen and Alexander. The intimacy of the two of them on the recipient line was unnerving. It was a reminder that they worked together, had a professional relationship. She almost found humor in the idea of a "professional" relationship and she remembered the joke they shared about acting "professional." And the emphasis on the word was "pro" and all day it was like that, describing how a "PROfessional" worked the photocopier, or how a "PROfessional dressed at a business lunch." But, not now, her mind barely recalled the humor. And, then she re-read the subject line: new submission protocols. She knew what Alexander would say-the deluge of jokes about "submission protocols" Gretchen read the e-mail and it simply detailed the guidelines for submitting copy for editor's review. The editing department did not like "wayward" e-mails with text copy or "random slips of paper left in her

inbox." In a moment of humor, the same familiarity she always had, she clicked on reply and started a reply only to Alexander.

"Ok, I am very concerned about the new "submission protocols." I am particularly concerned about the "wayward e-mails." What do you think?" she clicked on 'send' and in an instant she felt like she had offered an olive branch. A way out of the confused mess that they had wandered into. If anything was wayward, it was the course of their friendship.

Gretchen felt elation as she went into the bathroom and showered. She decided she would go for a walk on the pier and meander around the Thursday farmers market in the embarcadero. It was such a gorgeous day and she would relive the memories of when she first moved to San Francisco, the smell of eucalyptus, the sophisticated urban California skyscape. The pretty bay and views from the top of Nob Hill streets.

She expected an e-mail from Alexander would be in her in box and she was eager to check it, but she took her time getting dressed. The warm feeling of resolution and reconciliation and the affections she had for him murmuring through her body. She just felt good. She just felt like everything was back to normal.

Once she was dressed, she pulled the shade in her room and light poured in. The white IKEA curtains created a theatrical, heavenly mood. She tied a scarf around her neck and dabbed on her make up. She looked at herself in the mirror and held her hair back with both hands. She liked the idea of looking like a communist intellectual from the 20s. Mysterious, full of ambiguity. She grabbed her keys and as if -she really believed it was an afterthought-she went over to computer and clicked on her in box.

There were no new messages. Just as that Euphoria had blown her up and made her light and agile, a thin pinprick released the air in a stream of disappointment and shame and as she became deflated, it picked up momentum and all of the excitement emptied out of her. Because now the e-mail was sitting on his computer screen, having been devoured by his eyes and mind and he had made the decision not to respond. Gretchen looked at the time. It was 10:15. She clicked back on her own e-mail and re-read it. Gushes of embarrassment poured through her body and there was nothing to be embarrassed about. Gretchen tried to find the interpretation that was cavalier, who cares, no need to respond. But not after what had happened. Ordinarily, he would have responded in an instant-even in a meeting-he would have seen her e-mail on his iphone and typed a clever message. And, whenever she was out sick from work before, she would have gotten a call first thing. A pretend inquiry or an impersonation of some John Cleese official from the "human resource accounting department."

She now felt horrible. Why couldn't she have just behaved like a normal friend? She had crossed a line and it was bordering on mean. She clicked on the inbox again and there was nothing. And, it felt like a silence. And, even if it wouldn't last forever, Gretchen knew that some things do change a relationship for good. And, in another instant she reasoned with herself: what did he expect, for this to go on like this forever? Gretchen looked at her teacup and the little quote on the bag, now a deep orange from the liquid absorbed by the string. She flipped it over and read the pithy, calming bit of wisdom:

Let your manners speak for you.

Gretchen knew that all day she would feel horrible, despite the pretty San Francisco, light and cool air. All day she would feel beaten up on the inside. And, she knew just as well that Alexander wasn't going to respond to her e-mail.

*Friday Early Evening*  
*Disheveled Man on the BART subway platform, yelling:*  
*"Tired and discouraged souls keep on working."*

Gretchen will go back to work on Monday. She couldn't go in again today. It was too much still and with Alexander never responding to her e-mail, it was impossible to go in. Now she was waiting for the BART to take her to Tara's house in the mission: a big flat that a friend of hers had gotten a long time ago, from a friend of hers and so somehow Tara had scored an enormous flat with an upstairs attic apartment. And, because Tara owned a upscale furniture store, she had all the floor samples in her house. The attic loft looked like Andy Warhol's studio. That was where Tara did her paintings that she sometimes showed at galleries-mostly in the mission. And the paintings were modern, close ups of hands and fingers and in the fingerprints you could make out scenes of people, usually people kissing or Madonna and child. Gretchen shifted her weight and tonight she wore high strappy sandals. She had on a pretty silk outfit, a straight skirt and a fitted tank top. It was gold and rose colored. It was sophisticated and still casual. Her hair was down and she did look very pretty. And, she felt different than she did at work with Alexander. She felt not like a communist from the 20s, but like a thirty-year-old career woman in San Francisco.

A rush of oily smelling air burst past as the train pulled to a sudden halt in front of her. The doors slid open and she walked into the train. There were a few people on board and there was a seat available. She sat down and the train pulled out of the station. The movement of the

car was liquid and silent...the electric power generated a futuristic feel even though the train was probably thirty years old. She took out her iPhone and checked her e-mail. She opened her in box and there was a message from Alexander. No subject. She felt her heart pounding and she turned to the window momentarily and the train was passing through a dark tunnel. She saw her own reflection and she recognized a look of fear and then excitement.

What did she expect? On the one hand she hoped for a funny e-mail, the return of their friendship. On the other hand she wished for something more, something deeper. Because all those feelings that she wrapped up in boxes and hid away or sent off in the fed ex mail slot, they had all been returned to her. They were right here in front of her. And, she did care about him. She clicked on the e-mail.

"Are you still going to Tara's tonight?"

That was all it said. The blood in her heart was still pumping even though the e-mail didn't reveal anything. But, it was an end to the two-day silence. So that in itself was something.

Gretchen looked at the time: 6:40. She wondered where he was. He had his phone. He would get a text. She typed a text message.

"Where are you?" her finger hit send.

She waited a moment, looked out of the window as if she was just day dreaming, thinking about nothing. She looked back down at her phone.

"I'm downtown."

She kind of smiled. Because the communication was familiar again.

"Well what are you doing?" she typed.

"What are YOU doing?" he typed back.

She started to laugh. She started to type, "I asked you first." But she stopped. She thought about it. Instead, she typed, "do you want to." should she write "talk?" or just "hang out?" She typed "do you want to meet me for a drink?"

"Yes."

Her heart was racing and she ran her fingers over the screen.

"Ok." She typed and then she smiled and waited. Her heart pounded and she couldn't help but smile. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again she read: Can you get to pier 23?

"How bout 7:00?"

"Ok"

Gretchen got off at the next stop and took the next train back to downtown. When she arrives at Embarcadero, she hailed a cab and in a few minutes she was at the restaurant.

As she walked towards the restaurant she thought to herself that everything had changed. There was no more guise of platonic friendship. Then, in just another instant she thought maybe she has become confused by the communication. And for a split second she thought, what if that beautiful woman from Craigslist was here with him. Could that happen? And, there was a brief panic, but in an instant she saw him outside of pier 23, smoking a cigarette. She recognized his stance and his short dark hair. He saw Gretchen as she started across the street and his dark eyes were on her. They followed her the whole way.

For a moment, she felt awkward in the heels she was wearing. She didn't want him to feel awkward if she stood taller than him. But, as she walked up to him, she saw that the shoes had made her just about the same height. He looked at her for a long moment, standing in front of her. She expected a joke or a smile, but his face remained serious. So much so that it made



Gretchen reflexively start to smile. A subtle smile crosses his lips and then he let out an audible sigh. She waited for him to say something. And, it seemed too long. It seemed that they would have nothing to say to each other. But, then finally he whispered, "You look really pretty." Then he leaned closer and kissed her gently on the lips. Gretchen could feel the weight inside of her lift and drop and then there was that feeling again, defying gravity. He put his hand on her arm and pulled her even closer. He looked into her eyes and brushed the hair from her face. His lips found hers again. He pulled away and took something from his pocket. It was a tiny rectangular piece of paper.

"What's that?" Gretchen asked.

"It's the fortune from the Chinese restaurant, the other day when we had our fight. " He handed the little piece of paper to her and it was so small, it was difficult to take from him. But, she did and she carefully unfolded the little strip of paper. She smiled when she read the words:

You are going to have some new clothes.

"Wow" Gretchen said and looked at Alexander.

"I know," Alexander said joking, but with a serious expression "I mean it's uncanny."

"Yeah," Gretchen said smiling feigning seriousness "weirdly prophetic."

Alexander smiled at her again. He leaned closer and kissed her. She took in all of him: his spicy smell and his strong arms. Her whole body felt the radioactive electricity of the closeness of him.

"Should we go in?" he asked.

She nodded and together they walk into the restaurant and the evening was still warm; and, the sky over the San Francisco Bay was turning pink and yellow and it made the whole world feel heavenly.

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## A Love Story in Letters Written to Herself

I want to tell you something. It is something that happened to me when I was a little girl. It's not one of those horrible things I've mentioned before. This is different. Just a belief that I had. Do you mind that I write to you like this? Do you mind these letters?

*Of course I don't. You know I don't. I love them. I have told you before, haven't I? I wait for them. Isabelle... you know I love your letters.*

When we were little-my sister and I-every time we drove past one of the old New England houses on the way to town...remember the house I mentioned? The one close to the beach where we lived? As you drove towards the other side of town, there was a house. It was a tall colonial. Someone had painted it aqua. Isn't that funny? But, it was painted in the 1970s when people did things like that-it was left that way, dingy aqua. In the backyard was a large tower, probably a playhouse. It was on stilts and it was a box shaped room. It had just one window and that window faced the street. Whenever we would ride in the car with my mother past the house, she would tell us that two little girls were locked up in that tower all day long. She said the girls had a horrible mother who would only feed them in the mornings; sometimes she wouldn't feed them at all. I always had the most uncomfortable, helpless feeling when I saw the tower-even years later when my mother stopped telling the story. I imaged the little girls. You know, skinny with dirty clothes. Lanky, muddy legs, bruises. Cold in the winter. But, mostly: hungry. It was almost as if I could feel what they felt up there. But-I always thought-- at least they had each other, a witness to each other's experience. Then, one day I asked my sister. Now that we are grown. I said, "Do you remember the girls who lived in the tower in Fairhaven?"

She looked at me and I could see it registering in her eyes. But, then she looked down sadly and she said "I haven't thought of it for a long time. But, I don't remember two girls. I only remember one hungry little girl locked up in that tower all alone."

I don't know why, but that pierced through my heart. You know what I think? I think my mother must have told her the story before I was born. Since she was four years older, she had been hearing the story. And, once I was born, my mother added another girl to the fiction.

*I love telling you these things. Things would be so hard otherwise. Do you mind?*

*You know I don't. I love your words, Isabelle.*

### Real Life

When Isabelle walked outside, Kevin was there. He was sitting in the car in front of her apartment building and he had a New York Times spread open across the dashboard. Isabelle could see that he was tapping his knee to the music playing on the radio. The newspaper was shaking. The car was steamed up. He had been outside of the apartment for a while. Isabelle didn't know if he liked scaring her or if just he missed her. One time when she was babysitting Abby who lived on the fourth floor, Abby noticed Kevin standing on the corner. When Isabelle and the little girl walked off the stoop and on to the sidewalk, he passed quickly. Just rushed by them, almost brushed against Isabelle.

Abby said, "There is that man, Isabelle."

Isabelle told her, "He used to be my boyfriend."

Abby's eyes turned large. "Maybe you should marry him? If this were a movie you'd marry him."

"Why would I?" Isabelle wanted to ask, but the girl was only seven, much too little to understand. Even Isabelle didn't understand and she was twenty-four.

Now, she put the brass key in the rusted lock of the entry of her building and turned it. Her hand was shaking. But, she had learned to control her feelings and the way she carried herself. She had put make up on carefully, made herself look pretty, confident. And, now she stood tall in her wool pea coat. Her little Guatemalan knitted cap. She dropped her key into the deep coat pocket and started walking down the steps. When she reached the sidewalk, she heard the car start up. She didn't look back, but she imagined Kevin fumbling with the newspaper. She imagined him throwing the car into drive and taking off. As usual, he began trailing her until she got to the T. She could smell the exhaust from his diesel BMW in the crisp winter air. She knew that when she arrived at the station, then the chill would combine with the heat coming from the subway stairs and she would feel like she was entering a dream or a womb where she was safe from him. Until she got to work and checked her mail slot. Then, she would see another letter from him. Because I want you to see. But you WON'T understand, Isabelle. What the fuck? She doesn't like him addressing her by her name so often when he writes to her.

The train was crowded, but somehow she found a seat. When she did she removed her knitted gloves and placed them in her pocket too. She stared at herself in the reflection in the black window as the train sped through the dark tunnel. She thought about the letters. About the girls in the tower. Maybe her mother had told her too that there was one little girl stuck up there by herself. Maybe she had imagined the other. A companion to share the misery. She'll have to tell him that epiphany later. Maybe she conjured the other girl. She wasn't brave like her sister.

She couldn't imagine just one raggedy girl up there, especially in the winter. She couldn't imagine herself all alone trapped with her mother.

She closed her eyes leaned her head back against the seat. She always felt safe in the train. Its jerks and stops and the oily smell. She felt so at home and relaxed. She opened her eyes again and the car was crowded with people now. Considerate people who folded their newspapers into little manageable pieces that they could manipulate so that they didn't intrude on other's spaces.

There was a man standing reading the paper in such a way and he held one hand up and held on to the rings attached to the ceiling. He swayed back and forth with the car. She watched him: clean-cut, maybe in his thirties. Not that much older than her. Not much older than Kevin at all. She imagined a wife at home. A pretty suburban house, some town just outside of Boston: Natick, Marblehead, Brookline, Newton, Cambridge. She watched him for a moment, thought she could understand something about him. How he acted so much older than he was. She thought to herself, where did he learn that? Where did he learn to be a businessman? A husband? A nice person? She wanted someone just like him.

### Letters

I saw a man on the train today. Do you ever feel like you just know someone? Or, as if you can understand them. Some stranger that you are just watching without them knowing? That was how I felt.

*I have felt like that before-I don't mean to pry, but were you going to finish telling me what happened with Kevin? It was Kevin, right?*

Nothing happened. My mother has always said I am cold hearted. I stopped loving him. There must have been something...something he did. But, I can't remember now. I just remember his pleading and his wet eyes and I thought he was so weak. He said I wouldn't listen to him. He didn't understand how I could be so cold. Now he waits for me.

*That seems so scary.*

It is a kind of suffocation, but I feel completely silent--hey, this is crazy isn't it? I am smoking a cigarette-I had given it up and on the way back from work, it was like some old synapse. I saw an ad in the convenient store window. I just said, "Marlboro Lights" and there they were, on the counter in front of me. It is so easy to do bad things to yourself, addictive things. Everyone watches and no one cares. -- I am so tired. I forgot what we had been writing about. Scary? No it feels more like I have been wrapped in layers and layers of fabric. I feel almost as if I can't move as if I am entirely restricted. Maybe cursed.

Anyway, guess what I am thinking about? I am wondering if you have ever kissed someone in the rain...the pitter-patter of drops on metal. Inside the cab of a truck? A dreamy, late romantic night. That is what I am wishing for right now...

*In that case, close your eyes. I am kissing you.*

### Real Life

Isabelle could see Kevin across the street as she peered out the police station windows overlooking Beacon Street. The trees, large maple that lined the street were bare. He looked like a character on a 1970s album cover standing there in his gray sweatshirt and the blustery sky moving in large cloud formations behind him. The bare branches reaching upward, alive somewhere down deep, but the appearing dead for winter.

She didn't feel uneasy, not that she recognized. One thing she did feel, the only thing was that she wanted to go on the date with Jamie, the man from the train. That was his name, Jamie. The thought of him, the idea of him introduced a new Isabelle to herself. She started to wear her hair up in clips. More romantic, some of it falling down around her face. Like an artist would.

The officer nodded and put his hand on his chin. Kevin remained in the periphery, outside of the large historic window framed in marble. The police officer's dirty coffee cup sitting on the ledge: Go Sox!

"He is right out there," Isabelle said softly, pointing out over the red sox cup.

"Sit for a moment," the officer said. He had a kind of paternalistic impatience. Isabelle recognized it somehow. That is how men like him talked, it was almost nice.

Isabelle sat down. She smoothed her hair back and then delicately put her hand on her neck.

"You have to make a plan to deal with this," the officer said. "I have the paperwork right here, but don't be hasty."

"Hasty?"

"Sometimes a stalking order makes it worse."

Isabelle nodded.

A little steam from the radiator hissed, punctuated the pause in their conversation.

"Has he ever hit you before?"

"No."

"Been violent."



She nodded, and then squinted. "When we broke up. He was waiting in my apartment. He threw a jar at me. Tried to grab me, but I told him to leave and he did."

"Do you rent an apartment?"

She nodded.

"Could you consider moving?"

"Is that what I have to do?" Isabelle somehow thought that once you got a restraining order, it was over. She didn't know it was up to Kevin. "It's expensive to find a new place. I only make-I am an assistant with the Globe."

He nodded, smoothed his mustache. "Ok. Then, there are advocates who can help you. You could stay at an undisclosed location. They would help you find an affordable apartment-roommates. Do you live alone now?"

She nodded, "yes"

He let out a heavy sigh, staring at her the entire time. He shook his head. "You're taking your chances."

"I live in a building. There are other people there. I live upstairs and there is a security door to get in."

"How did he get in there when you broke up?"

She looked down. "I don't know."

"Your work. Does he know you work at the Globe?"

She nodded.

"Does he follow you there?"

"Not usually. Once or twice. He is a lawyer. He has to go to work at 9:00. I have to be there at 7:00. Sometimes he travels out of town so if he leaves early, he might show up outside of my office before I get there."

"Anything else? Besides following you? Letters?"

"Yes. There are letters."

### Letters

I saw the man. Again on the train again last week. I inspected him more closely. His business clothes are high quality. His hair seems so soft even though it is cut short. I am certain he is wealthy. I smiled at him and something registered in his eyes. They lit up for a moment. Almost with recognition. Then, he resumed reading his paper. It is just attraction. I know that. He got off the train at Peabody. He walked off-didn't look back.

### Real Life

On the train, Isabelle made up excuses about her house. She told Jamie -the businessman- that the apartment was being repainted and she was hopping back and forth from friends' houses.

"We could just meet downtown after work," she offered.

"Why don't we meet at Lucca?" he asked. "Do you know it?"

Isabelle shook her head.

"Here," he said and he scribbled down the name of the restaurant and cross streets on the back of his business card.

The train stopped at Peabody and Jamie rose. "I'm looking forward to our-to having dinner."

Isabelle smiled and elation overtook her for a moment. In an instant he was gone and the train started with a jolt. She couldn't help but smile. James F. Matthews, Broker. State Street Corporation.

### Letters

I wonder if little girls really were up in the tower. I was thinking that one of these weekends I'd drive down to Fairhaven and check out the house. I remember it. Maybe someone knows about the girls.

*Do you really think that there were girls living there? From what you told me, your mother was just mean. She was mean to you. It is mean to tell a child a story like that...*

Is it? I could still see if the tower is there. Oh did I tell you? Kevin wasn't outside today. Not for three days now. I don't trust anything, but I can hope. I wish I could see you. Tell you these things in person. Do you suppose we would like the looks of each other?

*Most certainly. Did you meet your friend at the Italian restaurant?*

Not yet. Tomorrow.

### Real Life

The light was dim, yellow. Jamie was different than he seemed on the train. He was relaxed and loose and so handsome. He looked at Isabelle. When he did, he was so generous with his attention. It felt uncomfortable to Isabelle, pretending to be part of this world.

Sane and insane. Isabelle imagined that's how poor people saw rich people, but she was neither. She was frozen in between and wanted to dive into this world: a restaurant with the pungent smell of garlic, warm and intoxicating...the mood mixed with the wine. She let herself

float down this current, momentarily. And, for a brief interval she was not the cursed, marked girl that she was. She was free...like any other woman out on a date.

"I think that the human mind can not survive on creativity alone." Jamie looked up at Isabelle and smiled, but still Isabelle could see that he was serious. "Its too amorphous."

Something rose and fell inside of Isabelle. A kind of excitement and joy. She smiled and looked down at her glass of wine. It was almost empty. The night was almost over.

"Really," he laughed a little and smiled. It was flirtatious. "That is why I do the stock market. And sculpture."

"But really," Isabelle asked. "Which are you really?" Maybe he was in between worlds too.

"That is what I am trying to tell you. I'm both." He blushed and swallowed down a sip of the red wine. His eyes stayed fixed on her. "You won't come home with me, will you?" He asked and he held her gaze.

Her insides rose but didn't fall. She shook her head. She wanted to say "next time," or "some time." She just smiled. Her mind flashed on Kevin. She felt indentured. "Not tonight," she said and she knew it was perfectly acceptable within the laws of dating. This restraint.

When she arrived home she saw a light on in her apartment. She hadn't left any lights on that she could remember, but she was paranoid now-all these months when coincidences were false, weren't coincidences at all but deliberate acts of intimidation. It made her shaky on the inside; it made her feel guilty and bad. Like this was all her fault. She thought about the police detective, "Has he ever been violent?" If she could just trust that the fear would not result in something horrible, she could rest. She could experience the possibility of a different life. In an

instant she felt ignorant and immature. She felt both like a child and a woman and she wanted so much to erase this part of things so that she could be free.

She started for the stone steps that led to the vestibule of her building.

"How did he get into your apartment?" the detective had asked. And, that night flashed before her. The illusion of safety. That night, she didn't have a thought about the front door ajar. Not a thought when her key went into the lock. It hadn't entered her mind that Kevin would break in that night. But, when she entered her apartment she saw his still face. He was frozen, sitting in the darkened living room...His features gouged out of clay, deep with shadows that made him look angular, frightening.

Was he up there now?

She took a deep breath and the cold air rushed out of her lips; a cloud of condensation. There was a light rain falling. If she were a normal person would she be with Jamie right now? Maybe not in bed with him, maybe not in his apartment but sauntering through the streets warm with infatuation and wine. Talking and laughing. Was it fair to pretend to him that she is a normal person? She glanced back up at the apartment window, searching for a sign of motion. She could imagine walking through the lighted vestibule and up the stairs, her heart pounding.

And, what if Kevin were up there now? Sitting there waiting. Maybe he knew all about Jamie. Maybe he was going to kill her.

Just then she felt a presence, almost a draft, behind her. She turned and it was Kevin. Just like that, he was there. Closer than he usually comes to her. Inches from her. At first he seemed small, his eyes were at eye level with her. If they were lovers he would be almost close enough to kiss her.

## Letters

*But...you haven't told me what happened when Kevin approached you that night outside after your date.*

Nothing happened. Really. I told him to come with me. To come with me to the tower and find out if a little girl had lived there. It was so late. It was almost one in the morning and he was surprised by what I said. He was standing close and I didn't ask him why he was there. I said "I am going to Fairhaven, near the Cape. I am leaving now."

## Real Life

Kevin shook his head and stared at Isabelle. He said "I saw you with someone tonight."

Isabelle was suddenly so preoccupied with the house and the girls up in the tower that she said "Can you tell me later? Can you tell me on the way?"

The car was cold and the vinyl seats felt like eggshells cracking when they sat down. Kevin sat in the passenger's seat and remained very still with his hands in his lap. He looked straight ahead and his curly black hair was neat. He looked clean cut. He seemed normal in that moment, and Isabelle looked at him for a long time and she said, "We don't even know each other at all do we?"

Somehow the scene had neutralized the situation. It was so bizarre and strange and the road in front of them, the highway, was dark and empty. The little Datsun's headlights seemed to illuminate only a short distance in front of them and beyond them was darkness, around them was pitch black.

"I know you," Kevin said.

"OK." Isabelle pressed down on the gas and the little engine revved before the transmission caught up with the acceleration, then it smoothed out again.

There was silence for a long time and Isabelle could see that Kevin was growing sleepy. His head bobbed several times and he caught himself and turned and looked out of the window to keep himself awake. She thought of turning the wheel sharply. She thought of killing them both.

"It's a long drive," she said without looking at him, "talk to me. Tell me what you want to say to me."

"I don't have anything to say to you."

She nodded, considered asking him why he followed her, why he spent so much time keeping track of her.

"Do you love this guy?"

"Who?" Isabelle asked, she had forgotten about Jamie. Here she was in the car with Kevin, driving to Fairhaven.

"The guy in the Italian restaurant."

She looked at him while she drove, stared into his eyes a little too long, ignored the road.

"Watch the road," he said instinctively.

She turned and looked back at the road. It was power, driving him. Asking him questions. He was weak. He was nothing.

"Did you ask me if I love this guy?" she said back to him.

He didn't say anything but looked down at the floor. He shuffled his feet back and forth.

Letters

It is altogether new and exciting and it is full of possibility.

*Do you love him? Jamie?*

I don't know him. I wish you could see me in this dress. Tell me how I look. If I seem normal. Oh, I love the idea of being washed clean. Being free and young. Being someone who is not so scarred.

*Could that be just in your mind? Maybe you are already clean and unscarred.*

Maybe.

### Real Life

Isabelle pulled the car in front of the house, once aqua now a traditional New England white. The street was run down when she was a child, but now it was all refurbished. They had removed the asphalt and revealed cobble stone streets. There were old-fashioned iron street lamps that made a pretty yellow light. It was like when Paul Revere rode down the street on horseback. Everything was quiet and now the night air was freezing.

"Is this it?" Kevin asked.

Isabelle looked at him and nodded. "It was aqua."

"I know. You told me."

"When did I?"

"You've told me lots of times."

He stepped out of the car and on to the sidewalk. He stopped outside of the iron fence that surrounded the house. "It's pretty fancy now."



She walked over to him and stood next to him, put her hand on the ice-cold iron fence too. They were under one of the streetlights and the bulb flickered just a little. It seemed like a gas lamp.

"Why do you follow me?" she asked.

He paused a moment and started to say something then stopped.

"You know I don't like it," she said.

He nodded. "I thought you still loved me."

"Why? Would you think that?" She thought of the letters, the conversations. The plain sheets of white paper and her careful penmanship, the ink bleeding on to the page. She knew why.

"Why do you write to me?" he asked. She couldn't tell him that she had constructed a person out of him...or out of the things he says to her in his letters. The gentleness and the kindness, but in real life with the cold air that surrounded them and his...how could she think about it? His propensity to do something so cruel.

"I haven't written to you for a long time," Isabelle said.

"I haven't followed you for a long time."

"Three days, but then tonight."

He leaned closer to her; his face was almost touching hers. "What do you want?" he whispered. And their eyes were communicating so intensely and deeply that neither of them spoke for a moment.

Finally, Isabelle said, "I want to go up into the tower."

"There is no tower," Kevin said. "Can't you stop now?"

"How do you know that?" she asked, "You don't know anything. You can't even stop following a girl who doesn't want you. What do you know about stopping?"

He didn't flinch. "Look at this neighborhood, look at how things are now. They wouldn't keep an old tower. That was twenty years ago. Who knows if it even existed?"

Isabelle's eyes stayed fixed on his. "You're nice to me in the letters."

He nodded. "I love writing to you. I just want to know if you love this guy."

She didn't answer and started walking around to the side of the house. There was now a thick hedge of evergreen laurel that was about eight feet high. The bushes were planted so close together that they screened the back yard; it would be hard to push through them.

"You'd be able to see it from here, if it were as tall as you said--"

"Not with these hedges--"

She started to break through the wall of shrubs. It was much easier than she thought at first. The branches were thin and bent easily against her weight. When she got through, she saw a manicured yard with a pretty stone patio. She looked all around and finally, in the corner--where the chain linked fence used to be when the house was ramshackle and duplexed or tri-plexed--that would be where she would have seen it from the road stopped at the red light. The tower was still there and it was right in front of her. All of the truths of her life came pouring out of her. They washed Kevin away, her fear dissipated.

"There," Kevin pointed. She stood frozen for a moment. It didn't occur to her that it was strange that this relic remained, with everything else polished over nicely. Everything so posh and pretty and here was this rickety looking tower with one room still standing.

Letters

I climbed up the steps, hardly stable at all and it was dark and it occurred to me that maybe animals were living up there or maybe the wood planks were rotten in places. But, it wasn't at all. It was sturdy. It had lasted all these years. Kevin waited at the bottom and I climbed up high and when I got up top, it was a small -tiny, tiny-little space. The ceiling was only about four feet high. And, there were little shelves remaining, like coops. I looked down at the floors, and although it had been years I could tell immediately that at one time, it had been for birds, maybe pigeons, but they had all flown away or been released.

*No little girl?*

No. There was no little girl. I don't think one ever existed.

*What happened to Kevin?*

You walked away from me. I climbed down from the tower I could see your figure, a shadow making your way down the cobble stone street under the dim old street lamps.

Just before you got too far for me to make out, you turned to me and smiled. I raised my hand and gave you a slight wave. I waited a little while -until you disappeared completely. Until your shadow was fully absorbed by the nighttime. I got into the car and drove back to Boston. It was really funny, I didn't think one thought the whole way.

Do you remember?

*Yes.*

But still, sometimes see your name in the newspaper. You're still a lawyer and just the other day they had a picture of you drawn by a court artist. There you were, Kevin, in that strange courtroom-style sketch. I knew it was you. I recognized your eyes and your smile.

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## Where Has Margie Gone?

In all those years of marriage, Margie never thought Steve would leave her. In fact, through all her infatuations, years and years of the same story pinned nicely on to miscellaneous men, Margie tried to make the story fit like pieces of fabric up against a model, adjusting, readjusting, standing back, then making the alternations where necessary. It wasn't easy. People are not dress forms, they are always out of character. But, Margie worked with what she had: her imagination. In all those years of tending to fantasies about other men, it never occurred to her that Steve might leave her. That he might be unhappy. To Margie, Steve seemed faithful and loving.

The story line always started with Steve dying. It was a swift, completely unfortunate tragedy whereby Steve was rendered conveniently out of the picture. Years like this. Each day dream -the stream of constant imaginary stories-- had a prologue that she elaborate on, just enough to absolve her of guilt. To get to the meat of the plot-- there would be a car accident, or heart attack, or the wrong place at the wrong time, an unnecessary victim of an pointless crime. Something like: Steve walks into a convenience store for a pack of gum. Bam, its over. Then the fantasies began. They were the making of epic love stories.

In reality, she didn't want Steve to die, but it was the only scenario she could conceive of to situate her fantasies, to be available -being widowed was perfect, it cast a kind of forlorn need over her character, a wistful vulnerability. Never once did she imagine infidelity, nor did she ever

pretend she was divorced. She wasn't that kind of woman; raised Catholic, an extra-marital affair was out of the question.

She just wanted the dream: like that period from 1999-2003 with the neighbor who resembled Captain Von Trapp. That fantasy lasted all those years. Once in a while there had been times when Margie thought:

this is slipping out. This is slipping into reality. Captain Von Trapp (her neighbor George) knows what I'm thinking. That I have been obsessively day dreaming about him.

She might panic like this if George passed by while she was working in the yard. Walking alongside his son on a tricycle, saying to her, "gorgeous flowers" Margie might wince and swallow hard.

Captain Von Trapp knows. George can see through this transparent illusion-my real life, the appearance of a housewife, gardening.

But, in reality he probably hadn't seen through her. And besides if he'd recognized an attraction and reciprocated -in those benign interactions-- Margie maybe would have come to see that George wasn't really even that much like the Captain. He was close enough in appearance, close enough to how Captain von Trap looked after he had softened, after he had fallen in love with Julie Andrews. Of course the real George was married so in the daydream-which had become elaborately complicated--his wife had some rotten fate too before the daydream would start. Fast. Uncomplicated.

Then, with all complications addressed, it would resume. It was the same fantasy over and over. The story line a reenactment of something Margie couldn't exactly put her finger on.

Sitting at a stop light with just the right soft rock playing: Nora Jones or Dave Matthews, then it would commence. The light, the color obscuring her field of vision and all of Margie's life, the tedium in particular; all of it giving way to the romantic story that caused her to blush or bat her eyes. Margie the star of the rom-com, caught in some quirky coincidence, something that would happen to Meg Ryan. It was the incarnation of "high estrogen levels" the fertility doctor told her year after year. Her estrogen was four times that of the normal woman. A normal woman. "A classic case of hysteria."

No one would ever believe her and even the one or two friends she confided in about her fantasies thought, sure it's your estrogen, really they thought something is wrong between you and Steve. And, this would scare her. It would scare her down deep. Down to the core. She sometimes worried she was crazy, but she had heard once that if you are truly crazy, you don't know it. And, more importantly, you can't control it. Insanity is obvious to everyone around you. If she were insane she would not be such an effective, convincing wife and mother. It wouldn't be possible.

So the stoplight would change from yellow to red and in that pause, that necessary respite she would indulge. And, Dave Matthew would describe the "crash" and she would feel the romantic feelings wash over her and Captain Von Trapp -her neighbor George-- would enter her mind: his broad chest and the way his hair would wisp over his forehead, that smile and all that strength and wealth. Part of it was that Margie imagined herself perfectly, entirely safe with Captain Von Trapp. And there were several stories that might be running and one would just enter seamlessly, simultaneously with real life. Like with a glimpse of herself in the rear view

mirror, just a certain angle of her face. It was the way the Captain's eyes looked at her. A kind of speaking to her. And, she might say something like "I thought you hated me."

He would look down, he would look at the ground and whisper "no." There would be a long pause and then he would stare into her eyes again, just the way he looked into Julie Andrew's eyes. And, then he would say, "just the opposite." It was tender and strong. It was the exact combination to her heart. A way of talking to her and understanding her. And the wind on the coast would rush past them, her hair tangled in her face and he would put both hands on her face, stare for a long moment and then--

Then the car behind her would beep. Green light. Time to go. Was it wrong to escape in those 90 seconds? Was it harmful? Yes, somewhere deep down, maybe Margie knew that this was some kind of illness. Maybe it was an addiction, or a some other kind of mental illness. And, she knew that this had been with her long before Steve. It had been with her since she was twelve and there was a boy named Martin and she imagined him saying things to her. Things like "I like you" and "do you want to go out with me?" A glass bottle of Fanta in his hand. He would take a sip and then hold it out for her, and she would take a sip as well. His eyes would watch her as she held the bottle to her lips. "Do you want to go out with me?" And it filled such a hungry, barren place inside of her and it took the place of everything else. And, where things were pale, it became vibrant. And, when she was twelve she took the idea of Martin everywhere with her. Adults would talk to her ya ya ya because really, she was in cut off shorts and a halter top in her imagination. She was standing next to the soda machine and Martin was putting money in and smiling at her. After Martin -after she moved away from his neighborhood-- there was Craig, and then when her teenage years hit, it was some teenage high school idol. At times, it was movie

stars, but since she has been married, it has been neighbors, friends, once it was the picture of an author on the back of a novel. Men who resemble Captain Von Trapp. That smile, those deep sparkling eyes, outside in the gazebo "And have you?" He had asked Julie Andrews. "Have you found love? Your purpose?"

"I have."

This is not the reason her marriage failed. In fact, her marriage existed separate from this. And, this secret, this luscious and complicated secret was a burden too-or the guilt was. And, she remembered her friend Jill saying "whatever gets you through the day." Jill was talking about one of the gardeners who worked on her yard every week. Tall and muscular. Margie had seen him many times but when Jill said that Margie had the feeling that this wasn't some criminal thing, it just was. Women had fantasies. But, Margie thought perhaps most people just let it pass, like a thought or a breeze and it didn't stay lodged inside of them becoming a compulsion. And she imagined that other women's stories weren't as elaborate, long running. They were just a quick flirtation before heading off to the gym or the grocery store.

And, often, very often she nudged her mind back into appropriate thinking. Told herself how to behave like a normal person. And, when the feeling or a thought entered her mind, she used Buddhism or what she thought was Buddhism to gently steer the thought away, let it pass, not linger, not indulge.

Then everything changed. One day, Steve came home; it was a night like any other. Well, no, it was different because on that particular night she hadn't been imagining the Captain. She had been nudging the thought of him away all day; and she had a particular kind of confidence in herself because she felt free. Emancipated.



She had just not really done much of anything that day. It was the kind of day where she concluded why not? Why shouldn't I take a day off? And, the laundry was in piles on the bathroom floor, and the dishes were in the sink. The TV was on and Oprah was interviewing a writer who had just written a book about a young girl from the south who came of age during the depression. It looked like a good book, long but good. And, the writer was pretty, articulate. Not old enough to write a book that thick.

Steve walked in and turned the TV off. He sat on the couch next to her and just stared at her. His eyes looked impatient and almost fatherly. He was smiling but kind of trembling and Margie thought maybe someone had been hurt. Maybe his aunt had fallen again. Maybe someone died. Someone from work, a bookkeeper whose name she may have heard once or twice, but someone Steve knew. Something terrible had happened.

But, it wasn't that at all. Steve started, "There is this person-woman..."

And Marge nodded and she was waiting to hear the details: cancer, or a car accident. Maybe she had been a drinker. Still tragic, but some plausible reasons for this unexpected death. She was probably young and Margie thought about how pointless life seems sometimes when someone that young dies. The only young woman she could remember from Steve's work was the secretary, the pretty one who looked like Kate Hudson. The adorable young woman with an inordinate amount of confidence. Gorgeous blue eyes--

"Are you listening to me?"

And Margie nodded yes. She was listening; she was also trying to construct an image of what might have happened. She could do both at the same time.

She nodded again. "Of course."

"And, we are going to get married."

It was out of place. "We - are-going-to-get-married." Each word, each syllable actually, lodged itself slowly in her consciousness. The words didn't go together. So, Margie at first thought she misheard and somehow Steve was asking her to marry him again, but that wouldn't fit either because they were already married. She tried to remember how he started this: there - is - this-person-a-woman. And, then and-we-are-going-to-get-married.

"Who?" Margie asked, but as often happens with tragic news, it actually registered just the moment after she had asked for clarification so she immediately added "you and this girl?"

His face took on the expression of Captain Von Trapp; a certain softness when he heard Margie say "this girl." How old fashioned it was to call a lover "girl" as in "girl and beau." The romance of it almost made it all right.

Except they had been married 18 years.

He nodded.

"You and this girl are going to get married?"

He nodded.

She leaned back on the couch and looked up at the ceiling fan, three little chains that controlled the light and the speed of the fan. Her muscles felt completely limp as if she had no feeling in them whatsoever, particularly in her arms. She looked back at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," he said, "you've been so far away."

"Oh" she said, and nodded.

And all at once, everything was empty. The house was empty; her thoughts were absent. It was the numbness, it permeated all of her and she wasn't exactly sad. It was just this enormous shift. Another person's life had been placed in front of her and she was supposed to figure it out like a maze: this is how divorcee's manage. Divorcee. It had a kind of 1970s women's lib connotation. It was crazy bizarre and although she was the same person: friendly, sweet; she was also something else. She was mature about it. She did now what she had to do. Just as back then a few months ago-forever now-- when she was married to Steve. She just did what life asked of her. And, without Steve she had to return to work, to accounting. No time for daydreaming as her father used to say. It made her laugh to think about it. But, being back at work was good. It was a nice labyrinth of concrete logic with solvable problems, puzzles and mazes of categories and columns and sub totals. Accounts receivable, debt, and revenue. Amounts of things that were real, measurable, unemotional. And after a day of work, or even a few hours her body felt exorcised of all the things right there below the surface: a kind of emotional debt.

Along with all of these changes, there was no Captain Von Trapp. It was a noticeable difference: at stoplights, the drive to the businesses to do the books, picking up Aiden from school. She was solidly now in the center of her life, and really, really and truly, she felt nothing for the Captain. She was no longer jealous of Maria, their love affair. That was their life, this was hers.

If she happened to be in the garden and if George walked by with his younger child, now a toddler. If George smiled at her, it wasn't Captain Von Trapp's smile at all. It was her neighbor George's smile; and, she didn't imagine him walking towards her. She didn't feel the adolescent excitement in the gazebo. There were no waves of anticipation as her mind transposed the story

of an imaginary love affair on her neighbor. Someone else's husband. If he happened to say, "The dogwood is beautiful," she might just stare up at the pink star-pointed flowers and smile. She might stand under its fragrant canopy and nod politely without much notice.

When Steve would come pick up Aiden, his new wife in the car --she wasn't even young or nearly as pretty as Margie, she didn't wear make up or really look very fashionable at all--when Steve would come to the door, Margie would stare blankly at him: this empty canvas. She knew she had feelings somewhere but it was as though they had evaporated--or more just drained out of her body that day on the couch when he said that he was marrying someone else. It was so startling, so shocking. And, now she knew a different life, she had become a different person and when she stared past Steve and watched his new wife, Erica, help Aiden into the car, she hoped she would see that glassy eyed, day dreaming expression that she herself must have worn for so many years. She hoped to see that same look in Erica's face, but it was absent. Margie became stiff around Steve. He would hug her and she would hug him back, but not really feel any affection.

One afternoon Margie's neighbor Lindley came to the door. Lindley was George's wife. She wanted to invite Margie to a small birthday party; a gathering at their house. It was odd to Margie but she smiled and accepted. Apparently, George "loves her garden." He always "talked about it," he had been "wanting to get to know Margie and Steve."

"Steve doesn't live here anymore," Margie said to the woman, the tall, thin woman that was George's wife. The one she had killed in her imagination so many times. Sometimes, Margie remembered now, it was a head-on collision on route 5 that claimed the life of both Lindley and

Steve, all at once Bam done. And then immediately after the wake, the romance between her and The Captain would start up "we are so alone, the two of us."

"But we have each other."

It seemed so absurd to Margie now that she almost wanted to tell Lindley, but it was impossible. Of course, it was impossible. How do you say, I've been imagining you in a tragic accident for years now. And then I imagined myself falling in love with your husband. Don't you get it? It's hysterical. No it wasn't.

"Oh-" Lindley said. And, then it was awkward, "well, we would love for you to come - just you. Where is Steve? Do you mind me asking?"

Margie shook her head and she had the feeling she should invite her in, but she didn't want to. She wanted to be alone. "He married someone else." Because really that is what it was. They didn't break up. They didn't just get divorce. There was none of that: the fighting, the years of emptiness between them, trial separation after trial separation. No. He just married someone else, moved from one life into the next without really much disturbance. It was surgical: he brought the paper for her to sign that night just after Oprah held up the book, the book about the girl in rural Alabama. Margie had bit her lip, pretended to read the pages of legal jargon on the table in front of her, but in the end she just went ahead and signed. And, then that night Margie just made sense of it the best she could: Steve is getting married. Strange as it seems, the divorce is a technicality, a preamble to this new life he's moving into. She knew now that there had been an affair and there had been years of infatuation between Steve and Erica. As horrible as it was, Margie realized, hadn't she been doing the same to Steve? The waltzes under the gazebo were beautiful and all that time together with her imagination, wasn't that infidelity in some

philosophical sense? The only difference was that it had evaporated; and, now Steve was married to someone else. And, Margie was alone.

"Erica-he's married to someone named Erica," Margie said to her neighbor. She nodded her head, confirming this fact for herself again and again. And Lindley shifted her weight from one long leg to the other and looked down at the painted porch. She bit her lip and looked up at Margie.

"Would you like to come? It's on Saturday."

Margie nodded, "yeah, that sounds nice. I would love to come."

It was quiet and a car passed on the street, and Lindley turned to look as if this were her cue to do something. "I should get back George has both the kids."

"Oh sure, no problem. Ok, see you Saturday."

"Yeah, see you Saturday-6:30, ok?"

Margie went into her house and sat on the couch. The room was empty and quiet. Everything was in its place. She looked out of the window at the vines of clematis that climbed in deep green leaves and bright purple flowers over the pergola attached to the front of the porch. She saw the honeysuckle intertwined with the other vines and bright blue iris's bordered the neighbor's house. Everything was healthy and lush. Margie leaned her head back and tried to imagine it. She tried to conjure the fantasy. For a moment, she felt the wave of longing, yearning. The infatuation. It was like a machine that started up, like a cat purring. And then she kept thinking over and over like whiskers on kittens and these are a few of my favorite things... It was amusing to have this impish feeling, but there was no story, no fantasy left.

On Saturday she put on a pretty dress. It was one of the one's that Steve had always loved: a light silk dress with a floral pattern. It was cheery and the sleeves were sheer, split at the shoulder. The collar plunged, but not too deeply. The dress was feminine, soft. She pulled her auburn hair back in barrettes, on the side. She looked in the mirror and she didn't know how she looked. She imagined who might be at this suburban party. Probably families with children and everyone coupled up. She wondered why George wanted her there in the first place. Maybe he had read her mind all these years. Maybe he had felt her ongoing electric, contagious infatuation. Just as she had been far away from Steve, maybe she had been intimate with George. She thought of Lindley and she washed the thought from her mind. It was never that way in the fantasy. It was never someone's husband. It was a widower, a wealthy captain in the navy. Seven children and a beautiful landscape. It was an inevitable love, because it was true love. She whispered "true love" and watched her lips in the mirror. She applied more coral lipstick and stared at herself momentarily. It hurt to be so lonely.

The party was inside George & Lindley's old Craftsman house. There were a lot of people moving about the rooms and it looked like one of those old professor's houses that you see in movies, where intellectual and creative people move about sharing stories or discussing avante garde topics. She expected someone to yell something like There is no humanity! Damn it! We are all just atoms moving around in a pile of dog shit! Something like that. Margie stood awkwardly at first by a tall wooden bookcase. She spent some time scanning the books, even picking up one or two and flipping the pages. Theirs was a collection of literature from the 1940s, 50s and 60s hard cover, first editions: *Lolita*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Sound and The Fury*. There was a glass encased cabinet half way down that held old botanical books, some of

the titles she didn't even understand: Orchids of Australia, Flora of Java, The Genus Phyllospadix-- Margie didn't open the cabinet, but her eyes scanned the titles. She looked up and George was in front of her, standing, holding two martinis. He did look remarkably like Captain Von Trapp at that moment in his black crewneck sweater and dark pants. His brown hair formed a cowlick near the center.

"I am so glad that you could make it."

Margie smiled. "I am so surprised by your house...just a few doors down."

"And why is that?" he asked. He was different somehow.

"Oh, I don't know--happy birthday" she said and he handed her one of the martinis and he held his up to toast.

"To gardening"

"To gardening" she said.

It was awkward for a moment and Margie looked around the room, to the right was the living room with a light green couch, 1940s style and a large fireplace made of stone with arts and crafts tiles was in the center of the room. There was a woman on the couch that looked remarkably like Meryl Streep--so much so that it took Margie's attention away from George momentarily. Yes, it was the same heart shaped face, and small, pursed lips. Margie couldn't help but notice her. The woman looked up and her eyes met Margie's. . The woman said something to the other woman sitting beside her, but kept her eyes on Margie. It wasn't until George touched her shoulder, leaned closer and said something that she looked away, broke the connection with this woman. But, this connection it was important; a kind of burning spreading inside of Margie. And, Margie didn't know why.



"I wanted to ask you about Gardening."

"What?" Margie was distracted. "Oh I don't garden much these days. I am back at work."

"Lindley told me about your husband."

Margie nodded and took a sip. The martini was dry and it was ice cold, it slid down her throat and she felt a magnetic numbness overtake her. Her eyes wandered back to the woman on the couch and the woman looked up and glanced at Margie briefly then she looked away. And, there was something-what? She thought. Cataclysmic...that wasn't the right word, but in a sense it was exactly the right word. There was something cataclysmic happening, destroying parts of her, inside parts that were molecular. Parts that she hadn't managed to ever feel or find inside of herself before.

She didn't hear George. She hadn't heard what he was saying to her, but now she was back and he was smiling and he did look exactly like the Capitan and a part of Margie wondered if George knew that and with his name, what a coincidence it was, except the movie was from a different era...how many contemporaries would remember the look of George Von Trapp and then make the connection? It was too long ago; but, Margie remembered. She remembered all of it. The words the Capitan had used and the way he looked. She almost equally remembered Julie Andrews and all of that innocence-a girl not a woman a girl knowing nothing else. Knowing nothing but this man's definition of her and in that she found a perfect completion. She liked what he saw. She liked herself in his eyes. Maria.

"Would it be weird?" he asked.

"Would what be weird," she said back, returning to time and place.

"To kiss your neighbor?"

Here it was: a script from the fantasy. No, Steve wasn't dead. He was gone. And, Lindley, Margie didn't even know Lindley. But, it would be weird to kiss your married neighbor. But, maybe this is what people do. This is what people who don't fantasize, but instead live, do.

"I don't know," she said and "I don't know if it would be weird or not."

His eyes filled with attraction, the deep connection --the heat-- and in no time, somehow she was in the back yard and they were sitting on a wooden glider, underneath an arbor that was abundant with grapes: green, red and purple. And, bunches hung overhead and Margie could hear the wasps hissing around up there, just above them. And, this was close to the scene at the Von Trapp estate; this arbor was almost a gazebo. It was just about the same nighttime, summer light that Maria and the Captain embraced under. George leaned close to her and his lips found hers. And, his hand was on her cheek and they kissed for a while, a long time. Now and again he looked up at her, his fingers found strands of hair and brushed them back away from her face.

"What are we doing?" he finally whispered softly. He looked at the ground and then he smiled back up at her. It was wrong and it was weird to kiss her neighbor, but she really didn't care about that. She didn't care about Lindley or any of it.

She pulled away and smiled at him "did you know," she said and laughed a little. "Do you know that you look exactly like Captain Von Trapp from the sound of music?"

A smile crossed his lips and even though it was dark, Margie could see that he was blushing. "Do I?"

"You do. You should watch the movie again some time. Even some of your mannerisms."

"I guess I have been told that before."

"That is why I was attracted to you," she said, "I used to daydream about you-or" She wasn't about to say that she daydreamed about Captain von Trapp.

"And I you." He said and his voice seemed to have the cadence of an English Accent.

She held her finger to her lip and she stared at him. None of this was very nice. She wondered if this was how things had started with Steve and Erica. Just a kind of selfish indulgence that turned into a friendship that became and formed something deeper and more solid than what she and Steve had built together for eighteen years.

"I should go."

"What do you think we should do?" he asked and there was a helplessness in his voice.

"Nothing," she said. "This is all we should do."

He nodded and she stood up and walked back into the party. He didn't follow her. The house was much less crowded when she went back in. Lindley was in a deep, absorbing conversation with two women standing around the kitchen island. Her long hair was held back in a pretty pony tale and her wiry muscular stature made her look sophisticated, like a Parisian model. George's wife. Margie could feel a violent storm erupting inside of her and she couldn't tell what it was. It was a kind of panic and anger and it was churning and percolating and alternating between terror and rage and the lights seemed to flicker in front of her eyes and things started turning black and for an instant she thought that she would faint or die even.

Somehow she made it the several houses down to her house. She unlocked the door and walked into the dark house. It was quiet and the contrast between this house, this experience and George's was like ice water being thrown at her. She lay down on the couch and as she let her head fall back on the pillow, the tears started to pour from her and she cried so deeply that she

almost couldn't catch her breath. She almost couldn't keep her moans and cries quiet. She was afraid someone would walk by on their way back from the party. She was afraid that George would hear and want to come to her rescue. When she finally stopped crying she opened her eyes and stared at the darkness. Here she was, all alone.

"All alone" she whispered to the empty room. Then, her mind flashed on the woman who looked like Meryl Streep. Her mind stayed on the vision. She closed her eyes and time and again, her thoughts landed on the image of that face; and, to Margie it meant something.

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## Motherhood

Today the wind is like liquid through the trees, so fluid it leaves a trace. Juliet is at the park watching Stella who is playing with three boys and a girl. The girl wins the race to the top of the climbing structure. She beats a little boy named "Emanuel"

"Emanuel!" His mother hollers "get over here, NOW!" He is getting in trouble for ignoring his mother.

"I'm in a race right NOW!" he yells, just as impatient with her as she was with him. The little girl with the blonde pageboy hair cut is standing at the top. The climbing structure is a tall web made of rope, like four pirate nets forming a large three-dimensional triangle. The little girl is high up, probably fifteen feet, at least. She is jumping up and down, "I won, I won, I won," she yells.

Juliet looks up. Stella is half way down the jungle gym, content to find a spot where she is still safe. Juliet's stomach feels like it is going to burst. It is a time bomb: both numb and fleshy.

Not that far along...

Whose voice was that? Her own, the doctor's? The nurse's? The lady at the pharmacy's?

Necrotic: that word had bored its way into her every experience for two days. "Necrotic" whatever it meant. Juliet had never heard the word before, but there it was an invasive little, penetrating, little thought. Finally, two nights ago, she looked it up.

"Necrotic: synonymous with dead. Dead tissue." For a fleeting second—less than that—she knew what it had meant for her to have been obsessively thinking that particular word. She

must have heard it somewhere. She must have known, intuitively, that she had miscarried. But, then she rationalized "So what? So what if a word pops up in my head. It doesn't mean I've lost the baby."

The baby. That is how it is in your mind. The baby. And, the idea of the baby begins to take up the space that the baby will eventually occupy—not all of it, just enough to create an opening in an already full life.

But there was that thought. Necrotic and it was invading the baby's space. In her mind.

So, for two days, she had ignored it. Ignored it like one of those little cartoon devils sitting on the shoulder, tempting, prodding, reminding, nudging. So for two days:

doing the dishes, necrotic,

swallowing down prenatal horse pills, necrotic,

on a conference call with the marketing team in New York,

Necrotic.

"Not this time" she had whispered to God while driving. REO Speed Wagon was playing on some oldies station and she drove and cried and sang along between sobs "keep on lovin you..." The song was so cheesy, but accepting it, singing it to the baby was a humbling, stupid compromise that didn't make any sense except for right at that moment.

Stella comes over and sits down.

"Snack" she says holding out a hand.

"You could say please."

"Snack please."

Juliet removes a plastic bag of cereal out of her purse. She hands it to Stella.

Stella munches and Juliet stares out into the playground that has emptied out except for the girl with the pageboy hair cut.

"Puffins are deceptively good" Stella says without smiling, without realizing how adult like that sounds on a little girl. It makes it cute.

"Yeah?" Juliet says and puts her large, dark sunglasses on. Her eyes fill. "That's good."

The little girl with the pageboy is standing in front of the play structure with her hands on her hips. "Come on Stella. Stella!" She jumps up and down for emphasis.

Juliet thinks of Tennessee Williams' Stanley. Stella! Stella! This couldn't be the first time she has thought of her daughter's name that way.

"Go play" Juliet says.

"You said I can't play while eating my snack."

"It's ok," Juliet whispers, "Just don't hang upside down while you're eating."

"What?" Stella scrunches up her nose and Juliet examines her freckled face and pug nose, curly red hair.

"Just don't, ok? Go on," Juliet says again, now irritated.

Stella stands up and runs over to the girl. Juliet watches her open the bag and the other girl sticks her dirty hand inside and grabs some pieces of cereal. Juliet feels the warm tears run down her face and she wipes her eyes inconspicuously under her glasses. She wants the tears to stop and, at the same time, she wants to keep crying. She looks out over the expansive field of clover. They are at the playground at the Waldorf School. School is now out for summer and so the playground is open to the public.

"It's growing normally, but it's too small."

Small. So what? Juliet was little too. She was only 5'3" Stella was only 6 lbs 4 oz when she was born, but when she thought about it, even she knew that rule didn't apply to embryos.

The bees now flutter over the little round, white flowers. Stella climbs the giant rope jungle gym. She hangs upside down by her knees. Juliet has the urge to yell "I told you not to do that with cereal in your mouth!" But, she is so numb and she doesn't want to be a helicopter mom. She imagines the puffin melting into chocolate goo. How could you choke upside down anyway? It is counterintuitive. The little girl with the pageboy hair cut hangs next to her, and together they are somehow sharing the bag of puffins. Juliet raises her eyebrows and looks down. Her shirt is loose and she purses her lips and smoothes the fabric over her jeans. What? She thinks. What now? She looks up at Stella and the sun is bright. She squints and thinks, what if Stella falls? Falls right now? And it is a kind of stream of consciousness thought. It maybe is anger. Maybe she wants Stella to fall. And, she can run save her. Brush off her child. She can have a way to make it better.

"What?" Stella yells and does some kind of flip off of the jungle gym.

Juliet shakes her head. Nothing.

The little necrotic thing was there still suspended in the sac the size of a quarter. Juliet saw it on the dark screen and she felt the gravity of the silence and stillness on the monitor. No thumpthumpthumpthump in a matter of seconds. No little bird black and gray flashing from the sac. Juliet knew even before the doctor's gentle eyes looked at Juliet, "a no go," he had whispered clicking some keys on a keyboard attached to the monitor. And when he did he zoomed in closer. And when he did Juliet saw what looked like a grainy, white tadpole. It was so magnified it



looked blurry, a blurry white tadpole in a small circle of black. And there was no rhythm of life. No little beating heart.

"Oh well," Juliet had said, but her voice had trembled, "I wasn't trying. It just happened." The opposite of a teenager. She had felt foolish for being so old.

"It was 50/50," he had told her all along. But when it died he had made a sad, sympathetic frown. Juliet felt undeserving of even that: a doctor's bedside kindness. Sensitivity training, Juliet thought.

A group of four or five young, pudgy Waldorf moms arrive and sit down in the grassy, cloverly field. Waldorf Moms. Juliet thinks, now feeling justified in her judgment. Under other circumstances she would have reserved her disdain for very close friends. Allies in motherhood. To everyone else she would have said, "I think it is great for everyone to raise their kids the way they want." Juliet shakes her head. No she doesn't think that. At this moment, she thinks that these mothers are self-righteous and raising little self righteous children with their long, drawn out explanations of organic cotton diapers, wearing babies on form fitting slings, no make up, clogs. They sit down in a circle. Breast-feeding, almost immediately. Changing soiled diapers. One woman opens a bell jar of water and takes a giant, satisfying gulp. Juliet thinks as she watches them that she could have developed a marketing strategy and predicted the green revolution, postured general mills for a planned transition to "organic."

She has the skills.

She didn't need this little necrotic thing inside of her to make her life any more complete. It had been completely complete with Stella and the career. She inhales a deep breath and watches the wind rush through the large cherry tree. The kids are now in the little enclosed farm

area. Stella is sitting with her new friend on a bale of hay. A little boy has joined them now, one of the Waldorf kids. Juliet looks around at the farm play area. It is nice, designed to look like a place out in the country: big open space, shaded by large cherry trees, bales of hay piled in several different areas. A garden overgrown with grapes and fennel.

Serene.

The moms are still sitting on the large quilt blankets. Hippies were what her father used to call people like that. Anne pushes back her sunglasses and she lets the tears fall down her cheeks. She pulls her glasses back down as she gently wipes her face.

It was horrible. Dark, private and horrible. The room was almost black with the glow and hum of the ultrasound monitor. She had been laying on the table in just a jony, naked underneath. What Juliet had thought about—in that moment—was how much better this was than the first miscarriage, almost a year before. Almost exactly. That was worse. Some obstetrician she had found on an Internet site. She had googled "feminist OBGYN, Portland." It was a link on a site called "urban mammas." It sounded feminist to Juliet: Every woman's Health Center. And they were horrible. So with this pregnancy, she did her research. She found "The Fertility Clinic" at the University Hospital. Any indulgence for high-risk pregnancy, which being "advanced maternal age" Juliet was. She got as many HCG level blood tests as she required (Juliet had requested seven in those six weeks). A few hours after each blood test, she took the numbers over the phone and plugged them into a spreadsheet and calculated their rate of increase. Graphed it. Just like with the markets. The data tells the story. Not profits but Profit Margins. Not HCG level increases but rate of increases. It was supposed to double every day. But, it was not doubling. It went from 2300 to 3500. At five weeks the range was supposed to be

2,580-6,530, at six weeks the range was supposed to be: 11,230-25,640, not 3500. "Did you say 3500 or 35,000?" Juliet had asked. 35,000 could have been twins. A little excitement leapt in her heart. Twins? She hadn't considered that before.

"No dear, it is 3500."

"That's not good."

"It's not bad. It's still rising. It's hard waiting. Isn't it?" The nurse's voice over the phone had asked Juliet.

And, because she was so vulnerable. Juliet had said, "It is really hard this time. I was pregnant before and I didn't want it. But, I want this one." The confession felt like a stone had been surgically removed from her chest. But, it didn't change the fear and doubt. The wish. The wish that against the odds, she would be one of those women she had read about on the Internet. "I had a HEALTHY baby at 44! My baby measured small until the 12th week! She was fine!"

There was no logical reason for God to answer her prayer. She was 42. She hadn't been trying: hadn't prepared her body, never taken the fertility drugs, she hadn't even really wanted a baby—at first. And the truth is. She wasn't even that nice of a person. That is the part she thought God was taking into account—for sure. In her own opinion, she wasn't the best mother she could be to Stella. The biggest confession: she was divorced, and the baby was the result of a really stupid two-week relationship. She was the anti-mother. Why would God move forward on this one?

Then she became attached to the idea. It would be different than with Stella—

Juliet is frozen, sitting here between now and what to do next. Why doesn't she just start bleeding? Go through a night of excruciating pain—like the other women like her on the internet had described—a cleansing, a release, an ending.

A process.

Stella and her friend are laughing and Juliet thinks, "Life goes on." This day isn't any different just because she found out this morning that she lost the baby.

Had a miscarriage. Not a baby yet. In her mind, maybe, but not according to the doctor. In fact, it was hardly even an embryo anymore. It had already started shrinking back into Juliet.

"What?"

"It dissolves back into the mother. Or, it becomes infected. Necrotic."

"Oh."

"Maybe that little guy had a reason for only staying a short while" the woman at the pharmacy had said when she filled her prescription for Cytotec the medicine to induce a miscarriage.

"Yeah," Juliet said, at first almost condescendingly. As if she might say, "yeah, that little guy wanted to be around for the batmitvah I attended last week." But, instead, Juliet started crying and nodded. "I was thinking that too. Maybe this was a message for me. Some kind of gift."

"It's so hard," the pharmacy clerk said. "I know." And, the lady's eyes were wet and the wrinkles around her fleshy face made her seem grandmotherly. And, it touched Juliet's heart. She needed the kindness.

Juliet notices that the two girls have removed their shoes and are filling the them with sand and putting the sand down their shirts and pants. Filling their clothes up.

"It's hard to let them be kids," a tender voice says. "Not to stop them from filling their clothes up with sand."

Juliet turns to see one of the chubby Waldorf moms standing next to her. The woman looks and seems youthful with brown hair and rosy cheeks. Skin that was olive and young with elasticity still in it. She has deep blue eyes, the color of the sky. She is holding a baby that is maybe eight months old. The baby is round and fat. Blowing bubbles with its tongue. One little hand on the mother's ear.

"That's a really beautiful baby," Juliet says softly.

"He's my little Buddha baby. He's all fattened up on mama's milk." The woman squeezes the baby tight and kisses his cheeks. The baby laughs. The mama lifts the baby and blows a raspberry into his belly.

Juliet looks back at Stella for a moment. Then she turns to the woman next to her. "My little girl wasn't a Buddha. I pumped milk and she drank it from a bottle. She didn't really like breast milk that much. She loved rice cereal. For some reason." Juliet pulls her large sunglasses on.

The Waldorf mother seemed unfazed. "Kids are unpredictable."

"Yeah," Juliet says, "they are. I brought her to work with me most of the time and I carried her around in a Bjorn and she napped during my meetings. I scheduled my life around her naps."

The woman's face softens a little. "That must have been nice. That is a really cool way to do it."

"Yeah," Juliet said softly, "it is."

The woman nods her head slowly and an awkwardness descends. The baby starts pulling the woman's hair, locks tangled in spit-covered fingers. He is putting his lips on his mama's cheeks.

Juliet walks closer to Stella. "Let's go Stella."

"You are not serious." Stella says and stares at Juliet, eyebrows raised in disbelief. For some reason, Juliet wishes her daughter's manner wasn't so adult like at this moment. It seems conspicuous.

"I am serious." Juliet says, "put your shoes on and we'll go to Dairy queen on the way home."

After saying it, Juliet freezes. Juliet imagines that Dairy Queen is the ultimate evidence against her ability to parent healthily and green: artificial flavoring, fast food, exploiting workers, raping the land.

"Can I have chocolate and vanilla mixed, dipped in butterscotch?" Stella negotiates.

"OK," Juliet says. She turns back to the woman with the baby and waves goodbye.

The young woman raises her hand and waves a friendly wave back. "See you."

Juliet feels small under the large cherry trees. She looks down at all the fruit on the ground, squishes a fat overripe cherry with her black pump.

She doesn't want to think about motherhood anymore today. She wants to lay down in her bed, in the dark and quiet. She wants to let the heaviness over take her. But she can't, it is just her. And Stella.

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## Circle K

Peggy sat behind the cash register and ripped open a carton of cigarettes. She pulled the long retractable metal sleeve from the rack above her head and slowly filled the tray, pack by pack. She was careful to get them all in straight otherwise, one end might get pinched with the rack snapped back into place and nobody would want to buy a pack with squished or bent cigarettes in it. She ripped another carton and a girl walked into the store. The bell rang its loud electronic peal and by eleven o'clock at night it kind of ran over her nerves like they were bare, exposed wires vulnerable to cold or heat or electricity. Her eyes were tired and dry and the discomfort was made worse by the white fluorescent lights. Everything in the Circle K / 24 Hours looked dingy and remarkably like the tapes you see on the TV news of a surveillance camera during a robbery.

"Can I fill it up on number 4?" the girl asked.

"Regular?" Peggy asked brusquely.

The girl nodded and threw a pack of gum on to the counter. Peggy looked at her. She didn't resent girls like this one. Not now that she was older. At 42 she didn't compare herself so much to others. The girl was young and pretty, in her twenties. Being young wasn't what made her attractive. It was a lightness to her. It was a niceness about her. A niceness that comes from not being hurt so much. Peggy had come to understand—and she curses herself for taking so long to figure it out—but at some point recently, Peggy realized that anybody—anybody—can be pretty and desirable and happy. But, at some point, it's too late. If too much has happened that

door closes. Peggy rung up the gas and gum and she tried to get the girl to look her in the eye while she did. Peggy had decided that she would smile at the girl if the girl smiled at her. It would be just a nice gesture. But, it would be a way to take some of the girl and give some of herself back. A part of Peggy was nervous and she thought she'd just smile any way. She should smile—it was actually part of her job responsibilities. But, the girl kept eyeing the scratch lottery cards and at one point while the credit card was processing the girl bent down real close to the glass and tried to make out the directions on one of the scratch cards.

"What's that one there do?" the girl sounded and acted like one of those teenagers on the MTV shows that Peggy's sons watch. Real World or Real Life or something like that. And, this was exactly the type of girl that Mike and Teddy would watch on the big screen TV. The girls would be rolling their eyes while putting on new earrings, gossiping about one of the other roommates or leaning back on a lawn chair by a pool painted toenails and an anklet. Maybe a tattoo somewhere.

"What?" Peggy asked. She deliberately made her voice deep because being as heavy set as she was she didn't want to have a high-pitched, squeaky voice. For obvious reasons.

"Is that a scrabble board game?" the girl said in a high pitched feminine voice, almost a southern drawl to it. It was just the slow, lingering way that young people spoke these days.

Peggy wanted to rip one of the cards and show it to the girl, but she could not rip one of the tickets unless it was paid for. State Lottery Rules and they are serious and tough about tampering with tickets. Peggy could get fired.

"Which one, the one there?" Peggy asked.



"Well it looks like a scrabble board, how do you play it?" And, Peggy imagined for a second her sons, Mike and Teddy with a girlfriend like that. Young, pretty. Happy. Someone who was going to go to college and maybe become a lawyer or own a business. Or, maybe even become what Peggy had wanted to become: a nurse. Not that Peggy didn't like the girls that her boys went out with. She was glad they had someone to love them and weren't lonely. This kind of girl promised an entirely different future. There would be possibilities with a girl like that instead of them marrying someone like Peggy herself: someone who had dreams but no idea how to go about making them happen.

Peggy had the feeling that she should just rip the ticket and give it to the girl. It was a five-dollar scratcher, a more expensive one, but Peggy could pay for it herself. She looked at the girl for a long time and the girl just kept staring at the card. "Do you make words and win money? Like a crossword puzzle or something?"

"Yeah, I think that is how it is done." Peggy said and her voice was softening. "Here, I'll just give you one free of charge."

The girl's blue eyes flashed up at Peggy suspiciously. Peggy noticed a gold stud earring in the girl's eyebrow. It made one of the eyebrows raise up a little higher than the other. It made the girl seem inquisitive. "Is that supposed to—are you supposed to do that?" the girl said flatly.

"It's ok," Peggy lied, "sometimes we do it just to—as a promotion to get customers to come back..."

"Really? To come back to the Circle K?" the girl asked incredulously. "OK." she almost mumbled as if she were a teenager and her mother had offered to buy the new "in" thing that everyone had. It was an almost sullen "I don't care—whatever" response that barely disguised the

joy at the unexpected fortune. She kind of leaned on the counter and squinted her eyes. Her blonde hair fell against her shoulder and Peggy looked at the girl's expression. She could see a piece of mint gum held in her teeth. The girl stopped chewing and stared at Peggy for a moment. "All right, that would be just great." The girl said and smiled a big happy smile.

Peggy smiled back and carefully tore a ticket from the roll. She felt a little sick about doing it. But, it wasn't a crime. It was just doing something nice for somebody and why shouldn't she? People buy drinks for people in bars. People take other people out to lunch.

But then a bolt of shame shot through Peggy, because she didn't know this girl. She didn't have a right to do something like that. People buy things for people when they know each other; they are nice when they are friends. Otherwise it is weird. Peggy could feel her face starting to turn red and she felt that she was a kind of sicko or that the girl would think that. And, Peggy handed the lottery ticket to the girl and didn't look back at her. Instead she turned to the cash register and said "Twenty-nine, fifty please." The girl had an debit card and at the same moment, that familiar electronic beep went off and Peggy looked up to see a young man who got into line behind the girl.

"Credit or Debit?" Peggy asked and her heart was beating ruthlessly. It was beating hard and Peggy wished she could just take a couple of deep breaths and calm herself down. She felt so exposed and sick about the lottery ticket that she couldn't stand it. She felt ashamed of the thoughts, which she could now clearly feel were wishes: she wished that a girl like that would go out with her sons. She wished that she had been that girl. It is like they say about coveting somebody or something. She coveted the girl.

She handed the girl the credit card receipt. Actually, just slid it across the counter and looked up at the man.

"I pumped twenty into pump 6." He said. "And a pack of Marlboros" Peggy put all of her attention into the man. She slid the rack of Marlboro's down from the overhead display and pulled a package out. "Twenty-four sixty" Peggy said almost not looking in the direction and she could see in her periphery that the girl was gone. And for a fleeting moment she thought she saw the man pull a gun out from his pocket. It was the way his hand moved slowly from his back pocket and just all of it in her periphery that made her shudder. And the little black wallet. Peggy gulped some air and her heart raced as her mind caught up with what was really happening. She was jumpy. Now everything was all wrong and screwed up. The man put a twenty and a five on the counter and walked out.

Marlboro man Peggy thought. No. He's just a boy.

She wished she hadn't given that ticket to the girl. Not only was it weird, but also she needed the five dollars. Peggy was mad at herself. She looked out of the large pane of glass, out into the parking lot. The lights from the street lamps were yellow and it was dark out. The ground glistened with new rain and cars passed on the road, one or two and then a lull. Nothing was happening. She looked up at the clock over the coke case: 11:45, only fifteen minutes until Steve got there. Peggy thought about the girl more. She imagined her scratching off the covering to the lottery ticket squares. Each little letter and Peggy wondered if the girl had uncovered two words; if she had won anything. In the whole year that Peggy had worked at Circle K there had never been more than a \$50 winner, and that had only happened a couple of times. She took five dollars out of her fanny pack and neatly rolled the remaining \$18 dollars back up and clipped it

with a silver money clip. When she looked at the money she felt as if the girl had stolen the ticket from her, taken her five dollars. Tricked her some how. And what if the girl had won? It would be at Peggy's expense. It should have been Peggy's winnings. She zipped the fanny pack and then punched the cash register keys and rung up the price for a lottery ticket. She was supposed to have scanned it but she had forgotten in all the commotion. So instead she just entered the override number for the lottery ticket card. Sometimes they get ripped and you can't scan them. She put the money in the register. It was done. All over with. Now she'd just have to wait for the feeling to pass—it wouldn't take long to forget about it.

Peggy looked up and saw the same young man as before, again standing at the counter. He hadn't left the store. How long had it been, Peggy wondered? Wasn't he just in there?

This time, the man—a boy really-- did have a gun. It was a small silver handgun. Not something you see often, if ever. And the barrel of the gun looked thin and short, too thin to be dangerous so at first Peggy didn't get it; but things became peculiar, time started to seem weird. It was because everything became bright and her senses were noticeably altered. Colors were sharp and a deadly silence took over the store. Not even the big refrigerators hummed. In its place was a kind of mental noise in Peggy's brain, a kind of whistling.

"Can I help you?" Peggy said and her voice was high pitched. It was almost a cry.

He raised his eyebrows and Peggy could feel something stir inside of her. At first it was a numbness, but that lasted only a fleeting second, then it was a kind of physical rabid fear. The kind you see children express when they are stuck: a foot twisted in a chair rung, or like the kid she had seen one time choking on a Charleston chew—right there in the store, the way his eyes grew large and he started frantically waving his hands and gasping. That was how Peggy felt.

And, then her mind thought about the alarm button right near the cash register. "When he tells you to open the register, gently flip the switch with one finger." That is what Steve had told her. Showed her using his pinky finger while hitting the big green button that opened the drawer. She had even practiced it; it was just a kind of reaching that would be impossible to catch on to. Except when someone is about to kill you, if they do catch on, they will kill you. That tiny little toy gun would shoot a real bullet in her heart or head and she would probably fall to the floor, and it wouldn't take long for life to leave her body. So, touching the button that alerted the police was a deadly venture. She weighed the odds, would he just take the money and leave or would something worse happen?

He raised the gun a little higher, and Peggy's eyes flashed on the reflection in the large pane of glass. It was an eerie bright fluorescent reflection and Peggy felt mocked by the boldness of the guy and at the same time, she had always expected it. She worked in a convenience store at night—although her manager said it is just as likely to happen any time of day as another—

She looked at his face: he was young, maybe twenty. He had a square face, a very square jaw and he had a goatee, dark brown mostly stubble. His eyes were brown; and even though his stature was similar to one of her teenage sons --Peggy saw something else. The boy looked empty. He didn't look drugged up or angry. He looked entirely empty. And, Peggy thought better of pressing the alarm. She figured in that moment, in the impenetrable emptiness of his eyes, that it would be best to give him the money. Just give it to him. And, let him leave. Steve would be there in a few minutes and if the guy got his money and got out of there, Steve could help her. He could call the police. So, that was the instantaneous plan that she decided to go with.

"You are going to open the cash register then you are going to lay down on the floor." He said slowly.

"My shift is over in ten minutes, someone will be—"

"And you are going to shut the fuck up." He said quietly as if there was someone in a nearby room that could hear him. Peggy had the feeling that the boy's demeanor and words were a carbon copy of someone else. Maybe an abusive father, someone like her own husband Jack who used a low, hushed threat to get what he wanted. Open the damned suitcase, Piggy. The way he said it was also a steely calm. It was the voice of someone who really, really and truly didn't care. And, Peggy decided maybe she should press the button.

"No." he said, and then corrected his instruction. "You are going to tell me which button to open the register then you are going to lay down on the floor."

Peggy nodded.

"I have two kids," Peggy said, "they are older, but they need me. I don't want you to kill me."

"I said shut up."

Peggy could feel herself start to cry. Blubbering. Jack used to say. "I just— Please sir, let me tell you something--"

He raised the gun higher and walked towards her. Would he just shoot her right there? Would he hit her with the gun? Why couldn't she just shut up? It was because her body had taken over. She would not shut up because she was about to die. Her body would do anything it could to preserve her life: try to run, or fight, or plead, or beg. It would do anything it could. And, no matter how hard her mind might try to control things, it couldn't. Her body and everything inside

of it was screaming to live and to be free again. To be free like she had been a moment before. But, by now an indelible burn had scorched and branded her.

Peggy couldn't shut up.

"I'll give you the money," Peggy said.

He walked around the counter. He stood next to her. She was trembling and he put the gun into her rib and he pushed it hard. It hurt. He looked at her and stared at her for a moment. "Show me how to open it, then lay down on the floor." For a split second he looked like a little boy about to cry. Like Mike or Teddy might have looked before they considered themselves too big to cry or plead. Before they had become men. Before they had stood up to Jack that last time. When they came in and found Peggy in her room, Jack at the kitchen table playing crossword, to make himself feel smart.

Her hand was shaking so hard that she accidentally pushed the green button that opened the drawer and the sound of it popping open --plastic with a kind of scraping against metal then, little bell sound that sounds when the register drawer pops open—it made them both startle. "What are you fucking stupid?" he said to her. "Lay the fuck down. Now!" It was hushed, but Peggy could tell the boy was scared, walked out too far on a ledge.

"I can't Peggy" and she was crying hard and she couldn't help it "I can't lay down there until you promise not to kill me."

He lifted the gun and held it up towards her face. "Don't fuck with me."

She nodded and she crouched down on the floor and it was a cramped space with the boxes of soda cups and empty milk crates that they used to sort papers and pieces of cardboard that they used as scrap paper or for little signs around the store. She felt large and conspicuous

and she lay down on the floor. She had the urge to cover her head and so even though her face felt uncomfortable with her forehead against the grimy Formica she put her hands over the back of her head, just in case.

"Don't say a fucking word," he said. She could hear him taking the money out of the register and each of the five spaces for bills went smack as he removed the money. She was breathing heavily and she was crying silently. She knew in her heart that he was going to turn around and shoot her. Shoot her in the head and it wouldn't matter to him at all. And, she thought about meanness and this was something else. This wasn't even human this was a kind of pointless evil. It didn't make any sense. She wanted to say something, somehow find out what was happening. She heard some shuffling and then the cigarette rack opened with a loud smack of metal. She heard him removing cigarette packs and she heard a plastic bag crinkle. She could tell from the sound that he was removing the packs and throwing them into the bag. She breathed heavily and she hated this time of waiting for him to decide if she even mattered to his plan. Did he care that she had seen him? His scruffy face, brown eyes, his goatee. Then she thought, he won't kill me. He would go to jail for a long time. He probably wouldn't get caught for robbery but to kill somebody. That was something else.

She felt it before she heard it, the door pealed with the familiar electronic whine. She heard it peal again. There was a moment of silence then she heard him jump or run around the counter. The door pealed again and then she heard a kind of yelp. Peggy's heart was beating and she was staring at the specks in the Formica, little brown and green dots that pits in the surface of the floor. What was happening? She felt a horror rush through her. Another person was involved.



Was it Steve sauntering in for his overnight shift? Then she heard a voice. It was the girl's voice. The girl who she had given the lottery ticket to.

"Lemme go," she said and her voice was trembling. It was a little girl voice. Peggy wanted to get up from the floor. She wanted to stand up and stop this whole business. She wanted that anger that she had with her boys with they had gone too far. Oh no you don't. Not in my house. But her body was limp, lifeless. She felt as if she were hiding under a bed. She was paralyzed.

"Get over here with me" Peggy heard him say and she heard loud thumps when his feet and the girl being part pushed part dragged back to the counter with him. Peggy could see if she slowly imperceptibly turned her head and strained her eyes. She could see the girl's little white sneakers and bare leg. There was a tattoo on her ankle. A small peach colored rose. The stem was green and hidden by the canvass shoe. And the boy had on running sneakers. They looked old, beat up. And, he had on jeans. Regular denim. Peggy was afraid but she turned her head so she could see what was happening. He had his arm around her neck, holding her below his shoulder. He was squeezing tight and the gun was right there in his hand. But he wasn't using the gun; he was just holding the girl and the gun kind of dangled there in front of the girl's face. The girl could easily reach up and fight him for the gun. Peggy's heart was beating fast. She wanted to do something. Could two people overtake this boy? It seemed plausible. But, would the girl fight back? Peggy needed something to fight with. She had the sense that the boy was just about finished and that he would drag the girl out with him. Peggy had a feeling that she knew what would happen to the girl, but she was so terrified she couldn't really move. She didn't want to die.

It was a selfish feeling. It was a its not my fault feeling that gave her permission to hide her head like a child, afraid of the dark. But, she could wait it out, ride it out like she had with Jack.

She clenched her teeth and waited another second.

The girl started to cry. "Please let me go." And, Peggy had that maternal feeling towards the girl. She realized that if she quickly scooted towards the boy she could grab his legs and pull him down to the ground. It might make him so off balance that he would fall over and drop the gun. But the three of them would be tangled up in a mess on the floor. What would happen? Would the boy run out of the store and just leave them there?

Peggy felt herself grow even more terrified and she felt like she was going to faint. She was going to just pass out on the floor.

"Ok," the man said, now just talking to the girl, "you are going to keep your fucking mouth shut, do you understand?" The boy was more forceful with the girl. He sounded older than he had with Peggy. Peggy could now see that he had the gun in the girl's ribs and had let go of her neck. The girl was crying and shaking. He held out the bag of cigarettes. "Carry this." But the girl couldn't move she was so afraid. He took the gun and hit her hard on the arm with it "wake up" and the girl took the bag, and when she did she was shaking so hard the bag made the sound of plastic rubbing against plastic.

In a moment, she heard the boy say, "Turn over old lady"

Peggy could feel herself obeying him and now she was lying on her back. She got a good look at the boy who seemed just the same age as the girl, they almost seemed like they could be together, except the look on the girl's face told a different story. Her long blond hair looked flat as if had already cried so much that her hair was now in flat, greasy streaks. Her make up was

running down her face, and her skin was ghostly white. She was shaking so hard it was making Peggy feel like she might throw up, like when you see a rodent partially run over when you are walking down the street. Part of it still intact, but the rest of it so smashed up that there would be no way for it to make it. The boy bent over Peggy and pointed the gun in her face. Peggy felt all the life and blood leave her and a sudden silence made her self, her soul evaporate. And in its place was a white numbness that was a kind of protection. It was God sitting beside her like she had heard happens when things are too much. As bad as things had been, things had never been too much before. It's over Peggy thought and she realized that Mike and Teddy would be ok. She realized that she was not much of anything on this earth. She could feel how things would close back up and how for all intents and purposes she hadn't really existed. But, then she felt her legs doing something. It wasn't embarrassing at all to lift her heavy thighs and draw them towards her body. It was such an unexpected and strange sight that no one moved. Peggy drew her legs towards her body and then in a violent thrust kicked the boy with both her legs. She kicked him in his knees and the force of her kick threw him hard against the counter, but he didn't fall and he didn't drop the gun. He was just shoved backwards. The cash register made a loud jangling noise then there was a silence. Peggy quickly rose and thrust her body close to the boy. She pushed him hard against the counter and he was so wedged in that he couldn't move. He couldn't raise the gun, and her heavy body was too much for him. Her face was close to his and now she could see the little boy in his eyes. The girl, who was standing next to them, screamed and ran out of the store. Peggy could see the headlights light up the store and flash on the boy's face as the girl pulled out of the parking lot.

"You are going to drop the gun and you are going to get out of here," Peggy said and she used the same voice she used when she was mad at her own boys. She pursed her lips and stared into his eyes. He licked his lips and clenched his teeth. Neither one of them moved. And, Peggy imagined the cars outside passing; if someone looked in what would they see? The two of them behind the counter, a frozen moment. A weird scene. The type of thing that a kid says to his parents Mom there's a fight in the store. The tired parents answering uh huh but not hearing. Or a young girl driving home, seeing inside but afraid. Not wanting to witness anything, turning her radio up and just continuing down the road.

Peggy heard the gun drop. The little metal thing sounded like a toy gun.

"Let me go, ma'am"

"I want you to stop doing this," Peggy said sternly.

The young man nodded.

"I'm going to let you go but first I want to tell me you'll never do this again."

The young man's eyes started to turn wet. He nodded and swallowed hard.

Peggy backed away and the young man started out slow, walking from behind the counter, then ran out of the store. Peggy could see his jean jacket and pants fade quickly as he rushed into the darkness.

Peggy stood in the white fluorescent light. She looked down at the gun on the floor. The tiny little thing. She picked it up and stood up. She held it in her hand, palm open. It was smaller than her whole hand. The gun seemed like a toy, like it couldn't possibly have killed her. She looked down at the cash register and then slowly pressed the little button, near the cash register, to call the police. She could see herself in the monitor that was above the counter. The

surveillance camera had seen the whole thing, captured it. She sat down on the stool by the checkout and waited. She placed the handgun on her lap and sat there staring at the large glass windows of the store. She didn't feel any particular way. She knew that sometime later she would feel something, but until the police got there she just let her senses return to her. And, they did slowly: the colors faded back into the washed out colors of nighttime in the convenience store, and the sound of the refrigerators started up. The high-pitched whistling that had been in her brain died down. For an instant, there was not a thing left in the world.

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## Sasha

Sasha wondered if it is dangerous to love a man like him. So cliché, like a love song. But, still she wondered. A man like what? She asked herself. So, he just got out of a bad relationship. That was nothing new. But, he had had many bad relationships and the casualties of them were the women: nervous wrecks, pathetic, and desperate. Maybe that was who he attracted in the first place; or maybe that is what they became after being with him. Sasha didn't know. And, in all these years, she hadn't considered anything with him at all. She had never noticed that he was in fact handsome. He was tall and had a strong frame. He still dressed like he had twenty years ago, in jeans and a t-shirt. He had wavy dark brown hair and blue eyes. His skin was tanned and Sasha thought it cute that he still wore a rope-braided bracelet. The kind that shrinks on your wrist and you have to cut off with a knife.

Sasha counted the money in the cash register again. She was responsible that is why she was in charge of the till. And as she counted the fives, tens, and twenties, his smile crossed her mind, not once but a lot of times. And when she had said to him earlier, "should I call Brad and tell them no bread tomorrow?"

"Sure. Forget the bread. Who needs it.?" And, there was a lilt in his voice and kind of husky drawl, a confidence. And the way he spoke to her with his eyes, it was only for her and it scared her to have someone break through and see inside of her, to understand her. That was the truth that she felt and tried to hide from herself: that she wanted someone to understand her.

He smiled and his eyes sparkled. He was so different at running the store than his father Ray had been. Ray was all business, all the time. And, when Sasha's mother, Barbara, would call in sick, the one or two times in twenty-five years, Ray would say "nope. Sorry Barbara. I'll be over to pick you up. We need the meat pies. I got nobody else" And fifteen minutes later he'd be at the door with medicine and a cup of hot tea with lemon and honey. "Drink up Barb" he would say as he helped her into his car. Ray would never have made a flirtatious, cavalier comment about the fresh baked bread. He would have told Sasha to go pick it up herself. If they can't deliver it, you'll have to go get it. At 5:00 a.m. Sasha knew. Her mother had to pick up the bread at the bakery on several occasions, still dark out. Sasha in the car, asleep under a blanket.

She had known Kenny for twenty years. Since they were kids. His family owned the small seaside market and her mom, Barbara, had worked there for over twenty years, making polish food in the back. She worked there until she died of cancer a few months before. Over the years, when Sasha was in high school, or visited from college, she and Kenny had hardly noticed each other. She remembered coming into the market and there would be a cute girl in cut off shorts hanging around the register or riding in the truck with him to make deliveries. Always pretty, always acting kind of dumb and adoring. Then they would break up and the girl would fall to pieces. Over and over again.

She now considered that maybe it was that she hadn't really noticed him; maybe he had noticed her all along. The way that he looked at her lately made her think that he had loved her forever. There was one time that she remembered him. She had been waiting in the car outside the back of the store. It was hot and she was wearing a halter-top and a black scarf in her hair. This was a week or so before her wedding, she had returned to Massachusetts from California.

She was different, felt different, looking back, she felt more worldly. She had waited in the car for her mother who worked until the market closed at 9:00. The sky was turning a pinkish orange and the air was still hot. Sasha was in the car, she had arrived early. She was smoking a cigarette and blew the air out of the window, watching the boats on the harbor across the street. She was not doing anything but waiting, listening to the radio. Now, she couldn't recall what song was playing. And, when she looked towards the back of Sea Side Market, towards the door, Kenny was standing in the doorway smoking a cigarette. His eyes were fixed on her and there was such seriousness, such intensity that she lost her breath. He blew a stream of smoke and his steel blue eyes—so pale and translucent-- kept a steady gaze on her. And, when she looked back at him made eye contact with him, taking a second to understand or interpret his stare, he didn't turn away. He didn't stop. He didn't hide it. That was three years ago, but she remembered that look, what she thought it had meant. Then, finally, after all that waiting, just at that moment, her mother awkwardly pushed past him with a tray full of perogies that his father Ray, had wanted Barbara to drop off at someone's beach house in Wareham, on their way back to the small cottage in Mattapoisett. "I'm sorry honey," she said in her heavy polish accent, "can I move from you? So I can find the car," He had smiled at her mother and in a very gentlemanly way, took the tray and carried it over to the big Pontiac her mother had bought from Ray's father. A twenty-year-old boat in pristine condition, every chrome part polished. The upholstery unstained. A preserved bit of automobile history. Kenny gingerly placed the catering tray in the back seat and didn't look at Sasha once during the exchange. He checked to make sure it was secure. He kissed her mother on the cheek. "Bye Barbara." He shut the door and Barbara rolled down the window and said to him, " See you tomorrow, czaruś" See you tomorrow, charmer, darling. But, she meant it lovingly,



affectionately. But, he loved her and he kissed again her on her fleshy cheek. Sasha watched him the whole time not saying anything. She started to back out and turned to him again, he looked at her again with that same secret communication. He kept his gaze until she turned towards the front of the enormous hood and carefully pulled away and started down the road.

All that time, Sasha didn't think of him while she lived in San Francisco. In fact, she had never really thought of him. And, now it was this sudden discovery. This person that she felt she knew, connected with since she had arrived several months ago. Moved in an instant from one life into this one.

As things happen, everything happened at once. Or maybe it was just her mother's illness that made her realize that her marriage was not working. Maybe it could have worked, but the divorce seemed logical in the violent storm of emotions that forced her back to Massachusetts, back to the little cottage in Mattapoissett. And asking Tim to come was not even a consideration. "Let's just do this thing," he had said in his dot-com business speak. Sasha shook her head. She had only been married for three years but she had known him for seven. It wasn't until recently that they had bought the flat in the mission, a tenancy in common. It wasn't until this past year, when he started making all kinds of money as a programmer and her as a project manager that they had furnished their house with pottery barn furniture and she started wearing clothes from Nordstrom. Tim started buying his clothes at banana republic." Remember when we bought all our shit at goodwill?" she asked him that last night, the night before she left. He was sitting in front of the blue glow of the computer and she was in a pair of his boxer shorts and a silk tank top. She was in great shape because she worked out everyday at lunch and ate sushi or Pho most of the time. He turned to her, didn't get up and she could tell from the rigid lines in his face, that

he was distracted, holding on to the computer code in his mind, the stream of numbers and letters that were the path to a solution. Some bug. He was preoccupied. And, he felt that he was important, that his thoughts were important. That his time was worth a lot of money, he was wasting money talking to her.

But, his wife was leaving for good.

She didn't say anything but he nodded as if she had.

"You can go back to work," she said and walked out of the office, a little alcove off the bathroom, really a walk-in closet. They hadn't made it that big. They could only afford a one bedroom in San Francisco, plus the alcove.

That night she waited in their room. She waited until two in the morning when he came in, his eyes bloodshot and his white button down shirt wrinkled. She was mad at him. He sat at the end of the bed.

"I am sorry you are leaving, but it really is the best thing. Right now anyway"

He had become such an ass.

It sent a sickening feeling into her stomach. She had known for a long time that he didn't love her, felt trapped with her. And, now this was his out. And, there was no way she could not leave and once the space between them was forged, it would grow greater.

"Let's just get a divorce." She said. He turned to her slowly and then held her gaze.

"Is that what you want.?" He kept his eyes on her alternating from her eyes to her lips.

"Its what you want." She said, "my mother has cancer and I am leaving for who knows how long and its two in the morning and you look exhausted and you are just now coming in the room to say that my leaving is the best thing. What kind of husband says that?"

And, the thing was when she said husband it felt fake, it sounded artificial, like she was pretending. No he couldn't be your husband.

He nodded. "Maybe you are right." He stood up and walked into the bathroom.

And, in that moment she entered the eye of the storm. It was calm and it was easy to get in the taxi at seven the next morning. In fact, it felt natural, like the lyrics to a love song. And, the plane ride was easy. It was calm in the airplane, the roaring of the engines lulling her to sleep. The cold air and the bright light coming in through the windows as they passed over the Sierra Nevada mountain range. That was the biggest demarcation: a mountain range that separated the rugged west, with its high bluffs towering over the ocean. And, the gorgeous, ice cold pacific. It was all gone. The further east she traveled, the flatter the lands beneath her were. And, finally she landed at Logan Airport.

The winds picked back up and the storm resumed. Her Uncle Nick picked her up at the airport. Her mother's brother, he didn't seem as old as he was. He looked younger. Actually, he had always looked the same. Hair combed to one side, greased or something to keep it slick and in place. A pressed, neat white button down shirt, cuffs rolled up. Dress pants, pressed and clean. Black, polished shoes. He looked sharp. He was a butcher and he always dressed so well underneath the apron that absorbed the blood and guts of the steaks and cuts of meat. He looked like he had walked right out of the 1950s and when he worked he kept a pencil behind his ear. She always wondered if he was running bets when he would laugh and talk, covered in blood and guts, with the customers. A kind face, a sweet man. Clever and outgoing.

"Sasha, you look so pretty," he said and leaned over and kissed her forehead. He stared at her for a moment and tears came to his eyes. "You know everything that is going on, with your

mom," He said with a hint of his polish accent. His was not as heavy as her mothers and his English was much better. He nodded and swallowed hard. "I'll bring you to your mother."

Sasha didn't know what she had expected. She thought hospice was a place. The place she pictured in her mind was a beautiful small bedroom. She imagined the perfect bedroom, serene with curtains that moved in the wind. Pretty old fashioned curtains, sprayed with starch and ironed. A comfortable chair near the bed.

When Sasha walked into the hospital room, she had a sick feeling. There was an oxygen tank in the front of room with tubes that ran all the way to the bed. There was tape over the floor so that no one would step on the oxygen tubes. And it created a strange desire to break the rules, to cut the oxygen and it created a horrific shame to imagine such a thing.

She should have come sooner.

Kenny –from the Seaside Market-- was in the room, sitting on a stiff wood and vinyl chair. He looked so much older, maybe he was tired from staying up or being so stressed, Sasha didn't know. He stood up when he saw her enter the room. He smiled at her, a kind smile "here take the chair," as if Sasha could just jump right into this, take her mother's hand, whisper the words that she imagined people say at the end "let it all go." "We're all right," "don't' fight it." She didn't want to say that. She wanted her mother to wake up and make her those little cookies with faces on them in different pastel colored icing. She wanted her mother to sit with her and struggle for the right word, to shake her head and raise her shoulders and say that Tim was "a..." 'Nice' but then look away saying, "anyway, enough about troubles" Which would infuriate Sasha. Who said anything about troubles?

Her stomach felt tight. She took a deep breath.

"Here sit down, Sasha" Kenny said to her. "I'll go to the waiting area."

Then she was alone with her mother. She studied her mother's face closely. And she couldn't stop watching her breathing, the breaths gurgling and shallow. Sometimes, an inhalation so full of fluid Sasha wanted to ring the nurse's buzzer and ask them to help her. Then, sometimes the breath would stop and the silence that descended terrifying. Her spine was stiff: ready, ready mom, please breathe. Then the exhalation would come and a wave of relief would wash over her.

It was the middle of the night the last night and she was asleep, sitting on the vinyl chair her head on the bed. She woke to the same gravely breaths. Her eyes felt sandy and Sasha stared at the hospital room for a time. She examined the instruments, and the little defibrillator kit in the corner, the sink with packages of little pink swabs. She looked at her mother, and her face looked different some how. Thin from the illness, but something more. She had the feeling her mom had died even though she was still breathing, "mom" she whispered and it seemed false, like she was being insincere, but she continued anyway "I am sorry I didn't come sooner. I didn't know." And the same uneven breathing. "You are really a special person. I love the smell of you. And, I love your cooking and your pretty smile." She ran her hands over her mother's forehead. She stood and kissed her. She held her face against her mother's for a long time. Her mother's skin felt warm, almost hot. She reached for her mother's hand and her hand felt cool. It was such a contrast. She stood still for a moment. And, her mind flashed on Kenny sitting there when she had come in. She wondered why he was there. She wondered if he was still in the waiting room. She walked out into the hall way and she didn't want to walk far. She didn't want to be away

from her mother. She looked in one direction, then the next. And, in that moment she saw his figure, silhouetted in the darkened lights coming closer.

"Hi" he whispered when he approached.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I love your mom," he said, "she's like a mother to me."

Sasha nodded. "Come sit with us."

He stared at her for a long moment.

She sat on one side of the bed and he sat on the other. Neither said anything but instead both listened intently to the breathing, looking at each other when there was an interruption, a long pause between breaths. Their eyes communicated something "is this it?" It seemed so surreal to have him there: someone she has known since she was a child, someone who knew her mother, but not a person she was intimate with. He held Barbara's hand in his and Sasha kept her hand on her mother's face and then she whispered, "Its ok mom. We love you. It's ok to go." She looked at Ken and his eyes were wet, tears building. He wiped them and looked down at the ground.

After her mother died, months passed and Sasha was restless. She didn't know what to do; she didn't want to go back to San Francisco. And, the little cottage in Mattapoisett felt safe and it felt right. It felt right to stay there just two blocks to the little cove and in the winter the nights were cold and even though most of the cottages were vacant off-season, there were a few locals who remained and she would see them on her walks. She didn't know where to go or what to do.

One afternoon, she was walking through Fairhaven and she smiled when she saw the Sea Side Market. She felt funny going in. She expected her mother in the back, her hair held up in a fancy twist in the back, flour powdering her cheek or some of the wisps of hair that fell in the front of her face. Sasha walked into the store and the little bell rang. Immediately she smelled the fresh bread and meat pies. Kenny was behind the register. He was leaning back drinking a bottle of lemonade. His eyes lit up when she walked in. He acted funny like a rabbit in a children's story, trying to tidy the place up, fix it up all around the squirrel who has come to visit.

"I was walking. I wanted to say hello," Sasha said and she thought of the night in the hospital room and the wake. Then, the funeral. A numb procession through ritual and mourning and even though he was right there, sitting right beside her mother when she had died, sitting in the room with Sasha. That final breath, the glance they exchanged but not really believing it was the last one. All the others weren't the end, why would this one be any different. And Sasha had counted in her mind following her mother's last inhalation. She counted to ten, to thirty, then forty, and then she knew. She knew that there wouldn't be an exhale. She knew her mother was dead. After that, she didn't really remember. Time moved in strange manifestations: slowly, then consciousness evaporated and hours had passed. And, the exhaustion, the headache and heaviness of her body. And really, the only thing she remembered from that first week was talking to Tim on the phone,

"You're strong," he had said, "you've always been so strong. You'll get through this Sasha" And it was so foreign. It was the feeling of him calling her by another name. He was comforting himself for being such an asshole. He could have said I'm sorry. She remembered telling her Uncle Nick. "He didn't even say he was sorry."

"Your mother never liked him," Nick said. And for some reason they both couldn't help laughing.

But then there was the screeching halt of nothingness. Nothing to do but forget. But, that is hard to do.

"Do you want a lemonade?" Kenny asked her.

Sasha smiled, "No thanks. I have to go, I just wanted to come in...I don't know."

And he watched her as she stood in front of the candy and gum rack. She looked around took the store in. She knew it well. It was like a home to her.

"Hey," he said, "how long are you going to be around?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, here, in Massachusetts."

She shrugged her shoulders. "For a while, I guess"

"We need—" he started. "Would you want to work here for a little while? Help out?"

So that was how it happened. How she happened to be back here, behind the register, counting money. Working where her mother had worked. That was how the attraction to Kenny started and grew. His stare, and smile, and gentle way with her.

In the beginning their friendship was very sibling like. Kenny acted very protective. He always walked her out to her car and if the roads were icy, he would follow her back to Mattapoisett. Then, one night he asked her to help him stock the liquor room—a big room where the liquor was separated from the food in the rest of the store. The store was closed and the kitchen and meat staff had gone home. It was just the two of them and all of the tension that had built up, the feelings that Sasha had that she thought, perhaps, were hers alone rose to the



surface. Kenny was standing close to her and she had her hand on a stack of boxes, the light from the street lamp outside cast a yellow hue on the room and she felt frozen, her heart beating quickly. But just as maybe something would have transpired, his eyes in that penetrating gaze, his cell phone pealed its familiar Beethoven's fifth and he fumbled for the phone in the back of his jeans. She could tell the way he answered it, it was Jessica. He stood motionless and looked down and the floor. Sasha could hear Jessica's impatience, her voice imploring. The crying started pretty soon into the conversation then followed by her anger. At times, her voice was so loud that Sasha could make out the words completely, "it's not fair. This is what YOU do, Kenny." Then silence. And Kenny's eyes looked at Sasha and she wasn't sure what they were pleading for. "I have to go," Sasha whispered. And, he nodded walking towards the door with his key in hand, holding the phone to his ear with his shoulder. He unlocked the door from the inside and pulled the glass door open. "Bye," he mouthed and then after she walked into the dark parking lot, he closed the door behind her and locked it. When she put her car into reverse, she could see he was still on the phone. He had lit a cigarette and was leaning against the counter, kind of hunched over. He held a hand to his forehead and just listened. Sasha had the desire to park across the street and watch him. See how long he talked to Jessica.

After that she didn't go back to the Seaside Market. And what she had seen in his eyes, all those sweet flirtations. The dream that she had made up, it seemed completely fictional to her now. And working at a market in Fairhaven seemed unreal, unnecessary. She wanted to leave everything but the cottage. She didn't want to sell the house in Mattapoisett. She knew her uncle would take care of it until she knew what to do. She got into her car and started driving down the road towards Boston, to the airport. She had friends in San Francisco and opportunities. She

missed working out and eating healthy Asian meals. She drove past Fairhaven, and the little harbor dotted with picturesque New England scenes. She thought about all she had made up about Kenny, the story that kept her preoccupied over the last few months. Could she fall in love with him? She tried to remember some of the fantasies. They seemed transparent, two-dimensional now. A light rain started to fall and she looked up at the gray sky. She felt a little like herself. And, then she had an image. It was the image that had helped her to sleep at night these months since she came to see her mother, since her mother had died. It was the same fantasy over and over, and Sasha realized that this was all it was just a simple, one sentence story: His eyes on her, penetrating and in the fantasy, he moved close to her, still staring into her eyes. "I love you," he would whisper and then he would kiss her. And, when he touched her body, his hand on her cheek, she felt understood. She felt loved.

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## Therapist Story

There is no heat yet the room grows warm. The therapist's office. My vulnerability is so inhuman that it is a vacuum, a force that turns on itself. The air loses oxygen and he can see it. He is all I have so I let it be there, not knowing the influence a stranger may have of the delicate balance of my memory and here and now. Both play tricks so it's hard to stay sane. Not knowing the influence he may have is also a delicate balance (of logic). So for him, he listens. he draws it out. So for him, I go back.

I describe the room. The light. The way the race car bedsheets are crumpled and scratchy. Cheap K-mart sheets. The flimsy trailer walls. I tell him there's a small picture by the bed. It's a 1970s painting of a clown on a piece of wood. The signature says Sally Smith and way back then -on that horrible afternoon--I came to know that signature so intimately. The rounded curves of the "S." The bottom so rounded it looked like a pregnant lady and the rest of the letters looked like her little children.

His voice pierces through time. He interrupts the event. "You're back." He says. "You didn't go away completely."

He's seen into my past. There was a tether. He found the way to take me back there.

The whole room shifts. I can tell what's happened.

In not too long, I'm going to sleep with my therapist.

**The End**

Donna Barrow-green is a writer, researcher, and college instructor. She has authored eight novels and several other books. Two of her novels were on Wattpad's featured list (2016, 2017). Her books have over 100,000 reads on Wattpad. Her 2013 full-length play *If There Are Any Heavens* won the Hillsboro Artists Repertory Theater's Promising Playwrights Competition. Her full-length play *Love Is Enough* won The Portland Civic Theater Guild's 2014 Fertile Ground Festival competition. *The Diarist* was nominated for 4 Audio Drama Awards and over 30,000 downloads in the first year. Donna lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, daughter, step-son, and two sweet doggies!!

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